

# Interpreting Scripture *with the* Great Tradition

Recovering the Genius of  
Premodern Exegesis

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To the blessed memory of

**John Bainbridge Webster**

(1955–2016)

beloved mentor and teacher,  
who spoke and wrote so profoundly about our God  
and who now beholds him face to face

“I thank my God upon every remembrance of you.”  
(Phil. 1:3 KJV)

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# Preface

The conventional wisdom concerning biblical hermeneutics among the vast majority of evangelical biblical scholars today goes something like this:

We should interpret the Bible like any other book. The sole purpose of exegesis is to try to understand what the original author meant to communicate to the original audience in the original situation. The text has only one meaning—namely, what the original, human author meant to say. Allegorical interpretation is dangerous because it allows people to read any meaning whatsoever into the text. Maintaining a commitment to the authority of the Bible depends on not departing from the single meaning of the text discovered by historical study. The purpose of a college or seminary education is to train future preachers and teachers in the historical method. It is not the responsibility of the scholar to determine the meaning of the text for today. It is the job of the preacher, teacher, or individual reader to decide how the gap between the ancient meaning and the contemporary situation should be bridged. This is called “application,” and it is not the job of the biblical scholar qua biblical scholar to do it, although as a Christian, a biblical scholar must figure out how to apply the text to the present just like everyone else. A scholar’s expertise as a scholar, however, is an advantage only insofar as it enables a clear determination of the original, historical meaning of the text.

In this book, I argue that every single component of the conventional wisdom described in the above paragraph is wrong or, at the very least, highly misleading. I argue that we must interpret the Bible in a unique manner because it is uniquely inspired. The purpose of exegesis is to understand what God is saying to us today through the inspired text. The text may have one or

several meanings because of the complexity of God the Holy Spirit inspiring the text through a human author. The authority of the Bible is God's self-authenticating Word speaking through it, and in order to hear God's Word, it is crucial that we interpret it as a unified book with Jesus Christ at its center. The interdisciplinary practice of biblical studies as found in academic settings today is an agent of secularization in the church and needs to be reformed so that it becomes a servant of Christian theology and spirituality rather than a confusing amalgam of history, philology, archaeology, literary theory, sociological theory, and philosophy operating with unacknowledged metaphysical assumptions and without any material center. The meaning of the text for today is what we seek to hear as we study the text carefully, intensively, and reverently. Biblical exegesis is a spiritual discipline by which we are gradually made into the kind of readers who can receive with gladness the Word of God. Ancient reading practices, which have never died out completely in the church, can help us hear God's Word in less subjective and more ruled ways than modern hermeneutics makes available to us.

Ironically, many preachers and laypeople who read this book will find in it a more accurate description of what they actually do in day-to-day biblical interpretation than what is found in many hermeneutics textbooks today. That is because the theory taught in those hermeneutics textbooks is not practiced in the church in any kind of consistent manner. This gap between theory and practice occurs because the neopagan philosophical naturalism of the Enlightenment has had a much greater influence on academia and hermeneutical theory than it has had on the actual practice of teaching and preaching in the local church. In many cases, the type of biblical interpretation practiced in evangelical churches today is in substantial continuity with the way the church has read Scripture throughout church history, even though readers in various eras have made use of different reading techniques and employed widely varying terminology to describe what they were doing. The way the church reads Scripture is rooted in a reading culture that nourishes good readers through a tradition handed on from generation to generation through practices and patterns of exegesis that are consistent with one another. Brevard Childs demonstrated a "family resemblance" in exegetical practices that can be seen from the church fathers to the modern period in certain interpreters.<sup>1</sup> The Enlightenment has exercised more influence on scholars who wish to make an impression on the secular academy than it has on faithful pastors who wish to cultivate a love of the Bible in their congregations. Many books seek

1. Childs, *Struggle to Understand Isaiah*, 299–300. Childs's conclusions will be discussed more fully at various points in this book.

to bring church practice into line with academic theory; this one seeks to do the opposite. It is my conviction that academic theory needs to be reformed according to church practice when it comes to biblical interpretation.

This book has grown out of a decade of reading, research, and reflection on the Christian doctrine of God. I have become increasingly disillusioned with modern theology in general and with the twentieth century's so-called revival of trinitarian theology in particular. The post-Kantian, Hegelian, trinitarian theology that has dominated the twentieth century is actually not a revival of the trinitarian classical theism of the fourth-century pro-Nicene fathers or of creedal orthodoxy as it has been understood throughout church history.<sup>2</sup> It represents instead a massive revision of the Christian doctrine of God. The Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy begins with the Old and New Testaments, crystallizes in the fourth-century trinitarian debates, and then continues through Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the leading Protestant Reformers, post-Reformation scholasticism, and contemporary conservative Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Protestant confessional theology.<sup>3</sup> The locus classicus of the Christian doctrine of God is qq. 1–43 of part I of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, which sums up and carefully sets forth in a clear and coherent form the wisdom of Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, and Augustine—that is, the trinitarian classical theism that is expressed in the Nicene Creed. The same doctrine of God is also embodied in the seventeenth-century *Westminster Confession of Faith* and in the twentieth-century *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It has a timeless character that stands in contrast to the shifting winds of doctrinal innovation and cultural fads. I am presently working on attempting to restate this beautiful and rationally compelling doctrine in a companion book to this one, tentatively titled *Trinitarian Classical Theism: An Introduction to the Christian Doctrine of God*.

I originally planned for the material in the present book to be part of the book on the doctrine of God, but it became so complex that I finally recognized the need to make it a separate, though closely related, book. As I studied the history of the doctrine of God, I gradually realized (not without some internal struggle and resistance) that the way the fathers interpreted Scripture, especially the Old Testament, was part and parcel of their trinitarian theology. Modern theologians who reject the fathers' exegetical methods and

2. For a penetrating and uncompromising survey of the doctrine of God in twentieth-century theology, see Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Immanent Trinity*.

3. For more on the contours and importance of the Great Tradition, see Oden, *Rebirth of Orthodoxy*. Especially pertinent to the present book is chap. 7, "Rediscovering the Earliest Biblical Interpreters."

hermeneutical assumptions but still accept the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity often fail to appreciate how this inconsistency threatens to undermine their deepest doctrinal commitments. I have come to see that the modern tendency to move in a unitarian direction is logically (not merely coincidentally) related to the rise of modern historical-critical interpretation of the Bible. Of course, many people do practice historical criticism while maintaining their belief in Nicene doctrine, but I am afraid that this is mostly because their knowledge of the fourth-century debates is shallow and because they lack an appreciation of the implications of basing their belief in the Trinity on the New Testament alone.<sup>4</sup> The intra-Jewish debate of the first few centuries of the church's existence between those Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and those Jews who did not was *the* crucial debate in the formation of the church, and it centered on the issue of whether the Old Testament witnesses to Jesus Christ. Only a gentile could imagine that everything does not hang on this point. Either this debate results in conclusions (principally the need to affirm the deity of Christ without denying monotheism) that make the doctrine of the Trinity inevitable, or else we are simply wrong to believe that Jesus fulfills the Old Testament hope and is the one spoken of in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings.<sup>5</sup> If we are wrong, then the entire Christian faith is one giant mistake and should be abandoned as soon as possible.

As I studied the fourth-century fathers and then Thomas Aquinas, I developed a deep desire to do theology in a classical manner by exegeting the text of Scripture and then reflecting philosophically on the revelation contained in the text in the light of the tradition of the church embedded in creedal orthodoxy. I realized that the study of Scripture is a spiritual discipline by which the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, and I came to understand that true Christian discipleship requires a high view of the divinity of Christ and the triune nature of God. Theology can be a means for building up the church into the image of Jesus Christ, the head of the church, but if this is to happen, theology cannot be a rationalistic enterprise designed to conform Christian doctrine to a system of metaphysics that is at odds with the Christian tradition of orthodoxy, as is the case in so much of contemporary theology. This book is an attempt to recover the approach to biblical exegesis that characterized the Great Tradition.

4. Andrew Louth writes: "The Fathers, and creeds, and Councils claim to be interpreting Scripture. How can one accept their results if one does not accept their methods?" (*Discerning the Mystery*, 100). Jason Byassee is even more provocative: "You cannot have the patristic dogma without patristic exegesis; you cannot have the creed without allegory" (*Praise Seeking Understanding*, 16).

5. The question that the disciples of John the Baptist brought to Jesus is *the* central question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" (Luke 7:20).

It is thus a methodological reflection on the practice I carry out in my book on the doctrine of God.

In reflecting on why the twentieth-century doctrine of God was so detached from the Great Tradition, I came to see in a new way the interconnections between exegesis, metaphysics, and dogma. The Christian Platonism of the Great Tradition was developed in order to express the metaphysical implications of the doctrine of God that emerged from pro-Nicene scriptural exegesis in the fourth century, and as a result the exegesis, the dogma, and the metaphysics are all intertwined together. Creedal orthodoxy is not just verbal formulations on a page; it is, in the words of Lewis Ayres, a “pro-Nicene culture,”<sup>6</sup> and the three essential elements of that culture are a tradition of spiritual exegesis, dogmas emerging from that exegesis, and the metaphysical implications of those dogmas, which in turn provide a hospitable context for the practice of exegesis. To reject any one of the three elements of pro-Nicene culture would be to plunge the whole project into crisis.

Tragically, this is exactly what has happened in modernity. Modern philosophy has systematically rejected the Christian Platonism of the Great Tradition. The nominalist, materialistic, and mechanistic philosophy of the Enlightenment embraced the exact metaphysical views that the pro-Nicene fathers had consciously and decisively rejected. Whereas the fathers found a kinship with the Platonists on a number of points and considered them the best of the Greek philosophers, the Enlightenment thinkers rejected the Platonists and embraced first the Atomists and the Epicureans (in the eighteenth century) and later the Stoics and the Skeptics (in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). The result was a crisis within Western intellectual thought, and this crisis expressed itself in two ways: (1) in the rise of the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation from Baruch Spinoza onward and (2) in the revisionist or liberal theology that flowed from the impetus provided by Friedrich Schleiermacher. In the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation, methodological naturalism became *the* central presupposition of exegesis.<sup>7</sup> This methodological naturalism led to a concentration on the single meaning of the text—that is, the original meaning the original human author intended to convey to the original readers in the original situation. This is

6. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 274–78.

7. That some scholars today seem not to be aware of how important philosophical naturalism is to their strongly held positions only shows how deeply ingrained in modern thinking it has become. It is the air we breathe as moderns; for pragmatic late modern people it seems like mere “common sense.” Such deeply ingrained patterns of thought form a culture and are seldom subjected to critical scrutiny; rather, everything else (especially tradition) is subjected to critical scrutiny on the basis of philosophical naturalism.

what the modern historical critics (consciously departing from the classical tradition) came to mean by “historical meaning.”

In this context, the term “critical” meant that older meanings that depended for their coherence on the supernaturalism of the older metaphysics had to be revised or rejected outright. The meaning of the term “historical” was drastically narrowed from its previous meaning of “an interpretation of past events” to its newer meaning of “an interpretation of past events that excludes the supernatural.” In the narrowed, modern meaning of the term “historical,” many crucially important events of the past are assumed to be impossible, such as the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea, Isaiah predicting the virgin birth and crucifixion of Jesus centuries in advance of their occurrence, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. When moderns speak of the “literal sense” of Scripture, they often mean the historical sense in the later, narrower sense of historical, whereas in the Great Tradition the meaning of the literal sense was much broader, allowing room for both human and divine (supernatural) authorial intent and also for levels of meaning in the text because of inspiration.

What I term “the liberal project” was launched by Schleiermacher, who intended to save Christianity from becoming utterly irrelevant to modern European intellectual thought and perhaps even from being pushed out of the modern research university altogether. The liberal project was to revise and restate Christian doctrines within the constraints of modern metaphysics—that is, within the limits of philosophical naturalism. This meant, for example, expressing the doctrine of the Trinity within the constraints of the nominalism, materialism, and mechanism of Enlightenment philosophy. These two wings of the liberal project—historical criticism and revisionist theology—have been the foundations on which twentieth-century relational theisms have been built. Theologians after Hegel have embraced various types of relational theism, such as process philosophy (Whitehead, Cobb), modern dynamic panentheism (Moltmann), pantheistic liberation theologies (Cone, Boff, McFague), and open theism (Pinnock, Sanders). In theological systems such as these, God is seen as being interdependent with the world (voluntarily in some cases and involuntarily in others), and creation is viewed as a necessary expression of the divine nature, if not an actual limit on the divine nature. In all of these theological systems, the doctrine of the immanent Trinity is largely eclipsed by an almost exclusive focus on the economic Trinity. But none of them can be considered a legitimate development of the orthodoxy of the Great Tradition. None of them affirm the true, uniquely Christian understanding of divine transcendence. Ironically (in view of their reflexive anti-Platonism), they have more in common with certain aspects of Neoplatonism that were

consciously rejected by the Nicene fathers.<sup>8</sup> But this sort of Neoplatonism offers no serious resistance to the philosophical naturalism that animates modernity. Even “Spirit” and “the Absolute”—even “God”—are all part of the one overarching reality that we inhabit; true divine transcendence has been abandoned. God is either *in* history, or God *is* history. Either way, God is not free of history and thus not transcendent in the classical sense.

Twentieth-century trinitarian theology is not even aware of how unorthodox it is because, in the poignant words of Lady Galadriel, “Some things that should not have been forgotten were lost.”<sup>9</sup> Modern theology has forgotten that metaphysics cannot be ignored without exegesis and doctrine being negatively affected.<sup>10</sup> And not just any metaphysics will do. Christian Platonism<sup>11</sup> was carefully and painstakingly crafted over centuries to serve as a context for reflection on Scripture that leads to true knowledge of the living God and enables true doctrinal statements about him. The companion book to this one will concentrate on reflecting about philosophical questions that arise from the theological exegesis of Scripture passages concerning God. The present book is an exercise in *ressourcement* that attempts to recover classical theological interpretation of Scripture for the church’s benefit today. This book provides the hermeneutical justification for the procedure employed in the other book, lest anyone be tempted to regard it as hermeneutically naive.

This book is an attempt to overcome the negative effects of the historical-critical method by repudiating the methodological naturalism that grows out of its Epicurean metaphysics and cheerfully embracing the supernatural,

8. For an extremely helpful discussion of the massive influence of Neoplatonism on Hegel and all the nineteenth- and twentieth-century theology influenced by him, see Cooper, *Panentheism*.

9. In the prologue to the movie *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), Lady Galadriel speaks these words about the ring of power: “And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost. History became legend. Legend became myth. And for two and a half thousand years, the ring passed out of all knowledge.”

10. John Webster reminds us,

A Trinitarian dogmatics of the holiness of God will be an exercise in ontotheology. For its concern is—with fear and trembling—to give a conceptual depiction of the Church’s confession of the works and ways of the Holy Trinity. And such a depiction necessarily requires an ontology—an account of the being, nature and properties of God. This ontology must certainly be resolutely dogmatic. . . . But dogmatics ought to be unpersuaded that Christian theology can long survive the abandonment of ontotheology and ought to think long and hard before it hands over the doctrine of God for deconstruction. The undeniably corrosive effects of certain traditions of metaphysics are best retarded, not by repudiating ontology, but by its fully Christian articulation. (*Holiness*, 32–33)

11. “Christian Platonism” is not simply identical with “Neoplatonism” or “the views of Plato” or even “Platonism in general,” much less with decadent versions like the various forms of gnosticism. In chap. 3 I will carefully define what I mean by “Christian Platonism” and place it in its historical context. Readers who exhibit symptoms of an allergy to Platonism should read chap. 3 before rejecting the term out of hand.

miracles, providence, inspiration, and other concepts central to the Great Tradition but often brushed aside by modernity. A great deal of the distance between contemporary theology and fourth-century pro-Nicene theology arises because even conservative and evangelical scholars today often view the allegorical methods of biblical interpretation used by the fathers as childishly inept. The fathers, following the explicit example of the writers of the New Testament, interpreted the Old Testament text as having multiple levels of meaning. The biblical text functioned sacramentally for them by manifesting Christ in the present.<sup>12</sup> The christological meaning of an Old Testament text could be discerned on this side of the resurrection because it was always there in the text, even though it was not necessarily discerned (or at least not *clearly* discerned) by those who lived before the incarnation of God in Christ. The lively awareness of divine authorial intent, in addition to human authorial intent, enabled them to see the *sensus plenior* as resident in the text itself and not as something read into the text by readers.<sup>13</sup> Without this way of reading the Old Testament, the New Testament writers could not have interpreted the Old Testament christologically and the apostolic witness to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of the Scriptures could not have been convincing. So in a very important sense, our faith is dependent on the validity of patristic exegesis. If Christology is not genuinely and objectively *in* the Old Testament text waiting to be discerned by the apostles as they are led into all truth by the Holy Spirit in fulfillment of Jesus's promise given in John 16:32 but rather is *read into* the text by the apostles and church fathers as one possible reading among others, then the question of the relationship of the Triune God of Nicaea to the God of Israel witnessed to in the Old Testament is left hanging.

It is my conviction that recovering a genuinely Nicene doctrine of the Trinity depends completely on first recovering the genius of premodern exegesis. But in order to accomplish that, we must first recover the Christian Platonist metaphysics inherent in the spiritual exegesis that was at the root of Nicene theology and reject both the historical criticism of the Enlightenment and the naturalistic metaphysics on which it rests. In other words, if we wish to draw

12. This is the central thesis of a recently published book that is now the best available introduction to the exegesis of the church fathers: Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*. This richly detailed and theologically astute treatment of patristic exegesis should be read alongside my work because it offers many excellent examples of the sort of exegesis I refer to at many points in this book. Boersma's work focuses on how the fathers actually did exegesis, whereas my work focuses on how we can and should appropriate the fruit of their work today. Both of us are seeking to contribute to the work of *ressourcement*.

13. David Steinmetz correctly positions the classic approach as a *via media* between the extremes of the single-meaning theory, on the one hand, and the postmodern reader-response theories, on the other. See Steinmetz, "Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis," 13–14.

on the deep, nourishing resources of the Great Tradition, we must come to grips with how exegesis, metaphysics, and dogma hang together in Nicene Christianity. But to do that sort of thing flies in the face of powerful currents of thought in the contemporary culture.

Stanley Jaki reminds us that naming things is an exercise of power and that the misnaming of something, such as an epoch of history, may well be a misuse of power and a form of intellectual domination.<sup>14</sup> The Enlightenment's periodization of Western history into three ages—classical, middle, and modern—helped to demote the peak of Western Christendom in the thirteenth century to the status of an “interlude” between classical antiquity and the revival of paganism in the so-called Enlightenment. What a different picture would be conjured up in the student's mind if the thirteenth century was named “the Enlightenment,” and the period from 1650 to 1800 was called something like “the Period of the Decay of Christendom”! The neopagans of early modern Europe drew a contrast between the “age of reason” and the “age of faith” and evaluated the various aspects of the culture of ancient Greece and Rome according to how well or poorly they foreshadowed the “age of reason.” This periodization of Western history was itself an act of interpretation and domination as the neopaganism of the Enlightenment sought to overcome Christendom and drive Christianity out of the public square.<sup>15</sup>

The sad contemporary spectacle of the so-called New Atheism is a continuation of the worst manifestations of this “Reason Worship,” which led to the attempt to brand Christianity as anti-reason, anti-science, and anti-intellectual during the Enlightenment. Just as current new-atheist writers exhibit an embarrassing lack of self-critical humility by labeling themselves “Brights,”<sup>16</sup> so the neopagans of high modernity flattered themselves by claiming the label “Enlightenment” for their age, which implied of course that the age of faith that preceded them was an age of darkness. It was no accident that the period during which Europe was converted to Christianity ended up being labeled the “Dark Ages.”

Using the term “precritical” to describe the way the church has historically read the Bible is meant to be pejorative, even though some writers gamely try to use the term without prejudice. “Precritical” or “premodern” biblical interpretation is often contrasted with “scholarly” or “academic” biblical interpretation, expressing a sentiment like the following: “Well, you may have

14. Jaki, *Genesis 1 through the Ages*, 109.

15. Notice the subtitle of the first volume of Peter Gay's magisterial history of the Enlightenment: *The Enlightenment*, vol. 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism*.

16. Daniel Dennett actually did this in a piece in the *New York Times* a few years ago. Quoted in Feser, *Last Superstition*, 3.

problems with philosophical naturalism, but surely you don't mean to reject the scholarly, scientific, and academic study of the Bible during the past two centuries."<sup>17</sup> Of course not, but the suspicion is inevitable given the way we have named these periods of history. One of the purposes of this book is to counter this misuse of the power of naming in which the historic and orthodox way of reading the Bible practiced by Christians from the apostles to the present is placed under suspicion and ultimately marginalized. My hope is to overcome the Enlightenment by showing that the Enlightenment movement of "higher criticism" is a dead end, a sideshow, a deviation from orthodoxy, and a movement that is now in the late stages of self-destruction. It is my conviction that the church will still be reading the Bible with Irenaeus, Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin long after Baruch Spinoza, David Strauss, Hermann Reimarus, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolf Bultmann, and the Jesus Seminar are mere footnotes in the history of the decline of post-Christian Western culture. One of the many reasons for this confidence is that, when all is said and done, the historic approach to exegesis will be found to be the truly scientific and rational method of exegesis, and the historical-critical method will be judged to have been ideologically driven and philosophically deficient. I am quite aware that many will regard these as bold claims; the reader is invited to delay judgment about the validity of these claims until after reading this book. Although this book is a necessary explanation for, and justification of, the exegetical approach taken in my forthcoming *Trinitarian Classical Theism*, it also stands alone as a contribution to the reform of biblical hermeneutics through *ressourcement* after the pathologies and heresies of the Enlightenment have been overcome.

17. The way many scholars reflexively associate "scholarly" and "naturalism" is very telling. "Can a nonnaturalist reading be scholarly?" they sometimes ask. Such a question, asked sincerely, indicates an alarming state of philosophical confusion.

## Acknowledgments

*I*t is a pleasure to acknowledge that many people have been helpful in the process of writing this book. I would like to thank Ben Reynolds, my colleague at Tyndale, for introducing me to David Nelson, who became my editor for this project. Both David and I studied with John Webster, and we share a mutual appreciation for him as a person and as a theologian. It has been a privilege to work with an editor who is broadly sympathetic to the kind of theology I want to write. I also want to thank Hans Boersma, whose work in patristic exegesis has been an inspiration to me and who was strongly supportive of this project in its early stages.

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I also need to thank the pastors and people of Westney Heights Baptist Church, where I have served as theologian-in-residence since 2008. The Reverend Jack Hannah, who brought me on staff a decade ago, and the current senior pastor, the Reverend Don Symons, have been unfailingly supportive and

encouraging. My ministry of teaching at Westney has been possible because of the tremendous interest in studying the Bible on the part of the people in this wonderful church. Every Thursday evening this past year I have taught a class on biblical hermeneutics to a group of twenty men; on Sunday morning I teach the book of Isaiah to more than one hundred people. After two years we have just finished chapter 45! Keeping one foot in the academy and one foot in the local church has forced me to think on multiple levels at all times and has kept me grounded in reality while thinking on a philosophical and theological level. This is how theology has been done for most of church history and how it should be done today. The isolated intellectual in the ivory tower is simply out of touch and crippled by the lack of feedback necessary for doing good theology. I thank God for placing me in the midst of people who love God's Word and who are not afraid to study it diligently.

I also want to thank Dale Dawson and Steve Dempster for many good conversations about the topics covered in this book. Dale is a pastor-theologian, who also studied under John Webster and teaches doctrine part-time, so he has been a terrific dialogue partner. Steve is a spiritually discerning student of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. I have learned much from both of them.

My wife, Bonnie, has been teaching a course on hermeneutics to a group of fifteen women at our church while I have been writing this book. She has put into practice many of the ideas I have written about in this book with amazingly positive results. She is a great source of support and encouragement to me, and without her this book would not have been possible. I would also like to thank my daughter, Rebecca Carter-Chand, for compiling the indexes.

I have dedicated this book to John Webster, my doctoral supervisor and the greatest theologian of his generation. Now that he has been taken from us, it is imperative that those who appreciated his work do whatever we can, according to the measure of grace we have been given, to carry forward the magnificent and inspiring vision of theology he exemplified.

It is customary to add in places like this that the people mentioned above do not necessarily agree with everything in this book and that responsibility for the viewpoints expressed here is mine alone. But surely you knew that already.

All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version of the Bible unless otherwise noted. I use, recommend, and thank God for the ESV Study Bible, which is a marvelous tool for anyone wanting to study God's Word today.

*Cover note:* The picture on the front cover, "Simeon's Song of Praise," was painted by Rembrandt in 1631. It depicts an aged Simeon quoting Isaiah 52:10 as he prophesies that this baby Jesus is "the Lord's Christ" (Luke 2:26). A faithful and skilled reader of Scripture, Simeon sees the messianic thrust of

the Old Testament as pointing toward the coming of the Suffering Servant. The text stresses that he understood this by the Holy Spirit. My book is about how to read like Simeon, Anna, and other faithful people of God, who discerned the christological meaning of the Holy Scriptures by the illumination of the Spirit, symbolized in the painting by the bright light shining down on the child and on Simeon's face.

# Abbreviations

## General and Bibliographic

AT	author's translation	esp.	especially
chap(s).	chapter(s)	etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and so forth
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	KJV	King James Version

## Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Song	Song of Songs
Exod.	Exodus	Isa.	Isaiah
Lev.	Leviticus	Jer.	Jeremiah
Num.	Numbers	Lam.	Lamentations
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Josh.	Joshua	Dan.	Daniel
Judg.	Judges	Hosea	Hosea
Ruth	Ruth	Joel	Joel
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles	Jon.	Jonah
Ezra	Ezra	Mic.	Micah
Neh.	Nehemiah	Nah.	Nahum
Esther	Esther	Hab.	Habakkuk
Job	Job	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Ps(s).	Psalms	Hag.	Haggai
Prov.	Proverbs	Zech.	Zechariah
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Mal.	Malachi

**New Testament**

Matt.	Matthew	1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem.	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb.	Hebrews
Rom.	Romans	James	James
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians	1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
Gal.	Galatians	1–3 John	1–3 John
Eph.	Ephesians	Jude	Jude
Phil.	Philippians	Rev.	Revelation
Col.	Colossians		

**Old Testament Apocrypha / Deuterocanonical Books**

Bar.	Baruch	Sir. (Ecclus.)	Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)
1–2 Esd.	1–2 Esdras	Tob.	Tobit
Jdt.	Judith	Wis.	Wisdom (of Solomon)
1–4 Macc.	1–4 Maccabees		



# Introduction

# 1

## Who Is the Suffering Servant?

### *The Crisis in Contemporary Hermeneutics*

Who has believed what he has heard from us?  
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?  
Isaiah 53:1

This chapter is intended to set the stage for the positive proposal I wish to make for the reform of contemporary biblical hermeneutics. I will do this (1) by introducing the problem we face today in interpreting the Bible, (2) by explaining how this problem arose, and (3) by pointing to some positive signs of renewal. The chapter will close with a brief outline of the rest of the book.

#### **The Gulf between Academic Hermeneutics and Church Preaching**

The origins of this book go back to an experience I had more than thirty years ago when I had just graduated from seminary and was starting my first full-time pastorate in two small country churches on Prince Edward Island, Canada. It was traditional in these churches to have a Good Friday service, and I was to preach. I wanted to take as my text Isaiah 53, but there was a problem. I knew that the passage was a prophecy of Jesus and that it described his atoning death on the cross, which is why I wanted to preach it. But, alas,

I was too educated to be able to preach this message with a clear conscience! In the seminary studies I had just completed, I had been taught the historical method of interpreting the Bible. I had a liberal-leaning professor who was always going on about “the assured results of higher criticism,” and also some more conservative ones who had advocated a grammatical-historical approach. As far as I could see, both liberal and conservative scholars were united in stressing that the text has only a single meaning: what the original author meant to convey to the original readers in the original situation. This is why the seminary had taught me Hebrew, Greek, ancient history, and critical methods like form criticism and source criticism: so that as a pastor I would be equipped to do what laypeople for the most part could not do—namely, recover the historical meaning of the biblical text.

### *Higher Criticism of Isaiah*

I knew that, since Bernhard Duhm’s work in the late nineteenth century, Isaiah 53 had been identified as the “Fourth Servant Song” and that the identity of the servant was a matter of wide scholarly disagreement. I also was aware vaguely that the church fathers and the Reformers had interpreted Isaiah 53 as a prophecy of Christ, although I was not as aware then as I am now of how universal that view was in the church prior to the Enlightenment. I knew I was going to preach Christ as the meaning of Isaiah 53, but I could not for the life of me see how to justify doing so on the basis of the hermeneutical theory I had been taught. I knew that the New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is the Messiah who fulfills the messianic hope in the prophets in general and in Isaiah in particular.<sup>1</sup> But while the fact that the New Testament writers interpret Isaiah 53 in this way gave me confidence in preaching Isaiah 53 as Philip did to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:30–35), it still did not solve the hermeneutical problem.

After all, maybe the New Testament writers were wrong. Modern historical criticism, I had discovered, was quite ready to declare the New Testament writers wrong about various things, such as the authorship of various canonical books, including the Pentateuch, Isaiah, and the Pastoral Epistles. And there is no way to reconcile the allegorical interpretation of Hagar and Sarah that Paul gives in Galatians 4 or the interpretation he gives of the rock in the wilderness wanderings in 1 Corinthians 10 with the historical-critical method. So the question arises: If the New Testament writers could interpret the Old Testament allegorically, and if the church fathers did so regularly in

1. In their widely used textbook, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, Hill and Walton state (745) that there are thirty-eight references to Isaiah 53 in the New Testament.

conscious imitation of the apostles, why could we not do so as well? If the answer to that question is that the historical-critical method is the right way to interpret Scripture, then that means the New Testament writers were wrong in their methods. Yet, if Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, they must have been right in their conclusions. How could that be?<sup>2</sup> How could they have arrived at the right conclusions via a faulty method?<sup>3</sup> Was it a fortuitous mistake? Or does the falsity of their method call their conclusions into question? Should we just appeal to the authority of the New Testament for our messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53 and ignore what Isaiah (or Deutero-Isaiah or whoever it was) meant to affirm?

I was aware of another possibility. Perhaps the apostles were able to interpret the Old Testament allegorically because they were inspired, whereas we should refrain from doing so because we are not inspired and are therefore liable to make errors.<sup>4</sup> Behind this view lay the common perception that the allegorical method is uncontrolled and arbitrary and therefore allows anyone to read anything at all into the text. Many people seem to confuse the allegorical method with postmodern reader-response methods of hermeneutics in which the reader actually reads meaning into the text that was not there initially. The difference between at least some of the allegorical approaches of the fathers and the modern, reader-centered approaches, however, is that the former do not seek to read the reader's ideas into the text, but rather to extract a second layer of meaning from the text itself. As David Steinmetz makes clear in his classic article, "The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis,"<sup>5</sup> the allegorical method actually lies between the two extremes of the Enlightenment's single-meaning theory, on the one side, and a postmodern reader-centered approach,

2. Louth rightly presses this question in *Discerning the Mystery*, 100.

3. Holmes wrestles with this dilemma in chapter 2 of *The Quest for the Trinity*. He writes: "We tend to assume today that a text means what the author intended it to mean. If this is right, it will be very difficult to find any treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament . . . whatever a text like 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Ps. 2:7 NRSV) might mean, its use in debates over whether the generation of the Logos from the Father is a volitional and time-bound act, or an essential and eternal one, is completely inappropriate" (34).

4. I was privileged to take courses on Mark and Romans from Richard Longenecker in the 1980s, and he advocated this solution. In the preface to the second edition of his work *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, Longenecker replies (xxxiv–xxxviii) to Richard Hays's criticism of his refusal to follow the apostles in their method as well as in their conclusions. For Longenecker, it is wrong to follow the apostles in doing allegorical exegesis even though they were preserved from erroneous conclusions by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He believes that Paul's use of allegory, midrash, and pesher is "culturally conditioned" and needs to be "contextualized" for today. It is difficult to avoid concluding that for Longenecker, modernity gets to decide which methods of biblical interpretation are allowable for theology.

5. Steinmetz, "Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis," 13–14. This article originally appeared in *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (April 1980): 27–38.

on the other. The allegorical approach views the text as having more than one meaning, but not an unlimited number of meanings and certainly not mutually contradictory ones. But if one believes (as many evangelical biblical scholars do) that the only thing standing between us and interpretive chaos is the single-meaning theory, one naturally would be loath to give it up lest the whole enterprise of biblical interpretation degenerate into the expression of individual opinions as to the meanings of texts with no way to adjudicate among them.

If the writer of Isaiah 53 believed that the servant was Israel or a righteous remnant within Israel, as major medieval rabbis taught,<sup>6</sup> or some historical figure in Israel like Moses or the prophet himself, as some modern critics say,<sup>7</sup> then clearly there is a problem in getting from the original author's view to the view of the New Testament writers, let alone in constructing an interpretive bridge between the original historical situation (usually construed by historical critics as the Babylonian exile) and the present-day congregation.

### *How the Church Preaches Isaiah*

When one consults the sermons and expositional and devotional commentaries written by pastors throughout the centuries of church history, one finds that the christological meaning of Isaiah 53 is enthusiastically advocated and expounded.

The volume on Isaiah 40–66 in the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series lists examples of the unanimous testimony of the fathers as to the identity of the servant of Isaiah 53. Just to give one example, let us hear Clement of Alexandria: “The Spirit gives witness through Isaiah that even the Lord became an unsightly spectacle: ‘And we saw him, and there was no beauty or comeliness in him, but his form was despised and rejected by people.’ Yet, who is better than the Lord? He displayed not beauty of the flesh, which is only outward appearance, but the true beauty of body and

6. Brown, “Jewish Interpretations of Isaiah 53,” 64.

7. E.g., Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, says, “The person referred to throughout this chapter is the same as the ‘servant’ of the three earlier ‘Servant Songs,’ 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–9—that is, the prophet Deutero-Isaiah himself” (171). North, *Suffering Servant in Deutero-Isaiah*, provides a survey of fifteen proposals for the identity of the servant covering Jewish, early Christian, and modern ones, and including both individuals (such as Moses, Hezekiah, and Isaiah) and collectives (such as ideal Israel, the righteous remnant of Israel, and the prophets). There are various forms of messianic identification, both Jewish and Christian. More recently, Blenkinsopp (*Isaiah 40–55*, 355–56) stated that no new options have emerged since North’s survey and that none of these fifteen suggestions have been met with unanimous approval. Blenkinsopp himself thinks that the Fourth Servant Song depicts Deutero-Isaiah but was composed by a disciple.

soul—for the soul, the beauty of good deeds; for the body, the beauty of immortality.”<sup>8</sup>

Commenting on Isaiah 52:13, John Calvin writes, “After having spoken of the restoration of the Church, Isaiah passes on to Christ, in whom all things are gathered together.”<sup>9</sup> It is worth stressing that Calvin here speaks of *Isaiah* (the author of the text) beginning in this verse to speak of Christ. To put it this way is different from saying, as so many have done, that the early church interpreted this passage in christological and messianic terms. The question is whether this meaning inheres in the text or is read into the text by later readers.

The great nineteenth-century evangelical preacher Charles Spurgeon comments: “How clearly you have before you here our blessed Redeemer, and how strong are the expressions used by Isaiah to set forth his substitution. If he did intend to teach us the doctrine that Christ suffered in the place and stead of his people, he could not have used more expressive words; and if he did not intend to teach us that truth, it is marvelous that he should have adopted phraseology so likely to mislead.”<sup>10</sup> For Spurgeon, the fact of inspiration makes predictive prophecy easy to imagine, and a text like this one makes it obvious to anyone whose mind is not closed to the possibility that Isaiah could be given a vision of the crucifixion of Christ centuries before it happened.

One of the greatest Bible expositors of the twentieth century was John R. W. Stott, who exercised a worldwide Bible preaching ministry from his home base of All Souls Langham Place, London. In *The Cross of Christ*, published in his sixty-fifth year and summarizing much of the fruit of his expository ministry over the previous forty years, he points out that Paul, John, Peter, Luke, and Matthew—the major contributors to the New Testament—together allude to eight of the twelve verses in Isaiah 53. Stott asks, “What was the origin of their confident, detailed application of Isaiah 53 to Jesus?” He then answers, “They must have derived it from his own lips. It was from this chapter more than from any other that he learnt that the vocation of the Messiah was to suffer and die for human sin, and so be glorified.”<sup>11</sup>

8. Elliott, ed., *Isaiah 40–66*, 159.

9. Calvin, *Commentary on the Prophet Isaiah*, 106.

10. <http://www.studydrive.org/commentaries/spe/view.cgi?bk=isa&ch=53>.

11. Stott, *Cross of Christ*, 31. Brevard Childs lists several noted modern scholars as holding to this view, including J. Jeremias, H. W. Wolff, P. Stuhlmacher, and M. Hengel (Childs, *Isaiah*, 420). To this list can be added leading conservative Old Testament scholars such as John Oswalt and J. Alec Motyer. Childs, however, follows the majority in rejecting the view that the authority of the biblical witness is determined by its being anchored in the mind of Jesus. We will revisit Childs’s views at several points in this book, so I will not go into my evaluation of them at this point. Suffice it to say that I believe Childs’s “third way” has laudable intentions but is insufficiently radical in its critique of modern ideas of “history” and “scholarly neutrality.”

Through the centuries the church has believed and taught that the Old Testament generally, and Isaiah 53 in particular, speaks of Jesus Christ because it is inspired by the Spirit of God. Enlightenment-inspired higher criticism, however, operates on the basis of metaphysical assumptions that make this impossible. What we have is a clash between university and church. Or, to vary the metaphor, perhaps it is not so much a clash as two solitudes that have never embraced each other. David Steinmetz ended his famously controversial article, “The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis” with these stirring words:

The defenders of the single-meaning theory usually concede that the medieval approach to the Bible met the religious needs of the Christian community but that it did so at the unacceptable price of doing violence to the biblical text. The fact that the historical-critical method after two hundred years is still struggling for more than a precarious foothold in that same religious community is generally blamed on the ignorance and conservatism of the Christian laity and the sloth or moral cowardice of its pastors.

I should like to suggest an alternative hypothesis. The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, struggles because it is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text it is interpreting, it will remain restricted, as it deserves to be, to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can endlessly be deferred.<sup>12</sup>

Is there any hope of bringing these two solitudes together? Can historical criticism be reformed on the basis of orthodox theology? Is it possible to develop a theory of biblical hermeneutics that can undergird and nourish ecclesial preaching and teaching? What would such a theory look like? I believe that it is possible to reform hermeneutical theory and that the prospects for doing so are better today than they have been for a long time. But the next step in the argument is to recount how things got to this point, so that we can see the scope of the reform needed.

### **How Such a Gulf Developed between Church and Academy**

Before we can interpret the Bible, we must decide what it is. If interpretation is to be scientific, it must adapt its method to the nature of the thing being studied. The methods of astronomy are obviously insufficient to study

12. Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis,” 14.

biology; one requires a telescope while the other needs a microscope. The methods of logic cannot be used to study history except in a secondary sense in testing the validity of arguments made in the course of evaluating evidence. But using all logic and no evidence at all will not work, for history is not a deductive science. The study of texts requires different approaches, depending on the nature of the text being considered. On the one hand, the historical researcher may scan and discard records until finding the specific piece of information being sought. On the other hand, the literary critic may read the same poem over and over until its rhythm and meter become so familiar they are unforgettable. The philosopher may pore over a few paragraphs and reduce the prose to a series of propositions arranged in logical order, something the literary critic would almost never think of doing. How does one study God?

### *Methodological Naturalism and Divine Inspiration*

According to the confession of the Christian church, the Bible is an inspired book. This is the inescapable fact confronting anyone who wants to interpret the Bible. All agree that this is a religious text used for millennia by religious communities, first Jewish, then Jewish and Christian. But that tells us only that certain people and groups ascribed deep religious significance to these texts and claimed that the Bible is a Word from God in which God reveals himself to us and therefore is different from all other texts. But were they *right* in doing so? Should the interpreter start from the standpoint of faith that God has spoken in these texts, or should a conclusion as to the truth of this claim be part of the results of the interpreter's investigations? In other words, is divine inspiration a necessary premise of good interpretation, or is it preferable to start with agnosticism on the question of the reality of inspiration? Would a presupposition of divine inspiration actually impede good interpretation? Would it be a good compromise to employ methodological naturalism in one's interpretation until one becomes convinced that the texts of the Bible really are the Word of God—perhaps after the work of interpretation proper is finished? But if one begins with methodological naturalism, is it really possible to come to such a conclusion except by repudiating one's starting point? How, exactly, does one change horses midstream? To the extent that it really is a *starting point*, does not repudiating it necessarily mean that one must start all over?

The question, then, is not whether the metaphysical starting point of interpretation potentially conditions the interpretation of the text. It seems clear, to me at least, that it does; I hope that the following chapters will convince

any readers who may doubt the validity of this point. But the question I wish to raise is what actual effects metaphysics has had on biblical interpretation throughout history. I invite the reader to consider the possibility that metaphysical beliefs (or denials, which in their own way are just as significant as beliefs) form a context in which interpretation is carried out and that the results of interpretation cannot be separated from the metaphysical assumptions behind the method of interpretation. By “metaphysical,” I actually do not mean anything radically different from what theologians traditionally have meant by the doctrines of creation and providence and by ideas such as miracle and inspiration. I find it preferable to use the word “metaphysical” for two reasons. First, some views of theology in the modern world can speak of theological issues as if they did not intersect with history and nature. But I am talking about the way the world actually is, how God relates to the world, and, specifically, how God speaks to creatures. This kind of theology inevitably has metaphysical dimensions. Second, I wish to compare two sets of faith commitments; I choose to call them two sets of metaphysical beliefs, rather than two religions, simply because one does not recognize itself as a religion (even though I must confess that it looks like a religion to me).

### *The Metaphysics (or Religion) of the Enlightenment*

The rationalistic faith of the Enlightenment has a view of God (Deism), revelation (general, not special), truth (known by reason alone), sin (Pelagianism), Christ (teacher of morality and example of love), atonement (via subjective theories only), salvation (through education and technology), the church (the scientific community), and eschatology (utopia on earth through progress). But most modern people who live their lives as though this set of beliefs were true dislike admitting that they follow a *religion*. They would rather it was a choice between religion and reason, which is why the myth of the warfare between science and religion was invented in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> It relieves them of the necessity of confronting the unpleasant fact that they have knelt before the altar of science and bowed to their god, just as surely as the despised Christians bow before the God of the Bible. But they are willing to affirm certain metaphysical doctrines, or at least they are always willing to admit to *denying* certain metaphysical doctrines (which often amounts to the same thing as affirming the opposite of the doctrines

13. For an influential example of the propaganda that was instrumental in pushing this myth to the forefront of public consciousness, see White, *Warfare of Science with Theology*. His work is continued a century later by the so-called new atheists. The definition of “new atheist” is one with less philosophical awareness and more bombast than most of the older atheists.

that are denied). For example, they eagerly refute Aristotelian teleology and trumpet mechanism. They oppose design in nature and affirm the power of chance to bring structure and order to the world. They deny universals and the supernatural realm (thus adopting nominalism and materialism), and they especially repudiate what they like to call “Greek metaphysics” or “classical theism.”<sup>14</sup> Evidently, however, many of them remain unaware that they have simply traded Christian Platonism for Epicureanism or Stoicism and that they have simply chosen *different* metaphysics, rather than succeeding in freeing themselves from metaphysics altogether.

It is the essence of scientism that one believes that one can be free of all metaphysical influence merely by substituting empirical science and mathematical reasoning for metaphysics.<sup>15</sup> All that is accomplished by this move is to become unconscious of one’s actual metaphysical assumptions and therefore uncritical of one’s own presuppositions, which increases the odds of ending up holding incoherent views. This is a dangerous self-deception that characterizes many liberal-leaning Christians today, in particular, and it is painfully obvious to an objective observer.

If one denies (as I do) that starting with methodological naturalism can possibly lead to an orthodox, theological interpretation of Scripture as the source and guide to the church’s faith, then the starting point becomes crucial. The rise of historical criticism in the Enlightenment took as a basic axiom that the Bible must be “allowed to speak for itself” rather than being “shackled” to a set of dogmas set forth in creeds purporting to represent the true meaning of the Scriptures. Historical critics like Baruch Spinoza, Hermann Reimarus, and David Strauss believed that, historically, church theologians had interpreted Scripture using the ecumenical creeds of the first five centuries as their guide to true interpretation. It seems clear, to me at least, that these Enlightenment thinkers and their heirs today vastly underestimate the degree to which the contents of the creeds had been composed, debated, challenged, and revised on the basis of biblical exegesis. From the seventeenth-century perspective, credal orthodoxy seemed frozen in time and a barrier to penetrating to the true meaning of the text. Radical thinkers of the Enlightenment,

14. The new metaphysics did not arise suddenly in the seventeenth century. It has crucially important antecedents going back to the nominalism of William of Ockham and the concept of the univocity of being in the thought of Duns Scotus in the dark and chaotic fourteenth century. The tragic breakdown of the medieval synthesis of faith and reason, which had been founded on the existence of universals and the doctrine of the analogy of being, after Thomas Aquinas’s majestic work in the thirteenth century, created the chaos and ferment in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries out of which the Enlightenment emerged. More will be said about this history in chapters 3 and 4.

15. For a lucid explanation of “scientism,” see Feser, *Last Superstition*, 83–85.

such as Spinoza, rejected the body of dogmas contained in the creeds and tried to interpret the Bible in a way that would be more compatible with their own faith, which was rationalism. They were convinced that ethics and true religion could be derived from “reason” alone and that the Bible should be interpreted like “any other book,”<sup>16</sup> rather than as a uniquely inspired Word from God. They sought religion based on general revelation alone without relying on special revelation. From our jaded, late-modern perspective it may appear to us that they were chasing leprechauns and unicorns, but they were deadly serious about it.

### *The Political Roots of Enlightenment Religion*

The political motivations of the Enlightenment must also be kept in view. The Enlightenment is usually dated from about 1650 to 1800. More precisely, we could say it began with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which brought to an end the Thirty Years’ War, and ended with the death of Immanuel Kant in 1804. Most Enlightenment thinkers were appalled by the bloodshed of the Wars of Religion, which stretched from the Peasants Revolt of 1524 in Germany through the war against Protestantism in France, the English and Scottish Reformations, to the English civil wars and the invasion of Ireland under Cromwell that did not end until the 1650s. Much of the intelligentsia of Europe, rightly or wrongly, blamed religion of all kinds for the passion and fury of these wars.

The purpose here is not to adjudicate historical blame or decide between competing historical interpretations; the point here is the narrower one of highlighting the motives of those who became convinced that the interpretation of the Bible must be wrested from the hands of bishops, pastors, and theologians and placed under the control of philosophers committed to reason as their highest authority. Those who answered to the church and its tradition naturally saw the Bible as undergirding the dogmas of the faith. Classical interpretation of Scripture involved reading the texts as the inspired Word of God and as teaching orthodox Christianity. But it was not only the orthodox theologians who brought concerns from outside the text itself into the

16. This phrase comes from Leo Strauss, who writes: “In our time scholars study the Bible in the manner in which they study any other book. As is generally admitted, Spinoza more than any other man laid the foundation for this kind of biblical study” (*Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, 35). For Strauss, the significance of Spinoza’s approach is that it is a critique of revealed religion. The context of Spinoza’s work is, Strauss says, “the critique of Revelation as attempted by the Radical Enlightenment” (35). For further discussion of Spinoza’s role in the emergence of historical-critical study of the Bible, see Harrisville and Sundberg, *Bible in Modern Culture*, chap. 2.

interpretive process. Enlightenment philosophers like Spinoza and Thomas Hobbes were convinced that the political power of the church could be broken and peace ensured in civil society *only* if a new method of interpretation could be devised that would make the Bible the symbol of the new religion of reason, although, of course, they would not have put it that way. Their way of putting it was to say that the Bible must be studied like any other book and that the meaning of each text was what the original author had intended to convey to the original readers in their original situation. Since this historical meaning could be uncovered only by a certain methodology, which was regarded by the Enlightenment thinkers as rational and scientific, only those who were committed to this new method and trained in its intricacies could establish the meaning of the Bible. Biblical interpretation would henceforth be a matter for “experts.”

This method, however, smuggled naturalistic metaphysics into interpretation under the guise of “historical method” and thus undermined the doctrine of inspiration without launching a frontal assault on the doctrine openly. The result was that political control of the meaning of the Bible gradually shifted from the church to the academy. In the early nineteenth century, the German research university emerged as an instrument of the state and became the model for universities worldwide in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Increasingly, the modern, bureaucratic state tended to justify its authority on a Weberian account of bureaucratic and technological rationality, the very thing that was cultivated in the research university.<sup>17</sup> So, indirectly, the interpretation of the Bible was brought, at least to some extent, under the control of the state, rather than the church.<sup>18</sup>

One of the clearest ways in which modern historical criticism functions as a religion is the way it proselytizes so vigorously for its point of view. Jason Byassee notes how many “deeply skeptical biblical scholars are recovering fundamentalists.” He mentions Wheaton College alumnus Bart Ehrman as an example and describes Ehrman as an evangelist for historical criticism.<sup>19</sup> Byassee calls the higher critical guild “a sort of shadow church with saints, canonized texts, hallowed processes of training novices, calls for ascetic renunciation and deferred reward, with its own glosses filling the texts of manuscripts, its own orthodoxy, its own heretics, its own desired political

17. See MacIntyre’s illuminating discussion of this point in *After Virtue*, 25–27.

18. This control was never total, of course. But the point at which the new Enlightenment method asserted its superiority to classical theological interpretation was when it claimed the title “scientific” for itself. Churches, clergy, and Christians could dissent but only at the price of being “unscientific” or “fundamentalist.”

19. Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 245.

and spiritual ends.”<sup>20</sup> Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III also view the historical-critical guild as a kind of religion. They were disappointed by the reaction to the first edition of their book, *A Biblical History of Israel*, and in an extensive appendix to the second edition, which addresses reactions to the first edition, they reflect on how it feels to be excluded from the community. After expressing frustration with J. J. Collins’s failure, as they see it, to engage the arguments of their book and his dismissing of it because it differs from the “standard” approach, they say, “He already knows, as he enters the discussion, which scholars are ‘critical’ and which are not, and the identification has nothing to do with whether scholars display critical thought via extensive argument in their writings; it has everything to do, rather, with which scholars agree with him in what he considers to be certain assured results of (truly) critical thought.”<sup>21</sup>

In language similar to that used by Byassee, they write: “The academy is a community of interpretation with its own presuppositions and traditions, just as are the synagogue and the church.”<sup>22</sup> It seems to me that if we take seriously what these (and many other) scholars are saying, it would be very naive to think of the historical-critical guild (as many evangelicals seem to do) as a neutral, objective, scientific group of disinterested scholars united by the sole purpose of seeking truth. That picture is probably less accurate than the other extreme of regarding the historical-critical academy as a heretical sect along the lines of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, only with PhDs.

The new method of biblical interpretation that we call “historical criticism” did not appear out of nowhere for no reason, and it was not discovered in a laboratory like insulin. It began with (1) the neopagan metaphysical assumptions of the Enlightenment, which led to (2) the development of a new method of interpretation conducted within (3) a new social location resulting in (4) a whole new set of doctrines. All four elements of this approach to biblical interpretation are very different from traditional ones. Theologians and pastors of the Great Tradition had (1) Christian Platonist metaphysical assumptions (which they believed were exegetically justified), (2) a method of spiritual exegesis (which they believed was the same as the way the New Testament apostles interpreted the Old Testament), (3) a social location within the believing community of faith (to which they saw themselves as accountable), and (4) a set of doctrines (contained in the ecumenical creeds) that were very different from the doctrines of the Enlightenment.

20. Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 18.

21. Provan, Long, and Longman, *Biblical History of Israel*, 424.

22. Provan, Long, and Longman, *Biblical History of Israel*, 424.

The doctrines of the quasi-religion of the Enlightenment were described above as follows: The rationalistic faith of the Enlightenment has a view of God (Deism), revelation (general, not special), truth (known by reason alone), sin (Pelagianism), Christ (teacher of morality and example of love), atonement (via subjective theories only), salvation (through education and technology), the church (the scientific community), and eschatology (utopia on earth through progress). In contrast to this description, traditional Christianity of the Great Tradition held to trinitarian classical theism; the necessity of correcting and supplementing general revelation with the special revelation found in Scripture; a view of truth as being found primarily in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and in Scripture read as his word; a doctrine of sin as moral rebellion resulting in true moral guilt; the corruption of human nature and the helplessness of humanity to save itself; salvation through faith in the penal, substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross; the church as the fellowship of the redeemed; and eschatology as a living hope centered on the personal return of Jesus Christ to earth at the end of the age.

None of the claims made up to this point are particularly new or controversial in and of themselves. What I am attempting to call attention to here, which may be new for some, is the interconnection between metaphysics, method, social location, and doctrine. To do this, it is necessary to stress the contrast between Christian Platonism, classical interpretation of Scripture, and theology that begins from revelation and that is done in and for the church, on the one hand, and Epicurean metaphysics, historical criticism, theology that takes reason rather than revelation as its highest authority and that is done within the secularized university for a secularized society, on the other hand. Here is the contrast in the form of a chart.

**Contrasting Methods of Scripture Interpretation**

Classical Theological Interpretation	Modern Historical-Critical Interpretation
1. The metaphysics is Christian Platonism.	1. The metaphysics is Epicurean naturalism.
2. The method of interpretation is faith seeking understanding by means of philosophical meditation on special revelation, which corrects and supplements general revelation.	2. The method of interpretation is the historical-critical approach, which excludes special revelation and relies exclusively on general revelation by employing methodological naturalism.
3. The social location is the church located (ideally) within Christendom.	3. The social location is the secularized research university within a secularizing (post-Christendom) society.
4. The result is the handing on of the core orthodoxy of the ecumenical creeds.	4. The result is the new religion of salvation through technology, education, and social progress (i.e., progressivism).

The thinkers of the Enlightenment wanted to break the power of the church in society, and one key move they made to accomplish this goal was to assert that morality could be based on reason alone without the need for special revelation. The power of the church in European society derived in large measure from the widespread assumption that society would degenerate into lawlessness and chaos without the church's teaching Christian morality on the basis of the Bible. Understanding their motive for the rejection of special revelation and the creedal orthodoxy of traditional Christianity is important for the way that they interpreted Scripture. What I called "methodological naturalism" above was the presupposition of the historical approach they advocated. Naturalism is the key methodological presupposition of the historical-critical method of biblical study; it is what makes the various historical-critical methods different from other methods of biblical interpretation. I will discuss metaphysics in more detail in chapter 3, but here it is necessary to make clear that the two basic starting points for interpretation depend on different metaphysical presuppositions. A fundamental choice confronts the would-be interpreter at the outset: inspiration or naturalism. This basic choice cannot be avoided, only obfuscated.

The choice between inspiration and naturalism is the basis of the gulf between the academy and the church of which Steinmetz spoke. Classical interpretation of Scripture—which was the approach in Western culture from the early centuries up to the Enlightenment and still is the approach followed in the preaching and teaching of much of the worldwide church today—cannot adopt methodological naturalism without rendering inoperative the doctrine of inspiration. This is so because the doctrine of inspiration requires a Christian Platonist metaphysics in which supernatural divine revelation can take place at the moment that the prophets and apostles write the text, in which divine providence can ensure the preservation and transmission of the text, and in which the Holy Spirit can illumine the meaning of the text to readers in every century. There has to be a metaphysical framework in which God is able to speak into history on an ongoing basis in order for special revelation to be possible. This metaphysical framework depends entirely on a uniquely Christian doctrine of divine transcendence that comes from the Bible. A naturalistic metaphysics produces a method that leads to a heretical form of Christianity (or perhaps a whole new religion?) that the church must reject.<sup>23</sup>

23. The judgment of J. Gresham Machen that liberalism is really a whole new religion and not Christian at all, which he offered in 1923, has been ratified rather than refuted by the developments of the past century. He saw liberalism as a "non-redemptive religion" called "modernism," which is rooted in "naturalism." See his *Christianity and Liberalism*, 2.

## Can This Gulf Be Overcome? Promising Developments in Recent Scholarship

Are there any signs that biblical scholarship is becoming more self-critical and more open to classical ways of interpreting Scripture? The answer to this question is a qualified yes, although it is not easy to distinguish between fads and actual retrieval of usable resources from the past. Michael Allen and Scott Swain are engaged in a project of retrieving the catholic nature of the Reformed tradition; this is the single most hopeful trend in contemporary theology as far as I am concerned.<sup>24</sup> In chapter 1 of their book, *Reformed Catholicity: The Promise of Retrieval for Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, Allen and Swain enumerate no less than thirteen recent trends in theology and biblical studies that could conceivably come to mind when someone calls for a recovery of classical approaches to biblical interpretation.<sup>25</sup> What these diverse approaches have in common is a sense that modern theology has exhausted itself and needs to go back to classical resources for renewal.<sup>26</sup>

Where would I situate my project with regard to those approaches? It might be helpful to run through them briefly, offering some comments. Some are irrelevant to my proposal, such as the emerging or emergent church movement, which I view as little more than a vehicle for young evangelicals who want to become liberal Protestants. The Evangelical Catholicism of Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson has not really been very influential on me, primarily because Jenson has not viewed classical theism as part of the tradition that needs to be retrieved.<sup>27</sup> The consensual Christianity of Donald Bloesch, the ancient-future approach to worship advocated by Robert Webber, and the modern hymns movement are congenial but not really influential on my thinking. The seminal work of Karl Barth, especially in exegesis, has been hugely influential on the entire twentieth and twenty-first centuries,

24. John Webster is the most important and influential figure in this movement. Although he did not live to complete his own projected five-volume *Dogmatics*, his influence through his essays, his supervision of doctoral students, his editorial work, and his interpretation of Barth has been substantial. He published a series of essays in dogmatics that gives a good idea of the overall shape of his theology. See *Word and Church; Confessing God; Domain of the Word; God without Measure* (2 vols.). See also his short monographs *Holiness* and *Holy Scripture*.

25. See also two new series they are editing: *New Studies in Dogmatics* (Zondervan) and *International Theological Commentary* (T&T Clark).

26. Allen and Swain, *Reformed Catholicity*, 4.

27. See Swain, *God of the Gospel*, for an explication of the concerns about Jenson's theology. I am in agreement with Swain's basic criticisms of Jenson's "evangelical historicism" (233) and with his call for *ressourcement* (234). And I can only echo Swain's appreciative reference to John Webster as "the supreme contemporary example of dogmatic theology in a (shall we call it?) Reformed and Thomistic key" (7). This description of Webster points to the central reasons why I see Webster, not Jenson, as the way forward.

but Barth's influence on me is mostly mediated through the work of John Webster. This means that I value Barth most where he is in line with the Great Tradition, which is just the opposite of how many influential readers of Barth receive his work. Certainly it must be recognized that exegesis of Scripture is one area in which Barth has deep roots in the Great Tradition; his exegesis is very fruitful and helpful to those who are trying to do theology in the tradition of classical orthodoxy, even when his specific conclusions may be challenged.<sup>28</sup> The growth in interest in reception history of the Bible, in part fostered by Barth's influential example as an exegete, is a very encouraging sign, because it shows an interest in taking seriously the way the Spirit has led the church in interpreting Scripture through divine providence in history that preserves the gospel from generation to generation, just as Jesus promised (John 16:13). The church is not infallible, but the Spirit is and, to the extent that the Spirit's preserving work is visible, we can get help in understanding Scripture.

One of the most encouraging trends in the past few decades has been the degree of interest evangelicals and other conservative Protestants have shown in the exegesis of the church fathers. One of the most important religious publishing events of the twentieth century was the appearance of the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series from InterVarsity Press.<sup>29</sup> Studying the history of how the Bible has been interpreted is a trend I wish to extend and reflect on theologically in this book. The work of John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy has been very helpful in understanding the role of the breakdown of medieval realism and the growth of nominalism in the development of modernity.<sup>30</sup> It has helped me to see that modernity needs to be rejected at a much deeper level than most conservative Protestants have imagined up to now. Thomas Oden's "paleo-orthodoxy" also has been very influential in my

28. One of the most helpful books on Barth's exegesis is Gignilliat, *Karl Barth and the Fifth Gospel*. The weakness of Barth's exegesis is related to his reluctance to challenge the modern Enlightenment understanding of history. But sometimes he is happily inconsistent on this score when it comes to the actual practice of exegesis.

29. This landmark work was done under the general editorship of Thomas C. Oden and made a selection of the best of patristic commentary on all sixty-six books of the Bible available in modern English for the first time. In the wake of this earthquake in the world of religious publishing, many publishers are now publishing translations of classic commentaries from the fathers, the medieval schoolmen, and the Reformers. Most notable in this regard is InterVarsity Press's own follow-up series, the Reformation Commentary on Scripture, under the general editorship of Timothy George. See also *The Church's Bible* being published by Eerdmans under the general editorship of Robert Louis Wilken, which is a project similar to the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series.

30. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*. Also helpful are Gillespie, *Theological Origins of Modernity*; and Tyson, *Returning to Reality: Christian Platonism for Our Times*.

thinking,<sup>31</sup> along with the emphasis on *ressourcement* in the Roman Catholic nouvelle théologie movement spearheaded by Henri de Lubac<sup>32</sup> and in the evangelical *ressourcement* movement as seen in the work of D. H. Williams and Hans Boersma.<sup>33</sup> The welcome rise of *ressourcement* Thomism in the work of scholars such as Gilles Emery, Thomas Joseph White, and Matthew Levering has facilitated a new reading of Thomas Aquinas that situates him within the living tradition of patristic exegesis and theology.<sup>34</sup>

Another trend that I welcome is the theological interpretation of Scripture movement,<sup>35</sup> although it has become something of a victim of its own success. Because everybody wants on the bandwagon, the movement has become so diverse as to be in danger of petering out without making the impact some of us originally envisioned. The emphasis on the spiritual exegesis of the fathers is welcome, as is the recognition of the importance of the rule of faith for disciplining exegesis. But there are problems.

Three of the most significant problems in contemporary discussions of theological interpretation of Scripture are (1) the unresolved relationship of theological interpretation to modern, historical-critical approaches;<sup>36</sup> (2) the

31. See *Agenda for Theology*; *Requiem*; and *Rebirth of Orthodoxy*. In these books Oden complains about modernity. In editing the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture series, he did something highly significant to counter the hold that modernity has on the Christian mind.

32. Three volumes have now appeared in English translation of Henri de Lubac's seminal work, *Medieval Exegesis*. These works are part of the valuable *Ressourcement* series published by Eerdmans. See the bibliography for publishing information on these works.

33. Boersma's emphasis on "sacramental ontology" has been valuable as one of the few contributions, other than Radical Orthodoxy, to bring philosophical considerations into the exegetical conversation. See his *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology* and *Heavenly Participation*. An important recent publication by Boersma is *Scripture as Real Presence*. See also his *Sacramental Preaching*, which demonstrates how exegesis and preaching come together within a sacramental worldview. Louth's *Discerning the Mystery* is also helpful in this regard.

34. I would mention Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics* as being of great importance for my understanding of Thomas Aquinas's conception of theology as contemplative wisdom. This, more than anything else, enabled me to see the kinship between Thomas and the fourth-century Cappadocian fathers. This book also makes clear that Aquinas's trinitarian theology is both rooted in fourth-century Nicene thought and a clear alternative to twentieth-century relational theisms.

35. An excellent introduction to the movement is *Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, ed. Bartholomew and Thomas. Also see Billings, *Word of God for the People of God*; and Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*. The *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Vanhoozer, is useful as well.

36. This is seen most clearly in the work of Brevard S. Childs. His final commentary, *Isaiah*, was a typical historical-critical work that barely touched the rich mine of theologically significant issues in Isaiah. However, his final book, *Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, is immensely fruitful and stimulating, not to say encouraging. But why could he not do the kind of theological interpretation that he so lucidly described having been done by the fathers, medieval schoolmen, and Reformers? It seems that his exegetical work proceeds

failure to distinguish between spiritual exegesis that honors the literal sense, and thus is compatible with *sola Scriptura*, and that which does not do so; and (3) the inability of some contemporary practitioners of the approach to rule out revisionist readings of Scripture, which leads to the suspicion that the approach is a wax nose liable to be made subservient to the contemporary communities of readers in such a way that the authority of Scripture over the church is rendered inoperative in practice. My sense is that two other issues lie behind these problems. First, it is a typically modern tendency to overvalue method and to undervalue culture and tradition. Method by itself cannot save us. Theological (or spiritual or figurative or allegorical) exegesis must be deeply embedded within a pro-Nicene culture that involves the fruitful interaction of spiritual exegesis, Nicene dogma, and the theological metaphysics generated by that dogma. This means that we have to pay attention to the metaphysical context in which exegetical work is done as well as the metaphysical implications of the exegesis. In chapters 3 and 4 of this book, I will address this issue by seeking to overcome the influence of the Enlightenment's philosophical naturalism on biblical interpretation. Second, with regard to the second and third problems, any concept of "theological interpretation" that undermines the Reformation's emphasis on the unique authority of Scripture over individual and communal human experience and ecclesiastical structures must be

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on two rails that never meet: (1) historical-critical insights into what John Webster calls "the natural history of the text" (Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 43), which are largely unhelpful for preaching or theology, and (2) canonical exegesis, which is often very theologically fruitful. It is a tragedy that he found himself unable to extend the great tradition of historic Christian exegesis himself. The reason why may be his unwillingness to challenge the metaphysical presuppositions on which higher criticism is based. Francis Watson contends that Childs's *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* never lives up to its promise: "Childs is in practice so concerned to preserve the integrity of the Old Testament that its dialectical relationship to the New virtually disappears" (*Text and Truth*, 14). The shortcoming about which Watson is speaking results from viewing the Old Testament as having only a historical meaning and not a christological layer of meaning that requires acceptance of the existence of divine authorial intent in the text. The refusal to integrate the human author's intent with the divine author's intent in defining the meaning of the text results in the spiritual, christological sense never quite being rooted in the historical meaning of the text. Childs certainly saw that the main tradition of Christian exegesis did take divine authorial intent into account. Why he exhibited ambivalence about doing so himself is difficult to understand. Matthew Levering has a penetrating analysis of Childs's thought on this topic in his *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 8–13. Levering points to the unresolved problem of the nature of history in Childs's thought and contends that Childs could not bring himself to accept the idea that a theological concept of history is compatible with the integrity of historical-critical research. According to Levering, Childs always viewed human authorial intent as inviolable if one is pursuing historical-critical study. Here is where we need to move beyond Childs to recover a properly orthodox theological metaphysics if we are to be able to interpret the Bible with the Great Tradition. Much more must be said about these issues as this book progresses.

rejected as incompatible with orthodox Christian faith. In the second half of this book, I will endeavor to describe an approach to biblical interpretation that does not fall prey to this danger.

Perhaps an example will help to clarify the issue. When Stephen Fowl argues that the inclusion of unrepentant, practicing homosexuals in the church may be analogous to the inclusion of uncircumcised gentiles in the church in Acts 10–15,<sup>37</sup> we have a perfect example of why so many people fear allegorical readings of the Bible and why theological interpretation of Scripture in general seems to be dangerous. It seems that he is making the text say something it does not say by imposing a contemporary agenda onto the text and inserting a meaning into the text that is foreign to the plain sense of the Bible. It does nothing to ameliorate this fear when, in response to Christopher Seitz’s concern that such a reading undermines the plain sense of Scripture, Fowl says, “It does . . . raise again the sharp issue of how compatible a static notion of the ‘plain sense’ of scripture, a plain sense located in the text rather than the believing community, is with Christian theological approaches to the Old Testament.”<sup>38</sup> Fowl gives every indication of being willing to allow the experience of the contemporary community to override the plain sense of Scripture, thus fatally undermining biblical authority. This tendency has been the Achilles’ heel of modern, revisionist theology and liberal Protestantism in general ever since Schleiermacher. It is, therefore, not a way forward and has virtually nothing in common with the way the historic mainstream of Christianity has read the Bible. It is a dead end.

Notice that Fowl’s proposed interpretation of Acts 15 drives a wedge between the literal sense of the text and the purported “spiritual sense.” In Acts 15:20, the gentiles are required by the Jerusalem Council to abstain from sexual immorality. That is what the literal sense conveys, whether we view it as simply the historical sense or as the plain sense.<sup>39</sup> In this text, sexual immorality would clearly include homosexual acts. Fowl is talking about extending the meaning of that text in such a way that the spiritual sense would permit a positive moral evaluation of homosexual acts. This sets the spiritual sense in direct contradiction to the literal sense, so it *clearly* is a wrong exegetical move. We will discuss this issue more extensively in chapter 6. The point here is to note that merely proposing a spiritual or theological sense or extending the meaning

37. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 119–26.

38. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 126.

39. In this case, as is often the case in the New Testament, there is no gap between the literal sense and the historical sense of what the original human author meant to convey in the original situation to the original audience. It is not necessary to assert that the historical sense is always the single meaning of the text in order to see that in many cases it is exactly that.

of a text in a certain direction is not automatically to be accepted. So let no one labor under the illusion that just calling it “theological interpretation of Scripture” automatically guarantees good interpretation. Theological interpretation can be done on the basis of good or bad theology; bad theological interpretation, of course, leads to unhelpful and wrong exegetical results.

### *The Decline of Historical Criticism*

Speaking of dead ends, another major trend in contemporary theology that is promising is the continuing disintegration of the historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation. This is encouraging in the sense that it demonstrates the need for a radical reform of biblical studies as an academic discipline. If we think of historical-critical scholarship as a tradition stemming from Spinoza and coming down to the Society of Biblical Literature today, we can point to four characteristics of the tradition in its current form.

First, it is characterized by chronic instability. The “assured results of higher criticism” may be assured while they last, but they do not last long. Modern higher criticism is typically modern insofar as it is firmly in the grip of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in another context, termed “the relentless cult of novelty.”<sup>40</sup> New theories and new twists on old theories seem to be the lifeblood of the discipline; as a result, the clear impression given those outside the guild is that the Bible has no stable meaning.

Second, we see methodological fragmentation. New methods proliferate and are used to get contradictory results. Scholars working in feminist or liberation modes can work without much communication with those practicing literary criticism or rhetorical criticism. The practitioners of the various methods do not seem to need one another. Under such circumstances, is it even meaningful to speak of a “discipline” (singular) at all? Or is there a hidden, underlying set of methodological presuppositions that needs to be exposed and evaluated?

Third, there is increasing relativism as to the results of the investigation of the biblical text. The historical-critical method was supposed to be objective

40. See Solzhenitsyn, “Relentless Cult of Novelty,” an address to the National Arts Club in New York City in 1993 on the occasion of his being awarded the Medal of Honor for literature. In this paper Solzhenitsyn writes: “This relentless cult of novelty, with its assertion that art need not be good or pure, just so long as it is new, newer, and newer still, conceals an unyielding and long-sustained attempt to undermine, ridicule and uproot all moral precepts.” While he is speaking of art in particular, what he says applies to many areas of academic life in the twentieth century, including biblical studies. Nothing is stable and nothing lasts. The contrast with consensual trinitarian and christological orthodoxy, which has existed in a stable form for over 1,500 years, could not be more stark.

and scientific; it was supposed to be the antidote to the subjectivism of the allegorical approach. Yet anyone who studies the Old Testament knows that hardly any two scholars agree on the dating, composition, and authorship of most of the books and sections of books, let alone their meaning. Entire volumes are written that never even get around to discussing the meaning of the biblical book as a whole, let alone how its meaning contributes to the meaning of the Bible as a whole. Only “fundamentalists” seem to do that.

Fourth, higher criticism causes the Bible to go silent in the churches. In denominations in which higher criticism dominates the seminaries, there has been a steep decline in preaching and teaching the Bible in the churches. Lay-people are told that they cannot interpret the Bible correctly without advanced degrees, and so they do not read it very much. Who can blame them? There is a famine of the Word of God in liberal Protestantism. With numerical decline since the 1960s continuing to accelerate, the prognosis is that the continued existence of these denominations for more than another generation or two is very much in doubt. In summary, historical criticism, like liberal theology in general, has done much to weaken the conviction of the church that the Bible is a unified book, uniquely inspired and authoritative, with a crucially important message for all of humanity that one can understand by reading it and listening to sermons that explain it. In short, historical criticism makes it hard to hear the message of God to us in the Bible.

The churches and denominations that are growing or stable tend to have preaching and teaching ministries that draw on the accumulated wisdom of the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy by standing in a linear tradition passed on from pastor to pastor and not relying exclusively on seminary education to do the job. It would be safe to say that more pastors derive more of their preaching and teaching material and methods today from the Tim Kellers and the John Pipers of the world than from academic hermeneutics textbooks. When I as a young pastor decided to preach Isaiah 53 as a prophecy of Christ’s atoning death, it meant more to me that I was following the example of John R. W. Stott and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones than that I was violating the rules laid down by the historical-critical method. The more liberal Protestantism disintegrates, the less relevant the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation will appear to be; this fact should serve to encourage more people to take a second look at what the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy has to offer.

### *Biblical Theology and a Theology of the Bible*

Before I conclude this all-too-brief survey of promising trends in contemporary theology, I want to mention two other trends that I think hold great

potential for nourishing the christological interpretation of the Old Testament and traditional exegesis of the Bible.

First, there has been a flowering of whole-Bible biblical theology in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. There are two main sources from which these writers drew inspiration: the work of Geerhardus Vos and Brevard S. Childs, respectively. Childs published his *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* in 1992 as the culmination of a decades-long publishing program highlighted by his major work *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* in 1979. A decade later Charles Scobie's massive, one-thousand-page work, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, appeared. In the preface to this work he spoke of inhabiting two worlds: the world of the academy, in which the historical-critical approach dominated, and the world of the church, where he often preached and led Bible studies for laypeople. He says, "The tension between these two worlds was often acute."<sup>41</sup> He mentions Childs as one of his inspirations for undertaking this project, as Childs was one of the few who deliberately tried to inhabit both of the solitudes.

The influence of Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) has been disseminated through the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary for the past half-century and has recently stimulated evangelical efforts in biblical theology more widely. G. K. Beale's *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* is an outstanding example.<sup>42</sup> Vos viewed biblical revelation as redemptive historical (rather than as historical critical) and as christocentric. His high view of revelation and inspiration provided a basis for a presentation of a unified biblical theology.<sup>43</sup> This approach is exemplified in his classic *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, published in 1948.

Recently, there has been an outburst of biblical theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, with three whole-Bible biblical theologies appearing within a span of only four years. First came the excellent *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* by James M. Hamilton Jr. in 2010, a book that every pastor should own and use regularly. It was followed by *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* by Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum in 2012 and then by *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* by

41. Scobie, *Ways of Our God*, ix.

42. See also Beale's important monograph, *Temple and the Church's Mission*. Another book that exemplifies a kind of biblical interpretation that is not supported by the historical-critical method but stands in the historic tradition of the church is Letham, *Message of the Person of Christ*.

43. Gaffin, "Introduction," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, xv.

Thomas R. Schreiner in 2013. By attempting to present the meaning of the Bible as a single unified witness to Jesus Christ, all of these works make a significant contribution to undoing the considerable damage done over the past two centuries by the atomizing effects of historical criticism.

Second, John Webster has articulated an ontology of Scripture that is based in trinitarian classical theism and offers tremendous potential as a theological framework for biblical interpretation. We have to piece together his perspective from the many articles and papers he published, which offer a glimpse of what he was planning for his dogmatics.<sup>44</sup> Here I want to point to three aspects of Webster's project that hold promise for biblical interpretation in the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy, although we will discuss them more extensively in chapter 2. First, he understands the need for theology to delineate an ontology of Scripture that gets beyond an ontology of "pure nature" in which the Bible and its readers inhabit a reality in which God does not act, which is what Spinoza meant by interpreting the Bible out of its own history. Webster stresses that the doctrine of creation is the basis of such an ontology, and he argues that we can have an adequate doctrine of creation only by means of an appeal to the Christian doctrine of God.<sup>45</sup> Second, he stresses that the most important factor in good biblical interpretation is a proper appreciation of what the Bible actually is: "divinely instituted signs in the domain of the Word."<sup>46</sup> The nature of interpretation depends on the inspired nature of the Bible. Third, he stresses the mystery of Scripture—namely, that "the Word accomplishes his act of *self-utterance* through these human auxiliaries."<sup>47</sup> Interpretation of Scripture cannot proceed with a focus on the human authors and their intentions alone; it must pay attention to what the divine author is saying through the human authors as well, which necessarily involves the interpreter in mystery, because no human interpreter can grasp all that God is or all the knowledge that God has of himself.

The strength of the recent revival of whole-Bible biblical theology is that it seeks to present the message of the Bible as a unified, coherent, meaningful, relevant Word from God given through the human words of the authors. The weakness of this movement, like the weakness of modern evangelical theology generally, is that it does not address in an adequate manner the philosophical, dogmatic, and theoretical issues that render biblical theology problematic. This is not to say that there are no answers to these problems; it is merely to observe that contemporary evangelical theology and biblical interpretation

44. See the bibliography for a listing.

45. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 5–6.

46. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 9.

47. Webster, *Domain of the Word*, 8, emphasis added.

need to be more historically grounded in the Great Tradition, more critical of modernity's philosophical deviations from the Great Tradition, and more aware of the way that exegesis, dogma, and metaphysics interrelate in the Great Tradition. It is my conviction that John Webster's theology of the Bible can serve as an adequate basis for the biblical theology that evangelicals have always written and are continuing to write today. It is my hope that this book contributes in some small way to making this happen.

### The Argument of This Book

This book seeks to address the problem outlined in this chapter of the gulf between the theories of academic hermeneutics and the practice of ecclesial preaching and teaching. In part 1 (chaps. 2–4), I critique modern hermeneutical theory by beginning with a discussion in chapter 2 of how the doctrine of Scripture is grounded in the classical doctrine of God. Next, I turn to metaphysics in chapter 3 and summarize the Christian Platonist metaphysics of the Great Tradition and how it embodies the metaphysical implications of the biblical doctrine of God. I also show that the Enlightenment was a point-by-point rejection of Christian Platonism and an embrace of ancient Atomist, Epicurean, and Stoic ideas instead. Chapter 4 proposes a revised template for the history of hermeneutics in which the modern hermeneutics of the Enlightenment is demoted from being the goal toward which all previous history led to being considered instead a dead-end road leading to nihilism. Part 1 ends with a call for *ressourcement*.

Part 2 (chaps. 5–7) answers this call by describing resources in the Great Tradition of Christian exegesis that can help us understand what it would mean to interpret the Bible as the Word of God. The goal is to introduce the reader to some of the riches of the Great Tradition's theological reflection on, and practice of, biblical interpretation. Limits of time and space here necessitate selectivity; we just sample the riches that lie for the most part barely tapped. The question of arbitrariness and subjectivism, which is such a big concern for modern interpreters, is addressed head-on, and the view is put forward that the historic manner in which the church has interpreted Scripture is actually *more* scientific and *more* objective than modern historical-critical methods.

This book tries to restore the delicate balance between biblical exegesis, trinitarian dogma, and theological metaphysics that was upset by the heretical, one-sided, narrow-minded movement that is misnamed “the Enlightenment.” It is an attempt to recover the pro-Nicene culture of the fourth century—to inhabit the tradition of Nicene orthodoxy in a substantial way

and not just by mimicking certain vocabulary in superficial ways while actually operating as if the neopagan metaphysics of the Enlightenment were true. In some ways, the original Enlightenment is over, but in other ways its legacy continues to exert a malign influence on Western culture. We could summarize it this way: the naive faith in reason as an adequate source of morality and truth has run its course and is dissipating into the acids of postmodernism, but the cult of the autonomous individual unfortunately continues without diminishment in the romanticism and postmodernism that followed the Enlightenment. With the rise of nineteenth-century romanticism, the individual remained central, but the romantic thinker looked to feeling instead of reason as the source of meaning. By the beginning of the twentieth century, romantic concepts of feeling were seen to be devoid of objective moral content and the Nietzschean will-to-power triumphed.<sup>48</sup> In the postmodern context, the reader-centered approaches to hermeneutics are essentially romantic in essence insofar as they see the individual as the source of meaning, which is then read into the text. But this kind of interpretation must inevitably degenerate into a form of the will-to-power.

In attempting to recover classical interpretation of Scripture, we must be aware of the history of Western thought since the Enlightenment; we must avoid the temptation to replace the single-meaning theory with as many meanings as we have readers (and we must be *seen* to avoid doing so). In a nutshell, my argument shall be that the classical approach to interpretation has always allowed for a fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit without opening the door to interpretive anarchy. Reading the text of Scripture under the guidance of the tradition of creedal orthodoxy allows for new light to break forth without that new light shattering the vessel that contains it. The Enlightenment can be overcome by recovering some of the things that should not have been forgotten.

48. MacIntyre provides a clear explanation of what he calls “the failure of the Enlightenment project” in *After Virtue*, chaps. 5–6.