

## **A THEOLOGICAL READING OF SCRIPTURE? CRITICAL PROBLEMATIC AND PROPHETIC VISION IN THE AFTERMATH AND CROSSROADS OF DISCIPLINARY TRANSFORMATION**

Biblical Studies today stands in both the aftermath of a lengthy process of re-visioning and re-direction and the crossroads of ongoing disciplinary transformation. On such a view of the present state of affairs, all critics, regardless of stripes, would be in fundamental agreement. On disposition toward such a state of affairs, however, the matter is quite different. Here sharp disagreement rules. In some quarters, such developments are decried as involving an unfortunate and damaging loss of scholarly rigor, which criticism must resist and counteract. In other quarters, these changes are looked upon as yielding a bewildering but inescapable situation, which criticism must simply acknowledge and cope with, in one way or another. In yet other quarters, such developments are hailed as constituting a welcome and salutary move in academic sophistication, which criticism must embrace and advance. On a point of origins for such a state of affairs, all critics, regardless of attitude, would agree that this period of transformation started in the mid-1970s.

At this point, therefore, as the discipline fast approaches the forty-year mark since the irruption of this process, the critics find themselves both in the wake of sustained and multidirectional change and in the face of ever more complex and more expansive discursive discussions. On my own stance regarding this process, let there be no equivocation. I readily situate myself within the last formation of critics outlined. I look upon this turn of events as very much in order and as decidedly beneficial. I see it, therefore, as a process that must be understood and mapped, weighed and critiqued, appropriated and furthered. I further agree that it began in the mid-1970s; in fact, I would propose the launching of the journal *Semeia* by the Society of Biblical Literature in 1974, described from its inception as experimental, as an ideal signifier in this regard.

This process, I would add, is by no means unrelated to matters religious and theological in general and to Theological Studies in particular. Quite to the contrary, such a relationship obtains at various levels.

- Such is the case, certainly, at the disciplinary level. Both Biblical Studies and Theological Studies constitute disciplines within the field of Christian Studies. In this regard, it would be most illuminating to trace, in comparative fashion, the trajectories of these two discourses from the 1970s through the present. Attractive as such a venture would be, that is not my goal here.

- It is also the case at the theological level. Theological Studies views Scripture as a foundational source for its work and reveals a long-standing tradition of activating and deploying the biblical texts in such work. Here, too, it would prove most insightful to study the appeal to and application of the Bible in theological construction. Again, attractive as such a project would be, it is also not my aim in this piece.
- It is further the case at the critical level. Biblical Studies encounters and addresses religious-theological terms and concepts in its analysis of the biblical texts and possesses a long-standing tradition of theological reading as part of its critical repertoire. It is in this direction that my goal lies. I should like to foreground and analyze the link between biblical interpretation and theological construction through a focus on the concept and practice of theological reading.

This is the aim that the title, “A Theological Reading of Scripture?” seeks to capture. To wit: how has the notion of theological reading fared in biblical criticism during this process of re-conceptualization and re-formulation in the discipline? This task I should like to pursue, as specified by the subtitle, in two ways: looking back—tracing past developments on the way toward the critical problematic presently before us; and looking forward, discerning future possibilities, in the light of such a crossroads, toward a prophetic vision for the discipline.

I shall begin, therefore, by unfolding a narrative of the discipline’s path from the early 1970s, through the middle 1970s, to the late 1970s and beyond. In so doing, I shall outline, in grand strokes, the various major phases of this transformation, while exposing in the process the operative conceptions of theological reading—the representations and ramifications of such models—present in the course of such stages. On the one hand, the task of interpretive unpacking demands close reflection on matters of method and theory. On the other hand, the task of theological surfacing calls for close attention to the question of the religious-theological in method and theory. The result is a sense of the discursive terrain that has come about from this process of transformation. From within this crossroads, then, I shall proceed to offer a vision of desiderata for the future, with matters of method and theory as well as the question of the religious-theological in mind.

A word on this *modus operandi* is in order. At the center of any academic discipline or subject, any field of study and research, lies the twofold question of method and theory—the interrelated and interdependent questions of procedure and rationale. With regard to procedure or strategy, the question is how to go about doing whatever it is that one does or wishes to do. With respect to rationale or framework, the question becomes why go about doing what one does or wishes to do. As a subject or discipline, Biblical Studies is no different in this regard. To enter the world of biblical criticism, the world of the academic reading of biblical and related texts, is perforce to enter the world of method and theory. Such has been the case since the formation of the discipline in the early nineteenth century, and is even more true today, in the early twenty-first century, as the discipline

continues to ponder, in intensive and expansive fashion, the fundamental questions of what and who as well as wherefore and how. In the world of biblical criticism, moreover, a core dimension at work in method and theory, and hence present across the range of such fundamental questions, is the religious-theological one—the roles and parameters allowed for this problematic in the various stages and models. Consequently, I find it imperative to trace the notion and practice of theological reading, its representations, and ramifications, in the discipline with reference to the methodological and theoretical frameworks in place. A final comment of clarification is in order: Given my expertise, my point of reference throughout will be Early Christian Studies, although my remarks would be readily applicable to Hebrew Bible Studies.

### LOOKING BACK: A VISION OF THE TRANSFORMATION

One way of approaching this long-lasting and still-ongoing process of transformation in the discipline is, I have argued, to treat it as a story—constructing a narrative about its recent path, its present outlook, and its future prospects. Such a tale would make use of, and hence be subject to analysis according to the different constitutive components of narrative, both by way of story or its what-contents and of discourse or its how-narration. Needless to say, such an approach is bound to yield a plurality of stories, given the variety of critics involved, the variety of points of view at work among critics, and the variety of plots deployed by critics in the telling of such a story. Such variety should not be seen as at all deplorable but rather as inevitable and revealing, insofar as it captures and expresses the present state of affairs in the discipline.

My own story has four major characters, four critical movements or grand models of interpretation, which it presents as coming onto the critical scene in more or less sequential fashion from the 1970s onwards. Such appearance the story constructs in terms of a plot with three major stages of development. This plot the story unfolds by way of a process of diversification, at the core of which there lies conflict. These three phases may be described as follows: At first, a sense of stability, long-lasting and self-assured, prevails, involving an initial grand model of interpretation, sole and entrenched. Then, a period of crisis erupts, involving the appearance of two other grand models, which problematize the claims of the existing model, displace it—in principle but not in practice—from its position of hegemony, and begin to turn the discipline into a competitive arena. Ultimately, a sense of resolution settles in, not by means of a return to stability, let alone the stability that marked the first stage, but rather by way of unstable stability. This involves the rise of another grand model, which problematizes the claims of all previous models, is able to offer a full-fledged explanation for the process of diversification as such, and hence renders the discipline into an even more competitive arena.

Given the type of characters in question, their character as highly complex discursive frameworks, this plot can be traced in a variety of ways. I have done so

by way of variations on a major theme: the relationship between subject and object as conceptualized and formulated in the various grand models of interpretation. I have thus explained the advent of diversity and the rise of conflict in the discipline by the varying conceptions at work regarding the relationship between the practitioner and the field of study—critics and texts; historians and history; inquirers and inquired. As a result, I have characterized the stages at work in the plot as follows: Diversity Bound; Diversity Unbinding; Diversity Unbound. In what follows, I shall summarize the developments in question and bring to the fore, in so doing, the representation of and attitude toward theological reading. These three phases may thus be further labeled as follows: Theology Historicized; Theology Historicized and Modulated; and Theology Integrated but Unpursued.

Two further comments are in order regarding this story. First, it is told from a point of view that presents it as a tale of progress and that rejoices in such a swift unfolding of diversity in method and theory. Second, it is told by a critic who has both lived through and engaged in all of these tectonic shifts from within the discipline and thus functions as an observing participant. Indeed, my professional and scholarly life has been one of constant retooling, so that the sense of rejoicing has come with a price, from its now-distant beginning in the late 1970s to its ever-closer conclusion in the years ahead.

### *Theology Historicized—Historical Criticism*

I have posited the existence of an established and dominant grand model of interpretation through the early 1970s. I have in mind, of course, traditional historical criticism. A historical approach to the world of early Christianity, its texts and contexts, reigned supreme for approximately one hundred and fifty years—from the formation of the discipline in the first half of the nineteenth century through its period of crisis in the third quarter of the twentieth century. Such hegemony thus lasted from the period of intellectual ferment that followed upon the French Revolution, when the study of Christian beginnings turned to the similarly nascent discipline of history for grounding, to that other period of intellectual ferment that followed upon the upheavals of the Sixties, when such study began to look elsewhere in the academy for grounding. This was a phase of remarkable stability.

For the academic interpretation of early Christian writings, today and in future, a knowledge of this *historical* mode of discourse remains crucial for critics as well as for Christian Studies at large. This is so not only because of its long duration and formative influence on the discipline but also because it would prove impossible to understand the recent transformation without a grasp of what preceded and motivated such a turn of events. Such knowledge demands interpretive as well as theological unpacking.

(i) *Interpretive Vision*—Historical criticism sought to study the writings of early Christianity in the light of their context, broadly understood—historical, literary, social, and religious. This it did from a variety of perspectives, depending

on the focus of study in the project of contextualization at any one point over its long duration: text criticism; source criticism; comparative criticism involving matters social and cultural; form criticism; redaction criticism; and composition criticism. Underlying these different approaches lay a specific view of the relationship between the practitioner and the field of studies, the ideal of exegesis.

For historical criticism, a wide historical as well as cultural gulf separated text and critic: the text was “out there”; the critics were “over here.” The text represented historical evidence from and for the time of composition and called for contextualization. As such, it was to be read in its own terms, within its own context, and as evidence for the reconstruction of that context. Its meaning was treated, if not viewed, as univocal and objective, as was the path of history itself. It was thus possible to recreate meaning and to reconstruct history. To do so, however, a decontextualization of the critic was essential. Such recreation and reconstruction could be achieved only by means of a scientific method that guaranteed neutrality and impartiality on the part of the critic. For anyone to attain such a level of reading, a process of divestiture was in order: putting aside all biases and taking on objectivity. The result was clear: historical criticism pursued with relish the diversity of Christian beginnings as reflected in the early Christian writings, yet it frowned severely upon diversity at the level of interpretation. With regard to critics, therefore, diversity remained bound: all would-be practitioners were to become alike—universal and informed readers.

(ii) *Theological Vision*—The project of contextualization captures the modernist élan of historical criticism. This grand model sought freedom from the perceived restraints imposed by dogma and tradition upon interpretation: the freedom to wrest the Bible away from the constrictive and distorting optic of the church and to bring it under the corrective and liberating lens of the academy. At the same time, behind the ideal of exegesis in contextualization, a specific view of theological reading can be discerned: its objective was historical appropriateness and accuracy, not confessional relevance and concordance. The past was the past, and the present was the present. Here, moreover, a bifurcation between texts and critics applied.

With regard to early Christianity, its texts and contexts, the focus of historical criticism could be described as intensely religious-theological in character and its prevailing model of analysis in this regard as one of conflict. Critics were interested in establishing the religious-theological positions of the texts at all levels of inquiry—from the earliest stratum of oral tradition, through the various literary layers identifiable, to the final and present layout. Such positions were invariably represented in terms of controversies within and among the early communities, so that vigorous debates and disputes were perceived and delineated as present throughout. These stances and conflicts were often cast against the broader social and cultural background and/or in interaction with concrete religious-theological formations within it, whether with the microcontext of Judaism or the macrocontext of the Greco-Roman world in view.

With regard to the study of early Christianity, its production and matrix, the emphasis of historical criticism was on transcendence of context and perspective. Critics viewed themselves as scientific scholars, beyond confessional moorings or inclinations in their research. As such, it did not matter what ecclesial tradition they came from or belonged to, nor, for that matter, whether they were believers or not. Analyzing the positions and disputes of early Christianity was thus possible without influence from or reference to the religious-theological stances and conflicts of critics. The objective was to lay out the facts, discursive or material, of early Christianity, not to pass judgment upon them or, much less, to engage them critically in terms of the present. Critics saw their work as providing a secure foundation for the constructive religious-theological work of other disciplines of Christian Studies.

The result was evident: historical criticism pursued without reserve the religious-theological terrain of Christian beginnings, with full awareness of its complex and conflicted character, but refrained altogether from examining the contemporary religious-theological terrain, whether by way of influence upon them or by way of engagement with the texts. With regard to critics, therefore, the religious-theological dimension was thoroughly historicized—of driving interest in the past and of no concern in the present. Critics functioned, in principle, as a-religious and a-theological readers.

I stated at the beginning that knowledge of this initial critical movement remained crucial today. I would actually advance a greater claim. First, a historical reading today requires a measure of sophistication in the history of historiography, so that the model followed by historical criticism can be compared with other models, and in contemporary historiography, so that the transformations of the field can be properly understood and applied. Second, a historical reading today should be accompanied by critical analysis of the religious-theological framework of critics and their work.

### *Theology Historicized and Modulated: Literary and Cultural Criticisms*

I have pointed to the emergence of two other grand models of interpretation in the 1970s as the second stage in the process of transformation of the discipline. I refer to literary criticism and sociocultural criticism. Voices of dissatisfaction within historical criticism began to surface in the mid-1970s, gradually evolved into major critical movements through the late 1970s and 1980s, and have continued to expand in diversity and sophistication since then. These voices came from different quarters, addressed different shortcomings of historicism, and remained largely independent of one another. The result was a period of crisis, which signaled the end of historical criticism as the sole and entrenched grand model and the rise of alternative models.

Dissatisfaction was expressed, on the one hand, with the way in which texts had been approached. Various tendencies of historical criticism began to be viewed as bypassing the text as such: its emphasis on textual ruptures (fracturing),

on the pre-existing stages of texts (excavative), and on verse-by-verse analysis (atomistic). The text, it was argued, was worthy of analysis in and of itself, as text, with a focus on its formal features. Dissatisfaction was also expressed, on the other hand, with the way in which contexts had been approached. The pointilistic tendencies of historical criticism began to view as simplifying the context as such: unstructured, impressionistic, and even ethnocentric. The context, it was argued, was worthy of analysis in and of itself, as context, with a focus on its social features. Both sets of voices began to look, therefore, to other disciplines for grounding: the former, to the human sciences (literary, rhetorical, psychological studies); the latter, to the social sciences (sociological, anthropological studies). In the process, the long-standing and exclusive association between Early Christian Studies and Historical Studies drew rapidly to a close.

For the academic interpretation of early Christian writings, today and in the future, acquaintance with the *literary* and *sociocultural* modes of discourse proves essential for critics and Christian Studies alike. Such is the case on two counts: the prominence and vigor of such movements and their pivotal role in the transformation. Interpretive and theological unpacking are, again, in order.

(i) *Interpretive Vision*—Within each grand model, a broad set of approaches gradually came into being, depending on the particular focus of study in question. From the point of view of literary criticism, one finds structuralist criticism; psychoanalytic criticism; narrative criticism; rhetorical criticism; reader-response criticism; deconstructive criticism. From the point of view of sociocultural criticism, one finds sociological criticism and anthropological criticism. With regard to the ideal of exegesis, a distinction is imperative in both models.

For the most part, this ideal remained unquestioned. In fact, both literary criticism and cultural criticism set out to outdo historical criticism by seeking to advance, from a methodological and theoretical point of view, a much more secure foundation and strategy for dealing with the text as text and the context as context. The basic perception was, in effect, that the task of contextualization—reading the text in its own terms, within its own context, and as evidence for the reconstruction of that context—had not been properly executed. At the same time, certain developments within both movements pointed to the first cracks in this ideal. From the perspective of literary criticism, the concepts of univocality and objectivity did yield some ground, given the increasing emphasis on the plurality of interpretations, whether due to the polysemy of texts and the agency of readers. From the perspective of sociocultural criticism, both concepts yielded further ground, given the increasing focus on the sociocultural dimensions of readers. In attempting to refine the task of contextualization, therefore, the grounds for radical reconsideration had been laid as well. While the scientific goals of recreation and reconstruction, neutrality and impartiality, prevailed, a degree of erosion was evident as well.

The result was evident: while both grand models continued to pursue unreservedly the diversity of Christian beginnings, the first hints of diversity at the level of interpretation began to surface. With respect to critics, then, this was a



case of diversity unbinding. First, expectations regarding practitioners witnessed a fundamental change from one grand model to a variety of such models—universal and informed readers, along different and contested lines of approach. Second, expectations regarding the ideal of exegesis began, ever so slightly, to be relaxed—informed readers, but not as universal as before.

(ii) *Theological Vision*—This project of refined contextualization preserved the modernist impulse of historical criticism. Both grand models sought freedom from the perceived stranglehold of historicism on the discipline: the freedom to approach the texts and contexts of early Christianity as literary texts and sociocultural contexts in their own right, respectively. Behind the proposed refinement in contextualization lay, again, a working view of theological reading: its aim was greater historical accuracy and reliability through modulation of the religious-theological dimension in terms of literary expression and sociocultural embodiment. The past was the past, and the present was the present, but the past called for literary and sociocultural nuancing. The existing bifurcation between texts and critics remained largely unaffected.

With respect to the texts and contexts of early Christianity, the earlier focus on religious-theological positions and controversies did not change. What did change was the adoption of a nuanced approach toward such stances and conflicts, so that the religious-theological dimension emerged as a signifier for other concomitant dimensions of meaning. Critics viewed such positions and controversies not just as revolving around issues of belief and practice—involving individuals, parties, or communities—but also as bearing broader discursive as well as material implications. Attention was centered on such implications: on the one hand, their literary-rhetorical dimension, such as matters of structuration and expression, of argumentation and strategies; on the other hand, their social and cultural dimensions, such as questions of organization and interchange, of values and customs. The religious-theological was now seen as having recourse to artistic features and as displaying material channels, which, given previous lack of attention, now rose to the fore.

With respect to the production and matrix of early Christian Studies, the earlier insistence on abstraction from context and perspective saw little change, and then only by way of surface cracks. The project of laying out the facts of early Christianity, in scientific fashion, without evaluation or engagement, did not relent, but did become more involved, given the call for a calibration of the religious-theological domain by appeal to literary as well as social theory. Securing a foundation for Christian Studies continued as the main task, but with a certain sense of fragility, given the beginning acknowledgment of interpretive agency and textual fluidity.

The result was evident: both grand models sharpened their pursuit of the religious-theological terrain of Christian beginnings, diminishing its overall importance in the process, and abstained from carrying out a similar expansion in the religious-theological terrain of Early Christian Studies, despite its incipient



challenge to the values of textual univocity and critical objectivity. With regard to critics, therefore, the religious-theological dimension remained thoroughly historicized, though now highly modulated and hence decidedly attenuated. Critics still functioned, in principle, as a-religious and a-theological readers.

I stated above that acquaintance with these two grand models of interpretation remained essential today. This claim is actually more substantial. Reading early Christian writings today demands a measure of expertise in literary as well as social studies, so that critics can be properly informed in approaching a text and dealing with context. Such reading further demands critical analysis of the religious-theological framework of critics and their work.

### *Theology Problematized yet Untheorized: Ideological Criticism*

I have referred to the existence of a fourth grand model of interpretation in recent times as a third phase in the process of transformation of the discipline. I have in mind ideological criticism. Not long after the emergence of literary and sociocultural criticisms, other voices of dissatisfaction started to come to the fore, now with all three grand models in mind. Given their varying optics, their appearance on the critical scene is not straightforward: the first such voices, addressing the problematics of gender and political economy, came to expression in the late 1970s; then, as these became increasingly vibrant formations through the 1980s, they were joined by other voices of dissent dealing with the problematics of race and sexuality; since then, all these formations have continued to grow in strength and subtlety, while joined by yet other voices of dissent, turning to the problematic of geopolitics. These voices came both from inside and outside the earlier critical movements. From the inside, the initial cracks regarding the ideal of exegesis widened and deepened. From the outside, momentous demographic changes were taking place in a discipline that up to this point had been male, clerical, and Western. These two developments coincided with and reinforced one another, yielding in the process a further grand model of interpretation, which was able to account for the plurality of grand models as such. The result was a sense of resolution, marked by stability, though of a peculiar sort—a stability of intractable pluralism in method and theory, and hence inherently unstable.

Dissatisfaction from the inside was inevitable, as the focus on the plurality of interpretations and the agency of readers in interpretation continued to intensify. A number of voices began to argue that behind all recreations of meaning and reconstructions of history, behind all methods and models, stood real readers and that such flesh-and-blood readers were always and inescapably contextualized and perspectival. Dissatisfaction from the outside became inevitable as well, as more and more outsiders to the discipline joined its ranks—from Western women, to men and women from the non-Western world, to women and men from non-Western minority groups in the West. These voices insisted on interpretive plurality and reader agency as well as on the contextualization and perspective of real readers in interpretation. In both regards, such rumblings were paralleled and

aided by similar discussions across the disciplinary spectrum of the human and social sciences. On all fronts, therefore, critical emphasis turned to the problematic of representation and the ideological analysis of differential relations of power with regard to texts and critics alike.

For the academic interpretation of early Christian writings, today and in the future, knowledge of this *ideological* mode of discourse is indispensable for critics and Christian Studies alike. This is so on two counts: first, because, as the most recent stage in the process of transformation, and as the crossroads within which the discipline finds itself, it serves as the foundation for all future development; second, because that is where the discussion continues in the academy at large. Such knowledge calls, yet again, for interpretive and theological unpacking.

(i) *Interpretive Vision*—Within this grand model, a variety of formations developed over time, depending on the particular factor of critical identity under consideration and the resultant constructions and relations in question. Most important among them have been feminist criticism and materialist criticism; ethnic-racial criticism and queer criticism; postcolonial criticism. Other factors come readily to mind: health-disability, age, and education. For the ideal of exegesis, this grand model proved shattering.

Given the emphasis on agency on the part of contextualized and perspectival readers, the sense of a wide divide between the critic and the text is cast aside. The basic perception now arises that the task of contextualization—reading the text in its own terms, within its own context, and as evidence for the reconstruction of that context—is fundamentally defective as formulated, since behind such contextualization lies not, as required, a neutral and impartial reader but rather a reader that is very much at work, in any number of ways, in the task of recreation and reconstruction. For ideological criticism, the reader is ultimately engaged in construction—the re-creation of meaning in texts and the reconstruction of history in contexts. Consequently, given the enormous variety of real readers engaged in such a task, such constructions will of necessity exhibit widespread and conflictive diversity. As a result, the phenomenon of diversity is explained and justified at a foundational level. In the end, contextualization for ideological criticism becomes a far more demanding and complex task, equally applicable to texts and critics; in fact, exegesis and eisegesis now go hand in hand.

The result was evident: with this grand model of interpretation, diversity at the level of interpretation becomes an established critical principle. With regard to critics, therefore, this is a case of diversity unbound. First, expectations regarding critics experienced the inclusion of a further grand model within the repertoire of the discipline—readers, informed, along even more different and contested lines of approach. Second, expectations regarding exegesis underwent a profound reversal—readers radically contextualized and perspectival as well as thoroughly at work in constructing texts and contexts.

(ii) *Theological Vision*—This project of overarching contextualization, encompassing both the axis of texts and the axis of readers, maintained the modernist impulse of literary and sociocultural criticism. This grand model sought freedom from the perceived stranglehold of objectivism on the discipline, as conveyed by the concepts of texts as independent entities and of critics as abstracted decipherers: the freedom to approach interpretations of early Christian texts and contexts as exercises in construction on the part of interpreters and to approach interpreters as contextualized and perspectival agents. Behind this proposed expansion, a working view of theological reading was, once again, at play: its aim was calibration of the religious-theological dimension by attention to unequal relations of power in society and culture throughout. The past was now in the present, and the present in the past, and both called for discursive and material nuancing of all sorts. In the process, the bifurcation between texts and critics was distinctly affected, but more in principle more than in practice.

With regard to the texts and contexts of Christian beginnings, the sustained focus on religious-theological positions and debates underwent significant change. On the one hand, the religious-theological dimension became an even broader signifier for other dimensions of inquiry, beyond the literary and the sociocultural, through the integration of the problematic of power, of domination and subordination, in society and culture. Critics viewed such stances and controversies as bearing, alongside matters of belief and practice and in addition to implications of literary expression and sociocultural embodiment, questions of identity and representation—like gender and economy, race-ethnicity and sexuality, geopolitics and other such. The religious-theological dimension was thus approached as reflecting and conveying differential constructions and relations of power, which, given their previous lack of attention, now became primary. On the other hand, attention to power relations and constructions tended to become the main object of inquiry, displacing the religious-theological dimension as such. In both regards, a peculiar situation obtained: while this dimension constitutes an axis within the problematic of power, analysis of its relations and constructions was deflected and unproblematized.

With respect to the production and matrix of early Christian studies, the sustained emphasis on abstraction from context and perspective witnessed even more radical change. The project of unearthing the discursive and material facts of early Christianity, already showing signs of fragility, collapsed, yielding two important results: on the one hand, the awareness of agency and construction in any project of interpretation; on the other hand, an alternative project of examining the dynamics and mechanics of such agency and such constructions. As a result, the realm of interpreters and interpretations was now viewed as thoroughly crisscrossed by unequal relations of power across all axes of human identity with consequences for the task of criticism. Again, however, the analysis of the religious-theological axis of power among critics failed to be pursued as such.

The result was evident: ideological criticism expanded the pursuit of the religious-theological terrain of Christian beginnings, further reducing in the process

its overall importance in the face of power, and carried such expansion to the religious-theological terrain of Early Christian Studies, though in neither case was the religious-theological foregrounded as an axis of power in its own right. With regard to critics, therefore, the religious-theological dimension was now no longer historicized but universalized, more highly calibrated in its implications but largely unproblematized in and of itself. Critics now functioned, in principle, as religious-theological readers, but without analysis of such a web of constructions and relations.

I have claimed that knowledge of this grand model of interpretation is indispensable today. Such a claim is quite comprehensive. Reading early Christian writings today call for a measure of expertise in the congeries of studies that constitute ideological criticism, if critics are to be properly informed in dealing with the problematic of power in identity and representation at all levels of culture and society. Such reading further calls for critical analysis of such relations of power regarding critics themselves, including attention to the religious-theological dimension as one such axis of power.

#### LOOKING FORWARD: A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

The preceding charting of the process of transformation, of re-visioning and re-direction, yields a distinct sense of the discursive terrain in the discipline at present. What emerges is a crossroad marked by increasing multiplicity of critical approaches, expanding integration of reading traditions, and a growing repertoire of academic interlocutors. It is from within such a crossroad that I should like to venture a vision for the future, with matters of method and theory as well as the question of the religious-theological in mind. A prophetic vision, therefore, but not in the sense of predicting what will come to happen, but rather in the sense of what I should like to see happen.

##### *Multiplicity of Critical Approaches*

Such fundamental shifts in method and theory have brought about a drastically altered state of affairs in the conception and exercise of the discipline. This is true in terms of both critical diversity in general and ideological focalization in particular.

To begin with, the impact of critical diversity has been enormous. What should be expected of critics today differs radically from what was expected through the early 1970s. Up until then, the field required expertise in one grand model or major formation of interpretation. Such training entailed mastery of and dexterity in a variety of reading strategies and theoretical frameworks. These, however, presupposed a fairly distinctive and rather homogeneous mode of discourse, though, to be sure, with variations across the different methods and models. Since then, the field demands expertise in an increasing number of such grand models. This training calls for familiarity with and facility in various

reading strategies and theoretical frameworks within each grand model. While each involves a fairly related and recognizable mode of discourse across strategies and frameworks, the variations in question now prove far more complex and demanding.<sup>1</sup> It was one thing to go from, say, form criticism to redaction criticism. It is quite another to move from, say, literary criticism to postcolonial criticism, or from feminist criticism to materialist criticism.

In addition, the impact of ideological focalization has proved similarly far-reaching. On the one hand, the search for Christian antiquity, the securing of the foundations, has given way to a search for the construction of Christian antiquity, the exposé of the foundations. Rather than a sense of progressive research toward an ever fuller portrayal of early Christianity, what prevails now is a sense that the constructions of early Christianity differ according to the particular discursive frameworks brought to bear upon the texts and contexts. On the other hand, the search for universality and neutrality in interpretation, the ideal of exegesis, has yielded to a search for the location and agenda of interpretation, the exposé of eisegesis. Instead of a sense of dispassionate observation in recreation and reconstruction, what now prevails is a sense that critical context and perspective are inextricably involved in all interpretation as well as in the interpreters behind them.

Such developments cannot but have a significant effect on the concept of a theological reading in criticism. Several come readily to mind.

- The traditional historicization of the religious-theological dimension must be set aside altogether. A prophetic vision calls for a pursuit of this angle of inquiry across all interpretation as well: not only with respect to critics and their production in the contemporary postmodernist era, but also by re-visiting and re-reading critics and their production from the modernist era.
- The religious-theological dimension as a central factor of human identity and as a problematic of power yielding unequal constructions and relations in society and culture must be foregrounded and analyzed in both the world of Christian antiquity and the world of Early Christian Studies. A prophetic vision calls for a pursuit of this problematic with the same intensity and rigor as the pursuit of other such problematics in recent decades. Just as critics must acquire expertise in such fields as gender

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<sup>1</sup>A cultural indicator drives the point home. First, from a curricular point of view, courses with a focus on method and theory came into being, by and large, only after the fact of diversity and the multiplicity of grand models. These now constitute a staple of the repertoire, ideally offered at the commencement of graduate training. Before diversity, such courses proved unnecessary. Method and theory were to be learned through the various offerings of the curriculum, all of which represented variations within the same grand model of interpretation. Today, such courses are simply indispensable.

studies and postcolonial studies, so they cannot do without expertise in constructive theological studies.

- Any sense of critics as a-religious and as a-theological must be abandoned, along with any dreams of establishing the foundations for constructive work in other theological disciplines. A prophetic vision calls for an approach to Early Christian Studies as an exercise in religious-theological construction of its own and for a view of critics as religious-theological agents in their own right, producing competing representations of early Christianity.

This part of the vision can generate many a project for the future. For example, in her evaluation of the project on minority criticism,<sup>2</sup> Mayra Rivera presses the project on the underlying conception of God at work in the project, at once noting the absence of such reflection on the part of contributors and urging attention to religious-theological issues. Similarly, the concept of the role and task of criticism must be addressed as a problematic. What is exactly is it that we do and why do we do it? This is precisely what a project on Latino/a criticism has undertaken to investigate.

### *Integration of Reading Traditions*

The shifts in method and theory have also brought about a reshuffling in the conception and practice of the discipline in terms of reading traditions, with academic or professional criticism as one among several such traditions.

Up to the early 1970s, it was consensus opinion, if not an article of faith, among critics that the scholarly reading of the Bible was inherently superior and hermeneutically privileged, providing the one proper and correct reading of the texts. This view of criticism was certainly elitist but by no means gnostic. First, it was a reading that called for systematic and arduous training but that was also open to anyone able and willing to undergo such training. Second, it was also a reading that called for dissemination from top to bottom—from graduate venues, to academic and ministerial venues, to ecclesial venues. Nowadays, given the view of the discipline as a crossroad involving a variety of grand models of interpretation, this sense of scholarly reading as unique has been displaced. On the one hand, professional criticism has emerged as a reading tradition based in the academy—subject to critical analysis regarding origins and principles, strategies and findings, context and agenda. On the other hand, professional criticism is further placed as one among several such traditions, all long-standing and wide-ranging, and all subject to similar intensive scrutiny. Consequently, claims of hermeneutical privilege and inherent superiority no longer constitute a critical given but become instead features of a particular ideological project subject to critique.

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<sup>2</sup>“Incarnate Words: Images of God and Reading Practices,” in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, eds. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Studies, 2009) 313-329.

To be sure, academic criticism is by no means abandoned as a result; the study of disciplinary history does remain a must, but attention to other reading traditions becomes a must as well. Such study would include the following examples, among others:

- The religious-theological tradition, which would encompass any number of different modes, such as the dogmatic and the constructive, the fundamentalist and the Pentecostal, the liberationist.
- The institutional-ecclesial tradition, which would bring together such variations as the liturgical and the homiletical, the denominational and the official, the catechetical and the pastoral.
- The popular or devotional tradition, which would entertain the many beloved and enduring practices observed in the daily lives of believers, whether among individuals or in groups.
- The social and cultural tradition, which would bring together the appropriation and use of biblical motifs and themes, scenes and situations, in cultural production and social framework at large.
- The political or statist tradition, which would encompass the appeal to and application of biblical texts in the realm of national and international affairs.

The ramifications of this development for theological reading in criticism are immense and obvious. This is a move that brings criticism into the full arena of Christian Studies, no longer as a foundational discipline for the others but as a scrutinizing discipline of them, seeking to surface and analyze the dynamics and consequences of their use of the Bible, direct or indirect. This is also a move that brings criticism into whole arena of Christian practices, no longer as imparting the truth but as analyzing the practices and results of reading the Bible wherever such activity takes place. A prophetic vision in this regard foresees the generation of any number of projects as well.

For example, my colleague Francisco Lozada and I have now launched, within the American Academy of Religion, a multi-year project examining the use of the Bible in Latino/a constructive theology and, within the Society of Biblical Literature, another multi-year project looking at the use of the Bible in Liberation Theology. Similarly, the Free University of Amsterdam, under the leadership of the Dom Helder Camera Program and Professor Hans de Wit, has been pursuing a global project on intercultural criticism, with a focus on comparative reading of texts between and among concrete Christian communities throughout all continents.

#### *Broadening of Academic Interlocutors*

The shifts in method and theory have further created a revamping in the conception and practice of the discipline in terms of interdisciplinary conversations. To be sure, the discipline has always been interdisciplinary in character, but the process of transformation has rendered it far more explicitly and broadly so.



Up to the early 1970s, introductions to the method and theory behind the established grand model of interpretation were uncommon. Introductions to the field focused briefly, if at all, on questions of method and theory. Further, introductions did not seek to connect with ongoing trajectories and debates in Historical Studies. Nowadays, given the recourse to literary and social studies as well as the appeal to the spectrum of ideological studies, it is indispensable, with regard to any major movement or grand model, to become conversant with the origins and parameters, the development and reception, of such methods and models within their respective fields of study. This means more than just a simple nod to a theory or theorist; it means critical appropriation of a body of literature and of any theory or theorist within such a corpus.<sup>3</sup>

The consequences for theological reading in criticism are boundless. Intrinsic to any religious-theological reading, whether in the ancient world or in the modern and postmodern worlds, is the realization that this dimension cannot do without pursuit of what it presupposed and implies in terms of relations of power in society and culture. It is impossible to do theology in universal and innocent fashion. At the same time, such a reading cannot be occluded by such power constructions and relations but must be pursued in the light of them and with all of them in mind. It is impossible to reduce the religious-theological dimension to other levels of inquiry.

Examples of needed projects abound. In the conjunction between Postcolonial Studies and Biblical Studies, there is the theoretical mapping provided by *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Interventions*<sup>4</sup> and the *Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*.<sup>5</sup> Much needed are similar works pursuing the juncture between Biblical Studies and Racial-Ethnic Studies and Materialist Studies, respectively. There is also an evident need for a sense of the biblical texts as an intersectional document, along with a sense of biblical critics as intersectional human beings.

## CONCLUSION

I have spoken much about theory and method in the discipline. I have also spoken much about major shifts in theory and method leading to corresponding shifts in models of interpretation. I should like to conclude with a budding

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<sup>3</sup>One cultural indicator proves revealing in this regard. In recent times, the emergence of introductions to methods, ranging over the different umbrella models of interpretation, individually or collectively, have become a popular and distinctive genre of scholarly writing, while broader discussions of method in general introductions to the field have also become *de rigueur*. Such a proliferation of this genre of scholarly writing parallels a similar trend in other fields as well, both in the social and human sciences. In effect, methods and theories have become so numerous and so complex that introductions to methods and theories have become an indispensable tool for any field of study and research.

<sup>4</sup>Eds. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Eds. Fernando F. Segovia and R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

reflection about the Bible as theory. I have in mind here not the project of outlining, say, a Theology of the New Testament, which can then serve as a sort of charter for theological construction. I also do not have in mind a project involving only the canonical books as the parameters for such a charter. I have in mind, rather, a sense of early Christian production as an overall field of vision for reading and addressing the world, the other-world, and the relationship between the two worlds—all within a specific material matrix.

I imagine a highly complex and conflicted field where convoluted and conflictive views of the world, the other-world, and their interaction are advanced. Such a field we, in turn, as critic-theologians would address and critique in our own views of the world, the other-world, and their relation—all within our own material matrix. This we would do with a sense of the early Christian tradition as a way of thinking and acting in the world and dealing with the problematic of society and culture as a whole. This we would do with an eschatological vision of a world gone deeply awry in so many ways and of a world in which freedom and liberation, justice and peace, dignity and well-being, is desperately and relentlessly sought. It is such an incipient vision that I place before you today as doing biblical theory, as a theological reading of the Scripture in and for our times.

In the field of Early Christian Studies, therefore, the twofold question of method and theory, always at the center of any discipline or subject, became much more prominent and absorbing but also much more intricate and consuming over the last quarter of the twentieth century. Following major tectonic movements at work across the entire disciplinary terrain of the human and social sciences, the study of the early Christian writings has been compelled, more often than not at a guarded historical distance, to re-consider and re-vision its own approach to texts—its own methods and models, its own self-conception as a tradition of reading—its own academic contextualization and perspective, and its own location in the academy—its relationship to and engagement with other fields of study.

A major driving force behind such tectonic shifts has been the issue of diversity, which always exacts a heavy price. For the field as a whole, diversity has meant a heightened demand in matters methodological and theoretical, a need for ever greater sophistication, conceptual as well as practical, on the part of all practitioners. Today and for the foreseeable future, this state of affairs is bound not only to perdure but also to intensify.

### *Prophetic Vision*

I referred at the beginning to a heightened state of affairs in matters methodological and theoretical within the discipline at the present time and accounted for it in terms of the diversity that has come to permeate the discipline in the last thirty-five years. In the preceding narrative of this turn of events, I proceeded to trace the irruption of diversity in terms of three stages involving a process of “unbinding.” The result of such unbinding, I have argued, has been a heightened demand on all practitioners with regard to method and theory: a need for ever

greater sophistication in an ever wider array of reading strategies, theoretical frameworks, and umbrella models of interpretation—both inside and outside the discipline. Such, I have pointed out, is the heavy price always exacted by any process of diversity.

Yet, diversity always proves enormously uplifting as well, and this is no less true with regard to Early Christian Studies. Its benefits for the discipline can be readily outlined. To begin with, it has forced practitioners to become ever more self-conscious in their use of method and theory, both with regard to others and to themselves, and such critical self-awareness always proves salutary in any field of study. In addition, it has forced practitioners to become ever more interdisciplinary in their understanding and exercise of the discipline, tying them ever closer to the human and social sciences and thus to the academy itself. Finally, it has forced practitioners to become ever more self-conscious as well regarding their own contextualization and perspective in the world, a world where a process of increasing globalization goes hand in hand with a process of increasing differentiation.

As I look forward, I see several areas of development: (i) a project of intersectionality in ideological criticism, (ii) a project of theological engagement, and (iii) a project of cultural biblical criticism, with attention to readings and readers of texts in modernity and postmodernity.

Reading Early Christian texts today and for the foreseeable future has become, therefore, a far more challenging task, to be sure, but also a far more exciting task. If the demands in method and theory have increased a hundredfold, so have their rewards. For now, furthermore, such demands and such rewards are bound to continue and multiply, making the field even more challenging and exciting in the years to come.

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