

Knowing One's Place: On Venues in Biblical Interpretation

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Catholics and Protestants alike ground some, if not all, of the tenets of their Christian faith in the Bible. Although there are profound differences between Catholics and Protestants on the fonts of divine revelation, namely, Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture (Catholics) or Sacred Scripture alone (Protestants), all Christians look to the Bible as their sacred text. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Christian faith was challenged by biblical scholarship. Initially, the provocations came primarily from Protestant auspices, but by the middle of the twentieth century, Catholics exegetes had caught up; and according to the opinion of many, they now even supercede their Protestant peers in the practice of biblical criticism. Reaction to modern and contemporary scripture scholarship has been mixed. On the one hand, there are those who claim that its challenge is positive insofar as it invites Christians to probe the doctrines of their faith; on the other hand, there are those who claim that its challenge is negative insofar as it provokes Christians to doubt the doctrines of their faith. But like it or not, the biblical academy has taken and continues to take positions which intimidate many Christians. In the past, Catholics and Protestants had few difficulties, *mutatis mutandis*, in interpreting the Bible. Today, debate rages within individual denominations and within Christianity as a whole about the nature of biblical truth. In too many quarters, the challenge of biblical interpretation has become a crisis of faith.

On January 27, 1988, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger delivered the Erasmus Lecture at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City under the title, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today." As is easily gleaned from the title, Ratzinger considers biblical interpretation to be in a state of crisis due to ungrounded and often unexamined philosophical and theological presuppositions behind exegetical methods, particularly the radical application of the historical-critical method. In his lecture, Ratzinger not only indicates some of these presuppositions, but he also offers "hopes" for the future of biblical studies. His fifth and final hope is that "the exegete [must] realize that he does not stand in some

neutral area, above or outside history and the Church.”¹ Ratzinger’s simple statement accentuates the venue of the interpreter rather than the object interpreted, that is, he highlights the importance of the venue within which the Bible is read. Stress on the setting of interpretation rather than the text may seem inconsequential, but careful consideration manifests the manifold importance of the turn, especially for biblical interpretation.² No one reads the Bible in a vacuum. Each of us reads the Bible within some venue, within a setting, within some place of contextualization—wherever it may be—and knowing one’s place is key to biblical interpretation.

We Catholics read the Bible for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment because we believe that the Bible is God’s Word. Our interest in biblical interpretation is an exercise of the *fides quaerens intellectum*, of the faith seeking understanding. Catholics believe that God has revealed himself in Tradition and Scripture; Catholics believe that the locus of our interpretative effort is the Church. We are aware that other Christians think of the Bible very differently from the way we do: Protestants consider the Bible to be the *only* font of revelation. Nonetheless, we share a common interest in things biblical. Due to the authority accredited to the Bible by Catholics and Protestants alike, the Bible has become the most extensively and exhaustively examined book in all of history. Before, during, and after the sad events of the sixteenth century—confessional differences notwithstanding—biblical interpretation in and of itself was relatively calm. Catholics and Protestants had little to define in terms of biblical truth. The few proclamations of the Council of Florence (1438–45) and the Council of Trent (1545–63) were more concerned with canonical problems than interpretation. Surely, there was a vast separation between Catholic and Protestant theology, but it was not over the truth of the Bible as much as it was over the interpretation of that same truth. Catholics and Protestants claim that their respective faiths are in fact based, partially or fully, on the Bible. The *truth* of the Bible *per se* has never been in question, for the generic venue of Christian biblical interpretation is revelation. The construal of biblical truth is another matter. That has to do with respective confessional understandings of the

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Exegesis Today” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus, Encounter Series 9 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 22. Five years later, in his preface to the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s *L’interprétation de la Bible dans l’Église*, Ratzinger noted that the historical-critical method inaugurated “a struggle over its scope and over its proper configuration which is by no means finished yet” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, trans. John Kilgallen and Brendan Byrne [Boston: St. Paul Books & Media], 27).

² For an earlier investigation of the reader’s role in biblical interpretation, see my “Hermeneutics Begins at Home: On Retrieving the Reader in Biblical Interpretation,” *Dunwoodie Review* 23 (2000): 77–99.

nature of revelation. Classical Catholicism and classical Protestantism differ on this salient point: Catholics believe that the Bible is an integral part of God's revelation to man, but not the whole of it; Protestants believe that the Bible is the whole of God's revelation to man. This discrepancy lies outside the biblical witness and cannot be adjudicated on biblical grounds. By and large, Catholics and Protestants agree that the foundation of biblical truth is God's revelation. The distinction in their respective venues involves an incompatible appreciation of the scope of revelation rather than a question of biblical truth or a crisis of faith.

However, the contemporary crisis of faith in biblical truth among Christians, the crisis of which Ratzinger speaks, is undeniable and multifaceted. One noteworthy facet is the disavowal or blurring of the venues in biblical interpretation, for the crisis was precipitated by changes in venue. Within the venue of revelation, everything in the Bible was accepted literally on faith. But with the advance of the scientific method in the physical sciences and its extended influence in the humanities, the venue of revelation was challenged by a venue of reason. This venue of reason, initially embraced as a great leap forward, with the application of the historical-critical method, has shown itself to be limited. Surely, the historical-critical method has yielded significant results in our understanding of the Bible. Yet, as an end instead of a means to an end, its results cry out for contextualization. With its acute impact on Christian faith, the venue of reason and the historical-critical method heighten by contrast the venue of revelation. The contrast draws attention to the fact that the venue of revelation is by no means static. Whilst it is profitable for Christians to highlight the shared points of their respective faiths, they do not share a univocal faith or, therefore, a common venue for biblical interpretation. Only an ill-defined ecumenism or a watered-down revisionism equates classical Catholic and Protestant belief. Likewise, only a flaccid rationalism seeks to prove things held by faith. Catholics and Protestants believe different things about the Bible because the Catholic and Protestant venues are different. In order to understand our Catholic venue, it behooves us to look closely at changes in venue, both in the venue of reason and the venue of revelation, as a proem to our Catholic venue. In so doing, there is no attempt to prove the validity of venues—either in themselves or in comparison to other venues—but only to describe them. The ultimate validity of venues is a matter of faith. It will be clear to all only in the Beatific Vision. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood” (1 Cor 13:12).

A Change in Venue

A change in venue came in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the onslaught of the “modern mind” and rationalism, followed by the resultant “contemporary mind” and post-rationalism (now often referred to as “postmodernism”). The momentous advances in the natural sciences, the precision of scientific verification, and the concomitant technological sophistication in those two centuries had an enormous impact on Western thought. The natural sciences gained an unprecedented preeminence in the academy, and eventually in popular thinking and culture, to the extent that nothing was to be held true without scientific verification. Hard science and its applications changed the world forever. So strong was this change that theology, philosophy, history, and literature, once considered much more noble enterprises than the physical sciences, came to be called “human sciences.” Across Europe and America, men desired to scrutinize themselves and their psyches via the quasi-scientific methods of the new “social sciences.” As they had mastered the physical world, they would master everything else. It came as no surprise that the disciples of the human and social sciences would seek the same precision and progress as their colleagues in the physical sciences. Everything was to become subject to scientific, physical verification, even things metaphysical. The biblical academy embraced the new way of thinking with open arms. All of a sudden, everything in the Bible was up for grabs, including biblical truth. The venue of biblical interpretation changed from church steeple to ivory tower.

The introduction of scientific methodology into biblical interpretation conveyed an approach to the Bible now known under the broad banner of the “historical-critical method.” Simply put, the historical-critical method is an attempt to consider individual biblical books in terms of the socio-historical and literary milieu from which they emerged.³ Widely practiced by Catholics and Protestants,⁴ the advances in understanding the Bible through the utilization of this method have been both multitudinous and multifarious. As a means to the end of understanding the Bible, the Church continues to speak of the historical-critical method as “indispensable.” According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission,

The historical-critical method is the indispensable method for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the “Word of God in human language,” has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the

³ See Edgar Krentz, *The Historical Critical Method*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975).

⁴ See Joseph G. Prior, *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis*, Tesi Gregoriana—Serie Teologia 50 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1999).

sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it.⁵

That requirement led to a broad application of the historical-critical method in biblical studies and, consequently, to many significant advances in our understanding of the Bible. Nevertheless, it became apparent very early in the application of the historical-critical method that some of its practitioners considered it to be an end in itself rather than a means to an end. Many of these practitioners began to consider their confessional moorings (Catholic or Protestant) as stifling restraints to a pseudo-scientific objectivity that they believed necessary for their interpretive endeavors. The lion's share of discussion about the Bible became limited strictly to the examination of the biblical texts and their historical circumstances. Any other discussion—the exegesis of the early Fathers of the Church, the opinions of the Doctors of the Church, the insights of theologians, even the *sensus fidelium*—fell under suspicion as “unscientific,” that is, unworthy of serious consideration. For this reason, the Pontifical Biblical Commission goes on to say,

No scientific method for the study of the Bible is fully adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness. For all its validity, the historical-critical method cannot claim to be totally sufficient in this respect. It necessarily has to leave aside many aspects of the writings which it studies.⁶

Despite this caveat, there exists a strong presumption in the biblical academy to denigrate those “many aspects” of the biblical texts outside the historical-critical purview as if they were inconsequential, irrelevant, or even inimical to the results of historical criticism.

Both Catholics and Protestants became increasingly alarmed at this trend in biblical interpretation. The advancing transmutation of the historical-critical method, from a means to an end to an end in itself, led to the presupposition that faith itself was a personal prejudice to be cast aside as the scientist (reader/exegete) treated the object of his study (text/Bible) in his laboratory (rational interpretive community/Church). So bent did the vocabulary of biblical interpretation become on borrowing the nomenclature of the physical sciences that the exegete was easily envisioned as a surgeon, sterile in mask and gown with scalpel in hand, who

⁵ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 35.

⁶ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 42.

scrupulously dissected the ancient, erstwhile holy, texts. For the Christians in the pews, the image of the exegete began to resemble Dr. Frankenstein more than St. Jerome, when the bald and unnuanced findings of historical criticism became homiletic fodder. But so surreptitiously had the banal imitation of the scientific method come to dominate biblical interpretation that many found themselves trembling before the (supposed) irrefutable “objectivity” of the radical historical critics. But few dared raise a question. After all, how could one challenge science?

Meanwhile, extensive self-examination was occurring in the human sciences, inside and outside the biblical academy. The absolute precision hoped for by aping the physical sciences proved illusory. Instead of recognizing the illegitimate transposition of methods proper to the examination of natural things to supernatural, the notion arose that inability to achieve pure objectivity meant that all was purely subjective. The fallacious subjective–objective distinction had come full circle. The rationalism of modernity was short-lived and eventually imploded into the anti-rationalism of postmodernity. Caught between a rock and a hard place were the biblical exegetes. As with their comrades in the human sciences, two extremes quickly arose. Some remained entrenched in the historical-critical method as an end in itself. Continued practice of the method would yield few, though absolutely certain, results. They claimed to continue the effort of presuppositionless and value-free investigation. Others rebuffed the goal of the historical-critical method as whimsical. Continued practice of the method would yield only ancient and antiquated impressions, whose verification could only be found in their affinity to contemporary perceptiveness. The validity of the teaching and historical recounting of the Bible was to be either demonstrated vis-à-vis an hermetically sealed experiment validated by method,⁷ or decided vis-à-vis a popular vote as with the Jesus Seminar.⁸ If but one of these two alternatives is viable, then the only option for the Christian is an undue optimism or pessimism. To be sure, no method of human reasoning can guarantee revealed truths; to be doubly sure, no opinion poll can guarantee revealed truths. The venue of human reason falls short of the venue of revelation, but that in no way diminishes reason’s proper use or usefulness.

⁷ This is by no means limited to the historical-critical method. The mindset trapped in a Cartesian *Weltanschauung* of methodological rather than ontological certainty is wont to cling to methods over things. Thus, if a given method proves unsatisfactory, it is to be replaced by another method or a synthesis of methods. For an introduction to some of these methods, see Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes, ed. *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

⁸ See their web page at <http://religion.rutgers.edu/jseminar/> for an introduction to the Jesus Seminar.

The Venue of Reason

Within the venue of human reason, the Bible is a book, a text, an ordinary text. Specifically, the Bible is an amorphous collection of ancient texts in diverse languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) and literary styles (prose, poetry, and epistolary, just to name a few), from assorted cultures and centuries (at least sixth-century B.C. post-Exilic Judaism to first-century A.D. Greco-Romanism), with an untold host of authors and redactors, and without one original extant text.⁹ To complicate matters further, Christians do not agree on the canon of the Bible, and the issue of canonicity is clearly one of revelation rather than reason.¹⁰ The Bible's only claim to fame and unity, from the venue of reason, is the credence given to it by Christians and its concomitant influence on Western literature, thought, and civilization. To lay aside faith-claims about biblical texts and fabricated alliances among the texts seems vital for undiluted rational enquiry. Proponents of the historical-critical method as an end rather than a means make it to seem that once the very things that draw readers to the Bible are eradicated, then objective clarity will follow suit. If the biblical texts are texts, they should be treated like texts, like ordinary texts, with no special status given because of the sacral character accorded to them by Christians. Needless to say, a book such as the Bible, when treated like an ordinary text, presents gargantuan challenges.

In the venue of human reason, the overarching hermeneutical challenge is to discern the relationship between reader and text and the context in which a reader encounters a text. In every interpretive moment, a reader meets a text in a context; in every interpretive moment, the reader is reading from some place. Such interpretive moments are never static. Whilst the text is invariable and locked in time, the reader and the context are constantly variable, ever shifting,

⁹ For an introduction to the difficulties of textual criticism and transmission, see Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (1988; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995); and Kurt Aland and Barbara Aland, *The Text of the New Testament: An Introduction to the Critical Editions and to the Theory and Practice of Modern Textual Criticism*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes (1981; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987). Transmission difficulties notwithstanding, for an example of other possible motivations in the corruption of texts, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁰ Catholics, who include the deuterocanonical books and differing parts of Esther and Daniel in the canon (along with the majority of the Orthodox, who also include 1 Esdras, the Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, and 3 Maccabees), have no stronger *historical* claim than their Protestant brethren and vice versa. Historical arguments are used by both sides, but in the end, the question is decided in terms of revelation and religious authority. See Joseph T. Lienhard, "To Follow Augustine or Jerome?" (chap. 5) in *The Bible, the Church, and Authority: The Canon of the Christian Bible in History and Theology* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press [Glazier], 1995), 59–72. On the importance of and difficulty with a literary canon from a secular point of view, see Harold Bloom, "An Elegy for the Canon" (chap. 1) in *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1994).

because human beings develop and advance as interpreters of texts and are immersed in interpretive communities. A reader comes to a text in time and place with presuppositions and expectations. Between reader and text there is an historical distance. The objective of interpretation is to close the separation of historical distance between a reader and a text as much as possible. The distance is to be bridged, though, and not eradicated. Even with the best of connections between reader and text, they are not one in the same. A bridge over the troubled waters of historical distance does not stem the tide, even if it allows for crossings back and forth. The historical-critical method, applied to ordinary texts, has the potential to serve as a stanchion, even a foundation, of that bridge, but it is not the bridge itself. Were the historical-critical method the bridge itself, there would be no need for any other methods in the interpretation of ordinary texts. Profane literary criticism, however, has not eliminated other methods. In fact, new methods are introduced continuously, since interpretation is so complex and multistoried. The historical-critical method can only be part of such a complex structure, for the presuppositionless reader demanded by the historical critics is a rational abstraction. Such an abstraction is suitable as a postulate in the hypothetical realm; outside the hypothetical, it is a philosophical absurdity. Although a reader may seek to the best of his ability to leave his presuppositions on the backburner, they are the “stuff” of himself, at least insofar as he approaches a given text. That is, the reader engages a text in the well-founded expectation of (in)validating that which he already holds to be true (or at least reasonable) or in the hope of discovering something new. The reader’s presuppositions are real—as real as he is. They have been formed in the reader’s life-long engagement with reality (including other encountered texts) and within the interlocution concomitant with human existence in a variety of interpretative communities and experiences. Presuppositions are not irrational accessories to be shed or ignored. Presuppositions are to be appreciated as fundamental to the reader himself. An appreciation of presuppositions exhibits two things: first, they are mutable; and second, they are not unexamined. The recognition of presuppositions, to the effect that they must be eliminated so as to level the ground for truth therewith creating a sanitary environment for the perfect application of a method, is unduly optimistic; so too, the recognition of presuppositions, to the effect that they cannot be eliminated so as to leave every methodological enquiry polluted with prejudice, is unduly pessimistic.

An undue optimism is created by those theorists of the historical-critical method—whose thoughts have seeped deeply into biblical criticism—who claim that we must put aside all that

we know and believe when we read a text. Such a claim is unfounded in the reading of ordinary texts. A yearning for cold objectivity denies reality as it presents itself to us. Once a reader begins to read a text, any text, the interpretive process has begun. However, even before the inauguration of that interpretive process, there is a relationship between the reader and the text. Although it may seem so obvious as to escape attention, there are only real readers and real texts, that is, the notion of a pure reader or a pure text is an imaginary abstraction from reality. There are only real readers and real texts; readers have only come to be by their reading of real texts; language and grammar bind reader and text to one another or no interpretation is possible. To suppose that a reader may come to any text *tabula rasa* is to deny the human condition. Each and every reader approaches a text only after being conditioned by the historical circumstances in which he has been reared. However, to say that he is conditioned by circumstances is not to say that he is determined by those same circumstances. The reader, necessarily equipped with intellect, will, and experience, approaches a text in the hope of broadening his understanding of reality. When the reader reads, he is reading for a reason. Without doubt, there may be a plethora of reasons for reading—for example, illumination, instruction, pleasure, recreation—but there is no possibility of reading without some prospect of the reader gleaning meaning, and therefore of transforming himself, even if only in the slightest of ways. In contemporary parlance, one reads “to get something out of it.” And once having read a text, the reader is changed, not only because of what the text said, but because of whom the reader was before he encountered the given text. The meaning he appropriates from reading is predicated on his personal ability to filter meaning. With intellect, will, and experience, he approaches a text from an interpretive point of view; right or wrong in his prior understanding of reality, the reader comes equipped with some presuppositions about the nature of things, otherwise he would not be a person at all. Not unlike the medieval maxim that knowledge is given only according to the capacity of the receiver, a reader cannot help but meet a text with some form of prior knowledge. Thus it is that a radical elimination of presuppositions, often held as the optimum ideal for radical historical critics, is an impossibility.

Now, acknowledgment that the optimism of complete objectivity is a false hope, should not lead us to any semblance of pessimism. Instead, it should demonstrate only that confusion ensues with the mistaken conception that the reader of a given text is irreconcilably recalcitrant because he holds opinions or knows of certain facts and truths prior to, or alongside of, his encounter with a text. Similarly, chaos ensues with the mistaken concept that the reader must

abandon or bracket that which he already opines or knows outside a given text. If it is the nature of man to acquire and assimilate knowledge through experience, and if we speak of these opinions and verities as presuppositions, then to conceive of human beings without presuppositions is to conceive of human beings without experience, without history. Not only do such human beings not exist, but to pine for the like of ahistorical human beings is tantamount to a denial of human freedom. The unspoken premise—the unspoken presupposition here, if you will—is that all presuppositions are carved in stone. Or in other words, previous knowledge presupposes the disallowance of further knowledge. The propensity to identify presuppositions as perennial prejudices is in itself a narrow-mindedness that is alien to human experience. Inasmuch as the reader brings his own presuppositions and the acknowledgment thereof to a text, he is not seeking to determine himself or the text. His presuppositions bind neither himself nor the text, which is not the same as saying that they do not condition his own self-reflection or interpretive stance, but they are the natural prerequisites for interpretation. His presuppositions may be malleable, but to disown them is to disown his very self.

Moreover, the reader must be allowed freedom in his discernment of texts. Although each and every text has something to say, meaning to convey, each and every text does not say something that is true or even something weighty enough to demand reconsideration of presuppositions. For example, when one reads the instruction manual for a piece of equipment, one presupposes that the manual, because it comes from the manufacturer of the equipment, is accurate. However, if one follows the instructions to the letter, and the equipment does not function properly, one must conclude that the manual or the equipment or both is faulty. Or, when one reads fiction, one may engage in the “willing suspension of disbelief,” not because one is confused about reality, but precisely because one knows his text to be fictitious. In fact, it is only with one’s experience of reality and natural reason that one may determine the difference between what is and what is not so. No ordinary text *qua* text carries within itself the assurance of truth. Rather, human beings, as readers, approach texts with experience and reason in the pursuit of acquiring and assimilating a deeper understanding of reality. Again, the interpretive process is relational, an interaction between the text and the reader, who is neither bound to benightedness nor determined to distortion if he approaches a text with previously acquired knowledge and reasonable opinion. In fact, it is the prior experience of reality and other texts that precludes the impediment of a Sisyphean stance before a given text.

Since it is relational, the interpretive process necessitates an upfront admission of the ties

that bind reader and text. The recognition of relationship(s) is not sought so as to annihilate the connection on the grounds that it is determinative (objectivity). Nor is the same recognition sought so as to examine the connection itself on the grounds that it is determinative (subjectivity). Instead, the relationship is illustrative of both reader and text. That being the case, the venue of reason demands that the reader stake a claim before a text. Ratzinger's hope—"the exegete must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the Church"—is borne out in terms of ordinary texts: the reader of a (any given) text does not stand in a neutral area (free of presuppositions), above or outside history (his own and/or the text's) and an interpretive community. In other words, the reader has to stake his claim, has to acknowledge the presuppositions that are his, and has to concede that what he holds came to him not in isolation, but in human discourse, both particular and general.

The Venue of Revelation

Within the venue of revelation, the Bible is not just a book or a text. It is the most extraordinary of texts. The Christian reader stakes a remarkable claim about the Bible insofar as he claims that it is God's Word. This does not mean that the Bible does not share many of the attributes of ordinary texts and, concomitantly with those attributes, all of the difficulties inherent in interpretation, but it does mean that the Christian approaches the Bible with presuppositions and expectations that he does not bring to ordinary texts. In short, the Christian's faith is part of the "stuff" of himself. As we have seen in terms of ordinary texts, the reader cannot come to them without recognition of his presuppositions. What is more, the Christian reader does not come to the Bible without a recognition of his presuppositions of which the principal one is faith. The Christian believes that God has revealed himself in the Bible. To ask that he prescind from his faith in the reading of this extraordinary text is as ludicrous as to ask that he prescind from his reason in the reading of ordinary texts. The difference, of course, is that Christians make metaphysical claims about the Bible; however, such claims are by no means irrational. The Christian presupposition is in fact a faith-claim, namely, that the Bible is God's Word, that the context of its interpretation is his interpretive community of faith, and that the insights of God's Word are impenetrable apart from the venue of revelation.

The Christian claim of revealed truth in the Bible is known to any and all who read it. It is unrealistic to postulate any reader coming to the Bible without some knowledge of Christianity. And it is surrealistic to suppose that Christian, atheist, and agnostic can leave their faith-stances at the door as if they were appendages and not part of themselves. When a Christian comes to

read the Bible on any given occasion, there is a prior relationship between the Christian and the Bible. Without doubt, that relationship is multifaceted with many presuppositions, but there are certainly two hallmarks. First, it is impossible to be a Christian without some knowledge of the Bible. A Christian only comes to be such by accepting certain claims based in the Bible or, at least, confirmed or recounted there. Second, the Christian holds for the unique nature of the Bible, that is, what he claims about the Bible, namely, God's authorship, he claims for no other text. He reads the Bible in order to contemplate and discover (revealed) truth that is disclosed therein. An atheist comes with just as many presuppositions in that he denies any unique nature to the Bible insofar as he denies the existence of God. An agnostic also comes with presuppositions: that the uniqueness of the Bible is an unknown and most likely unknowable. The agnostic abjures the claims of the Christian and atheist. Too often it is thought that the position of the agnostic is somehow neutral. His is hardly a middle ground. To consider it so is commensurate to holding that theism and atheism are poles on some fanciful linear and quantifiable spectrum of belief to be melded by some Hegelian resolution; when, in fact, they are substantially different claims about the very nature of reality. The agnostic, who claims that he neither affirms nor denies, claims that he claims nothing, but that, in itself, is a substantial claim—with the same evidence available to Christian and atheist, he has come to a different conclusion from both of them. Again, that is not a medial position, but a different one from that of the Christian or atheist. The illusion of neutrality on the theological level is itself loaded with presuppositions. It is a lame attempt to establish the ahistorical *tabula rasa* position on the theological (or ontological) level.

The fact of the matter is that no one in the twenty-first century comes to the Bible without presuppositions. It is not possible. On the historical level, it is impossible to approach any text without them. On the theological level, it is impossible to approach the Bible without them, because by definition the "Bible" is a text for which particular faith-claims are made as the Word of God. It is asserted by Christians that a particular collection of books, a canon, is inspired and inerrant. This polyvalent presupposition exists outside the Bible itself, even if it is corroborated therein (for example, John 20:30–31; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:19–21; 3:15–16). For Christians, this presupposition, brought to any experience with the Bible, is not one of reason but of revelation. The acceptance or rejection of this revelatory declaration is a definite disposition; so too is an ambivalence toward it. And the ultimate validity of such dispositions is found in reality, not in opinion or natural reason. Nonetheless, it is clear that that no reader of the Bible, whether he be Christian or not, approaches it without prior perspective of the unequivocal

claims made of it.

Therefore, it is legitimate to speak of a “venue of revelation,” specifically a “Christian venue” of the Bible. However, we must take great care in defining this Christian venue. It is said that, generally, a Christian venue is synonymous with a Catholic or Protestant venue. That is, a Christian venue is the venue within which Christians interpret the collection of their holy books, that is, the Bible. For Christians, the venue in which they read the Bible is akin to the Muslims’ venue for the *Koran*. In this sense, a Catholic is no different from a Protestant venue, both being merely variations on the theme of a Christian venue. Nothing more significant is to be said for such a venue than may be said for any religion and its ancient (or not so ancient) holy books. Here, a Christian venue is more a common or generic description than a specific theological designation. Scant consideration is rendered to the Bible itself. The least common denominator is the respect of the interpretive community for those writings they consider to be holy. The Bible is respected because it is important to Christians. Again, a Christian venue for the Bible is equivalent to a Latter Day Saints’ venue for the *Book of Mormon*. Specifically, however, we may speak of a Catholic venue in opposition to a Protestant venue, a much finer distinction. Despite the omnipresent pseudo-ecumenical slant in contemporary theology that equates Catholic and Protestant faith—a position equally loathsome to devout Catholics and Protestants—Catholics and Protestant believe different things about divine revelation. That they share a least common denominator of faith in the revealed Word of God and venerate the same Bible is a significant plot of common ground (canonical considerations notwithstanding). Both Catholics and Protestants believe that God has revealed himself authoritatively and uniquely in the Bible. But it is not the end of the story.

Initially, it would seem that, with their similar acceptance of the Bible as God’s Word, any distinction between Catholic and Protestant venues for matters biblical is negligible, a difference of degree rather than kind. After all, since Catholics and Protestants both venerate the Bible, they must believe basically the same things, differing only in degree, as opposed to the difference in kind we find between a Muslim’s veneration of the *Koran* and a Christian’s of the Bible. This is true in terms of the Bible, as the venerated text *in se*. Nonetheless, it is an assumption involving an underlying premise that the holy book, the Bible, is *the* rule of faith for all Christians. But there is a principal and monumental difference between Catholics and Protestants: Catholics believe that God has revealed himself authoritatively and uniquely elsewhere than in the Bible, whilst Protestants do not. This fundamental difference stands

outside the Bible. By necessity, the view of Catholics and Protestants is theologically and ontologically different and external to the Bible itself. Although there are, obviously, salient similarities between Catholics and Protestants because both acknowledge Christ as Lord (surely, no small thing), the distinction between the Catholic venue in biblical interpretation and the Protestant venue is one of kind and not degree, even if it be of a different kind from that between Christians and Muslims and Mormons. For Catholics, God's Word is comprised of Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture; for Protestants, God's Word is comprised of Sacred Scripture alone. The difference is in the faith-claim of revealed truth known to the believer, who is the reader of the Bible. To put it another way, the Bible—the text itself or even the understanding of the text—is not the locus of difference. What Catholics and Protestants believe *about* the Bible is the difference. Catholics and Protestants read the Bible from different places.

Knowing one's place makes it no more possible for a Catholic or a Protestant to accede to the prior presuppositions of the other about the nature of God's revelation than it would be for either of them to accede to the Muslim's or Mormon's, or vice versa. Ratzinger's hope that "the exegete must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the Church" is borne out as an imperative for biblical interpretation. Neither a Catholic nor a Protestant exegete may stand in a neutral area if he is to remain a Catholic or a Protestant. To claim a neutral area, outside the historical vicissitudes that have formed reader and therefore his relationship to texts, is to claim an ahistorical area, one of imagination, no more naturally possible than Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. To claim a neutral area, outside the ecclesial or interpretive community, which has formed the believer and his relationship to the Bible, is to claim an atheological area, one of invention, no more ontologically possible than John Lennon's *Imagine*.

Without doubt, the demonstration of the unreasonableness of such a neutral area does not perforce show the validity of a Catholic or a Protestant venue, or even of an atheistic or agnostic venue for that matter. As mentioned, such validation may only be found in reality. But it does show the reasonableness of viewing the Bible from the perspective and presuppositions of one's faith. A Catholic, Protestant, atheistic, or agnostic view of the Bible has almost everything to do with the "eye of the beholder"—who the interpreter is and where he comes from—and very little to do with the "beauty"—the extraordinary text—that is in the Bible. On the level of opinion, in a society that considers everything in terms of political and personal predilections, Catholics and Protestants can easily dismiss the claims of many, including many biblical exegetes, who claim

that their respective venues are illegitimate, by simply explaining that theirs is a different venue from others, but that *everyone* reads within one venue or another: the choice is not to have a venue or not to have one, the choice is to recognize one's venue. For those who believe in God's revelation, those who do not, and those who cannot make up their minds, the ultimate validity of venues is out of this world. Meanwhile, Christian venues, venues of revelation, differ. In their differences they seek description, not rationalization. Thus, it behooves us to consider our Catholic venue.

The Catholic Venue

The Catholic venue for biblical interpretation begins with Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the fullness of revelation, and with his Church, his mystical body, the people of God. Biblical interpretation in the Catholic venue is rooted in the salvific moment of the Christ in history and the ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church and the apostles from Pentecost until Parousia. Catholics begin biblical interpretation in the Church, for the Bible is the Church's book—the Church is not the Bible's. In so doing, Catholics begin with revelation as understood by the Church, not under an umbrella of “Christian revelation.” As we have seen above, to speak of Christian revelation is really a misnomer, much too general a description, because Christians disagree about its very nature. For Catholics, the best place to start is with *Dei Verbum*, Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation.¹¹ Though there have been a number of papal encyclicals and pronouncements in regards to things biblical,¹² *Dei Verbum* is the most comprehensive articulation of the Church's understanding of revelation in recent memory. Rarely in the history of the Church has the Catholic venue been as clearly presented as it is in *Dei Verbum*. Given the enormous emphasis by Catholic (and Protestant) theologians on biblical studies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the stage was well set for the Church to pronounce her positions thereupon at Vatican II. With a plethora of insights garnered from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well as two millennia of tradition, the Council made itself clear inasmuch as it recognized its teaching as the most recent point in a continuum: “Following,

¹¹ All citations of *Dei Verbum* are taken from *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents—Study Edition*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1987).

¹² Between Vatican I's *Dei Filius* (1870) and Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* (1965) there are five papal encyclicals dealing directly with issues related to biblical studies: Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Benedict XV's *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920), Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), *Mediator Dei* (1947), and *Humani Generis* (1950). For other Church teachings during this period, see the excerpted translations in James J. Megivern, ed., *Bible Interpretation*, Official Catholic Teachings (Wilmington, N.C.: Consortium Books [McGrath], 1978).

then, in the steps of the Councils of Trent and Vatican I, this Synod wishes to set forth the true doctrine on divine revelation and its transmission.”¹³

To lay the groundwork, *Dei Verbum* repeats three longstanding principles of reason and revelation, which mark the limits of the Church’s discourse. First, the Council affirms the potential of human reason. It repeats the declaration of Vatican I: “God, the first principle and last end of all things, can be known with certainty from the created world, by the natural light of human reason (cf. Rom 1:20).”¹⁴ In other words, despite original sin, man can reason to the existence of God. Therefore, his reason precludes agnosticism. And moreover, his reason is useful and competent in understanding all that is revealed to him by God for the sake of our salvation. This frees theology, as the (rational) study of God, from second-guessing its ability to recognize what is presented to it. Second, the Council affirms the parameters of revelation as fixed: “The Christian economy, therefore, since it is the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away; and no new public revelation is to be expected before the glorious manifestation of our Lord, Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tim 6:14 and Titus 2:13).”¹⁵ This safeguards against a boundless body of data for theological enquiry. Third, the Council affirms the requisite assistance of faith and the Holy Spirit for the comprehension of the things of God: “The Holy Spirit constantly perfects faith by his gifts, so that revelation may be more and more profoundly understood.”¹⁶ The study of revelation depends on the fact that our powers of reason are intact, that there is a defined field of study, and that the help of God is indispensable for knowing the things of God. In a nutshell, the Catholic venue for biblical interpretation is rooted in the Catholic understanding of revelation: that God has given us the gift of human reason to know and explore what he has revealed to us in the Bible within the context of the interpretive community, that is, the faithful guided by the Holy Spirit—the Church.

According to the Council, “Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture make up a single sacred deposit of the Word of God, which is entrusted to the Church.”¹⁷ That is, the Scripture is a component of the Word of God or revelation in terms of a defined field of study, and along with

¹³ *Dei Verbum*, no. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 10.

Tradition, it constitutes an entirety; Scripture is a part of a whole, and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. To avoid the notion of Scripture and Tradition being an uncomplicated conflation, *Dei Verbum* continues:

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together, and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing, and move towards the same goal. Sacred Scripture is the speech of God as it is put down in writing under the breath of the Holy Spirit. And Tradition transmits in its entirety the Word of God which has been entrusted to the apostles by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit. It transmits it to the successors of the apostles so that, enlightened by the Spirit of truth, they may faithfully preserve, expound and spread it abroad by their preaching. Thus it comes about that the Church does not draw her certainty about all revealed truths from the Holy Scriptures alone. Hence, both Scripture and Tradition must be accepted and honored with equal feelings of devotion and reverence.¹⁸

The intercommunication between Scripture and Tradition is not only needed for the goal of revelation, the salvation of souls, but also for the fuller understanding of each component. Efforts to disassociate the interpretation of one from the other or to play one against the other belie a misconstrual of the nature of revelation—a dynamic whole, which does not admit of fracture. In terms of biblical hermeneutics, there is little room for fracturing vis-à-vis individual interpretations: “the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living office of the Church alone.”¹⁹ The Magisterium functions throughout the history of the Church as the adjudicator within the interpretive community that is the Church. Whether in defining the canon (as with Trent) or defending the historicity of the gospels (as with Vatican II),²⁰ the Magisterium assesses interpretations of Scripture and Tradition, and matters related thereto, because the same Holy Spirit who is the author of Scripture and Tradition guarantees magisterial authority in the Church. “Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it. At the divine command and with the help of the Holy Spirit, it listens to this devotedly, guards it with dedication and expounds it faithfully. All that it proposes

¹⁸ Ibid., no. 9.

¹⁹ Ibid., no. 10.

²⁰ For Trent, see Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupius, eds., *The Christian Faith: Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 6th ed. (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba House, 1996), nos. 210–213; for Vatican II, see *Dei Verbum*, no. 19.

for belief as being divinely revealed is drawn from this single deposit of faith.”²¹ Indeed, it is the single deposit of faith, of which Scripture and Tradition are integral, that Catholics draw upon for their knowledge of God under the auspices of the Magisterium. The mutual interrelationship of Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium requires that every aspect of biblical interpretation, every quest for the meaning conveyed in the Scripture, entails congruence with both Tradition and Magisterium. “It is clear, therefore, that, in the supremely wise arrangement of God, sacred Tradition, sacred Scripture and the Magisterium of the Church are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls.”²²

Cognizance of the analogy of faith, by which “we mean the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation,”²³ helps us to focus on the Catholic venue, wherein the Scripture is read and interpreted in the ancient, living, and ongoing tradition of the Church. Without acknowledgment of the Church as the context of biblical interpretation, cursory findings may come to light from rational or Christian venues, but the fuller meanings will remain obscure. Pope Leo XIII, in *Providentissimus Deus*, makes this point somewhat starkly:

For although the studies of non-Catholics, used with prudence, may sometimes be of use to the Catholic student, he should, nevertheless, bear well in mind—as the Fathers also teach in numerous passages—that the sense of Holy Scripture can nowhere be found incorrupt outside of the Church, and cannot be expected to be found in writers who, being without the true faith, only gnaw the bark of the sacred Scriptures, and never attain its pith.²⁴

Leo teaches that the sense of Scripture is rooted in the interpretive community of the Church because the faith, the proper understanding of revelation, is undiluted in the Church and ever enlightened by the Holy Spirit. Let us take for example the historicity of the gospels. One of the hallmarks of the radical application of the historical-critical method has been to claim that many of the events and words chronicled in the gospels did not actually happen or were not actually

²¹ *Dei Verbum*, no. 10.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 103.

²⁴ Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, On the Study of Sacred Scripture, trans. NCWC (November 18, 1893; Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1992), 19.

spoken. Yet according to *Dei Verbum*,

Holy Mother Church has firmly and with absolute constancy maintained and continues to maintain that the four gospels, whose historicity she unhesitatingly affirms, faithfully hand on what Jesus, the Son of God, while he lived among men, really did and taught for their eternal salvation, until the day when he was taken up (cf. Acts 1:1–2).²⁵

While the Church is reluctant to spell out the process of the gospel transmission in detail,²⁶ she is adamant to assert the success of the process.²⁷ Thus, in the Catholic venue, the assurance of the gospels' historicity is not found in the historical-critical method (or in any method for that matter). The assurance of the historicity of the gospels is found in the authority of the Church.

This point is driven home, albeit unintentionally, by C. S. Lewis in a lecture to Anglican theology students at Wescott House (Cambridge) in 1959. Lewis remarked:

A theology which denies the historicity of nearly everything in the Gospels to which Christian life and affections and thought have been fastened for nearly two millennia—which either denies the miraculous altogether or, more strangely, after swallowing the camel of the Resurrection strains at such gnats as the feeding of the multitudes—if offered to the uneducated man can produce only one or other of two effects. It will make him a Roman Catholic or an atheist.²⁸

Lewis is surely correct in speaking of such a denial as a theology. The seminal events of Christianity recorded in the Bible are not provable. Any acceptance or rejection thereof—for a Christian—cannot originate in a venue of reason, but in a venue of revelation. The particular issue of choosing which parts of the Bible are true and which are not—for example, a resurrection, but no feeding of the multitudes—is of course absurd. There is no historical means of verifying either one. But Lewis' point is well taken in that regard. The denial of the feeding of the multitudes must necessarily lead to a denial of the resurrection. For the only thing that grounds the resurrection is the testimony of the gospels, and if that testimony is to be found uncertain in terms of something of a seemingly lesser matter, why should it work with the great matter of the

²⁵ *Dei Verbum*, no. 19.

²⁶ For the three stages of transmission, see Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Sancta Mater Ecclesia*, On the Historicity of the Gospels, no trans. (April 21, 1964; Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1964), 5–7.

²⁷ See *ibid.*, 8 et passim.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, “Fern-seed and Elephants,” in *Fern-seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity*, ed. Walter Hooper, Fontana Religious Series (May 11, 1959; Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1975), 105.

resurrection? Little did Lewis approve of any theology that denies the historicity of the gospels. But, it would seem, little did Lewis realize the point that he, an Anglican, also asserts, namely, that Catholicism is fideistic. In other words, assuming there is only one font of revelation (the Bible) vis-à-vis the *sola scriptura* of Protestantism, the giving of credence to anything other than the Bible, like Tradition or Magisterium, is Lewis' problem with Catholicism. But it is Catholicism's strength rather than its weakness. That is, Lewis elucidates the fact that only an assurance outside the Bible can guarantee the validity of things biblical—if some things biblical are taken to be untrue. Such an assurance was not and is not granted in Anglicanism (surely the most “Catholic” of Protestant views). Lewis is entirely correct. Within a theology that precludes any revelation other than the Scripture, the rational mind must proceed to Roman Catholicism or atheism. But is not Lewis' own opinion about the nature of biblical truth a kind of fideism? Surely it is. It is the *sola fide* of Protestantism. The point is this: if one concedes only one font of revelation embodied as the Scripture, with no surplus of revelation, men are confronted with only one choice in regards to its historical validity—to accept the Scripture or to reject it—*on faith*.

The same basic point was made in a different context over thirty years later by Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. during a lecture given at John Carroll University. In reminding us that the historical-critical method can only affirm some “discrete facts from the past” and cannot “provide the foundation for faith,” Lienhard goes on to say, “Two choices remain: either to abandon faith, or to fall into fideism.”²⁹ Lienhard, obviously a learned Catholic, knows the difference between his venue and Lewis'. Like Lewis, he knows that reliance on the historical-critical method as an end would demand either the abandonment of faith in biblical claims or atheism—if it were not for the fact that the Catholic venue presents an additional font from which revelation is known. In terms of the historicity of the gospels, the example Lewis uses, the assurance of the validity of the events chronicled therein is complemented by Tradition. Without Tradition and the magisterial guidance in interpreting Scripture and Tradition, the interpreter is cut off, with nothing else to turn to for verification. Thus, the Protestant venue articulated by Lewis and the Catholic venue articulated by Lienhard both acknowledge the importance of faith as the remedy for fideism and atheism alike. To be sure, Lewis and Lienhard do not profess the same faith, and in neither of their faiths can the venue of reason be said to guarantee things biblical. The source of their stance toward the Bible is what they believe outside it; and the choices they present are completely consistent with their beliefs. Lienhard is correct in noting

²⁹ Lienhard, *The Bible, the Church, and Authority*, 7.

that without the Church as the assurance of biblical truth nothing is left but atheism or fideism. But it is Lewis who gives us pause for his clarity of thought: there is an alternative to atheism or fideism, namely, Catholicism. And while it may be that Lewis would equate Catholicism with fideism on some level, he has innocently illustrated the strength of Catholicism and the necessity of context and guidance in interpreting the Bible.

The Catholic venue for biblical interpretation begins with Christ and the Church. The quest for revelatory meaning in the Bible is preceded by faith in Christ and incorporation into his Church. The validation of such interpretation is guaranteed not by reason or an unspecified notion of revelation, but by a specific understanding of revelation. To opt for a venue other than the Catholic one is to opt for a venue that appreciates the nature of revelation differently. No doubt, such an opting is sustained outside any biblical warrant; it can only be sustained by an interpretive stance that logically precedes an interpretive experience with the Bible for truth about God and man. But for the Catholic, the quest of the interpreter is an exercise of the *fides quaerens intellectum*. It is a faith, the Catholic faith, which lies outside the Bible itself and which motivates the believer to seek knowledge from the Bible. It is the same faith that leads the believer to know the assertion *credo ut intelligam*—I believe so that I might understand—to be veritable. Understanding is not prior, but posterior, to faith. In the Catholic venue, Ratzinger’s hope—that “the exegete must realize that he does not stand in some neutral area, above or outside history and the Church”—is not merely a desideratum, but a necessity. And a crisis of biblical interpretation is bound to follow interpretive efforts that are dislodged from the very faith that gave rise to them. Whatever an exegete is doing when he seeks to stand above or outside history and the Church, he is not engaged in a Catholic theological enterprise. Whether or not he cares to admit it, such an exegete is outside the Catholic venue in which he first encountered the Bible, namely, the Church. And once outside this venue, he has not escaped constriction for freedom, moved from an area of prejudice to tolerance, or risen above myopia to intuitive clarity; instead, he has exchanged one set of beliefs, one faith, for another. If he binds himself to the venue of reason, it comes as no surprise that he should be rationalistic and discover only the most limited of insights. If he binds himself to the venue of a generic Christian revelation with no parameters or authority, it comes as no surprise that he should be vague and unsettled about revealed truths in the Bible. As long as he knows his place and admits it to himself and others, his findings are lauded as sensible. Part and parcel of the recent crisis in biblical interpretation is the adaptation of vague, interlineated venues that obscure rather than clarify.

The Catholic venue, which holds for the interrelationship among Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium, is as a matter of revelation, a matter of faith. To the man without the gift of faith, that is to the man who cannot see above reason, such a postulate may never be anything more than a form of circular reasoning. The same may be said for those Christians who do not profess the fullness of the Church's faith. Persistently, the crisis in contemporary biblical interpretation will revolve around the interpreter's understanding of himself, the Bible, and the interpretive community in which he encounters the Bible; persistently, the crisis will devolve to the interpreter's faith, to the issue of revelation. That being the case, Catholics need make no apologies for their understanding of revelation, wherein God has vouchsafed to reveal Jesus Christ, the Word, simultaneously in Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, and wherewith God has pledged the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the Magisterium. In the Catholic venue, the Catholic faith does not merely have something to say about biblical interpretation; it has everything to say about it. For this reason, we should not be shocked to discover that a crisis in biblical interpretation is, indeed, a crisis of faith. What else could it be? We Catholics take great solace in knowing our place, which is the Church of the living God, "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (1 Tim 3:15).