

STUDYING THE BIBLE: EXEGESIS AND BIBLICAL PASTORAL MINISTRY

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I shall approach the relationship between biblical criticism and biblical pastoral ministry with a look backward as well as forward – in light of the II Vatican Council and its Constitution on Divine Revelation and in view of our postmodern world of today and the foreseeable future. This I shall do in three steps: I will start by recalling the significance of the Constitution for this relationship in the context of the 1960s; I will continue by tracing the path of biblical criticism since the mid-1970s through the present and thus in the aftermath of the Council and the Constitution; and I shall conclude with a contemporary vision for this relationship in the wake of such developments within Biblical Studies and in the face of a different historical context. By way of prologue, however, I should like to open these reflections with a bit of personal reminiscing and contextualization, not only as a way of situating myself vis-à-vis the Constitution but also because of a certain haunting relationship involving Vatican II and my own life.

Prolegomenon: Reminiscing and Contextualization

To begin with, January of 1959 proved crucial in both regards. On January 1, in the early morning hours, all of Cuba, the land of my birth, woke up to find that the dictatorship of President Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar, in power since a coup d'état in 1952, had come to an end and that the Revolution, consisting of a broad front with the figure of Dr. Fidel Castro Ruz as focal leader, had triumphed. A few weeks later, on January 25, Pope John XXIII issued a call, with the renewal of the Church in mind, for an ecumenical council to be held at the Vatican, the first such gathering since the I Vatican Council (1869-1870). Both events were to prove of enormous significance for the geopolitical world, the Christian churches, and my own life.

Subsequently, the years of Vatican II, 1962-1965, coincided with my years of secondary education, now in the United States. In the intervening period of 1959-1961, as preparations toward the Council developed apace, the Cuban Revolution experienced a swift process of radicalization that included mounting tension with the Church and that came to a head with the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 17-20, 1961. Upon the defeat of the expeditionary forces, President Castro declared the Revolution as socialist, described himself as a Marxist-Leninist, and, among a variety of measures, mandated the close of all private education, including religious education, and placed severe restraints on all religious organizations and activities. Like so many others, my family, active members of Catholic Action at the time, chose the path of exile, and it was thus that I came to find myself in New York during those years of the Council. There, as the Church in Cuba withdrew into the model of a church of silence, I kept abreast through my religion classes of the fascinating process of *aggiornamento* at work in Rome.

Finally, the years immediately following the Council, 1966–1972, found me in pursuit of studies toward the priesthood, undergraduate studies in philosophy as well as graduate studies in theology. These were years of great excitement, as the Church sought to renovate itself in thought and praxis, opened itself to the modern world, and empowered the laity in all dimensions of its mission. In those years of seminary, the effects of the Council and its various decrees began to make themselves felt in ever wider areas and ever greater ways. The study of theology, across all of its constitutive areas, witnessed the emergence of innovative, sophisticated, and engaged approaches toward questions old and new. None more so, in my opinion, if only in terms of reach and impact, than that movement whose first major salvo was heard at the Second Latin American Bishops Conference of 1968 in Medellín, Colombia, which would resonate for decades to come

under the banner of Liberation Theology. During these very same years, and for decades to come, the Church in Cuba would continue to endure in silence and under restraint – beyond any possibility for *aggiornamento*. It was such weighty developments in Church and world alike that drew me to theological education in general and Biblical Studies in particular, a calling to which I have now devoted my personal and professional life for the last thirty years.

It is hard to believe that forty years have elapsed since the conclusion of the Council and the promulgation of such decrees as the Constitution on Divine Revelation in its final session of 1965. In retrospect, the Constitution stands as a splendid achievement, worthy indeed of such commemoration as the present one. Its influence on biblical criticism within the Catholic tradition was profound and far-reaching. It was invoked as a charter for the future in my seminary classes in the early 1970s, and I still invoke it today as a key document in my own courses, even within the ambit of a non-denominational Divinity School in the mainline Protestant tradition within a secular research university, the site of my academic appointment.

Institutionalization of Academic Criticism

The Constitution solidified in no small measure a trend in biblical interpretation already very much underway at the time. In effect, it provided full backing for a shift in paradigm in biblical interpretation from a dogmatic-ecclesial model, in which the writings functioned in rather unmediated fashion as sources for church thought and life, toward an academic-disciplinary model, in which the writings were approached as sources from another time and place and hence in need of contextualization within their original social and cultural settings in order to secure their original meaning before application to church life and thought. This historicizing development was by no means new in the study of Christian origins.

By the middle of the 19th century, among Protestant scholarly circles in northern Europe, Biblical Studies had established itself as a discipline within the context of the university. It was one of several academic disciplines whose formation took place in the wake of the French Revolution, a time of ferment in the West. Within the academy, it drew directly on another incipient discipline, Historical Studies, for grounding and direction in its task of contextualizing the texts that constituted its object of study. In other words, as biblical criticism sought to address the basic questions of dating and location, authorship and genre, literary history and technique, community concerns and aims, sociocultural context and socioreligious comparison, Biblical Studies turned to the methodological and theoretical apparatus of that field of studies whose task it was to raise such questions of historical texts – historiography. This development gave rise to that critical approach that would eventually rule the field for approximately a hundred and fifty years – historical criticism.

To be sure, the historical critical paradigm was not without opposition, both inside and outside the halls of the academy. In Protestant circles, for example, both fundamentalism and pentecostalism offered severe critiques and opted for different paths: while the former emphasized the literal understanding of Scripture and the principle of inerrancy, the latter highlighted the role of the Spirit as the ultimate arbiter in interpretation. Within the academic tradition of mainline Protestantism, moreover, opposition to the project of contextualization emerged from quarters holding on to a dogmatic-ecclesial paradigm, pursuing 'lower' criticism and avoiding 'higher' criticism. In Catholic circles, meanwhile, the path of historical criticism proved a bumpy one indeed, both inside and outside academic circles, given its relationship to modernism and its espousal of rationalism. While Catholic piety and devotions stayed away, by and large, from the use of the Bible, recourse to historical criticism within the Catholic academic tradition long remained under the shadow of suspicion and the threat of condemnation. Toward the middle of the

twentieth century, however, steady acceptance and ascendancy within the Church was evident, a position soundly confirmed by the Constitution of 1965. Moreover, the Council further urged close study of the Bible among the people of God, placing the biblical writings at the center of Catholic devotions and piety.

As a result, biblical interpretation would proceed henceforth, unquestioned and undisturbed, according to the tenets of historical criticism in seminary and doctoral programs alike. Such was the training that I received, during my years of ministerial training in the early 1970s, in Old Testament and New Testament. Questions having to do with revelation and inspiration, canonicity and authority, were approached as a propaedeutic to interpretation and addressed in an introductory course to the discipline of Biblical Studies as a whole. Questions involving theological reflection and practical application were pursued as ramifications of interpretation and raised in their respective areas of the curriculum. Within the biblical curriculum itself, historical contextualization was the norm.

Within this framework, the relationship between biblical criticism and pastoral ministry can be readily ascertained. Historical criticism, it should be recalled, was, for the most part and for all practical purposes, envisioned as a 'scientific' enterprise: its conception of 'history' was objectivist – the reconstruction of Christian antiquity, within the limits established by the historical evidence available; its lens on 'history' was detached – a decontextualized gaze, above and beyond social and cultural realities; and its entry into 'history' was neutral – impartial analysis, beyond ideological concerns and aims. Within such a framework, therefore, critical interpretation functioned as 'exegesis', a foundational and indispensable exercise in mediation between the texts of biblical antiquity and the readers/hearers of present-day Christianity. In this exercise, moreover, the biblical critic, ideally conceptualized as a member of a circle of progressive and complementary scholarship, reigned supreme as mediating agent. Consequently, in approaching the biblical texts, all theological reflection and practical application would have to proceed with due attention to the findings and discussions of biblical criticism in mind.

Biblical pastoral ministry was no exception in this regard. The logic is obvious. If criticism establishes, again within the limited possibilities afforded by the extant historical evidence, the reconstruction of biblical life and thought, any recourse to or impartation of such thought and life, at any level of ecclesial activity, would have to be done in keeping with the tenets of such empiricist, universalizing, and disinterested research. Any departure from such established boundaries would be perceived as raising the dreaded specter of violating the historical divide between past and present and hence introducing the mortal danger of eisegesis, of reading the present into the past, in such communication and pedagogy. In sum, a well-founded biblical pastoral ministry had to be anchored in biblical scholarship. This remained the operative model through the late 1960s through the 1970s, in the wake of Vatican II.

Subsequent Developments in Academic Criticism

In the wake of the 1960s, a time of ferment not only for the West but for the non-Western world as well, all academic disciplines, whether in the social sciences or the human sciences, witnessed a period of profound rethinking and reorientation, as modernism gave way to postmodernism. Such a crisis eventually reached Theological Studies in general and Biblical Studies in particular. Biblical criticism would no longer be the same. Its conceptualization and practice underwent drastic changes as a result of internal and external developments. I shall mention four such influences.

First, the long-standing ties to historical criticism were significantly affected as the discipline reached beyond Historical Studies to Literary Studies and Sociocultural Studies

for grounding and guidance. Questions involving both textual dynamics and contextual configurations, it was felt, could no longer be answered adequately by traditional historiography. Consequently, the historical critical method was dislodged as the exclusive mode of interpretation in academic circles, as literary criticism and sociocultural criticism were incorporated into the discipline. This twofold development began in the mid-1970s, expanded rapidly through the 1980s, and has continued unabated into the present.

Second, the traditional claims of historical criticism to detachment and impartiality were called into question from two different quarters, both consisting of newcomers to the field: within the West, an expanding number of women scholars turned to feminist criticism, foregrounding the issue of gender construction and relations in interpretation; outside the West, beginning in Latin American, an expanding number of non-Western critics introduced liberation criticism, highlighting the question of political economy and class relations in interpretation. The stance of scientific decontextualization, it was argued from both sides, could no longer be considered valid in historiography. The result was the beginnings of ideological criticism, with its focus on differential relations of power, which came to the fore in the 1970s as well and expanded in different directions through the 1980s and beyond, including minority criticism and postcolonial criticism.

Third, the flow of historical criticism from text through critic to application in thought and life was ruptured by liberation criticism through its turn to popular ecclesial communities as its base and its appropriation of the classic model of “seeing, acting, and judging” as its *modus operandi*. The site of criticism, it was envisioned, would switch from the privileged confines of the academy to the struggles of the oppressed. Interpretation would begin with a critical analysis of contemporary society and culture, proceed to theological analysis in light of the biblical writings as the Word of God, and conclude with a concrete plan of action in the world. In this process, moreover, critics would function as allied and committed facilitators, providing direction when requested or deemed necessary. Such emphasis on social location and real readers came to the fore in the 1970s and received sustained theorization in the new literary, sociocultural, and ideological paradigms of interpretation.

Finally, the close links between historical criticism and modernism were radically revisited in the aftermath of postmodernist thought. From the point of view of poststructuralist thought, the concepts of textual indeterminacy, plurality of meanings, and agency of readers entered the area of biblical criticism. From the point of view of ideological critique, the focus on unequal relationships of power in culture and society became an integral part of biblical criticism as well. The age of Cultural Studies had arrived, therefore, with its twofold focus on the problematic and politics of meaning as well as representation; beginning in the 1980s, it has grown steadily more sophisticated through today.

Such ferment in biblical criticism cannot but have a profound impact on the working model of pastoral biblical ministry adopted under the aegis of historical criticism. Gone now was that unshakeable sense of scientific mediation provided by traditional historiography between the past of the biblical world and the now of contemporary Christianity. Interpretation now called for a very different set of qualifications: expertise in a variety of methods and theories, including literary and sociocultural approaches; problematization of social location and angle of vision in texts and interpretations alike; attention to real readers and power relations, whether inside or outside the academy, including the marginalized and the dispossessed; sensitivity to issues of diversity and conflict in texts and interpretation alike. In the last thirty years, then, since the mid-1970s, biblical criticism has developed in directions beyond all imagination at the time of Vatican II, in the early 1960s. Such developments call for a vigorous revisioning and reorientation of biblical pastoral ministry, its role and parameters, in the present and future Church.

Envisioning a Biblical Pastoral Ministry for the Future

By way of conclusion, I should like to offer a few pointers in this regard. This I do in the spirit of Vatican II, with a view of a Church that opens its arms, resolute and unafraid, to the world of postmodernity, and the élan of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, with its view of human agency very much at work in the composition of the biblical writings.

First, the insight of Liberation Theology regarding the need for a thorough critical analysis of society and culture as point of departure in interpretation should, I believe, be treasured most highly. If biblical pastoral ministry is to speak authoritatively and effectively to the world of postmodernity, it must develop a sharp understanding of it, in all of its complexity. Toward this end, critical reflection must address such issues as the following: globalization as a further stage in the development of capitalism; the utter demise and bankruptcy of 'real' socialism and the character of a postsocialist world; the new imperial-colonial framework in place as the result of the emergence of the United States as a global hyperpower; a globalized world marked by growing disparity between haves and have-nots and massive migration from the non-West into the West; the rise of global Christianity, including Catholicism, leading to a shift in its center of gravity away from Western Christendom and an expanded consciousness of interreligious life and dialogue. One could go on. Biblical pastoral ministry cannot take place in a social or cultural vacuum. At the same time, given the radical change in circumstances and the critical distance afforded by the passage of time, such critical analysis of society and culture cannot be undertaken in the same key as did Liberation Theology decades ago.

Second, no longer bound by the hierarchical model of texts-critics-readers and its corresponding vision of the critic as mediating agent, biblical pastoral ministry stands to benefit, I should think, from a broader examination of the use of biblical texts in reading traditions beyond academic criticism. Attention to the invocation and deployment of biblical terms and concepts in a variety of social and cultural arenas is now in order – the political and the economic, the literary and the artistic, the popular and the devotional, the ecclesial and the missionary. Within this vision, academic criticism would be approached as one among many reading traditions. Such a wider horizon of interest would not only expand the scope of theological reflection and practical application but also further the task of engaging postmodern society and culture at large.

Third, given the switch from a modernist (empiricist; universalizing; disinterested) to a postmodernist (constructed; contextual; perspectival) understanding of historiography and interpretation, biblical pastoral ministry should, it seems to me, keep the following questions in mind throughout with respect to both texts and interpretation: the social location and angle of vision at work; the problematic and politics of meaning and representation, with special emphasis on interpretive diversity as well as relations of power; the ethical and political ramifications of texts and interpretations for church and world alike. In so doing, biblical pastoral ministry assumes, in self-conscious fashion, the role of responsible critique – sensitive to previous and ongoing uses of the biblical texts, to the representations of different groups in texts and interpretations, and to the consequences of such uses and representations.

Finally, no longer dependent on a traditional historicist vision of a faithful translation of the biblical texts – through the mediation of learned critics – for theological reflection and practical application, pastoral biblical ministry should develop, I would hope, a driving vision of its task in the world of postmodernity. Such a vision, grounded in the Christian tradition and nurtured within the Catholic tradition, could serve as a much-needed and indefatigable advocate for human and social rights in a world of dislocation and devastation – a prophetic and unceasing voice on behalf of justice and freedom, dignity and wellbeing, for all.

This vision of biblical pastoral ministry would, I submit, be in fundamental accord not only

with the élan of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, given its expanded view of the composition and deployment of the biblical writings in this world of ours, but also with the spirit of Vatican II in general and the Constitution of the Church in the Modern World in particular, given its updated vision of a Church calling for a Christian vision of a better world for all as it opens its arms, determined and undaunted, to the postmodern world.

Epilogue: Anticipating and Dreaming

I should like to bring these reflections of mine to a close by returning to that haunting relationship between Vatican II and my life described in the Prolegomenon. It is a haunting that still perdures today and will do so until the day I die. Indeed, that early sense of excitement so palpable in 1959, given the great expectations attached to both the Cuban Revolution and the Second Vatican Council, was based on a common vision of *aggiornamento*, of reaching out to the world of modernity, with confidence and resolve, from within the radical uncertainties of the Cold War. The future, to be sure, would prove ambiguous. On the one hand, the Church would enter a glorious period of ecclesial renewal, ecumenical relations, and theological vitality. Now, decades later, it is beset by a host of severe challenges, none sharper than the crisis of sexual abuse on the part of the clergy. On the other hand, Cuba would fall prey to dictatorship again, under a different imperial master from the East. Now, decades later, it stands on the very brink of total collapse. Yet, as I look to the future now, that early vision of *aggiornamento*, its sense of excitement admittedly much less vibrant now, comes to haunt me: the need and duty to reach out to the world of postmodernity, with similar resolve and confidence, from within not only such ecclesial and political crises but also the radical uncertainties of globalization. That would be the greatest homage one could render to Vatican II, and, toward this end, a properly rethought and reoriented biblical pastoral ministry would constitute a most appropriate homage as well to its Constitution on Divine Revelation.