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Interest in the history of biblical interpretation is rising among students of the Bible, church history, and theology. Insights from scholars of premodern and ancient generations are increasingly valued in dialogue with contemporary explorations into the meaning of the Bible. Evidence of this growing interest shows in the sheer volume of recent monographs and reference works on biblical interpretation and its history.

Despite this expanding body of valuable resources, no single-volume reader covers the entire span of the Bible’s history, presenting examples of how people have thought about interpreting Scripture. This anthology is intended to fill the gap. The selections in this collection include reflections on biblical interpretation as well as examples of actual interpretations. The readings proceed chronologically from the second century B.C.E. to the end of the twentieth century in both the Christian and the Jewish exegetical traditions. Contemporary students of theology and the Bible do not fully equip themselves when their education fails to recognize the contributions made by great thinkers of other generations and other religious traditions. In particular, by including contributions from ancient, medieval, and contemporary Jews, this volume aims to expand the mental horizon within which students of my own faith (Christianity) reflect upon Scripture.

For as long as people have read the Bible, they have interpreted it at many different levels of sophistication and toward many different purposes of understanding and application. A truly comprehensive survey of the history of biblical interpretation might include examples of simple devotional reflections on the text, sermons, political speeches, and many other examples of appropriation from the Bible into social and religious life. This anthology does not cast its net so wide as to reflect the full range of biblical interpretation through the ages. Given the depth and breadth of the Bible’s presence in world culture, such a collection would fill many volumes. Instead I have selected only readings representative of the best thinking on the subject from epoch to epoch as well as examples of the most influential exegetical treatments of biblical texts. Consequently, this collection focuses somewhat narrowly on scholarly biblical interpretation. To provide maximum benefit to students of the Bible, I have sought clarity of expression in selecting each piece. In some cases this has meant passing over a more famous work by a given author in favor of a selection more accessible to nonspecialists.

Even with this restriction, many more examples could have been included. Needless to say, the documents of the New Testament present a rich field of insight into interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures at the beginning of the Christian era. But as they constitute a portion of the Christian Bible, they are readily available to students. Readers interested in learning more on exegesis in the New Testament may consult Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). I have also
not attempted to introduce the reader to the esoteric, philosophically symbolic world of Jewish kabbalistic interpretation. Interested readers would benefit from the work of Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) and from the kabbalistic commentary on the Torah called *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist, 1988). It is my hope, however, that the selections of the present anthology will give students of biblical interpretation a sufficient idea of the interests of learned biblical interpreters over the last twenty-two hundred years.

Dividing history into discrete periods is a subjective enterprise. I have chosen to treat the history of biblical interpretation in five parts. First, however, an Introduction surveys the major trends in twenty-two centuries of learned biblical interpretation. *The selections will be better understood if the introduction has been read.* Part 1 (150 B.C.E.–70 C.E.) features biblical interpretation as it was practiced before Christianity and rabbinic Judaism became firmly established religions. Part 2 (150–1500 C.E.) covers key writers reflecting the classical period of Christian interpretation by the church fathers and their exegetical heirs. Part 3, on rabbinic Judaism, covers key Jewish writers in the same general time span. Part 4 (1500–present) shows some of the ways in which historical concerns came to dominate scholarly interest in the Bible as attention was drawn to questions of philology and ultimately to questions of history and faith. Part 5 (1970–present) brings the reader to the present generation of interpreters, for whom historical questions share the spotlight with concerns about unavoidable subjectivity and ideological motivation in interpretation.

Unique to this collection are selections never before available in English. Three of them are compendia of comments on Psalm 23. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a number of commentary-anthologies were compiled in Europe for use among Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. Traditional rabbincic comments on Psalm 23 as compiled in the *Yalkut Shim'oni* are rendered from Hebrew and Aramaic into English. English readers can also access the time-honored patristic observations on the psalm as accreted in the Latin text of the *Glossa ordinaria*. Comments by leading humanist scholars of the Renaissance are translated from the sixteenth-century Latin text of the *Critici sacri*. A comparison of these three commentary traditions on the same biblical text makes for an interesting study in itself. Additionally, excerpts from the biblical scholarship of the eighteenth-century Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn are also published here in English for the first time.

To bring readers an accurate sense of how different generations have thought about interpreting Scripture, this collection includes a rather wide range of genres. It thereby runs the risk that some selections will be more challenging than others, particularly where linguistic nuances are difficult to bring across in translation. For this reason, I supply more explanatory footnotes for the pre-1600 C.E. entries than for those from the last four hundred years. All footnotes, unless otherwise marked, are mine. The name of an author or translator at the end identifies a footnote that comes from the edition of the reading’s source. Biblical references appear in square brackets when they have been added.

In the writing of this book I have been supported and assisted by more people than I can name here. I am particularly grateful to Azusa Pacific University from whom I received several grants, allowing me time and resources to include the original translations that appear in these pages. The translation of the selection from the *Glossa ordinaria* was produced by James T. Dennison, and the English from the *Critici sacri* section was rendered by J. Derek Halvorson. To these capable scholars I am indebted for their distinctive contribu-
tions. This book has been shaped with the help of thoughtful suggestions from many friends and colleagues, including John Hartley, Carole Lambert, Gerald Wilson, Aya Levy, and Yair Barkai. My thanks also go to James Ernest who got the editorial process under way, and to Shirley Decker-Lucke along with her indefatigable associate Sara Scott at Hendrickson for their help in bringing the process to its fruitful end. I will be grateful to readers for suggestions they might share that would improve any future edition of this book. Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my family—Ann, Molly, and Mitchell—for their love that kept this project in its proper perspective.

This volume leaves untouched many aspects and episodes in the history of biblical interpretation. Readers interested in further exploration into the subject would benefit from consulting any of the following works.


INTRODUCTION: THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

Contemporary interpreters approach the Bible from many directions and produce different results. Side by side on a single library shelf today one can find historical studies, sermonic reflections, theological treatises, cultural analyses, and devotional guides—none saying the same things but all presented as reliable interpretations of the Bible. How did such plurality of interpretation happen? Were there always so many different interpretive voices speaking on behalf of Scripture? The purpose of the present anthology, covering the history of biblical interpretation, is to help the reader formulate answers to such questions by becoming more familiar with the many ways in which the Bible has been read for over two thousand years.

The time span during which Scripture has been interpreted is quite broad. So is the range of forms that reflect biblical interpretation. Thousands of years ago scribes and priests were interpreting sacred Hebrew writings even before these became part of the canonical collection we call the Bible. Jews and Christians have been teaching and preaching from canonical biblical texts now for two millennia. Millions of people worldwide continue to make major life decisions on the basis of their understanding of the meaning of Scripture. Beyond the walls of church and synagogue, the influence of the Bible can be seen in a great variety of cultural forms, such as legal codes, scientific treatises, social customs, education systems, linguistic expressions, plays, novels, and films. Extending across such a long period of time and such a broad field of expression, the history of biblical interpretation will obviously include radically different ways in which the Bible has been read. Fully considered, the presence and impact of the interpreted Bible in the West is a subject greater than what any single book can adequately cover.

The aims of this book are more modest. For the sake of practicality in dealing with such a large subject, our survey of the history of biblical interpretation has drawn more or less arbitrary boundaries for itself. As a result, many writings and interpreters from the Jewish and Christian traditions will not appear in this anthology. The focus throughout will remain on selected documents and writers that most clearly and best represent the most important ways interpretation of the Bible has been understood and practiced from the third century B.C.E. to the present. This introduction will offer a tour through these centuries, serving as a general backdrop to the specific readings that constitute the rest of the book.

1The third century B.C.E. is the earliest point for which we have evidence of scriptural interpretation reflected in documents that did not themselves become part of the biblical canon. On the beginnings of exegetical activity by biblical writers themselves before the Hellenistic age, see William Yarchin, History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader, Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, © 2011. Used by permission.
As we shall see, much of the history of biblical interpretation concerns the question of referentiality in the Bible: to what extent are the texts of Scripture to be read for what they plainly state, and to what extent as figures of something other than their plain reference? Moreover, what constitutes a plain statement in Scripture as distinguished from a figural reference? To understand adequately the nature of these questions, we must first take note of the way readers understood important traditional writings during the age when the Bible began to be interpreted.

**Ancient Reading of Traditional Texts: Insights into Mystery (150 B.C.E.–100 C.E.)**

During antiquity, people, for the most part, read sacred texts figuratively. Before there was a Bible, the classical Greek literary canon included many mythological narratives that, as early as the fifth century B.C.E., were being explained allegorically. As the educated classes of the Greco-Roman world grew more philosophically sophisticated, the stories of the gods and heroes preserved in the classical literature became targets for ridicule, or at least produced confusion about how they might be taken other than at face value. According to one of the traditional myths about Hercules, for example, the hero eased the burden of the heavens from the shoulders of Atlas. But Herodorus of Heracleia (fifth century B.C.E.) explained that the tale was an allegory relating how Hercules (Heracles) acquired skill as a priest and scholar in understanding heavenly phenomena. Centuries later Heraclitus (first century C.E.) devoted an entire treatise to showing how Homer had written his poetry as allegories of profound truths about reality.

We would be mistaken to conclude that ancient interpreters had no regard for authorial intent simply because they allegorized. Rather, the meaning derived from allegorical readings of ancient stories was typically taken as the meaning intended by the ancient poet. If the poet were regarded as having been divinely inspired, then the allegorized meaning was the originally inspired meaning. The basic interpretive presupposition was this: due to the inherent limitations of human understanding, there will always be something in the sacred text that remains undisclosed to unglossed reading. **Mystery, then, was characteristic of sacred texts.** God is the speaker, but humans are the writers, and multiplicity of meaning (plain and obscure) is to be expected in the discursive space between what the words humanly say and what they divinely teach. For the ancients, it was not a matter of exposing what is hidden in the text but rather a hope to be guided through figurative reading into a sharing of the divine mind. In this way the truth about divine and mundane reality would be accessible, but only to those who would—through sustained philosophical reflection—put themselves in a position or frame of mind to perceive it. Unlike modern exegesis, in the ancient world the text was not an object for examination vis-à-vis the inquiring subject, testing for truth. Reading and interpreting religious texts in the ancient world was rather a process of participation in the mysteries that they hold. Depending on the setting, the text was sung, memorized, recited, philosophically allegorized—all activities that wove the divine truth of the text into the fabric of the interpreters’ social and spiritual existence.

Some of the earliest biblical interpretation during the Hellenistic and Roman periods reflected this attitude. The Jewish Torah contains stories about warring brothers and wandering patriarchs as well as obscure laws about foods and clothing. But sophisticated readers of the first-century Mediterranean world had come to understand sacred texts largely in terms of moral philosophy. How were such texts in the Torah to be understood? Philo of Alexandria (and also Pseudo-Aristeas) responded to this question by showing how the Jewish Scriptures—figuratively interpreted—could speak to the concerns that framed the Greco-Roman cultural horizon. The words of the Torah constituted a message of divine instruction for the education and edification of the soul, instruction that was delivered through the vehicle of stories about the patriarchs and of laws about kosher foods. By adopting the appropriate point of view through figurative reading, educated people in the Greco-Roman world could understand the Torah for its relevance to the contemplative life: the ancient text could make sense according to the prevailing notions of what cohered as appropriate for divine teaching. Philo’s interpretation, though, did not do away entirely with the ordinary reference of the Torah’s words. Although the Mosaic laws of purity may, in a way hidden to plain reading, teach a moral philosophy, it was nonetheless expected of Jews to obey the laws of Moses according to their plain sense.

Not all Scripture interpretation at the beginning of the present era was philosophical allegory. The Hebrew Scriptures contained hidden truths of another kind according to readings by the group of Jews (probably the ancient sect called the Essenes) who had established themselves in a settlement near the Dead Sea. The scrolls discovered there in 1947 preserve many examples of a certain way of reading Hebrew Scriptures historically: the ancient documents were taken to speak predictively of historical events that had unfolded only during the time of the Dead Sea community itself. Indeed, the scroll writers at the Dead Sea regarded their own community as the historical fulfillment of the very specific predictions expressed figuratively in lines from certain biblical narratives, psalms, and prophetic scrolls. It seems that, in the light of certain events that transpired among the priestly elite in Jerusalem in the last 150 years B.C.E., the Essenes discerned that these Scriptures were speaking in a mysterious prophetic way about them and their movement’s founder, whom they sometimes called the Teacher of Righteousness. By way of illustration, note these lines from one of the scrolls, known as the Damascus Covenant (6:2–11):

But [after the judgment of exile] God remembered the covenant of the forefathers. And he raised from Aaron men of knowledge and from Israel wise men, and made them listen. And they dug the well: ‘A well which the princes dug, which the nobles of the people delved with the staff’ (Num 21:18). The ‘well’ is the law. And those who ‘dug’ it are the converts of Israel, who left the land of Judah and lived in the land of Damascus, all of whom God called ‘princes,’ for they sought him. And the ‘staff’ is the interpreter of the law, of whom Isaiah said: ‘He produces a tool for his labor’ (Isa 54:16). And the ‘nobles of the people’ are those who came, throughout the whole age of wickedness, to ‘dig the well’ with the prescriptions that the Law-giver had prescribed for them to walk in. Without these they would never attain until there would arise the true teacher at the end of days.

In the book of Numbers, this verse is part of a song with which the Israelites celebrated God’s provision of water during the wilderness journey.

Adapted from the translation in Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, trans., The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (New York: Brill, 1997), 559.
Here again, although the specific form of interpretation is not allegory, the basic presupposition of figuration underlying the Dead Sea historical interpretation was the same as for Alexandrian _allegoria_: there can be learned from the inspired text a teaching that speaks to the cultural or historical situation of the interpreter—who himself can share in that same inspiration and so become privy to what otherwise cannot be discerned in the text.

**Early Christian and Rabbinic Biblical Interpretation**

(100–600 C.E.)

A manner of interpretation roughly analogous to the historical interpretations from the Dead Sea Scrolls is evident in the first century C.E. among the followers of Jesus. As the Jesus followers sought to make sense of what had happened in the teaching career of Jesus and his death and resurrection, it was Scripture that gave insight and voice to their emerging understanding. Certain texts from various parts of the Jewish Scriptures already, in the generations preceding Jesus, had been taken as messianically referential; the earliest Christians found in these texts, and many others, predictions (or at least typological adumbrations) that they believed had found their fulfillment in Jesus—whom they thereby recognized as Christ, the Messiah.4 (By the second century, a number of Christian writings themselves had come to rank with the traditional Jewish collection as sacred Scripture among the churches, and so the “Old” and the “New” Testaments came to constitute the Christian Bible.) Following this apostolic lead, Christian interpretation of Scripture in subsequent generations developed a more extensive apologetic catalogue of Old Testament texts showing expectations that were properly understood as having been fulfilled in the events surrounding Jesus Christ and his church.

This sort of Christian “expectation-fulfillment” reading is usually known as typological interpretation. As interpreters trained in the schools of rhetoric and grammar during late antiquity, the church fathers generally read the narratives of the Old Testament with a sensitivity for their Christian teaching as discerned in their narrative logic. It was from the narrative coherence of the ancient Jewish stories—what the stories were about—that a representation or prefiguration of what had come later could be discerned. Typology, then, would refer not so much to an exegetical technique as it would to a way of approaching the ancient texts whereby they “are invested with meaning by correspondence with other [scriptural] texts of a ‘mimetic’ or representational kind.”5 The discernment of such correspondences between texts and events, a correspondence that generates meaning otherwise not visible from the text, is probably best understood as a variety of figurative interpretation.6 Like allegory, typology is a condition of understanding within

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which the older text represents more than simply its subject. From this condition is discerned the foreshadowing dimension of the earlier text. Again, like allegory, typological interpretation is more hermeneutical than exegetical because it is less concerned with learning what the ancient texts say than with understanding how they are to be taken in the light of later texts (the New Testament documents) that the Fathers recognized to be works of interpretation as well as scriptural texts in their own right.

To illustrate, let us note how the following homiletic recitation, attributed to the late-second-century writer Melito of Sardis, alludes to the sense of worshipers’ participation in the old Exodus Passover story as it was told—for typological effect—during the Christian eucharistic ritual:

What is said and done [in the ritual] is nothing, beloved, without a comparison and preliminary sketch.
Whatever is said and done finds its comparison—what is said, a comparison, what is done, a prefiguration—in order that, just as what is done is demonstrated through the prefiguration, so also what is spoken may be elucidated though the comparison. This is just what happens in the case of a preliminary structure: it does not arise as a finished work, but because of what is going to be visible through its image acting as a model. For this reason a preliminary sketch is made of the future thing. . . .
As then with the perishable examples, so also with the imperishable things; as with the earthly things, so also with the heavenly.
For the very salvation and reality of the Lord were prefigured in the people [of the Exodus story], and the decrees of the gospel were proclaimed in advance by the law. The people then was a model [typos] by way of preliminary sketch, and the law was the writing of a parable; The gospel is the recounting and fulfilment of the law, and the church is the repository of the reality.7

Turning to Jewish exegesis in late antiquity and on into the eighth century (the end of the talmudic period), we see a similar proclivity to interpret one scriptural passage in the light of another, albeit not necessarily by means of a typological correspondence. Solomon, for example, as (traditionally) the author of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, appears in rabbinic discussion as not only a writer of Scripture but also an inspired authority who in his biblical writings interprets the Torah. We find the matter expressed in the midrash to the Song of Songs:

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He [Solomon] pondered the words of the Torah and investigated [the meaning of] the words of the Torah. He made handles to the Torah . . . R. Jose said: Imagine a big basket full of produce without any handle, so that it could not be lifted, till one clever man came and made handles to it, and then it began to be carried by the handles. So till Solomon arose no one could properly understand the words of the Torah, but when Solomon arose, all began to comprehend the Torah.8

The psalms of David, and indeed the texts from all the scriptural authors, were similarly regarded by the rabbis, so that the whole of the biblical canon presented itself as a self-interpreting text through intertextual illumination. Midrash—the Hebrew term for a notoriously hard-to-define rabbinic mode of interpretation—almost always involved the establishing of connections between biblical texts by any of a number of linkages: philosophical, paronomastic, thematic, numeric, historical—almost any basis could be employed to shed light from one biblical text upon another. As the supremely abiding gift from God to Israel, the midrashically interpreted Torah was so fully infused with teaching potential that combinations of its elements could endlessly yield insight and understanding.

“Torah” in the rabbinic context, however, does not refer strictly to the books of Moses or even just to the official canon we call the Hebrew Bible. The tradition of the two Torahs—the Written (the books of Moses and, by extension, the whole biblical corpus) and the Oral (the traditional biblical interpretations and legal rulings of the Jewish sages)—holds that both were revealed at Sinai. So, the interpretive tradition does not exist separately from the body of texts it interprets but shares in its authority as both Written and Oral Torahs are spoken in the name of a chain of interpreters going back to Moses and through him to God. Biblical interpretation in this context is a thoroughly social and dialogical phenomenon. Virtually the whole of the vast rabbinic corpus is presented to the reader as though it were a series of conversations across the generations: sometimes page after page of this rabbi offering an interpretation, that rabbi offering an alternative interpretation, and so on. Indeed, within the Jewish tradition of Torah study, it is unthinkable to proceed in isolation: “Why are the words of Torah compared to fire, as it is written, ‘Is not my word like fire? Says the Lord’ [Jer 23:9]. This is to teach you: What fire is there that can ignite itself? So also the words of Torah do not endure with [one who studies] in solitude.”9 Here again we find biblical interpretation practiced not so much as a method but as a highly participatory form of life, a life of dialogue with the Torah—which is the mind of God.

The innately communal, dialogical nature of rabbinic interpretation presents a challenge to students consulting traditional Jewish biblical interpretations for the first time. Modern readers often puzzle over the lack of finality in biblical interpretation as it is found in the midrashic collections and the Talmuds: multiple interpretations of the same biblical passage and open-ended interpretations constitute the norm rather than the exception.10 Modern desires for a debate-ending discovery of the final, uncontestable determinate

8 Song of Songs Rabbah 1.1.8.
9 Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 7a. See also Berakhot 63a.
10 The rabbinic notion of a single biblical passage yielding multiple meanings but without redundancy is reflected in this tradition preserved in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 34a, following the Soncino translation): “One Biblical verse may convey several teachings, but a single teaching cannot be deduced from different Scriptural verses. In R. Ishmael’s School it was taught: ‘And like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces’ (Jer 23:29); i.e., just as [the rock] is split into many splinters, so also may one Biblical verse convey many teachings.”
meaning in a biblical text, resulting from a methodically impeccable analysis performed upon the text by a transcendent self—such desires are frustrated in the world of rabbinic exegesis, where it seems that no one finally concludes anything. It is a world where students and teachers come together at the beit midrash (house of study) with questions driven by the presuppositions that 1) the biblical text has been given by God to illuminate human existence and 2) illumination shines forth only in the mahloqet, the give-and-take of open dialectic around the text. Illumination in the beit midrash does not necessarily entail arriving at an interpretive destination. Classical Jewish interpretation repudiates the notion that understanding is coterminous with final graspability and synthesis. Rather, understanding the Bible more authentically resides, perhaps strangely, in the uncertainty of its interpretation, never fully finished. “The words of the wise [rabbinic interpreters] are not added to the text; they are the text as well, linking its words to form not an integrated, hierarchical system but an ongoing tradition, a structure of mutual belonging. The Torah emerges as what it is and comes into its own only in the dialogue it generates; and only by entering into the dialogue can one enter into the Torah. To belong to the dialogue is to belong to Judaism.”

On the Christian side, during the first five centuries C.E., differences in biblical interpretation could often become downright contentious. Jews did not generally agree with the way Christians interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures, and among Christian factions there were severe disputes regarding the nature of the Godhead and other issues. Virtually all the disputants agreed that the truth of matters lay in Scripture; the differences frequently boiled down to how the Scriptures (for Jews, the sacred Hebrew scrolls; for the Christian groups, the Old and New Testaments) were to be interpreted. The line of interpretation that eventually prevailed as orthodox among the Christians would require alignment with apostolic teachings as they had gelled in Christian liturgy and worship. The second-century writer Irenaeus of Lyon summarized the orthodox Christian position in his Rule of Faith:

And this is the drawing-up of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life. God, the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all; this is the first and foremost article of our faith. But the second article is the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the father disposed; and through Him were made all things whatsoever. He also, in the end of times, for the recapitulation of all things, is become a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life, and bring about the communion of God and man. And the third article is the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs were taught about God and the just were led in the path of justice, and who in the end of times has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God.

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How were the prophets’ and patriarchs’ texts known to properly yield orthodox teachings? In another polemical document, Irenaeus alluded specifically to the figurative (allegorical/typological) way of reading Scripture, which would reliably uncover what others cannot see:

If any one, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field [Matt 13:44], that is, in this world (for ‘the field is the world’ [Matt 13:38]); but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ, since He was pointed out by means of types and parables. Hence His human nature could not be understood, prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of Christ. . . . For every prophecy, before its fulfillment, is to men [full of] enigmas and ambiguities. But when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then the prophecies have a clear and certain exposition.13

With words like these, the early Christians acknowledged that their claim to the Christian meaning of the Jewish Scriptures was less a matter of what these documents said than how they were read. Although here and there patristic discourse regarding the Bible focused on exegetical issues such as philology and literary context, by and large the questions of biblical interpretation were hermeneutical. For passages obviously commensurate with the Rule of Faith, the reading would be literal (with allowance for genre distinctions and figurative expressions) whereas, for passages that required a second reading to agree with apostolic teaching, that second reading would be figurative.14

In the fifth century, Augustine refined Christian hermeneutics to a question of reading the Bible in such a way that greater love of God and love of neighbor come of it.15 Augustine also emphasized what had been affirmed by Origen and all the Fathers as the sine qua non for reading the Bible in this way, namely, the perspective that Jesus himself granted the church on the biblical text.16 Ancient biblical hermeneutics was never simply the application of

14 Thus orthodox interpretation was never simply a matter of (allegorical) technique, for opponents of orthodoxy as the gnostics were themselves accomplished allegorizers.
16 One of the key biblical passages on which the early church based this affirmation is the story, near the end of Luke’s gospel, in which the resurrected Jesus read himself into the Jewish Scriptures, showing his disciples—probably through some sorts of figuration—how he was the consummate meaning of the Scripture tradition: “And he said to them, ‘O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:25–27). Shortly thereafter: “They said to each other, ‘Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?’ And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:32). And finally, a little later that same day, addressing a larger group of followers: “Then he said to them, ‘These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead’” (24:44–46). Note how this gospel text refers to an opened mind as the necessary condition for perceiving in the Scripture tradition that which was otherwise indiscernable.
method to the text but entailed a living relationship with it; only secondarily was the text transformed in Christian interpretation. Before the biblical text could be converted to Christian reading, there first had to be a conversion of the reader to the interpretive perspective in Christ. Only from this vantage point were such readings possible.

**Medieval Christian Interpretation (600–1500 C.E.)**

In the minds of the church fathers, figurative interpretation of Scripture became a key part of a larger hermeneutical perspective strongly influenced by neoplatonic philosophical categories of metaphysics. That is, beyond the drafting of ordinary words into the service of expressing extraordinary truth, Christian allegorical interpretation manifested a way of reading not just Scripture but the world itself: visible, tangible things were taken to speak of invisible, spiritual things. As Scripture communicates its divine message, it uses words that signify actual objects or actions in the world (lion, mountain, bread, walking, wrestling, sleeping), which themselves are symbols of intangible, spiritual truths (divine sovereignty, nourishment of the soul, the struggle between godly and ungodly human natures). In this hermeneutical framework, then, it is not only the words of Scripture that God has set forth to communicate divine truth but also the physical world: as the words of Scripture refer to them, things in the tangible world speak symbolically of spiritual realities because God has ordered both—the world and Scripture—to be read together so that humans can be instructed about divinity and morality.¹⁷

The modern reader sometimes balks at the liberties that ancient and medieval Christian interpreters seem to have taken with biblical texts, as though the literal meaning that words carry were simply disregarded. We note, for example, this comment by the eighth-century British monk Bede on Exod 25:23, where the Israelites are given the specific dimensions for constructing a table to be used in the tabernacle:

> The table made from acacia wood is the Holy Scripture composed out of the bold words and deeds of the holy fathers... This [table] has length, because it suggests to us perseverance in religious undertakings; width, because it suggests the amplitude of charity; height, because it suggests the hope of everlasting reward.¹⁸

Despite the attention devoted to a figurative sense of Scripture, it was, in the Christian tradition of interpretation, the literal sense that served as the foundation upon which the entire framework of figurative meanings could be built. The grammatical and rhetorical schools of the Greco–Roman world had for generations recognized the establishment of the lexicographical meaning of an author’s words as a basic step for interpreting literature.¹⁹

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¹⁹ E.g., during the late second century, Origen had compiled unparalleled notes on the textual readings of various biblical manuscript traditions. One of the motivations for his scrupulous lexicographical attention to the biblical text was to help establish an accurate semiological basis for allegorical interpretation. A corrupted text would obscure the doctrine that God’s Spirit had intended to teach by the selection of only the words that the authentic textual readings preserved.
This discipline continued to influence the Church’s figurative exegesis into the Middle Ages, as the standard or literal meaning of a word was important to know in order to identify the correct symbol by which various figurative meanings could be understood: doctrinal (allegorical), moral (tropological), or prophetic (anagogical). An example for this fourfold plurality of meaning is this medieval scriptural allegory attributed to Dante:

“When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of a strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion” [Ps 114:1–2]. For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified.20

However much the spiritual meanings of this passage might edify medieval Christians, the plain meaning—the reference to Israel’s flight from Egypt—could not be abandoned. The plain or historical sense always remained the fundament for interpretation. In the twelfth century, French scholastic theologian Peter of Poitiers wrote, “Unless the foundation of history [the literal meaning] is laid beneath, upon which the walls of allegory ought to be erected, and the roof of tropology ought to be placed, the whole edifice of the spiritual understanding will collapse.”21 After stating a similar admonition about the primacy of attending to the literal meaning, Peter’s Parisian contemporary Hugh of St. Victor advised his students,

You have in history the means through which to admire God’s deeds, in allegory the means through which to believe his mysteries, in morality the means through which to imitate his perfection. Read therefore [the literal, historical sense]. . . . After the reading of history, it remains for you to investigate the mysteries of allegories, in which I do not think there is any need of exhortation from me since this matter itself appears worthy enough in its own right.22

As Hugh’s words imply, even with necessary care given to ascertain the biblical text’s literal sense, figurative meanings were usually more valued than the literal.

Attention to the plain sense of the Bible was complicated by the fact that the Christian Scriptures for centuries were studied only in translated versions. Since the fifth century, the Latin Bible, known as the Vulgate, had become the standard translation of the Christian Scriptures—indeed, virtually the only Bible—for the Western church. When the Latin text was found to present a strange expression or an odd grammatical construction, the stakes involved in providing a satisfactory explanation were high. After all, the text—even in translation—had recorded the very words of God, the Author of Scripture, whose voice was to be heard in every single word. By the end of the first Christian millennium,

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however, Latin had ceased to be spoken in Europe as a vernacular. Biblical interpretation thus came to require much greater attention to grammar and syntax than had previously been the case. Such study entailed questions of linguistic signification, particularly the need to explain more clearly how words from a human language (such as Latin) could be taken to communicate suprahuman or divine truth. With refined questions of grammatical functions filling the air and with advanced cultivation of the liberal arts increasing in the twelfth century, understanding how the biblical text could be taken to authentically possess multiple meanings became a more pressing problem. The Aristotelian metaphysical tradition provided heuristic categories for scholars of this age. For instance, God could be understood as the efficient cause of what is expressed whereas the human writers were the operating cause. Along similar philosophical lines, the thirteenth-century theologian Thomas Aquinas articulated how multiple senses can be legitimately derived from the biblical text and employed for the construction of theological subtleties. But the medieval Aristotelian insistence that the hidden essence of things could be humanly discerned only from their manifestation to the senses began to make some of the more exaggerated forms of allegorical interpretation less attractive than the plain sense of Scripture. The literal, historical sense of Scripture was beginning to emerge from centuries of relative neglect.

The intensified study of classical Latin, accompanied by a dynamic complex of commercial, cultural, and political factors, burgeoned into the European Renaissance of the fifteenth century. Scholars took up the study of ancient Greek and applied themselves to proving the authenticity of classical texts, editing them, and translating them from the original. As greater numbers of ancient texts were recovered and manuscripts were compared, it became apparent that texts have a history. So also do words and expressions. Biblical interpretation would now proceed on the recognition that languages and words have a history of meaning. The humanist impulse was to recover, as much as possible, the original meanings of ancient expressions in their social dimensions as they were addressed to their original audiences. In order to support greater historical understanding of the Bible, scholars began to produce voluminous fact-filled compendia, such as dictionaries, encyclopedias, polyglot Bibles, concordances, and philologically oriented commentaries replete with fresh translations for biblical words. Learned interpretation of the Bible was now a journey back into the distant biblical world, and these tools equipped the exegetical traveler for the trek.

Biblical interpretation in the sixteenth century proceeded within a tension between two tendencies. On the one hand, there was the antiquarian motive that fueled the philological and historical inquiries into the long-dead culture of the biblical world. But at the same time, on the other hand, there was the desire to hear in the words of the text the voice of God’s Spirit speaking to the individual worshipper. Indeed, among Protestants the sacrament of the proclamation of the word was effectively replacing the Eucharist as the primary mode of Christian participation in divine mystery. Many Protestants were also zealous to build a Christian society on the basis of what Scripture indicates; here the quest to understand the ancient social structures was aimed at living in them again or at least

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24 For insights into the collegial world of Renaissance scholarship as it affected biblical interpretation, see Debora K. Shuger, The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
adapting them to the civics of Geneva or Zurich. This tension reflects the Janus face of the Reformation age: the Reformers as servants of the biblical text shared with the medieval world an existential stance regarding the vitality and relevance of Scripture, but as heirs of the Renaissance, their historical objectivism vis-à-vis the antiquity of the biblical world made the distance between sixteenth-century Europe and biblical Palestine ever more evident. The always-present tension between the Bible’s ancient signification and its contemporary meaning would increase thanks to the refined historical tools developed at the birth of the modern era.

Post-Talmudic Jewish Interpretation (600–1500 C.E.)

Among the various Jewish communities in southwestern Asia, North Africa, and Europe, midrash had been generally the prevalent form of biblical interpretation during the first eight centuries of the present era. Although exegetical debate among the rabbis had generated the maxim “a biblical passage cannot depart from its plain *peshat* meaning,”\(^\text{25}\) it was the derived meaning (*derash*, from the same root as for *midrash*) that largely occupied Jewish interpreters, particularly in the haggadic or homiletic traditions but also in halakic or legal exegesis as well. The bases for Jewish interpretation had been firmly established in the corpus of rabbinc traditions.

By the tenth century, however, influence from philosophically sophisticated Arabic intellectual culture could be seen in the increasing attention given to grammatical, scientific, and rhetorical elements in the study of Scripture.\(^\text{26}\) Jewish scholars such as Sa’adia ben Joseph (tenth century) in the East and the great scientist and commentator Ibn Ezra (eleventh century) in the West began producing commentaries based much more centrally on the details of Hebrew grammar and philology than had been the case in previous generations. In accord with this approach, there emerged a greater historical awareness and a considerably more consistent focus on the *peshat* and less reliance on midrashic interpretations of biblical passages. Ibn Ezra, for example, insisted on grammatical and contextual factors as primary guides for interpretation, and he sharply criticized the haggadic tradition of midrash when the *derash* seemed to have replaced the *peshat* without warrant. Expressing his dissatisfaction with this characteristic of traditional midrashic interpretation, Ibn Ezra created a play on Eccl 12:12–13: “The end of the matter is—to midrashic interpretation there is no end.”\(^\text{27}\)

The eleventh-century master commentator R. Shlomo Yitshaqi (Rashi) almost always provided explanatory comments along the lines of *peshat*. But he was not averse to including (and sometimes adjusting) the traditional midrashic interpretations where he sensed they contributed to a better understanding of what the text had to teach. His grand-
son R. Shmuel ben Meir (Rashbam; twelfth century) was even more insistent on the primacy of the plain meaning when interpreting Scripture. We find almost no midrashic interpretations at all in Rashbam’s commentaries but instead explanations of the Torah “in a manner that conforms to the [natural] way of the world.” In part, the shift, noted above, among Christian interpreters away from figurative interpretations developed from the influence of the cultivated Jewish knowledge of grammatical details and preference for the peshat. Respected Christian scholars such as Nicholas of Lyra (thirteenth century) and Johannes Reuchlin (fifteenth century) consulted Jewish sources and were influenced by them. Overall, there was a parallel trend among Jewish and Christian exegetes during the late Middle Ages: respect for traditional, derived scriptural interpretations continued while there developed a grammatically and philosophically informed insistence that traditional homiletic interpretations could not be maintained at the expense of the Bible’s plain sense.

Modern Biblical Interpretation (1500–Present)

As we have seen, by the fifteenth century, an unprecedented historical consciousness was beginning to emerge among European scholars. With a greater concern to establish more clearly what the ancient authors had written, there came also an increased appreciation of the original meaning of an ancient text. Interpreters were less interested in the allegorized meanings that had accumulated from the Fathers and subsequent commentators. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, biblical interpretation became less directed toward aligning a biblical passage with a known Christian teaching through allegory and more directed toward discerning what the biblical author had intended to communicate. We might call this a quest for a certain determinacy of meaning: a text is more and more understood to possess a single (“plain,” “literal,” “historical”) meaning—the authorially intended meaning—rather than a multiplicity of moral, theological, and ecclesiological meanings derivative from the things to which the author’s words pointed. This is not simply a change of attitude regarding the text of the Bible; the way the world itself was viewed also underwent a transformation. The physical, historical world and all the things in it were seen less and less as symbolic of metaphysical truths or as bearers of spiritual meaning. Instead of providing objects of moral or theological interpretation, the physical world became an object of study in its own right. The task of making the physical universe intelligible (the construction of worldview) was becoming less a theological and more a scientific enterprise.

For biblical scholarship, the significance of this gradual shift in perspective was profound. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, scientific inquiry overwhelmingly proved itself superior to prescientific efforts in accounting for the causation and properties of physical phenomena. Inevitably the modern, scientific frame of mind would be applied to the study of Scripture. Fifteenth-century scholarship had already recognized that there was a history to the biblical manuscript tradition and to biblical linguistic

28 See Lockshin’s reference for Rashbam’s intriguing Hebrew phrase in Rashbam’s Commentary on Exodus (ed. and trans. Martin I. Lockshin; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 225, from which this quote is taken.
conventions. The ability to detect semantic shifts in the ancient languages made it possible to distinguish historical strata in the texts on the basis of the types of words and expressions found in the text. A single text was no longer assumed to come from a single author at a single point in time. Beyond the signs (the words), it was eventually recognized that what the words referred to—the persons, the events, the places mentioned in the Bible—were also historical and therefore best understood when studied in a historical, scientific manner. Scholars applied themselves to the enormous amounts of linguistic and historical information available in newly rediscovered ancient sources such as Josephus, Philo, the Targumim, and rabbinic literature as well as in early Semitic texts discovered at archaeological sites in the Near East. The meaning of Scripture was no longer to be found in a network of doctrinal symbols connoted by the words of Scripture, that is, in a symbolic universe, but rather in the physical and historical universe. The criterion for truth in Scripture no longer resided in that symbolic network but in the correspondence between what is written on the pages of the Bible and what is shown to be true in the historical world of human observation and experience. Modern reading of the Bible highlights the question of what in Scripture can be accepted as literally true in a historical, scientific sense.

Historical criticism is the term frequently used to identify this modern scientific approach to biblical interpretation. The phrase denotes the discernment (“criticism”) of historical factors that account for the features of the text: the time when it was written, the real (as distinguished from the attributed) author, and the social, political, and religious circumstances of the author. Through rationally defensible modes of analysis, the reader as investigator seeks to reconstruct the meaning of the text objectively within the time of its origins. Fewer scholars accepted the meaning of the text as it had been determined by (ecclesiastical) authorities that the modern mind now considered external to the world of the text and therefore less binding than the authority of reason and historical evidence. Access to the Bible’s meaning was no longer assumed to exist within the reader’s world of relations as created and maintained by the teaching authority of the church. This authority had for centuries valorized spiritual and moral figurative readings, and as a result believers had felt a great existential proximity between themselves as reading subjects and Scripture as the textual object. Rather, the starting point of the historical-critical approach was an assumption of separation and distance between subject (reader) and object (text) by virtue of the recognition that the text originated in an ancient world and was written to speak to that world. Understanding the biblical text—now recognized to be an ancient artifact—became a matter of explaining the historical and cultural elements of its world.

Traditional authorities, such as the church fathers and the legacy of medieval scholarship, became less reliable sources for pursuing modern questions about the Bible. Learned biblical interpretation in the modern era required more information about the world of the ancient texts and about the historical development of the biblical documents themselves. The scholarly genre of “biblical introduction” emerged to supply such data. Early examples include the critical histories of the Old and New Testaments published in the late seventeenth century by the erudite French scholar Richard Simon. With particular focus on the textual and philological history of the Bible and through detailed attention to stylistic nuances in the ancient languages, Simon demonstrated, for example, that in the

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growth of the biblical tradition, Moses could not have authored all of the texts that had long been attributed to him. Simon’s purpose was to show that “those who do not sufficiently examine the style of the holy Scriptures are subject to fall into great errors concerning the chronology [of biblical events and texts].” By such charges the Catholic Simon intended to convince Protestants that the historical facts of the Bible demonstrated the need for the church’s interpretive authority. But the sharp traditionalist reaction that Simon’s work triggered was a harbinger of the sort of conflict that modern biblical study would continue to generate between historical investigation and traditional theological doctrine through subsequent centuries—even to the present day.

During the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth centuries, researchers continued to investigate the nature of the correspondence between the actual history of events mentioned in the Bible and the biblical narration of those events. The results of such study showed that events often differed from how the Bible presents things. For example, the contents of the Pentateuch were seen to derive from several sources that postdated Moses and that were edited together at the end of the Israelite monarchy or later. Scholars identified and reconstructed four main pentateuchal sources: J (for the Yahwist or Jahwist writer, from the early Israelite monarchic period); E (for the Elohist writer, somewhat later in the monarchic period; D (for the Deuteronomic writer, from the late monarchic or exilic period); and P (for the Priestly writer, from the postexilic period). Such reconstructions had larger ramifications for historical understanding of the Hebrew Bible.

For example, the judgments against Israel, announced by the prophets of the monarchic era, could not have been prompted by Israel’s violation of the laws that God had established through Moses at Mt. Sinai, as traditionally believed. Instead the judgments were announced before the inclusion of these laws in the biblical record. Moreover, historical research indicated that the prophets themselves in some cases were not the originators of everything that appears in the biblical books bearing their names. (It had long been argued that the Hebrew prophecies did not foretell the coming of Jesus so much as they referred to realities on the historical horizon of the Israelites themselves.) The latter portion of the book of Isaiah, for example, was seen as so distinct in style and substance from what is found in the first half, and so relevant to the situation facing the exiled Jews in sixth-century B.C.E. Babylon, that it was concluded that the eighth-century B.C.E. Isaiah of Jerusalem could not have written it. Modern scholars dubbed the anonymous Babylonian prophet Deutero-Isaiah.

Analogously, close attention to the Greek style found in the New Testament epistles to Timothy and Titus—traditionally accepted as having been written by the Apostle Paul—produced the conclusion that they are in fact non-Pauline; similar negative conclusions were reached concerning the authorship of the epistles bearing the names of the Apostle John and the Apostle Peter. Historical examination of the New Testament Gospels generated theories regarding sources used in the writing of the Gospels. Seeking to more directly access the genius of Jesus’ teachings, scholars labored to distinguish his genuine words and deeds from later addenda and to reconstruct a more historical account of his life.

Archaeological discoveries in the Near East and intense historical research brought more accurate understanding of ancient cultures and religions as they pertained to biblical

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studies. As a result, Hebrew and Christian religious beliefs and rituals reflected in the biblical documents were beginning to be understood within the general context of the history of religions. By the first decade of the twentieth century, scholarly study of the Bible in the West was dominated by a concern to interpret the Bible historically as a document of antiquity for the sharpest focus upon the highest religious ideals expressed in its noblest passages.31

Greater access to ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean texts helped twentieth-century biblical interpreters realize that the sources lying behind the present biblical documents were not literary creations in the sense that a modern author would write but rather collections of ancient traditions. The quest to identify the earliest (and so, it was thought, the purest) expressions of biblical thought led scholars to investigate the preliterary traditions that could be discerned behind the written deposits. Such oral traditions had served certain social, cultural, and religious functions in the life of the ancient communities before these traditions had been adapted to the purposes of a written record. So, the practice of source criticism in the nineteenth century was supplemented by form criticism in the twentieth. The narrative and legal traditions currently found in the early part of the book of Exodus could be seen as having originated in the ancient Israelite Passover observances, orally recited. The shape of Jesus’ own teachings as recorded in the Synoptic Gospels was seen to have been influenced by Christian proclamation and teaching in the early church. As form-critical studies drew greater attention to the social settings from which the earliest biblical traditions had emerged, biblical scholars began to turn to the social sciences, such as sociology, social and cultural anthropology, and economics, to better understand the social realities of the ancient biblical world.32

In short, modern scholars realized that historical understanding of what is written in biblical texts entails far more than linguistics. The necessity of reading specific Bible verses in the light of their larger literary context had been recognized for centuries; the modern insight was that context reaches far beyond the range of a biblical verse’s literary neighborhood. The meaning that any given biblical word or expression had for its ancient speakers is contingent upon a wide range of factors constituting the frame of reference that would have been operative at the time of utterance. Much modern biblical scholarship has been devoted to identifying and explicating these factors in an effort to realize the modern ideal for interpreting ancient texts: hearing the text as the ancients would have heard it. Such hearing, many modern biblical interpreters maintain, is what gives access to the meaning of the text.

**Late Modern Biblical Interpretation (1970–Present)**

The phrase just used—“the meaning of the text”—captures the quintessential stance of the modern interpreter vis-à-vis the text as an object to be interpreted. From that stance, the text is to be examined for the determinate meaning that awaits discovery in its political or historical or religious or psychological or authorial world. This meaning can be

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31 For a spirited account of the rise of modern biblical historical criticism, see Howard M. Teeple, *The Historical Approach to the Bible* (Evanston, Ill.: Religion and Ethics Institute, 1982).

recovered for contemporary reflection. Such a manner of interpretation “is principally in-<ref>ent upon circumscribing the text within a specific historical horizon.”<sup>33</sup> What is assumed in this stance is that a text’s meaning exists in utter distinction from any hermeneutical framework that might be brought to bear upon it from the interpreter’s world. Indeed, most of the modern interpretive enterprise has aimed to eliminate any contemporary historical or cultural factor that might insert itself between the reader and the ancient text. Heir to the humanistically charged Reformation and European Enlightenment, with their characteristic aversion to authorized interpretive structures such as church doctrine, the modern mind is uncomfortable with the notion that understanding the biblical text (or any literature) cannot occur without interpretation. The nineteenth-century Oxford don Benjamin Jowett even said as much: “The true use of interpretation is to get rid of inter-<ref>pretation, and to leave us alone with the author.”<sup>34</sup>

It is the hallmark of late modern biblical interpretation to acknowledge that Jowett’s ideal is not only impossible but also not even desirable. In recent decades scholars have begun to repudiate the notion that the contemporary reader approaches the text as a transcendentally neutral observer. They point out that just as the biblical text was created within a historical and cultural situation that affects the way it was written, so also they themselves as readers are situated within a cultural situation that cannot but affect the way they read. Both biblical text and biblical interpreter are contingent. Any reading of the biblical text, then, will be according to a hermeneutic of some sort (whether or not that fact is acknowledged), and thus the question prompting <ref>interpretatio</ref> is not, “What does this text mean?” but, “How do we interpret this text? How is it to be taken?”<sup>35</sup> The two are very different questions. Instead of pursuing an unencumbered encounter with the pristine text (or the authorial mind behind the text), interpretation in the late modern period entails a more self-conscious recognition of the unavoidability of a hermeneutical system or of pre-suppositions according to which sense will be made of the text.

The recent emergence of canon-based interpretation may be understood as one way in which biblical scholars attempt to do just that. The framework for interpretation in this case is the biblical canon, the literary assemblage within which the individual biblical compositions have had their home for as long as they have been regarded as Scripture. A canonical approach is a self-consciously theological way of reading biblical texts. Just as, according to structural linguistics, the meaning of a word is not determined by its etymology so much as by its place within a system of signs, so the theological significance of biblical compositions is determined not so much by their earliest versions or settings as by their role within the biblical text-system.<sup>36</sup> Any meaning an ancient composition—such as the Song of Songs—may have had when it was first written became subject to alteration or

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<sup>35</sup>See Gerald L. Bruns, <i>Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern</i> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

even obliteration by that text’s inclusion in the biblical canon. The function or voice of a biblical composition within the canon, however, is not a given but an intertextual potential the specific contours of which come to light as the faith community (which has received the biblical collection as its textual authority, as its canon) reads the text for relevance to its own historical contingencies. Modern biblical scholarship has identified ways in which some of the biblical compositions were shaped by intertextual resonances with other (earlier) biblical texts during the beginnings of the canonical process. Such shaping was, in part, the outcome of the way the faith community was interpreting its traditional texts. Canonical hermeneutics essentially extends the tradition history of the sacred collection through the ages to the current generation. It is the church and the synagogue—the communities that read the biblical writings as components of their authoritative canon, served by their respective hermeneutical institutions—that will locate among these writings the intracanonical resonances by which the Bible makes sense to them.

We have been speaking of textual meaning as something that readers make or that is made as readers engage with the text. A focus on the text itself as a literary field of potential meaning—instead of a search for the intentions of the author or for the influences of the author’s world—is another characteristic of late modern biblical interpretation. Instead of taking biblical writings as a window through which to view the author’s meaning (or even divine doctrine), reading the Bible as literature opens the interpreter to meaning evident in the literary artistry of the text itself. By way of a brief example, the Catholic biblical scholar Sean McEvenue writes concerning the poetic line sung by the angels in Luke 2:14,

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth, peace to men of good will.

The meaning . . . does not come from a mimetic reading of the words, but only from a literary reading, noting a trope which is familiar in semitic poetics, the form of parallel stichs. Thus heaven parallels earth, glory parallels peace, and God parallels people: the heavens “in excelsis” are made parallel to the earth and hence the earth to the heavens; the glory of the angels’ song is made parallel to the peace which men and women are to experience, and hence our peace is lifted up by angels’ singing; and God who receives this song of glory is made parallel to people of good will who receive this angelic peace. . . . To “get” the significance of this little line, one must experience an exhilaration leveraged out of the paralleling of human experience and supernal joy. And if one assents to this feeling, one might be led to change the way one lived.
The phenomenon of interpretation here resembles the aesthetic experience of art. Literary interpretation of Scripture is artistic in that the text is understood to be its own meaning, but not without the necessary engagement by a reader.

Reader-oriented (as distinguished from author-oriented or even text-oriented) interpretation is emerging as another characteristically late modern or postmodern way of understanding the Bible. According to this perspective, all human cultural expression—including linguistic, textual expression—is shaped through institutions, behavioral conventions, practices, and norms that are socially constructed rather than inherent realities of physical being. Interpretation of texts is therefore a dynamic process, attentive not just to what language says but to what language does—and this is never through a single speaking voice but through a dialogical process of interaction. Thus the interaction of voices (a social dynamic)—not the single, individual voice—is the generative matrix of meaning. Meaning in a text certainly qualifies as a socially generated construct, and so, like all social constructs, meanings (i.e., what readers find meaningful) will vary relative to the ideologies or value structures that they support. Such variation inevitably means that the construction of meanings for texts is an unavoidably indeterminate process: there are no fixed, determinate meanings encoded within the texts; texts are made to make sense in terms of indeterminate meanings constructed by readers. There is therefore no such thing as the single, correct meaning of a text, and the role of the reader (or the reading community, sometimes called the interpretive community) is recognized to have a much more prominent place in the construction of meaning.

Truth in biblical texts, then, at the turn of the second millennium is pursued less exclusively according to philosophically based epistemology. Scholars are drawing greater attention to the rhetorical basis of truth as it is constructed both through the way language is used in the texts and through the way it is used by the interpreter. The biblical writers and their interpreters are by definition always situated in one or another web of social interests. So, the presence of a truth-constructing, rhetorical element in biblical interpretation raises the further question of the ideological interests that the rhetoric may be seen to serve—again, both in the world of the text’s creators and in the world of the text’s interpreters. Biblical interpreters are more and more examining biblical writings for the extent to which they were written or have been taken up by church and synagogue in order to claim divine sanction in favor of, for example, certain class interests, gender prejudices, and power hierarchies in social, ecclesiastical, and political institutions. The “results” of biblical interpretation are no longer restricted to understanding the world that created the Bible. The quest now extends more broadly to include the world that the Bible has created.

In the postmodern world, no single approach to biblical interpretation can claim exclusive validity or relevance. Since the Bible is studied in many different settings—church, university, seminary, home—the questions that are put to it will vary, as will the assumptions regarding the nature of the text. Even in the heyday of historical criticism, figurative reading never died (at least in some circles), and although historical questions now share the stage with reader-oriented queries, they have by no means made a complete exit.

In short, biblical interpretation currently includes a spectrum of methods that reflect elements from every era of its history. Carefully considered, any question or concern brought to the Bible has legitimacy for the Bible-reading audience that presents the question. If all allow for this legitimacy, it may be that interpretive communities can gain insightful perspectives on the Scriptures that otherwise would have remained hidden to them. The world of biblical interpretation has ever been rich and manifold, and so it continues into the twenty-first century.

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42 For a sensitive reflection on such prospects, see Daniel Patte, Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995).