

A SYMPHONY OF VOICES

The Legacy of Vatican II

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MANY TEXTS IN both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures underwent a period of growth and development before achieving their final form as found in the Bible. The same can be said for Chapter III of *Dei Verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, the chapter concerned with the interpretation of Scripture. Its history may not be as intricate as some texts in the Bible but it possibly went through more redactions within a shorter period of time than any biblical text ever did. By the time it received the approval of the participants of the Second Vatican Council it had gone through six drafts within five years. (Vorgrimler 1969, 215) Much was at stake in the preparation of this chapter because it was to set the future direction of biblical interpretation for the Catholic Church, a direction that was by no means agreed upon. In fact, some thought this the ideal time to change the direction that *Divino Afflante Spiritu* had set for biblical interpretation almost twenty years earlier.

In 1943, Pope Pius XII wrote the encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, in which he stated that the principal objective of the Catholic exegete is to determine the literal sense of the Scriptures, i.e. the intention of the author when the book was composed. Essential to this process is the determination of the various types of literary forms of which the author made use. It is through the literary forms that we can arrive at an understanding of the author's intention. (Carlen 1981, 73) These two directives of Pope Pius XII: the intention of the author and the author's use of literary forms became the heart of *Dei Verbum's* teaching on biblical interpretation in the Catholic Church:

...the interpreter of sacred Scriptures, if she/he is to ascertain what God has wished to communicate to us, should carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words.

In determining the intention of the sacred writers, attention must be paid, *inter alia*, to 'literary forms for the fact is that truth is differently presented and expressed in the various types of historical writing, in prophetic and poetical texts,' and in other forms of literary expression. Hence the exegete must look for that meaning which the sacred writer, in a determined situation and given the circumstances of the time and culture, intended to express and did in fact express, through the medium of a contemporary literary form. (*Dei Verbum*, par. 12.)

As important as the literary form is in biblical interpretation, it is only one aspect of a wider process of exegesis known as the historical-critical method. This process, which had its beginning in the eighteenth century is composed of several steps:

1. Textual criticism—which attempts to determine, as nearly as possible, what the original Hebrew or Greek text was.
2. Literary criticism—which analyses the grammar, syntax, and style of the scriptural passage.
3. Form criticism—which is the study of literary forms.
4. Redaction criticism—which examines how the various forms were brought together into the final work as well as the unique characteristics of the completed work.

It is really this entire process of exegesis that

the Second Vatican Council endorsed in *Dei Verbum*.

In addition to elucidating the intention of the author, the historical-critical method has proved invaluable in shedding light on the historical circumstances surrounding the development of the books of the Bible as well as the Jewish and Christian communities for whom they were written.

Despite its advantages, this method also has its shortcomings. First, considerable effort is spent on tracing the development of the Scriptures but little is said regarding the text in its present state. Second, as important as it is to understand the meaning of Scripture that was intended by the author, how do the Scriptures speak to the contemporary world? How does the Bible address the questions and problems of the twenty-first century? How does Scripture guide the church of today, a church separated by over two millennia from the church for which the New Testament was written? These questions have sparked the development of new techniques of biblical interpretation.

Developments Since Vatican II

Since *Dei Verbum* was promulgated by Vatican II forty years ago, a number of new exegetical methods have appeared. These include: rhetorical analysis; narrative analysis; semiotic analysis; the canonical approach; approaches that use the human sciences such as sociology, cultural anthropology, and psychology; and the advocacy approach, which interprets Scripture from the point of view of the poor and of the marginalized. All these types of biblical interpretation cannot be discussed in this article. However, a description of two of the more popular ones will provide some idea of what is occurring in contemporary Bible study. The two methods that will be examined are narrative criticism and feminist interpretation, which is a form of advocacy interpretation. Following a description of each, they will be compared with the historical-critical method, and then evaluated in light of the 1993 document from the Pontifical Biblical Commission,

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The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church.

Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism arose from within the ranks of the historical-critical method itself. Some historical critics, who had worked on the redaction criticism of the Gospels, felt that the time-honored process was so concerned with studying the individual pieces of the biblical books and how they were put together that it failed to appreciate the finished product for what it is—a unique literary work, specifically, a narrative. They also questioned the necessity of being concerned only with the historical background of the Gospels. They contended that the history behind the text is not necessary in order for contemporary people to read a biblical book and profit by it. More important than the ancient history is the need for the reader to enter into the narrative and to make a response to the events and characters that compose the story. (Powell 1990, 2)

By its nature, narrative criticism is only interested in books of the Bible that contain narratives. Understandably, much of the work has been done on the Gospels. The major concerns of the narrative critic are the three principle components of any story: the events (also called the plot and sub-plots); the characters; and the settings, which refer to the time, place and social situations in which the story takes place. By means of the analysis of these three aspects as well as the manner in which they interact with each other to produce the narrative, the goal of the narrative critic is to show how the story is able to engage the reader, drawing

her/him into the world created by the author so that a certain response can be elicited.

Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism rose from a different need than that of narrative criticism. Narrative criticism responded to a certain direction that was developing in the area of literary analysis, which began in the secular sphere and was then appropriated into the biblical field. Feminist exegesis, like other forms of advocacy interpretation, originated in order to respond to the needs of a marginalized group within the Christian community—women. In the New Testament, the feminist interpreter perceives that the early Christian community was one of equality among women and men according to the tradition established by Jesus himself and practiced by Paul when he established Christian communities throughout the Roman world. As Christianity grew and the New Testament was written, a patriarchal approach predominated that marginalized the place and role of women. (Genest 2000, 27)

The task of feminist exegetes is to elucidate the role of women in the Gospels and in the early Church with a critical eye on the gender bias that often colours this representation. To achieve this they make use of existing means of interpretation. The historical-critical method is used to analyse the Gospels and to reconstruct the period of the early Church in order to demonstrate that women held a more prominent presence in Jesus' ministry as well as in the early Church community. A presence that was eventually obscured by the cultural bias of the times.

Narrative criticism also plays an important part in feminist interpretation. Evaluating the characterization of the Gospels tells much about the prominence, or lack thereof, that is afforded women in these stories. Women appear infrequently, and when they do appear they have minor roles, often without speaking parts. The development of a female character is rare.¹

The descriptions of these two types of

biblical interpretation, narrative criticism and feminist criticism, are very rudimentary to say the least, and do not do justice to their contributions to biblical scholarship, but this will have to suffice.

Comparison of the Three Methods

Even though only two of the new approaches to interpretation have been examined, it is possible to make some comparisons with the historical-critical method.

- The historical-critical method is diachronic, i.e. it traces the development of the biblical text through time. Most of the more current approaches are synchronic, which means that they work only with the text as it stands now. They are not concerned with how the text developed or the historical background of the text. An exception is feminist interpretation, which is concerned with the history and sociology of the biblical text in order to understand the role of women in the early church.

- The historical-critical method focuses on the author of the text and the author's intention in writing. Feminist interpretation and narrative criticism focus on the reader and how the text is able to engage the reader and transform him/her.

- Because the more current forms of interpretation are reader-oriented rather than author-oriented, they approach the task of biblical interpretation from a different perspective than that of the historical-critical method. The historical-critical method strives to recreate the historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the text in order to shed light on the author's intention. Narrative criticism and feminist criticism, on the other hand, approach the text with certain critical questions in mind and evaluate the text in light of this criteria. This technique is common to many of the more recent modes of interpretation, thereby making it possible to address the biblical text directly with issues more pertinent to the specific needs of the twenty-first century church and world.

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church

This brief look at two examples of post Vatican II biblical interpretation gives some idea regarding the direction that biblical interpretation is taking at the present time. The Church has also been observing the developments in biblical studies. In 1993 the Pontifical Biblical Commission felt the time was right to comment on the new trends in exegesis. It produced the document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. The document begins by reaffirming the Second Vatican Council's endorsement of the historical-critical method by calling it 'the indispensable method' that is required for authentic exegesis. (par. 35.) It continues by acknowledging the newer methods of interpretation that have appeared on the scene and recognizes them as valid and important supplements to the historical-critical method:

No scientific method for the study of the Bible is fully adequate to comprehend the biblical texts in all their richness. For all its overall validity, the historical-critical method cannot claim to be totally sufficient in this respect. It necessarily has to leave aside many aspects of the writings which it studies. It is not surprising, then, that at the present time, other methods and approaches are proposed which serve to explore more profoundly other aspects worthy of attention.' (par. 42.)

I am indebted to my colleague, Michele Connolly, rsj, who shared with me her insights regarding narrative criticism and feminist criticism.

What is the state of biblical interpretation today? The historical-critical method remains the foundational method for exegesis. However, its limitations are clearly recognized. It is still the best method for recovering the intention of the author and for acquiring an understanding of the history behind the text; but it falls short of being able to adequately apply the Scriptures to the twenty-first century. To address this need other processes such as feminist exegesis and narrative criticism, to name only two, are necessary. As the Christian community moves into the future, other methods of interpretation, as yet unknown, will arise to help us interpret the Bible. Working in harmony with each other, they will help us to understand ever more fully our relationship with our gracious and generous God and how we can most appropriately present this to a world longing for God's healing presence.

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