

ALLEGORY AND THE INTERPRETATION
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Allegory is the Church's love affair with the Bible. It is the oldest and most enduring way of interpreting the Bible and is very much alive today in the selection of scriptural readings in the liturgy, in the Church's daily praying of the psalms, and in classic works of devotion, such as St. Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* or St. Bernard's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*. Each Lent in connection with my morning prayers I read from John of the Cross's writings and last year I was particularly impressed by his inventive interpretation of unexpected and often obscure passages from the Old Testament. Without allegory his spiritual writings would be much less penetrating and biblical. Though he lived in the 16th century he moved in a world that was formed by the biblical commentaries, homilies and sermons of the Church fathers.

Yet for generations, indeed centuries, biblical scholars have scorned allegory. With the triumph of the historical approach to the Bible in the universities and colleges and seminaries many took it as self-evident that only the original meaning of the text, presented to us with the tools of historical criticism, can claim the allegiance of modern readers of the Bible. Yet literary critics have always realized that the notion of a single sense does not carry us very far in the interpretation of great works of literature. One reason that the "classics" of our civilization endure is because each generation is able to discover in the texts depths of meaning that were not discerned by earlier readers.

This is even more true with the Scriptures, as the distinguished literary critic Frank Kermode wrote: "For the last century or so there has been something of a consensus among experts that parables of the kind found in the New Testament were always essentially simple, and always had the same kind of point, which would have been instantly taken by all listeners, outsiders included. Appearances to the contrary are explained as consequences of a process of meddling with the originals that began at the earliest possible moment. The opinion that the parable must originally have been thus, and only thus, is maintained with an expense of learning I can't begin to emulate, against what seems obvious, that 'parable' does and did mean much more than that."¹

¹ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979), 25.

Allegory has to do with words and things and events meaning “much more than that.” The term itself means “another meaning” in addition to the original sense and, significantly, it is used at a key place within the New Testament. In the famous passage in Galatians 4, St. Paul gives an allegorical interpretation of Abraham’s two wives, Hagar and Sarah. “For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an *allegory*: these two women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar . . . she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (Gal. 4:22-26).

In the early Church Galatians 4 is one of three texts that is cited consistently in support of the use of allegory. The others are 1 Corinthians 10 that speaks of the Israelites who were baptized in the cloud and in the sea, and drank from the supernatural rock that was Christ and Ephesians 5 where Paul quotes the words of Genesis, “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” To which he comments: “This mystery is a profound one and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church.” In the introduction to his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine cites 1 Corinthians 10 and Ephesians 5 to observe: “No Christian will dare say that the [biblical] narrative must not be taken in a figurative sense.”²

All of these examples, Galatians 4, 1 Corinthians 10, and Ephesians 5 have to do with the interpretation of the Old Testament. The term allegory is used so loosely today that it is sometimes forgotten that it is primarily a technique for interpreting the Old Testament, the Jewish Scriptures that the early Christian community made its own. In the words of a medieval Spanish exegete: The New Testament “*pro se stat sicut auditur; non est allegoria*,” the New Testament stands on its own, it does not need allegory.³ The epistles of St. Paul do not call for allegory, and only occasionally is it appropriate for passages in the gospels, for example, in dealing with certain parables.

As the passages cited above indicate it was St. Paul who taught the Church how to use allegory for the interpretation of the Old Testament. By giving us “some examples of interpretation,” writes Origen, the first great Christian exegete, Paul also pointed the way toward a rationale for the use of allegory by later interpreters. In 1 Corinthians 10, Origen observes, Paul says that the things that took place in ancient times and recorded in the

² *De Genesi ad litteram*, 1.1.1.

³ PL 96: 958d. See Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1962), 4:110.

Old Testament were “written for our instruction.” What a text says about past events and persons is an integral part of what they mean, but the interpretation is never exhausted by the original meaning. These things happened “for us.” The text belongs to a world that is not defined solely by its historical referent. For St. Paul this is not an enterprise in literary artifice, but a matter of divine revelation. For the same Christ “through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:4), who was at work among the Israelites in the wilderness in ancient times, is alive and present in the Church today. This profound truth is disclosed in the words, “and all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the supernatural rock which followed them, and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4).

Another example of how St. Paul became the Church’s teacher and model in matters exegetical is his interpretation of Psalm 19 in Romans 10. There Paul writes: “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” and “how can men preach unless they are sent?” Then he says, citing the prophet Isaiah: “How beautiful are those who preach good news?” Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the preaching of Christ. Indeed, he adds that they have heard, citing Psalm 19: “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.”

In its original setting the first part of Psalm 19 (Psalm 18 in the Vulgate) celebrates the silent witness of the heavens to the majesty of God. “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. . . . There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard.” Paul, however, interprets the text not in relation to the knowledge of God displayed in creation but as a psalm about the mission of the apostles. He gives the passage another sense than its obvious or plain meaning, that is, he allegorizes the psalm.

Even the biblical scholar Joseph Fitzmeyer, no apologist for allegory, recognized that St. Paul had done something significant when he interpreted Psalm 19 in relation to the apostles. In his magisterial commentary on Romans, Fitzmeyer says this of Paul’s use of the psalm: “The psalmist sings of the works of nature proclaiming the glory of God everywhere; Paul accommodates the psalmist’s words to the preaching of the gospel.”⁴ Fitzmeyer makes no mention of allegory or spiritual interpretation, but his word “accommodate” says all that is needful. Once a text from the ancient Jewish scriptures is brought before the eyes of a Christian reader it can no longer mean simply what it once meant, or what it means for Jews. Paul “accommodates” the words of the psalm to the new thing that has happened, the coming of Christ and the preaching of the gospel.

⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 599.

In the words of Henri De Lubac, the French theologian who more than any other modern thinker has helped the Church rediscover the enduring worth of allegory: “With its varied panoply of nuances” ancient Christians exegesis “throws into relief ‘the prodigious newness of the Christian fact’. It sets in motion a subtle dialectic . . . it defines the relations between historical reality and spiritual reality, of society and the individual, of time and eternity It organizes all revelation around a concrete center, marked in space and time by the cross of Jesus Christ. It is itself a complete and completely unified dogmatic and spiritual theology.”⁵

Paul’s accommodation of Psalm 19, to the apostolic mission was an interpretation with consequences. For his exegesis of the psalm passed over into the Church’s worship, most notably in daily prayer. Whenever we celebrate the feast of an apostle, one of the psalms appointed to be read in the office of readings is Psalm 19, whose words “their voice has gone out to the limits of the earth, their words to the end of the world” are used as the antiphon. For those who pray with the Church the apostolic interpretation of Psalm 19 is as familiar and natural as the original or plain sense of the psalm.

This does not mean that the original meaning of the psalm is abandoned. It stands confidently as a testimony to the witness of creation to the mystery and majesty of God. At the same time the allegorical or spiritual interpretation became a precious and fixed part of the Church’s life and worship. The two interpretations live comfortably side by side.

Of course it is significant that the interpretation of Psalm 19 as referring to the apostles has a foothold in the New Testament. Yet, if one looks at another psalm used in the daily office for the “common of apostles,” Psalm 64, the New Testament offers no support. In its original setting Psalm 64 was a prayer for deliverance from personal enemies—“hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the scheming of evil doers who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows. . . .” Confident of God’s deliverance the psalmist wrote: “They will tell what God has done, they grasped the meaning of his deeds.”

In the Liturgy of the Hours, the verse “they will tell what God has done” is used as the antiphon for Psalm 64. The English translator botched the matter by translating the verse differently in the antiphon from the verse in the psalm itself, but in the Latin breviary the antiphon and verse 9 are the same: *Et annuntiabunt opera Dei, et facta eius intellegent* (translated as “They will tell what God has done. They will understand God’s deeds”). There is, however, one small but revealing change. In the antiphon the future tenses of the psalm, *annuntiabunt* and *intellegent* (“they will tell” and “they will understand”) are changed into perfects, *annuntiaverunt*

⁵ De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, 1:16.

and *intellegerunt* (“they proclaimed” and “they grasped the meaning”). As with Psalm 19, here too there is an “accommodation” to the new setting in which the psalm is recited, the coming of Christ and the preaching of the apostles. In the Church’s worship the psalm came to be interpreted not only in reference to the time in which it was written, but also as a celebration of what has come about since it was written. In other words, Christian interpreters followed the example of St. Paul when they interpreted the Psalm, even though there is no specific warrant within the New Testament.

The distinction (urged by a few writers in antiquity) between Old Testament texts whose meaning is given by the New Testament (for example, the serpent on the pole in John 3:14, or the rock in the desert in 1 Corinthians 10:4) and those whose spiritual sense arises later within the Church’s worship or catechesis, collapses in actual practice. In Christian tradition, most notably in the writings of the first readers of the Bible, the New Testament was not viewed as a comprehensive commentary on the Old Testament. By its very nature it only provided a few examples, but those passages served as a guide for interpreters. In the words of St. Augustine: “By explaining one passage (1 Cor. 10), [Paul] shows us how to understand others.”⁶

I have chosen interpretations of Old Testament texts from daily prayer because the most inviting portal to enter classical Christian exegesis is how it is used—the setting in which a passage from the Scriptures is read, recited, or sung within Christian worship. Take, for example, Psalm 42, “As the deer yearns for streams of living water, so longs my soul for you O LORD.” This psalm was sung as the newly baptized were about to receive communion at the great Vigil of Easter.⁷ So accustomed are we to think of the locus of interpretation as the scholar’s study that we forget that liturgy is the most pervasive and enduring setting for interpretation. Even in the solitude of study early Christian interpreters were never far removed from the Church’s worship.

Another text whose classical interpretation has no obvious support within the New Testament is the opening verses of Chapter 63 of Isaiah. Isaiah writes: “Who is this that comes from Edom in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he that is glorious in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength?” According to scholarly opinion these are words of a watchman of the city demanding to know who the solitary terrifying figure with blood red vesture approaching from Edom could be. Astonished, the watchman challenges him, “Who is this?” In the next verses he receives an

⁶ *Contra Faustum Manichaeum*, 12.29; for the same point see also Origen, *Homily on Exodus*, 5.1.

⁷ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 41.1.

answer: “It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save.” The one who approaches is the living God, the God of Israel, victorious over Israel’s foes. What follows is a hymn of triumph celebrating the triumph of the divine warrior, the God of Israel.

Origen, however, took Isaiah 63 to be a depiction of Christ’s passion and ascension. After his death, writes Origen, Christ returned to the Father “victorious and bearing trophies with the body that had been raised from the dead.” When he is greeted by the heavenly host they ask him: “‘Why is your apparel red and your garments as if fresh from a full wine press that has been trampled down (Isa. 63:2).’ To which Christ answers: ‘I trampled them’ (Isa. 63:2). And his escorts say to those stationed at the gates of heaven: Lift up your gates and the king of glory will come in (Ps. 24:7).”⁸

This is an imaginative, even breathtaking exegesis characteristic of Origen. Yet his interpretation of Isaiah 63 was not idiosyncratic—it can be found in many early Christian commentators, even among those whose approach to the Old Testament differed from his. Cyril of Alexandria [who was not an Origenist] is a good example: “This prophetic oracle,” he writes, “wisely and artfully gives a true to life portrayal of Christ, the Savior of all, as he makes his return to heaven. . . . He was seen by the powers above in the form which he had among us, that is, as a man [Cyril is thinking of 1 Tim. 3:16, “manifested in the flesh . . . seen by angels”], and displayed to them the signs of his passion. This passage teaches not only that the perforations from the nails and the others marks remained in his holy flesh after he rose from the dead, it also gives us to understand that as he showed the nail wounds and his side to Thomas . . . by ascending into heaven with the signs of his passion so Christ also showed to the heavenly powers what he had accomplished ‘that through the Church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places’ (Eph. 3:10).”⁹

Though on first reading this interpretation of Isaiah 63 may seem contrived, “a serious misapprehension of the spirit of the prophecy” as one modern commentator put it, it fills a space left vacant by the two verses from the New Testament: 1 Timothy 3:16, with the phrase “seen by angels,” and Ephesian 3:10, where it is said that the manifold wisdom of God made known in Christ “might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places.” According to the Church fathers, at his ascension Christ’s work on earth was announced to the heavenly host upon arriving, clothes stained with blood. On seeing him they called out, “Why is your apparel red?” to which Christ replied, “I trampled them.” Just as the New Testament’s interpretation of Isaiah 53 had led interpreters to other texts not cited in the New Testament—such as, “I gave my back to the

⁸ Origen, *Commentary on John*, 6.287-292.

⁹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on Isaiah 63:1-7* (P.G. 70: 1381b-1384b).

smiters. . . . I hid not my face from shame and spitting” (Isa. 50:6)—by the same reasoning it allowed them to give concreteness to the depiction of Christ’s passion with phrases from Isaiah 63: for example, “I have trodden the wine press alone,” and “I looked but there was no one to help. . . .” This reading of Isaiah 63 became something of an *opinio communis* in Christian tradition and passed over into the Eucharistic liturgy. Isaiah 63 was read on Wednesday of Holy Week in conjunction with Isaiah 53 until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Now all would agree that context forms meaning. The few lines from Chapter 63 cannot stand alone, they need to be related to something other than themselves, be that the section of the book in which the passage falls, the historical setting in which the prophet lived, the meaning of the words established by usage in 6th century Hebrew, among other things. The most obvious context of this passage then is the book of Isaiah, or Second Isaiah, which portrays, after the lament in Chapter 62, God’s vengeance on the nations for their abuse of Israel during the time of exile, and the vindication of Zion and the glorification of the city of Jerusalem. In this view the key persons in the text are Israel, the nations that surround Israel, such as Assyria and Babylonia, and the God of Israel. Context is defined historically and literarily. Without context as a guide interpretation, it is argued, will be arbitrary and captive to the caprice of the interpreter—as Northrop Frye, the literary critic, once quipped: like going to a hermeneutical picnic in which one person brings the text another the interpretation.

Context is, however, an elusive category. In dealing with ancient texts it is often assumed that what went before or what is contemporaneous with the text set the terms of interpretation. Yet one might ask why context should be restricted to what happened earlier. Is what went before more significant than what occurred afterward or what came about because of what happened, was said or was written down? With great political ideas, for example, it is only as they are played out in history that we know what they mean. In the telling of American history, President John Kennedy’s achievements during his presidency would be remembered much differently had he not been assassinated in his first term.

Even in our personal lives and in relations with others we are constantly adjusting our view of the past and of the lives of others as new experiences unfold. We view a close friend who has patiently and heroically endured a grave illness differently than we did before his illness. Even the things done or said earlier appear different.

Fyodor Dostoevsky thought that any understanding of the past that did not see things in light of what came later produced the “worst kind of untruth.” As an example he referred to a painting by the Russian artist, Nikolai Ge, in which Christ and his disciples were portrayed as average Russian men and women of the 1860s. Dostoevsky writes: “There sits Christ, but is that Christ? It may be a very good young man, deeply hurt by his quarrel with Judas, the latter standing there getting dressed to go off

and denounce him, but this is not the Christ we know . . . [and] we must ask the question: where are the eighteen centuries of Christianity that followed? . . . How is it possible that from such an ordinary quarrel of such ordinary people gathered to have supper . . . there could arise something so colossal?" If we are to be true to what happened, a person or event from the past must be seen in light of subsequent developments "which had not yet occurred at the historical moment" which the artist was depicting.¹⁰

Dostoevsky's question is our question. Where are the 19 centuries of Christian life and history in our interpretation of the Bible? Echoing Dostoevsky we might say, "there stand the psalms as ancient Hebrew poems, but are they the psalms we know?" When I read this passage from Dostoevsky in the final volume of the magnificent biography by Joseph Frank, I was reminded of the words of another 19th century figure, Adolf von Harnack, whose ideas have dominated the interpretation of the history of theology in the 20th century (and, one might add, prejudiced generations of scholars against patristic exegesis).

Many years ago I wrote down this passage from his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*: "No religion gains anything through time, it only loses." For Harnack, the Church's history had to be scoured by the acid of critical historical reason to uncover an earlier allegedly more pristine form of the gospel. Yet what is most characteristic of the Christian (and one might add the Jewish) interpretation of the Scriptures is that the words of the Bible do not arrive smooth and clean, scrubbed free of the experiences of centuries. Much of what we hold most dear in the Scriptures was discerned only over time.

Time has endowed the words and images of the Bible with a fullness that can be known only by reading the text forward, not backward. A particularly egregious example of the unanticipated and unhappy consequences of self-imposed amnesia is the New Revised Standard Version translation of *Beatus vir*, "Blessed is the man," in Psalm 1. By translating the verse according to the perverse and ephemeral logic of the moment, "Happy are *those* who . . .," the Christological interpretation of the psalm is swept away to become a forgotten chapter in the arcane specialty of the history of exegesis.

Allegory resists the tyranny of historicism and invites us to see things as they are, not as we imagine them to have been centuries ago. This is one reason for the formative power of the liturgy on interpretation. The Church at prayer spans the great divide separating what the text *meant* from what it *means*. Allegory is about what has come to be, the accommodation that is inevitable because of what happened in Christ, in the Church, and what continues to unfold.

¹⁰ Cited in Joseph Frank, *Dostoevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet 1871-1881* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2002), 111-112.

There is then a realism in allegory as well as spiritual depth. The mystery of which the Bible speaks is realized historically and socially. St. Paul was not interested in ephemeral “meanings” that could be attached *ad libitum* to the ancient texts. He sought to discover what the authoritative documents of his religious tradition (and ours) meant in light of “the things that have been accomplished among us,” to invoke Luke’s memorable words.

Any discussion of allegory turns, in the end, on the Jewishness of Jesus and of his first followers. Because the things proclaimed by the prophets had taken place in their time and of which they were witnesses (something the readings from Acts during the Easter season remind us of again and again), the disciples believed that the end of the ages, the last days of Isaiah 2, had dawned. When they opened their sacred books anew, the ancient oracles could no longer be read as earlier generations of Jews had read them. Christian interpreters did not impose an evanescent superstructure on the text without root in history or experience. They shunned a strictly literal or historical reading of the law and the prophets, not because they preferred spirit to history, but because they were members of a community that had been transformed by a new series of events. Paradoxically, the spiritual sense was the historical sense.

Allegory is a form of translation. The most familiar is translation from one language into another. As any skilled translator knows, even in this type of translation the words and ideas of the Bible take on new coloring as they are expressed in the idiom of another language. The term translation is also appropriate when speaking about presenting and explaining the truths of the Scripture in the language of a new and alien culture. But there is also a translation that takes place within the idiom of the Bible itself, a rendering of what is found in one part of the Bible into the language of another part of the Scriptures. So in the example cited above, Cyril of Alexandria uses the words and the imagery of Isaiah 63 to express what is stated more straightforwardly in the gospels about the passion and ascension of Christ.

In practice, allegory is a way of thinking about what is given in the Bible using the words and images of the Bible. An impressive instance of this kind of translation is the use of the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs to interpret the words of Jesus, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength.” It is a truth that Augustine recognized in *De Doctrina Christiana* when he said that it was more delightful to contemplate the Church as a beautiful row of teeth, using the image from the Song of Songs, “Your teeth are like a flock of shorn ewes . . .” than simply as Church.¹¹ It is something that Gregory the Great grasped in his *Moralia*, when he took a metaphor

¹¹ *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2.10-12.

from the book of Job such as “the waters wear away the stones” and applied it to temptations that come on gradually, “penetrating unobtrusively into the heart of man,” like rocks worn down slowly.¹²

Allegory’s playfulness and inventiveness grows out of the certainty of faith formed by a community of shared beliefs and practices. It keeps words from evaporating into nothing, from becoming simply things, not signs. It also introduces a welcome and necessary obliqueness into our reading of the Scriptures. Remember that according to Exodus, God showed only his back to Moses. Metaphor, symbol, image are the natural clothing of religious thought. “Tell all the truth but tell it slant,” wrote Emily Dickinson, the American poet. By likening what is known to unexpected words or images within the Bible, allegory gave Christian thinkers a more subtle and versatile vocabulary to speak of the things of God. The language of the Bible became a vehicle of discovery.

Allegory is about privileging the language of the Bible. It assumes that it is better to express things in the language of the Scriptures than in another idiom. As the Church’s great preachers have always known metaphors drawn from elsewhere, no matter how apt, lack the power of the biblical language to enlighten the mind and enflame the heart. Like rhetorical ornaments that momentarily delight the hearer, they are ephemeral and soon forgotten. The words of the Bible, however, are emblematic and weighted with experience. Unlike words taken from elsewhere, their meanings cannot be disengaged from the biblical narrative, from God’s revelation in Israel, the sending of Christ and the pouring out of the Spirit on the Church. The range of possible meanings is never exhausted.

In spite of its many accomplishments, a strictly historical approach to the Bible is incapable of receiving the Bible as Bible. It can offer various kinds of syntheses, such as a cultural history of the ancient Near East, a chapter in the religious history of the Greco-Roman world, to mention the most obvious, but it cannot give us the book of the Church, the Scriptures that have been read, the psalms that have been prayed, the holy men and women whose lives have been imitated, the teachings that have been expounded. To be sure, the Old Testament is a book that has its origin in the ancient Near East, but the book the Church reads also belongs to another time and to other places.

It is of inestimable significance that Christians did not rewrite the Old Testament to suit Christian taste (or dispense with it). As Rémi Brague the French philosopher has reminded us, one of the marks of Christian civilization is “secondarity”—receiving what was earlier, reinterpreting, build-

¹² *Moralia on Job*, 12.18.22.

ing on it, not constructing new foundations.¹³ There remains the book written in Hebrew and Aramaic, but the earliest Christians read it in Greek and in translations from the Greek. When read in conjunction with the apostolic writings, its words resounded with meanings they did not have before Christ. Words were singled out that had seemed commonplace, images that had lain dormant sprouted anew, persons and events once thought secondary became paradigmatic. It was this book that formed the Christian imagination. To understand the Christian Old Testament, the ancient Near East is the place to begin but hardly the goal toward which interpretation moves.

The unique vocation of the Christian exegetical tradition was to offer a comprehensive understanding of the Bible as the book of the Church centered on the Triune God. This required more than what is considered interpretation today. For the Bible of the early Church was a living voice, not only a document from ancient history. In its pages the fullness of Christian faith and life could be found in bewildering detail and infinite variety—all organized around the center which was Christ. Early Christian exegesis was not simply exegesis, but a distinctively Christian way of thinking. That we should find ourselves drawn to this synthesis does not mean that the exegesis of the early Church or the middle ages can be appropriated without being filtered through our experience and thinking, including our historical consciousness. But it does mean that at the beginning of the 21st century the time has come to take out of the closet and polish a very old word from the Christian lexicon, “allegory,” and to discover anew why it is indispensable for a genuinely Christian interpretation of the Old Testament.

¹³ Rémi Brague, *Eccentric Culture* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 2002).

