1. Introduction: The Legitimacy of Theological Interpretation

Theological interpretation is becoming a common practice among Catholic and evangelical theologians, but one occasionally criticized for neglecting the historical and social setting of the text in order to pursue a spiritualizing reading that is arbitrary, prejudiced and unscientific.¹ Not infrequently, this criticism is combined with the conviction that especially patristic theological exegesis departs from the historical, inner-biblical context because world denying influences of Greek philosophy have crept into Christian theology and its interpretive practices. According to this view, Greek metaphysical longings and concepts have eclipsed the more earthbound Hebraic imagination and distorted actual meanings of New Testament texts. This argument implies that an objective, truly text-oriented, philological approach to the biblical texts would not commit such subjective flights of fancy and bind itself more faithfully to a historical framework and Christianity’s Judaic roots. As the following example from the history of biblical exegesis illustrates, however, there is no such guarantee.

We are turning to the early twentieth century, when theological interpretation made a comeback in Germany after the long reign of the historical-critical school.² Dietrich Bonhoeffer deliberately participated in this recovery of theological exegesis. The following paragraphs are meant to contextualize his approach to the Bible and to affirm it by establishing the continuing legitimacy of theological interpretation. We will then turn to his actual interpretive practice in the remaining sections of this article.
The return of theological interpretation in Germany was spearheaded by Karl Barth’s Commentary on Romans. His criticism of the historical-critical school, and his openly theological interpretation of the text triggered a passionate, critical response from those who had devoted their lives to objective, historical scholarship of the Bible and the Christen tradition. The classic debate between theological hermeneutics and supposedly factual exegesis took place between Barth and the church historian Adolf von Harnack.

Not unlike some critics of theological interpretation today, von Harnack rejected Karl Barth’s theological exegesis as Romanticism and dangerous theologizing unmoored from scientific textual exegesis. Yet, it was the supposedly objective historian, Adolf von Harnack, who sought to appropriate Marcion’s rejection of the bloodthirsty Old Testament God for modern Protestantism. It was Harnack’s alleged “scientific” exegesis that unhinged the New Testament from the Old, a move that aided theological anti-Semitism later on during the church struggle in Germany. This brief example shows that the question of what makes something “biblical” interpretation cannot be decided by any kind of positivism, by retreating behind the empirically verifiable, obvious, or objective meaning of the text. In fact, the delusion of achieving neutral, unbiased exegesis has been generally recognized by biblical scholars in the latter half of the twentieth century. And biblical critics have recognized this not because they no longer value objective truth, but because they have realized that objectivity is not obtained by presuming an uninvolved stance toward our object of investigation. The question is no longer whether we approach the texts with presuppositions, but rather what kind of presuppositions are adequate for the sort of text and the subject matter we want to examine. In the words of Martin Heidegger, “it is never a question of avoiding the hermeneutical circle, but to enter it in the right way.” In other words, any discussion concerning the legitimacy of theological reading, and of the Bible as the book of the church, has to begin with examining our presuppositions about epistemology and cosmology, or, to put it more simply, by interrogating our views on how we know and how we construe the reality within which God makes himself known to us. Thus, the reason that theological and spiritual readings of the scriptures were commonplace among the church fathers but later were derided has much less to do with the supposed superiority of modern exegetical tools (even though such superiority exists), than with the shift from participatory metaphysics in the ancient world to the separation of nature and supernature in our times.

Frances Young, who studied the development of patristic exegesis, confirms that the differences between pre-modern and modern exegesis depend on different conceptions of reality:

An authoritative text is understood to refer to the world in which people live, and so its meaning is bound to be received or contested in the light of the plausibility structures of the culture which receives the text. A culture
which can conceive of the material universe as interpenetrated by another reality, which is transcendent and spiritual, will read the reference of scripture in those terms. That is far more significant for the differences between ancient and modern exegesis than any supposed ‘method.’ Methodologically, exegesis involves many of the same procedures.\(^5\)

Exegesis in the ancient world among pagans and Christians was based on a view of reality in which textual meaning participated in spiritual realities beyond the text. On the basis of this worldview, the church fathers could develop a sacramental view of language, according to which, following the pattern of the incarnation, the self-communication of a transcendent God was mediated through finite human language.\(^6\) Thus patristic exegetes could speak about a unifying reality behind the text, about the “the mind of the text” that allowed for coherent overall meaning.\(^7\)

The assumption of a meaningful transcendent reality to which the text referred permitted, in turn, mimetic interpretations of the text. Mimetic interpretation was common in the ancient educated world, and entailed the reading of texts in a typological fashion as teaching moral and doctrinal precepts. As Young explains, “in the ancient Church *mimesis* or ‘representation’ was important. It underlay the enactment of the saving events of the sacraments, as well as the ‘exemplary’ use of scripture.”\(^8\) Mimesis also helps us understand ancient use of typology as a form of allegory. As Young points out, because the ancient world embraced a sacramental view of reality—that is, a participatory metaphysics—it is misleading to oppose allegory and typology by identifying the latter with historical occurrences and the former with fanciful spiritualizing of history.\(^9\) Such distinctions rest on modern notions of history and nature as divorced from spiritual realities that were unthinkable to the ancient world. The real question is, of course, whether we, today, are still bound by this separation.

The answer is, “it depends.” For even while we no longer inhabit an ancient cosmology in which the natural and supernatural easily interpenetrate, there is nothing that absolutely compels us to bracket spiritual realities from our reading of texts. At the very least, something approaching a sacramental view of language has been reintroduced through hermeneutic theory as developed by Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, all of whom rejected an instrumental view of language and positivistic conceptions of truth. Perhaps Gadamer most clearly expresses this change when he argues that while the link between the human and the divine mind may have become untenable to modern consciousness, language still ties our minds to the universal rationality of the human spirit as it is mediated through human traditions. In fact, Gadamer thinks that Christianity’s belief in the incarnation makes possible a truly hermeneutical conception of
human knowledge by establishing the linguisticality of human understanding. In Greek thought, true correspondence between thought and word was impossible since every concept was merely a copy of its perfect form. Yet Christianity’s claim that the eternal Word was incarnated in human form without any loss to His integrity laid the foundation for the notion that particular languages could truly reflect universal human insights.\(^\text{10}\) Contrary to Greek philosophy, for which the move from intellectual idea to external word entails a sense of loss and disunity, the Christian incarnation allows for the unity between thought and speech, between universal concepts and their particular expressions.\(^\text{11}\) Such correspondence in no way implies full comprehension of universals on our part, but it does mean that the uttered word truly participates in and reliably reflects the concept. It is true that “no human word can express the mind completely,” because our intellect is finite. Nonetheless, the multiplicity of words and interpretations always remain truly connected to, or in union with, the thing we are trying to express.\(^\text{12}\) In this way, Gadamer concludes, “Christology prepares the way for a philosophy of man, which mediates in a new way between the mind of man in its finitude and the divine infinity. Here what we have called the hermeneutical experience finds its own special ground.”\(^\text{13}\) Hermeneutic theory thus opens once again the way to a sacramental view of language and to the legitimacy of theological interpretation. This is not to say that biblical scholars as a whole are happily returning to theological readings of the scriptures. Yet even those committed to reading the Bible purely as a literary artifact are reflecting more deeply on the interpretive presuppositions of their craft.

The well-known biblical scholar John Barton, for example, seeks to defend biblical criticism as a strictly literary discipline that is neither hermeneutically naïve by supposing neutral objectivity, nor theologically committed to reading the Bible as a sacred text. Instead, Barton champions biblical criticism as the preparatory philological foundation that establishes the meaning of the text on which subsequent confessional readings can build. Against caricatures of biblical critics as dissecting the text with a positivist scalpel in order to reconstruct history ‘as it really happened,’ Barton argues that “biblical criticism is not a matter of processing the text, but of understanding it.”\(^\text{14}\) His emphasis on understanding renders questionable, however, Barton’s affirmation of biblical criticism as a preparatory discipline for establishing the plain sense of the text prior to ecclesial or other readings.\(^\text{15}\) As Gadamer made clear in *Truth and Method*, our understanding is inseparable from the applicatory expectations and questions we bring to the text.\(^\text{16}\) Even in the case of the Bible, these questions need not, it is true, necessarily concern Christian belief. Moreover, Barton is certainly correct to claim that the biblical critic is not a mere clinician but motivated by love for truthful meaning.\(^\text{17}\) Yet surely, while recognition of the reader’s shared humanity with the author is important,\(^\text{18}\) the specific understanding required by the biblical text involves more than a general passion for meaning, especially if, as Barton insists, we aim at
a kind of interpersonal understanding, of “human heart speaking to human heart.”19 After all, the Christian Bible as sacred text is a record and reflection of human experience and self-understanding as shaped by an actual encounter with God in real time and history, and by the ultimate revelation of this God in Jesus the Christ. If the biblical authors are inspired by the Spirit of God, and as those who, in the New Testament, are reshaped as God’s people, moving from communion with God through the observance of Temple worship into communion with God through Jesus the Christ, then is not the church the proper framework for reading these scriptures?

Gadamer insists that understanding a text requires that the questions we put to the text are guided primarily by the subject-matter of the text.20 More precisely, the hermeneutic task is to reconstruct the question to which the text offers an answer, for each text is really an answer to a question.21 And while purely literary critics surely can be very successful in allowing themselves to be shaped by the biblical text, there is a difference between the Bible and a literary text. The difference is that the Bible is especially (though not exclusively for them) a literary text inspired by a people’s experience with God, and this God still actively shapes the present community of his people by the power of his Spirit. To use Gadamer’s vocabulary, the fusion of horizons between the past horizon and the present application of the biblical text is enabled and directed by more than a common humanity, because God’s own personal presence within tradition shapes the process of reception and understanding. Another way of expressing the unique character of the scriptures is to describe them as the book of the church, and to acknowledge Christ as the key to their interpretation.

Christians have argued since the beginning of Christian hermeneutics that the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies through the incarnation of God in Christ is the hermeneutical focus of the Christian Bible.22 In Origen’s words, a new light shines forth on the scriptures with the advent of Christ,23 the same Christ whose Spirit moulds a new humanity, the people of God represented by the church. While it is entirely plausible to read the Bible like any other text and to “bracket out questions of truth” in a sort of “procedural neutrality,”24 it is hard to see how bracketing out the christological focus assumed by early Christians does not distort the questions we put to the text and thus skew our understanding. In other words, the kind of “procedural distinction between discovering what texts mean and evaluating or using them”25 suggested by Barton is questionable, since our use co-determines what we consider permissible readings. For the same reason, it also seems odd to advance a purely literary reading of the Bible as preparatory reading for a more confessional approach on the assumption that theological interpretations are gnostic, accessible only to insiders. With these claims, Barton lapses into exactly the kind of modernist assumptions he wants to repudiate.

Barton rightly points to the fact that biblical criticism as such has philosophical roots in antiquity, making it implausible to equate biblical criticism
with Enlightenment rationalism. Yet this very fact of co-existing spiritual interpretation and historical-critical tools in pre-modern exegesis indicates that biblical criticism, along with its critical tools, requires a hermeneutic framework that views the Bible as the book of the church. Like many other biblical scholars, Barton remains too much wedded to the German cultural movement that expatriated the Bible from the church, making it the possession of the academy, a purely cultural and literary artifact. Michael Legaspi has succinctly summarized this development and shown that establishing the Bible as a cornerstone of Western culture and its universal values required the “death of scripture.” By becoming the domain of academic philologists and literary critics, the Bible was divested of its scriptural character and domesticated into a cultural treasure.

These historical and hermeneutical reflections on the biblical text show us that attempts to sever biblical criticism from the text’s native environment in the believing and practicing church community stem from the false opposition of tradition and objective knowledge, which hermeneutic theory has rightly criticized. As Yves Congar has argued, in the Christian life, the scriptures are an intricate part of a living stream of tradition within which the Christian faith is communicated and the Christian is shaped into godlikeness. And this tradition is alive in the people of God as community, in the church. In short, the Bible can and ought to be read as the book of the church, and this is how Bonhoeffer insists on reading it.

Given the hermeneutical dynamic of human understanding we have just described, for the Christian to profess Christ as the center of scriptural exegesis is not a cowardly sheltering from radically open inquiry, but rather constitutes a stance of intellectual integrity in conformity with the workings of textual interpretation. Because all questions emerge from our human existence as an interpretation of the world, and are therefore never neutral or disengaged, the question concerning the center of biblical exegesis is already theological and emerges from a Christian experience of the world, which, as a human experience of the world governed by a certain interpretive framework, is as valid and open to rational discussion as any other worldview. Ingolf Dalferth has made this hermeneutical point clearly: “Jesus Christ,” he writes, “constitutes the compass and destination of evangelical interpretation of the scriptures because he is also the compass and destination for the Christian interpretation of the self, of the world, and of God.” Christian biblical interpretation is Christological and inherently seeks to transcend the historical letter toward the presence of God as mediated by the letter: “Faith is not directed to the scriptures but to Jesus Christ, and by attuning itself to this center of the scriptures, [the reader] doesn’t focus on a handed down ‘once upon a time’ or ‘back then’ but on the effective now and today of God’s presence.” The biblical text is not itself an object of devotion but a means of meeting and speaking with God as he reveals himself in Christ. Consequently, Christian biblical exegesis has to take place within a consciously
Christological hermeneutic. Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers such a hermeneutic, and he does this as one seeking to overcome the limitations of historical-criticism with its implicit dualistic view of reality and its consequent separation of reason from faith. Bonhoeffer sees with total clarity that biblical exegesis depends on how we understand the relation of “history, and spirit.” He recognizes that historical criticism rests on the philosophical foundations of a “natural-scientific-mechanical worldview” and its scientific epistemology that excludes dogmatic considerations from reading the text. Such historical criticism fragments the biblical documents until it destroys any unified reading of the text. Bonhoeffer seeks to move beyond this failure of historical-critical exegesis to a theological, edifying reading, based on a Christological hermeneutic. Therefore, his work provides an important contribution to the retrieval of theological exegesis in our day.

2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Christological Hermeneutic

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s own defense of spiritual (he called it “pneumatic”) interpretation owes much to Karl Barth’s view of the Bible. In his Church Dogmatics, Barth stressed the importance of the incarnation for biblical interpretation. Just as in the incarnation real divinity dwells in real humanity, so God mediates himself through the human words of the Bible. Truly human words in all their fallibility and historical context are used by God to make himself present to the reader. Yet, according to Barth, this self-presencing of God does not reside in the text as if by magic, is never automatic, and never at the command of the reader. For these reasons, the reader should not attempt to differentiate between the divine and the human word. To do so would be to rebel against the miracle, against “the hard thought” of the incarnation. The sovereign grace of God, by which He took up humanity in complete freedom, is equally at work when the Bible becomes a vehicle for His presence. Bonhoeffer shares Barth’s incarnational view of the scriptures. The written words of revelation are a true image (Abbild) of the Person of Jesus Christ himself, of the eternal word become flesh. Every word of scriptures, says Bonhoeffer, is “a true image of the person of Jesus Christ,” presenting the reader with a historical reality and its divine inner reality that transcends this historical element. For this reason Bonhoeffer, like Barth, rejects as presumptuous any distinction between human and divine words in the scriptures. Such distinctions inevitably destroy the unity of God’s word along lines drawn by our own ideologies, separating, for example, Jesus’ miracles (now deemed credible only to a pre-modern, unscientific imagination and hence no longer believable) from His ethics (timeless universal truths). Bonhoeffer concludes that, indeed, “the divine and the human word are commingled in the scriptures, but in such a way that God himself says where his word is, and he does so within the human word.” Otherwise, warns Bonhoeffer in a letter to his skeptical brother-in-law, Rüdiger Schleicher, we
will merely meet our own thoughts in the Bible instead of being transformed by it.42 This incarnational approach to the scriptures allows Barth and Bonhoeffer to avoid the pitfalls of verbal inspiration theories on the one hand, and of the Bible’s reduction to a mere historical document on the other.

Yet while Bonhoeffer inherited from Barth a high view of scripture and a conviction that it requires theological exposition, he more clearly and succinctly integrates the theological interpretation of the scriptures into a general sacramental framework, in which the Christian life revolves around God’s becoming present within church and world. To be sure, both theologians understood faith to be an encounter with a personal, Trinitarian God. Both reject the liberal Protestant view of the Christian faith as cognitive assent to propositions or universal moral values. Yet Bonhoeffer, more than Barth, offers an understanding of faith as genuine participation in Christ. To be sure, Barth’s emphasis on God’s revelation of Himself in Christ as “God for us” and even as “one of us” also seeks to establish faith as a real communion with God. Yet Barth’s stress on God’s freedom and sovereignty still suggests a gap between our identity as Christians in God and our historical being. We have to “believe in our faith,” says Barth, whereas Bonhoeffer proclaims our “being in Christ.” He criticizes the early Barth for implying that “God is always the ‘arriving’ but never the ‘present’ (daseiende) God.”44 But God, says Bonhoeffer, has promised to be “with us,” to be “haveable” (habbar) or present in his church.45 For this reason, Bonhoeffer defines faith as participation in Christ, a “being-in-Christ” that is equally a being-in the church as a member of Christ’s body, so that the transcendent and ontological realities of Christian existence are held together.46

This understanding of faith as a mode of being that defines our human identity holistically as new creation constitutes the heart of Bonhoeffer’s Christological hermeneutic. God nourishes this new identity by presencing himself in the church through baptism, Eucharist and preaching, and the goal of this communion with God is the formation of Christ in each believer and the church as a whole through the power of the Spirit. The Bible as God’s word is central to the Christian’s education into true humanity. The church, as Bonhoeffer phrases it, is “Christ existing as community,” and biblical exegesis is one way by which the community understands its identity as formation into the new humanity for whose creation God became human and whose prototype is Jesus the Christ, the perfect image of God. For Bonhoeffer, salvation is the attainment of our true humanity in Christ.47 True humanity, however, does not exist in isolation, but is marked by the kind of unity and solidarity the church ought to represent. The new human being is not a single individual but “the church community, the body of Christ.”48 These sentiments align Bonhoeffer with the Christian humanism that determined the theology of the church fathers, and that underlies a number of Roman Catholic documents, such as the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (or Pope Benedict’s Apostolic Exhortation,
Verbum Domini), linking the interpretation of scripture to the vocation of the church as the new humanity in Christ. We can summarize the ethos of this Christian humanism with the motto that “God became human so that human beings could attain their true and full humanity, their god-likeness.”

Bonhoeffer’s Christological hermeneutic follows the church fathers in placing God’s written word and its interpreter within a genuinely logos-centric, a Word-centered reality. The Bible is not merely an old book of great cultural relevance but a primary witness to the living, eternal Logos that sustains creation and became human in Christ. Incarnational Christology is the centre not only of scriptural interpretation but of understanding reality in general. Bonhoeffer’s concept of “one Christ-reality” places the Christian interpreter within a unified world determined through its creation in the eternal logos and its reconciliation to God in Christ. Faith and reason are unified by Christ, who is “the center and the power of the Bible, of the church, of theology, but also of humanity, reason, justice, and culture.” Christology, ecclesiology and general epistemology are in this sense all sustained by the same Word of God, and our response to this word constitutes “action in accordance with reality.” Reality in the highest sense as ultimate purpose and meaning is not some abstract, neutral thing but “the real one, the God having become human. In the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Christ, everything factual obtains its ultimate foundation (Begründung) and its ultimate relativization (Aufhebung), its ultimate contradiction and its ultimate yes and its ultimate no.” The Christian is the quintessential realist because he lives out of his participation in Christ, in whom God reconciled the world to Himself. Thus “Christ-centered action is realistic action,” because Christ summed up in himself all of reality. Bonhoeffer thus anticipated Pope Benedict’s recent affirmation of a Christological realism. In his apostolic exhortation Verbum Dei, Benedict writes, “The Word of God makes us change our concept of realism: the realist is the one who recognizes in the Word of God the foundation of all things.” With Bonhoeffer, Benedict holds that “the Christ event is at the heart of divine revelation,” wherefore the Bible itself is the word of God only in a derivative sense as witness to divine realities. Bonhoeffer’s linking of Christology, ecclesiology and biblical interpretation also finds echoes in Benedict’s affirmation that the church is “built upon the word of God” that “she is born from and lives by that word.” At the very least, then, Catholics and Protestants share the conviction that the Bible, as Bonhoeffer put it, is “the book of the church” and has to be interpreted as such.

3. Reading the Bible as the Book of the Church

Without question, Bonhoeffer is heir to the sola scriptura tradition of Protestantism. Yet his reason for this position differs from traditional Protestant affirmations of the internal coherence of the Bible, its verbal inspiration, or its supposed perfection in the original documents. Instead, Bonhoeffer argues
from an incarnational model of the scriptures as both spirit and flesh, as historical document whose proper meaning is revealed only through the Spirit’s power, who creates spiritual understanding in the reader, a gift that is received every time anew. Reading the Bible as the book of the church means first of all that exegesis follows a circular movement, whereby interpretation of biblical texts requires prior familiarity with the spirit in which they are written. The paradox of the Bible is that only through God can God be known. This paradox, claims Bonhoeffer, is described by Luther’s famous dictum “scriptura sacra est sui ipsius interpres.” The maxim that scripture interprets itself was not intended as a grammatical principle but as a description of the need for spiritual illumination, and an assertion of spiritual interpretation. Being drawn into communion with God through Christ by an act of grace, the theological exegetes are taken into a reality that is independent of the Bible, into a living relation with God, and yet they only learn the nature of this relation through reading the biblical text. Bonhoeffer is not saying, of course, that one cannot read the Bible unless one is a Christian. Such a claim would contradict his conviction that the Bible is written in truly human words arising within their socio-historical fields of reference. He is saying, however, that the biblical authors employ the cultural language of their day to express a particular experience of God, wherefore their meaning cannot be grasped fully nor become contemporaneous with us without participation in the same divine reality. Just as faith does not oppose but goes beyond reason, so spiritual exegesis does not negate but goes beyond mere historical-critical reading in seeking the spiritual referent of the human words.

In advocating theological interpretation, Bonhoeffer seeks to strike a balance between a historical-critical approach to the Bible in which he was schooled and a pneumatical (spiritual) approach to scripture as a vehicle for God’s transformative grace: “Theological interpretation,” as he once put it, “regards the Bible as the book of the church and interprets it as such. Its method is this assumption and entails a continual referring back of the text (which has to be ascertained with all the methods of philological and historical research) to this presupposition.” Historical criticism is justified because the Word became flesh, and so the spiritual exegete has to wrestle with the historical dimension of the text, because the Bible is at one level a human word about God. Yet historical criticism is limited by the very fact that God entered history and that his Spirit is needed to reveal his divine Word in the human word. For this reason, problems concerning the redaction and genesis of texts are ultimately less important than the actual subject-matter of the scriptures as God’s word to his people.

Based on this conviction, Bonhoeffer even suggests that belief in the historical veracity of the virgin birth is less important than grasping its theological import, namely that in Jesus God has become human. Bonhoeffer is here rigorously true to his incarnational principle: in entering humanity, God has also entered the ambiguity of language and history. His divine reality shines...
forth through the unstable medium of human communication. Textual ambiguities and even conflicting views of Jesus’s actions are part of the scandal constituted by the incarnation and kenosis of God. For this reason, textual clarity itself cannot be the final criterion for belief. If Christians insist that an unbeliever’s doubt of the virgin birth constitutes an obstinate refusal to accept clear textual evidence, they confuse dogmatic theology with textual criticism. Equally bad, they are blind to the incarnational nature of the biblical text.71

Together with the New Testament writers and the greater Christian tradition, Bonhoeffer assumes that reading the Bible as the book of the church is to read it Christologically. His conviction that Christ is the inner logic of the scriptures that unifies the Old and New Testaments72 prompts Bonhoeffer to adopt Luther’s hermeneutical key of “whatever promotes Christ,” and he even argues for an open canon based on this principle.73 For Bonhoeffer, Christological reading, however, is also an eschatological reading, a reading in light of the end: “The church of the holy scripture—and there is no other church—lives in light of the end. For this reason, she reads the entire holy scripture as the book about the end, about the new, about Christ.”74 The Bible as the book of the church has to be read from the point of view of the fulfillment of all things in Christ. The incarnation, death and resurrection of God in Christ is the hermeneutical center from which anything preceding or following this event gains its meaning.75 For example, from a historical-critical perspective, one can speculate about what the concept of God meant in the Genesis account for pagan or pre-Christian hearers. These anofair, historical questions that move within the legitimate penultimate realm of religious history. Yet pneumatic exegesis read these penultimate considerations in light of God’s ultimate self-revelation in Christ. Theologically, neither who God is, nor the purpose of the Genesis account within scripture as a whole, can be understood apart from Christ.76 And the full meaning of God’s self-interpretation in Christ has itself to be worked out by the church with the help of theological exegesis. Such theological exegesis in turn is always oriented toward the question “who is Jesus Christ for us today?” Within the penultimate fallen world and all its ambiguities, the church lives out its vocation as the new humanity in response to this question, always in light of God’s ultimate reconciliation of the world to Himself. The relation of historical-critical and theological interpretation is thus governed by the same ultimate-penultimate relation that shapes Bonhoeffer’s entire theology as an eschatological understanding of reality.77

This ultimate-penultimate tension also ties together Old and New Testament. In no way has the Old Testament become superfluous, nor is it to be read as an important but merely secondary source. Rather, the Old Testament has its’ own relative autonomy and validity as the penultimate reality precisely because it is now carried and fulfilled by the ultimate word of God in Christ. To combat the theological anti-Semitism of his day, Bonhoeffer argues that the historical reality of the incarnate God in the Jewish Messiah Jesus ties Christianity and the occident indissolubly to the Old Testament and Judaism.

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Reading the Old Testament with the Jews keeps open the question of who Christ is. At the same time, the Christian reader, if Christ is truly God’s incarnate Word, will have to read the Old Testament story and its sources in light of this revelation.

Bonhoeffer has left us two published examples of theological exegesis, both of the Old Testament: his theological interpretation of Genesis chapters 1–3, and his short treatise on the Psalms as the prayer book of the Bible. We will briefly examine the latter. Without once mentioning his name, Bonhoeffer follows in Augustine’s footsteps by reading the Psalms ecclesiologically as the prayers of Christ and the church. Bonhoeffer justifies this approach by citing Christ’s own claim that the Psalms predict his ministry and Christ’s deliberate use on the cross of phrases from the Psalms, as well as the claim by the writer of Hebrews that Christ himself speaks in the Psalms of David. The Psalms are, as it were, the voice of Christ already pregnant with the church. By working through the Psalms christologically, the church learns to pray with the voice of Christ. All Psalms are to be read from the point of view that in Christ all things have been fulfilled. Yet, how is the Christian to pray through the imprecatory Psalms? Bonhoeffer thinks that we can still pray that the wrath of God may be poured out over all of His enemies, but with the Psalmist, we should turn the judgment of others over to God. God himself, however, has focused all the wrath of sin and evil on Christ at the cross, who defeated them through his death and resurrection. Hence through a Christological lens, the message of wrath becomes one of grace: “Jesus Christ himself asked for the execution of God’s punishment on his own body, and thus he leads me daily back to the somberness and grace of his cross for myself and for all the enemies of God.” Bonhoeffer argues that the Psalms should guide our individual prayers, but as the prayer book of the new humanity in Christ, they should really be part of the liturgy and shape communally our understanding of who God is and who we are to become.

4. Conclusion: The Sacrament of the Word

This liturgical aspect of spiritual exegesis takes us to our final point, namely the subservience of biblical exegesis to preaching and the Eucharist. This sacramental aspect of Bonhoeffer’s theology should once and for all obviate any criticism of his exegetical approach as following a dualistic epistemology by removing God’s presence from the real realm of history. The opposite is the case, but Bonhoeffer insists that history and temporality have to be understood from God’s rather than our perspective. For Bonhoeffer, preaching of the Word and the Eucharist are two different modes of God’s becoming present among his people. Preaching, in fact, is for him a third sacrament, the sacrament of the word (sacramentum verbi). Theology is merely the church’s guarding, ordering memory of the Word, a necessary but merely descriptive discipline. Preaching, on the other hand, is a sacrament that makes possible the direct encounter with God and his address to us: “the scriptures belong 

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essentially (wesentlich) to the preaching office; the congregation, however, to the sermon. Scripture wants to be interpreted and preached. It is not, in the first instance, an edifying book for the community. Instead, exegesis is subservient to preaching Christ and preaching legitimates itself as the incarnation of Christ: “The sermon derives from the incarnation of Jesus Christ and is determined through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. It does not originate in any general truth or experiences. The word of the sermon is the incarnate Christ himself. The incarnate Christ is God. Hence the sermon is Christ himself. God as human being, Christ as word. As word he walks among his community.”

In preaching, the congregation encounters the cosmic Logos in whom all things co-inhere and in whom the church subsists. Just as the Eucharist unifies the body of believers and impresses on them the cruciform being of Jesus, the sacrament of the Word draws the listener toward Christ-likeness. Both sacraments belong inseparably together.

Since the same Christ is present in both sacraments through the power of the Holy Spirit, preaching and the Eucharist are related means of conforming the believer to Christ-likeness. In other words, the ancient theme of deification resurfaces also in preaching: God became man so that man could become like God. Luther puts it this way: “You see that God pours himself and Christ, his beloved son, into us and, conversely, draws ourselves into him, so that he becomes completely human and we completely divinized.”

The sacraments of the Word and of the Eucharist are thus both means for the believers’ divinization and thus for their becoming most fully human in the image of the God-man. The church, to put it in Bonhoeffer’s terms, “is the place where the taking shape of Jesus Christ is proclaimed and where it happens. Christian ethics stand in service to this proclamation and event.”

Because God makes Himself present through preaching, the theological exegesis underlying the sermon should not be motivated by the attempt to make the scriptures relevant. The claim that the Bible has to be made relevant for the present already fails to understand that the Christ who is present in the Scriptures determines what reality actually is. It is wrong to read the scriptures, including the New Testament, as templates for current actions or as manuals of wisdom. For the scriptures proclaim the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ and the concrete issues besetting a congregation have to be transposed into the universal situation of humanity before God. For example, when in the exegesis of the Word, Christ himself becomes present, “the one who formerly considered himself important as a man, national socialist, or Jew, becomes someone who considers himself now only sinner, called one, or forgiven one.” In this way, the door is opened for the authentic situation of a human being before God, and room is made for the Holy Spirit to speak into our concrete situation. Because of this Christ-reality, the texts, when followed carefully, will become relevant all by themselves because they will speak out against abuses of humanity. Relying on this living presence and power of Christ in the reading of his word will save us...
from trying to establish eternal norms on the basis of our own cultural situation that may become unworkable for posterity. In drawing attention to this intrinsically applicatory dimension of reading, Bonhoeffer reminds us that biblical exegesis is essentially “translation,” that is, the making present to our particular circumstances the one Christ-reality. In this sense, the interpretation of scripture indeed does link heaven and earth by supporting the church in fulfilling its vocation as a place of God’s presence and thus as the only true source for the renewal of our humanity.

NOTES

1 It may be useful to distinguish between theological and spiritual exegesis, insofar as some biblical critics may agree that even philological work for establishing the meaning of the text requires sensibility to theological conceptions and yet they remain indifferent to the spiritual realities expressed by these theological concepts.

2 For the purposes of this article, I distinguish between the “school of historical criticism” with its modernist and Enlightenment presuppositions cloaked in the guise of objectivity on the one hand, and historical-critical tools of exegesis which are, of course indispensable, on the other hand. In Germany, the historical-critical school or method came under serious attack in Barth’s day and was declared officially as untenable by Gerhard Maier in the seventies. Maier argued that “the historical critical method, in its actual application, has become an impenetrable screen which simply does not allow certain statements any more, even though they may be proved a thousand times in the experience of the believers. This is not evil intent but the helplessness into which a falsely selected method blunders.” The historical-critical method is finished because its supposed objectivity has revealed itself as biased ideology. See Gerhard Maier, The End of the Historical-Critical Method, trans. Edwin W. Leverenz, (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1977), pp. 11–12.


6 Ibid., p. 160.

7 Ibid., p. 129.

8 Ibid., p. 209.

9 The difference was rather greater attention to narrative context in Antiochene typological exegesis, and to the spiritual content beyond narrative in Alexandrian allegorical exegesis. In the ancient world, “language was symbolic, and its meaning lay in that to which it referred . . . [t]he difference between ‘literal’ and ‘allegorical’ references was not absolute, but lay on a spectrum” (ibid., p. 120). Therefore neither literalism nor greater historicity distinguished ancient typology from allegory. Rather, the Antiochene school objected to the neglect of narrative coherence by Alexandrine allegory. Both schools, however, used similar tools and engaged in spiritual interpretation (ibid., p. 176).


11 Ibid., p. 421.

12 Ibid., pp. 426–427.

13 Ibid., p. 428.


15 Ibid., p. 6.


18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 59.
See Karlfried Froehlich, “Introduction” to *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 1–39. As Froehlich points out, the apostle Paul establishes the precedent for Christian interpreters of scriptures by claiming that “the fulfillment of messianic prophecy in the coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus made the Jewish Scriptures the book of the Christians, the essential key to their understanding of the events which had taken place among the disciplines of the first generation.” Jesus as the center of God’s history with humanity meant “[a] new reading of God’s history with his people... which contrasted with the old reading like Spirit and Letter, even life and death (2 Cor. 3:6 ff).” See also F. G. W. H. Lampe’s assertion: “[l]ike the New Testament writers, the Fathers approach the Old Testament in the conviction that the divine purposes in history are revealed in a pattern of promise and fulfillment, and that this means that the Old Testament can in principle be applied at every point to Christ and the Church.” F. G. W. H. Lampe, “The Exposition and Exegesis of Scripture to Gregory the Great,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West From the Fathers to the Reformation* Vol. 2, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 155–183; at p. 163.


Ibid., p. 188.

Ibid., p. 189.


Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, translated by A. N. Woodrow with a foreword by Avery Cardinal Dulles, (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 41–43. Congar argues that the living presence of God within tradition does not obviate its historical and interpretive character: “it is not enough to say that there is a living subject. It must be added that this subject lives in history and that historicity is one of its inherent features without, however, implying that its truth is relative or that it is nothing more than the changing thought of men” (*ibid.*, p. 114).


Ibid., p. 307.

The German is “pneumatische Auslegung” in DBW 9, p. 312.

Barth rejects verbal inspiration on this incarnational basis. Neither prophets nor apostles have channeled God’s word but rather conveyed it through their fallible human words truthfully: “In accordance with the Scriptures’ testimony about human beings, which also pertains to them [the prophets and apostles], they could err with every word and did err with every word, and according to the same scriptural testimony, they did nevertheless speak God’s word, justified and sanctified by grace alone, based on this very fallible and erring human word.” See Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik. Drittes Kapitel: Die Heilige Schrift* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1986), p. 588. This and following passages are my translations of Barth.

Ibid., p. 589: “The presence of God’s Word itself, however, that is, his actual, present being-said and being-heard, is not identical with the existence of this book as such.” The Bible is rather an “instrument” used by God.

Ibid., p. 588.

“Referat über historische und pneumatische Schriftauslegung” in DBW 9, p. 316.
[47x579]40 DBW 14, p. 407.

41 Ibid., p. 408 (italics Bonhoeffer’s).

42 Illegal Theologenausbildung in Finkenwalde, DBW 14, p. 145.

43 See for instance Karl Barth, Kirchliche Dogmatik I, 1 §5, “Das Wesen des Wortes Gottes,” p. 190: “[W]e have to believe in our faith no less than in the believed Word.” Barth laudably intends to ensure that faith depends completely on grace. Even when we confess our faith, this is solely the work of God. Faith certainly is also a human (i.e. ontological) experience but this experience is decided not on the basis of our faith but comes from the Word of God. Barth’s concern is to avoid any method that could secure the presence of God. Human experience can never secure (sicher stellen) the presence of the Word of God, at least not in a way “that they [human experiences] can be unambiguously signs of his reality” (ibid., p. 191).

44 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, DBW 2, p. 85.

45 Bonhoeffer, Act and Being, p. 90. See here the related criticism by Alan Torrance that Barth’s desire to guard God’s otherness leads him to adopt a revelational model that prevents him from adopting categories of personhood for the Trinity. Consequently, Barth cannot properly integrate the immanent and economic Trinity and thus ends up with impersonal Trinitarian “relations” (Beziehungen) rather than with more dynamic, personal intercommunion that allows for real human-divine participation. See Alan Torrance, Persons in Communion: Trinitarian Description and Human Participation (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 260–261.

46 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Sein in Christus ist Gerichtetsein auf Christus, das nur möglich ist als ‘Schon-Sein’ in der Gemeinde Christi” DBW 2, p. 154. By defining faith as “being-in-Christ” Bonhoeffer seeks to unite transcendental and ontological approaches to revelation (ibid.). In Ethics Bonhoeffer increasingly employs participatory language with words such as “Teilhabe” and “Teilnahme” to express this mode of being (DBW 6, pp. 151, 173, 436).


48 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Nachfolge. DBW 4, p. 219. See also ibid., p. 233: “not the justified and sanctified individual is the new human being but the community of faith (Gemeinde), the body of Christ, Christ.”

49 Gaudium et Spes, ch. 4, “Role of the Church in the Modern World”, p. 185 (“Christ the New man” restoring our God-likeness”) and p. 207 (the church’s common journey with humanity). The document also refers to “Christ as the goal of human history” and “center of humanity” (ibid., p. 216).


51 DBWE 6, p. 341.

52 DBWE 6, p. 263.

53 DBW 6, p. 261.

54 Ibid., p. 262.


56 Ibid., p. 17. See also Vatican II on Revelation in Dei Verbum which refers to Christ “who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of revelation.” Dei Verbum, in Austin P. Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Company, 1996), pp. 97–117, at p. 98. Benedict also sees, like Bonhoeffer, the direct import of the relation between reason and faith for the interpretation of scripture. The division between theological and historical-critical exegesis stems from too narrow a view of reason that rules out “in advance the self-disclosure of God in history” (Verbum Domini, p. 65).

57 Ibid., p. 18.

58 The view expressed by Bonhoeffer and Benedict represents the official position of the Roman Catholic Church on revelation: “The writings of the New Testament stand as a
perpetual and divine witness to these [divine] realities.” See, Dei Verbum, p. 110. Again, like Bonhoeffer, the authors of Dei Verbum assert the sacramental qualities of the scriptures, so that, their human qualities notwithstanding, “in the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them” (ibid., p. 112).

59 Verbum Domini, p. 6.
63 Ibid., p. 312. More recently, Oswald Bayer has confirmed this possible interpretation of Luther’s axiom. Rather than an “argument for internal interpretation in the sense of a concordance-method,” the statement means that “the scripture is not interpreted by me. Rather it is capable of interpreting itself, in that it interprets me, inscribes and judges my life history, so that the God who is identical with the author of the Holy Scriptures is the author of my life history.” Oswald Bayer, “Hermeneutical Theology” in Petr Pokorný and Jan Roskovec, Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Exegesis Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), pp. 103–120, 118.
64 As Bonhoeffer puts it, “Of course one can also read the Bible like any other book, and thus from the viewpoint of textual criticism etc. One cannot object to that. Only, one cannot access the true nature of the Bible that way, but merely its surface. . . . Only if we dare to engage the Bible as if here the God who loves us really speaks to us, and does not leave us alone with our questions, only then will be derive joy from the Bible” (“Letter to Rüdiger Schleicher” in DBW 14, p. 145).
66 Bonhoeffer’s distinction is between Sachbeziehung (reference to the subject matter) and Geistesbeziehung (reference to spirit). Only the former is necessary and built into human language. The latter is the work of the divine Spirit (Bonhoeffer, “Schriftauslegung,” DBW 9, p. 315).
67 It is necessary to distinguish between the historical-critical school of interpretation as an ideological approach to the Bible, and the historical grammatical tools of exegesis that may be employed within different hermeneutical frameworks. In German terminology, one distinguishes between historisch-kritischer exegese (the school) and historisch grammatischem Ansatz (historical grammatical “tools” of exegesis).
68 Bonhoeffer, Creation and Fall, DBWE 3, p. 22.
69 Bonhoeffer, “Schriftauslegung,” DBW 9, p. 319. Hence Bonhoeffer’s Barthian statement that the Bible is merely a literary-historical source for the historical critic but witness for spiritual exegesis (ibid., p. 320). See also DBW 14, p. 404: “The most concrete element of the Christian message and textual interpretation is not a human act of presencing (Vergegenwärtigung) but always God Himself, the holy Spirit.”
71 In Bonhoeffer’s words it is not the “how” question but the “what” (does it mean) question that is more important. It is helpful to read his statement on the virgin birth in light of similar remarks made by Bonhoeffer with regard to the Eucharist. Not how God is present, but that he is present is of greater importance. In other words, one cannot doubt Bonhoeffer’s insistence on God’s real presence at the Eucharistic table, nor his belief in the divinity of Christ. In the last phase of his thinking, Bonhoeffer reiterates his view on miraculous doctrines. Revelation occurred in this world and for this world, and thus warrants a theocentrically grounded anthropocentrism “not in the sense of liberal, mystical, pietistic, ethical theology, but in the biblical sense of creation, and the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” To make the virgin birth and the Trinity equally important pieces of a theological system that one has to accept in order to be able to call oneself a Christian (“Friss Vögel oder stirb”) is the kind of Barthian revelational positivism that Bonhoeffer criticizes as unbiblical, because it does not do justice to levels or stages of knowledge. See Bonhoeffer, “Stufen der Erkenntnis,” Widerstand und Ergebung, DBW 8,
Clearly, at this point, Bonhoeffer’s approach is open to the role of tradition and doctrinal development as guarded by the church in determining biblical meaning.

As Martin Kuske has shown, “Bonhoeffer perceives in the Old and the New Testament the Word of God, because it is the one God, who speaks in both Testaments.” Thus the whole Bible is the Word of God when read with reference to Christ, and therefore, “for Bonhoeffer, the problem of having to legitimate the Old Testament in contrast to a predetermined and unproblematic authority of the New Testament does not exist.” This unified view of the Bible distances Bonhoeffer from his teachers Harnack and Seeberg, and puts him closer to Karl Barth, and, indeed, Martin Luther. See Martin Kuske, Das Alte Testament als Buch von Christus: Dietrich Bonhoeffers Wertung und Auslegung des Alten Testaments (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971), p. 26.


DBWE 3, p. 22.

“The name Jesus Christ, in which God reveals himself, interprets itself in the life and death of Jesus Christ. After all, the New Testament does not consist in an endless repetition of the name Jesus Christ, but that which this name encompasses is interpreted (ausgelegt) in events, concepts and sentences that are understandable for us.” DBW 6, p. 338.

Ibid., pp. 22–23.


I take this to mean that Old and New Testament are to be read in a penultimate-ultimate tension that takes seriously the possibility of not believing that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah, while at the same time reading the Old Testament as fulfilled in the New Testament (see DBW 6, pp. 94–95).

Bonhoeffer thus avoids any simple successionism in his approach to the Old Testament. For a similar Catholic attempt, see Benedict’s Verbum Domini, p. xx.


Heb. 2:12; 10:5. DBW 5, p. 111.


Bonhoeffer, DBWE 5, p. 175.

Richard Weikart arrives at this conclusion in “Scripture and Myth in Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” Fides et Historia, Vol. 25 (1993), pp. 12–25, at p. 13. Weikart does not grasp the hermeneutical concerns of Bonhoeffer’s refusal to go beyond the word of scripture to the real events (p. 19). Bonhoeffer realizes the interpretive quality of knowledge and rightly rejects the historical-critical separation between facts and interpretation by insisting that the gospel accounts are theological interpretations of events. Thus Bonhoeffer’s approach is not “irrationalist” (p. 16) but rather “anti-rationalist.”

See his Christology lectures on this topic in DBW 12, pp. 294–295.

Bonhoeffer, DBW 14, p. 507.

Bonhoeffer, DBW 2, p. 130: “Theology is a function of the church; for church is not without preaching, preaching not without memory; theology, however, is the memory of the church.”

Bonhoeffer, DBW 6, p. 397.


Bonhoeffer, DBWE 6, p. 102.

Bonhoeffer, DBW 14, p. 405.

Bonhoeffer, DBW 14, pp. 411–412.

Bonhoeffer, DBW 14, p. 410.

Bonhoeffer, DBW 14, p. 415.