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Examining the Role of the Reader: A Necessary Task for Catholic Biblical Interpretation

GILBERTO A. RUIZ
Saint Anselm College

Thanks to the explosion of methods and hermeneutical frameworks that have surfaced in biblical studies since the 1970s, the discipline looks very different today than when Catholic scholars were first openly permitted to engage it. Among these approaches are those that foreground the complex role the real flesh-and-blood reader plays in interpretation. Recent discussion on what makes biblical interpretation "Catholic" reveals it to be a contested topic. Through an analysis of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church *and Frank M. Yamada's article "What Does Manzanar Have to Do with Eden? A Japanese American Interpretation of Genesis 2–3," the present article enters the discussion over what constitutes Catholic biblical interpretation to argue that it must integrate hermeneutical approaches that foreground real readers within the context of lived realities.*

Keywords: Catholic biblical interpretation, Pontifical Biblical Commission, Frank M. Yamada, contextual approaches, contextual hermeneutics

RECENT discussion on what makes biblical interpretation "Catholic" reveals it to be a contested topic.[1] Roland E. Murphy defends historical criticism as a method that contributes to the living tradition of the

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[1] See Carolyn Osiek, "Catholic or catholic? Biblical Scholarship at the Center," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 1 (2006): 5–22; Ronald D. Witherup, *Scripture: "Dei Verbum,"* Rediscovering Vatican II (New York: Paulist, 2006), 110–15. Osiek captures some of the central questions that have emerged in this debate when she writes, "What makes biblical interpretation Catholic (with capital *C*)? That it is done by someone who professes adherence to the Roman Catholic Church? And its teachings?

Gilberto A. Ruiz is Assistant Professor of Theology at Saint Anselm College in Manchester, NH. His research interests include studying the Gospel of John in light of its Second Temple Jewish and Roman-imperial contexts, as well as biblical interpretation from theological, contextual, and Latino/a hermeneutical perspectives.

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church and attributes responsibility for instilling a Catholic character to biblical scholarship to the individual exegete.[2] Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz argue that Catholic biblical scholarship should reexamine premodern biblical interpretation (e.g., patristic and medieval exegesis) and bring it and other aspects of church tradition to bear on interpretation today.[3] Peter S. Williamson analyzes the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* and derives twenty principles of Catholic interpretation from it.[4] For Daniel J. Harrington, an appreciation for the capacity of divine revelation to occur through human expression (the word of God in human language) is the key characteristic of the Catholic approach to biblical interpretation.[5]

Ronald D. Witherup maintains that, in order to be truly "catholic" (as in "universal"), a Catholic approach to interpretation must embrace all different types of exegetical methods as an acknowledgment of Scripture's ability to foster new readings as new methods emerge and new questions are asked of the text.[6] According to Frank J. Matera, the future of Catholic biblical interpretation lies in a renewal of the theological dimension of the text so that exegesis itself becomes a theological act that seeks to deepen the understanding of Scripture as God's word.[7] Benedict Thomas Viviano sees Catholic

By someone who has grown up with a Catholic cultural heritage? By someone who expressly and consciously holds in mind the major church documents of the last two centuries on biblical interpretation? By someone who simply interprets out of one's own academic and religious identity, the unarticulated 'pre-understanding'?" (7).

[2] Roland E. Murphy, "What Is Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship—Revisited?," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28 no. 3 (1998): 112–19. According to Murphy, it is the exegete's self-understanding as a Catholic interpreter working within the living tradition of the church, not any particular method or product of biblical research, that "colors the approach to the text" (118).

[3] Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).

[4] Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,"* Subsidia Biblica 22 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2001); Williamson, "Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (2003): 327–49.

[5] Daniel J. Harrington, *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* Come & See (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 13–16. According to Williamson, this is the foundational principle undergirding the Pontifical Biblical Commission's approach to Scripture (*Catholic Principles*, 28–40; "Catholic Principles," 332–33).

[6] Witherup, *Scripture*, 113–14.

[7] Frank J. Matera, "An Act of Theology: The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship," *Commonweal* 140, no. 13 (2013): 8–9.

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hermeneutics as both presupposing church tradition (especially more recent encyclicals and other ecclesial documents) and accepting the Bible "as the unnormed norm of theological teaching" that presents "the original claims of the gospel and its truth, both in ethical action and dogmatic coherence."[8] For Viviano, the historical-critical method plays an indispensable role in presenting biblical affirmations in general and specifically in relating Scripture to dogmatic and moral theology in the church.[9]

In this article, I wish to enter the discussion over what constitutes Catholic biblical interpretation, but I do not seek to propose or outline a comprehensive hermeneutical framework for conducting biblical interpretation in a Catholic mode. My aim is more modest: to argue that in order for biblical interpretation to be "Catholic," it must integrate hermeneutical approaches that foreground real readers within the context of lived realities.

As defined by Fernando F. Segovia, the terms "real reader" and "flesh-and-blood reader" construct the reader or interpreter as "always positioned and interested; socially and historically conditioned and unable to transcend such conditions . . . not only with respect to socioeconomic class but also with regard to the many other factors that make up human identity."[10] The "real reader" thus stands in contrast to "the construct of a neutral and disinterested reader" who can transcend his or her biases and presuppositions "to attain a sort of asocial and ahistorical nirvana."[11] The construct of a universal, impartial reader was a long-standing feature of biblical criticism that has been shown by feminist, liberationist, and postmodern critics no longer to be sustainable, either in theory or in practice.[12] Therefore, responsible exegesis necessarily involves the interpreter theorizing him or herself—raising to critical consciousness his or her biases, ethnicity, social and geopolitical location, and any other pertinent aspects of his or her identity. To be truly "Catholic," Catholic biblical interpretation must take on the task of employing hermeneutical frameworks that account for the role that real flesh-and-blood readers play in the interpretative process.

[8] Benedict Thomas Viviano, *Catholic Hermeneutics Today: Critical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), xii.

[9] Ibid., 1–13, esp. 12–13.

[10] Fernando F. Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies: A View from the Margins* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 30.

[11] Ibid.

[12] See Michael Joseph Brown, *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship* (Harrisburg, PA; Trinity Press International, 2004), 1–23; Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 3–33.

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Biblical studies looks very different today than when Catholic scholars were first openly permitted to engage it.[13] This is due in no small part to the explosion of methods and hermeneutical frameworks in the discipline since the 1970s.[14] Among these are approaches that foreground the complex role that the real flesh-and-blood reader plays in biblical interpretation.[15] Every interpreter brings to the text his or her own gender-identification, socio-economic status, personal history, and cultural, racial, and ethnic identity. Taking the US context as an example, African American, Asian American, and Latino/a biblical scholars who foreground social-cultural and ideological contextualization at the level of reception and interpretation have developed (and continue to develop) models of interpretation that attend to the hyphenated realities represented by each of these groups.[16] Many of these scholars

[13] As anticipated by Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), which allowed Catholic scholars to use scientific methods of biblical criticism, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965), gave Catholic biblical interpreters license to enter the academic discourse of critical biblical studies. Catholic biblical scholars took advantage of this freedom and today are welcome partners in the guild, participating fully in the enterprise along with their Protestant and secular counterparts. Indeed, so closely interwoven with the model of Protestant and secular biblical criticism has been the work of Catholic biblical scholars that the question of whether we can even call the work of Catholic exegetes "Catholic" has been asked, perhaps most directly by Johnson (Johnson and Kurz, *Future*, 3–34; see Viviano, *Catholic Hermeneutics Today*, 29–33, for a critique of Johnson's views). For a concise history of the Roman Catholic Church's relationship to critical biblical studies, see Osiek, "Catholic or catholic?," 7–15.

[14] For an incisive charting of academic biblical studies since the 1970s, see Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 3–52.

[15] In addition to those cited in note 16 below, works of biblical interpretation that foreground the reader and his/her context and interests include Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline E. Lapsley, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012); Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from This Place*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures*, 2 vols. (New York: Crossroad, 1993–94); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, rev. and expanded 3rd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

[16] Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 57 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); Randall C. Bailey, ed., *Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 42 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Brian K. Blount et al., eds., *True to Our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Brown, *Blackening of the Bible*; Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991); Tat-siong Benny Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics? Reading the New*

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employ interpretative frameworks that are viewed as improper or secondary to the task of biblical criticism, which is said to be elucidating the "plain sense" of the text, as argued at length by John Barton.[17]

Barton's argument, that illuminating the "plain sense" of the text is the task of biblical criticism, provides a good example of how foregrounding the reader is viewed as a secondary, if at all necessary, move in biblical interpretation. Barton addresses two forms of attacks on the model of biblical criticism that he espouses. One is the "confessional" view that biblical criticism has "taken the Bible away from the church."[18] The other is from proponents of what Barton dubs "advocacy" readings, by which he means interpreters who claim that traditional biblical criticism has too often had oppressive effects and who in response aim to interpret the Bible to unleash its potential for liberation.[19] Barton's critique of both "confessional" and "advocacy" interpreters is that they collapse the two-stage process of interpretation into a single process. According to Barton, interpreting any text is a two-stage operation. The first stage is to perceive the text's meaning, and the second stage is "an evaluation of that meaning in relation to what one already believes to be the case."[20] "Confessional" and "advocacy" interpreters falter because they seek a text's meaning in light of their convictions. In the case of "advocacy" interpreters, Barton suggests that carrying out thorough, rigorous exegesis that is as objective as possible is in their best interest, so that the text itself is shown not to support oppressive applications.[21]

Barton collapses the notion of rigorous exegesis with traditional biblical criticism, which he defines as elucidating the "plain sense" of the text. In doing so, he makes the implicit claim that other models of interpretation do not constitute rigorous analysis of the texts in question, since rigorous analysis is only reserved for biblical criticism as Barton has defined it. Moreover, Barton's advocacy for the derivation of the plain sense denies multivalence to the biblical text, since for him the text has a

Testament (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia, *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 68 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); Hugh R. Page Jr. et al., eds., *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel's Scriptures from Africa and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

[17] John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

[18] Ibid., 137.

[19] Ibid., 142.

[20] Ibid., 159.

[21] Ibid., 162.

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plain sense rather than a plurality of meanings that can be supported exegetically.[22]

Regarding his contention that quasi-objective exegesis works in favor of "advocacy" approaches, Barton sidesteps the issue raised by such so-called advocacy interpreters as Brian K. Blount and Segovia, who emphasize that real flesh-and-blood readers de facto affect the interpretation of the biblical text, making it vital for interpreters to critically assess themselves, their interests, and their contexts in the act of interpretation.[23] This is not the same as collapsing two stages of interpretation into one. It is to acknowledge that reading does not take place in a vacuum, and then to take this reality into account when one approaches the biblical text. How can approaches that foreground this reality constitute an integral component of Catholic biblical interpretation?

Given its important status as an ecclesial document on the topic of biblical interpretation, the Pontifical Biblical Commission's (PBC) *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* serves as my point of departure for addressing this question.[24] I will start with a summary and analysis of this document, focusing especially on its treatment of contextual methods. I will then proceed with a discussion of Frank M. Yamada's "What Does Manzanar Have to Do with Eden? A Japanese American Interpretation of Genesis 2–3" in relation to the PBC's document.[25] This discussion begins with a summary of Yamada's article, which serves as an example of how theorizing the reader's point of view affects reading the text. I will then proceed to show how, without dismissing the PBC's understanding of the historical-critical method as indispensable, a reader-centered approach forms a necessary part of Catholic biblical interpretation according to the logic of the PBC's document. The

[22] On the polysemous nature of biblical texts, see J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987).

[23] Brian K. Blount, *Cultural Interpretation: Reorienting New Testament Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*; Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement," in *Reading from This Place,* vol. 1, *Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 57–73.

[24] In Dean P. Béchard, ed. and trans., *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 244–317. On the PBC and the nature of its ecclesial authority, see Williamson, *Catholic Principles*, 13–17; Williamson, "Catholic Principles," 329; Witherup, *Scripture*, 115–22.

[25] Frank M. Yamada, "What Does Manzanar Have to Do with Eden? A Japanese American Interpretation of Genesis 2–3," in Bailey, Liew, and Segovia, *They Were All Together in One Place?* 97–117.

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final section of the article will affirm the point that interpreting the biblical text from the standpoint of real readers must be seen as an integral part of biblical interpretation that seeks to be Catholic.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's Assessment of Contextual Approaches

Issued in 1993, the PBC frames its document as a response to the multiplicity of methods that have arisen in the field of critical biblical studies and the negative response in some quarters to critical biblical studies as hostile to the faith (Introduction, §A). Given this context, the PBC seeks "to indicate the paths most appropriate for arriving at an interpretation of the Bible as faithful as possible to its character, both human and divine," and "to examine all the methods likely to contribute effectively to the task of making more available the riches contained in the biblical texts" (Introduction, §B).[26] The ultimate aim of the document may be characterized as religious or pastoral: "that the Word of God may become more and more the spiritual nourishment of the members of the People of God, the source for them of a life of faith, of hope, and of love—and indeed a light for all humanity" (Introduction, §B).[27]

Accordingly, the PBC supplies a description of the methods and approaches in use in critical biblical interpretation. Each description ends with a brief evaluation of the method (§§I.A–F).[28] Following this section on methods and approaches is a section on hermeneutical questions that discusses the philosophical hermeneutics of Bultmann, Gadamer, and Ricoeur in relation to biblical exegesis (§II.A) and the meaning of inspired Scripture with reference to the literal, spiritual, and fuller senses of ancient and medieval Christian exegesis (§II.B). The document then outlines characteristics of

[26] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 248–49. More fully stated, the document's purpose is "to give serious consideration to the various aspects of the present situation as regards the interpretation of the Bible—to attend to the criticisms and the complaints, as also to the hopes and aspirations that are being expressed in this matter, to assess the possibilities opened up by the new methods and approaches, and, finally, to try to determine more precisely the direction that best corresponds to the mission of exegesis in the Catholic Church" (Introduction, §B; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 248).

[27] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 249.

[28] The methods covered are historical criticism (§I.A), certain methods of literary analysis (rhetorical, narrative, and semiotic analysis) (§I.B), approaches based on tradition (the canonical approach, Jewish traditions of interpretation, and the history of influence approach, i.e., *Wirkungsgeschichte*) (§I.C), approaches that use the human sciences (sociological, cultural anthropological, psychological, and psychoanalytic approaches) (§I.D), contextual approaches (liberationist and feminist approaches) (§I.E), and fundamentalist interpretation (§I.F).

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Catholic interpretation by discussing interpretation in the biblical tradition (§III.A) and in the tradition of the church (§III.B), and then delving into the task of the exegete (§III.C) and the relationship of biblical exegesis to other theological disciplines (§III.D). The document follows with a section on the interpretation of the Bible in the life of the church that treats the actualization of the biblical message (§IV.A), the dynamics between inculturation and actualization (§IV.B), and the use of the Bible in the church (§IV.C).

The final section of the document draws four conclusions.[29] First, "biblical exegesis fulfills, in the Church and in the world, an *indispensable task*" (Conclusion).[30] Second, the historical-critical method will remain a required component of biblical interpretation and must inform other methods. Third, despite the crucial role played by the historical-critical method, it "cannot lay claim to enjoying a monopoly" and must be supplemented by recourse to other methods of interpretation, developments in philosophical hermeneutics, and the traditions of interpretation within the Bible and the church (Conclusion).[31] Fourth, without diminishing its scholarly rigor or allowing theological apologetical commitments to hamper scholarly methodology and research, Catholic exegesis should "maintain its identity as a *theological discipline*, the principal aim of which is the deepening of faith" (Conclusion).[32]

The PBC's assessment of contextual approaches (§I.E) is especially relevant to our discussion. This section examines two contextual approaches, the liberationist approach and the feminist approach, and introduces the discussion of these approaches with an admission that readers always influence the interpretation of a given text, whether or not they realize it. This introduction to contextual approaches also recommends that interpreters bringing the contemporary concerns of real readers to the biblical text ought to "do so with critical discernment" (§I.E).[33]

The PBC treats the liberationist approach first (§I.E.1) before discussing the feminist approach (§I.E.2), in each case offering a succinct presentation of the approach's historical origins, a summation of its main principles, and

[29] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 313–15.

[30] Ibid., 313 (emphasis in the original).

[31] Ibid., 314.

[32] Ibid. (emphasis in the original).

[33] "The interpretation of a text is always dependent on the mindset and concerns of its readers. Readers give privileged attention to certain aspects and, without even being aware of it, neglect others. Thus, it is inevitable that some exegetes bring to their work points of view that are new and responsive to contemporary currents of thought which have not up until now been taken sufficiently into consideration. It is important that they do so with critical discernment" (§I.E; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 269).

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an evaluation. With respect to the liberationist approach, the PBC considers of "undoubted value" liberationist hermeneutics' profound awareness of God's saving presence, its emphasis on the communal dimension of faith, its call for a liberating praxis founded on justice and love, and its "fresh reading of the Bible that seeks to make the Word of God the light and the nourishment of the People of God in the midst of its struggles and hopes" (§I.E.1).[34] Because of these features, liberationist hermeneutics "underlines the capacity of the inspired text to speak to the world of today" (§I.E.1).[35]

The PBC also formulates several reservations about the liberationist approach. Its first stated concern is the movement's general neglect of biblical texts that do not highlight oppression and inspire social change (§I.E.1).[36] The PBC also expresses concerns over the tendency of some practitioners of liberationist approaches to analyze the Bible under the inspiration of materialist doctrines (such as the Marxist principle of class struggle), which the PBC deems "a practice that is very questionable" (§I.E.1).[37] Finally, the PBC points out that the liberationist focus on earthly eschatology "has been to the detriment of the more transcendent dimensions of scriptural eschatology" (§I.E.1).[38] Its evaluation ends with the recommendation that the liberationist movement clarify "its hermeneutical presuppositions, its methods, and its coherence with the faith and the Tradition of the Church as a whole" (§I.E.1).[39]

Turning to feminist biblical hermeneutics, the PBC acknowledges that "feminist exegesis has brought many benefits" (§I.E.2).[40] Mentioned first is the increased number of women undertaking exegetical research and their success at recovering the presence and significance of women in the Bible and in Christian origins. The PBC also expresses appreciation for the fact that feminist exegesis ensures that new questions are asked of the biblical text, leading to new discoveries, and helping to "unmask and correct" tendentious but commonly accepted interpretations that justify women's oppression (§I.E.2).[41] Without explicitly explaining the role of feminist interpretation on

[34] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 270.

[35] Ibid.

[36] The PBC elaborates this point by warning that, despite the fact that exegesis can never be neutral, "it must also take care not to become one-sided," and by stating outright that "social and political action is not the direct task of the exegete" (§I.E.1; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 271).

[37] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 271.

[38] Ibid. To be sure, the PBC finds this focus understandable given the immense social problems addressed by liberation theology.

[39] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 271.

[40] Ibid., 272.

[41] Ibid.

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this matter, the PBC remarks that a better understanding of the image of God in the Old Testament has emerged, one that affirms that the biblical God "is not a projection of a patriarchal mentality."[42]

The PBC lists what it considers to be some pitfalls of feminist exegesis. First is a concern that, "to the extent that it proceeds from a preconceived judgment," feminist exegesis risks "interpreting the biblical texts in a tendentious and, thus, debatable manner" (I.E.2).[43] The PBC laments that the nature of the texts being studied means that feminist exegesis often has to argue from silence, which is insufficient for establishing a solid basis for its conclusions. The PBC also states that the feminist "attempt made, on the basis of fleeting indications in the text, to reconstitute a historical situation that these same texts are considered to have been designed to hide . . . does not correspond at all to the work of exegesis properly so called" (§I.E.2).[44] According to the PBC, this strategy "entails rejecting the content of the inspired texts in preference for a hypothetical construction, quite different in nature" (§I.E.2).[45] The evaluation of feminist approaches ends with a paragraph that was the subject of some controversy at the time of deciding its inclusion: "Feminist exegesis often raises questions of power within the Church, questions which, as is obvious, are matters of discussion and even of confrontation. In this area, feminist exegesis can be useful to the Church only to the degree that it does not fall into the very traps it denounces and that it does not lose sight of the evangelical teaching concerning power as service, a teaching addressed by Jesus to all the disciples, men and women" (§I.E.2).[46]

A few things can be said about the PBC's treatment of contextual approaches at this point in our discussion. To its credit, the PBC recognizes the value of contextual approaches, seen in the positive elements of its evaluation of liberationist and feminist approaches. The PBC also rightly acknowledges the influence readers have when they read a text. But one wonders what content lies behind the PBC's disclaimer that interpreters who "bring to their work points of view that are new and responsive to contemporary currents of

[42] The full quotation reads as follows: "With regard to the Old Testament, several studies have striven to come to a better understanding of the image of God. The God of the Bible is not a projection of a patriarchal mentality. He is Father, but also the God of tenderness and maternal love" (§I.E.2; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 273).

[43] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 273.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid. There were nineteen votes cast on the text of this paragraph, eleven in favor and four against, with four abstentions. At the request of those who voted against this paragraph, the PBC agreed that the results of this vote be published in a footnote to this text.

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thought . . . do so with critical discernment" (§I.E).[47] What does the PBC understand "critical discernment" to be?

The critiques leveled at liberationist and feminist hermeneutics seem to indicate that, for the PBC, "critical discernment" has to do with employing contextual approaches in a manner that respects the meaning of the biblical texts in their original contexts. This concern appears to lie behind its critiques that liberationist approaches neglect biblical texts that do not advance liberationist causes, employ "materialist doctrines" external to the text to analyze the Bible, and downplay the transcendent aspects of eschatology contained in the Bible (§I.E.1).[48] All of these criticisms amount to the charge that the text and its own worldview are not taken sufficiently into consideration. This charge is made explicit in the PBC's concern that "feminist exegesis, to the extent that it proceeds from a preconceived judgment, runs the risk of interpreting the biblical texts in a tendentious, and, thus, debatable manner" (§I. E.2).[49] The PBC's concern that contextual approaches risk devaluing the biblical message finds further expression in its comments regarding the tendency of feminist exegesis "to reconstitute a historical situation that these same texts are considered to have been designed to hide" (§I.E.2).[50]

Finally, the last paragraph on feminist approaches perhaps adds another layer to what the PBC means by "critical discernment." The PBC states that "feminist exegesis can be useful to the Church only to the degree that it does not fall into the very traps it denounces and that it does not lose sight

[47] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 269.

[48] Ibid., 271.

[49] Ibid., 273. This criticism is vague, as this statement could be made about any approach, since none are truly objective and devoid of preconceived judgments. Indeed, this is the great insight of the contextual methods—to make preconceived judgments explicit and bring them to the analysis of the text.

[50] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 273. According to the PBC, this attempt at historical reconstruction is based on "fleeting indications in the text," "does not correspond at all to the work of exegesis properly so called," and "entails rejecting the content of the inspired texts in preference for a hypothetical construction, quite different in nature" (§I.E.2; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 273). But how does this attempt at historical reconstruction differ from what other exegetes employing historical-critical methodology do? To cite source and form criticism as examples, whatever sources make up the Pentateuch, the Gospel of John, or Second Corinthians, source critics determine the presence of sources precisely on "fleeting indications in the text." Form criticism then proceeds to develop a "hypothetical construction" of these sources and to reconstruct their *Sitze im Leben*, which may well be "quite different in nature" from the current "inspired texts" in which they are presently found, since the final editors embedded their sources into the present documents and in doing so hid their previous historical and social situations. So what is different about feminist exegesis in this regard?

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of the evangelical teaching concerning power as service" (§I.E.2).[51] Much can be said about this statement, but I would like to draw attention to the phrase "useful to the Church." Achieving what is "useful to the Church" appears to be a key factor in deciding whether contextual approaches are a valued component of Catholic biblical interpretation.[52]

In sum, the PBC values contextual approaches because they take seriously the fact that readers always influence interpretation. But in its evaluation of contextual approaches, the PBC betrays a concern for contextual approaches that stray too far from the biblical text and its message. Further, the PBC recommends that these approaches clarify their relationship to the church.

Yet even with such reservations about contextual approaches, the PBC leaves an important space open for their use in interpretation in §III of its document. While insisting that Catholic exegesis must attend to the historical character of biblical revelation and employ historical-critical methodology to do so, according to the PBC "sole validity" cannot be granted to the historical-critical method (§III.C.1).[53] This is due to Scripture's status as the word of God, which means that exegetes "arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's Word for today" (§III.C.1).[54] In order to do this, the PBC exhorts Catholic exegetes to "take into consideration the various hermeneutical perspectives that help toward grasping the contemporary meaning of the biblical message and that make it responsive to the needs of those who read Scripture today" (§III.C.1).[55] This last statement is significant, for it shows that contextual approaches to interpretation lie well within the scope of Catholic biblical interpretation, since interpreting biblical texts by foregrounding the needs, questions, and insights that real readers bring to the text has the potential to make Scripture responsive to the needs of people who read Scripture today.

A Japanese American Reading of Genesis 2–3

At this point it is appropriate to discuss a recent example of one such contextual approach to see how contemporary contextual approaches can fulfill the mission of Catholic biblical exegesis to "take into consideration

[51] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 273.

[52] The problem, though, is deciding who determines what is "useful to the Church," since a feminist approach, as the PBC correctly states, "raises questions of power within the Church" (§I.E.2; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 273).

[53] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 296.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.

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the various hermeneutical perspectives that help toward grasping the contemporary meaning of the biblical message and that make it responsive to the needs of those who read Scripture today" (§III.C.1).[56] Frank M. Yamada's reading of Genesis 2–3 from the perspective of Japanese American identity serves as a good text for discussion.

We are familiar with the traditional Christian reading of Genesis 2–3 as indicating the fall from grace of Adam and Eve, with its understanding that their act of disobedience is the source of "original sin." The logic of the reading is simple: the human beings are placed by God in a lush garden where they live in harmony with God and nature, but God gives them a single command—not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—which they break. This act of disobedience is the original sin, and it results in the human condition of life outside the garden, where paradise is lost and life is hard and painful. This traditional reading is highly theological, in particular from a Christian theological point of view, and biblical scholars using the tools and methods of historical criticism have looked past this highly theologized reading to attain a sense of what this passage meant in its original historical context, before the theology of original sin developed.[57]

According to one trajectory of historical-critical analysis of this passage, the historical context in which this story took its final shape is the period of Israel's early monarchy. Scholars who see this as the story's historical backdrop interpret Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit as symbolic of "open rebellion to the gracious deity/king," who in the story functions as a benevolent figure who creates a space for his people, provides for them, and decrees laws with which they should comply.[58] The implication is that not complying with the law and order established by the king is a bad thing—an act of rebellion—that will have negative consequences, as shown in the narrative by the shame, violence, and disorder that unfolds in Genesis 4–6.[59]

Other readings and historical contexts have been proposed for this passage in its history of interpretation.[60] I point out this proposal because, even though it seeks to move past the highly theologized Christian interpretation of the story, it shares with that reading the view of God as a good or benevolent God and of Adam and Eve's disobedience as a bad or evil act on their part. For some or perhaps even many of us, it could be the case

[56] Ibid.

[57] Yamada, "Manzanar," 98–99.

[58] Ibid., 99.

[59] Ibid.

[60] See the review in Yamada, "Manzanar," 98–101. Yamada himself agrees with recent Pentateuch scholarship that, while containing material that predates the Babylonian captivity, the final shaping of the Pentateuch took place during the Persian period (97).

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that our personal histories and identities affirm this reading. For those of us who have been taught and have accepted that God is good and that disobeying authority figures (e.g., God, our parents, the police, government authorities, church pastors) is bad, positive experiences with authority figures may have confirmed this basic conviction.

But such a scenario may not be the case for all real flesh-and-blood readers. Yamada locates himself as a third-generation Japanese American who grew up in a predominantly white, upper-middle-class suburb of southern California. In his article, he probes the implications of his particular Japanese American identity for reading Genesis 2–3. Like other Japanese immigrants on the West Coast, his family was affected by the Japanese and Japanese American internment policy that took place in the United States during World War II. In the 1940s about 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans in the western United States were displaced from their homes and relocated, and without due process were confined as prisoners in their new location for the duration of the war.[61] At the time, the war was with Japan and was situated mainly on the Japanese side of the Pacific. War hysteria in the United States led to this policy of internment of West Coast Japanese immigrants as a security measure.

Explaining how this policy affected his family, Yamada writes:

> Neither of my parents was interned, though my father's family was evacuated.…The FBI arrested my paternal grandfather like many other…first-generation Japanese American men. My father's family, with several other Japanese families, was permitted to move to a "safe zone" on an abandoned farm in Keetley, Utah. Ironically, though they had more freedom than the families who were interned in camps, their living conditions were almost as poor, and they were not always as well-protected from the surrounding community, where war hysteria had taken hold. Like most Japanese families who were evacuated, my father's family lost almost everything that they had owned.[62]

After pointing out that most of his relatives and friends in the Japanese American community are directly connected to this experience of internment, Yamada concludes that "the internment was a profoundly significant event in Japanese American history and had a decisive effect on Japanese American identity in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly for those Japanese Americans who lived on the West Coast of the United States."[63]

[61] Yamada, "Manzanar," 102–3.

[62] Ibid., 102.

[63] Ibid.

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As a Japanese American bringing this racial-ethnic identity and its formative experiences to Genesis 2–3, Yamada detects in the story of Adam and Eve's disobedience a different possible interpretation. He views God's act of placing Adam and Eve in the garden with suspicion. He correctly points out that there is no beautiful garden before the creation of the man. Rather, the picture we get in Genesis 2:5 is of a barren desert ("There was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the Lord God had sent no rain upon the earth" NABRE).[64] Not until after the creation of the man does God plant a garden in Eden (2:8). Yamada reads God's act of creating this garden in light of the creation of internment camps, which were located in desolate, remote desert areas that were previously uninhabited.[65] The faraway location of these camps was a deliberate choice on the part of the War Relocation Authority, which sought "isolated, uninhabited areas in order to minimize the perceived threat of a concentrated Japanese population."[66]

As a result of his contextualization of himself as reader, Yamada sees God in the story as an authority figure who has the power to create a place for people in a location that had previously been uninhabitable, and has the power to locate the human beings there. A hermeneutics of trust might evaluate positively God's ability to create a beautiful home for humanity, but Yamada's critical reflection of Japanese American identity leads him to question why God would do this.

Placing God's action in conversation with the Japanese American experience of internment, Yamada interprets God in the story "as a threatened deity/ruler who exercises control over the subjects in the garden by barring access to knowledge and life [symbolized by the two trees in the garden] through an arbitrary command."[67] God is not a benevolent ruler seeking what is best for humankind, but rather "is characterized within the Eden story as an authority figure who rules by control," attempting "to maintain social order through an arbitrary command and, when the threat of the humans becomes too great"—that is, when they eat of the tree of knowledge and so possess knowledge that is more like God's knowledge and can become immortal like God by eating from the tree of life (3:22–24)—God "removes the couple by forceful exile."[68]

Seeing God's actions in this way leads Yamada to read Adam and Eve's act differently than the traditional reading. The traditional reading sees the

[64] Ibid., 106.
[65] Ibid., 107.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid., 108.
[68] Ibid., 110.

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disobedience as a "sin" on the part of the humans, but Yamada argues that "the meaning and function of human rebellion in Gen 2–3 depends on the context in which obedience/disobedience is assumed."[69] He points out that interpreters have often taken God's side in this story, which leads them to equate the human disobedience with sin and identify it as the act that leads to the human condition of alienation from God and a life that is full of suffering.[70]

At this point Yamada asks us to consider the choices Japanese Americans had to make when faced with internment. Some chose to comply with the US government as their survival strategy, figuring that the best way out of the internment camps was to demonstrate loyalty to the United States.[71] Others opted for resistance and civil disobedience.[72] These different responses divided the Japanese American community, and once the internment policy ended, the affected generations responded either with silence—the experience became something that was not talked about—or with disproportionate patriotism by which they vowed to be "doubly American."[73] Whatever the choice, Yamada suggests that "all of these responses to the events surrounding the internment share a theme of survival and community preservation."[74] Put in an impossible situation, they developed different, conflicting ways to survive and preserve their families and community.

This historical experience leads Yamada to view the actions of the first humans as a survival mechanism as well:

> When a suspicious governing authority gives an arbitrary command, the options for the ruled subjects become limited.... As the experience of Japanese Americans suggest[s], this harsh reality results in difficult consequences for whatever way of life the human subjects choose. One must either decide between the harsh realities of a life that is not human—a life without knowledge or wisdom—or face the penalty for noncompliance in an atmosphere of divine suspicion....Within a setting of mistrust and control, marked by the arbitrary command of a suspicious ruling authority, the primordial parents must decide between a denial of their human existence and the consequences of a life in exilic noncompliance. The first humans choose to transgress the boundaries that [God] had created for them. They choose to survive in a life that would now be marked with suffering and painful existence.[75]

[69] Ibid., 113.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 103.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 104.
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 114–15.

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So for Yamada, what Adam and Eve do is not a sin but rather a choice they make for their survival as humans. Any choice would bring consequences. The choice they make is to live as humans with knowledge rather than deny their humanity by remaining as God's imprisoned subjects in the garden.

Yamada provides a challenging reading of Genesis 2–3 that views God as an arbitrary, self-interested ruler and Adam and Eve's eating of the fruit as a choice they make for their survival in light of the way God has demonstrated authority over them. Yamada's reading stems from his theorization of his Japanese American identity, and he corroborates his reading with exegetical analysis, showing it can be supported by the passage's narrative dynamics and textual elements.[76]

Can any theological, ethical, or pastoral insight be drawn from such a reading? Yamada thinks so, and it lies in the counterintuitive interpretative move that suggests that we do not necessarily need to side with God in this drama. The historical, cultural, and religious tendency to view God as the benevolent deity/king in this story has a potentially dangerous side to it, namely, that "such interpretations produce meaning structures that function to reinforce the logic of the status quo, contributing to cultures of violence against people who are considered as other in the system. Divine authority and social order are given preference over the particularities of human experience. Disobedience is a threat to social order, and, thus, ruling authority is justified in suppressing humanity's initiative, especially in the name of state security."[77]

In other words, reading the story of Adam and Eve in the traditional way could lead us to see challenging rules and laws that are established by a higher power—whether a political power like the government or a religious power like a church—as something that should never be done. This may be acceptable as long as laws are right and just, but what if they are problematic or unjust? The theological and ethical payoff of Yamada's reading is that the first humans demonstrate the validity of challenging suspicious or oppressive actions by higher authority figures. Indeed they do not die, as God said they would, but survive and multiply in the world outside the garden (Gen 4:1–2, 25; 5:1–32).[78]

[76] See note 97 below.

[77] Yamada, "Manzanar," 114.

[78] Ibid., 112–13.

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Reader-Centered Approaches and the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*

This hermeneutical exercise can be repeated any number of times. The more we foreground the role of the reader in interpretation, the more we open ourselves to encountering different possible ways to understand the Bible.

Aside from the question of whether or not one finds Yamada's reading of Genesis 2–3 persuasive, what are some implications of Yamada's article for Catholic biblical interpretation as understood by the PBC? First, Yamada's reading demonstrates that interdisciplinary analysis of the experiences and identities of flesh-and-blood readers (individual or corporate) has the capacity to bring out dimensions of the text that go unnoticed when the perspective or worldview of the text or of traditional methods of interpretation is prioritized. Insofar as it sees promulgating God's word in real-world contexts, Catholic biblical interpretation must intentionally employ analytical frameworks that foreground real readers in order to gauge how real-world experiences and identities influence the reception of readings based on traditional methods of interpretation.

The PBC states that reconstructing the meaning of the text in context is not the goal of Catholic exegesis. The goal is to make God's word responsive to the needs of people today—through the other methods (§III.C.1). Methods that prioritize the sociocultural locations and racial-ethnic identities of readers demonstrate ways in which Scripture interacts with flesh-and-blood readers whose experiences bring out dimensions of the text that may not have been intended by the text's original author(s) but still have the capacity to manifest God's word in the world.

Yamada's reading tells us something about authoritarian relationships that deny the humanity of ruled persons. While God is depicted throughout the Bible as the proper object of human devotion, and human devotion is held as the proper response to God's entering into a covenantal relationship with human beings, human history has provided ample examples in which unequal distributions of power in governance led to systematic injustice and stymied human flourishing. For God's word to take hold in a life-affirming way among people on the losing end of this dynamic—like Japanese Americans whose current identity has been influenced by the internment policies of the 1940s—the interpreter must be proactive in deconstructing oppressive readings of the biblical text and in analyzing the text/reader relationship with a focus on how the text's worldview bears on real readers.

From this process of engaging and evaluating the text from the point of view of real readers standing within particular social locations, dehumanizing readings (or readings that are dehumanizing for certain groups) may be

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exposed, and liberating readings may be proposed. Given their training and experience, professional biblical interpreters are well positioned to analyze the text and the interplay between the text and its readers. By the logic of the PBC's document, interpreters conducting their work in their capacity as "Catholic" biblical interpreters must enter this realm of the discipline, even if it means unanticipated training in interdisciplinary scholarly frameworks.

Moreover, as the complexity of world crises increases and presses scholars to engage the world at large, Catholic biblical scholars seeking to make the text a living reality in today's world must not only engage the work of scholars foregrounding their social location and racial-ethnic and gender identities but also attempt to theorize criticism from their own standpoints.[79] How does Irish American identity affect interpretation? What do racial constructions of "whiteness" mean for interpretation? What are the implications of "Catholic identity" for interpreting the Bible? Addressing questions like these requires interacting with scholarly disciplines outside the guild of critical biblical scholarship, such as Irish American studies, race theory, or Catholic theological studies in the case of these examples. This is hardly a simple matter or an easy task. But if Catholic biblical scholars intend to play a role in manifesting God's word in the world (as the PBC exhorts Catholic scholars to do), they must take up the task of engaging the work of scholars (from both the Global North and the Global South) who analyze and theorize the world, and bring those analyses to bear on their own work.[80]

What can be said about the relationship between historical-critical methodology, which the PBC affirms as an essential component of Catholic biblical interpretation (Conclusion), and interpretation that foregrounds real readers and their contexts?[81] Does highlighting the world in front of the text as a critical component of Catholic biblical interpretation mean that historical-critical exegesis and its results should be disregarded? Does historical-critical exegesis at least set limits on the parameters of acceptable contextual interpretation, or does "anything go"? Should we accept any reading by any person? What about arbitrary or even oppressive readings?

The first point to be made with respect to these questions is that Catholic biblical interpreters who wish to comply with the PBC document must continue to account for historical-critical exegesis in their readings. From the point of view of the PBC, historical-critical exegesis is foundational and indispensable to Catholic biblical interpretation. While the PBC document states

[79] Fernando F. Segovia, "Criticism in Critical Times: Reflections on Vision and Task," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 1 (2015): 6–29.

[80] Ibid., 16–25.

[81] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 313.

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that the goal of Catholic exegesis is to explain the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today by taking into consideration the various hermeneutical perspectives that help achieve this aim, it nonetheless maintains that "Catholic exegetes have to pay due account to the *historical character* of biblical revelation" and therefore "have to make use of the historical-critical method" (§III.C.1).[82] The doctrine of the Incarnation provides the theological rationale for the PBC's insistence on the importance of historical-critical analysis, as seen in its comments against fundamentalist approaches.[83]

In seeking to incorporate hermeneutical approaches that foreground real readers in front of the text, Catholic biblical interpreters can certainly incorporate traditional historical-critical scholarship and its results into their work. Indeed, to cite two examples, the hermeneutical frameworks articulated by Blount and Segovia, who both insist on the necessity of taking real readers and their contexts into account in the interpretative task, do not eschew historical criticism.

For Blount, historical-critical approaches remain a crucial part of the interpretative task, but they can only partially grasp the text's meaning(s). Blount contends that since sociolinguistic theory has shown that social context determines meaning in language as much as does a language's internal structure, a text cannot have a single meaning.[84] Rather, a text has "meaning potential," an open-ended range of possible meanings that can vary and even expand according to the social context that each interpreter

[82] Ibid., 295–96 (emphasis in the original).

[83] "The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation . . . is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the Incarnation itself" (§I.F; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 274).

[84] Blount, *Cultural Interpretation*, 7–16, esp. 11–12, 15–16. Blount draws on sociolinguistics, especially the work of M. A. K. Halliday, to identify the three "macro-functions" that form the basis of the adult grammatical system: textual, ideational, and interpersonal. The textual macro-function "comprises the grammatical component that enables the speaker to organize his or her material effectively so that it can perform its function as a message" (11). The textual macro-function, then, refers to the actual words and sentence structure produced by a speaker or writer. The ideational macro-function refers to the ideas, concepts, and experiences ("ideational content") that are encoded and signified by the words and grammar in a communicative act (11). The interpersonal macro-function refers to the role language plays in conditioning our self-perception and our relationship with others within our social context or environment (11). For Blount, sociolinguistic theory as developed by Halliday has significant implications for biblical interpretation. It means that attention to the interpersonal element of communication—both of the ancient biblical authors and their communities and of modern interpreters—is as important for unlocking their meanings as is analysis of the biblical writings in their historical, cultural, and social contexts.

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or set of interpreters brings to the text.[85] Despite the extensive "meaning potential" of a text, Blount holds that this does not mean a text can mean anything we say it means, since the words and grammatical structure of the text and the ideas, concepts, and experiences encoded and signified by this text set limits on what it can mean:

> We are suggesting, then, that the text language has a potential of meaning whose boundaries are limited by textual and ideational data. A text cannot be made to mean anything a community desires. Meaningful conclusions must respect established textual and ideational parameters. This still allows for a vast potentiality of meaning, but it is a limited potentiality. Within that range of potentiality the interpersonal dynamics have free play. Thus, when conclusions are reached that fit within this textual-ideational boundary and simultaneously interact beyond this boundary with the interpersonal context of the reader, the result is a conclusion that is both linguistically accurate and contextually appropriate. This process allows for distinct and yet accurate conclusions regarding the meaning of a particular text or set of texts.[86]

In other words, textual and ideational analyses, which are the sort of analyses that are traditionally employed in biblical scholarship, establish limits on the meanings of texts and thus "guide the interpreter by unequivocally stating what the material cannot mean."[87] Within these limits, however, "a full range of possible meanings remains," meanings that can just as likely be accessed interpersonally as they can through traditional textual and ideational analysis.[88]

In Segovia's hermeneutics, which he calls a "hermeneutics of otherness and engagement," the text is viewed as an "other," that is, as an artifact or entity conditioned by its own historical and cultural context far removed from our own.[89] Because these methods aid in constructing the text as a

[85] Blount, *Cultural Interpretation*, 15–16. Blount likens this reality to how the same idyllic lake in the mountains has a different meaning for a man seeking respite from city life than it does for an eagle seeking fish. For one, the lake represents beauty and serenity; for the other, it is a source of food. It's the same lake, but it means something different depending on the perspective from which one approaches the lake. "The change is one of perspective. This change allows, perhaps even demands, a change in what is seen. The eagle does not place fish in the pond, neither is the man's visit here problematic because he has missed the fish. Each of them has seen something unique in the vast array of possibilities because each has come to this place with different questions. It is for this reason that while they see clearly, they also see differently" (175–76).

[86] Blount, *Cultural Interpretation*, 28.

[87] Ibid., 89.

[88] Ibid.

[89] Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 68. Segovia argues that biblical criticism should be "a genuine exchange with otherness—the otherness both of the text and

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socially and culturally conditioned other, Segovia still accepts historical criticism and other traditional modes of analysis as critical in the interpretive process. What Segovia does not accept is that historical criticism be positioned as a reading strategy that stands apart and unaffected by social and cultural conditioning; it must be liable to theoretical criticism and not presumed to be objective.[90] Because the interpreter's own context and interests indelibly affect their historical-critical analysis, the method itself and its results are not neutral but rather are socially and culturally conditioned and therefore subject to analytical engagement by other (socially and culturally conditioned) readers using other (socially and culturally conditioned) reading strategies.[91] This need not lead to unrestrained relativism in the production of meaning, since interpretative claims can still be made by any reading strategy,

of other readers of the text," which is impossible without renouncing the presumption of universality and objectivity and accepting the indispensability of contextuality of both text and reader (67).

[90] "The question is not, therefore, whether there should be historical criticism; it is a point I readily grant. The question rather is what kind of historical criticism should there be. What is rejected is historical criticism as traditionally practiced" (Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 67n).

[91] Since "no reader—not even an ideal or highly informed one—is atemporal, asocial, or ahistorical, speaking uniformly for all times and cultures" (Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 70), the reader too is to be "regarded as socially and culturally conditioned, as an other to both text and other readers" (69). Just as historical criticism and other traditional forms of analysis seek to contextualize biblical texts within their social and cultural contexts, so too should readers and their reading strategies be subject to contextualization (69–70): "Rather than seeking after impartiality or objectivity, presuming to universality, and claiming to read like anyone or everyone, the hermeneutics of otherness and engagement argues for a self-conscious exposition and analysis of the reader's strategy for reading, the theoretical foundations behind this strategy, and the social location underlying such a strategy" (69). Additionally, the reading or interpretative process is not to be considered "a neutral encounter between two independent, socially and culturally conditioned entities or worlds, but rather as an unavoidable filtering of the one world or entity by and through the other, of the text by and through the reader" (70). As a result, any historical or cultural reconstruction or contextualization of the text is actually "not a reconstruction but a construction of the past on the part of the reader" (71). World "behind the text" analyses themselves are thus "readings" and not impartial assessments of the evidence. Ultimately, Segovia sees historical criticism as itself a contextual approach because (1) it constitutes an industrious effort to recover the context of the original author (or redactor) implied by the text in order to reconstruct the otherness of the text, and (2) the interpreter who deploys historical criticism brings his or her own context and interests to the task of interpretation. Therefore, historical criticism constitutes a reading strategy that must be engaged critically, as must any other reading strategy that is employed in interpretation.

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and such claims and the reading strategies that produce them remain subject to critical evaluation and engagement.[92]

Segovia's hermeneutical framework stands more in tension with the PBC's understanding of historical criticism than does Blount's. Whereas the PBC positions historical criticism as essential for undergirding other methods of interpretation, Segovia holds that all methods be assessed equally without any one approach serving as a neutral arbiter of a text's meaning.[93] Nevertheless, for different reasons both Blount and Segovia accept historical criticism and other traditional modes of analysis as critical in the interpretive process, because these methods either set the outermost limits of the text's meaning potential (Blount) or aid in constructing the text as a socially and culturally conditioned other (Segovia).

By returning to Yamada's article from the perspective of both Blount's and Segovia's hermeneutical frameworks, we can see that the approaches of both Blount and Segovia guard against unrestrained relativism and allow for the use of historical criticism and other traditional methods of analysis. Using Blount's hermeneutics, we can say that Yamada draws a meaning of the story that may be contained in its textual and ideational components by approaching it from a different interpersonal entry point. To the degree that Yamada successfully situates his reading within the text's textual-ideational boundary and simultaneously interacts beyond this boundary with his own interpersonal context, "the result is a conclusion that is both linguistically accurate and contextually appropriate."[94] Thus Yamada may have brought to light a dimension of the text's "meaning potential."[95] Still, one remains free to contest the degree to which Yamada successfully situates his reading within the text's textual-ideational boundary. Similarly, from the perspective of Segovia's hermeneutics, just as Yamada offers a critique of the traditional reading of Genesis 2–3 on the basis of his contextualization of Japanese American identity, so can others critique Yamada's reading on any number of grounds, including whether or not his reading successfully

[92] Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 72.

[93] For Segovia, that historical criticism can be practiced without presuppositions and that the method is itself value-neutral and can thus serve as the foundational method for determining a text's meaning is not theoretically sustainable. See Segovia, *Decolonizing Biblical Studies*, 55–86, esp. 59–63, 73–86.

[94] Blount, *Cultural Interpretation*, 28.

[95] In fact, Yamada's reading is not entirely new, since gnostic readings of the first chapters in Genesis from the early Christian period (e.g., the gnostic text *Hypostasis of the Archons*) also accessed this "meaning potential" (though on different grounds), viewing God as the antagonist of the story. See note 97 below.

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constructs the "otherness" of the text within its own historical and literary contexts.

A different question than whether an interpretation has successfully accessed a passage's "meaning potential" is the question of evaluation. Even if a reading accesses some facet of a passage's meaning potential, is the reading a "good" one, or is it problematic or even oppressive?

Segovia's hermeneutics help address this issue with respect to Yamada's article. For Segovia, analyzing how texts have been interpreted by others "demands critical engagement with these others—a thorough evaluation of reading strategies, theoretical orientations, social locations, as well as interpretative results, reception, and aftereffects."[96] Arriving at his reading by foregrounding certain aspects of Japanese American identity, Yamada sees in his reading of Genesis 2–3 pastoral relevance and social justice implications. The first humans validate the act of challenging authority when such authority uses its power to stymie human flourishing. Some may evaluate his reading strategy and its results positively, agreeing that this reading of the text is a viable one that can help the text speak to contexts that call for the questioning of authority figures. Others may evaluate his reading strategy and its results negatively on the grounds that this produces a reading that is in considerable tension, if not outright dissonance, with the original intent of the passage's redactors. Still others may evaluate Yamada's reading critically on the grounds that, as is the case with gnostic appropriations of the same text, it contains problematic anti-Jewish implications and thus potentially negative "aftereffects," viewing as it does the God of Israel as an arbitrary ruler who seeks to repress human flourishing.[97]

[96] Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora," 72. "Readings" of texts can be critically engaged from any number of standpoints, so long as one remains critically honest and does not presume that his or her standpoint is objective and neutral, and therefore superior (69–72).

[97] Whether Yamada is aware of such anti-Jewish implications is not clear (he makes no mention of such in his article). But by following recent Pentateuch scholarship in situating the passage's origins within the context of Israel's own historical exile and displacement, Yamada grounds his alternate reading of Genesis 2–3 in a manner that builds upon the results of historical-critical scholarship ("Manzanar," 97). It is this context of exile that leads him to propose the experience of another displaced people (Japanese Americans during World War II) as an appropriate "intertext" with the biblical narrative (98–99). Moreover, he justifies his reading on exegetical grounds, especially the fact that it addresses the exegetical puzzle of why the first humans do not suffer the stated punishment of death for their disobedience (101, 110–13). Instead of death, God in the story "creates exile, a reality that Israel knew all too well" (112), and the survival of the humans outside the garden resonates with Israel's own persistence and survival "even when death was proclaimed for them in a land that was not their home" (113). Yamada's

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However one goes about critically assessing Yamada's reading, we see that foregrounding the social locations and racial-ethnic identities of modern readers need not devolve into a state wherein all readings are uncritically accepted as equally valuable. Rather, it should lead to robust critical discussion of readings that are produced and the reading strategies used to produce them. And even as it integrates other reading strategies that foreground the world in front of the text, Catholic biblical scholarship may still use historical criticism as a reading strategy in this process of evaluating readings and reading strategies.[98] Yamada's reading could be subject to criticisms similar to those made by the PBC toward the contextual methods discussed in its document, namely, that not enough attention has been paid to the text itself and its worldview, or that the text's worldview has not been given enough priority as a source of God's revelation. But from the point of view of interpreters like Blount and Segovia, Catholic biblical interpretation, still using historical criticism and even positioning it as essential, must also recognize that it too is a contextual approach whose development and practice have been and remain influenced by the cultural contexts under which it developed and is practiced.

Reader-Centered Approaches as Fulfilling the Aims of Catholic Biblical Interpretation

The push in biblical criticism to foreground the real reader's impact on interpretation also poses a challenge to the PBC's view that there is a stable "message" that can be "actualized" in different contexts without itself being changed (§IV.A).[99] But should Catholic biblical interpretation resist this

reading, then, functions to explain why the final redactors of Genesis 2–3 shaped this story as they did. This differs from classic gnostic readings of this same passage, which approached the text not with the aim of the texts' redactors in mind but with the theological supposition that the Jewish God is an oppressive force, reading the text as an indictment of what the Jewish God is actually like from their point of view. Yet despite being grounded in historical-critical scholarship on the Pentateuch and supported exegetically with reference to the narrative dynamics of Genesis 2–3, Yamada's reading may still raise concerns over its potential anti-Jewish ramifications, since the passage is now so far removed from its original context of exile and displacement.

[98] Its position on the historical-critical method leads the PBC to be very critical of fundamentalist approaches to Scripture. Within the paradigms of Blount and Segovia, the PBC can still be critical by articulating clearly (as it does in the document) its position against fundamentalist hermeneutics.

[99] On this point, see the work of Catholic systematic theologian Orlando O. Espín. Espín accords to popular religion a revelatory status, so that what people do to express their religious faith is itself a source of revelation, a *locus theologicus*. For Espín, there is not

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movement that has emerged in the guild of biblical studies? One of the hallmarks of the Catholic intellectual tradition is its understanding of the dynamic nature of revelation. For Catholics, revelation is multifaceted, with God's word hardly being contained in Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*). Catholic biblical interpreters thus have a theological motivation for incorporating hermeneutical approaches that foreground the sociocultural, racial-ethnic, and gender identities of real readers, since from the Catholic point of view God's word can be manifest just as much in the act of reading the biblical text as in the text itself.

The authors and editors of Genesis 2–3 likely did not intend for this story to be read in a fashion that treats the deity as the villain. One may assess Yamada's reading strategy negatively then, if the criterion by which one evaluates methodological approaches is whether or not they help us understand the text in context. But what Yamada's reading represents is the reality that messages always have the capacity to change once they become grounded in the experiences of real flesh-and-blood readers.

This is an insight that scholars working within the Catholic intellectual tradition should know very well. The Church Fathers, living in temporal and cultural contexts much closer to that of the biblical tradition than we do today, read Scripture in all sorts of dynamic ways that produced readings that may or may not cohere with the text's original meaning(s) in its original context (s). Moreover, liturgical practices of the church both past and present constitute an act of biblical interpretation as well.[100] It is this tradition of real readers and of praxis in the real world that, together with the biblical witness itself, forms Catholicism.

To put it in Johnson's terms, Catholic biblical scholars are in a unique position to cultivate biblical scholarship in terms of "both/and."[101] For Catholics, interpreting the Bible is *both* a matter of understanding biblical texts in their original contexts *and* engaging the multiplicity of meanings that the texts take on as they take root in other contexts where other epistemologies of reading are thrust upon them. In order for Catholic biblical interpretation to be distinctly "Catholic," it cannot settle on the successful implementation of historical-critical exegesis as the goal of interpretation, as the PBC rightly states (§III.C.1). It must also engage the readings of real

an abstract "message" that becomes "actualized" in the faith of the people. Rather, the faith of the people plays an indelible role in constructing the message. See his *The Faith of the People: Theological Reflections on Popular Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

[100] Johnson and Kurz, *Future*, 6, 43–45.

[101] Johnson and Kurz, *Future*, 5. See also Harrington, *How Do Catholics Read the Bible?* 38–41, esp. 40.

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readers, both ancient and modern, analyzing how the interaction between text and reader affects the revelation of God's word. To avoid foregrounding the sociocultural locations and racial-ethnic and gender identities of real readers in the interpretive task is to jeopardize the possibility that Catholic biblical scholarship can make God's word alive today (§III.C.1) in a world that is increasingly diverse, complex, multiethnic, and racialized.

Even since the publication of *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* in 1993, a veritable explosion of methods and approaches has occurred that employ analytical frameworks that foreground real readers for biblical interpretation. Engaging them can be daunting for biblical scholars trained in more traditional historical-critical and literary-critical methods, myself included. But the time is past for viewing these developments with suspicion on the grounds that they may not tell us the "plain sense" of biblical texts. Biblical scholars who seek to interpret the Bible within the context of their identity as Catholic biblical scholars should particularly welcome such developments. To be sure, reconstructing the Bible's meanings within its ancient contexts remains a vital component of the critical task, since doing so allows biblical texts to speak in their own voices to us.[102] But the voices of real flesh-and-blood readers standing within particular social locations and representing the world's racial-ethnic and gender identities must also be part of the interpretative process. As the PBC states, Catholic exegetes must "take into consideration the various hermeneutical perspectives that help toward grasping the contemporary meaning of the biblical message and that make it responsive to the needs of those who read Scripture today" (§III.C.1).[103] Otherwise we risk relegating the Bible's meaning to the past and fail to address how the biblical text takes on new and different meanings in the present.[104]

[102] "Historical criticism may not of itself capture precise nuances, but it can approximate the historical meaning at some level, and this cannot be considered as theologically without value" (Murphy, "What Is Catholic?," 112–13).

[103] Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 296.

[104] Osiek also cites *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* to make a different argument for viewing the newer methods of interpretation as an integral part of Catholic biblical interpretation. Her comments are worth reproducing at length. Discussing the PBC's distinction between the literal, spiritual, and fuller senses of Scripture (§II.B.1–3), she states:

> For Christians, the "spiritual sense" . . . is "the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ, and of new life that flows from it" [*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, §II.B.2; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 281–82]. "And of the new life that flows from it"; this new life did not cease at the end of the biblical

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period, but continues to flow through the patristic, medieval, and modern eras, into our own age. . . .

In light of this, I would expand on the understanding of the "spiritual sense" to include many newer methods and perspectives that are informed by the desire to have us live more authentically the new life that flows from the paschal mystery. I am speaking of those methods born out of the hermeneutic of suspicion, for example, liberation, feminist/womanist/*mujerista*, and postcolonial interpretation, which probe the implications of the paschal mystery in ways not envisioned in previous centuries. Even if they challenge established power bases—or precisely because they do—they are new manifestations of the same inspiration that led earlier interpreters to ask of the biblical text the question: But what does this have to do with life today? Earlier answers included various forms of metaphor and allegory arising from contemporary preunderstanding. Today's preunderstanding requires analysis of how power is used. If the paschal mystery is about deliverance from death to life, then without the hermeneutic of suspicion, we risk being diminished, not by the text but by earlier preunderstandings that are not yet open to a wider and more inclusive way of living and loving. Just as historical criticism asked the hard analytical questions a century ago and was suspect by many for that reason, so too does the hermeneutic of suspicion today ask the critical questions of our time, and is suspect on the part of many for the same reasons.

The 1993 *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* stresses that spiritual interpretation is not to be confused with subjective imagination. "Spiritual interpretation, whether in community or in private, will discover the authentic spiritual sense only to the extent that it is kept within these perspectives. One then holds together three levels of reality: the biblical text, the paschal mystery, and the present circumstances of life in the Spirit" [§II.B.2; Béchard, *Scripture Documents*, 282]. I believe that this is where these newer methods fit into the common endeavor, as part of the expanded spiritual sense in which we bring our own new understandings to the task, out of our own new questions, and discover new levels of meaning as participants in the ongoing flow of interpretative tradition ("Catholic or catholic?," 20).

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