

Sandra Schneiders, Critical Exegesis, and the Theological Interpretation of Scripture

CHRISTOPHER McMAHON
Saint Vincent College

Current trajectories in biblical interpretation have increasingly shelved or even attacked historical-critical methodologies, replacing these methodologies with doctrinally grounded (meta)narratives as the primary framework for the interpretation of Scripture. This trajectory is particularly apparent among proponents of the “theological interpretation of scripture” (TIS). These interpretive trajectories tend to be self-referential inasmuch as their primary aim is to buttress the doctrinally grounded narrative framework itself rather than providing any critical function that could move readers beyond ecclesially established horizons. Sandra Schneiders, however, stands out in the field of theology as a potent exemplar of nonreductive critical biblical exegesis, and her performance as an exegete has long anticipated the concerns of TIS. Schneiders’ approach marks an important path forward for interpreters of Scripture, one that is critically informed, hermeneutically sound, and both theologically and spiritually fruitful. Schneiders’ own account of the Johannine resurrection narrative may prove helpful and even exemplary for contemporary exegetes and systematic theologians alike.

Keywords: Sandra Schneiders, theological interpretation of Scripture, historical critical method, spirituality

CURRENT trajectories in biblical interpretation, especially evident among many proponents of the so-called “theological interpretation of Scripture” (TIS), have increasingly shelved or even attacked historical-critical methodologies.¹ While the exegetical community has long recognized

¹ For an overview of TIS see, for example, Daniel Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009); and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002). Of course, there is an equally

Christopher McMahon teaches in the Theology Department at Saint Vincent College, Latrobe, Pennsylvania. His essays have appeared in Revue Biblique, Australian Biblical Review, The Heythrop Journal, and Journal of Moral Theology, among others. He is the author of several textbooks: Understanding Jesus: Christology from Emmaus to Today (Anselm Academic, 2013), Reading the Gospels (Anselm Academic, 2012), and Called Together: An Introduction to Ecclesiology (Anselm Academic, 2011).

the limitations of these methodologies, the present moment has witnessed the construction of hypothetical (meta)narratives as the primary framework for the interpretation of Scripture—narratives that provide clear doctrinal or ecclesial guardrails for interpretation—especially evident among those associated with TIS. Unfortunately, these narratives are often self-referential inasmuch as they serve primarily to buttress the narrative framework itself rather than actually move readers beyond ecclesially established horizons. In contrast, for several decades now, Sandra Schneiders has stood out in the field of theology as a potent exemplar of nonreductive critical biblical exegesis, and her performance as an exegete marks an important path forward, one that is hermeneutically sound and spiritually fruitful precisely by being critically informed. Her work, bypassed by far too many proponents of TIS due to her commitment to critical exegesis or perhaps because of her identity as a feminist theologian, speaks to both the promise and the limitations of the tools employed by twentieth-century exegetes for gaining access to the intended subject of the writings of the New Testament (NT), namely, a radically transformative encounter with the living God in the proclamation of Jesus' resurrection.²

Schneiders' account of the Johannine resurrection narrative, in particular, may prove helpful and even exemplary as a profoundly theological interpretation of Scripture, and contemporary New Testament exegetes would do well to emulate her. This article will serve as an invitation to reengage her work by first setting out some of the claims made by proponents of TIS. Next, the article will contextualize and recommend Schneiders' perspective on the critical dimensions of biblical interpretation, which bridges a positive account of historical-critical methodologies with deep theological vision, thus affirming many of the most substantive and well-warranted concerns of those

robust critique of historical-critical methodologies from more progressive voices in theology and exegesis (see, e.g., Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1984], esp. chap. 5), but these voices are not the focus of this article. For a brief and serviceable description of historical-critical methodologies, see, for example, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Historical Criticism: Its Role in Biblical Interpretation and Church Life," *Theological Studies* 50 (1989): 244–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398905000202>. I often use the plural (methodologies) and alternative constructions (e.g., "historical criticism," "historical methods," "critical methodologies") simply to acknowledge and to highlight the fact that what is often abbreviated "HCM" is really a complex cluster of interrelated questions and methodologies designed to uncover the origins of a text, its composition, and its meanings in that context.

² Robert Moberly, "The Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3 (2009): 161–78, at 165, notes the potential of Schneiders' hermeneutical theory for TIS, but he does so almost in passing.

associated with TIS while simultaneously employing the valuable tools of critical exegesis. The final section of the article will offer a brief and selective overview of Schneiders' exegesis of the resurrection of Jesus in John 20 in an effort to demonstrate the fruitfulness of her practice of biblical interpretation, a practice that utilizes historical-critical methodologies to open the text to the reader and to provide for a transformative encounter with the living God.

I. Current Trajectories in the Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS)

In the sixty years since C. S. Lewis' popular essay, "Fern-Seed and Elephants," many theologians (and not a few exegetes) have decried the state of biblical exegesis, particularly what has been pejoratively described as the professionalization of the discipline.³ It is rightly asserted that this professionalized critical exegesis has introduced a gap between the reading of the biblical material and its use as a primary source for theology. Pope Benedict XVI, including in his earlier role as the Vatican's chief moderator of doctrinal matters, has frequently joined Lewis in identifying Rudolf Bultmann and other pioneers of modern biblical exegesis as enemies of authentic and fruitful biblical interpretation in the church. While not fully repudiating historical-critical exegesis, Benedict has joined the chorus pleading for a "criticism of [historical] criticism" for several decades.⁴ In part, his argument against Bultmann and modern critical methodologies remains focused mainly on their presuppositions (both philosophical and theological). Perhaps the real issue for Benedict and his allies, however, is the manner in which critical exegetical

³ C. S. Lewis' remarks were originally delivered at Cambridge (May 11, 1959) under the title "Modern Theology and Biblical Criticism," and later included in various collections of Lewis' writings, including *Fern-Seed and Elephants and Other Essays on Christianity* (London: Fontana Press, 1975), 104-25.

⁴ This phrase likely comes from Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 107. It also figures prominently in the speech Cardinal Ratzinger gave at the Erasmus Institute in 1988 and has been repeated elsewhere (see R. J. Neuhaus, ed., *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, Encounter Series, vol. 9 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989]). Within Roman Catholic circles, the phrase is remarkably akin to the liturgical imperative to undertake a "reform of the [liturgical] reform" inaugurated at the Second Vatican Council and tends to predominate among segments of the Catholic population dissatisfied with the trajectory of Catholic life and thought and seeking to recover what was lost at the council. The "reform of the reform" is another movement vocally endorsed by Benedict XVI.

methods cast doubt on the historical reliability of the gospels by atomizing the text, dividing it into smaller and smaller units (apothegms or chreia), and thereby breaking down the narrative framework supplied by the biblical authors. The historical or temporal gap uncovered by these methodologies—a gap that seemingly separates the gospels from the events they purport to narrate—remains a fundamental sticking point among exegetes and theologians even today.⁵

A. *The Rise of Narrative*

The works of Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Brevard Childs, along with the proliferation of their ideas through what some have identified as a “Yale School” of thought concerning the value of narrative in theology, have had an undeniable impact on the shape of theology in North America and the United Kingdom over the last several decades.⁶ Moreover, the emergence of Radical Orthodoxy (RO) in the 1990s has aggressively amplified some important and helpful developments initiated by the Yale School, developments that have invited the reconsideration of various assumptions that have guided scholarship in the twentieth century.⁷ Although the work of RO itself has generally centered on historical theology, systematics, and political theology, its influence, even though it might be somewhat oblique, has become more noticeable within biblical circles in recent years. In the mid-1990s, for example, one could easily discern the influence of Radical Orthodoxy in the work of exegetes such as N. T. Wright, Stephen Fowl, and Kevin Vanhoozer, and the last decade has seen a more widespread growth in efforts to recover a larger theological narrative in Scripture that has

⁵ There is notable scholarship that seeks to close this “gap.” Of special interest has been the work of Rainer Riesner, *Jesus als Lehrer. Eine Untersuchung zum Ursprung der Evangelien-Überlieferung*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, Band 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981). Riesner contends that Jesus taught his followers as a rabbi, and in the rabbinic tradition, they were equipped to memorize much of Jesus’ teaching, and this memorization is reflected to the consistency of the gospel accounts of Jesus’ life and teaching.

⁶ For a brief and helpful overview of this movement, see, for example, the introduction in C. C. Pecknold, *Transforming Postliberal Theology: George Lindbeck, Pragmatism and Scripture* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 1–12.

⁷ The two works that perhaps best exemplify the movement are John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1990) and the volume edited by J. Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 1999). For insightful critiques of the movement, see, for example, Daniel Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

supposedly been lost or suppressed due to the hegemony of modern critical biblical interpretation.⁸

For his part, N. T. Wright has attacked modern biblical criticism for its faulty, positivistic, naturalist, and unimaginative approach to human understanding and knowledge.⁹ For Wright, the perception of reality occurs within a prior framework that is best described as a narrative, and it is within narrative that he situates his own approach to human understanding and a “critical realist account of reading in all its parts.”¹⁰ Instead of working upward from specific observation of data to intelligent interpretations of the meaning of that data and finally to a judgment about the truthfulness of those interpretations, Wright suggests that such “positivism” ought to be replaced by an account of knowledge as occurring “within the larger framework of the story or worldview which forms the basis of the observer’s way of being in relation to the world.”¹¹ In such a case, people gain knowledge

⁸ See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 38n18 (hereafter *NTPG*) where Wright admits to reading Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* and stating: “I read Milbank’s account of what he calls ‘a true Christian metanarrative realism’ (389), which, if I understand it correctly, seems to me quite close to what I am arguing, though of course much more finely tuned.” See also the many works by Stephen Fowl, especially *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998) and his essay, “Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Its Future,” *Anglican Theological Review* 99 (2017): 671–90. The most prolific among these three when it comes to reflection on Christian doctrine and Scripture is Kevin J. Vanhoozer; see, for example, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), 200, where he also admits to an indebtedness to Milbank. Regarding the hegemony of modern critical biblical interpretation, see, for example, Craig Bartholomew and Heath Thomas, eds., *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016). The movement has even spawned its own journal, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* (Eisenbrauns, 2007–present), which was founded by the well-respected exegete, Joel B. Green.

⁹ In addition to *NTPG*, see N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 3–27.

¹⁰ *NTPG*, 61.

¹¹ *NTPG*, 37. Of course, Wright here laudably addresses what Bernard Lonergan identified as “the principle of the empty head” (i.e., one is in a better position to gain objective understanding and knowledge the less prior knowledge [bias] one has; see Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan (hereafter *CWBL*), vol. 14 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 157, but the dangers of the absolute hegemony of narrative goes well beyond correcting the fallacy. For succinct and helpful appreciation of Bernard Lonergan’s account of critical realism over and against what N. T. Wright offers, see James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered: Christianity in the Making*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 110–11.

as they “*find things that fit* with the particular story or (more likely) stories to which they are accustomed to give allegiance.”¹² The truth of a narrative or counter-narrative is to be found in its ability to make better sense than competing stories. Wright’s criteria for adjudicating competing stories are as follows: simplicity of outline, elegance in handling details, the inclusion of all parts of the story, and the ability of the story to make sense beyond its immediate subject matter and contribute to a better understanding of other stories.¹³

Wright’s appropriation of what he terms “critical realism” might be better called “narrative realism” (how “critical” his approach is merits further scrutiny). This “realism” has an echo in the exegetical world where the critique of modern biblical criticism has been accompanied by the birth of biblical projects meant to overcome and marginalize the perceived hegemony of historical criticism. Narrative, literary, and liberationist approaches to Scripture have flourished amid the critique of historical-critical methodologies, as a tour through any meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association or the Society of Biblical Literature will make abundantly clear. But there has also been a robust conservative theological response in recent years, one that seems to eschew historical-critical methodologies more pointedly. Within this context, the Brazos Theological Commentary stands out insofar as many of the volumes have been well received among a diverse group of readers, both exegetes and theologians.¹⁴ The series, and others like it, has provided interesting, often ennobling, and even powerful readings of biblical texts.¹⁵ Yet many of the prominent theologians featured in the series (both Catholic and Protestant)¹⁶ adopt what can rightly be seen as an aggressive reading of the text, that is, a reading informed by a prior commitment to a very specific narrative, one that blends both a theological worldview and cultural engagement—somewhat reminiscent of the thrust of RO itself.¹⁷ The editorial

¹² *NTPG*, 37, emphasis original.

¹³ *NTPG*, 42–43.

¹⁴ For example, both Donald Senior (“New Testament and Related Topics,” *Bible Today* 58 [2020]: 422–27, at 427) and Dianne Bergant (“The Bible in Review,” *Bible Today* 54 [2016]: 138–42, at 139) have offered words of praise for volumes in the series.

¹⁵ The *Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture* from Baker Academic has enjoyed similar praise and criticism. It should be noted that the Brazos series (an imprint of Baker Academic) includes several prominent Catholic theologians including Matthew Levering, Thomas Joseph White, Francesca Murphy, and Robert Barron.

¹⁶ Although TIS and RO have deep roots among Protestant scholars, there are numerous Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish allies; see, for example, Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1993).

¹⁷ For example, R. R. Reno, in his commentary on Genesis 1:2 (“The earth was without form and void ...”), spends more time with Augustine’s refutation of Manichee doctrines than

preface to the series outlines the qualifications for the authors invited to contribute and, in turn, helps to define its philosophical stance on the matter of exegesis.

The commentators [in this series] were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned.... We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline.¹⁸

This vision of the series signals, in part, a troublesome feature of the so-called theological interpretation of Scripture: an overriding commitment to the sufficiency of Christian doctrine specifically, and the dominance of the Christian narrative more generally. The result has been readings of Scripture that often fail to ponder or even to acknowledge the contradictions, the seams, the biases, and the incoherence of biblical texts.¹⁹ Instead, theological clarity provides the narrative thread that ties together an all-too-neat reading with

he does with the actual text of Genesis. In the end of this section, after denigrating modern biblical exegesis of the passage, he states, “But any reading that contradicts the doctrine of creation out of nothing will undermine our capacity to read the Bible as a whole in a theologically coherent fashion.” See R. R. Reno, *Genesis*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010), 46.

¹⁸ R. R. Reno, “Series Preface,” in *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009). For a critical evaluation of this series, see Luke Timothy Johnson, “Interpretive Dance: How the Brazos Biblical Commentary Falls Short,” *Commonweal* 139, no. 4 (February 14, 2012): 17–20.

¹⁹ Compare Reno’s preface to Barbara Reid’s introduction to the *Wisdom Commentary* series from Liturgical Press: “Feminist scholars who use historical-critical methods analyze the world behind the text; they seek to understand the historical context from which the text emerged and the circumstances of the communities to whom it was addressed. In bringing feminist lenses to this approach, the aim is not to impose modern expectations on ancient cultures but to unmask the ways that ideologically problematic mind-sets that produced the ancient texts are still promulgated through the text.” Barbara E. Reid, “Editor’s Introduction to *Wisdom Commentary*: ‘She Is a Breath of the Power of God’ (Wis 7:25).”

doctrinal perspectives, abandoning much of the dialectical²⁰ and critical function of biblical exegesis, and leaving the Christian tradition rhetorically emboldened but perhaps increasingly stagnant in the face of enormous contemporary challenges.²¹

B. Critical Exegesis and Theology: Triumph or Fall?

The concern to recover Christian doctrine as decisive for authentic biblical interpretation has given birth to some interesting work that contextualizes how critical exegesis and modern political theory emerged together. Jeffery Morrow and Scott Hahn, two prominent Catholic allies of TIS, have recently offered insightful and thought-provoking accounts of modern biblical criticism's genesis.²² Morrow, for his part, has made good use of the challenging work of William Cavanaugh, who has been associated with the early efforts of the RO group. Cavanaugh highlights the origins of the "secular" as a safe and supposedly neutral space for reasoned discourse and the myths upon which notions of the secular are based. Cavanaugh's work on the emergence of "secular space" in Western culture has generated well-warranted caveats about the politics involved in the recognition of this space.²³ Scientism, empiricism, and false accounts of "objectivism" continue to bedevil contemporary culture as well as the academy, and theologians would do well to pay attention to the history and some of the presuppositions that accompanied the rise of modern biblical criticism. Morrow and his allies not only reference Cavanaugh and his critique of secularism, but also document the manner in which historical criticism was cultivated as a cudgel with which to beat down the authority and standing of the church in order to bolster the power of the modern state. Few students of Western culture could safely argue against the basic contours of these arguments, yet one

²⁰ Throughout this article, the terms "dialectical" and "dialectic" should be understood in the sense outlined by Bernard Lonergan (rather than Hegel); see *Method in Theology*, chapter 10, where dialectics amounts to the functional specialty of understanding and reconciling differences and tensions on what Lonergan defines as the mediated stage of theology.

²¹ David Bosworth signals the shortcomings of this approach to Scripture in his review of R. Barron, *2 Samuel*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015) in *Horizons* 43 (2016): 177–78, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hor.2016.6>.

²² See Jeffery L. Morrow, "Secularization, Objectivity, and Enlightenment Scholarship: The Theological and Political Origins of Modern Biblical Studies," *Logos* 18 (2015): 14–32, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/log.2015.0002>, and Scott Hahn and Benjamin Winker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2013).

²³ Of particular interest are William Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T & T Clark, 2002) and *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

might rightly question whether Morrow's narrative of the competing powers does justice to the complexity of the whole story. In other words, can the narrative really be as binary as it is presented? On the one hand, the divine authority of the church is bolstered by doctrinally grounded theological exegesis, and on the other hand, the secular state is aided in its suspicion of church authority by critical exegesis divorced from all ties to ecclesial life. At its best, this narrative sheds light on the troublesome provenance of modern biblical criticism, but at its worst, it masks important contributions made by critical history to the development of the doctrine of revelation in history.²⁴

Accounts of the rise of modern critical scholarship in the United States from an older generation of Catholic biblical scholars run in a decidedly different direction. This older generation heralded critical methods as liberating Catholic exegetes from mindless dogmatism and ideologically masked history. For example, Gerald Fogarty²⁵ and Donald Senior²⁶ have offered histories of modern biblical criticism and its relevance, especially within American ecumenism, where the emergence of historical-critical method unfolded as part of a story of triumph over narrow ideology, whereas the histories offered by Morrow and Hahn interpret these developments within dramatic narratives of apostasy and the coopting of Scripture by forces hostile to the gospel. A helpful counterexample to the constructs offered by Morrow and Hahn can be found in Senior's recently published account of the late Raymond Brown's well-documented struggles with both the Catholic hierarchy and conservative activists in the decades following the Second Vatican Council. At issue for Brown was the dialectical function of modern biblical scholarship vis-à-vis church doctrine.²⁷ Brown believed that "a thoughtful and responsible dialectic between theology and exegesis, or between the Bible and church dogma, would be fruitful and not destructive."²⁸ Yet, for

²⁴ See *Dei Verbum*, 12, and *Lumen Gentium*, 48–51.

²⁵ Gerald P. Fogarty, *American Catholic Biblical Scholarship: From the Early Republic to Vatican II* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

²⁶ Donald Senior, CP, *Raymond E. Brown and the Catholic Biblical Renewal* (New York: Paulist, 2018).

²⁷ Two of Brown's most "controversial" books were *The Virginal Conception and the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972) and *Priest and Bishop* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970). When read in light of the ensuing decades of NT scholarship, the claims made in these works seem rather straightforward. The attention of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the criticisms of Baltimore's Lawrence Cardinal Sheehan, however, were not to be taken lightly by a vowed member of a Roman Catholic religious community in the 1970s (Brown was a member of the Sulpicians).

²⁸ Senior, *Raymond E. Brown and the Catholic Biblical Renewal*, 107.

all of his efforts to situate the interpretation of Scripture and the insights of historical-critical methodologies, efforts that were always deeply theological while at the same time critical, Brown continued to suffer at the hands of both ecclesiastical and lay critics even to his last days.

The story of Raymond Brown's harassment by conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy and their allies in the decades after the council, even as he sought to make the teaching of the council more widely known and appreciated, is indicative of the widespread fear of (1) the dynamics of historical progress and (2) theological ambiguity, both of which are still deeply embedded in some powerful corners of the contemporary church.²⁹ Even in the present cultural moment, a fundamental dynamic abides within the Catholic Church (and is evident to varying degrees in other Christian churches) such that Christian doctrine is often construed so as to preclude a dialectical engagement with the tradition through a critically informed reading of Scripture.³⁰ In other words, a reading of Scripture that challenges claims made by the Christian tradition, or at least the manner in which those claims have been articulated or understood, often continues to be seen as an attack on the tradition itself rather than a contribution to its ongoing progress and clarification.³¹ Some advocates of TIS (the movement is certainly richly diverse in both its aims and ecclesial positioning) seem to share these fears and have made TIS a tool for limiting the impact of critical dimensions of biblical interpretation. Perhaps some of this dynamic is generational, a swing of the proverbial pendulum meant to correct the extremes of hypercriticism and a perceived marginalization of theology in biblical interpretation. But if the pendulum swings, it should not then become a wrecking ball that obliterates the gains of critical scholarship, gains that have come at a cost but have contributed mightily to the ongoing enrichment of the church and its mission in and to a critically conscious world.

²⁹ For a detailed account of the opposition Brown endured, see Senior, *Raymond E. Brown and the Catholic Biblical Renewal*, 199–230.

³⁰ The diminishment of historical-critical approaches to the interpretation of Scripture, approaches that had been vindicated in *Dei Verbum*, has been evident in the work of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and in the drafting of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. See Brendan Byrne, "Scripture and Vatican II: A Very Incomplete Journey," *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology*, 37 (2003), <http://compassreview.org/winter03/2.html>.

³¹ See, for example, Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 3–5. The entire work is, of course, an exploration of theology and its development in history.

C. *Critical Exegesis and Theology: An Integration*

Joseph Gordon has recently reined in some of the extreme claims made by TIS against critical methodologies even as he affirms TIS's basic concerns and trajectory.³² Gordon, one of many thoughtful and subtle proponents of TIS, makes use of Bernard Lonergan's twofold approach to theological method and signals the intimate connection between the initial mediated phase of theology (i.e., in Lonergan's functional specialties of research, interpretation, and history) and the necessary role historical-critical exegesis plays as the precondition for an appropriate exercise of the theological interpretation of Scripture on the mediating side of Lonergan's schema. For Gordon, as for Lonergan, authorial intention, context, and original audience need to be addressed in any adequate interpretation of a text, especially a biblical text, and it is here that the critical methodologies under assault find their proper place as a base and precondition for TIS.

Evident within Gordon's presentation is the recognition that with the shift to historical-critical methods, biblical exegesis moved from an approach to Scripture that was primarily ahistorical, typological, and allegorical to an approach that was historical, genetic, and dialectical. In other words, the shift tried to account for the origins of the Christian community through attentiveness to the dynamics of the emerging Christian tradition centered in the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, with a view to rendering the biblical texts theologically significant within the contemporary context. Such a move need not abandon wholesale the exegetical tradition of the Christian church; rather, these traditions are chastened even as they contextualize and challenge excessively flattened accounts of the biblical text. Yet, the idea that historical methodologies are, of themselves, to be sublated to "theological approaches" ignores the contention that it is precisely the historicity of the biblical text that is an essential dimension of its authentic (i.e., theological) interpretation.³³

³² Joseph K. Gordon, "On the (Relative) Authenticity of Theological Interpretation of Scripture," *The Lonergan Review* 9 (2018): 78–102. See also, Joseph K. Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding: A Systematic Theology of the Christian Bible* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

³³ For a rehearsal of the opposing argument, see, for example, Stephen E. Fowl and Lewis Ayres, "(Mis)Reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513–28, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399906000306>. Gordon, for his part, has a more robust appreciation for the mystery of the historical dimensions of the text and the role of those dimensions in the holistic theological interpretation he advocates. See, for example, Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding*, 243.

Some of the appeal of TIS seems to rest on a fear of a historical criticism that challenges or complicates accepted theological paradigms or doctrines. One might raise a justifiable concern in the face of such a disposition, namely, to what extent are some so-called theological approaches to Scripture simply masking what Bernard Lonergan, for example, termed a “classicist consciousness.”³⁴ Such a consciousness operates within the realms of common sense and theory, but it lacks the self-appropriation necessary to distinguish effectively among higher realms of meaning. Historical consciousness, in its most fully operational form, has the ability to distinguish among the kinds of meaning characteristic of common sense, theory, interiority, transcendence, scholarship, and art, and can do so dynamically.³⁵ It was precisely the emergence of historical consciousness that became crucial in the revitalization of the Christian theological tradition and its reappropriation of history in the work of so many theologians prior to the Second Vatican Council. For example, the *real* genius of Aquinas became increasingly apparent precisely as his ideas began to be viewed against the background (and limitations) of his very specific context and by distinguishing his thoughts from those of his interpreters. Chenu, Rahner, Congar, and Lonergan, each in a different way, unlocked the rich depth of Aquinas to address the challenges of modernity, but it was Henri de Lubac’s work on Aquinas’ doctrine of grace and the history of its interpretation that created the space and the resources that so many postliberal theologians enjoy today.³⁶ Moreover, liturgical studies provide some of the best examples of how historical-critical scholarship, evident in works like Jungmann’s *Mass of the Roman Rite*, paved the way for even richer accounts of the origins and development of eucharistic celebrations and proffered healthy insights into the forms the

³⁴ See Bernard Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist Worldview to Historical Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection, CWBL*, vol. 13, eds. R. Doran and J. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 3–10.

³⁵ On Lonergan’s contribution to the introduction of history into Roman Catholic theology, see Frederick Crowe, “All My Work Has Been Introducing History into Catholic Theology,” in *Developing the Lonergan Legacy: Historical, Theoretical, and Existential Themes* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 78–110. Crowe does a masterful job outlining the way Lonergan’s attentiveness to history, especially to the questions posed by the intersecting fields of *Geisteswissenschaften*, played a central role in Lonergan’s understanding of the differentiation of consciousness and the stages of meaning.

³⁶ See, for example, John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). The writings of de Lubac on biblical interpretation also find a home among proponents of TIS. See, for example, Marcellino D’Ambrosio, “Henri de Lubac and the Critique of Scientific Exegesis,” *Communio* 19 (Fall 1992): 364–87.

liturgy will take in the future.³⁷ Historical consciousness has thus been a catalyst for theological innovation and has provided for a “traditioning” of Christian faith that a classicist consciousness is quite incapable of, especially within the present cultural moment.³⁸ The interpretation of Scripture, when approached from the perspective of a historical consciousness that is attentive to methodological consistency, is able to be more sensitive to the theological richness of biblical texts and the insights they offer while confronting the limitations of exegesis.³⁹

Among many (though certainly not all) proponents of TIS there seems to have emerged an inherently “conservative” approach to exegesis and a diminishment of any attention to the dialectical aspects of interpretation, an approach that calls into question various aspects of both the Christian tradition as well as the brief “tradition” of modern biblical interpretation. The gap between the text itself, the historical character of the events it relates, and the vision of the interpreter is made evident in a variety of ways in modern critical exegesis. Attentiveness to that distance necessarily raises questions about the precise relationship of the text to larger narratives, doctrines, and practices of the Christian community and impels the interpreter (1) to engage in a dialectic account of interpretations of the text, (2) to embrace an interpretation that more accurately (or truthfully) captures the intended subject of the text, and (3) to fruitfully respond to that subject through ongoing religious, moral, and even intellectual conversion.⁴⁰ This project is, per se, a theological task, a part

³⁷ See Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development (Missarum Sollemnia)*, trans. F. A. Brunner, 2 vols. (New York: Benzinger, 1951–1955). Although one might challenge or nuance some of Jungmann’s conclusions, his approach opened up an understanding of the liturgy that led to further discussions in other realms beyond liturgics, including theology, sociology, and literature/humanities. For a critical overview of contemporary trends in liturgics, see, for example, Albert Gerhards and Benedikt Kranemann, *Introduction to the Study of Liturgy*, trans. L. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017).

³⁸ For a wonderful and succinct account of the development of a dynamic theology of tradition and revelation, see Patrick Hayes and Christopher Denny, “Introduction: A Realist Church,” in *A Realist Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph A. Komonchak*, eds. Christopher Denny, Patrick Hayes, and Nicholas Rademacher (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 1–20.

³⁹ On the importance of method over speculative reason and logic in the development of science, see Bernard Lonergan, “Aquinas Today,” in *A Third Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 34–52.

⁴⁰ Lonergan presents his account of conversion in *Method in Theology*, chapter 10.2. A thumbnail sketch of conversion from a Lonerganian point of view sees human consciousness as defined by a drive to know, value, and love, and this drive finds its limit in our ignorance, the limit or horizon of our knowing, valuing, and loving. These limits can be manifested in certain biases in these areas, biases that blind us to our

of any authentic interpretation of the biblical text. Hence, as Gordon's use of Lonergan in constructing a "systematic theology" of Scripture makes clear, historical-critical methodologies are necessary even if, on their own, they are insufficient.⁴¹

II. Grounding and Liberating: Sandra Schneiders and New Testament Hermeneutics

Sandra Schneiders stands out as an authoritative exemplar of nonreductive critical biblical exegesis, yet she is seldom engaged by the most vocal proponents of TIS even though her work anticipates many of their concerns by several decades. Her thoroughgoing self-consciousness as an exegete, evident in all of her writings on Scripture,⁴² is not born of an unease with hermeneutical theory; rather, she sees such theory as a necessary vehicle for bringing her readers along in her exegesis, as a way of preparing the reader for how she is engaging the text, why her approach is warranted, and what kinds of (legitimate) questions or issues are going to be put to the side. Schneiders' approach to biblical texts has been formed through training in critical exegesis as well as studies in spirituality. The context of her studies is important insofar as her time in both Paris and Rome (1968–1975) imbued her work with a sense of the interconnectedness of biblical exegesis, theology, and spirituality, as well as the significance of an adequate hermeneutics in

ignorance, our limits. As that boundary between what we acknowledge as unknown and what Lonergan calls the unknown is moved, that is conversion. At the level of knowing, or intellectual conversion, it means one becomes aware of the process of knowing and how knowing is not like "taking a look" at something. Moral conversion involves the apprehension of value beyond oneself or one's own community. And religious conversion is likened to "falling in love with love itself," the fulfillment of the unrestricted desire to know and to love (see Romans 5:5). It is the ongoing encounter with the living God mediated through the reading of Scripture that is at issue in this article, as well as how historical-critical approaches have a role to play in this encounter. The secondary literature on Lonergan and conversion is vast, but for a thorough account of the various dimensions of conversion from a Lonerganian perspective, see Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

⁴¹ For a good overview of the emerging necessity of historical-critical method in Roman Catholic theology, see Joseph G. Prior, *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis*, *Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia* 50 (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2001).

⁴² Schneiders remarks that Ricoeur's *Interpretation Theory* was the most important academic book of her life; see "Take and Read: Interpretation Theory," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 9, 2016) <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/take-and-read-interpretation-theory>.

linking these three.⁴³ Central to her project is the cultivation of an approach to Scripture that is rooted in the long tradition of the Christian church—one that is encouraged by both a critical eye and a robust spiritual commitment.

Modern readers need not shed their critical habits to approach the Bible with an unaffected “first naïveté.” The great biblical scholars of the patristic or medieval periods were not so naïve but used the critical reading methods available to them. Indeed, given the complexity of the biblical text, such a naïve reading tends to lead more toward scandal than toward spiritual nourishment. The challenge for the modern reader is to achieve a “second naïveté” that does not negate or suppress critical rationality but integrates it into a larger project of transformation. In other words, biblical theology and biblical spirituality are not mutually exclusive realms of discourse, much less competitors for the mind and heart of the biblical reader, any more than musicology is the enemy of symphonic performance. They are, or should be, partners in the holistic approach to the Bible that allows the inspired text to be what it is, the mediator of that encounter between God and humans called revelation.⁴⁴

A brief overview of some of the salient aspects of Schneiders’ approach to the interpretation of the gospels provides a rich foundation for her practice as an exegete who is (1) rooted in the tradition of the church, (2) formed by the critical methodologies of the guild, and (3) attentive to the living reality that makes the prayerful reading of the biblical text a transformative encounter with the living God. Although a substantial dimension of her hermeneutical theory is explicitly devoted to feminist exegesis, the focal point of this presentation is her use of historical-critical methodologies and the impact that use has on the theological claims made in her work.

A. The Value and Limits of Historical Criticism

Like many contemporary exegetes, Schneiders finds the cold calculus and persistent positivism of historical-critical approaches to biblical interpretation to be problematic, especially when the task of exegesis operates solely within the limited horizon of historical inquiry: “To state the matter somewhat dramatically, the hermeneutical presuppositions out of which much current exegesis is done are outmoded, theoretically inadequate, and disjointed.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Schneiders completed licentiate in patristics at the Institut Catholique, Paris, where she also studied ancient languages. She obtained a doctorate in biblical spirituality from the Institute of Spirituality at the Pontifical Gregorian University.

⁴⁴ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Biblical Spirituality,” *Interpretation* 70 (October 2016): 417–30, at 430, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020964316655108>.

⁴⁵ Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation,” *Theological Studies* 46 (1982): 52–68 at 52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056398204300103>.

Schneiders does not, however, find historical-critical approaches without benefit. Indeed, she emphasizes that the clear benefits of such approaches have in some ways hidden their problematic aspects: “The exegetical results of such vastly improved methodology have been sufficiently impressive over the last century to mask the disarray of its hermeneutical foundations, but this disarray is coming to the fore as the method has increasingly been unable to integrate new approaches to the biblical text.”⁴⁶ The fact that Schneiders herself joins the growing critique of the historical-critical methodologies demonstrates how frustrated scholars have become with the narrowness of the methods and sterility of their results when presented as the goal of legitimate interpretation. Yet while some aim their critique at the methodologies themselves, claiming that the problem can be adequately addressed by simply bypassing history altogether, Schneiders points to the need for a more adequate hermeneutical foundation within which to situate historical-critical methodologies.

At the methodological level, Schneiders endorses the results of historical-critical scholarship. In fact, she writes, “The result of such [historical] research should commend itself as simply correct to anyone who can follow the presentation of the data. In the enterprise of digging out historical information about the theological positions and actual practices of the early Church, historical-critical exegesis is fully vindicated as an autonomous discipline.”⁴⁷ But, for Schneiders, the clarity of the method tends to make it paradigmatic, leaving the results of biblical research not achieved by this methodology suspect. For Schneiders, that suspicion is where the real problem of the method abides.

Schneiders insists that the real task for the exegete of the gospels is to ask fundamental questions concerning the relationship between the text and its subject matter. But in order to address such questions, two facets must be acknowledged at the outset: first, the biblical authors did not intend to give an ancient literary form of a “videotape” of Jesus’ life and ministry; second, the authors did intend to speak truthfully about Jesus.⁴⁸ Therefore, the exegete must make some judgments about the historicity of the text’s subject matter and the validity of its treatment of that subject matter. Schneiders has argued that the approach to biblical interpretation that

⁴⁶ Schneiders, “The Paschal Imagination,” 51.

⁴⁷ Schneiders, “The Paschal Imagination,” 57.

⁴⁸ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013), xvi, and *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), xx.

privileges authorial intention is rooted in magisterial documents issued over the course of the last century,⁴⁹ but that the freeing dimension of this move in the history of Catholic biblical scholarship has reached its limit insofar as authorial intention has remained, at best, an asymptotic goal and one fraught with great difficulty.

Of particular concern for Schneiders is the way the goal of ascertaining authorial intention, when made the indispensable (though not the only) aim of interpretation in Roman Catholic magisterial documents, tends to confine the meaning of the biblical text to the past.⁵⁰ For Schneiders, the “ideal meaning” provides the consistent and normative pole for biblical interpretation.⁵¹ The “ideal meaning” of the text refers to a semantic structure in the text that is produced by the dynamic confluence of (1) sense and reference, (2) the genre of the text, and (3) the personal style of the author as it provokes the engaged reader who is part of a community of readers. The resulting interpretive “game” unfolds whereby the meaning of the text constantly erupts anew with force and a claim on those who give themselves over to the play of interpretation. Thus, the ideal meaning “begins,” in a certain way, with the intention of the author and what sense a given clause, sentence, story, or image may have meant within the author’s historical, linguistic, and social context. Next, the reference of that meaning, its claim, must be ascertained, and finally, with that reference, the question of truthfulness of a text comes to the fore in a dialectical interplay between text and interpreter. This interplay is what mediates the possibility of a transformative encounter with the God of Jesus Christ in the present.⁵² Therefore, the subjectivity of the reader must also be a focal point of any adequate interpretation of the New Testament. For Schneiders, “The replacement of authorial intention by ideal meaning as the touchstone of objectivity allows for both the possibility of multiple valid interpretations that literary scholars rightly insist characterizes all texts and for the ‘norming’ of interpretation by the text itself, which is thereby enabled to speak for itself and not simply as a projection of the interpreter.”⁵³ Context is key, but that includes not only the original context of the

⁴⁹ See, for example, *Dei Verbum*, 12; see also Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.

⁵⁰ See Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, xxxix–xl, n 18. On the hegemony of authorial intention in magisterial teaching, note *Dei Verbum* §12.

⁵¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 19–23. Put simply, the ideal meaning of a text is the result of a dialectic between the sense of the text (its grammar, syntax, etc.) and its reference (its claim as a true or as reflective of reality).

⁵² Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 144–48.

⁵³ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, xxxiv.

author(s) of a text, but also its interaction and contribution to the contemporary context at the time the text is interpreted.

B. Tradition and Distanciation

Schneiders regularly acknowledges her indebtedness to the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, whose writing informs her basic approach to the interpretation of the New Testament. Her major work on biblical interpretation, *The Revelatory Text*, includes entire chapters dedicated to Ricoeur's basic distinctions among the three "worlds" of the text (i.e., "the world behind the text," "of the text," and "in front of the text"⁵⁴), and she makes good use of Ricoeur's methods in setting forth a series of important distinctions and connections among these "worlds" and the horizons that define them. Along with Ricoeur, Schneiders privileges Gadamer's emphasis on the value of "tradition" (i.e., prior communal interpretive contexts) for its capacity to provide the necessary context for adequate and effective interpretation.⁵⁵ She therefore reads the New Testament with a robust commitment to the place of Scripture within the believing community and its tradition as a "classic" (limitless reservoir of meaning) and a privileged source of spiritual encounter with the living God. But Schneiders also views with suspicion the notion that the interpretation of the Bible is the exclusive purview of the church, and she instead recognizes the value of ecumenical, interreligious, and even secular contributions to the interpretation of Scripture.

Schneiders provides a nuanced and critically informed account of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, one that privileges the ongoing dynamic of interpretation over and against any petrified notions of traditionally or even magisterially defined interpretation. She posits a reciprocal relationship between not only the traditions that aid in the interpretation of Scripture but also the authority of Scripture itself to ground and hold accountable the exercise of tradition. This is a thoroughly Catholic and robust account of the reciprocity of Scripture and tradition.⁵⁶ Schneiders aptly sums up this relationship by calling attention to the manner in which progress in interpretation is accomplished in the course of history through a thorough submission to the proclamation carried in the text: "The Church that produced the text placed itself under the guidance of this text and as it lives that guidance it enters more deeply into the meaning of the text, even to the point of

⁵⁴ See Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," in *Interpretation Theory*, 71–88.

⁵⁵ See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 277–304. Of course, these concepts have been deployed, nuanced, and amplified in the writings of Ricoeur and David Tracy, among others.

⁵⁶ See Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, chap. 3.

understanding the text better than its original writers did and having to modify the originally constructed meaning of some of the text.”⁵⁷

Progress in interpretation demands an active suspicion of purely academic and historical-critical methodologies, but Schneiders insists “the academy and the church need each other if the work of biblical interpretation is to be at once intellectually responsible and spiritually fruitful.”⁵⁸ Because the New Testament is indeed both ancient artifact and religious classic, the academic and the believer (even if she is the same person) need one another so that the academic will be precluded from reducing the biblical text to mere historical artifact and the believer can be disabused of “a simplistic naiveté in presuming a familiarity with the text that is both irreverent and blind to the challenging complexity of this strange book.”⁵⁹ And it is precisely through this movement of the estrangement, or “distanciation,”⁶⁰ of the biblical text from its immediate availability in a contemporary setting that Schneiders retains the value of historical-critical methodologies as well as the value of biblical scholarship in general.⁶¹

Schneiders’ ability to value the contributions of historical-critical methodologies offers an important corrective to a narrow understanding of growth and revelation within history. Indeed, much of the emphasis among some practitioners of TIS privileges the New Testament as the unique if not the exclusive provenance of the believing community, the church. From that perspective, orthodox exegetes who choose to make use of the tools and results of

⁵⁷ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, xxxv.

⁵⁸ Sandra M. Schneiders, “Critics Corner: Church and Biblical Scholarship in Dialogue,” *Theology Today* 42 (October 1985): 353–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004057368504200309>. Schneiders has dedicated a significant portion of her work to hermeneutics, including, for example, “Hermeneutics,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. R. E. Brown, J. A. Fitzmyer, and R. E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NY: Prentice Hall, 1990): §§55–70; see also Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*.

⁵⁹ Schneiders, “Critics Corner,” 354.

⁶⁰ On distanciation, see Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” *Philosophy Today* 17 (1973): 129–41; see also Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 43. The term “distanciation” has a complex pedigree, and Schneiders’ use of it is mediated through Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, distanciation includes the distance between the originating situation of the author, audience, and context to the dialectical situation of the reader.

⁶¹ Paul Ricoeur makes use of critical scholarship on the sources and structure of the Hexateuch to illuminate the relationship of Genesis 1 to the rest of the Hexateuch as a soteriological introduction. The analysis that will lead Ricoeur to his conclusion presupposed the identification of traditions, redaction, and developments within the Hexateuch, without which the disparities in meaning “cannot be made significant.” See “On the Exegesis of Genesis 1:1–2:4a,” in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 129–43.

critical exegesis may do so to further theological goals, but not because such tools have value in their own right, and only if they further an explicitly theological agenda. Stephen Fowl, for example, uses the image of the Israelites plundering the Egyptians as an example of the manner in which Christian exegetes ought to plunder non-Christian critical exegesis for their own ends.⁶² For Fowl and others associated with TIS, the questions and insights derived from critical exegesis are, at best, suspect resources to be used merely on an ad hoc basis, with no real obligation to address the judgments of historical criticism.⁶³ It is true that the church and Bible (the New Testament in particular) are related reciprocally in a way that outsiders are not, but that does not make Christian faith a requirement for interpretation, for such a requirement would threaten to reduce the biblical text to a solipsistic arsenal of proof-texts for dogmatic and cultural agendas. Contrary to Tertullian's position, non-Christians and non-Christian methodologies can and do offer valid and important insights into the meaning of the biblical text, and one might rightly argue that a willingness to be open to what the text proposes is the minimum requirement for exegesis.⁶⁴ For Schneiders, biblical scholarship must keep the text at least somewhat strange and unfamiliar, even making use of nonecclesial voices and experiences to unlock the revelatory power of the text; otherwise the message of the text will likely become domesticated, stale, and irrelevant. Conversely, without engaging believers and their communities of faith, academics risk missing a genuine dialogue with the actual subject matter of the text, leaving them with an interesting but irrelevant record of an ancient and dead world.⁶⁵

Schneiders is ready to engage in a dialectic account of interpretation when it comes to the tradition and received wisdom on a variety of biblical passages and church practices. She subjects the Christian tradition, and even the tradition of academic research, to a thorough critique, a hermeneutics of

⁶² The image is found in the prologue of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* and popularized by Karl Barth as well.

⁶³ See Stephen Fowl, "Theological Interpretation and Its Future," *Anglican Theological Review* 99 (2017): 671–90 at 679, where he makes reference to the image of the Israelites plundering the Egyptians in Origen's *Letter to Thaumaturgos* in connection to the Christian's ability to plunder pagan philosophy for its own purposes. The image of plundering the Egyptians comes from Exodus 12 and was used in Reformed circles amid the struggle between liberal and traditional biblical exegesis in the early twentieth century.

⁶⁴ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 65, with reference to Tertullian's *De Praescriptione Hereticorum*, 15–19.

⁶⁵ Schneiders, "Critics Corner," 356. See Paul Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 121–39.

suspicion, and grounds her exegesis within a horizon of authentic meaning and value derived from an engagement with the text itself. Indeed, for Schneiders, authentic meaning is often unlocked through appeal to critical scholarship, but it is also unlocked through an appeal to the common experience of believers, especially the experience of the marginalized, and this sets up a recurring dialectical engagement. Through a consistent distancing from the text, readers cultivate a disposition of openness and receptivity and risk their very selves in an engagement with the subject matter, refusing to allow biblical interpretation to become a settled question. As an encounter with the living God, Scripture always speaks anew, speaks personally, guides community, and leads to radical transformation.

C. Spirituality, Transformation, and the Paschal Imagination

The fundamental importance of religious conversion stands at the heart of Schneiders' understanding of the paschal imagination and its place in the authentic interpretation of the gospels. At the heart of the paschal imagination lies the experience of an ongoing transformative encounter with the God of Jesus Christ. This grounds Schneiders' understanding of the nature of the experience of the earliest Christians, and it also informs her approach to the interpretation of the gospel witness. For Schneiders, the experience of the earliest Christians was so unexpected and ineffable that the biblical texts reflect the struggle of the earliest disciples to understand such radically "good news." Indeed, some of the insights of historical-critical methodologies help to highlight the omitted, contorted, or distorted material presented in the text, demonstrating the apophatic dimensions of the earliest disciples' experience. These strange features of the gospel narratives bear witness to how fundamentally inadequate the original authors were for the subject matter of the text they produced—the power of the living God revealed Jesus Christ.⁶⁶ The realization of this "gap" (mentioned previously) between the text and the events the authors proclaim becomes intelligible, affirmable, and above all accessible, once the gap is acknowledged and taken into account. Such distancing unlocks the sense of witness evident in the biblical proclamation and makes the acknowledgment of the authorial gap "an indispensable moment in the full interpretive process."⁶⁷ Unlocking this witness character of the gospels is actualized by what Schneiders calls "the paschal imagination."

⁶⁶ See Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 134–36.

⁶⁷ Schneiders, "The Paschal Imagination," 58. See also, Sandra M. Schneiders, "Scripture as the Word of God," *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 14 (1993): 18–35 at 26–27.

The proclaimed Jesus is the inclusive subject of the gospels, and it is this proclaimed Jesus who anchors the imaginative symbol termed “the paschal mystery.” That symbol includes elements of the historical moments in Jesus’ life, but it also includes transhistorical and interpretive elements (e.g., the resurrection and ascension). The tensive image of the paschal mystery that governs the Christian imagination yields the proclaimed Jesus, and it is through the paschal imagination that the proclaimed Jesus is encountered.⁶⁸ Schneiders’ recognition of the paschal imagination grows out of an understanding of the historical dimensions of the gospels and rests, at least in part, on the work of historical critics who acknowledge and emphasize the gap or distance between the mere recording of historical occurrences and the events of revelation and proclamation. Given the status of the gospels as proclamation and witness, they are inexhaustibly revelatory—they are recognized as religious “classics” *par excellence*. They represent the fusion of the historic witnesses to the event of Jesus and the appropriation of the revelation of God in Christ by the first generation of believers, and it is in this fusion that the paschal imagination births the gospel text and reveals the living God.

The paschal imagination is both the agent and object of the gospel text. In other words, Schneiders sees the text emerging from the experience of the first believers:

In them the life of Jesus became the mystery of Christ under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Their experience of being baptized into Christ, of Christ in them as hope of glory, of living no longer as themselves but of Christ living in them, of being in Christ and he in them, in short, of really participating through his paschal mystery in eternal life, was the experience of transformation according to the new self-understanding and possibilities of existence that became available to them in Jesus. In hermeneutical terms, the objective coincidence of the ideal meaning of the Jesus event, and their own subjectivity, constituted their conversion. I suggest that what I like to call “the paschal, or Christian, imagination” is precisely the concrete effect on the whole cognitive-affective capacity of the person under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus which enables the person to grasp the paschal wholeness and character of the Jesus event and thus enter into an existential participation in the mystery of Christ. These first Christians exercised their paschal imagination in giving witness, the witness we have as the NT text. I suspect that the emergence and exercise of the paschal imagination in the production of the text as witness comes

⁶⁸ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 105; Schneiders, “Paschal Imagination,” 64–68. Schneiders presents here an application and expansion of R. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder, 1968), esp. chapter 5; and Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.

close to what we mean by the concept of inspiration and that the paschal character of that imagination is what gives the entire text its Easter quality.⁶⁹

For Schneiders, the paschal imagination is a cipher for the Christian spiritual imagination born of religious conversion.⁷⁰ It is a constructive imagination insofar as it produces a worldview, yet this worldview is neither simplistic nor without intellectual depth. Indeed, for Schneiders, constructive imagination has several dimensions. First, the paschal imagination brings together images that are dynamic, assembling experiences and insights that were previously scattered and dispersed in time into a tensive whole. Second, these images operate hermeneutically inasmuch as they provide a pole around which other objects, symbols, and experiences begin to coalesce. Third, the images produced by the paschal imagination are irreducible, never fully thematized, and always somewhat elusive. Fourth, Schneiders says that these symbols operate beyond the frozen images of “the past.” Instead, these symbols work in the present to interpret and provide depth to the flow of experience while bringing healing to traumatic memories (note theories of trauma in the study of the Resurrection narratives in particular).⁷¹ Finally, the images produced by the paschal imagination are loaded with affect and are actualized in the realm of feeling even as they assist in the apprehension

⁶⁹ Schneiders, “The Paschal Imagination,” 65.

⁷⁰ The radical transformation that is the goal of scriptural interpretation for Schneiders finds helpful specification in the work of Bernard Lonergan and his interpreters, who have articulated the intrinsic intelligibility of God’s saving work in Christ through an appeal to the structure of religious conversion offered in terms of the “the just and mysterious Law of the Cross” (see, e.g., William P. Loewe, *Lex Crucis: Soteriology and the Stages of Meaning* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016]). At the heart of the matter for both Schneiders and Lonergan is the experience of “transformed dying and rebirth into new life,” and this experience is thematized in Christian worship as “the paschal mystery”—the participation in the dying and rising of Christ (e.g., Galatians 2:19b–20). This experience of religious conversion is also characterized more generally by Lonergan as falling love with love itself: “a radical being-in-love, a first principle of all of one’s thoughts and words and deeds and omissions, a principle that keeps us free from sin, that move us to prayer and to penance, that can become the ever so quiet yet passionate center of all our living. It is, whatever its degree, a being-in-love that is without condition or qualifications or reserves, and so it is other-worldly, ... Such unconditional being-in-love actuates to the full the dynamic potentiality of the human spirit with its unrestricted reach and, as full actuation, it is fulfillment, deep-set peace, the peace that the world cannot give.” See Bernard Lonergan, “Natural Knowledge of God,” in *A Second Collection, CWBL*, vol. 13, 99–110, esp. 110.

⁷¹ See, for example, Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 81–110, and Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017).

of meaning and value.⁷² Through the process of symbol-making, the biblical authors proclaim the mystery by which they have been redeemed, and they begin to enact the values inherent in the symbolic narrative that was birthed by them.⁷³

It is through the distancing made possible by historical-critical methodologies (“the gap”) that the interpreter can begin to appreciate the real character of the gospels. Herein lies the space to see the gospels as products of the paschal imagination, the fruit of the encounter with the risen Jesus. It is here that the revelatory power of the text is both displayed and realized in redemptive communion, that is, through participation in the paschal mystery. This participation in Christ finds its actualization in constant rehearsal, prayerful appropriation, and the performance of concrete acts of love, whereby the truth of the gospel is made known and affirmed by the transformed subject committed to doing the truth.⁷⁴ This realization of the biblical text, one that is born of a communal process of “scripturing” the truth (to borrow a phrase from Schneiders) is an authentically theological interpretation of Scripture, one that takes into account the limitations of the biblical text in order to open it.

III. Hermeneutics in Practice: Schneiders and the Resurrection of Jesus (John 20)

Schneiders has spent her entire academic career thinking and writing about the resurrection narrative in John. Her dissertation at the Gregorian

⁷² See Lonergan, *Method of Theology*, 37; see also, Jason E. King, “Feelings and Decision Making,” *New Blackfriars* 97 (2015): 39–51.

⁷³ For a fuller and more robust discussion of the theological power and value of metaphor (and not just analogy) in bridging the theological and spiritual, see Ligita Ryliškytė, “Metaphor and Analogy in Theology: A Choice between Lions and Witches, and Wardrobes?” *Theological Studies* 78 (2017): 696–717, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040563917714622>; Blake E. Wassell and Stephen P. Llewelyn, “‘Fishers of Humans’: The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor, and Conceptual Blending Theory,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133 (2014): 627–46, <https://doi.org/10.15699/jbiblite.133.3.627>; and Robert Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God: Theology after Cognitive Linguistics*, Studies in Philosophical Theology, 54 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014). Masson is quite clear about this feature of metaphorical language: “Religious and theological assertions, doctrines, analogies, and symbols can be metaphorical or figurative and at the same time can be semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case, in other words, can qualify as ‘literal truths’” (8).

⁷⁴ David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1981), 71. See also Bernard Lonergan, *The Subject* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1969).

University was on the spirituality of the Johannine resurrection account, and one of her latest books is a collection of previously published essays on the subject.⁷⁵ Schneiders' exegesis of the Johannine resurrection narrative proves not only helpful, but exemplary, offering New Testament scholars a model by engaging with legitimate critical insights from nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical-critical scholarship, while grounding those insights within a sound hermeneutical and faith-filled foundation. Schneiders sets her reading of John 20 within the practice of "scripturing," meaning that she mines the truth of the Johannine resurrection account and brings the text to life not by simply rehearsing "factual data" on the background of the text, but by orienting her work to the spiritual appropriation of the text.⁷⁶ Schneiders develops and occasionally presupposes historical data as she engages the very event that structures the religious horizon of the author, audience, and the interpreter—the resurrection of Jesus.

A. Distanciation: The World Behind the Text and the Authority of the Witness in John 20

As discussed previously, Schneiders acknowledges that historical-critical methodologies, and the questions they seek to answer, reach the end of the road when their sole aim is to "get behind" the biblical narratives of the resurrection.⁷⁷ But getting partially behind the narrative in John 20 is certainly possible, and Schneiders makes some important claims about the world behind the text, the world that gives birth to and structures John 20.

Drawing on the work of Raymond Brown, among others (including even Bultmann),⁷⁸ Schneiders rejects the facile identification of John, the son of Zebedee, as both the author of the Fourth Gospel and the Beloved Disciple (BD).⁷⁹ She views the authoritative eyewitness behind the gospel as distinct

⁷⁵ See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Johannine Resurrection Narrative: An Exegetical and Theological Study of John 20 as a Synthesis of Johannine Spirituality*, 2 vols. (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982) and Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*.

⁷⁶ Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, xvii.

⁷⁷ For a succinct presentation of these limitations, see Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Resurrection: Did It Really Happen and Why Does It Matter?* (Los Angeles: Marymount Press, 2013), 16–25.

⁷⁸ See Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979). Brown regularly and profitably engaged Bultmann even as Brown eschewed Bultmann's philosophical commitments and his emphasis on both gnosticism and the history of religions in his interpretation of John.

⁷⁹ See John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature, and Theology of the Johannine Community*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1994), 73–74, cited in

from the evangelist, and as distinct from the so-called “ecclesiastical redactor” of the gospel. Her work on identifying these figures and illuminating the development of the Johannine community instantiates a clear and fruitful embrace of historical criticism—wrestling with complex questions of the origin and purpose of the Fourth Gospel.⁸⁰

Schneiders views the eyewitness testimony of the BD as the authoritative tradition from which the Fourth Gospel flows. Moreover, the BD functions as a textual paradigm historically realized in the leading figures of the Johannine school but “refracted” in the text through several important characters, including: Nathaniel, the Samaritan woman, the royal official, the blind man of Bethsaïda, Martha-Mary-Lazarus of Bethany, Mary Magdalene, and Thomas. Among these figures, Mary Magdalene is the most significant, given her place in the resurrection narrative and her role as the witness of the resurrection to the apostolic community, “the apostle to the apostles.”⁸¹ The BD thus functions not only as authoritative witness and “auteur,” but also as the ideal disciple, providing testimony to the Johannine idea of discipleship while simultaneously inviting the reader to enter into that identity.

The evangelist (i.e., the writer of the gospel), for Schneiders, is a second-generation Christian, whose identity is intentionally concealed. This concealment is designed to secure the legitimacy of the gospel within the larger church body of the first two centuries, the churches of the Petrine and Pauline ministry, allowing the textual “alter ego” of the evangelist to emerge in the figure of the Samaritan woman (John 4) who blends Samaritan and Jewish theology throughout the narrative. Additionally, the Samaritan woman, like the community of the Fourth Gospel, claims to derive its authority directly from Jesus rather than from the twelve, and she stands as a reminder that the Johannine community embraced the foundational role of women in the church. A late editorial hand, the one Bultmann famously identified as the Johannine “ecclesiastical redactor,”⁸²

F. Martin and W. Wright, *The Gospel of John*, Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 18n9.

⁸⁰ For what follows in the next two paragraphs, see Sandra M. Schneiders, “‘Because of the Woman’s Testimony ...’: Reexamining the Issue of Authorship in the Fourth Gospel,” *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 513–35, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0028688500016702>.

⁸¹ Mary Magdalene is called “*apostolorum apostola*”; see Rabanus Maurus, *De Vita Beatae Mariae Magdaleneae*, 27, and Thomas Aquinas, *In Ioannem Evangelistam Expositio*, 20, 3. In his commentary, Aquinas actually gives her the rank of “prophet” and “angel” as well as that of “apostle.”

⁸² See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1971), vii. Of course, Bultmann sees the hand of this redactor in far more places than does Brown or Schneiders; see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. F. J. Moloney, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York:

was likely responsible for tempering what Schneiders identifies as the two most distinctive features of the Fourth Gospel: (1) the autonomy of the BD versus Simon Peter and (2) the preeminent role of women as the foundational apostolic witnesses of the community. Although not sharing Bultmann's characterization of the redactor or Bultmann's account of the history of the Johannine text, Schneiders nevertheless discerns the hand of this redactor in mollifying these two features of the Fourth Gospel, features that the dialectic and critical dimensions of her interpretation bring to the fore as illuminating theological dimensions of the text.

Schneiders draws on an account of the historical context of the production of the Fourth Gospel as she leads the reader into an exegesis of the text, and her exegesis distances the text from its literal and immediate simplicity without doing violence to it. Historical questions about the origin and redaction of the text help to shed light on important features that may otherwise be domesticated in more doctrinal or traditionally centered exegesis. These features of the text are highlighted as Schneiders engages the resurrection narrative in John 20 and they are illuminated by her exegesis.

B. Encounters with the Risen Christ (John 20)

In many of her writings on the Resurrection of Jesus, Schneiders points out that exegetical approaches that ignore the question of "what happened" risk ignoring the central conviction of the entire Christian tradition. As a "saturated phenomenon" (a category Schneiders borrows from Jean-Luc Marion), the Resurrection of Jesus remains an event of inexhaustible meaning and consequence.⁸³ It is an event that overwhelms the human capacity to absorb or analyze it, and it is precisely this dimension of the

Doubleday, 2003), 40–86, esp. 84. In particular, Schneiders argues that "regardless of who actually penned the chapter" (Schneiders will admit to indications of a redactional hand), John 21 ought to be interpreted as an integral part of the Fourth Gospel, as reflecting the experience of the first generations of Christians and their encounter with the risen Christ. On the theological consistency of John 21 with the rest of the Gospel, see "Contemplation and Ministry (John 21:1–14)," in *Written that You May Believe*, 224–29. For Schneiders' affirmation of a redactional hand behind John 21, see "'Because of the Woman's Testimony ...,'" 535. Schneiders' approach is defined by a privileging of literary, theological, and canonical concerns rather than concerns centered on source or redaction criticism.

⁸³ See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Resurrection*, 29–32. Schneiders references, among others, Brian Robinette, "A Gift to Theology?: Jean-Luc Marion's 'Saturated Phenomenon' in Christological Perspective," *The Heythrop Journal* 48 (2007): 86–108, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2265.2007.00307.x>. On Marion's account of "saturated phenomenon," see Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," *Philosophy Today* 40 (1996): 103–24, <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtoday199640137> and *Being Given*:

Resurrection event that inaugurates and finds a home in the paschal imagination described previously. Even with the utter newness and radicality of the event, the earliest Christians nevertheless were consistent about some matters pertaining to the Resurrection of Jesus: the risen body of Jesus, while no longer physical, was still material, and it served as the definite and real symbol of Jesus—it mediated his presence and placed him within a network of relationships. This symbolic presence of the resurrected body of Jesus, this bodyperson, was no longer *sarx* or *psykikos* (“flesh” or “natural”) and therefore no longer subject to the physical or natural limitations of space and time. The spiritual implications of these features of the risen Christ became increasingly important for Christian spirituality for several reasons, most notably because the relationship between the disciples and Jesus was changed, but it was still personal. This personal relationship also defines the relationship between Jesus and believers of subsequent generations: in prayer and acts of mercy/justice, one acts in personal concord with Christ, and one thereby encounters Jesus as a person.⁸⁴

One important presupposition of Schneiders’ reading of John 20 is that Bultmann was wrong to see it as a concession to the emerging orthodoxy of the Christian church, which took the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the sign of his vindication by God. For Bultmann, John 20 was appended to the Fourth Gospel, which had originally ended with the glorification of Jesus on the cross and thus with no need of a resurrection narrative.⁸⁵ For Schneiders, a sapiential eschatological reading of the Resurrection obviates Bultmann’s point and lets stand the glorification of Jesus on the cross, but makes the Resurrection of Jesus “manifestation of the meaning for the whole bodyperson of life in God now lived in all its fullness.”⁸⁶ In the case

Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness, Cultural Memory in the Present, trans. J. Kosky (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

⁸⁴ See especially, Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Resurrection of the Body in the Fourth Gospel: The Key to Johannine Spirituality,” in *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, 61–98.

⁸⁵ See Rudolf Bultmann, *The Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribners, 1955), 56, quoted in Sandra M. Schneiders, “Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the Twin in John 20,” in *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, 36.

⁸⁶ C. H. Dodd is often regarded as one of the heralds of realized eschatology in the Fourth Gospel, over and against those who valorized a “consistent” or apocalyptic eschatology (e.g., J. Weiss, A. Schweitzer). In the context of early Christianity, realized eschatology is characterized by its investment in the moral response to the teaching and person of Jesus in the gospels and tends to downplay or recast notions of a future intervention by God in terms of battle and cosmic destruction/recreation. On the emergence of a realized eschatology based on Old Testament wisdom traditions (i.e., a “sapiential” eschatology) in relation to apocalyptic eschatology, see A. Y. Collins, “Aspects of New Testament Thought,” *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall,

of Jesus, the Resurrection is a precondition for the possibility of his post-Easter personal presence to his disciples and his continuing action in the world.”⁸⁷ Schneiders thus argues for the literary unity of the chapter as it stands, making the initial scene at the empty tomb an integral unit and connecting the BD and Mary Magdalene as examples of the journey into full Johannine faith.

Coming to faith in the risen Christ unfolds in a series of appearances in John 20, and these appearances are imagined around the major figures and themes that define the Johannine community and make it, at least in some ways, both spiritually provocative and perhaps, in a sense, dangerous. As a unique scene in the gospel tradition, Schneiders sees John 20:1–10 as a provocative statement about the faith of the BD (and the Johannine community) and the struggle of Simon Peter to come to faith. As Schneiders reads the passage, Peter stands as a foil for the BD. On the one hand, Peter arrives second to the tomb and sees that it is empty, notes the linen burial clothes set aside, and sees the *soudarion* folded by itself, but he does not understand nor does he believe. When the BD, on the other hand, sees the *soudarion*, he comes to believe (John 20:8). Schneiders, therefore, centers her reading of the passage on the *soudarion* and connects it to the flesh that Jesus has, in his Resurrection, set aside. Schneiders interprets the *soudarion* as the veil worn by Moses (Exodus 34:33–35) after he descended from his encounter with God on Sinai.⁸⁸ Like the flesh of Jesus, the *soudarion* was worn by Moses after his face became resplendent on Mount Sinai as it reflected the glory of God. The veil protected the people and allowed them to encounter and talk to Moses. As the flesh of Jesus is set aside, the *soudarion* acts as a genuine Johannine *sēmeion*, “a perceptible reality that is itself ambiguous.”⁸⁹ Peter’s

1990), 81:25–56. The distinction between these two approaches to eschatology is contested and unclear at times. For a fuller discussion, see George Nicklesburg, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Early Judaism,” in *Conflicted Boundaries in Wisdom and Apocalypticism*, eds. L. Willis and B. Wright, SBL Symposium Series (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 17–38. For fuller picture of realized eschatology in the preaching of Jesus, see, for example, J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus, Vol 2: Mentor, Message, and Miracles*, The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library (New York/New Haven: Doubleday/Yale University Press, 1994), 398–454.

⁸⁷ Schneiders, “Touching the Risen Jesus,” 40.

⁸⁸ Schneiders makes this connection by the fact that the Greek word, “*soudarion*,” is a Latin loan word (“*sudarium*”) used in an Aramaic transliteration in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Targum Neofiti* to render the technical Hebrew term used for the veil used by Moses (Ex 34:33); see Sandra M. Schneiders, “Seeing and Believing in the Glorified Jesus (John 20:1–10),” in *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. (New York: Herder, 2003), 207.

⁸⁹ Schneiders, “Seeing and Believing in the Glorified Jesus (John 20:1–10),” 207.

failure to respond to the *sēmeion* is indicative of the nature of Johannine faith in the resurrection: it is not deducible from the empty tomb. Rather, “the believing of the Beloved Disciple is the faith response to revelation encountered in sign.”⁹⁰ The BD stands out as the example of faith in contrast to the preeminent figure of the other churches as reflected in the synoptic tradition, namely, Simon Peter.⁹¹

The subsequent scenes in John 20 offer another pair of examples of Resurrection faith: on the one hand, Mary Magdalene, and on the other, Thomas. Through Schneiders’ work with these scenes, she moves the discussion of the encounter with the risen Christ away from a question centered on “What happened to Jesus in his Resurrection?” or “How was Jesus raised from the dead?” to an exploration of the theologically more important question, “Where is the risen Christ?” and “How does one relate to him?” In the first scene following the discovery of the empty tomb and the departure of Simon Peter and the BD, Mary Magdalene mourns the loss of the master and the loss of his body. Because the tomb is empty, someone must have taken the body. But in the subsequent encounter with an unrecognizable figure, Jesus addresses Mary Magdalene using her Aramaic name, *Mariam* (not the Greek form of her name, *Maria*, used throughout the rest of the Fourth Gospel), and Mary Magdalene responds with the Aramaic word, *Rabbouni*, conveying an intimacy, a familiarity, between the two. But Jesus corrects Mary, admonishing her to stop relating to him as if he was still “in the flesh,” as if nothing had changed. Indeed, everything had changed. The biblical admonition, as exegetes often point out, is “stop touching me” (*mē mou haptou*), meaning, “stop being in relationship to me as you were before.” Mary is then given the task of going and announcing the Easter message to the disciples, identified here as *adelphoi* (“brothers and sisters”) for the first time, those who now share in Jesus’ relationship with his Father.

In the ensuing episode with Thomas, Schneiders once again characterizes the position of the disciple as one who tries to be in relationship to Jesus “in the flesh” (“unless I probe the nail marks ...”). Thomas does not “doubt,” as is so often assumed; rather, Thomas is *apistos*, that is, “without faith,” and certainly without Johannine faith. Schneiders notes that in the Fourth Gospel, faith is always a deliberate response to God’s revelation in Jesus, and

⁹⁰ Schneiders, “Seeing and Believing in the Glorified Jesus (John 20:1-10),” 208.

⁹¹ The competition between Peter and Mary Magdalene is also well documented in early Christian literature, especially in the Pauline and Lukan traditions of Simon Peter rather than Mary or “the women” as the first to encounter the Risen Christ. On the basic historicity of the initial appearance to Mary, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1973), 101n170.

Thomas is clearly refusing to believe. Thomas wants the conditions of the earth-bound “fleshy” Jesus to return. When Jesus appears to Thomas, he prompts Thomas by saying, *ide* (“see” or “behold”) and telling Thomas, *phere ton daktylon sou hōde kai ide* (“bring your finger here and see”) the marks in his hands. Additionally, Jesus commands Thomas by telling him to “thrust” (*bale*) his hand into the side of Jesus. But Thomas responds not by touching Jesus, but by declaring his faith (“My Lord and my God”). Jesus then blesses those who do not see but who nevertheless believe because of the testimony of the disciples and because of the words of the Fourth Gospel (20:31).

Much of what Schneiders does in John 20 reflects her penchant for a literary-theological approach to interpretation. She engages in word studies, “reads” the development of characters and ideas in the text, and connects scenes and details in one part of the narrative with others, emphasizing the flow and development of themes in the story told in the Fourth Gospel. But there are at least three ways in which Schneiders’ interpretation of John 20 integrates historical-critical insights, that is, insights that center on “world behind the text” questions, questions that deal with the origins of the Fourth Gospel, its circumstances, and its authorial intentions in a way that grounds the deeply theological reading Schneiders provides.

First, the authority or authorship behind the Fourth Gospel and the story of the community anchor Schneiders’ reading of the role played by Mary Magdalene and the BD in the story. The BD is clearly an alternative authority in the community, and this status impacts and reinforces the tension between the BD and Simon Peter at a narrative level. As for Mary Magdalene, she functions as the authoritative witness of the Easter message and stands in contrast to the women who feared and failed in the synoptic tradition (Mark 16:8).

Second, Schneiders’ work on reformulating the theological context of late-first-century Judaism and the emergence of sapiential eschatology (as an alternative way of understanding the meaning of the resurrection in terms of Jesus returning to his disciples) allows the Johannine resurrection narrative to stand out from the synoptic accounts. It rebuts, in a sense, the notion that the Resurrection was itself primarily to be understood as a vindication of Jesus. In other words, Schneiders highlights a significant theological, and perhaps spiritual, tension in the biblical accounts of the Resurrection and its meaning.

Third, Schneiders’ emphasis on the encounter of the bodyperson (not the “flesh”) of Jesus with those who knew him and to those who would come to know him amplifies her account of the options within early Judaism for understanding the Resurrection. The Resurrection does not serve as a sign of Jesus’ vindication; rather, the Resurrection of Jesus centers on the

ongoing personal relationship of Jesus to his disciples and to subsequent generations who come to believe through the witness of the Fourth Gospel. Both the invitation to touch (Thomas) and the prohibition of touching (Mary) in John 20 serve, in their own ways, to reinforce and locate the encounter with the risen Christ in the life and proclamation of the church and not merely as a historical event in the past related to Jesus' life and ministry.

These three features help Schneiders' interpretation of the Resurrection in John 20 to speak more directly to contemporary believers through their significance as spiritual insights that lead readers to an engagement with the text beyond questions of literary meaning or history. Rather, the features of Schneiders' exegesis of John 20 play directly into a spiritual encounter with the risen Christ precisely by inviting readers to be aware of and to engage the paschal imagination, both as it is present in the text as well as how it might be present within their own experience of personal encounter with the Risen One—this Jesus, who we crucified. Such encounters are born of a deeply ecclesial reading of the text, but a reading that is nevertheless open to the tensions and contradictions that Scripture brings to the reader—challenges that don't always square simply with flat notions of Christian piety or doctrine.

Conclusion

New Testament exegesis has moved from a classical approach to Scripture that was primarily ahistorical, typological, and allegorical, to an approach that is historical, genetic, and dialectical. Theologians and exegetes would do well to recall the importance of this shift as they explore the ways in which the academy can help to promote a more fulsome and theologically robust reading of sacred texts, an approach that can account for the origins of the Christian community through attentiveness to the dynamics of the emerging Christian tradition centered in the life, ministry, death, and Resurrection of Jesus, but with a view to rendering the biblical texts theologically significant within the contemporary context. Such a move does not abandon wholesale the exegetical tradition of the Christian church; rather, these traditions are chastened even as they contextualize and challenge any reductionism. Sandra Schneiders' hermeneutics of critical distanciation and moral and spiritual integration holds out great promise as a model for the consistent critical engagement with *the biblical text*. Such readings can serve as a catalyst and an aid for the fruitful encounter with the living God, an encounter that promises to radically challenge and change readers who are *willing* to become open and vulnerable to the claims of the text rather

than simply looking for the confirmation of convictions. Historical consciousness is an integral aspect of the modern person's horizon, and the questions that emerge from this consciousness cannot be adequately answered simply with an appeal to Christian doctrine, and even less by appeals to the piety and vision of ancient authors. Within historical consciousness, the complexity of meaning drives the tradition forward to embrace authentic innovation and to engage the emerging spirituality of the contemporary believer, and the contributions of TIS to the church will be more fully realized by incorporating Schneiders' insights and example (as well as the insights and example of other feminist and liberationist exegetes). Preaching and teaching that ignores, or worse yet, vilifies, the critical dimensions of biblical interpretation serves neither the gospel, nor the church, nor the contemporary believer.⁹²

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