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**REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERPRETATION
OF THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH (1993)**

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1. Introduction

After the epoch making and cutting-edge Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, Leo XIII erected "The Pontifical Biblical Commission" through the Apostolic Letter *Vigilante* on 30 October 1902 to promote the study of Sacred Scripture.¹ Its stated purpose was "to have effective care that the sacred texts get the sort of research our times demand; that they are studied everywhere by Catholics; and are kept safe not only from any breath of error but also from every hasty opinion."² However, as time passed the commission focused more on the second role of vigilance "to take pains to stem the growth of the deplorable attitude of thinking and acting which gives excessive value to the opinions of those who differ from us doctrinally, as though the true understanding of Scripture is to be sought mainly from outside methods of learning."³ As Fitzmyer notes, the *responsa* of the Biblical Commission "created fear and suspicion about everything connected with the Bible so that the

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¹ASS 35 (1902-1903) 234-238.

²Dennis J. Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*. Bangalore: Theological Publications of India, 2007, 86.

³Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*, §164, 86-87.

clergy and faithful alike suspected anyone who tried to interpret it as dangerous and unorthodox.”⁴

After the Second Vatican Council, the Biblical Commission was reorganized by Pope Paul VI through the motu proprio *Sedula Cura* “to continue to promote biblical studies and help the Church’s magisterium in interpreting the Sacred Scriptures.”⁵ The Biblical Commission is no longer part of the teaching office of the Church. Its main duty was not to be vigilant of errors but to promote biblical studies and interpretation. On 11 April 1991, Pope John Paul II, while addressing the members of the Biblical Commission, delineated certain guidelines in preparing a document on the interpretation of the Bible in the Church. He urged the members to make a holistic appraisal of various modern scientific methods, evaluating both the merits and limitations of them. He stressed that they adopt a corrective course to the one-sided approach to the understanding of *Dei Verbum* §12 on the interpretation of the Word of God. The pope warned against the tendency of some exegetes to highlight only the Council’s approval of the use of scientific methods while ignoring the other “that the sacred scripture must be read and interpreted with its divine authorship in mind.” His words are clear:

The Bible has certainly been written in human language, and its interpretation therefore requires the methodical use of the science of language, but it is the Word of God; exegesis would be seriously incomplete if it did not shed light on the theological significance of Scripture.⁶

He urged the Commission to produce a document which would help the exegetes to avoid a unilateral approach to various tools of exegesis and to pay attention to the two dimensions of the Bible, namely, the human and the divine, as was well-documented by *Dei Verbum* §§12-13.⁷

⁴Joseph A Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”*: Text and Commentary. New York: Paulist Press, 2008, 20. See also Thomas M. Bolin, “The Biblical Commission’s Instruction, *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels (Sancta Mater Ecclesia)* And Present Magisterial Attitudes Towards Biblical Exegesis,” *Gregorianum* 93, 4 (2012) 768.

⁵Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*, §895, 378.

⁶Pope John Paul II, “Exegesis is a Theological Discipline,” in Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*, §1639, 665-666.

⁷Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*, §§1636-1642, 664-666.

Taking a cue from the Pope's recommendations, the Biblical Commission published a document on "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" on 21 September 1993. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger remarks in the preface of the document,

It contains a well-grounded overview of the panorama of present-day methods and in this way offers to the inquirer an orientation to the possibilities and limits of these approaches. Accordingly, the text of the document inquires into how the meaning of Scripture might become known—this meaning in which the human word and God's word work together in the singularity of historical events and the eternity of everlasting Word which is contemporary in every age.⁸

In the introduction, the document, after describing the confusion that exists regarding the proper methodology for biblical interpretation, delineates the purpose of this document: 1) to indicate the paths most appropriate for arriving at the interpretation of the Bible, being as faithful as possible to its character both human and divine; 2) to examine all the methods likely to contribute effectively to the task of making more available the riches contained in the biblical texts.⁹ The document is divided into four parts: I) Methods and Approaches for Interpretation; II) Hermeneutical Questions; III) Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation; IV) Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church.

In this essay, we look at the document's evaluation of the various methods and approaches for interpretation of the Bible in the life of the Church. The major part of the article will be on the document's understanding of the methods for interpretation. This study is more a rereading of the document than an evaluation of it.

2. Methods and Approaches for Interpretation

The Commission classifies the various methods and approaches into six major groups: 1) The Historical-Critical Method; 2) New Methods of Literary Analysis which include Rhetorical Analysis, Narrative Analysis, Semiotic Analysis; 3) Approaches based on the Tradition of the Canonical Approach, the Approach through Recourse to Jewish Traditions of Interpretation, the Approach by the History of the Influence of the Text; 4) Approaches that use the Human Sciences comprised The Sociological Approach, The Approach through Cultural Anthropology, and The Psychological

⁸Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*, §1705, 691.

⁹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 24.

and the Psychoanalytical Approaches; 5) The Contextual Approaches include The Liberationist Approach, The Feminist Approach; and 6) The Fundamentalist Approach.

It is noteworthy that the document avoids the terms 'Diachronic' and 'Synchronic' in the title to refer to the methodologies. However, from the description of the methods, it becomes clear the comparison and contrast is basically between the diachronic and synchronic approaches.

2.1. The Historical-Critical Method

Fitzmyer gives a concise description of the historical-critical method in his book *Scripture, Soul of Theology*:

This method of biblical interpretation is called 'historical-critical' because it borrows its techniques from both historical and literary criticism. It recognizes that the Bible, though it is the inspired written Word of God, is an ancient record, composed by many human authors over a long period of time. As such, it has to be read, studied, and analysed as other ancient records of human history. Since the Bible narrates events that affected the lives of ancient Jews and early Christians, its various accounts have to be read, compared, and analyzed in their original languages, against their proper human and historical backgrounds, and within their contemporary contexts. In effect this method applies to the Bible all the critical techniques of classical philology [...]¹⁰

The first official recognition of the use of this method in Catholic exegesis came from Pope Pius XII in *Divino afflante spiritu*.¹¹ Finally, since the dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II *Dei Verbum* officially ratified its relevance in Catholic biblical interpretation, it has been embraced by the Catholic exegetes wholeheartedly and has produced wonderful results. However, perhaps due to the unilateral approach of mainstream biblical scholarship in using this method, there began to emerge critical voices against its over-emphasis as the only valid scientific tool for biblical studies. Many brought to light the limitations of it. The document's evaluation of this method is to be seen against this background. It is to put it in proper perspective.

Following the intent of *Dei Verbum* §12, the document makes it clear that the historical-critical method is an indispensable method for the scientific study of meaning of ancient texts, including the Holy

¹⁰Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, the Soul of Theology*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994, 19.

¹¹Murphy, ed., *The Church and the Bible*, §§ 591-599, 247-250.

Bible, which is the Word of God in human language. Hence, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method, but actually requires it.¹²

2.1.1. History of Development of the Historical-Critical Method

This methodology is not of recent development; rather, its antecedents can be traced to the Alexandrian classical philology. Since the time of the Renaissance and the interest in returning to the sources and to the study of the original languages such as Latin, Greek and Hebrew, interpretation of the biblical texts has taken a new direction. It was at this time the historical-critical method began to be further refined. With the development of textual criticism and literary (source) criticism, it became even more developed. It was at this time that the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch and Synoptics was proposed and took root. With the development of “form criticism,”¹³ the impression of historical-critical exegesis as more of a literary criticism which “simply dissolved and destroyed the text” in its attempt to identify various sources was rectified.¹⁴ Form criticism was subsequently supplemented by redaction-criticism, which paid attention to the editorial history of the final form of the text. The document concludes the history and development of historical-critical method with an appraisal:

All this has made it possible to understand far more accurately the intention of the authors and editors of the Bible, as well as the message which they addressed to their first readers. The achievement of these results has lent the historical-critical method an importance of the highest order.¹⁵

2.1.2. Major Elements of Historical-Critical Method

It is *historical*, because it deals with ancient texts and tries to understand the historical context in which these texts originated and were subsequently expanded with additions. It is *critical* because in its analysis it operates with the help of scientific criteria to evaluate the text as objectively as possible. It is *analytical* because it studies the

¹²Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 25.

¹³This approach was developed by Hermann Gunkel. See Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyrics of Israel*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998.

¹⁴Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 27-34.

¹⁵Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 36.

Bible as any other ancient text and attempts to grasp the intention of the ancient biblical author (literal sense) as expressed in the text.¹⁶

This method includes many analytical modes of introducing an ancient text: a) Textual criticism: This tries to compare various ancient manuscripts (e.g., Qumran), ancient versions (e.g., Septuagint, Peshitta, Vulgate) and the patristic texts to arrive at a biblical text as close as possible to the original text; b) Linguistic and Semantic analysis (Philological Analysis): This includes “literary criticism,” preferably called source-criticism, genre criticism, redaction criticism and historical criticism.

In the evaluation of this method for biblical interpretation, the document concludes that its contributions are more positive than negative. It helps in understanding that the Bible is a collection of writings coming from various authors and to understand the prehistory of the text. In other words, this method is important in getting to the literal sense of the Scripture. Though in the earlier phase this method was linked to certain philosophical systems, at present it is no longer linked to any particular system. However, the Commission also identified a certain inherent limitation. “It restricts itself to a search for the meaning of the biblical text within the historical circumstances that gave rise to it and is not concerned with other possibilities of meaning which have been revealed at later stages of the biblical revelation and history of the Church.”¹⁷ It has showed also a tendency to “a greater insistence on the form of a text, with less attention paid to its content.”¹⁸ This problem needs to be corrected through semantic analysis. The document recommends a complementary approach to the historical-critical method, which is diachronic in nature, by the inclusion of synchronic analysis, which takes into consideration the final form of the text. However, the indispensable character of the diachronic method is stressed in clear terms in order to understand the historical dimension of the Word of God.¹⁹

¹⁶Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 37.

¹⁷Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 48.

¹⁸Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 49.

¹⁹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 49-50. For a detailed discussion of Magisterium's attitude towards historical-critical and other modern critical approaches to biblical exegesis from *Providentissimus Deus* to *Verbum Domini*, see Thomas M. Bolin, “The Biblical Commission's Instruction, *On the Historical Truth of the Gospels (Sancta Mater Ecclesia)* And Present Magisterial Attitudes Towards Biblical Exegesis,” *Gregorianum* 93, 4 (2012) 765-785.

2.2. New Methods of Literary Analysis

After a rather long section on the historical-critical method, the document deals with new methods of literary analysis which can complement the limitations of it. The document selects three methods of literary analysis: rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis and semiotic analysis.

2.2.1. Rhetorical Analysis

The basic aspect of this method is the understanding that *Rhetoric*, i.e., the art of speaking, is an effective instrument to persuade an audience through discourse. It focuses on the typically Semitic style of “symmetrical compositions, through which one can detect relationships between different elements in the text.”²⁰ Applied to the Bible, it “aims to penetrate to the very core of the language of revelation precisely as persuasive religious discourse and to measure the impact of such discourse in the social context of the communication thus begun.”²¹ Since the Bible contains language to persuade and to convince, its language carries with it a certain power of argument and a rhetorical strategy; thus, rhetorical analysis is a useful method for biblical study. However, the document does not see it as an indispensable tool because of its limitations such as:

- 1) It can be merely a superficial description of the text’s style;
- 2) Being a synchronic approach, it cannot claim independence or autonomy as a substitute for the basic (diachronic) method;
- 3) It can be eisegetical, attributing to the biblical text a degree of sophistication of either Greco-Roman or Semitic rhetoric that it really may not have.²²

Hence rhetorical analysis must be used with proper discernment. Yet, it can serve as a supplement of refinement to the historical-critical method.

2.2.2. Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis approaches the Bible as a narrative and tries to understand it by the study of the plot, narrative time, and structure of narrative communication, narrator and reader perspectives.²³ In short, “narrative analysis studies how a text tells a story in such a

²⁰Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 56, also http://www.retistica.biblicaesemitica.org/eventi/02_23%20aprile_Vanhoye.pdf, accessed on 22.03.2013

²¹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 57.

²²Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 58.

²³For details, see. J.L. Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*. Rome: Editrice pontificio istituto, 1990.

way as to engage the reader in its 'narrative world' and the system of values contained therein."²⁴ The document considers narrative analysis useful as it can facilitate the transition from the meaning of the text in its historical context to its significance for the reader of today.²⁵ The Commission evaluates positively this method to complement the diachronic approach, although it has some drawbacks.²⁶

2.2.3. Semiotic Analysis

A third method among the Synchronic approaches to the study of a biblical text identified by the Commission is Semiotic Analysis. It tries to analyse a text as a coherent whole, obedient to precise linguistic mechanics of operation. It is a highly complex method which studies the matrix textual relations based on structure, grammar, etc. The document warns the exegete to separate the method from that structuralist philosophy, which "refuses to accept individual personal identity within the text and extra-textual reference beyond it."²⁷ About its advantages for biblical study, the Commission seems to be less than enthusiastic to endorse it as very useful.

2.3. Approaches Based on Tradition

These approaches, in contrast to the previously discussed methods, consider the biblical texts as related to each other "as a gathering together of a whole array of witnesses from one great Tradition." It studies various writings as parts of a coherent whole. Under this heading the document deals with the canonical approach, the Jewish traditions of interpretation, and the approach by the history of the influence of the text (*Wirkungsgeschichte*).

2.3.1 Canonical Approach

The Canonical approach looks at the Bible as the faith of the community of believers. It tries to study individual texts as part of a single plan of salvation. This method is suggested not as a substitute for historical-critical method, but as a complement to it "which enables one to come more easily to a fully theological understanding

²⁴Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 60.

²⁵Here the movement between "real author", implied author", "real reader" and "implied reader" is in play, see J.L. Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us*, 40-43. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 62.

²⁶Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 62-63.

²⁷Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 66-67.

of a biblical text in its relation to the Bible as a whole.”²⁸ In this approach two different perspectives are proposed, one centring on the final canonical form of the text, and the other paying more attention to the “canonical process” through which the canon is formed. The Canonical approach rightly balances the exaggerated focus of the diachronic study on what is supposedly original and early, and the claim that later development in the text is secondary. The document, however, points out some problems with the Canonical approach. First, it is difficult to define “canonical process.” At what point of the transmission of a text does it become canonical?²⁹ Second, the nature of the canon is different for the Jewish community, for Catholics and for Protestants. As a result, the canonical interpretation cannot be identical for all believing communities. Third, though the Church reads the Old Testament in the light of the Paschal event, it ought not mean nullifying the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament which preceded the Christian Passover. The Old Testament has its own independent relevance.³⁰

2.3.2. Approaches through Recourse to Jewish Traditions of Interpretation

In this section, the document highlights the significance of the Jewish interpretation, starting with the Septuagint, for Christian understanding of the Bible. The Old Testament reached its final form during four to five centuries prior to the Christian era. Judaism of this time provided the environment for the origin of the New Testament and the early Church. Judaism developed during these centuries various modes of biblical interpretation, such as the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in the Septuagint and into Aramaic in the targums. These translations were not literal translations but were already an interpretation. The extra-canonical Jewish literature, called apocrypha, is an important source for understanding the New Testament texts. The Jewish commentaries, grammars and lexicography are a rich resource to understand difficult passages or expressions that are rare or unique. The document endorses the pertinence of Jewish traditions for Christian interpretation when it says, “Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for

²⁸Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 68.

²⁹For a detailed discussion of this point, see Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 69-70.

³⁰Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 73-74.

the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion.”³¹

2.3.3. Approach by the History of Influence of the Text (*Wirkungsgeshichte*)

This rather recent approach has two presuppositions: a) a text becomes a literary work only insofar as it is accepted by readers by appropriating it to themselves b) this appropriation of the text, which can have individual and communitarian dimensions, can occur in various spheres such as theology, art, mysticism, etc., thus contributing to a better understanding of the text. This approach seeks to understand the development of interpretation over the course of time through the influence of the concerns readers have brought to the text. It studies also the role played by tradition in finding meaning. This method helps to access the growth of a tradition through the interaction between text, context and reader. If used with proper discernment, this approach is helpful for biblical interpretation.³²

2.4. Approaches That Use the Human Sciences

Since the Bible is the Word of God in human words, it is quite logical to think that it has been “through the psychological dispositions of various persons who composed the biblical writings that it has pursued its path.”³³ So the human sciences, especially sociology, anthropology and psychology, can contribute to a better understanding of some aspects of the biblical texts. The document dwells on three approaches under this section: the sociological approach, the approach through cultural anthropology, the psychological and the psychoanalytical approaches.

2.4.1. Sociological Approach

Since the biblical texts, like any other religious text, were formed in different life contexts (*Sitz-im-Leben*) “the scientific study of the Bible requires as exact a knowledge as is possible of the social conditions distinctive of the various milieu in which the traditions recorded in the Bible took shape.” To this end, a sociological approach is very important which broadens the biblical exegesis in many ways. However, the document points to certain dangers involved in this

³¹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 78.

³²Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 79-81.

³³Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 82.

approach, in particular, the application of sociological criteria of modern societies to societies of the distant past. Added to that, sociological analysis tends to pay more attention to the economic and institutional aspects than to the personal and religious dimensions. Having said this, however, this approach has become an important component of diachronic study of the Bible.³⁴

2.4.2. The Approach Through Cultural Anthropology

This approach comes very close to the sociological approach. The main difference lies in that while the sociological approach studies more the economic and institutional nature of a society, the anthropological approach analyses various factors in human and community life, such as language, art, myth, symbols, religion, legend, etc. This method has helped exegetes to understand the ideas of kinship in the Old Testament, the position of women in Israelite society, etc., and in the New Testament, many details of the parables can be explained. On the positive side, "this approach allows one to distinguish more clearly those elements of the biblical message that are permanent, as having their foundation in human nature, and those which are more contingent, being due to particular features of certain cultures." On the negative side, however, the approach may not be suitable to determine "what is specifically the content of Revelation" and hence, "the anthropological aspects of the Bible do not necessarily bring the reader closer to the religious and spiritual meaning of God's Word."³⁵

2.4.3. Psychological and Psychoanalytical Approaches

The document recognises that even psychological and psychoanalytical approaches can serve biblical interpretation in a positive way. They can help to understand the Bible in terms of experience of life and norms of behaviour. The document recommends a collaborative effort between exegetes and psychologists to understand the symbolic language of the Bible. However, the document warns that these methods should not serve to eliminate the reality of sin and of salvation. Care should also be taken not "to confuse spontaneous religiosity and biblical revelation or impugn the historical character of the Bible's message."³⁶

³⁴Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 83-86.

³⁵Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 87-89.

³⁶Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 91.

In concluding this section, it is well to remember that the document keeps the doors open for new approaches based on human sciences. These approaches, if used with expertise, can complement the historical-critical method.

2.5. Contextual Approaches

Under this heading the document discusses two important approaches, i.e., the contextual approach and the feminist approach, to the study of the Bible deriving from interaction of the text with the contemporary context. At times this approach is called “‘advocacy exegesis’ because it is an interpretation of the Bible used to support change in existing social or religious conditions; it is interpretation in support of a modern ideology.”³⁷

2.5.1. The Liberationist Approach

There is no other approach so critically and cautiously supported by the document. This approach is an offshoot of liberation theology, which originated as a response to the economic, social and political situations of Latin America in the 1970s, as well as taking inspiration from Vatican II’s pastoral orientation of *aggiornamento* and the Second General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America held in Medellin in 1968. This approach does not keep the Bible as archival material for academic research just to find the meaning of the text in its original context. It seeks to find patterns and paradigms from the Bible in order to find “nourishment capable of sustaining the people in its struggles and its hopes.”³⁸ The main principles of this approach are these: the God of the Bible is a God who is presented as a God who intervenes in human history to bring salvation. He is a God of the poor and cannot tolerate oppression and injustice. Exegesis cannot be neutral; rather, in the following of such a God, one needs to take sides on behalf of the poor and to be engaged in their struggles. It stresses the communal dimension of the Word of God.³⁹

The document acknowledges the undoubted value of the liberationist approach to biblical study in projecting the saving presence of God, in insisting on the communal dimension of faith and on the pressing sense of need for a liberating praxis rooted in justice and love.

³⁷Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 92.

³⁸Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 94.

³⁹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document*, 94.

However the document lists five risks involved in this approach:

1) This kind of reading is centred on narrative and prophetic texts which highlight situations of oppression which inspire a praxis leading to social change. At times, such a reading can be limited, not giving enough attention to other texts of the Bible. 2) It is true that exegesis cannot be neutral; it must also take care not to become one-sided. Moreover, social and political action is not the direct task of the exegete. 3) In certain cases, a liberationist approach to biblical interpretation is influenced by materialistic doctrines, especially by the Marxist principle of class struggle. 4) There is a tendency to bypass the more transcendent dimensions of biblical eschatology while emphasizing the earthly eschatology, i.e., the Bible is read as giving answers to modern socio-political problems. 5) Its hermeneutical presuppositions are to be clarified in order to contribute positively to the interpretation of the Bible in the Church.⁴⁰

2.5.2. The Feminist Approach

Similar to the liberationist approach, the feminist approach is also rated very cautiously by the document. This approach, developed from the movement of the liberation of women and the acquisition of their rights denied by the patriarchal societies, interprets the Bible using feminist hermeneutics. There are various forms of feminist hermeneutics: a) a radical form, which denies the authority of the Bible as it is androcentric; b) the neo-orthodox form, which accepts the Bible as prophetic and its potentiality to side with the marginalised and so with women; c) the critical form, which employs a subtle methodology to rediscover the status and role of women disciples in the Apostolic Church, which was later obscured by the New Testament writings.

This approach has no methodology of its own. It makes use of the historical-critical method. But it adds two other criteria: 1) criterion drawn from liberation theology, which is basically a hermeneutic of suspicion. Since history is written by victors, in interpreting one should look for signs beyond the written text which may reveal something quite different; 2) sociological criterion, which studies the social stratification of biblical times and the place given to women.⁴¹ The document summarises the benefits of feminist exegesis as follows:

⁴⁰Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 92-96.

⁴¹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 96-98.

Feminist exegesis has brought many benefits. Women have played a more active part in exegetical research. They have succeeded, often more than men, in detecting the presence, the significance and the role of women in the Bible, in Christian origins and in the Church. The worldview of today, because of its greater attention to the dignity of women and to their role in society and in the Church, ensures that new questions are put to the biblical text, which in turn occasions new discoveries. Feminine sensitivity helps to unmask and correct certain commonly accepted interpretations which were tendentious and sought to justify the male domination of women.⁴²

However, the feminist approach has certain dangers. 1) Since it proceeds from a preconceived judgement of male supremacy, there is the risk of interpreting the Bible tendentiously and in a debatable way. 2) Because of its hermeneutic of suspicion, it often has to reply on argument *ex silentio*. But this kind of argument may not bring reliable conclusions. 3) The attempt to reconstruct the historical scenario of early Christian living from the scanty indications in the New Testament, which is kept in oblivion by the same texts, cannot be called proper scientific exegesis. "It entails rejecting the content of the inspired texts in preference for a hypothetical construction, quite different in nature."⁴³ 4) The feminist exegesis which raises questions of power within the Church "can be useful to the Church only to the degree that it does not fall into the very traps it denounces and that it does not lose sight of the evangelical teaching concerning power as service, a teaching addressed by Jesus to all disciples, men and women."⁴⁴

Thus, the Commission's assessment of feminist exegesis together with the liberationist interpretation is cautiously positive.

2.6. Fundamentalist Approach

This is the last of the methods discussed by the Commission's document. The basic premise of this approach is that the Bible, being the Word of God, inspired and free from error, "should be read and interpreted literally in all its details." However it understands the literal reading in a narrow sense of simplistic literalist interpretation, rejecting the historical origin and development of the text. Hence, it opposes Historical-critical and any other scientific interpretation of

⁴²Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 98.

⁴³Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 101.

⁴⁴Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 101.

the Bible. Originated at the time of the Reformation, this tendency has been influential in many Christian traditions, including that of Catholics. The Commission accepts the fact that this approach's insistence on inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible is right, but its way of presenting these truths is rooted in a non-biblical ideology and dominated by rigid doctrinal points. The fundamentalist's denial of critical research, of the historical character of biblical revelation, of the linguistic and textual critical problems of the original languages, its refusal to take into account the development of Gospel tradition, its anti-Church tendency, etc., make this approach dangerous and cannot be regarded as contributing positively to the interpretation of the Scripture in the Church.⁴⁵

After discussing and evaluating the various approaches and methods for biblical interpretation, the document discusses some hermeneutical questions, especially those modern philosophical hermeneutical schools which have had their impact on biblical interpretation. Contemporary hermeneutics is very important for making the Word of God relevant for the present situation. However, the document warns of certain hermeneutical theories, such as demythologization, which are not suitable for interpreting the Bible. Any method which does not give due importance to the "person of Jesus Christ and the saving events accomplished in human history" cannot be adequate for biblical interpretation.⁴⁶

The document examines all aspects of Catholic biblical interpretation rather exhaustively, consisting of the notions like inspiration, the literal sense, the spiritual sense, the fuller sense, etc., which pertain to the understanding of the Bible.⁴⁷ The document also takes up various aspects of the "Characteristics of Catholic Interpretation"⁴⁸ and finally the "Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church."⁴⁹ Since a review of these elements in detail is beyond

⁴⁵Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 101-108.

⁴⁶Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 109-116.

⁴⁷Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 117-131.

⁴⁸Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 132-169: In this section. The document discusses biblical interpretation in the living Tradition of the Church. It includes elements like rereading the relationship between the Old Testament and New Testament, formation of the Canon, Patristic exegesis, the role of various members of the Church, the task of exegetes, relationship with other theological disciplines, etc.

⁴⁹Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission's Document*, 170-188: in this section, discussion is made of points which pertain to the assimilation of the biblical message, such as

the limit of this article, I would conclude by making an overview of the 'Task of the Exegete' according to the document.

3. The Task of the Catholic Exegete

The task of the Catholic exegete is multifaceted. It is ecclesial, for it consists in the study and explanation of Holy Scripture in a way that makes all its riches available to pastors and the faithful. It is scholarly, which demands serious research and teaching. The document gives certain guidelines to the exegete: 1) The exegetes have to respect the historical character of biblical revelation; 2) They should not forget that they are interpreting the Word of God. Their duty is not over by merely identifying the sources, the textual problems, and studying other literary aspects. This is only the preliminary step towards the actual goal of their work, i.e., the explanation of the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today; 3) Exegetes should explain the Christological, canonical and ecclesial meanings of the biblical texts; 4) They have also to explain the relationship between the Bible and the Church. That implies that not only Scripture but also the living tradition of the Church needs to be respected; 5) Since the Bible tells of God's universal plan of salvation (*Dei Verbum*, 7), the exegesis must include a universal dimension by respecting other religions and addressing the issues of the contemporary society (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1).

An important duty of exegetes is to do serious research on the Bible, but with true dialogue with theology, because "the study of the sacred page" is the very soul of theology (*Dei Verbum*, 24). Another important task is to engage in teaching the Bible in faculties of theology, seminaries and houses of study of religious orders. In order to make the teaching effective, the document proposes a two-pronged pedagogy consisting of a synthetic exposition to introduce to the student all the books of the Bible and to make an in-depth analysis of selected texts.

4. Conclusion

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's document on "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" is an important post-conciliar document with regard to the study of the Bible. It is a well-balanced and scholarly work which should be studied seriously by all

those in the Church who engage in the study of the Bible. It gives the correct orientation regarding the various methodologies, highlighting both merits and limitations of them, and the necessary elements to be included in the scientific study of a text. While upholding the need for a scientific approach to biblical interpretation, it stresses in clear terms that the Bible is a faith document, and hence the ultimate goal of every exegesis is a deepening of faith.⁵⁰ It explains many articles of *Dei Verbum* in concrete terms. The importance of this document is evident by the many references to this work in the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*. Thus, this work is an effective tool for a Catholic exegete to make a comprehensive study of the Bible, without being driven by unilateralism and together with *Verbum Domini*, can serve for a “re-evaluation”⁵¹ of Catholic biblical exegesis in the light of *Dei Verbum*.

⁵⁰See Pope John Paul II, “Exegesis is a Theological Discipline,” §1640, p.666.

⁵¹Bolin, “The Biblical Commission’s Instruction,” 784.