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Muller, Richard A.

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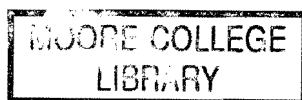
Biblical Interpretation in the Era of the Reformation

Essays Presented to David C. Steinmetz
in Honor of His Sixtieth Birthday

edited by

Richard A. Muller
John L. Thompson

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The Significance of Precritical Exegesis: Retrospect and Prospect

RICHARD A. MULLER
JOHN L. THOMPSON

ALTHOUGH SCHOLARS MAY be found who insist that objectivity is neither possible nor desirable for understanding the past, most historians find it exceedingly desirable, if never fully possible, to attempt to control — or at least to ascertain — their methodological biases and the predilections to which their culture, time, and circumstances dispose them. “Precritical exegesis,” however, like such descriptors as “gothic” and “Dark Ages,” never served anyone as a self-referential term; it was neither coined nor embraced by those supposed to have practiced it. Instead, it was spawned by an era and a method that held these earlier practitioners in some contempt; as such, the term represents a profound (and, one may add, uncontrolled) bias in the historical literature. For although the biblical exegesis with which this volume has been concerned does indeed stand prior to historical-critical exegesis, it is by no means therefore also uncritical, and to equate “precritical” with “uncritical” in this context is simply to commit an anachronism.

“Precritical” exegetes, in other words, were not bereft of method merely because they followed a different method. Nor should they be deemed insufficiently critical because their standards do not always reflect our own, as if they had no standards for self-evaluation — indeed, as if peer review and the harsh judgments of the marketplace were inoperative prior to the Enlightenment! No. They saw the text in a different light, and employed their own criteria in examination of the text. Sometimes their

concerns mirror our own; sometimes they are said to “anticipate” critical exegesis, which often is itself an uncritical comment. But despite some parallels to the criteria used by the modern exegete, precritical exegetes also exhibit substantial differences over against the methods of modern “higher criticism.”

The time has come, therefore, to move beyond the “chronological snobbery” so often displayed by modern exegesis toward its own forebears. Indeed, many of the modern histories of precritical exegesis have themselves spent far more time vilifying these earlier interpreters than understanding them. Would it not be more fruitful, and fairer, and certainly less facile, to reread this story here as not the triumph of truth over error but instead as a confrontation between divergent methods and their divergent results? The essays in the present volume have attempted to demonstrate, in various ways, that the allegedly “precritical” exegesis of the Reformation era is of more than antiquarian interest, yet to do so without simply strip-mining it to unearth elements deemed valuable sheerly because they remind us of modern “critical” history and exegesis. By way of conclusion, then, we wish to offer some reflections on the significance of precritical exegesis both in light of the limitations of historical-critical exegesis and in its own right.

* * *

The career of historical-critical exegesis in the twentieth century is fraught with irony. Historical-critical exegesis has been lionized as the key to unlocking the past, even as it has been vilified as the source of a reductionism that effectively dismisses the past by dissolving it into its various cultural, economic, social, and psychological components. Protests against such reductionism have been regularly voiced; those of Martin Kähler and Karl Barth are two of the best known, but lists both longer and more up-to-date could easily be compiled. Significantly, however, support for such a protest has more recently begun to develop out of an increasing disillusionment with historical criticism not on the part of outsiders but among those who have been most dedicated to its practice.

Moreover, the cracks that have appeared in the edifice of historical criticism reveal not only that modern exegesis is often overburdened but also that not all modern exegetes willingly dismiss their forebears. Signs of second thoughts have begun to appear, and several of the post-historical-critical hermeneutical and methodological stances of the late twentieth century have either overtly recognized the insights of older exegesis or have generated ways of understanding the text that stand in continuity more

with the precritical than with the so-called “critical” approach. For example, approaches such as “canonical” and “rhetorical” criticism have led to a new and deliberate appreciation of precritical understandings of the scope and unity of the biblical text and of the necessity of understanding the meaning of a particular passage not only in terms of its immediate context but also in light of its inclusion in the canon of Scripture.¹ On the other hand, recent hermeneutical theorists as diverse as E. D. Hirsch, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Anthony Thiselton have recognized that the interpretive task — and, therefore, the meaning and significance of the text itself — derives not only from the text in its original *Sitz im Leben* but also from the reader of the text and the tradition in which he or she stands. Consequently, much contemporary interpretation has come to admit that it can no longer discount the older tradition as an aid to the interpretation to the understanding of the text.² As Karlfried Froehlich has elsewhere summarized the issue, “In order to understand a text, its posthistory is as important as its prehistory and *Sitz im Leben*.”³

Here is where the contrast between the “critical” and “precritical” approaches could scarcely be greater. The critical approach looks to the most primitive meaning of the text, often disparaging the work of Scripture’s alleged redactors as “unenlightening,” in order to locate meaning in a precanonical and therefore also prescriptural (if not preliterate) reconstruction of the text. The larger context of the canon is lost, and the final,

1. See Gerald T. Sheppard, “Between Reformation and Modern Commentary: The Perception of the Scope of Biblical Books,” in William Perkins, *A Commentary on Galatians with Introductory Essays*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), pp. xlvi–lxxvii; Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1984), pp. 91–184; Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970); idem, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); and Gene M. Tucker, David L. Petersen, and Robert R. Wilson (eds.), *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). Also note the discussion of patterns of patristic exegesis in David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now: Contemporary Hermeneutics in the Light of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992).

2. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967); idem, *The Aims of Interpretation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1976); Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); idem, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

3. Karlfried Froehlich, “Biblical Hermeneutics on the Move,” in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 188–89.

canonical form of a biblical book drops out of the interpretive picture — as does the community that received and then treasured these writings as Scripture. Of course, whether or not this precanonical reconstruction is historically correct (itself a highly questionable conclusion!), the text that it finally posits as a historical source is no longer the church's book. Indeed, it is scarcely a book that belongs to anyone, not even to the academy, for it is "known" only to those critics who prize one particular reconstruction or hypothesis over others, and as such it may well be "owned" by no one at all. Whereas the critical approach often undermines the canon of Scripture and the role of the canon in biblical interpretation, the latter respects it and takes it with utmost seriousness. Indeed, the precritical approach assumes not only the relevance of the whole book to the interpretation of a part, but also the relevance of the whole book to a community of readers that the book itself maintains in a measure of continuity over time.

Although, as noted, there have been many challenges to the hegemony and reductionism of modern critical exegesis, for many recent historians and exegetes David Steinmetz's essay "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis" served as a catalyst in recognizing the values of the older forms of exegetical investigation. As Steinmetz observed, much contemporary exegesis assumes that "the most primitive meaning of the text is its only valid meaning, and the historical-critical method is the only key that can unlock it." By contrast, "medieval theologians defended the proposition, so alien to modern biblical studies, that the meaning of Scripture in the mind of the prophet who first uttered it is only one of its possible meanings and may not, in certain circumstances, even be its primary or most important meaning."⁴ Finally, Steinmetz also pointed out, over against the modern misconception of medieval exegetes as practitioners of unrestrained allegorical fantasy, that once the framework for understanding a text was acknowledged, medieval exegetes were just as restrained in their approach to the text as "any comparable group of modern scholars."⁵

An example of such critical restraint may be derived from the seemingly perennial controversy over how to translate Isa. 7:14. Modern critical exegetes have often assumed that the text must be translated as "a young woman shall conceive and bear a son." Accordingly, the traditional rendering of *'almah* as "virgin" is deemed erroneous, and Isaiah's words therefore

4. David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today* (April 1980), p. 28.

5. Steinmetz, "Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," p. 33.

cannot be taken in their original context as a prophecy of Christ. Yet this controversy is by no means unknown to the older exegetical tradition. To the contrary: these exegetes were well aware that “a young woman shall conceive” was textually possible, but such a reading did not in itself rule out a christological understanding of the text.⁶ They thus accepted as a matter of principle what historical-critical exegetes often dismiss as a matter of principle, namely, that the text could have more than one level of meaning. In the case at hand, the prophet, as the human author of the text, may himself have been unaware of his words’ prophetic significance; or, alternatively, he may have intentionally proffered a contemporary image as a figure of Christ’s advent.⁷ Modern exegesis adds few if any new ingredients to the treatment of this text, for the medieval and Reformation commentators are just as keen to consider the enduring problems of philology and context. Where the two groups part company is not over critical method but over critical presuppositions, indeed, over the matter of who constitutes the community of interpretation and what comprises its ethos. For the “precritical” exegetes, a truly critical understanding must include a scrutiny of the text in the light of the broader scope of Isaiah’s prophecy and of the relationship of the Old Testament to the New.

In fact, among the many differences between the fundamental assumptions governing precritical versus historical-critical exegesis, four stand forth as crucial to understanding the precritical address to the text of Scripture and the relative unity or community of exegesis in the history of the church prior to the eighteenth century. First, unlike the historical-critical exegesis of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, the older exegesis (whether of the patristic, medieval, or Reformation eras) understood the *historia* — that is, the story that the text is properly understood to recount — to be resident in the text and not under or behind it. In other words, the “story” is identified with the literal or grammatical sense. This point is made in first phrase of the old couplet about the fourfold

6. Calvin, e.g., knew of the reading offered by some of his predecessors in the Christian exegetical tradition that Isaiah referred to a child born under ordinary circumstances at the time of his prophecy, “by whom, as by an obscure picture, Christ was foreshadowed”; see his *Comm. Isaiah* 7:14 (CO 36:155; CTS 1:245).

7. This view was rejected by Calvin in favor of identifying the text as a direct prophecy of Christ. Calvin believed that the imposing character of the revelatory event in the text of the prophecy itself ruled out identifying its object as a contemporary child. Thus Calvin rejected a reading of the text related to Lyra’s double-literal sense in favor of a reading akin to Lefèvre’s spiritual-literal understanding of the Old Testament, but on the basis of a series of textual considerations.

sense of scripture: "The letter teaches what happened."⁸ And however strongly one might wish to pose the opposition between Reformation-era exegetes and their medieval predecessors concerning the three spiritual senses — allegorical, moral or tropological, and anagogical — virtually no difference can be discerned in their understanding of the literal sense.⁹

Second, quite in contrast to modern historical-critical exegesis, the older exegesis assumed that the meaning of a particular text is governed not by a hypothetically isolable unit of text having a *Sitz im Leben* distinguishable from surrounding texts or from the biblical book in which it is lodged. Instead, the meaning of a text is governed by the scope and goal of the biblical book in the context of the scope and goal of the canonical revelation of God. In other words, Christian exegetes traditionally have assumed that a divine purpose and divine authorship unite the text of the entire canon. To be sure, Reformation-era exegetes were well aware of differences in style and in content between the various biblical books. Yet they still assumed that the exegete needed to come to terms with the historical and theological unity of the whole of Scripture as an integral part of the attempt to understand a particular book or passage. The point is perhaps best illustrated by the constant use of Scripture to explain Scripture — an interpretive technique that well supported the *sola Scriptura* of the Reformation but one that was also characteristic of patristic and medieval exegesis. Thus (for example) the text of the Old Testament is illuminated by its fulfillment in the New Testament; the Psalter is illuminated by the use of the Psalter in the Gospels, the Acts, and the Epistles; the story of creation in Genesis 1 is illuminated by the first chapter of the Gospel of John; and so on.

Third, the older exegetes understood the primary reference of the literal or grammatical sense of the text not as the historical community that gave rise to the text, but as the believing community that once received

8. This oft-quoted verse reads in full: *Littera gesta docet, / quid credas allegoria, / moralis quid agas, / quo tendas anagogia*. See pp. 9 and 42, above. The same point is also made in the more precise definition of the literal meaning offered by Alexander of Hales: "Intelligitur in prima facie litterae, hoc est per significationem verbi, et sic est litteralis sive historicus; historia enim est rerum gestarum narratio quae in prima facie litterae continentur"; see Alexander of Hales, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, cap. iv, a. 4, 4 vols. (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1924-48), as cited in Ceslaus Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen âge* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), pp. 268-69.

9. See Brevard S. Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," in *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie*, ed. Herbert Donner, Robert Hanhart, and Rudolf Smend (Fs. Walther Zimmerli; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), pp. 80-93.

and continues to receive the text. The text is of interest above all because it bears a divinely inspired message to an ongoing community of faith and not because it happens also to be a repository of the religious relics of a past age. And yet this crucial preference in no way conflicts with the concomitant interest among precritical exegetes in the immediate and concrete historical context out of which a prophet or an apostle spoke. Aquinas, for example, offers as much detail concerning the historical context of Romans as most Reformation interpreters of the text; Alcuin of York ponders in detail the situation that produced the Pastoral Epistles; virtually all precritical exegetes recognized what has come to be called the “synoptic problem”;¹⁰ and many of the older exegetes recognized the redacted character of the Pentateuch and of the historical books from Joshua through 2 Kings. The precritical exegete, however, did not understand these historical or contextual issues as providing the final point of reference for the significance of the text. Or, to make the point in a somewhat different way, the precritical exegete understood the text, by its very nature as sacred text, as pointing beyond its original context into the life of the church. “Literal,” therefore, had a rather different (and fuller) connotation for the older exegetical tradition than it does for many today.

A fourth point amplifies the third. The Reformation-era exegete, like his medieval and patristic forebears, never conceived of his task as the work of an isolated scholar on the shoulders of whose opinion the entire exegetical result could be established and carried. Instead, the exegete of the Reformation era — indeed, even the Protestant exegete of the later sixteenth-century, who held as a matter of doctrine that Scripture was ultimately self-authenticating as the highest norm of theology — understood the interpretive task as an interpretive conversation in the context of the historical community of belief. Modern Protestant understandings of *sola Scriptura* have often obscured and caricatured this characteristic of older exegesis by individualizing exegesis in the name of freedom of conscience. Admittedly, the Reformers considered the biblical text to be clear and authoritative in itself, capable of

10. Thus Calvin, in his *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* (CO 45:3-4; CTS 1:xxxviii-xxxix), weighs in against the reliance of Mark on Matthew. Matthew Poole (*A Commentary on the Holy Bible* [1683-85; repr. 3 vols., London: Banner of Truth, 1962], 3:147), however, indicates in the “argument” to his commentary on Mark that the Evangelist “seemeth much to have compared notes with Matthew, and hath a few things which Matthew hath not,” even as he puzzles with no result over the possible sources of Luke (*ibid.*, p. 185). The same concern is voiced by Hugo Grotius’s *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum* (Leipzig, 1755), pp. 11, 13, 591, 593, 674-75 (Matthew, cap. 1, praef.; Mark 1:1, in loc.; Luke 1:1, in loc.); there, Matthean priority is argued, with Mark and Luke both relying in part on Matthew.

being interpreted both grammatically and canonically by the comparison of difficult passages with clearer passages. But interpretation, for them, was not a conversation between a lonely exegete and a hermetically sealed text! The preceding essays have amply documented many of the resources used in the sixteenth century, from medieval works such as the *Glossa ordinaria*, to Nicholas of Lyra's *Postilla*, as well as to individual commentaries by exegetes as diverse as Bonaventure, Aquinas, and Denis the Carthusian. The Reformation of the church implied neither a refusal to examine such works nor a consistently negative response to them; indeed, the Reformers shared with earlier eras a vision of interpretation that was communal in nature, insofar as it drew on the "cloud of witnesses" comprised of the church and its exegetes throughout the ages. In other words, the older exegesis assumed that the exegete lived and functioned not as part of an academic guild but as a "doctor" or teacher of the church in a long line of churchly teachers. As in the case of the older dogmatic theology — whether of the patristic, medieval, or Reformation era — the notion of new, original, or individualistic interpretation was both foreign and alarming to precritical exegesis. Reformation exegetes were also quite capable of discovering their predecessors' errors and of offering corrections based on more careful philology, or on more accurate geography, or on more accurate knowledge of cultural backgrounds — all as part of their commitment to an ongoing exegetical conversation. By the same token, modern exegesis has become a far lonelier task than it ever was for these older exegetes.

Other contrasts between precritical and modern exegesis could be isolated, but the lesson to be drawn here is, once again, simply that precritical exegesis is not necessarily uncritical in its methods or values. While it is often appropriate to recognize that traditionary readings of the text are erroneous on the grounds offered by the historical-critical method, we ought also to recognize that the conclusions offered by historical-critical exegesis may themselves be quite erroneous on the grounds provided by the exegesis of the patristic, medieval, and Reformation periods. We further ought to acknowledge that the higher-critical result may not be capable of speaking to the living community of belief, whereas the precritical result addresses the living community of belief directly. That historical-critical exegetes dismiss many traditional questions out of hand may well say more about their own context and constituency than about the questions themselves. And that such questions have lately begun to arise anew even within the guild of historical-critical exegetes surely indicates that the valuation of the text as Scripture that is expressed by the older exegesis has never been fully extinguished.

By all accounts, the sixteenth century marked an epoch in the history of exegesis, for the combined force of the philological and textual interests of Renaissance humanism and the theologically critical, scriptural demands of the Reformation led to a flowering of editions, translations, and interpretations of the biblical text. The essays assembled here, however, have also contributed to the conclusion that many of the generalizations found in much of the older scholarship concerning this epochal event have misunderstood its nature and character. In particular, the “standard” English-language studies — ranging from Farrar’s well-known *History of Interpretation*¹¹ to the *Cambridge History of the Bible* — have typically claimed a dramatic disjuncture between medieval and Reformation patterns of interpretation, and a similar contrast between the exegetical work of the Reformation and that of the post-Reformation era. Indeed, it was Farrar’s judgment that the medieval church was so clogged with absurd allegories as to offer Reformation exegetes little useful precedent, and the Protestant orthodox were so similarly preoccupied with dogmatic system as to have virtually no relation to the biblical interpretation of the Reformation era. In Farrar’s view, shared in large part by the third volume of the *Cambridge History*,¹² the Reformation appears as a rather isolated outpost of literal, grammatical exegesis on the difficult (but now vindicated) path toward the historical-critical method.¹³

But when the history of exegesis is examined with the sort of care and detail that this volume has sought to exemplify, these long-standing caricatures lose their punch. Medieval exegesis cannot, in fact, be reduced to allegorism. Moreover, the assumptions underlying the fourfold pattern of exegesis did not simply disappear, whether in the later Middle Ages with

11. Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation* (New York: Dutton, 1886; repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961).

12. But note the excellent essays by Raphael J. Loewe, “The Medieval History of the Latin Vulgate” (*CHB* 2:102-54), and Beryl Smalley, “The Bible in the Medieval Schools” (*CHB* 2:197-220).

13. Such an approach to the history of exegesis is suspiciously similar to the timeworn caricature of the Reformation as a sudden rupture with medieval superstition — and akin to the frequent claim that later Protestantism “forgot” the insights of the Reformers and reverted to a scholastic dogmatism, just in time to be chastened by the protests of the Pietists. But when placed into a larger historiographical context, the approaches of Farrar and the *Cambridge History* to Reformation-era exegesis are easily seen to be defective, if only because their understandings of precritical exegesis were tailored entirely to the standards of modern historical-critical method. See Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” pp. 27-38; and idem, “John Calvin on Isaiah 6: A Problem in the History of Exegesis,” *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 156-70.

the rise of various alternative patterns of interpretation or with the humanists' and the Reformers' emphasis on the literal meaning of the text in the sixteenth century. On the one hand, not only does medieval exegesis manifest a considerable variety of interpretive patterns, but it also displays what can only be called an increasing interest in both the text and its literal sense and thereby situates itself along a trajectory pointing toward the Reformation rather than away from it.¹⁴ On the other hand, when the medieval fourfold method is understood less under the general rubric of allegory (which is, of course, a misunderstanding of the method) and more as an attempt to express that — beyond the basic literal and grammatical reading of the text — Scripture also speaks to the teaching, to the morality, and to the expectation of the believing community, then the continuity of intention between the various medieval approaches and the methods of the Reformers also becomes far more obvious.¹⁵ Naturally, this is not to imply that one cannot also distinguish between patristic and medieval exegesis, between medieval and Renaissance exegesis, between Renaissance and Reformation exegesis, or between Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant exegesis. As demonstrated by several of the essays in this volume, there are such differences, and they can be substantial. Nonetheless, as also demonstrated, often by these very same essays, there remain continuities of assumption about the sacred text, its scope, and its import that unite the exegetes of these several eras despite the variety of their methods and results.

* * *

What is the value or significance of precritical exegesis for today? For those who stand within the Christian tradition, "precritical" exegesis is at once strange and yet strangely familiar. This is as it should be. To trade the

14. This assertion is amply corroborated by the best studies in the history of exegesis, including Henri De Lubac, *Exégèse mediaevale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959-64); Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen âge*; James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964); and Gillian Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984-85).

15. A similar parallel could be traced between the formats employed by medieval and Reformation interpreters. Accordingly, the medieval fondness for a running gloss accompanied by more detailed scholia or postils not only carried over into the practices of the young Luther but also found echoes in the tendency of Reformers such as Bullinger and Musculus to offer both a running commentary on the text and a series of specific (if excursive) doctrinal *loci* developed from the text.

traditionary exegesis for a mess of historical-critical pottage would assuredly leave one hungry in the long run, for the “meaning” of Scripture per se is not the goal of historical criticism. And yet to refuse to learn from historical-criticism would distance one from the tradition and from traditional and precritical exegetes still more, for they, too, are concerned about matters of historical context, intention, and philology. If the several authors contributing to this volume are correct in the view that the older exegesis has been misunderstood and misinterpreted, and if, moreover, they are correct in their assumption that exegesis is a churchly exercise that must take place in a such a way that particular texts are understood nonreductionistically — that is to say, understood in their immediate context and in their canonical relationships, indeed, understood in terms both of their original grammatical meaning and of their historical reception in the ongoing community of belief — then “precritical” exegesis may well offer some invaluable guidance for how historical-critical exegesis may be employed alongside and in the service of a more holistic and ecclesial approach to the text of Scripture. To appreciate the significance and value of precritical exegesis does not require a naive faith in the infallibility of its findings, much less a Luddite or antiquarian mentality. For it is far less the specific findings or positions of precritical exegesis that should command attention than its commitment to an exegesis at once careful (one could easily say “critical”) and yet also contemporary. Precritical exegesis was not always correct in its assertions, nor certainly univocal in its views; but it was always concerned to locate biblical exegesis within the community of those who valued the text as more than a curiosity, indeed, as inspired Scripture. For moderns and postmoderns alike, then, the traditionary path of “precritical” exegesis may well be the only track that joins the present-day interpreter to the sacred text and that brings the sacred text forward again to us as having significance, not only for the dead but also for the living.