

The Transcendent Mystery of God's Word

A Critical Synthesis of Antioch and Alexandria

Edited by

John W. Martens and Paul V. Niskanen



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To Ben F. Meyer (1926–1995)

*A biblical scholar who strived in all of his work
to bring together Antioch and Alexandria for the sake
of the proclamation of the Gospel*

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Abbreviations

AASF	Annales Academiae Scientiarum Fennicae
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACCSOT	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament
ACNT	Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament
AGJU	Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
AncB	Anchor Bible
ANRW	Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
ATANT	<i>Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments</i>
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BAC	The Bible in Ancient Christianity
BDAG	Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> , 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000)
BTCB	Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CThFS	Catholic Theological Formation Series
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> , 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019)
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CM	Christianity in the Making
ConBOT	<i>Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series</i>
CSCO	Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium
CSHB	Critical Studies in the Hebrew Bible
<i>Dial.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>
DtrN	“nomistic” Deuteronomist
ECCo	Eerdmans Critical Commentary

ABBREVIATIONS

EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
EKV	Essener Kulturwissenschaftliche Vorträge
FaCh	Fathers of the Church
FoFaNT	Foundation and Facets, New Testament
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GCS	Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte
<i>HTKNT</i>	<i>Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures
Int.	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
LBPT	I libri biblici, Primo Testamento
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEC	Library of Early Christianity
LiRo	Le livre et le rouleau
LSJ	<i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , ed. Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1940)
LXX	Septuagint
MBS	Message of Biblical Spirituality
MFC	Message of the Fathers of the Church
MoBi	Monde de la Bible (Paris)
MT	Masoretic Text
ML.B	Museum Lessianum, Section Biblique
MLT	Mowbrays Library of Theology
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NPNF 1	<i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , First Series, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1887–1894)
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NTLi	New Testament Library
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
NTS	New Testament Studies
NTSI	New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel
OTL	Old Testament Library
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
PaThSt	Paderborner Theologische Studien

PG	Patrologia Graeca, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1857–1866)
PilNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PL	Patrologia Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris: J.-P. Migne, 1841–1855)
<i>Plant.</i>	Philo of Alexandria, <i>De plantatione</i>
<i>Praescr.</i>	Tertullian, <i>De praescriptione haereticorum</i>
PTMS	Princeton Theological Monograph Series
QD	Quaestiones Disputatae
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SAE	Studien zur Adventistischen Ekklesiologie
SBAB	Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBMat	Studia Bíblica Matritensia
SC	Sources Chrétiennes
SECT	Sources of Early Christian Thoughts
SHJ	Studying the Historical Jesus
SMWTUSK	Studia i Materiały Wydziału Teologicznego Uniwersytetu Śląskiego w Katowicach
<i>SNTSMS</i>	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SP	Sacra Pagina
SPNT	Studies on Personalities of the New Testament
TB	Theologische Bücherei
TC	Traditio Christiana
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964)
T.Jud.	<i>Testament of Judah</i>
TKNT	Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
T.Levi	<i>Testament of Levi</i>
TU	Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur
VD	Verbum Domini (series)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WGRWSup	Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

Introduction

The Transcendent Mystery of God's Word

John W. Martens and Paul V. Niskanen

Introduction

In June 2022, a small number of biblical scholars who teach in Roman and Byzantine Catholic seminaries and universities throughout North America, Africa, and Europe met at the Alverna Center in Winona, Minnesota, sponsored by the Monsignor Jerome D. Quinn Endowment for Biblical Studies at The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity and the University of St. Thomas (St. Paul, Minnesota), and its director Fr. Kevin Zilverberg. The Quinn Endowment allowed us to bring scholars to Minnesota to consider the question of how to express the transcendent mystery of God's Word in current seminary teaching of biblical studies. The late professor Ben F. Meyer believed that the "most pressing exigence in biblical hermeneutics today is for a critical synthesis of Antioch and Alexandria," which for him represented not precisely the schools of the ancient Church, but two stances toward the Bible.¹ Today's biblical studies is sensitive to historical consciousness, but so often closed to the presence of the divine that suffuses the Bible. This stance Meyer labeled "Antioch," without intending to dismiss the value of historical study of the Bible or the value of the ancient school. But Meyer knew that for biblical studies to do its proper work it needed to be theological and for it to be theological it needed to be attentive to "the transcendent mystery of salvation" that permeates God's Word, not

1. Ben F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, PTMS 17 (San Jose, CA: Pickwick, 1989), 33.

just attentive to historical context or development.² Such openness to the mystery of the saving function of Scripture Meyer designated “Alexandria,” which represents not precisely the allegorical methods of the ancient school but that school’s openness to the mysterious depth of Scripture that transcends historical time and place.

The articles which appear in this book were prepared for and presented at the conference in June 2022. Each scholar who presented at the conference was asked to consider how biblical studies might in its current context attend to both Antioch and Alexandria, for the benefit of seminarians and other university students and for the benefit of the Church and the world, by examining a biblical passage or passages in light of these two orientations to Scripture. Before appearing in this book, each article went through a rigorous process of double-blind peer review in order to meet the highest academic standards, and not every paper presented at the conference appears in this volume. Prior to summarizing each of these papers, it is necessary to offer a bit more background on Ben F. Meyer’s project and accomplishments and why he was chosen as a means by which we would consider ways to invigorate the biblical text for students, preachers, and other students of the Bible today.

A Sketch of Meyer’s Project

In a series of books and articles, written from 1979 to his death in 1995, especially *The Aims of Jesus*, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, and his entry on “Jesus Christ” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Ben F. Meyer undertook a project through which he intended to make clear for biblical scholars the philosophical underpinnings of historical research on the Bible and biblical interpretation.³ Though a Roman Catholic biblical scholar, influenced deeply by the work of Bernard Lonergan, SJ, Meyer’s work was ecumenical and intended for all scholars of goodwill. At the heart of his project was his understanding that history, valuable in itself as a tool for understanding the literal sense of the Bible and reconstructing the contexts in which the biblical texts emerged, was not up to the task of grappling with the depth of the mystery of God’s Word and the questions of faith. For that

2. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 33.

3. Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), reprinted in 2002 with an Introduction by N. T. Wright, PTMS 48 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2002); *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1994), reprinted in 2016 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016); “Jesus Christ,” 773–96 in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

Antioch was not sufficient, and Alexandria would need to be brought into the equation. But how to balance Antioch and Alexandria?

The first step was understanding the process and nature of interpretation. As Meyer conceived it, interpretation has limits, for it “does not do everything. . . . It does not try to do all theology, but limits itself to the single question: what is the intended sense of the text?”⁴ For Meyer, seeking the intended sense of the biblical text was an ongoing and complex process that took seriously advances in textual criticism, philology, historical criticism, and new methods of analysis. Meyer’s interpretive program of interpretation rejected all forms of fideism, whether religious or secular, that attempt to reduce the Bible’s meaning to one single thing or nothing at all. It takes seriously all the concerns of the text, which, with respect to the Bible, includes spiritual and religious meanings that are often difficult to determine.

Theology is always at the heart of the continuing exegetical task because this is what the biblical texts demand. The attempts of religious fideists to read the Bible “in the plain sense” (and by this Meyer did not mean the fuller sense of literal that Thomas Aquinas and other medieval scholars envisioned⁵), and postmodern attempts to jettison the theological realities of the Bible and its ultimate meaning, both fail in Meyer’s eyes as either “a flight from interpretation” or “a flight from the intended sense of the text.”⁶ What Meyer sought was the transcendent mystery of God’s Word, utilizing all the tools of the scholar’s toolbox in order to open up Scripture for its divine purpose: to make the name of Jesus known and loved. This takes us, however, beyond technique and into the heart not of interpretation but of the interpreter.

Goodwill Comes First

How does one approach the Bible? With goodwill, said Meyer. With openness. With a willingness to hear. Yet, Meyer did not feel that approaching the text with goodwill was the end of the story, as he ended the phrase “goodwill comes first” with an interesting corollary, “but suspicion has its uses.”⁷ The text was not the end of the story, but a part of the story: the interpreter, whose questions are raised in conjunction with the text, is the necessary completion of the story. And this is where we begin, with the subject asking questions of the object.

The question of the relation of the subject to the object has been at the

4. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 49.

5. On this comparison, consult Paul Niskanen’s article in this volume.

6. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 94–101; *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 28–29.

7. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 78–96.

heart of a shift in interpretation ascendant since the Enlightenment in biblical studies, and other areas of study dependent upon interpretation of texts. At the heart of the Enlightenment project was an attempt to free texts from their ecclesial, dogmatic, and doctrinal constraints, imposed on the New Testament—said these newly freed interpreters—by the Church and its interpreters. Thus liberated, the text would be available to a study unencumbered by the presuppositions of the Church. The New Testament would be available in its original, pristine form for the practitioners of *religionswissenschaft* or *religionsgeschichte*. These scientific experts would guide the interpretation of the New Testament, and would allow modern interpreters access, in an objective manner, to the meaning of the text.

Such a scientific method, with the objectivity construed as inherent in the interpreter, was bound to fail. The most searching critique is that such objective interpreters failed to see themselves as bringing their own presuppositions and biases to the Bible, that their scientific method was often dependent upon their subjective stance that rejected the truth of the Bible a priori. The next stage was a series of postmodern thinkers arguing that the issue was not one of objectively reading the Bible but of placing the biases, interests, and tendencies of the interpreting subject front and center. Now the newly freed subject could read the Bible with new questions and new methods, guided by the different presuppositions and biases inherent in every interpreter. The subjectivity of the interpreter became not something to avoid, but something to explore, embrace, and unleash. Objectivity was passé, subjectivity the new vanguard. In practice, then, the Bible means what any interpreter wants it to mean, which has led to questions currently about why should we even focus on the Church's canon as Scripture, that is, why should this collection of texts take precedence over other ancient Jewish and Christian texts? Lost in these developments was often the sense and meaning of the Bible as God's Word for humanity.

Meyer's Response

Meyer's response to the issue of objectivity and subjectivity in interpretation steered a middle course. He placed the subject, the interpreter, front and center but insisted that the subject was moored by the biblical text. The text was the necessary limit on the interpreter, for Meyer believed that the text demanded to be interpreted in light of its intended sense. Not every interpretation was valid, for the Bible offered the necessary checks and balances on flights of fancy, or, more significant for him, on flights from the intended sense of the text. Objectivity resided in the text, not the interpreter. But there was an additional condition for biblical interpretation that can extract the salvific

mystery of the Bible, which is as important as establishing the objectivity of the text itself: the stance of the subject, the interpreter, toward the biblical texts.

Every act of interpretation is a meeting between object and subject, and subjectivity was all to the good, but subjectivity needs to meet the demands of the Bible. There are two ways to determine, in general, the interpreter's worthiness for the task: one, was the interpreter willing to manage *all* of the *data* found in the text, not just Antioch or not just Alexandria, or did the interpreter reject or ignore passages or meanings which were not amenable to their personal understanding or beliefs; and two, was the interpreter approaching the text from a stance of *goodwill*, that is, a willingness to hear and be formed by the religious and spiritual content of the Bible. Interpreters today often see *suspicion* as the controlling dynamic for reading biblical texts, not *goodwill*.

In Meyer's interpretive understanding, the role of every interpreter was balanced by the objective nature of the biblical texts, while still allowing free rein to subjectivity formed by the teaching of the Church and the Bible, which today must include careful use of modern methods of interpretation. Key to this balancing act for Meyer were cognitional processes, derived from Bernard Lonergan's study of human operations, which each person, so every interpreter, ought to bring to their tasks: attentiveness, reasonableness, intelligence, and responsibility.⁸ Was the interpreter willing to use these cognitional operations to grasp the "thing" of the text, the referent, or *die Sache*? When the interpreter meets and knows *die Sache*, the intended meaning, the intended sense of a text heaves into view.⁹

In the case of the Bible, the "thing" of the text is God's saving acts in history culminating in Jesus Christ. What if the interpreter does not know *die Sache*? What if the interpreter is not aware of "the thing of the text," whether it represents Antioch or, more likely, Alexandria? This, Meyer argued, was at the heart of many problems in biblical studies. The result of this inability to meet with the thing of the Bible was the subsequent attempt to jettison the data which the interpreter did not find sympathetic. What this has meant in practice, Meyer claimed, was that many interpreters today, though in tune with themselves as subjects, share one thing in common with interpreters from

8. See, for examples, Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 3–25, 153–73; *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 173–44, 271–316, 319–47.

9. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 96–104; *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 91–92, 178. This does not mean that someone with such a vital relationship to the "thing" understands all texts or that the process does not demand intensive work. It is not a magic trick to understanding but demands ongoing and sustained work.

the Enlightenment, who saw themselves functioning with a transcendent sort of objectivity: both groups are unable or unwilling to deal with data dealing with, for instance, the miracles, exorcisms, healings, and the resurrection.¹⁰ For scholars of the Enlightenment this all could be cast off as an ancient relic, unable to be synthesized with a new science, ancient primitivism that had crept into the heart of modernity; for postmodern thinkers, these data are generally ignored—probably laboring more than they think under these same Enlightenment presuppositions that reject the work of God in the world—and other questions are asked, which often have nothing to do with the religious questions and answers the text is asking and offering. Often, Meyer felt, analysis took the place of interpretation as a “flight” from interpretation.¹¹

The reason for such flight was due to the interpreter’s “alienation” from the Bible, and analysis could allow one to sidestep interpretive issues instead of handling them head-on.¹² Meyer’s most controversial stance on interpretation is his position that what might be required for the interpreter is conversion. By conversion, Meyer argued for the need for an interpreter to be “in tune” with the world of the text.¹³ As it does not help a musician to come to a piece of music without any sense of melody or rhythm, and as it does not help a painter to have no stance one way or another toward the use of color and shade, so it does not help an interpreter to come to a theological text without any sense of the theological concerns at stake in the Bible or without a sense of goodwill toward the “thing” of the text.¹⁴ This stance marks, in our words, a “great divide” in biblical studies, and gets to the heart of interpretive fault lines and the inability to speak to one another in many cases: it is not precisely a matter of methods, but whether one accepts the Bible as the Word of God.

If conversion to *die Sache*, the “thing” of the Bible, is needed, then the great divide is a philosophical and theological issue, not one of historical methods and scholarly tools. What it does imply is that someone who is “in tune” with the Bible takes seriously the theology of the Bible, and takes seriously all of the biblical data and the historical doctrines of the Church that developed with and from the earliest Church’s documents.¹⁵ Theology must be in view at all times, because that is the concern of the Bible. What also guides the interpreter, then, is the tradition of the Church, doctrinally and more broadly in terms of the

10. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 95–110.

11. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 28–29.

12. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 177–78.

13. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 57–75.

14. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 77–96.

15. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 93–110.

history of interpretation, from the New Testament to the Church Fathers, to the medieval period, and beyond.

If an interpreter's horizons are limited, unable to grasp *die Sache* with which the Bible is concerned, they will be unable to grasp the biblical text or interpret it fully. It is worth citing Meyer at length on this matter:

It may be that the problem of the interpreter is not met by resources such as encyclopedias, handbooks, Oxford Dictionaries of one kind or another, and that what is needed is neither information nor the solution of a problem, but the cure of a blind spot, which might be massive. The cure might lie (it often does lie) only in a conversion—religious, moral, or intellectual. The inadequate interpreter probably will be unaware of the need of conversion; so the conversion may never be forthcoming. A Ph.D. might be a union card of sorts, but it does not guarantee that its holders are able to measure up to the texts of the New Testament in the sense that they are able to figure out what such texts mean and how they mean it, or (if others have figured it out) to catch on to what others say such texts mean.¹⁶

Conversion, as Meyer sees it, in debt to Lonergan, is

a revolutionary transition from one horizon to another. Intellectual conversion is a transition from the horizon of cognitional myth (knowing is something like seeing) to that of transcendental method made fully thematic and affirmed. Moral conversion is a transition from the horizons of satisfactions to the existential primacy of values. Religious conversion is a transition from the horizon of this-worldly commitments to the primacy in one's life of the love of God.¹⁷

Meyer states simply: "The theologian lacking in religious and moral conversion cannot function."¹⁸ This is the key to Alexandria.

Meyer's claim that "conversion" was necessary for the interpreter did not rule out historical questions, nor the methods and tools of historical-critical and other modern methods, as the role of Antioch in interpretation can never be ignored, but he was insistent that such methods and tools were not the end of the process. The end of the process was to interpret biblical texts, singly, and so come to an overarching sense of the spiritual meaning of the Bible and its salvific concerns as a whole. Meyer felt that there was always room for more questions, there was always a place for new insights, there were always contours and trajectories to any given text of the Bible not before considered. But

16. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 93.

17. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 69–70.

18. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 70.

all of this was in the service of determining the theological import of the individual biblical texts and the Bible as a whole. Our goal in this volume is to bring some of his insights to bear in the papers you find here.

Summary of Papers

In the first chapter, “Letter or Spirit? Toward a Testimonial Exegesis,” Luis Sánchez-Navarro begins by noting that Alexandria and Antioch are sometimes presented as a false dichotomy. Neither is a pure model, and the two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Scripture presents us with “sacred letters” and is (in the words of Joseph Ratzinger) “the essential witness of revelation.” Sánchez-Navarro answers the question in his title by asserting that neither letter nor spirit exists without the other. But even more than this, he argues that a truly critical exegesis must also take into account a third reality: the believing community that has experienced the revelation of God. Scripture is not only a human word and a divine word, it is essentially an ecclesial word.

In chapter 2, Paul Niskanen also considers the sometimes overly simplistic opposition between Alexandria and Antioch. The lines between literal and allegorical readings are not as sharp as some would imagine. Working with Meyer’s “intended sense” of Scripture, which in itself is closely related to Aquinas’s literal sense, Niskanen argues that this literal sense of Scripture is itself frequently polyvalent. He illustrates this point with examples of theologically weighty texts that defy a simple or straightforward “literal” reading. The very language and imagery of biblical texts invite an encounter with the transcendent that cannot always be neatly bound or classified according to our exegetical categories.

Joseph Briody, in chapter 3, turns to a closer examination of typology. He argues that typology can serve as a model for Catholic biblical exegesis. As an extension of the literal sense that grounds allegory, typology can respect the Old Testament in itself as well as in relation to the New. Using the Deuteronomistic History as an example, Briody shows how a sound exegesis of the historical-literal sense can lead to a rich theological interpretation.

In chapter 4, Hryhoriy Lozinskyy gives a close examination of a particular text, Moses’s flight to Midian in Exodus 2:11–22, in order to analyze the different interpretive techniques of Alexandria and Antioch. In this case study, he looks at Moses’s flight into Midian within the context of the book of Exodus as well as from the perspectives of Alexandrian and Antiochene exegetes. Finally, he also considers its use in the Byzantine liturgical tradition. Each in their own ways, allegory, *theoria* and liturgy all strive to read this text in the light of Christ.

Chapters 5 and 6 take us to the book of Psalms. First, Maurizio Girolami examines how ancient interpretive techniques that were applied to the book of Psalms (especially the prosopological method) are still very much relevant for contemporary and future biblical exegesis. While ancient exegetical techniques can sometimes appear dated or irrelevant to us, their questions and concerns regarding the meaning of texts are very much our own. Next, Juana L. Manzo compares Alexandrian and Antiochian exegesis of a single text, Psalm 75. While noting a certain overlap in themes and theological content, Manzo also perceives that a critical piece may be missing from both schools, pointing toward the need for a greater synthesis.

In chapter 7, Marcin Kowalski also weighs the merits and shortcomings of both Antioch and Alexandria while examining the baptism of Jesus. While contemporary exegesis might separate the historical-critical and theological approaches that these cities represent (privileging the former), Kowalski argues that the latter is not a dubious addition. The union of Antioch and Alexandria is essential to discerning the full meaning of the biblical narrative.

Finally, Isacco Pagani reckons with Meyer's claim that much biblical scholarship lacks "the responsiveness to the note of definitive fulfillment" that Scripture offers. Pagani's analysis of "fulfilment" statements in John 13–17 is based on a careful reading of the Gospel texts and is illumined by narrative theory. Pagani's paper is a fitting conclusion to this study, as he asks, like Meyer, that we continue to work toward "a more in-depth exploration" of the relationship between Antioch and Alexandria, "following different paths" of examining personal and collective memory, narrative memory, and the memory of the Scripture of Israel.

Conclusion

These papers respond to, engage with, and build on Meyer's insights from the late twentieth century. Meyer stood against what he saw as the positivistic debris of the Enlightenment that saw history in its narrowest form, as simply facts available to the five senses. This sort of historical stance decided in advance that such things as prophecy, miracles, healings, and such could not have taken place, and so the historian could exclude these from the data a priori. He called this "an indiscriminating ideological stance" that has "had a deeply negative impact on the exegetical and historical appropriation of the New Testament."¹⁹ Again, on this matter he needs to be cited at length:

19. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 92.

INTRODUCTION

If the historian of religions cannot entertain the meaningfulness of “saving acts in history,” then he cannot envisage miracle as a concrete possibility. There follows this dilemma. It is his business to give an account of data en route to answering questions about matters of fact. Now, in fact, he has no basis on which to exclude miracle *a priori* from either the data or the answer. On the other hand, he has pledged himself as historian not to envisage the possibility of miracles. He accordingly finds himself in a situation which does not allow him as historian to come to grips with history, for he cannot know whether or not the possibility he dutifully omits to consider offers the best account of a given constellation of data.²⁰

If this residue of the Enlightenment still exists among biblical interpreters in their attacks on Christian tradition and the biblical texts and the meaning found in them by the Church and its interpreters, it is not to be found in this volume. Meyer bemoaned biblical interpretation that

trails off into the capricious, thwarted by absorption in pretentious or unpretentious trivia. This includes, on the part of literary scholars who for whatever reason find themselves with nothing very compelling, or even definite, to do, a misplaced hankering to break out into creativity and inventiveness. There follow declarations of independence from the tyrannies of philology and history, from the merely intended sense of the text, and finally from the text itself. But faddism, and particularly the faddism that hinges on forms of alienation, is notoriously ineffective occupational therapy.²¹

Yet Meyer traced this alienation back to the beginnings of biblical scholarship:

Modern biblical studies took shape as twin streams, one of continuity, the other of discontinuity, with biblical religion. . . . Both streams or wings have made tangible contributions to technical progress. The differences between them have always been hermeneutical. The strong point of the tradition of discontinuity (dogma-free scholarship) has been its resolutely critical stance. Its weakness has lain in the sometimes latent, sometimes patent, alienation pervading its critical distance from the biblical text. Conversely, the strong point of continuity (religious and theological conservatism) has been its connaturality with the text; its weakness, a propensity to harmonize divergences and to underestimate the discontinuities between past and present. The ideal is somehow to comprehend these extremes and occupy

20. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*, 102.

21. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 87.

the space between them, to temper the warmth of connaturality with the coolness of critical distance.²²

Our goal at our conference in Winona and in this volume of papers collected from that conference was and is to “occupy the space between” extremes, by bringing “dialectic” to bear on the judgment of biblical interpretation and theology, that is, by occupying both Antioch and Alexandria. Meyer felt that biblical scholarship was often

a flood of monographs and articles that divide into two streams, with plentiful dry land between them. The one stream is the mass of positivist-tintured works—sober, cautious, timid—sometimes meant to shore up religious assurance; the other stream, reminiscent of the “chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Tim. 6), is up-to-the-minute, indulgent toward bright ideas, original and hungry for acknowledgment as such, tempted to be all-explanatory. The large middle ground between these streams ought to be flooded with the work of an international, interconfessional community of scholars, products with a plausible claim on being acknowledged as intelligent, reasonable, and responsible. The ascertainment that this is far from true should prompt our best efforts to bring about improvement and progress.²³

It is our hope that in our work at our conference and in this volume, we have helped to bring about some improvement and progress by occupying a large part of that middle ground, by drawing inspiration from the theological truth of God's Word, intended for our salvation, and by demonstrating how to draw on both Antioch, with its careful attention to historical detail and modes of interpretation, and Alexandria, which highlights the depth of God's Word. It is our hope that this volume will encourage others to produce scholarship for our students, our colleagues, and our parishes that helps make the transcendent mystery of God's Word come alive.

22. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, 196–97.

23. Meyer, *Reality and Illusion in New Testament Scholarship*, 126.