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Where is the Scribe?

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We begin with a question: "Where is the scribe?" The communities that hear and read the words of Scripture have long had scholars and interpreters to help them understand the meaning of those words. Where do we find the critical scholars of Scripture in the church of the twenty-first century? Who is listening to them, and how do we hear their words? These questions frame a pressing concern about what the church may learn and utilize from critical scholarship as it remains faithful to its engagement with the gospel as given in Scripture. The relationship between church practice and critical study is clearly vexed and problematic, and has been so for a very long time. Yet in my view there have arisen in recent decades new perspectives, new ways of engaging faith and criticism that offer a constructive and hopeful way of moving forward.

I

It is important to see that the rise of modern critical scholarship, as a university project in Germany and England, arose in the modern period of the Enlightenment, in the wake of the Reformation. Two matters may strike us as crucial about this beginning point of modern criticism. First, it was in the wake of the Reformation and was, for a very long time, a Protestant project. Indeed, Roman Catholics did not participate in historical critical work until after 1943, and Jews took up the work of criticism variously in the modern period with Benedict Spinoza commonly cited as a beginning point. Reformation leaders sought to champion the free, unfettered Bible as the word of God, free of church domination in the service of clergy power. By the seventeenth century, however, both Lutheran and Calvinist traditions had been largely reduced to a scholasticism in which the freedom of

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the gospel had been reduced to absolutist theological formulations. The slogans of the Reformation were now used to work against the claims of the Reformation, the reduction of the biblical gospel to an absolutist package of doctrinal truth.

Second, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the option of Enlightenment rationality was utilized by liberal academics who found the alternative of "orthodoxy" unconvincing and unbearable. In the Old Testament, that initial question led to a challenge of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, and in the New Testament David Strauss began to rethink the testimony about the life of Jesus. In both cases, the critique honed in on the central narrative of faith, and began to challenge the absolute claims of the primal narrative. It is impossible to understand the critical enterprise except as a response to such absolutizing claims made by the church; critical scholars, now empowered by autonomous reason that was impatient with the unquestioned claims of "the tradition," began to think and study outside the box of church authority.

In the Old Testament, the project reached its culmination in the late nineteenth century with the definitive work of Julius Wellhausen, who summarized over a century of scholarship with the famous "documentary hypothesis" about JEDP.[1] That hypothesis was a combination of two very different claims. First, it was judged possible and necessary to identify different documents (sources, layers) in the Pentateuch that came from different periods and reflected different historical circumstances. Second, the documents were said to be credibly arranged in an interpretive sequence that moved from primitive to sophisticated, from polytheistic to monotheistic, from magical to ethical. That is, scholarship imposed an evolutionary schema on the text that continues to be commonly popular even now in the church as one way of explaining away what is embarrassing in the text. The effect of the two-pronged argument was the conclusion that (a) no document could claim absolute authority, (b) every document or source reflects a human perception in a moment of history, and (c) the sequence is inherently supersessionist, so that each new document supersedes the last, and one does not need to linger over what is primitive, polytheistic, and magical. This approach permitted scholars to take only

1 See Patrick D. Miller, "Wellhausen and the History of Israel's Religion," in Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 182–196.

"what was best," judged by European Enlightenment rationality, so that they could articulate from it a scheme or narrative that was considerably at variance with the attestation of the text itself.

The operational work of criticism was defined, in the early days, by the milieu of the "historical," thus "historical criticism." That accent on the historical is given primacy by Hegel in his dynamism of change, came to expression in Darwin's judgment that all species have a history, and is taken up by Freud in his mantra that personal history reiterates cosmic history. Eventually the accent resulted in the conclusion that even God has a history (a history of human perception), so that everything, including biblical faith, was in a developmental process to a "better stage."[2] The "historical" part of criticism is the attempt to situate each biblical text in a particular historical context, albeit often a constructed historical context, so that the argument is at times circular. What must be stressed is the notion of "historical evolution" about every facet of creation, so that no moment in the text can be assigned an absolute status.

As a consequence of this academic (*Wissenschaftliche*) challenge to church authority, the context for faith in Europe and the United States eventually came to a quarrel that persists to this day among several groups:

> —the *orthodox,* who continued to traffic in absolutist dogmatic claims that manifestly stood some distance from the biblical text itself;
> —the *rationalists,* who prized autonomous reason and who held the Bible accountable to modern rationality that fit their own intellectual conviction (these are the practitioners of historical criticism);
> —the *pietists* (my own tradition), who tried to duck the battle by an affective approach to the gospel, and who looked askance at both the orthodox and the rationalists.

Insofar as the battle was between the orthodox and the rationalists, it is clear that the terms of engagement concerned ideas that had only passing connection to the claims of the Bible itself, for the orthodox

[2] The evolutionary hypothesis reached an artistic acme with Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), with his notion of "the omega point."

were caught in seventeenth-century reductionism and the rationalists were committed to nineteenth-century developmentalism, neither of which lived very close to the claims of the Bible.

It is clear that the struggle between the orthodox and the rationalists continues to our own time. From the retrenchment of Roman Catholicism in the First Vatican Council of 1870 with papal infallibility and the *Syllabus of Errors* to the famous liberal-fundamentalist conflict of the 1920s that culminated with Harry Emerson Fosdick, or from the current rearguard action among Baptists and Missouri Synod Lutherans with occasional Presbyterian flourishes to the popularity of contemporary rationalists like Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan, and John Spong, the issue is kept before us. And all the while the pietists, whom we now call "folks who are into spirituality," stand on the side and wish for a peaceableness.

II

This war may continue. But I suppose we are at this time and place and topic because we have, in our unarticulated way, arrived at a weariness of the battle and concluded that it is not in any case worth arguing about. I submit that it is a nineteenth-century battle that is ill-suited to the twenty-first century, even though it may still evoke adrenalin from time to time on all sides. The battle has become not worth waging because:

> —*the developmental scheme* is persuasive only to those who have been wounded by or are suspicious of an authoritarian church, but is otherwise without energizing force;
> —the offer of *a static package of truth* is too remote and without dynamism for a humanity that yearns for a generous, lively relationship of mutual fidelity that is reliable;
> —the disorder of the world and the manifest power of evil presses us to think again about *dialogic engagement*, and the ancient theodic legacy of Leibniz is no longer adequate.

Beyond the old categories and the old quarrels, there is a general wonderment among us (and among our young) about what can be claimed in this tradition and whether it can offer a credible place in which to live that is outside of and in tension (if not contradiction)

with the power of nation-states, the reductionisms of scientism, and the capricious hunger of the market. The failure of nation-states, the emptiness of scientism, and the exploitative injustice of the market (all seductions faced by the church) create an environment in which the old quarrel no longer compels.

III

In what follows I will outline, as best I can, three perspectives that I have found useful in my own attempt to move past the stalemate of the old quarrels. I should say that my sense of this is not theoretical, but lives very close to my recent experience with seminary students who simply have no energy for the old battles or even for the old critical consensus. There was a time when JEDP aroused great excitement or great resistance, but no more—now only a yawn, because the enigma of a world at risk makes such a quarrel a luxury that does not deserve our energy.

1. Pre-critical to Post-critical

Paul Ricoeur, in many of his writings, has proposed a hermeneutic that moves from pre-critical to critical to post-critical.[3] By "pre-critical" he means to take the text at face value. With reference to the Bible, this means most often to take it as "the Word of God" in a direct way, a way that characteristically leads to an authoritarian view of an undifferentiated mass. The first task of interpretation is to problematize the text, to notice how complex and differentiated it is. In Old Testament study this task has been well accomplished by two centuries of criticism, and is the primary task in Scripture accepted by most mainline seminaries, which are fully aware of the problematic character of the biblical text that precludes taking it at face value as the Word of God. A critical perspective situates texts historically and

[3] Over time Ricoeur has used a variety of terms to characterize the process of moving from pre-critical to post-critical. In "Reply to Lewis S. Mudge," *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1980), 43–44, he has it "'naïve' understanding, objective explanation, and appropriation." In *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970), he speaks of "suspicion" and "retrieval." For variations on the terminology, see Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University, 1990), 5, n. 16.

moves powerfully against any attempt at absolutism; everything is relative to specific context and, as it happened, could be situated along the evolutionary track of "developing" human perception.

But Ricoeur's primary interest is in a post-critical move, the one that concerns us here, and the one that now must, of necessity, preoccupy seminaries and churches. Indeed the critical project, I suggest, is mostly of interest only to those who have been wounded by the church in its absolutism or are embarrassed by the church's lack of intellectual rigor. That same critical task, in another idiom, is the undertaking of Dawkins and Hitchens, who have no sensibility for the post-critical work to be done in religion or in social theory more generally.[4]

By "post-critical" Ricoeur means continued serious theological interpretation that takes into account the significant gains of critical scholarship, but continues beyond. This move he terms a "second naiveté," that is, a willing suspension of disbelief, thus "naiveté," that is quite contrasted with the "first naiveté" of pre-critical, flat innocence.[5] In this "second naiveté," the interpreter knows better—knows about the two creation stories of P and J, knows about the two visions of monarchy in Samuel that are in tension, knows about the rewrite by the Chronicler of the Deuteronomist, knows about the tension between justice in Jeremiah and holiness is Ezekiel, knows that none of this fits together in a neat package of a seamless affirmation.

The post-critical interpreter has enough patience and imagination to watch how the canonizers have reconstrued the text, and has the courage as an interpreter to continue that reconstrual. Whereas the critical perspective of an act in history is to ask "What happened when?" the post-critical task is one of imagination, to ask "What is being offered? What is being proposed? What is being imagined out beyond the givens of historical 'facticity'?" Thus, for example, a post-critical reading of the book of Jeremiah notices the ("fictive"?) role of Baruch, the scribe, to see that the book of Jeremiah is now designed as an act of scribal hope after the work of prophetic denunciation. It is

[4] The best response I know to the strictures of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens is by Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009). His response is not one of "ideas," but of "praxis."

[5] Ricoeur uses the phrase in *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1967), 351–352. More broadly see Wallace, *The Second Naiveté.*

clear in such a work of imaginative reconstrual—the ancient work and the contemporary work—that there are not the same methodological controls as criticism has enjoyed, so the risks are greater. While such imaginative reperformance lacks "historical" appeal, what counts post-critically is the text-based articulation of another reality that depends neither upon the scholastic reductionism of the church nor upon Enlightenment rationality, because neither scholastic reductionism nor Enlightenment rationality can bear the reality given in the text.

The character of God is now being reimagined in new circumstances and the world is being redescribed according to the rule of God. What becomes clear in post-critical "second naiveté" is that the theological offer of the text-*cum*-interpretation is an act of counter-imagination that moves beyond the critical and that contradicts the dominant imagination of culture that we generally take as a given. In the end, the pastoral declaration "Christ is risen" is an invitation for the congregation to engage in a construal of reality beyond the perceivable "facts" at hand. And one does not ask, in such an instance of reperformance, (a) "Is this an historical claim?" or (b) "Is this only a mere metaphor?" What counts is the naiveté that is not dumb or uninformed, but is willing to host a text-based world that lives on the lips of the interpreting community. And baptism, I propose, is an assent to enter into this particular "second naiveté."

I best understand the interpretive drama proposed by Ricoeur by the analogue of what happens to a candidate for ministry in the process of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). Many such candidates enter seminary in a kind of pre-critical innocence about self and family: everyone is nice, moral, and church-going. In CPE, the work of critical analysis is an invitation to sometimes painful reflection on unacknowledged hurt about self and family that often eventuates in an "authority problem" or some other dimension of alienation. As I discover that Moses did not write the whole thing, so I may discover that my life is more vexed and complex than I had suspected. But if I stay at the task long enough, I may arrive at a post-critical differentiation that allows me to see that, for all I now know about "me" and about "us," in fact my mother did love me as best she could.

I suggest that not only is the textual grid of pre-critical/critical/post-critical analogous to the personal dimensions of pre-critical/critical/post-critical work, but in fact the two are intimately related to each other. By which I mean that a person with a pre-critical sense of self

will not likely go very far with a critical sense of the text, or one with a critical sense of the text likely will not move to a post-critical sense of self. It is my judgment that pastoral leadership, in the crucible of text and personhood, works at both of these tasks at the same time. A post-critical sense of self, engaged in a post-critical reading of the texts, yields freedom and energy for mission. Conversely, excessive lingering over the critical does very little except to nurse the wounds generated in pre-critical innocence. Thus I propose, following Ricoeur, that scribal critical work is a moment along the way. We in mainline culture have tended to make it an end point with the text rather than a step along the way. What we are now considering is the step beyond the critical that has rarely been on our horizon in any sustained way.

2. Rhetorical and Ideological Criticisms

A second perspective I have found helpful in moving past the old quarrel between faith and criticism is to observe that in the last generation there has been an explosion of newer criticisms that have moved away from old-fashioned historical criticism. To be sure, the historical issues never disappear, but they do not need to be handled through the narrow categories of Enlightenment historicity. The ground for moving beyond such criticism is the recognition that "tradition" cannot be reduced to "history," and in any case "memory" pertains when scientifically verifiable history no longer suffices.[6] In Old Testament study, my impression is that historical questions preoccupy either detractors of the Bible who want to show that it is "not true," or conservatives who want to fight a rearguard action for pre-critical historicality. Neither of these, so it seems to me, carries us very far concerning the urgent tasks of faith and ministry. I will mention two emergent habits of criticism that take us beyond lean historicity.

(a) *Rhetorical criticism*, a notion formulated by my teacher, James Muilenburg, attempts to bracket out historical questions and to go "inside the text" to see how the words work and how a "world" is proposed out of a configuration of words.[7] It is surely the case that when historical questions are posed, we read books about the Bible rather

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[6] See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 1982).

[7] The definitive study is Phyllis Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1994).

than read the Bible. Rhetorical criticism proposes that we put those books aside for an instant and read the text, and notice the twists and turns of the artistry of the text, and take the text as an imagined, artistically offered proposal of a world that we would not have, except for the utterance of this text. Such a focus on a particular text to generate a world implies (a) an acknowledgment that the world depends on utterance and not "factuality," and (b) that what the text and its interpreters offer is not a universal truth about the world for all times and places, but rather a hint, a trace, and a glimpse for this particular moment of speaking and hearing in this assemblage. The outcomes are modest. Such a read yields not a great cosmic truth, but an empowered body of "text-creatures" who live by utterance. Every preacher knows, after church, about those who live by such utterance, because they tell us so. Rhetorical criticism proceeds in the conviction that the text itself, in its network of detail and nuance, is more interesting than extraneous anecdotes we might add on, more interesting than our reasoned self-confidence, and more interesting than the settled dogmatic claims of the church.

Thus, for example, a scanning of the familiar text of Psalm 103 lets us notice that the psalm revolves around the fourfold usage of the term *hesed,* covenantal fidelity. In verse 4, the term occurs in a recital of God's good deeds:

> . . . who forgives all your iniquity,
> who heals all your diseases,
> who redeems your life from the Pit,
> who crowns you with *steadfast love* and mercy. (vv. 3–4)

In verse 8, we find a doxology about the character of God:

> The Lord is merciful and gracious,
> slow to anger and abounding in *steadfast love.*

In verse 11, the term concerns the forgiveness of sins:

> He does not deal with us according to our sins,
> nor repay us according to our iniquities.
> For as the heavens are high above the earth,
> so great is his *steadfast love* toward those who fear him. (vv. 10–11)

In verse 17, the term offers assurance in the face of mortality:

> As for mortals, their days are like grass;
> they flourish like a flower of the field;
> for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
> and its place knows it no more.
> But the *steadfast love* of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting.
> (vv. 15–17)

The outcome in this psalm is the constant of a world grounded by God's reliable loyalty. That world clearly contradicts the world we mostly inhabit. We are invited to trust the text more than our worldly judgment.

The focus on *hesed* is even more appreciated when we notice the fourfold use of the same term in Psalm 109, a great song of vengeance. This quality is lacking in the one condemned by the psalmist:

> For he did not remember to show *kindness*,
> but pursued the poor and needy
> and the brokenhearted to their death. (v. 16)

Indeed, the psalmist expresses a wish that the one who lack such kindness will himself receive no *hesed*:

> May there be no one to do him a *kindness,*
> nor anyone to pity his orphaned children. (v. 12)

An urgent appeal is made, apart from him, to the God of *hesed*:

> But you, O LORD my Lord,
> act on my behalf for your name's sake;
> because your *steadfast love* is good, deliver me. . . .
> Help me, O LORD my God!
> Save me according to your *steadfast love.* (vv. 21, 26)

No historical judgments are required in order to see how the rhetorical repetitions focus us on the elemental issue of trust that subverts and transcends all Enlightenment notions of what "happened." Of course, that is an easy case to make in the Psalms. But the case is the same elsewhere. My impression is that such freedom with rhetoric as a generator of worlds is more available to those who are less inured to

Enlightenment notions of historicity, as for example, in much of the Black church. This does not mean that pastors in the Black church tradition do not know about Enlightenment criticism; it means only that it has not become defining there, as it has in many of our White establishment venues.

(b) A second cluster of emerging methods goes under the name of "social scientific methods" that includes sociology and political economy; these methods see that the text is embedded in power relationships, even if we cannot identify specific historical contexts. The facet of this I wish to identify is *ideology criticism*, which has been variously taken up in liberation theology, feminist hermeneutics, and, more recently, in postcolonial interpretation.[8] Indeed, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has proposed that the insignia of empire is so deeply inscribed in our way of interpretation that to interpret outside the claims of empire is exceedingly difficult if not impossible.[9] "Ideology critique" is the critical awareness that our interpretation is never disinterested but characteristically we occupy a field of power in which we have a stake. The text itself is likewise never disinterested for the same reason. From that it follows that here are no innocent texts, and no text that stands outside vigorous contestation. One can readily contrast that awareness with older historical criticism that could claim, in good Enlightenment fashion, that it offered an "objective" read of texts, a common assumption of Enlightenment autonomy. In the church, moreover, there is a common assumption that the texts are innocent and that the readers close at hand (including the preacher) are also innocent. To be sure, every serious interpreter is clear that his or her own work is not so contaminated. Most assuredly, moreover, good rational liberals who have been wounded by pre-criticism imagine they have a better angle.

Thus in Old Testament study it is possible to trace trajectories of interpretation, whether of the Jerusalem elites, or the Deuteronomic

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[8] See David Jobling and Tina Pippen, eds., *Semeia 59: Ideological Criticism of Biblical Texts* (Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 1992), and James Barr, *History and Ideology in the Old Testament: Biblical Studies at the End of a Millennium* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Barr himself, given his commitment to Enlightenment "objectivity," fails to understand what is at issue in the discussion as it pertains to the Old Testament.

[9] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *The Power of the Word: Scripture and the Rhetoric of Empire* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2007).

school, or even the Shiloh priesthood.[10] In our reading habits, moreover, it matters about our denominational location, and even more acutely which seminary and who our defining teachers have been. Once we grasp this truth about our practice of the text, it is impossible any longer to pay much attention to the old claims of "objectivity," for it turns out that the old "objective" consensus was simply arrived at by limiting the voices in the room.

Thus it is possible, even in a local congregation, to reflect on the vested interest that is evident in the text, what dispute is engaged in the text, and what the advocacies are that operate in the utterance and that very often go unnoticed and unacknowledged. Beyond Ricoeur's notion of "second naiveté," Jason Byassee has pled for a "third naiveté" that exposes the stance of the interpreter as well as the stance of the text.[11] It turns out, not surprisingly, that every local congregation is a venue of textual advocacy that lives among many rival advocacies; we find the texts that advance our particular advocacy, even when our finding of the right text is called "a lectionary."

A pastor's experience of this reality of advocacy occurs when adult children help to plan the funeral for an aged parent. Clearly there is no "interpretation" of the life of the parent that even pretends to be disinterested, for every entry into the planning process is one of great emotional force rooted in ancient experience. So it is with texts as well.

What may happen in ideology critique is that anyone can ponder the question, "What vested interest is being championed in this text?" In the end, the best post-critical truth comes to us filtered through our interests, some of which can be recognized and of which we may repent.

The movement beyond historical criticism (in which most of us are schooled) to rhetorical and ideological criticism makes possible a greater possibility for post-critical affirmation that is rich and thick. It may be rich and thick because we ourselves are now implicated in the process of interpretation, whereas in thin Enlightenment rationality

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[10] See, for example, Odil Hannes Steck, "Theological Streams of Tradition," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament,* ed. Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1977), 183–214, and Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 98 (1979): 161–185.

[11] Jason Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding: Reading the Psalms with Augustine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007), 272.

we had thought we stood outside the text as objective observers, judges, and critics.

3. Jewish Modes of Interpretation

A third perspective I have found useful in moving beyond the quarrel of faith and criticism is the prospect of learning more from characteristic Jewish modes of interpretation that do not move so urgently toward closure. In rabbinic practice, one is offered a story or an old rabbinic saying by way of interpretation. And if one asks about that response, the question evokes yet another rabbinic saying or story, because the supply is limitless and each saying carries interpretation to another angle of possibility.

One helpful way into such Jewish modes that refuse closure is to pay attention to Freud's theory and practice of psychoanalysis, for it is clear enough that Freud's way of "reading" repressed personhood was taken from rabbinic ways of reading the hiddenness of texts. The psychotherapeutic conversation can walk endlessly around a memory, an event, a dream, or a phrase, because the memory, event, dream, or phrase has a rich capacity for multiple meanings, any of which may be censored, but all of which may be emancipatory.

Freud's great insight is that the human self, never more than partially brought to awareness, is thick, layered, and conflicted:

> —*The self is thick* in the sense that word and image and memory are freighted with more meaning and force than any single saying of it can ever unpack.
> —*The self is layered* because, in our fearful repression, we have stacked experience upon experience, hurt upon hurt, rage upon rage, and sometimes even joy upon joy.
> —*The self is conflicted* because of the inescapable friction between the felt self and the socially expected self, a friction that we spend our lives negotiating.[12]

And of course what we present (even to ourselves) of such a complex self is most often only in bits and pieces, only some of which come to our awareness.

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[12] See D. W. Winnicott, *The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development* (Madison, Wis.: International Universities Press, Inc., 1965), 140–152.

If, as I believe, following Susan Handleman, Freud learned this approach from rabbinic ways of reading texts to watch for their thickness, layered quality, and conflictedness, we may take his great insight about the modern self back into our reading of biblical texts that are also thick, layered, and conflicted.[13] At its best, criticism has seen exactly that about the text:

> —*The text is thick*, and that is what keeps preachers going. The text, in rich artistry, cannot be flatly explained or reduced to single meaning, even though pre-critical innocence and critical rationality tried to do so. You can check this by reading the old historical-critical commentaries. What strikes one about them is how thin they are; when the texts are taken thinly, there is almost nothing to be said about them.
> —*The text is layered,* as we see most broadly in the JEDP hypothesis, so that the text, like the self, is an assemblage of many voices over time, each of which has struggled to be the last word.
> —*The text is conflicted*, so that it is not difficult to discern tensions and contradictions in the text. When honored, those tensions and contradictions are not to be explained away; rather, they are the matrix of generative interpretation, as with the work of pastoral therapy.

A pre-critical certainty wants to deny this quality of the text. A critical understanding wants to explain and resolve and sort out. But in good psychotherapy, after the work of "explanation" has been attempted, there comes a time of pause for wonderment, silence, and respect for the rich dimensions of the self in front to us, "the many selves of the self."[14] So it is with the text. There comes a time for a pause in wonderment, silence, and respect for a text that refuses thinness. We dare to say, moreover, that it is precisely this text, in its thickness, layeredness, and conflictedness, that bears witness to the true God, this Jewish God who refuses the old Greek rationality and who

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[13] Susan A. Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1982).

[14] See Roy Schaeffer, *Retelling a Life: Narration and Dialogue in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), esp. chap. 2.

continues to refuse our modernist thinness, this triune God who refuses the old deistic flatness of monarchy. We dare to say, as we move beyond the text to the God witnessed there, that we are in the image of that God—thick, layered, and conflicted. So we can imagine that any congregation, met around this thick, layered, conflicted text, bears witness to this God in whom we live and move and have our being. We do so in resistance to the reductionism of pre-critical innocence, in refusal of Enlightenment rationality, and in defiance of the thin requirements of technological consumerism. The entire interpretive project is open and deep and emancipatory. We have, to be sure, often failed to recognize that in our long history of woundedness and reason; that process, moreover, continues to be largely entrusted to the pastors of the church.

Thus I propose that in the crisis of moving from the critical to the post-critical, we take the text with new seriousness as a revelatory disclosure of the character of God, world, and self that speaks powerfully against the reductionisms of contemporary society. The challenge for a pastoral hermeneutic, of course, is that one must minister, all at the same time, among those committed to pre-critical innocence, among those recovering from pre-critical wounds, and among those eager to move on to the post-critical. The critical is an important step in that process, as the scribes have understood, one that is always again to be revisited. But to linger there excessively, as we have done, is a measure (a) of how much we have been wounded by the pre-critical, (b) of how embarrassed we are by the pre-critical, and (c) of how much our church has been co-opted by Enlightenment rationality.

The Western church has gone through a critical phase of Enlightenment rationality and now moves to a post-critical perspective. It is not surprising that ministers of the gospel may now move to a new innocence, not denying the wounding of pre-critical absolutism but not yielding finally to the thin remedy of criticism.

IV

It is time now to return to our original question about the place of the scribe in the church today, and draw our conclusions. What is the work of the scribes? The work of the scribes—in our case the critical scholars—is to help the church read Scripture knowingly, responsibly, and, as a result, more faithfully:

—The scribes insist that the text is problematic—thick, layered, and conflicted—when the church is tempted to regard it as simple, direct, and straightforward.
—The scribes insist that there is always more work to be done in reading Scripture, when the church is seduced into thinking it has arrived at a final reading, a Final Solution to the Scripture problem.
—The scribes insist that reading and listening to Scripture is a life-long, worthy, fully occupying vocation, when the church is variously distracted into its several orthodoxies, its moralisms of the right or of the left, its liberal rationalism, or even its patronizing entertainment.

The work of the scribes is not, to be sure, the final word about the text. That word belongs to the Spirit, to whom the church must finally listen. But in anticipation of the Spirit, or even as a vehicle for what the Spirit may want to say to the church, the scribes may make it possible for the church to listen more attentively.

The ongoing dynamism of scribal activity is evidenced in the work of the two great scribes of the Old Testament. On the one hand, Baruch made the book of Jeremiah possible, and he is plausibly implicated in the formation and canonization of the book of Deuteronomy.[15] In Jeremiah 36, that narrative in which Baruch both writes and promulgates the book of Jeremiah at considerable personal risk, it is reported that when the scroll of Jeremiah had been shredded by royal anxiety, Jeremiah took another scroll. Baruch wrote on it the words of the previous scroll, "and many similar words were added to them" (Jer. 36:32). Baruch is the vehicle whereby the old prophetic utterances are kept alive and available for the time to come.

Another great scribe, Ezra, convened the Jews in order to reconstitute the community of Judaism. It is reported of that convocation held at the Water Gate in Jerusalem: "The Levites helped the people to understand the Torah, while the people remained in their places. So they read from the scroll, from the Torah of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading"

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[15] On the cruciality of Baruch for the formation of the Bible, see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

(Neh. 8:7–8).[16] The Levites, the aides to Ezra, the early exegetes and preachers, "interpreted"; they "gave sense"; they helped the people to "understand." They extended the tradition by their exegesis. Scribalism, ancient and contemporary, is an engagement with the text not only to reiterate and treasure. Ezra knew, as all faithful scribes have known, that the text must be interpreted, made contemporary according to the best interpretive categories available, in order to exhibit its powerful, defiant force for renewal.

And the dynamism of Baruch and Ezra extends to Jesus. He is the one who knew "of old" but who said, "But I tell you . . . " (Matt. 5:21–48). That same generative interpretation is the work of contemporary scholarship when it is done at its best. The scribes keep learning. We must not imagine that critical scholars are still doing what they did in ancient days when we were in seminary. The scribes keep learning how to do their work:

—The scribes have learned in recent times how the old traditions have been put together in what we call the canonizing process. The scribes know about *redaction criticism* in the same way the therapist helps us to see how each of us has been complexly arranged.
—The scribes have learned in recent times how words matter and how texts are in fact a network of artistically arranged signs and symbols, what we call *rhetorical criticism*. The nuance and detail of such speech is as freighted as it is when we recall the shaping utterances of our parents who sometimes healed by words and sometimes wounded.
—The scribes have learned in recent times how they themselves are present in the text, what we call *ideology criticism*, or at least the force of context. The scribes have traduced the modernist assumption that we are objective observers, to see that both the text and content are saturated with vested interest. Listen to this testimony from Mark S. Smith, a noted interpreter who wrote earlier this year:

> Yet in our work, we rarely ask about the impact of life events or world events on our intellects. In this respect, we often operate on autopilot. For all the riches of our knowledge,

[16] All translations are by the author.

> even the best scholars among us are only human; if we academics cannot fathom our own place in our work, then at least we could express some humility about the limit of our interpretations.[17]

—The scribes have learned in recent times that the text sounds a large voice of truth, but with countless nooks and crannies for otherness, traces of variation and hints of imaginative defiance, the large awareness of *canon criticism* that cannot be reduced into a single seamless witness.

—The scribes have learned in recent times that the text is so thick, layered, and conflicted because it is occupied by this elusive, sometimes irascible character of God who is the hope of the world. This is the God who moves through the text and comes among us with freedom: "Am I a God near by, says the LORD, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? says the LORD. Do I not fill heaven and earth? says the LORD" (Jer. 23: 23–24).

Preoccupation with the text is what the scribes do. They set the table so that the church can see and meet this Holy Character in all of God's own thickness, layeredness, and conflictedness. The scribes have learned to keep going, to read and listen yet again, precisely because "time makes ancient good uncouth."

The scribes speak a penultimate word about Scripture, but it is a word without which we cannot do. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells a series of parables. The disciples ask him, in verse 10, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He replies: "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matt. 13:11). When the series of parables is finished, he says to his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" And they say, "Yes," not knowing what they did not understand. And then he says to his disciples: "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (13:52). Scribes trained for the kingdom have two responsibilities: *to treasure what is old* and *to offer what is new*. A failed scribe may linger over what is old but offer nothing new.

[17] Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010).

Or a failed scribe may scuttle what is old for the sake of what is new. But kingdom scribes, scholars who serve the secret of God, do both, working at the artistic pivot point of old and new, of tradition and interpretation, of crucifixion and resurrection. At their best, scribes preclude the dumbing down to which the church is deeply tempted in its effort to domesticate. They insist that what is familiar and comfortable must be recognized as strange.[18] He left them with the parables (13:53); and he left them with the heavy lifting to do.

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[18] See Karl Barth, "The Strange New World within the Bible," in Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 28–50. Ricoeur's term for "making strange" is "distanciation." See Dan. R. Stiver, *Theology after Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 89–97.