We all are using Bible commentaries. They are part of the basic toolbox of the theologian. In the past, this did not seem to raise any problem. Biblical commentaries were written, purchased, revised without any one being concerned about the genre, the commentary as such. This normal situation seems to undergo a change today as it is evident when one looks at the situation in the United States of America. Production of Bible commentaries proceeds at a hectic pace in the English-speaking world but authors and users are increasingly skeptical regarding the entire enterprise. Many commentators are uncertain about their exact task, and many readers are not sure whether they really should buy more commentaries when the usefulness of the ones they already own appears to be questionable. A symposium organized by the Center for Hermeneutical Studies at Berkeley, California, in 1976 dealt with the topic of the commentary from the vantage point of the user: "What Should a Commentary Be or Do?" "Of Commentaries Good and Bad." The result was disappointing¹. The presenters restricted their remarks to little more than personal impressions and preferences. Much more interesting,

however, are the minutes of the ensuing discussion. Here deeper problems of the genre seem to surface: What should be the starting point of a commentary—the biblical text or the situation of the reader? Should the reader be placed under the text or above it? Should one make a distinction between an "engaged" commentary and a "neutral" one? Should a Bible commentary achieve something different from what a commentary on non-biblical texts of the classical age is supposed to do? In a recent issue of the highly regarded journal "Interpretation," which was dedicated to the topic of the biblical commentary and even included practical advice for the user, the Old Testament scholar Bernhard W. Anderson raised similar questions, this time from the vantage point of the author. First and foremost: Why should a biblical exegete write a commentary at all? Anderson's answer points to the need of being in contact with the "community of biblical interpreters" both in a vertical and in a horizontal sense. But this leads immediately to the next question: What constitutes this "community"? Anderson speaks of the double role exegetes are playing and this is bound to raise the issue: Which side commands their loyalty, the scientific endeavor or the church? How can one keep the two together in the intellectual climate of our day? Anderson's argument for a careful balance of these two authorities reveals clearly the disquieting dilemma with which the basic question of the purpose of the Biblical commentary confronts us.

In contemporary German scholarship the perception of a crisis does not seem to have reached the same level of urgency even though the problem is being noticed. The starting signal for the discussion was provided by an article of Norbert Lohfink, published in 1974 and titled, "Commentary as Literary Genre," which elicited a number of responses. Lohfink's starting point was a concept of the commentary which owed its orientation to modern textual linguistics. He developed his definition by positing three criteria: A commentary interprets a biblical text sequentially, in a subject-oriented manner (sachgemäß), and argumentatively (not appellatively). On this basis, he establishes a standard for his description of eight types of commentaries and then goes on to discuss the present tendencies of the genre and, with some concern, its future, which seems to be heading for infinite dimensions.

Two reactions to Lohfink's initiative are critical of his pragmatism but stress even more than he does the priority of textual-linguistic considerations as the leading principle for the Bible commentary of the future. The New Testament scholar René Kieffer wants to apply the multiple levels of the concept of “text” – even a commentary is a “text” in need of being understood! – in order to assist the

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commentator in accomplishing his or her task. Werner Schenk (Amsterdam) asks, “What is a commentary?” and answers his own question by suggesting to throw the remnants of the “annotation type” overboard altogether and resolutely shift over to linguistic methods. Only in this way, he suggests, can a scientifically defensible basis for understanding biblical texts be established, a basis which then would be able to serve as the foundation for an ecclesiastical consensus and therefore for the ongoing task of preaching.\(^4\)

That such bold forays do not evoke sympathy everywhere is demonstrated by the discussion of a lecture by Catholic systematician Alex Stock given at a meeting of the editorial circle of the “Protestant-Catholic Commentary.” The lecture has been published in a volume of “Preliminary Essays.”\(^6\) In line with the current trend, Stock was endorsing the argument for the use of modern linguistic methods in the planned commentary series. The minutes show that among the editors the apparent “distrust” of linguistics as the primary method to be employed was based above all on the perceived theological conception of the task of a biblical commentary. The new commentary, the argument went, understands itself as a service rendered to a text, a text which cannot be reduced to a communicative event between individual author and reader but carries inherently a kerygmatic character.

What is common to the American and the German contribution is the remarkably pragmatic tendency. The question is: What does a good, or rather, a better, commentary look like?, and practical proposals are being made to achieve the needed new orientation. This tendency, to me, seems to obscure the real problem of the genre; it strikes me as being nothing but a flight forward. I think the problem above all is the far-exaggerated horizon of expectations with which all those concerned, authors as well as users, approach the commentary and which is based on an almost axiomatic identity of Bible commentary and the exposition of the Bible. For most people, a Bible commentary is for all practical purposes identical with exegesis; the commentary is the proper form of what exposition of the biblical text must mean. In other words, exegesis of the Bible always leads to the commentary; to interpret a biblical text must mean to start writing a commentary. With this assumption, the Bible commentary practically is declared to be the comprehensive genre of proposing Christian theology. “There can be no doubt,” Stock states at the beginning of his lecture, “that the scriptural commentary is

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the oldest and most genuine form of the theological endeavor.” Lohfink formulates: “It is not the system but the commentary which is the adequate form to express Christian theology.” There is much to be said for these statements historically. It is well known that the independent form of systematic theology developed in the Middle Ages out of the literature of exegetical questions. “Sacra pagina” was the older name for that which Thomas Aquinas called “sacra doctrina.” But this insight contributes little to the solution of the crisis of the genre. When we ask: “What belongs in a good commentary?” and must answer: “Everything,” then the historical past pales before the immensity of the present task. Too much is being demanded of the genre.

The problem of the equation commentary equals exposition is further exacerbated by the common picture of the course of the history of biblical interpretation. The patristic era, so the story goes, still knew independent, creative interpretation of the Bible, even though it may have lost itself frequently in fantastic, uncontrollable typology and allegory. The richness of patristic exegesis was then followed by a phase of compiled catenas. Only in the high Middle Ages was this deplorable style replaced by a new speculative-theological interpretation. The late Beryl Smalley, the undisputed expert in the field of medieval exegesis, considered the growing 12th century interest among the theologians of the school of St. Victor in the literal sense, and therefore in the historical meaning of the Old Testament, independent of the New, to be the true progress in the history of the medieval biblical commentary. Pursuing this line, this ongoing progress would have found its expression in the commentaries of the humanists whose philological-historical interests led to a truly scientific-critical interpretation of the Bible. The Reformers, with their rigorous restriction to the literal sense of Scripture, may have furthered this progress, but the decisive breakthrough happened with the concentration on the scientific exploration of the literal sense in the historical-critical commentary of the 19th century. With it, so it is often said, we are provided with the indispensable basis of responsible exegesis, an exegesis which is in step with the historical consciousness of our present time. Beyond this basis, however, we have come to realize that a modern exposition has also to be theological, psychological, sociological, anthropological, literary, and textual-linguistical. If progress is the essence

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7 Stock (see note 7), p. 75.
8 Lohfink (see Note 4), p. 16.
of this history, the commentary cannot pass over anything. The call for more will never be silenced, and the cumulative task of the commentator must appear hopeless, even if one relies on the most up-to-date methods, on teamwork and data processing.

This never-ending spiral must be stopped. The flight forward provides us with no solution. In my opinion, the first item to be reconsidered must be the axiomatic identity of biblical exegesis and the biblical commentary. In addition, we need a realistic reflection on the limits and possibilities of the commentary genre as such in light of a methodology which does not lift up scientific progress as the leading principle but understands the history of the genre as the history of forms. This is the way the founder of *Gattungsgeschichte*, Hermann Gunkel, understood it. For a “history of the interpretation of the Bible” in general, numerous collections of material, of introductions, surveys, and monographs have been produced since the 19th century.  

What is missing is a comprehensive analysis of the entire development. At least since Gerhard Ebeling’s programmatic inaugural lecture at Tübingen, “Church History as Interpretation of Holy Scripture” we even know why this is so. Rightly understood, Ebeling warns, the history of interpretation would have to take into account the totality of all expressions of the Christian faith – not only the commentaries but also sermons, catechetical material, liturgy, law, art. Who is the scholar capable of writing such an encyclopedia? What is even more surprising is the fact that even an ever so minimal history of Bible commentaries as a genre is absent. Lohfink, who himself attempts a very rough survey, puts it succinctly: “For such a history of the genre, even preliminary studies are not available.” Yet it does not take more than a cursory glance at the evidence to be impressed by the continual existence of the literary phenomenon of the biblical commentary in history. It should be possible to write the history of the genre; the project would be limited enough. The difficulty would be that the history of a genre cannot proceed simply in a diachronical fashion, it could not simply describe a history of evolution and progress. At first, Gunkel

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12 Lohfink (see Note 4), 3; on the genre of Biblical epics, Reinhart Herzog has made a start: *Die Biblelepik der lateinischen Spätantike. Formgeschichte einer erbaulichen Gattung*, (Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und Schönen Künste 37; Munich: Fink, 1975).
understood *Gattungsgeschichte* primarily as a history of tradition. It was only when the breakthrough to understanding it as a history of forms occurred that the horizons opened up into further insights. The synchronic element demanded consideration: “The person who wishes to understand the genre must constantly keep track of the total situation and must ask: Who is speaking? Who are the listeners? What mood is dominating the situation? What effect is intended?” The history of a genre has an interest in its constitutive elements in their variety and in their coherence, but also in their differentiation one from the other. It does not trace primarily a development but rather the inherent logic of these elements and their historical potential.\(^\text{13}\)

I will not be able to present here a comprehensive history of the genre of the biblical commentary. Instead, I will limit myself to the preliminary discussion of four important elements: designation, situation, format, and method.

I

The first set of problems has to address the question: Which designations for the biblical commentary are present in history? When do they first appear, and why? Let me first remind the reader of a simple fact. As far back as we can reach, the literary form of the Christian biblical commentary was always closely connected with the Hellenistic genre of the Greek textual commentary. Here already it is evident that the term “commentary” is originally not identical with “exposition,” but has to be understood in a narrower and more precise way. The Latin word “*commentarius*” (more frequent is the plural: “*commentarii*”)\(^\text{14}\) designates, as its etymology suggests, at first all kinds of aides for the memory: private notes and drafts, draft documents for school and lecture, but also public records and minutes or diaries of administrative entities. Of course, even autobiographical self-justifications such as Cicero’s “*Commentarius consulatus sui*” or Caesar’s “*Bellum Gallicum*” and “*Bellum Civile*” pose as such artless, unliterary writings. Here, the unassuming genre is deliberately repurposed as a literary form which, the author hopes, will have a specific effect on the reader. Along with this use of the word, the technical meaning of a genre of textual aides is secondary. This meaning derives from the

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Greek word *hypomnema*, for which “commentarius” had become the accepted Latin translation. In Greek, *hypomnema* has essentially a similar breadth of meaning, but even in the school of Alexandria, it gained special importance as the designation for a specific literary step in the treatment of ancient texts. Recently, Rudolf Pfeiffer described this development in a masterful way. When the Museion in Alexandria was founded, that amply endowed research institute for poets-philologists and its collection of scrolls which, according to the will of Ptolemy I was devoted to the care and preservation of the Greek national literature, the tasks of working with a text emerged almost automatically. The famous *pinakes*, alphabetically arranged inventories, which became necessary with the expansion of the holdings under Ptolemy II, were compiled by the poet Kallimachos. Zenodotos, the first “librarian,” was primarily interested in establishing the text; we would say he practiced textual criticism (*diorthosis*). His carefully established text of Homer’s epics constituted the basis for all further scientific endeavors. Part of this task was the elaboration of tools such as lists of archaic words, textual-critical symbols, biographical notes, and minor explanatory monographs dealing with individual topics (*syngrammata*), among which the so-called Peri-literature occupies a special place. It was only after the time of the poets, who still were studying the ancient authors as models for their own poetry, that the systematic explanation of texts, the coherent commentary made its appearance under the name of the *hypomnema*. Tradition holds that Aristarchos of Samothrake (c. 216-144 B.C.), the fifth director of the library, was the initiator of this new genre. According to Suidas, Aristarchos is said to have written no fewer than 800 *hypomnemata*, whatever that term may have meant. Kallimachos, the poet, still regarded *hypomnemata* as casual collections of material serving his own literary work. In Aristarchos, the “philologos”, they only serve the understanding of the ancient texts, but they go far beyond the scopos of the previous textual work. Aristarchos’s “commentaries” presented not only the lemmata of the critical texts; they also indicated the reasons for his textual-critical decisions. They not only contained lists of words but explanations of the Homeric and poetic language by giving biographical, geographical, and other information, by referring to parallels, hapaxlegomena, and other linguistic peculiarities in the current text. It is important to note that this is not a hermeneutically defined interpretation of the text in a philosophical context. In the case of

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16 Friedrchi Leo has postulated with good reasons a category of περὶ τοῦ δείνα which is to be distinguished from ύπόμνημα [Review of the edition of] Didymus, Περὶ Δημοσθένους (1904; in *Ausgewählte Kleine Schriften*, ed. E. Frankel, II, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e letteratura, 1960), pp. 384–394.

17 The passage in Suidas is discussed by Pfeiffer (see Note 15), p. 261
Aristarchos, the genre “commentary” appears in the framework of a purely analytical treatment of ancient texts which does not have any further aims than to make the text understandable in itself.

This aim, however, is not characteristic of the earliest Christian writings on the Bible. Their Jewish-Hellenistic antecedents such as the exegetical writings of Philo of Alexandria do contain plenty of linguistic-analytical material and occasional substantial explanations, but they clearly belong to that older genre of syngrammata and the Peri-literature: they are individual thematic tracts. In this connection, they provide a philosophical interpretation of the text which understands it as conveying deeper truths. The early Christian writings are even less “commentaries” in the sense of Aristarchos’s genre. Their linguistic-analytical toolbox is very simple, and their intention throughout is polemical and apologetic. Wherever the designation hypomnema appears, we therefore have to reckon with the primary, non-literary sense. Hegesippos’s hypomnemata, which are mentioned by Origen and Eusebius, were notes on the results of his search for authentic reports about the early Christian period, not a coherent book. Already in his title, Clement of Alexandria calls his Stromateis “Carpets of wisdom-conveying hypomnemata according to the true philosophy,” and notes expressly: “This writing is not meant to be a work of art of which one could boast, but it presents hypomnemata for my old age, a safeguard against forgetfulness ...” When Eusebius speaks of hypomnemata, he may refer to writings such as the Gospels of Matthew or John, the pagan Acts of Pilate, or the literary remains of Justin. Things are hardly different in the case of the Gnostic Heracleon, whose work about the Gospel of John, which Origen cites under the title hypomnemata, is often considered the first full commentary on a book of the New Testament. In reality it offers much less: short remarks, fragmentary expositions, and

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18 Even the current literature on Philo seems hardly to have gone beyond the earlier classification of Philo’s works such as that of Massebeau (1889) which regularly speaks of “commentaries”; cf. Richard Hecht, Studia Philonica 6 (1979–1980), 143, note 30. Recently, Valentin Nikiprowetzky, Le commentaire de l’écriture chez Philon d’Alexandrie (Leiden: Brill, 1977), pp. 181ff. has raised serious questions about the assumption of three distinct Genesis commentaries. Peter Borgen and Roald Skarsten, “Quaestiones et solutiones: Some Observations on the Form of Philo’s Exegesis,” Studia Philonica 4 (1976–77), pp. 1–15 see the form-critical analysis of Philo’s work correctly as “an area in which much research needs to be done”.


20 Clement: Stromateis I. 1. 11:1; for the full title see also the conclusion of Stromateis I, III and V. Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica III. 24:5; I. 9:3; IV. 18:1.
notes which aim through intensive allegorizing at proving the superiority of the Christian writings over the Old Testament books.\textsuperscript{21}

In fact, the assertion that ancient Christian writers authored “commentaries” on biblical books goes back to Jerome. Jerome likes to call his own exegetical writings "commentarii" or, more modestly, "commentarioli," but he also uses other titles.\textsuperscript{22} His inconsistent terminology actually reveals the consequences of his well-known nightmare: "Ciceronianus es, non Christianus." On the one hand, Jerome wants to do justice to the classical model of the commentary; on the other hand, he feels obliged to maintain the unclassical simplicity of Christian antiquity. However, when he speaks of the exegetical efforts of his predecessors, they receive as a rule the proud title “commentarii.” According to Jerome, authors such as Theophilos of Antioch, Hippolytos, Apollinaris of Laodicea, Eusebius of Emesa, and Victorinus of Petavia wrote “biblical commentaries.”\textsuperscript{23} The reason for this assertion is clear. Jerome wants to claim that even Christianity has a respectable “scientific” literature of commentaries. How little one can trust this apologetic exaggeration is demonstrated by the case of Pantaenos, the first director of the Alexandrian “Catechetical School.” Jerome attributes to him “multi quidem in sanctam scripturam commentarii;” Eusebius, however, just calls them syngrammata. He classifies them as belonging to that genre of loose tracts which is precisely not a biblical commentary.\textsuperscript{24}

At one point, however, Jerome was correct. Origen indeed did write full scientific commentaries on biblical books and thus established the Christian connection to the Alexandrian science of texts. Like the ancient philologists, he took seriously the task of establishing the text, explaining words and usage, and providing tools such as onomastica and word lists. Like Philo, however, he also was determined to practice the biblical textual interpretation under the presupposition of a Christian “philosophy” and justified his own spiritual hermeneutics with an original theory which he developed in detail in the fourth book of his treatise Peri Archon.\textsuperscript{25} At first glance it seems that here already the equation “biblical commentary = interpretation of the Bible” makes its initial appearance in the sense of an interpretation according to Christian principles. It is notable, however, that Jerome does

\textsuperscript{22} E.g., \textit{parvula abbriviatio} (CPL, no.585); book (no. 580–581); explanations (no. 589, Micha; cf. PL 23, 759).
\textsuperscript{24} Jerome: PL 23, 651; Eusebius: \textit{Historia Ecclesiastica} V. 10:4.
not consider this equation to apply in the case of Origen. Rather, he subdivides the exegetical oeuvre of the Alexandrian theologian into three genres: *exerpta* or *scolia, homiliae*, and *volumina* or *tomoi*. The designations may change: the *scolia* sometimes are called “*commaticum genus*” (from *komma*, brief piece) or *semeioseis*; for the *tomoi* Jerome uses the designations “*libri*” or “*commentarii*.”

It is clear that Jerome regards only the latter ones as true commentaries and categorizes the *scolia* under simple word glosses (*glōssae*) “in which things that seem unclear and difficult are explained summarily and briefly”— quite in tune with Alexandrian philology. Theological interpretation, however, he seems to understand quite specifically as belonging to the “*homiletic genus*.”

Jerome’s division essentially corresponded to the intentions of Origen himself, who interpreted a number of biblical books more than once and in different form. His common designation for writings on the interpretation of the Bible was *exegetica* or *exegesis*. In the world of “commentaries,” however, this term has its place more in the context of the schools than that of literary genres, as we will see later on. But the tripartite typology of genres which Jerome developed in regard to the works of Origen had a strong impact. Medieval interpreters also made the distinction between summary glosses, edifying or homiletical expositions, and “commentaries.” Expanding the Alexandrian concept, Jerome had defined the aim of the commentary to be, among other things, a presentation of the expositions of other exeges:

“A commentary should present the opinion of many writers and say: Some explain this paragraph in this way, others in that ...; thus, a critical reader will be able to judge which explanation is the best.”

Here, we see the beginning of a justification of the *catena*, the compilation of patristic exegeses accompanying the continuous text of the Bible, which dominated the corpus of exegetical writings since the sixth century. The homiletical-theological interpretation was soon designated by other terms such as “*expositio*,” “*lectio*,” and later especially “*postilla*”; the concept of “commentary” was less prominent.

It was with the writings of humanist scholars, who pursued linguistic and antiquarian interests, that the term regained its importance, now however clearly in the sense of the deliberate equation with the interpretation of the Bible as such. Erasmus distinguished between the “*homiletic genus,*” which he called “*paraphrasis,*” and the philological gloss, which he presented

26 The main text is found in the prologue to the Latin translation of Origen's homilies on Jeremiah and Ezekiel: PL 25, 585f; cf. also PL 24, 21. This tripartite division was transmitted to the Middle Ages through Isidore’s *Etymologiae* VI. 8 (PL 82, 237f). For the various designations, cf. Gustave Bardy, *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément* II (1934), p. 86f.

27 PL 25,585: “Primum eius opus Excerpta quae Graece σχόλια nuncupantur, in quibus ea quib sibi videbant obscura atque habere aliquid difficultatis, summam breviterque perstrinxit.”


under the heading of “annotationes.” When he spoke of a “commentarius,” however, he did not think of linguistic analysis only. Like most humanists, he saw the task of the commentary in terms of a rhetorical function: the analysis of a text leads immediately to proclamation. Only the “oratio,” the impassioned application to the present time by the interpreter, is able to inflame the hearts to the true love of God in an age in which the apostolic fervor of faith has been extinguished and miracles have ceased to occur.30 Our modern notion of a commentary is still indebted to this understanding when the “gloss” or “annotation” commentary is rejected and a “theological” interpretation, a commentary geared to proclamation is demanded, or vice versa, when edifying and homiletical interpretations are called “commentaries.”

II

Our second set of problems concerns the question: Where does the biblical commentary have its place in the life of the Christian community? What is its goal? For whom is it intended? The problems of classifying exegetical literature which Jerome addresses, especially the distinction of a genus homileticum from scholia and commentary, indicate the connection with the realm of education, the world of the schools.

Even Aristarchos’s hypomnemata have to be seen in this context. On the one hand, the Museion and its library were founded to be pure research institutions. But at the time of Aristarchos, the scholars working at the Museion were certainly no longer mere researchers but also teachers who saw their task as serving a general system of education geared toward tasks similar to the intention of Ptolemy I’s foundation. The goal of the schools in Hellenism, as we said, was textual work, especially

work on the texts of the classical age.\textsuperscript{31} As Marrou describes it, the Hellenistic educational system proceeded along three levels of instruction: the elementary teaching of reading and writing, a higher stage of exercises designed to achieve the basic mastery of the classics, and the advanced instruction provided by rhetoricians and philosophers. Working with texts dominated all three stages. Even the material for the elementary instruction, learning letters, syllables, and words, came from the poets, especially Homer. Copying and correcting under the supervision of the teacher provided the pupil with his or her working text. The memorization of word lists served the illumination of the text and the choice of practice pieces included the element of a focused interpretation even at the primary level. The higher stage was devoted to the acquisition of the classical literary heritage according to a conventional canon of readings under the guidance of the \textit{grammatikos}. This endeavor involved several activities, or \textit{merē}. First came the establishment of the text, the \textit{meros diorthotikon}; the text was determined, copied, and corrected. Then came the declamation of the text, the \textit{meros anagnostikon}; the text was memorized, read, and declaimed. It was followed by the explanation of the text, the \textit{meros exegetikon} – this was the central task. The text was “explained” first of all linguistically. This concerned, for example, the lexical definition of words (\textit{onomastikon}), artificial expressions (\textit{glōssae}), etymology, especially of proper names, and the correct use of forms, which only in later times, in the first century B.C., became specialized as a system of grammar.\textsuperscript{32} The “exegetical” explanation also included topical questions; the underlying narratives were analyzed according to location, time, events, persons, and in this way taught the full framework of classical mythology. A last step was the interpretation of the text, the \textit{meros kritikon}, the moral exposition aimed at promoting the ethos of the community which established its norms for action and its heroic archetypes on the basis of its classical literature. Even the third level of instruction, the advanced stage, was to a large extent concerned with the treatment of texts. In the school of the rhetorician, even before the student was practicing his own rhetorical efforts, he studied models, especially the canon of the ten great orators. In the school of the philosopher, the “reading” of the classics of one’s philosophical school was the main activity as a preparation for the personal introduction to wisdom through the teacher. It is evident that the origin of the genre of commentary has to be seen as belonging to the context of the schools on the second level, without being created for this purpose, e.g. by Aristarchos. We saw that for Aristarchos, establishing and explaining the text was his central interest, not the philosophical interpretation. For

\textsuperscript{31} On the following, see the relevant sections in Henri-Irénée Marrou, \textit{A History of Education in Antiquity}, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1976).
\textsuperscript{32} Pfeiffer (see note 16), p. 329 (On Dionysius Thrax).
later generations, his commentaries presented the model, the exemplary form of that which was to be accomplished in the two stages of diorthosis and exegesis. Thus, they could become “schoolbooks,” aids for schooling on the two higher levels. In later times, numerous commentaries on the classics were indeed planned and distributed as schoolbooks. This trend toward schooling had the disadvantage that the simpler needs of elementary instruction now determined the history of the genre, no longer the topical dynamics of in-depth work on the text itself. The philologists of late antiquity regarded the old hypomnemata to be far too long and difficult for use in the schools. They provided excerpts and summarized the material in collections which were pedagogically useful, and the original tradition of the older commentaries ceased. Today, we regret this development as a decline of the genre, as degradation. Such a judgment is probably premature and historically unjust. Once it moved into the context of the schools, the commentary served in the first instance the school—that is, the traditioning of a heritage which became more and more expansive through the textual endeavors of generations. It was particularly in times of the decline of a literary culture that the commentary, which was serving the schools, had its great hour. Its form, aimed at tenaciously preserving a heritage, kept the foundations of classical philology alive and was able to convey the continuity with antiquity to a new cultural effort with its own schools and its new way of working with texts.

Christianity had developed its own system of schooling very early in the form of the catechumenate and baptismal instruction. Along with it, however, it kept the Hellenistic system of schooling as the propaedeutics for all literary culture. Even the monastic and episcopal schools of the early Middle Ages, the new universities of the twelfth century, and the schools of the humanists in early modern times received their orientation from the three levels of education in antiquity and from its material and tools. It is no surprise that during each cultural renaissance, each new beginning, the commentary played an important role as a genre of essential schoolbooks. The educational enthusiasm, e.g. of the Carolingian renaissance, which constituted a truly new start after the collapse of the old social institutions, is evident in the numerous commentaries, not only on Latin classics and Christian poets, but also in the elementary schoolbooks of late antiquity, the Donatus, Priscian’s grammar, the “Disticha Catonis,” and the simple fables of Avian.33 During the so-called Renaissance of the twelfth

century, the genre of commentary became even more the central expression of a new educational system. In the new universities, the “lectura,” the basic method of reading and explaining the old and new classical texts in all disciplines, required the commentary as its literary form. The circle of the scientific endeavor from the school back to the school is particularly evident here. The bulk of writings from the medieval universities consisted of commentaries, which originated in the schools and were used only there. Even late medieval humanism found the commentary to be an appropriate expression of its ideal of education. The enthusiastic revival of antiquity connected the genre again carefully to the classical models, knowledge and imitation of which was close to the heart of the humanists.

The genre of the Christian biblical commentary also had its original place in the schools, and its history too begins with the model case—Origen. According to Eusebius, Origen practiced as a young man the profession of a grammatikos; i.e., he taught at that level of the Hellenistic school to which the genre of commentary belongs. Asked by his bishop to take over the instruction of catechumens, Origen allowed someone else to do the elementary instruction and devoted himself to teaching at the highest level, that is, as teacher of Christian philosophy, the school text of which was the Christian canon of the Bible. Like the older Alexandrian philologians, he practiced in the first place textual criticism and textual explanation, but from the very beginning added the interpretation in the form of allegoresis, always trying to keep a careful distance from Jewish and Gnostic school ideology. The fruits of this instruction were his series of scholia, if he really wrote them, and his large tomoi. Just like Aristarchos’s commentaries, they showed to those who came after him what diorthosis and exegesis, but now also the meros kritikon can do to illumine the biblical text. The great Bible commentaries of the fourth and fifth centuries are to a large degree oriented toward this model. Their authors were mostly bishops or teachers of the church who regarded their interpretation of the biblical text as the highest stage of Christian instruction, and in this role were competing with the philosophers. This self-understanding of Christian exegetes as teachers on the highest level signaled a new situation for a movement with totally unliterary beginnings. Even Jerome still defended the “sermo piscatorius,” the simple fisherman’s language of the apostolic time, against the formalistic pomposity of the rhetoric of

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36 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI. 2:15; 3,8f.

the schools. But he distinguished sharply between “sancta simplicitas” and linguistic barbarity, “verbosa rusticitas.” The elevated subject matter of the biblical texts, he remarks, does not only require a proper linguistic form, but also a full scientific treatment by those who are capable of it.\(^{38}\) The sequence of the three genres of exegetical writings which Jerome distinguished in the works of Origen – scholia, homilies, commentaries in the proper sense – is an indication that he thought that all three were connected with Origen’s teaching activities. He was probably right. Even the homileticum genus, the expositions presented as sermons, were most likely preached by Origen in front of Christians who understood themselves as students at the highest level. When later exegetes, such as Chrysostom or even Augustine, practice their biblical exposition to a large extent in the genus homileticum and present them as sermons, this does not mean that they leave the framework of school activity. We have to reckon with an early Christian understanding of preaching which considers even the regular congregation of listeners as recipients of a Christian education at the highest level.

Like the great Hellenistic commentaries of the classical authors, the biblical commentaries of Origen and other Christian bishops and teachers have survived only to a small extent, but they were partially incorporated as excerpts into the manuscripts of catenae. The transition of the patristic commentary to the is often explained as the expression of a general intellectual fatigue or of the requirements of the proof from tradition.\(^ {39}\) I would like to stress, however, the connection with the Christian schools. In order to uphold the fiction of a biblical higher education of all Christians or at least the serious ones, the monks and clerics, at a time when classical education was in decline, the compilations of the catenae were more practical and effective than the demanding originals. The Bible commentaries of the Middle Ages are all products of a revived system of schooling, especially in their standard form as catenae. In the exegetical lecture courses, the biblical text was first being read, then briefly “glossed,” i.e. explained linguistically, and finally “interpreted” in constant dialogue with the interpretive tradition contained in the compilations. Here we also find the reference to different elements of the ancient school system, e.g., the classical dialogical form of problēmata kai lyseis, thematic questions and answers arising from a biblical text. It has ancient Christian antecedents and led through the insertion of argumentative quaestiones into the commentary to the instructional method of


the “disputatio.” Another form was the textual analysis according to the rhetorical method of division and subdivision (diairēsis, divisio) construed in terms of a complex nested system through which the exegete analyzed the outline of the “rhetorical” books such as the Pauline Epistles—Main theme, subtheme, 1. a. b. c.; 2. a ... The Bible commentaries of the humanists reacted strongly against the zealous obsession with citing authorities by scholastic teachers “who inebriate themselves by enumerating that which others have said,” but they themselves took up even more zealously the characteristic forms of the classical genre. They authored again commentaries on the Bible and the classics with detailed textual criticism and purely linguistic explanations of a grammatical and historical kind. These commentaries, too, originated frequently in the context of instruction, but they also counted on a broader educated readership of patrons, educated clerics and literate laypeople. 

The biblical commentary of the Reformers embraced this new expansion of the idea of the instruction of all Christians. Martin Luther’s early biblical commentaries still belong squarely in the specialized theological context of medieval schooling. As a reformer, however, he insisted more and more on the necessity of an elementary literary education for all Christians and the establishment of appropriate schools so that the biblical endeavor of the experts in translating, commenting, and preaching the Bible would not be in vain. Melanchthon appropriated even more directly the educational program of the humanists. In his first Wittenberg semester, he commented on Homer but also on the Epistle to Titus. His biblical commentaries, which served as schoolbooks for a long time, offered linguistic and topical explanations of the text and an ethical application in which Stoic wisdom


43 Kristeller, (see note 36), p. 226f.

44 “Eine Predigt, daß man Kinder zur Schulen halten solle” (1530), WA 30/2, (508) 517–588; “An die Rathener aller Städte deutsches Lands, daß sie christliche Schulen aufrichten und erhalten sollen” (1524), WA 15, (9) 27–53. Otto Scheel, “Luther und die Schule seiner Zeit,” Luther-Jahrbuch 7 (1925), pp. 141–175, mentions that Luther did not design a program for a new primary school (Volksschule) but championed a Protestant town school (Bürgerschule) which would give the old Trivium-school (Trivialschule) a new religious content but not a new form. See also Ivar Asheim, Glaube und Erziehung bei Luther (Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1961).
merged with the biblical paraenesis.\textsuperscript{45} Calvin’s Bible commentaries clearly reflect the idea of a new evangelical school context on the highest level, which found its practical expression in the Geneva Academy. Quite apart from their theological content, the biblical commentaries of the Reformers are not only indebted to the classical form of commentary with its linguistic-historical style of explanation, but presuppose a basic literary and rhetorical education even on the part of the reader, just as it was the case in classical times.\textsuperscript{46}

Even today, the biblical commentary has its actual \textit{Sitz im Leben} in the academic context. With few exceptions, its authors are academic teachers; its users are academically trained theologians, pastors, and students. But even the memory of the ancient Christian expansion of the idea of schooling to all Christians is present. The interest and ability to read and use academic commentaries is expected even of “interested and educated laypeople,” as one can read time and again in the prefaces of recent commentaries, without any fundamental explanation of this expectation which, in reality, is rather unusual.

III

The issue in our third set of problems is: What belongs to the normal format of a biblical commentary? What is its formal architecture and structure? What can one expect, what not? With Aristarchos, the genre was there, and it is amazing how tenaciously the original format has endured until today. In writing a commentary, the first interest of the author is to establish the text. Aristarchos did not offer new recensions but took over existing forms of the text. Even his scroll, however, contained some kind of a textual-critical apparatus in the form of \textit{sēmeia}, marginal symbols which distinguished his own decision from those of his predecessors. He used the \textit{obelos}, the “little skewer,” which “athetated” a verse, i.e. rejected it as inauthentic; the \textit{asteriskos}, the “little star,” which marked it as bing out of place; the \textit{sigma} and \textit{antisigma} for interchangeable verses, and others. The commentary to which these symbols referred was entered on a second scroll and followed the text verse by verse. It began with the passage to be commented on, the \textit{lemma}, then presented the textual-critical reason for the adopted text, and finally gave explanations of words and topics. There was no second apparatus;

\textsuperscript{45} The most important example is probably provided by his highly regarded commentaries on the Book of Proverbs, cf. Robert Stupperich, “Melanchthons Proverbienkommentare,” in: \textit{Der Kommentar in der Renaissance} (see note 31), pp. 21–34.

even today, footnotes are not really acceptable in a biblical commentary. Marginal glosses are written into manuscripts of the texts themselves only after the appearance of the “book” form of the codex in the fourth century A.D. As is well known, the writing of the commentary on the page itself was further differentiated in the Middle Ages. Short word glosses were often placed between the lines as interlinear glosses, more extensive explanations and quotations around the text in the margins.\footnote{On the early history of the medieval Biblical glosses, cf. now Guy Lobrichon, “Une nouveauté: les gloses de la Bible,” in: Le Moyen-Age et la Bible, ed. Pierre Riché and Guy Lobrichon (Paris: Beauchesne, 1984), pp. 95–114.}

In the time of the Reformation, professors ordered printouts of the text for their exegetical lectures in a private edition with wide margins so that the listeners could enter the oral commentary into their own copy.\footnote{One of the best-known examples is Luther’s printed psalter of 1513. His personal copy, in which he wrote his own commentary, is extant (the so-called “Wolfenbütteler Psalter”). Facsimile print: Martin Luther, Wolfenbütteler Psalter 1513–1515 (Frankfurt am Main: Insel-Verlag, 1983). Also, Melanchthon had the text printed in this form for his early Wittenberg lectures; see Stupperich (note 46), p. 21.}

We may assume that Origen’s biblical commentaries were not essentially different from the usual Alexandrian format: lemma – textual-critical remarks – explanation. Even in the Christian realm, the endeavor to provide a correct text preceded the appearance of the commentary. Early biblical interpretation occurred not infrequently by a manipulation of the text itself. Marcion “purged”—more precisely: “athetated”—the text of the Gospel of Luke as Tertullian reports. Tatian, in his Diatessaron, compiled a combined text of the Gospels, and the anti-Gnostic and anti-Jewish Christian polemicists of the second century frequently accused their enemies of textual manipulation disguised as \textit{diorthosis.}

Origen’s main contribution to establishing the biblical text was his impressive Hexapla which, in addition to presenting the comparative material from other translations of the Greek Old Testament, supplied the authoritative text of the Septuagint with the textual-critical \textit{sēmeia} (obeliskos and asteriskos), which was a true achievement totally in line with Alexandrian philology.\footnote{On the classic \textit{sēmeia} cf. Pfeiffer (see note 16), pp. 218; 221; 267f. Origen’s text-critical marks are discussed by Frederick Field in his introduction to \textit{Origenis Hexapliorum quae supersunt} (Oxford: Clarendon, 1875), pp. lii-lx.}

We must not forget, however, that Greek-speaking Jews and Christians did not regard the Septuagint as a translation, but as a Greek original text which enjoyed its own inspiration and which was commented on as such. The Latin commentary, however, posed the question of an adequate translation.\footnote{On the following, see Heinrich Marti, \textit{Übersetzer der Augustin-Zeit. Interpretation von Selbstzeugnissen} (Munich: Fink, 1974).} In early Christian times, bilingual skills were still widely expected. Tertullian, just like Cicero before him, was able to write in Greek.\footnote{Tertullian, \textit{De corona} 6, \textit{De baptismo} 15; \textit{De virginibus velandis} 1; \textit{De viris illustribus} 40. See Marti, pp. 16–19.} There were not many literary translations. At best, they existed in the form of “\textit{aemulationes},” paraphrases for the Latin theatre as we know them from...
Plautus and Terence. On the other hand, exercises in translation were an important part of the instruction in articulate expression through the Roman rhetorician. In this situation, one will probably have to think of the old Latin translation of the Bible, the Vetus Latina, not as a unified, fixed text, but rather as a variable auxiliary text which was not meant to crowd out or replace the Septuagint. The loss of bilingualism occurred during the period of Augustine’s life. The fifth century became the century of the great translations into Latin. Its principles still were strongly determined by the “aemulatio.” Rufinus, for instance, admits freely that in translating Origen he proceeded like a teacher of literature: he thought that additions, clarifications, and elucidations belonged necessarily to the procedure of establishing the text, if the goal was to edify and instruct the reader. For the Latin Bible, the versions produced by Jerome slowly became the standard text. Already his own later commentaries were based on it. Medieval interpreters hardly tried new translations. Their work of establishing the text was generally restricted to “correctories” of the text of the Vulgate, into which copyists’ errors found their way time and again. The scholars in the mendicant orders were especially active as authors of “correctoria.” On the other hand, medieval commentaries contained from time to time remarks on difficulties arising in the translation (interpretationes). Since the twelfth century, the occasional interest in Jewish biblical interpretation was primarily directed at explanations of words, forms, and facts, not at issues of translation. In this way, Jerome’s philological interest in the “hebraica veritas” experienced a revival. It was only in connection with the vernacular translations of the Bible in the late Middle Ages and the age of the Reformation that a new translation of the entire text became a regular feature of a Bible commentary. Another constant element seems to have been the introductory material. It seems that Aristarchos prefaced his commentaries with a short “vita poetae.” In the practice of the schools, the biographical data of the poet and of his works belonged to the meros exegetikon, which was the responsibility of the grammatikos. Roman school editions of the classics such as those issued by Marcus Valerius Probus offered at their beginning brief notes about the life and

52 Marti, p.19.
53 The essential texts are cited and reviewed by Marti, p. 54f.
55 An anticipation of the modern commentary with translation were the "Bible Works" (Bibelwerke), i.e., printed Bibles with glosses and commentary, common in the 17th-century; cf. Siegfried Raeder, "Bibelwerke,” in: TRE Theologische Realencyklopädie, vol. VI (1980), pp. 311-316.
work of the author, followed by a dispositio of the text. Such introductions, called “accessus ad auctores,” are regularly found throughout the Middle Ages in the manuscripts of school authors and commentaries which served the academic instruction directly. The content of such an “accessus” seems at first to have been borrowed from the classical list of introductory questions treated by the grammaticos in the Virgil commentary of Servius: biographical data on the author, title of the writing, style and meter, intention, division, disposition, and explanation. Along with it, a “rhetorical” series was in use which followed the elements of the “inventio” in rhetorical instruction. It was easy to remember by means of an hexameter: “quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando.” After the twelfth century, a shorter list derived from Boethius was dominant: vita, content of the writing, intention, value, and attribution to a branch of philosophy. This list appeared later in a logically more precise form, organized as an introductory study of the “four causes” of a literary work: “causa efficiens, materialis, formalis, finalis.” Thus the “accessus” could occasionally turn into an independent scholastic treatise at the beginning of a longer piece of literature.

The question of introductory material in the early Christian biblical commentary is difficult to answer. Not one of Origen’s tomoi is preserved in its entirety. Jerome wrote a short Christian literary history presenting the biographies and works of 135 authors under a title which Suetonius had used for a similar collection: “De viris illustribus.” In addition, he prefaced several of his commentaries with prologues containing the introductory material which became standard later on. These prologues competed with other series of prologues, e.g., the anti-monarchian prologues to the Gospels. In medieval manuscripts of the Bible, practically all books of the Vulgate open with a Jeromian prologus,

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59 Sandkühler (see note 58), pp. 30–38; Brinkmann, pp. 7–9.

which in most cases was copied as part of the Bible text and was interpreted in the commentary. In the commentary of the humanists, who looked to the classical rhetoric as their model, a dedicatory address to the patron, or a friend or an important personality, was frequently added. With this development, the format of our contemporary biblical commentary was essentially established: preface, introductory material, translation, and continuous commentary.

IV

The last set of problems which we can address here concerns the question of method: How did the commenation of the Bible proceed? What methods were used? What principles formed the framework of interpretation? What rules were followed? We will have to deal here with the role of hermeneutics for the genre. We cannot address the issue in any depth. But we can draw out some basic lines in the framework of our overarching theme which might illumine and clarify the hermeneutical problem of the biblical commentary as a genre.

As we saw, the last step of textual work in the school of the grammaticos was the meros kritikon, the interpretation of the text in an ideological framework. Aristarchos had little interest in this aspect of textual work. To him as the heir of the poet-philologists, who was no longer himself a poet, the task of the commentary was restricted to understanding the language of the ancients. Aristarchos did not want to answer the question why the interpretation of Homer and the poets was important. For him, it was answered by the very existence of the Museion and the task he performed there. Had he been subjected to more insistent questioning he might have suggested that Homer’s epics are so ancient, valuable, beautiful, and magnificent – and at the same time so much in need of explanation!

On the higher levels of school instruction, his rational philology which contented itself with the

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61 The standard texts of these prefaces are reprinted by Friedrich Stummer, *Einführung in die lateinische Bibel* (Paderborn: Schöningh 1928), pp. 222–262 (Anhang 1).


establishing and illuminating of the text, led more directly to rhetoric than to philosophy. Aristarchos still had true philologists as pupils, but on the whole, his detached, literary-aesthetic hermeneutics remained merely an episode in the emotional atmosphere of late Hellenism and the imperial period. It was the exegetical school of Antioch which continued the scientific heritage of those classical Alexandrians on Christian soil. It can boast of considerable contributions to biblical textual criticism and the explanation of the Bible in lexical, grammatical, and antiquarian terms. Its teachers treated the Biblical text primarily as a linguistic monument—old, valuable, magnificent, totally appropriate to divine revelation—and as a historical document. It is understandable that the Antiochian exegetes of the fourth and fifth centuries reacted strongly against the fantastic allegorical Bible commentaries coming from Alexandria at their time. In their opinion, they were the true heirs of the classical Alexandrian tradition. Clement and Origen, as they saw it, were involved in monkey business.

In fact, the allegorism of the Christian Alexandrians was a product of the philology of the competition, the school of Pergamon. At the time of Aristarchos, the ruling Attalids at Pergamon intended to establish a library, promote literary studies, and attract significant scholars as it was the case in Alexandria. They did not have much success. The only felicitous appointment was that of Kratēs of Mallos, not a poet-philologist but a philosopher, a Stoic. Contrary to the Alexandrian grammaticoi, he styled himself proudly kritikos. His main interest was the interpretation of texts. Beginning with him, allegoresis as a literary method of interpretation conquered from Pergamon the entire Hellenistic world. In practice, allegorein as a method was considerably older. Even at the time of the rhapsodes there were circulating allegorical explanations of Homeric statements, which were meant to defend the poet. But it was the Stoics of the third century B.C. who developed into a system the theory of hyponoia, the hidden meaning of ancient texts. Zeno, Kleanthēs, and Chrysippos were still using Homer’s authority to support their own teachings. Kratēs on the contrary relied on the authority of Stoic doctrine in order to explain Homer, not to defend him. We know, for example, that he did not, like Aristarchos, “athetate” the description of the shield of Achilles in the Iliad, but interpreted the ten segments of the shield as the ten cosmic circles.

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65 On the following, see Pfeiffer (note 16), pp. 286–305.
The presupposition for this allegorism was an image of Homer which considered the ancient poet as theologos, as proclaimer of deep wisdom and thus as “divine seer.” Aristarchos thought otherwise. He maintained the line taken by Aristotle who regarded Homer as an inspired, but certainly fallible poet, a human being like us (“Here Homer is asleep...”). Homer wanted to “delight, not teach,” he was surely the great poet of the Greek tradition, but he was not a divine voice. Precisely this, however, was the Stoic conviction—through Homer the deity spoke. The Greek allegoresis of the Stoics presupposed a Greek doctrine of inspiration. It held that the deity does not “write” or “dictate” books, as the Old Testament report of the giving of the law at Sinai suggests (Exo 24:12; 31:18; 32:16; 34:27f); rather, the God “seizes,” “fills,” “enthuses” elected human beings by revealing to them the content or even the words of the divine message and speaks through them as his tools. It was on the soil of Hellenistic Judaism as it attains visibility in the work of Philo of Alexandria, that this notion of inspiration was applied to a text, not only to the Hebrew original text of the Bible, but to its Greek translation. The Letter of Aristeas told of the miraculous origin of the Septuagint, but it still emphasized the fact that the translation was endorsed by the Jewish community. Philo advanced further the elimination of the human element accompanying this miracle, and the later Christian legend left no room for doubt that the text itself was inspired.

Origen applied this presupposition not only to the Septuagint, but even to the early Christian writings, which, as he assumed, according to the Greek understanding of inspiration, were written under the direction of the spirit of God. As we saw, his commentaries continue on the one hand the best traditions of Alexandrian philology; on the other, however, he did not rest at the point where Aristarchos’s interests ended. Origen reckoned with a biblical text which was given and traditioned according to God’s plan. He therefore developed a hermeneutics of biblical interpretation which was directed toward grasping the hyponoia hidden by God in the text. In its basic structure, this

68 Pfeiffer, p. 283.
69 So already Eratosthenes according to the report of Strabo I, 15: Ποιητὴν γὰρ ἐφε πάντα στοχάξεσθαι ψυχαγωγίας, οὐ διδασκαλίας. Cf. Pfeiffer, p. 207.
70 Johannes Leipoldt has precisely described the distinction in his article, “Die Frühgeschichte der Lehre von der göttlichen Eingebung,” ZNW 44 (1952–3), pp. 118–145.
71 Leipoldt, pp. 128–130.
hermeneutics, like that of Philo, followed the Platonic dynamics of body and soul. Origen, however, expanded the dichotomy to a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit, so that the proper sense of the inspired Scriptures naturally had to be the spiritual one. His allegoresis shows an upward-directed, anagogical dynamic. Everywhere, the goal of biblical interpretation is the spiritual understanding as leading to higher truths; it is the guide of the soul in its ascent to God.74

Just like the format of Origen’s biblical commentaries, his hermeneutics remained a model for the future. Augustine, who conveyed to the Middle Ages the notion of an anagogical hermeneutic of the Bible in the form of his “figurative” exegesis, could at best set new accents.75 In his early years, Augustine had been a teacher of rhetoric. It cannot be a surprise that he places the consideration of the linguistic structure of the Bible at the center of his hermeneutics. The Middle Ages owes to his theory of signs the distinction between two languages: the language of vocal signs (“voces”), which is regulated by humans, and the language of things, which has its origin in God’s act of creation.76 To understand the former, one needs to master the rhetorical fields, grammar, dialectics, and oratory, to master the latter, the totality of all secular sciences. But all fields of human knowledge are basically no more than “auxiliary sciences” supporting the reading of the Bible, whose sacred vocal signs unlock the language of things in such a way that from there the entire book of the created world in its deepest anagogical meaning opens itself up to understanding. Here, biblical interpretation does not only become the center of all literary education and endeavor, but it turns into the interpretation of the world, as medieval hermeneutics up to Bonaventure make clear time and again.77

The well-known order of the four senses of Scripture (sensus litteralis, allegoricus, tropologicus, anagogicus), which plays such a prominent role in medieval hermeneutics, does not originate with Augustine but acquired its normative status later on.78 It must be understood in terms of the rhetorical diairēsis: The one literal sense has with it as its goal one spiritual sense which is

74 An important study of the hermeneutics of Origen is Karen Jo Torjesen’s Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986; Patristische Texte und Studien 28). The author does not only treat the hermeneutical sections of De principiis but also the exegetical writings themselves. Still relevant is: R.P.C. Hanson, Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen’s Interpretation of Scripture (London: SCM Press, 1959).


76 See Brinkmann (note 58), esp. pp. 21–51; 74–86; 260–276.

77 This aspect is impressively demonstrated by Hans Mercker, Schriftauslegung als Weltauslegung. Untersuchungen zur Stellung der Schrift in der Theologie Bonaventuras (Munich: F. Schöningh, 1971).

78 The basic passage is John Cassian, Collationes XIV. 8 (CSEL 13, 1886, 404–407). On the history, see esp. Henri de Lubac, Exégèse médiévale (see Note 38) I/1.2 (Paris 1959). On the fourfold sense in the Middle Ages, see also Brinkmann (note 58), 226–234, 243–259.
unfolded in a threefold subdivision. It is rare that a medieval commentary pursues all four senses. In fact, this is possible only where the genre of a biblical book does not seem to require automatically a particular sense, as is the case with the Song of Songs, Job, or the Apocalypse. Whether after ascertaining the sensus litteralis an exegete interprets a passage allegorically, tropologically, or analogically is unimportant. The spiritual goal always remains the same.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the literal sense experienced a hermeneutical expansion and with it a considerable boost. This expansion was based on the conviction that no literary form is without it, including textual entities such as fictitious tales, fables, and parables. Of course, the Bible knows no “fiction,” but only true story (“historia”), but it uses poetic metaphor and parable. Thomas Aquinas included the sensus parabolicus expressly within the literal sense. Thus, the weights in the process of textual interpretation were shifting, a process which Hugh of St. Victor had described earlier as the three steps of littera – sensus – sententia. Hugh understood the littera as the simple language form of a text; he understood as sensus that which was directly intended, as sententia the deeper meaning. Even here, one can discern easily the two higher stages of textual work done by the grammaticos based on the establishment of the text itself: the meros exegetikon and the meros kritikon. In classical rhetoric, for instance in Quintilian, those aspects which Hugh distinguished as sensus and sententia were seen as being very closely connected; they were part of krisis, not of exegesis. Hugh, however, introduced the middle term of sensus because he saw the immediate meaning of a statement more on the side of the littera, and thus belonging to the task of exegesis. What is said and what is meant both have to do with the intention of the author; they designate an outer aspect and an inner side. With Thomas Aquinas, the sensus moves even closer to the meaning of the littera, thereby taking with it a large part of the old, deeper sense of the sententia.

Here, a development announces itself which was to have enormous hermeneutical consequences. It is well known that Martin Luther, the Reformer, rejected the entire system of the four-fold or multiple sense of Scripture and spoke of the one clear, literal sense of Scripture. With this

80 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae Ia q.1 a.10 ad 3: “Ad tertium dicendum quod sensus parabolicus sub litterali continetur; nam per voces significatur aliquid proprie, et aliquid figurative, nec est litteralis sensus ispa figura, sed id quod est figuratum.”
81 Hugh of St. Victor, Didascalicon III, 8; cf. Brinkmann (note 58), 157; 236–239.
comprehensive expansion of the literal sense, however, he had not solved the problem that was addressed in the older schemes, but had only moved it elsewhere. Even for him, the literal sense was bound to be a theological one, i.e., it had to carry the entire burden of the anagogical dynamic. Even according to Luther, the true sense of Scripture cannot be found in the letter, but in the spirit. The meaning of Scripture is “what promotes Christ” (“was Christum treibet”). Only the hermeneutics of our modern age began to question the anagogical framework itself and thus the older concept of theology. Scripture, it seems to many scholars, speaks in a human way about divine things, and thus the aim of textual interpretation today rests within the human sphere. Transcendence, anagogy as a hermeneutical method, are not in demand. The historical-critical commentary of our century attempts to determine the literal sense again in a scientific way. Philology, linguistic analysis, topical explanation, literary comparison, and historical investigation are flourishing. It seems that hermeneutically we have returned to the place where Aristarchos stopped.

V

What is the result of our excursion into the history of the genre for our deliberations about the crisis of the biblical commentary? It cannot be a question of drawing out pragmatic consequences for the commentary of the future. Practical advice for formal improvement does not go to the heart of the crisis. We said at the beginning: We demand too much of the genre. Our expectations are too high. But here is the point: These are our expectations. The excessive demand stems from us, from producers and users of commentaries, from authors and readers. It is not the genre that must be changed; we must try to change our thinking. I am of the opinion that a glance at the history of the genre of commentary can be helpful for this new thinking. It can help to reduce our expectations and to reconsider the limits of the biblical commentary more soberly. The necessary re-evaluation of the equation between commentary and interpretation will make progress if we take seriously the historical dynamics of the elements discussed here.

1. The concept of a biblical commentary has widened infinitely. Too much is covered by this term. In the face of this confusion, it is good to remind ourselves that in terms of its origins, the genre may be defined much more narrowly. A commentary does not have to be more than an aide to the understanding of the language of the Bible, a simple tool serving the text. Commentaries are allowed to be something modest, humble, which resists all comprehensive demands.
2. The true *Sitz im Leben* for the commentary is without a doubt the school. This, too, is comforting. A biblical commentary may without prejudice bear the stamp of the university, of the academic community. It may be a gloss-commentary or a simple collection of auxiliary material. In principle, a commentary is and remains a schoolbook. This has disadvantages but also advantages; one can always learn from good teachers and good textbooks. If readers complain about a commentary which they judge to be too demanding, they only reveal that they are not willing to expose themselves fully enough to the demands of an education at the highest level which, as we have seen, is open to all Christians.

3. Our hermeneutical deliberations have indicated that the commentary as a genre certainly could restrict itself to establishing and explaining the text. A purely textual-critical and philological, technical biblical commentary would not leave the frame of that which a commentary should be. This applies as well to the recent call for more textual linguistics. A commentary primarily written under textual-linguistic presuppositions is certainly possible, and today perhaps necessary. But the claim that only in this way “a scientifically defensible basis for the understanding of a text” can be postulated (Schenk) must give us pause. The price would be an even stronger specialization and technicalization of exegesis without profit for the actual hermeneutical problem. In this situation, it is good to remind ourselves that from the beginning, since Origen, Christian hermeneutics in terms of the biblical commentary did not stop with Aristarchos, but asked for the wider horizon and included the *meros kritikon* in the endeavor. We may expect even today that the biblical commentary does not neglect this theological, and in this sense “critical” horizon.

4. In his essay mentioned early on, Bernhard W. Anderson summarizes his expectations for the biblical commentary in five points. He expects information on the text, a clear decision in terms of hermeneutical presuppositions, help with the penetration into the foreign world of the text, but also help in developing the reader’s own poetic and imaginative facilities in dealing with language, and finally help toward the incorporation of the text into the life of the Christian community with its mission in the world. I can endorse every single one of these points wholeheartedly. Certainly, they are also practical and pragmatic, as is proper in the contemporary American context, but beyond that, they

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83 A first attempt in this direction is the commentary on Amos by Klaus Koch, *Amos. Untersucht mit den Methoden einer strukturellen Formgeschichte* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament, 30; Kevelaer: Verlag Butzon & Bercker, 1976). Koch and his eight collaborators introduce the reader to an extremely technical, textual-linguistic discussion, the hermeneutical yield of which remains difficult to assess.
seem to me to say what is essential: It is not the genre of the biblical commentary that needs help because it finds itself in a crisis of its self-understanding. *We* are the ones that need help in the crisis of our encounter with the word of the Bible, today more than ever. Let us not forget that in this crisis a commentary can only provide “first aid.”