

## WORD AND IMAGE



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## *The Hermeneutics* of The Saint John's Bible

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CHAPTER 3 CONTRIBUTED BY  
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THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE

Collegetown, Minnesota

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Brother Dietrich Reinhart, 1949–2008

*Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Dan 12:3)*



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# ABBREVIATIONS

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ASV	American Standard Version; a revision of the KJV, completed in 1901
CIT	Committee on Illumination and Text; the group in charge of selecting images and providing theological oversight for <i>The Saint John's Bible</i>
HMML	Hill Museum & Manuscript Library; contains the world's largest collection of microfilmed and digitized early and medieval Christian manuscripts and curates, houses, and exhibits <i>The Saint John's Bible</i> on the campus of Saint John's University, Collegeville, MN
KJV	King James Version of the Bible; completed in 1611
LXX	Abbreviation for <i>Septuagint</i> ; the Old Testament written in Greek and the version used by the Evangelists and other New Testament writers
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version; a revision of the RSV completed in 1989
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
RSB	Rule of Saint Benedict
RSV	Revised Standard Version; an American revision of the KJV, completed in 1952

# INTRODUCTION

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Back in 1996 when the millennium was fast approaching, the monastic community at Saint John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, pondered how to mark this great turning point in Christian history. The desire was to find something that could draw on the fifteen-hundred-year-old Benedictine tradition while simultaneously vivifying the Christian imagination in its service to the future. Sponsoring a handwritten and illuminated Bible seemed to fit both criteria. Just as the biblical account of divine revelation was the source of artistic inspiration for previous centuries, there was hope among the monks that it could once again proclaim the glory of God by reigniting the fires of artistic imagination. Doing so was no easy task. One of the biggest obstacles was trying to make clear for themselves, as well as for others, why, in an age when even the commercial printing press faces an uncertain tomorrow, anyone would want to embark on a project using vellum, ink, and goose quills to produce something that could be obtained by the click of a button.

The university president, Brother Dietrich Reinhart, convened a task force to develop a project plan for *The Saint John’s Bible* once both the regents of the university and the monks of the abbey had approved the undertaking. The plan included what has since become known as the “Vision and Values” statement listing six points grounding the reason for the work:

- to glorify God’s Word
- to give voice to the unprivileged
- to ignite the imagination
- to revive tradition
- to discover history
- to foster the arts

All told, these six points can be summed up by the word “evangelization,” for they each stand as component parts of proclaiming Christ’s salvation to the ends of the earth. Christianity is an incarnational faith, and that faith takes root in the things of this world, including all noble human endeavor.

The commentary that follows functions as a guide to and a study of *The Saint John's Bible*. Divided into four parts, it discusses the many areas that have influenced the composition, art, reading, and interpretation of the first handwritten and illuminated Bible commissioned by a Benedictine abbey since before Gutenberg invented the printing press.

## PART 1: WORD AND IMAGE: A HERMENEUTICAL MATRIX

The hermeneutical key for understanding *The Saint John's Bible* lies with reading, viewing, and reflecting upon it as an experience and encounter with the Word in a sacramental form. It is a treasury of the church's rich tradition of prayer, faith, and thought as well as a repository of beauty and a promoter of social justice. Anything that assists us in understanding the Bible and growing in the love of God is good—inconsistencies, ambiguities, contradictions, and puzzlements notwithstanding. Proceeding with this intent, we should keep an important point in mind: Ancient theologians and exegetes had one ultimate goal in reading Sacred Scripture and that was the divinization of the human person into life with the risen Christ. And they employed the greatest tools of faith and reason to achieve it. Resting on two thousand years of ongoing scholarly, biblical tradition, we should now use the best at our disposal for that same goal. Part 1 draws, therefore, from the tradition of biblical interpretation as well as develops a way to keep the Word of God dynamic, challenging, and life-changing.

## PART 2: WHY THIS ENGLISH TEXT

The Bible has played a tremendous role in the formation of civilization in both the East and West, and that influence, though changed, was not diminished when it was translated from Latin to the vernacular, in this case, English; its role in the development of the thought and culture of the English-speaking world is a case in point. Because *The Saint John's Bible* uses the interplay of image and text in its interpretation, this discussion on the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and its antecedents displays some of the scholarship that establishes the textual fidelity to the Word. This English edition of the Bible is a noble work in its own right; no other English translation could have sufficed for this project.

## PART 3: THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE: PART OF AN ARTISTIC AND MONASTIC LINEAGE

Benjamin C. Tilghman, currently assistant professor of art history at Lawrence University and former curatorial fellow at the Walters Art Museum in

Baltimore, Maryland, examines several distinct moments in which monasteries and others reflecting on the ecclesiological goals of reformers sponsored the handwriting of Bibles. He demonstrates what we can learn from history about a monastery's use of artists and scribes of the highest caliber to write the Bible and related works. *The Saint John's Bible*, by employing an ancient method for a contemporary age, reinforces the continuity of the faith tradition.

#### PART 4: HERMENEUTICAL GUIDE

As the largest section of the book, these chapters feature material from the deliberations of the Committee on Illumination and Text (CIT), the artists at the Scriptorium in Wales, and discussion on the images themselves.

##### *Approach*

A dynamic tension exists in biblical interpretation between what the faith community sees as the meaning of a certain passage and the great many thoughts given birth by that meaning. For example, the four gospel accounts of Christ's baptism have filled Christianity with hymns and artistic works referencing water, the Jordan River, the Red Sea, dew, cleansing, grace, doves, seashells, clouds, and heavenly voices—things that go beyond what is mentioned in the gospel passages. Do they enhance the biblical interpretation, hinder it, bring forth greater understanding of baptism, or lead people to confusion? The resolution may very well lie in the constant dialogue between the accepted understanding of the faith community and the resulting meditations of its members.

The pages that follow guide readers through such a dialogue inhering within *The Saint John's Bible*. In doing so, readers must keep in mind some assumptions upon which the hermeneutics of *The Saint John's Bible* rest:

A primary consideration is that the CIT, in its own discussion and in its communication with Donald Jackson, the artistic director of *The Saint John's Bible*, perceived early on in the project that the different books from both Testaments, in their numerous stories, episodes, and personages covering a period of approximately twelve hundred years of composition are connected to each other through themes, plots, and vocabulary. The Christian Bible, therefore, relates only one message: God has brought salvation to the world through his only begotten Son and continues to do so in the Holy Spirit, and the community of the baptized must respond accordingly. While this understanding may seem like an oversimplification of a tome yielding a variety of genres and countless passages, it is actually an acknowledgment of the great diversity comprising not only the human race but also the whole creation. Yet, all creation's complexity and intricacy springs from that one moment of

creation's birth at the Big Bang and leads to that one moment when the fullness of Christ's salvation will come in its completeness.

Second, throughout *The Saint John's Bible*, we should never consider art and theology separate entities. Indeed, the word written in calligraphy and the accompanying images expressing a salient point are both art. In this sense, the art is not only a vehicle to express the theology but also an embodiment of theological thinking, wonderment, and exploration. Moreover, in its best moments and pieces, the art functions as a window into the divine.

Third, by working with both word and image, *The Saint John's Bible* utilizes two human senses—hearing and sight. The Bible is meant to be read aloud, preferably within a community at prayer and worship together. Images, on the other hand, are meant to be seen, and the fullness of their interpretation comes from the Christian context which inspired them, even as that context is broadly construed. Word and image have a symbiotic relationship with each informing the other, and together they give rise to Sacred Scripture's polyvalence. Readers should not be surprised if they find that their engagement with *The Saint John's Bible* opens their imaginations, hearts, souls, and intellect to new ways of conceiving God. In addition, they may also find themselves entering a deeper relationship with God.

Finally, we should always keep in mind what the project represents for the church as the Body of Christ in this space and time. At the dawn of the third millennium, the Holy Spirit has moved an abbey and university to write and illuminate by hand and on vellum the Word of God, the same Word of God that has become flesh in a particular time and place two thousand years ago. *The Saint John's Bible* is a great sacramental enterprise from within the Body of Christ, making the Word of God present to the same Body of Christ.

### *A Guide*

This book is meant to guide the reader through *The Saint John's Bible*. Although it includes small images of some of the major and minor illuminations, these thumbnail representations are not meant to substitute for the work itself. The point is to concentrate on *The Saint John's Bible*, whether the original, the Heritage volumes, or the reproduction books. My hope is that by reading, pondering, and meditating on the Bible, and by using this book to assist the effort, the reader will come to greater experience and understanding of the Word of God and its transformational power. By no means is this study exhaustive. If readers find fonts of inspiration or connections that I may not have mentioned, so much the better, for they show the Holy Spirit at work.

Part 1

WORD AND IMAGE:  
A HERMENEUTICAL  
MATRIX

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# Chapter 1

## IMAGE AND TEXT

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**B**iblical study has its own rich methodologies for deciphering and understanding a text. There are age-old ways of interpreting Scripture: for Christianity, the traditional, patristic,<sup>1</sup> fourfold way of interpretation (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical), and for Judaism, the rabbinical and midrashic. In the modernist period there arose the historical-critical method along with narrative and reader-response criticisms. And now in the face of postmodernity we see many employing the hermeneutics of suspicion and intertextuality among others.

It is not difficult to find corresponding political and social associations tied to each method used for interpreting Scripture. We could categorize them as liberal and conservative, fundamentalist and holistic,<sup>2</sup> modern and postmodern, and I am sure many others. Much of the tension and debate, however, centers on claims of modernity and the disciplines or, at least, the biblical disciplines that have derived from the thought of the Enlightenment, with historical criticism chiefly among them.

The church's tradition of faith and reason includes establishing a coherent reading of the text amid any of its ambiguities or inconsistencies, studying how the culture over time has influenced the interpretation of the text (as well as how the text has influenced the culture, thereby allowing the text to

1. The term "patristic" refers to the period from the first generation of theologians after the death of the last apostle (ca. 150) to the death of Augustine AD 430. Patristic writings set the foundation for the development of Christology, trinitarian thought, salvation, and justification.

2. Used here to mean an interpretation cannot be reduced to isolated, fractured parts. It is the opposite of fundamentalist. A holistic reading sees the necessity of interpreting all Scripture within the context of history and the 2,500-year-old faith tradition.

affect our action in the world), and finally forming a personal and communal relationship with the Word of God.

I present below, therefore, an exceedingly brief history of biblical interpretation as well as a way to draw from that tradition an interpretive process that will keep the Word of God dynamic, challenging, and life-changing.

## THE PAST

Of all the great battles Christian apologists have had to face, the one over the interpretation of Sacred Scripture has loomed among the largest. Many of the theologians of the patristic era were forced to answer for inconsistencies, contradictions, and redundancies found in the biblical text. This situation led some, notably Origen, to rely on a “mystical interpretation” of Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Augustine to a certain degree departed from Origen on this issue and preferred a more literal reading, with the idea that passages whose content tested the credulity of human reason must be interpreted within the “rule of faith.” For Augustine, this rule is set in place by the believing and praying community instructed by homilies gathered around a bishop and the sacraments. Whether or not one sees this optic as just, valid, or desirable, it at least provides a counterweight to today’s kind of biblical literalism, as well as to our era’s skeptical nihilism.

When Christianity arrived on the scene, it inherited a culture in which the line between the material and spiritual was not easy to distinguish. The Greeks and the Romans may not have been a part of the Jewish monotheistic tradition, but they certainly believed in something beyond this time, space, and dimension. The Roman *lares* and *penates* (household gods) were real and omnipresent, and functional in a way that the major gods of the state, such as Mars and Minerva, were not. On an anthropological and sociological level, one of Christianity’s strengths was that it had the ability to take this human need for contact with divinities and reconstitute it by employing Christian theological interpretations of the world it had inherited and converted. So, for instance, the personal, household gods that people treasured would become the cult of the saints. The protection and blessing of Jupiter and Juno came under the aegis of the personal, omnipresent, beneficent, and triune Godhead. In addition, because of high mortality rates (which did not really begin to fall until the last century), death was never far away, and so the early

3. See David Laird Dungan, *The History of the Synoptic Problem* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), for a historical treatment of biblical hermeneutics.

Christian community found fertile soil in stressing the salvation of one's soul as the primary purpose of life.

This mentality engendered a vision that looked for signs of God's presence in the everyday experience. Rain and sun in their proper seasons were expressions of God's love. Misfortune befell a person who had lapsed in his or her prayer life. And if God's merciful minions of angels were always around, so were the diabolical forces ready to engage them in a tug-of-war over the soul of the recently deceased. The important point of this mentality is that none or very little of this worldview is described in the Bible, yet it was this very same worldview that people wanted the biblical stories to address; simultaneously, this worldview helped people interpret these stories. In its greatest moments, this fusion of the Bible and the premodern *Zeitgeist* produced a mysticism in which every human endeavor was measured by its ability to maximize the presence of God's grace in the world and in one's life so that people could rest secure in the promise of eternal salvation. The incarnation made such a fusion possible, and it became the foundation for a grace-filled universe, from which the church's sacramental life springs.

The doctrine of the incarnation asserts that the Second Person of the Trinity took on human flesh and became a mortal being at a certain point in history. As Saint Athanasius would say, "God became human so that the human could become divine."<sup>4</sup> If created matter in the form of human flesh were to be so elevated, the rest of creation, too, has its role to play in reflecting and participating in the presence of the divine. One can point not only to the outdoor shrines and forest chapels dotting the landscape in Christian countries, but also to the cultural output of the first sixteen hundred years of Christianity in art, music, architecture, literature, and manuscript illumination as evidence of Christian expressions of divine presence in the world. Art expresses reality through metaphor, and if looking for a way to describe the premodern worldview, one would have to say that it is a symbolic, metaphorical one.

Although the Christian West often relied on allegory as the matrix of interpretation in its biblical and sacramental life, it did not do so exclusively; it has always maintained a strong footing in the metaphorical world as well. The Christian East, on the other hand, never loosened its firm hold on the metaphorical world, as its icon tradition attests. The ability to appreciate metaphor opens the way to greater mysticism. So, for example, as artistic and well-executed as a Greek icon is, it is never to be considered a mere decoration.

4. *De Incarnatione* 54.3 in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca cursus completus accurante; Series Graeca in Patrologia Graeca* 25:192B (Paris: Frères Garnier, 1912).

Rather, it is a window into the realm of God, and when we gaze upon the icon, we enter the divine realm while it simultaneously permeates us. Furthermore, because the icon makes the “invisible reality . . . more perceptible” it can be “as effective as printed or spoken words—perhaps for some people, even superior to words,” as a vehicle of the holy.<sup>5</sup>

In the Greek East, the icon is on par with Sacred Scripture.<sup>6</sup> It can transmit historical fact, such as the birth of Christ, and point to a truth beyond the fact. This “truth beyond the fact” rides on the metaphor. An icon, like Scripture, “indicates the revelation that is outside time, contained in a given historical reality.”<sup>7</sup> Through icons, then, we not only read factual details<sup>8</sup> but also encounter and know God, and, in this sense, the icon is like Sacred Scripture.<sup>9</sup>

An important point—indeed the most important point within these ancient forms of exegesis—is that reading Sacred Scripture and venerating an icon are interpreted as encounters with the divine, in all the deep mystery and incomprehensible love that probing the divine can muster.

## THE FRACTURED SYMBOL

The Enlightenment ushered in many advances in the biblical sciences, with the historical-critical method being primary. The period’s emphasis on empirical data, however, not only shunned the symbolic world but also castigated it. Faith and belief were seen as obstacles to interpreting Scripture and therefore had to be jettisoned in favor of a reading that stressed the text uninhibited by a bias toward faith. For those scholars interested in demonstrating the folly of religion, the difficult passages with their incredulous miracles or glaring inconsistencies served as proof that religion was for, well, the “unenlightened.” These scholars themselves pursued their intellectual interests, content that

5. Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 72–73.

6. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer and E. Kadloubovsky (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1982), 36.

7. *Ibid.*

8. While the Bible contains details that can be factual, not every detail is factual. For example, we know through archaeology that the walls of Jericho crashed several times in the city’s history, yet scholars dispute whether the archaeological and historical evidence date from the time when, according to the text, Joshua was in the area.

9. Ouspensky and Lossky, *Meaning*, 36.

they were advancing Western civilization by unmasking such bogus elements as religious belief and spiritual practice.<sup>10</sup>

To be sure, this new thought and the social advances it encouraged gave rise to modern medicine, science, and parliamentary and representative democracy. It successfully challenged religious structures that maintained their power by using dogma and belief as tyrannical weapons. Moreover, in biblical studies, it promoted historical-critical research that utilized archaeology, anthropology, and other disciplines as a way of furthering the interpretation of the text.<sup>11</sup>

The Enlightenment's greatest drawback, however, is that it destroyed that symbolic system that acted as the counterweight to an overly literalistic reading of the Bible. This legacy is the soil that has given rise to biblical fundamentalism. Whereas the agnostics and the atheists could manage in this universe without recourse to the world of either religious texts or metonyms,<sup>12</sup> the believers could not. Christians, without the sensitivity to and awareness of the symbolic system (especially if they belonged to sects that had eradicated all symbols during the Reformation), had nothing left but the biblical text; as such, every word could only be taken as literal—not metaphorical—truth.

### *Historical-Critical Method*

Historical criticism is a necessary component of biblical exegesis. It situates the text most closely with the writer's time and place and, thus, his or her intent, insofar as we are ever able to know fully that particular intent. Problems arise with historical criticism when exegetes present it as the all-encompassing final word of any passage, capable of completely asking and answering all the relevant questions a text may raise. For example, historical criticism cannot answer a question on why or how a certain biblical passage

10. A case in point is Baruch Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise*, which questioned biblical claims of a divinely inspired text. In a similar vein, Thomas Jefferson reworked the New Testament by removing the beginning and end of each of the four gospels. In Luke, he deleted every reference of divine intervention at the birth of Christ: the annunciation, virginal conception, and hosts of angels. The result was his *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*, in which Jesus is portrayed as a teacher of common sense.

11. It should be noted, however, that early forms of some of these other disciplines existed before the rise of modernity and are seen particularly in Origen's tools of textual analysis—tools that are afforded to the material culture of Rome during the period stretching from the early church through the Renaissance. Moreover, the great emphasis placed on pilgrimage to the Holy Land brought the context of the Bible closer to the reader.

12. A "metonym" is a part that represents the whole, as in the phrase, "The White House," for the whole executive branch of government. More to our point, for Christians, a statue of the Blessed Mother could represent the whole cult of saints.

is used in a liturgical antiphon, and because it cannot, many employing this analytical lens may feel that the respective passage has no place in the liturgy at all and, unfortunately, may say as much.

A more organic approach (and a more honest one) would be to admit the limits of historical criticism by introducing, for example, the polyvalent nature of Scripture, the context of its use within the history of the living faith, and the reason why certain writers and artists have interpreted it in a particular way. Doing so breathes life, creativity, and excitement into the subject matter while showing a great deal of sensitivity and humility before the Word of God. People coming from a variety of positions, from liberal to conservative and churchd to unchurchd, can understand and become enthusiastic by such an open approach.

### *Why Images?*

In the words of John Julius Norwich, “Ever since the dawn of history, when man first became a religious animal and almost simultaneously—give or take a millennium or two—made his first clumsy attempts at adorning the walls of his cave, he has had to face one fundamental question; is art the ally of religion, or its most insidious enemy?”<sup>13</sup> While Norwich’s question lacks nuance, it is exactly what plays itself out in the iconoclast controversy, for as the outcome of this debate shows, the truth is that art cannot be separated from theology.

The iconoclast controversy broke out in the Eastern church in the early eighth century. The argument was that the Bible explicitly stated graven images of any kind were prohibited (Exod 20:4; Lev 19:4; Deut 5:8 and 7:5), and yet the church, from almost the very beginning, made use of representational art. Furthermore, this art had found its way into the hearts, minds, and devotion of most Christians. When others began to challenge the practice of using representational art, those who held on to the veneration of mosaics, paintings, and statues were threatened, especially when both secular rulers and church leaders backed the iconoclasts (those destroying the religious icons).

The western half of the church, that is, the area from Constantinople to Spain, was much less affected by the iconoclasts. Much of the reason can be credited to the pagan, Greco-Roman civilization. Unlike the eastern regions (Anatolia to the Persian border), pagan Greece and Rome reveled in their statues, mosaics, and frescoes, all depicting their gods of various temperaments. Lands under Persian cultural influence, on the other hand, were more prone to the predominant religion of Zoroastrianism, which had a very strong aniconic

13. John Julius Norwich, *Byzantium: The Early Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 354.

tradition that frowned on the use of images. Once the Roman world became Christian, these two cultural backgrounds determined how each population would more or less respond to images as representations of its faith.

*A deeper look.* The theology of icons was first articulated by Saint John of Damascus or Damascene (dates uncertain, ca. 676–787), who around 706 became a monk at Mar Saba monastery in Palestine. John Damascene wrote three treatises explaining his point; the first sets out the argument and the remaining two recapitulate it after a fashion. No doubt John Damascene’s life under the Muslim Caliph al-Walid in the Syrian city of his birth had a great effect on his thinking. As a Christian in the Caliph’s court, John Damascene had to learn the subtleties of theology as a matter of religious survival. While the Muslims condemned icons as idolatrous, the iconoclasts were doing the exact same thing in the Christian Empire. With great scholarly intensity, John Damascene’s argument outlines that to capitulate on the question of icons would place Christian doctrine itself in jeopardy. More was at stake than art, or, rather, art became united with theology.

John Damascene’s methodology in his treatises is a paradigm of scholarly presentation. He defines two key terms, “icon” and “veneration.” *Icon* is Greek for “image.” Damascene says that the Son is the image of the Father and that God the Father relates to the created order through images of his divine intention.<sup>14</sup> Visual images tell us something about invisible realities. For instance, a painting or statue of a historical figure reminds us of events, people, and circumstances of the past, or in the case of Damascene, the Old Testament prefigures the New. To destroy icons is to destroy past and present realities as well as to call God into question (1.9–13).<sup>15</sup>

“Veneration” is another term Damascene defines. A translation of the Greek *proskynesis*, literally “bowing down,” Damascene distinguishes “veneration” from “worship” (Greek, *latria*). “Veneration” is done on account of God, to God’s friends and servants, and even to places that God has touched. Here, Damascene gives examples from Scripture: “Let us go to his dwelling place; let us worship [Greek, *proskyneō*] at his footstool” (LXX Psalm 131:17). He also discusses how ancient Israel venerated the temple tabernacle (1.14–15).<sup>16</sup>

John Damascene then moves into the heart of the matter with some of the most uplifting passages in theology. Iconoclasts based their conclusions

14. Andrew Louth, trans., *Saint John of Damascus: Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 10.

15. *Ibid.*, 25–27.

16. *Ibid.*, 28–29.

on the assumption that created matter could not possibly represent the uncreated God. Damascene counters, however, that the incorporeal God became corporeal in the incarnation of God's son, Jesus Christ. If God's son became created matter, how can created matter be sinful or lead into sin (1.16)?<sup>17</sup> The cross of Christ is physical matter. Golgotha is physical matter; so is the tomb, the place of resurrection (1.16).<sup>18</sup> He continues, "Is not the ink and the all-holy book of the Gospels matter? Is not the life-bearing table, which offers to us the bread of life, matter? [Are] not the gold and silver matter, out of which crosses and tables and bowls are fashioned? And, before all these things, is not the body and blood of my Lord matter? Either do away with reverence and veneration for all these or submit to the tradition of the Church and allow the veneration of images of God and friends of God, sanctified by name and therefore overshadowed by the grace of the divine Spirit" (1.16).<sup>19</sup>

Damascene's genius lies in connecting the veneration of images to the incarnation and resurrection, and from there to the whole sacramental life of the church. He continues by arguing with those who would countenance making an image of Mary, Mother of God and Jesus, but who would protest images of any saints. This move, says Damascene, denies the effects of the redemption, for Christ has called all to salvation and glory. If one cannot venerate the saints, one is saying that it is impossible to attain the glory God destined for us, and one becomes an enemy of God (1.19).<sup>20</sup>

Finally, John Damascene does not rely on his wisdom alone to make his point. He concludes by quoting such patristic sources as Saints Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory Nazianzen, John Chrysostom, and others (1.28–65).<sup>21</sup> This tack of using a plurality of sources, too, is an important one in theology. Writing that employs the works of past theologians and scholars is called *florilegia*, a Latin term meaning "a selection of flowers." *Florilegia* remains a standard feature of theological writing up through the Middle Ages and beyond. Indeed, one can see in this style of writing the forerunner to footnotes, endnotes, and other forms of documentation. For our purpose here, we see the great theologian and hymn writer, John of Damascus (whose compositions we still sing today), relying on the intellectual tradition of the church to make a point.

17. *Ibid.*, 29.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, 29–30.

20. *Ibid.*, 32.

21. *Ibid.*, 40–56.



The conclusion to draw from the iconoclast controversy is that art and theology in the Christian tradition are of an organic whole. Entering theology through art or art through theology is not something that starts with *The Saint John's Bible*. It is an ancient practice almost lost first during the iconoclast controversy, second through the excesses of the Reformation, and third through the empiricism of the Enlightenment. It could very well be that biblical exegesis will never be complete without recovering the ancient forms of exegesis that included icons and, in today's case, artistic components to Christianity that have developed since then.

## THE TRANSCENDENT METANARRATIVE

The great rub in any biblical interpretation is acknowledging what we expect Scripture to be and do. From the outset, let us all be clear that the Bible is not intended to be an empirical handbook proving God's existence. The Bible does not prove anything. The proof of the faith comes in living within the divine relationship explicated by Scripture and charged by the Holy Spirit. Like all good relationships, there is a great deal of mystery that one must enter into but never solve or complete. No conclusion is possible in mystery; possibilities are constantly unfolding, and these possibilities keep the relationship alive.

For the community of believing Christians and similarly, though not identically, for Jews, the Bible is a transcendent text in physical form—specifically, a sacrament. The written Word of the Bible is the presence of God in our midst. While differing in kind but not degree, the same can be said of beauty. When the biblical Word and its artistic expression influence each other, therefore, we can have a very strong sacramental encounter. Such a sacramental experience of God is bound to have moral and ethical implications, provided that the beauty leads us to see beyond the object. Concentrating only on the object itself is literally and figuratively a dead end, for anything of creation is, by nature, subject to decay.<sup>22</sup>

By relinquishing the tight empirical hold on the Bible, it is much easier to focus on the fact that Sacred Scripture deals with divine revelation. As pastors, teachers, parents, and students, we can and should do justice to the rigor and insight of biblical scholarship as a theological exercise—which is, by Saint Anselm's famous dictum, *faith seeking understanding*—enabling one to make the leap of viewing the sacred text as the Word of God in human language. We have faith in the transcendent metanarrative seeking understanding through

22. Jensen, *Substance*, 9. Jensen reflecting on Augustine's *Confessions* 10, chap. 33, para. 49–50.

study of its physical form; it is a sacramental engagement between divine reality and its physical manifestation in the written text.

Some people respond with words while others utilize images. Yet the word is most important in creating the image, as Robin Jensen notes: “The greatest works of literature and poetry . . . rely on words to shape and express the images that appear to our imaginations.”<sup>23</sup> Making art is hard work. It demands as much attention, concentration, and focus as we would expect from a researcher. It also demands skill. It is not “the result of a moment of unconscious or mystically channeled genius.”<sup>24</sup> Artists are in dialogue with the society in which they live, and their work contributes to the communal experience.

### Lectio Divina

As a Benedictine venture, the CIT relied on the Benedictine spiritual practice of *lectio divina* as the model and means for discussion. *Lectio divina*, or sacred reading, is an ancient monastic discipline in which one reads a biblical passage as a prayer. One meditates on it, reflects on it, and ruminates on it. In fact, an often used analogy is that one “chews and digests” the sacred text. In this exercise, one avails oneself of thoughts and insights that would otherwise not be possible. In the Christian tradition, such insight is considered to occur under the direction of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

*Lectio divina* describes a culture as well as a method. While it certainly refers to the slow, meditative reading of Sacred Scripture, at one point in history it also affected the environment that fostered and sustained such a study. Within this system, everything read in Scripture must be interpreted within what Hugh of St. Victor calls “the grand *historia*”; that is, to be understood properly, everything one peruses must find a place between the books of Genesis and Revelation.<sup>26</sup> The grand *historia* is the narrative in which the

23. Jensen, *Substance*, 14.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Lectio divina* is not a private undertaking in which a reader is left alone to interpret Scripture on his or her own, without recourse to commentaries or reference to the scientific world. It is not, in other words, a synonym for a fundamentalist reading of the Bible, as some would have it. From antiquity until today, *lectio divina* demands that one use all the interpretive tools at one’s disposal in order to understand the biblical text.

26. Ivan Illich, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 33. See also Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953); S. Boynton and D. J. Reilly, eds., *The Practice of the Bible in the Middle Ages: Production, Reception and Performance in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Justin

personal experience, Christian devotion, and spiritual growth are a unified entity. The individual reads in order to learn and grow in Christ, and in this sense the reader has wisdom as its motivator and goal.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, wisdom contributes to and is gleaned from the artistic.

In the monastic culture, the Word becomes flesh in the *book*, and as such, it becomes an allegory for Christ's incarnation in Mary's womb, and the allegory is but one reason why the Bible is venerated.<sup>28</sup> This assimilation of one reality into another recalls Augustine's dictum, "God has written two books, the book of creation and the book of redemption."<sup>29</sup> Art and text fuse into a whole, resonant, unified sound of God's indwelling on earth.<sup>30</sup>

For the great theologians of the early church, then, *lectio divina* furthers the end of reading and studying Scripture as a mystical encounter with the divine. Because such study is sacred, one who would read Scripture must use all the tools of scholarship and study at his or her disposal to delve into the mystery the Bible holds. Anything less does not take the Word of God seriously.

To be sure, the culture of the early church cannot be reproduced today; now, the world is too pluriform and diverse to support such an enclosed system even if it were desirable. This ancient monastic approach, however, can provide us with a new vision of how to read and interpret the Bible in ways that postmodernism makes possible. The internet, iPads, and other sources that provide and proliferate music, art, literature, and performance build a culture of experience and information—the foundation for an ambient Wisdom tradition. The key is to situate them somehow within the grand *historia*.<sup>31</sup> Reading the Bible is an encounter with the divine Word of God, and we should approach it as such. To do so, we must use research tools as a means to an end and not an end in themselves.

*Intratextuality.* Brevard Childs, in his book *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction*, breaks away from the ironclad rules of historical criticism and sees that, in the New Testament anyway, "the canon was fashioned through a particular intertextuality to render its special message."<sup>32</sup> Childs holds that "at times the canonical text receives a meaning which is derivative of its function within the

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Taylor, "The Treatment of Reality in the Gospels: Five Studies," in *Cahiers de la Revue Biblique* (Pendé, France: J. Gabalda et Cie, 2011), 78.

27. Illich, *Vineyard*, 64.

28. *Ibid.*, 122.

29. *Ibid.*, 123, citing Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram*.

30. Illich, *Vineyard*, 124.

31. *Ibid.*, 33.

32. Brevard Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994; first printing 1984), 48.

larger corpus, but which cannot be directly linked to the intention of an original author."<sup>33</sup> To clarify, Childs emphasizes that books of the Bible were written independently of the whole work, yet they are all interconnected with each other. Childs confines intertextuality to works within the biblical canon (hence, I refer to his practice as *intratextuality*) and the response of those works to each other.

*Canon within the Canon.* In this discussion on the relationship of one book to another within the canonical text of the Bible, I must draw attention to the fact that in planning *The Saint John's Bible*, the CIT engaged in developing a canon within the biblical one. The themes of the project plan, along with those passages highlighting Christian salvation history, made some parts of the Bible determinative for the overall understanding of the text while relegating other sections of the Bible to a lesser status. For example, the book of Numbers has three special calligraphic treatments<sup>34</sup> and 1 Chronicles has none. On the other hand, the Wisdom books are awash in visuals and the book of Revelation has an image at nearly every turn of the page.

Although many of these choices for selection have parallels in earlier Bibles, some do not. An overview of illuminated Bibles throughout history shows that different works within different cultural settings stressed different passages. It is easy to conceive, therefore, that years hence, should anyone wish to produce something similar to *The Saint John's Bible*, there would be another set of images stressed that may or may not match the ones the CIT has chosen here. From the perspective of the role of Sacred Scripture in the life of the church, these historical nuances simply give evidence of the Holy Spirit's working in the faith lives of people; the Spirit nourishes us with the food we need at a particular time.

The interrelatedness of individual biblical books with each other is a definitive hermeneutical stance. Generally, our manner in interpreting a particular book in the Bible is that each text must be studied independently of any other book. A scholar, for example, cannot look to references in Psalms as a means of interpretation for the book of Job. A scholar can note the parallels that a section of Job has with a particular psalm, but that psalm in question cannot influence the meaning we ascribe to Job. *The Saint John's Bible* takes another tack—in fact, the opposite approach.

While there are many books composing the Bible and each may have its own message and theme, the Bible itself, from Genesis to Revelation, has only one central message for the Christian: the story of salvation, beginning now.

33. *Ibid.*, 49.

34. Num 6:24-27; 20:12; 21:8-9.

Such an understanding allows for questions raised in Genesis, Deuteronomy, or 2 Kings to find their answers in Romans, Hebrews, or the Gospel of Luke. The ability to see and make these connections is in a very large part developed and enhanced by the practice of *lectio divina*.

This act of seeing Old Testament stories fulfilled in New Testament gospels is called “recapitulation,” which dates back to the evangelists themselves. Recapitulation as a theological term defines the system of biblical exegesis in which events and passages in the Old Testament are seen as foreshadowing Christ’s salvific act in the New Testament. For example, Matthew’s gospel comments on the events leading up to Christ’s birth by paraphrasing Isaiah 7:14, “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: / ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, / and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ / which means, ‘God is with us’” (Matt 1:22-23). In their approach to the Bible, the gospels in particular, the earliest artists followed the lead of the evangelists in presenting their biblical depictions in a series of Old Testament foreshadowing and New Testament fulfillment.<sup>35</sup>

### *Intertextuality*

In the practice of *lectio divina*, human experience both meets and is interpreted through the biblical text. It is not so much a process that filters out thoughts and experiences that seemingly have no biblical context, inasmuch as these same thoughts and experiences are converted into a scriptural idiom with biblical references. For example, personal struggles are tied to biblical figures and events, daily ambiguities are cast into the ambit of the mystery of God, and human love is seen within the realm of divine love. There is no end to what can be interpreted through the scriptural tradition. No thought is considered unworthy or profane, for even tangents of thought are under the Holy Spirit. While many might see this process as a postmodern exercise, from the perspective of *lectio divina*, it is at least as old as monasticism itself. In this sense, *lectio divina* is very similar to what Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva

35. Recapitulation becomes erroneous and even dangerous when misused or misunderstood. Old Testament prophets, for example, speak to the situation, period, and personages in which they are living without any regard for events five hundred to one thousand years after they are living—namely, the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. Recapitulation results when Christian writers, looking backward, interpret the Old Testament events in the light of Christ. A helpful parallel is to consider the American Declaration of Independence and Constitution. When the founders wrote these documents, they did not have anyone in mind other than free white males of property over the age of twenty-one. As time went on, and as discrepancies manifested themselves, others saw that the founding principles implied full citizenship to all adults, regardless of income, race, or gender.

mean when they employ such nomenclature as “intertextuality” and “dialogue between texts.”<sup>36</sup> These terms are very useful for describing the mind-set for interpreting *The Saint John’s Bible*.

Anyone reading and looking at *The Saint John’s Bible* will be encountering the bits of experiences and of thoughts others have had and interpreted through Sacred Scripture. The pages can contain only the partial reflections and memories. The limits of space and time have precluded the full breadth of comments from the CIT. More important, any reader of *The Saint John’s Bible* will never bring the full gamut of human consciousness to its pages. The images and the texts are meant to inspire others to do what monks, nuns, the CIT, and many others have done with the Bible throughout the ages, which is to use the images to connect personal and communal experiences to the Bible and to let the Bible interpret the experiences. In fact, engaging *The Saint John’s Bible* has caused some to pun on the term *lectio divina* by calling their experience *visio divina* or “sacred viewing.”

The emphasis on *lectio divina* as a means of biblical interpretation might be mistaken as an attempt to bar any scholarly research into a text; however, it would be a terrible misreading of the tradition to think so. The ancients, by practicing *lectio divina*, used all the tools at their disposal to interpret the Bible they were reading. In their libraries they had books to define the meaning of any flora or fauna mentioned in Scripture with symbolic value attached to each. These *lapidaries* and *bestiaries*<sup>37</sup> are the source of nearly every manner of poetic language of the period. The monks and nuns of an earlier period respected the great Christian scholars that came before them and even some pagan ones as well (Virgil and his *Eclogues* come to mind). In our day and age, we also use the best that science and the humanities say about the world. In other words, *lectio divina* is not a private enterprise or an anti-intellectual endeavor. We glorify God when we use the human mind and talents he has given to individual persons as well as to the whole human race. It is not a system closed to the world; it is open to everything that the human endeavor has to offer. Art, literature, and music contribute to and lead from our understanding of Scripture. Science, chemistry, and biology have their own laws that reflect

36. Magdolna Orosz, “Literary Reading(s) of the Bible: Aspects of Semiotic Conception of Intertextuality and Intertextual Analysis of Texts,” in *Reading the Bible Intertextually*, ed. Richard B. Hays, Stefan Alkier, and Leroy A. Huizenga (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), 191.

37. The *bestiary* and *lapidary* worked with the notion that God reveals God’s self in the created world. Animals, therefore, reflected God’s glory and had a moral purpose that humans could follow. As a book, *bestiaries* describe and allegorize the symbolic value of each animal. Similarly, *lapidaries* are books that relate the same for stones and minerals.

the greater glory of God. Neglecting or downplaying any of these areas of knowledge or discipline is a nearly blasphemous negation of the incarnation and the Holy Spirit's presence in the universe.

In studying the work of Childs, Bakhtin, and Kristeva, it becomes evident that their theories—to the extent that they respect the complexity of human experience and knowledge—very much approach the worldview of the Bible as it was before the Reformation, or at least before the Enlightenment.

In this vein, *The Saint John's Bible* represents a fuller, more organic, richer, and catholic understanding of Sacred Scripture than what many of us have come to expect from the world of biblical interpretation; it is a visual commentary on the written text. Moreover, *The Saint John's Bible* reworks the fourfold system of interpretation that we see in Origen and Augustine up until the Enlightenment. The literal now employs the tools of historical criticism; the allegorical includes recapitulation as well as intra- and intertextuality; the anagogical leads to a life in Christ, which is the sole aim of the whole endeavor of Scripture study. The moral is the result of love of and life in Christ.<sup>38</sup>

As such, its use of a premodern answer to a postmodern question brings us back to sacramentality.

Catholicism is nothing if it is not sacramental.<sup>39</sup> Painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, and all the smells and bells that go with liturgy are a part and a parcel of faith. Just as the windows, carvings, and layout of medieval cathedrals taught people of the Middle Ages everything about the Bible and salvation, good art today can do the same thing for those who encounter it. People are drawn to beauty, and beauty is a reflection of the glory of God. What better way to bring people to the Catholic tradition than by using the treasury of resources that the tradition has given birth to? *The Saint John's Bible* draws on and contributes to the great patrimony of Christian art, and in doing so, leads us into a relationship with God.

### *Contemporary Biblical Criticism*

The fact of the matter, however, is that we are not living in the High Middle Ages when Christianity provided the sole optic for interpreting reality. Nine

38. Unlike the classic definition of the fourfold interpretation, these various ways of gleaning meaning from the text are not seen as a progression. Rather, they are integrated into a life of ongoing maturity. Consequently, the *moral* derives from the anagogical even as it leads to it.

39. The term *catholic* is not used in a sectarian sense. Here it means all forms of Christianity that see God's self-revelation in the whole of Creation, manifested in liturgies, sacraments, sacramentals, processions, plays, songs, etc.

centuries ago in the lands of Christendom, the symbol structure forming the metaphors as well as the reasons for every human endeavor arose from the faith life of the people. No doubt there were certain degrees of faith and its intensity, but even if one were able to live in a way not particularly religious, he or she would still understand the significance of the Christian metonymy; it was nearly universal and absolutely pervasive. Such a society no longer exists, and building a Christian culture in our globalized environment is exceedingly difficult but not impossible.

Robin Jensen observes that since the time of Plato, there has been a conflict between those who champion art as free and pure aesthetic and those who hold art as subject to the formation of a moral society.<sup>40</sup> In a Christian context, art goes beyond the formation of a moral society; it becomes anagogical, that is, it leads to life in Christ. In the Christian optic, art competes against thought systems, some of which could be flagrantly anti-Christian.<sup>41</sup>

*How art and text function.* Is the art in *The Saint John's Bible* supposed to enhance, replace, or explain the biblical text? The answer is that if it were to do any one of these things, it would fail in its endeavor. Rather, the art and the text form a single, rich, overlapping work that can draw in, as much as possible, a full sensory reading of the Bible. Indeed, the text itself is in calligraphy, that is, "beautiful writing." On the pages without any artwork, the rhythm, shadows, and form of the script alone are beautiful and communicate with the viewer. As a test, we should take time to step back far enough from the written text so that we cannot read the material but still see the writing. The balance, shape, and design of the letters upon the page create an experience of communication. While it may be difficult to denote what the meaning might be, connotations of grace and beauty arising from the written forms of the letters and sentences can be strong and enduring.

When the experience of gazing at calligraphy imparts a nonverbal meaning to us, we are touching the nonrational part of our being. Nonrationality is another plane of reality. It refers to perceptions that can touch us deeply and profoundly but which defy logical explanation. For example, few Westerners can read and write Standard Chinese but nonetheless will find beauty and meaning in Chinese calligraphy. The experience of beauty and the transforma-

40. Jensen, *Substance*, 89.

41. The question of what constitutes Christian or religious art is a delicate one. The incarnation can make seemingly vulgar or even offensive works a vehicle of God's grace. This situation is part of the Christian paradox. Nonetheless, one would be hard-pressed to find the moral or anagogical content in racist music or demonic symbolism.



tion that takes place because of it rests on the nonrational plane. There may be logic and rational thought involved in many of the parts that lead to the experience, but the total experience itself will still be nonrational. Another example is good liturgy in worship. The component parts of the Mass or other celebration—processions, bells, music, incense, readings, homily, and actions—have historical, theological, and practical reasons in their execution, but the overall experience for any one of us can be indescribable.

The image and text of *The Saint John's Bible* work best when they work nonrationally, and certain pages work better in this regard than others. Moreover, some people will be greatly moved by one configuration that might very well leave another cold. Part of the reason for such different responses can be attributed to what each of us brings to the page when we encounter it, and these variables can be as numerous as the personalities involved.

An obvious influence upon our encounter with the page is our experience of the passage. Something read at Christmastime will bring with it warm memories of food, family, and friends, and the corresponding image will work with these memories. A particular metaphor used in the image, say, a recognizable flower such as a crocus, can elicit memories of springtime, rebirth, and Easter. Likewise, the color palette might even remind us of our grandparents' home, or the overall theme of the work could touch us regarding our own vocations and life choices. Such variables and many more will also work in combination with one another. Employing nonrepresentational art is the key in allowing for the multiplication of possibilities.

For example, illustrated Bibles have long been a part of catechetical programs in nearly every Christian denomination. They have served as good teaching tools for generations and are a result of strides in mass publication and lithographic printing. While certainly many illustrated Bibles were produced with sophisticated audiences in mind, they nonetheless featured a great deal of representational art. On the one hand, representational art can be of high technical quality, and may even be necessary for those who do not understand the story, but, on the other, it can also inhibit the participation of the viewer in the interpretation of the piece; it is a visual form of literalism.

*Interpreting the text and image.* Interpretation is also based on factors independent of each individual's experience or personality. The Bible has been foundational in civilization and culture for over two thousand years. What its inspired writers intended as well as what saints, scholars, and believers—i.e., the community of faith—have said throughout the ages has an impact on the understanding of the passage. The art, therefore, must take into consideration both the personal and the communal backgrounds. It is not so much that

certain genres of art do a better job than others at breathing new life into an age-old tradition inasmuch as some art is better at evoking God through beauty. For instance, in comparing the richness of Suger's Saint-Denis in Paris with the nearly contemporaneous austerity of Cistercian monasteries, Jensen observes that despite the two different styles, "both can be described as beautiful and inspiring."<sup>42</sup>

Likewise, art is not merely decorative to give pleasure to the viewer; beauty must also give "glorification and praise of the divine."<sup>43</sup> Art that is didactic must do more than relay information as a literalistic rendering of the story; it must also impart "a point of view, dimension, and amplification of the narrative."<sup>44</sup> Art that is prophetic cannot become propaganda; its goal must be to "call forth personal transformation, not to sell a particular product or idea."<sup>45</sup>

How biblical texts are envisioned in the mind's eye and how that view is shared with others is a difficult line to walk. At no point should an image in *The Saint John's Bible* be the totality of the experience with the text. The artwork is intended to lead the viewer into the image, the Word, and the mystery. Here we enter the world of metaphor.

*Metaphor as communication.* Metaphor makes communication possible at the deepest level. Such communication is beyond words, or if words are written or spoken, they are employed analogously. We are more accustomed to this type of communication than we might initially think. For example, if someone wishes to evoke our response to a beautiful sunset, all she or he need do is say, "Look at the sunset!" If at that moment the person continues to explain the intricacies of the purple, orange, and red colors upon the remaining clouds with their reflection off the water, the impact of that beautiful sunset is debilitated, if not entirely destroyed. The best way to evoke the response is by silence; even the best-intended speech becomes idle, distracting chatter. Later, when the moment of the sunset has sufficiently passed, we might respond to the experience with a series of descriptors: "majestic," "peaceful," and "ethereal." Then, maybe without any connecting phrases, we might launch into a discourse on loved ones, childhood, or important events in our lives. Still later, because we are so engaged with the experience, we may want to find out all the science of sunsets, light theory, and such. In the end, the scientific knowledge will enhance that particular sunset and all future ones.

42. Jensen, *Substance*, 84.

43. *Ibid.*, 81.

44. *Ibid.*, 86.

45. *Ibid.*, 100.

This example of the sunset, and other similar occurrences in our lives, are communicating metaphorically and analogously. Specific words describing the particular event itself stumble and fall; they cannot carry the weight of what has transpired. On the other hand, someone listening to us talk, say, about the death of a loved one would know exactly how and why that sunset has become so important to us.

For purposes of outlining the interplay of image and text within *The Saint John's Bible*, we must rely on the experience of metaphor, not only with the images, but also with the text. This process does not mean that there cannot be any analysis of individual components constituting the work; it means that this analysis cannot dominate the interpretation or, worse yet, replace it. As with the sunset, our experience might very well be enhanced by knowing Einstein's particle theory of light, but the light theory will not explain the significance or depth of our experience. In this case, poetry is better than scientific treatise, and we are standing once again within the realm of nonrational thought. Indeed, scientists see their work as highly poetic and explain it as such.

*Word and image as metaphor.* In order to enter the world of metaphor, we must be prepared to visualize texts.<sup>46</sup> The depictions in *The Saint John's Bible* are the result of many people not only imagining the narrative line of the passage in question but also conceptualizing two, three, or four-dimensional interpretations of that same passage in form and color. Furthermore, the images are meant to inspire within the viewer ways of imagining the text in light of the experiences he or she has brought to the biblical encounter. People should not view *The Saint John's Bible* thinking that what they see on the page has only a single meaning based on a one-to-one correspondence with the written text. In other words, the illuminations, like the Word of God, have a life guided by the Holy Spirit. The correct interpretation is one that respects the divine revelation as understood by the Christian theological tradition plus our own experiences with the tradition. Moreover, just as we all grow, mature, and change our opinions on any number of issues over time, so too may our interpretations and imaginative depictions of Scripture change. The artwork within the pages is meant to prompt images of one's own making over time.

46. See Martin O'Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield, UK: Phoenix Press, 2007); and Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (London: Random House, 1996). Both O'Kane and Calvino expand upon the importance of using our imaginations to visualize the text we are reading. In the words of Calvino, we should be able to "paint frescoes crowded with figures on the walls of [our] mind" (86).

The artwork is also an invitation. As we gaze and meditate on any one of the illuminations, we are invited to step into the image itself. Our interpretation depends on expanding the text through the imagination, a point that Martin O’Kane further develops. Relying on Paolo Berdini,<sup>47</sup> O’Kane states, “The relationship between text and image is conceived of, not in terms of a correspondence between a narrative and its visual equivalent, but rather in terms of the visualization of an expanded notion of it. . . . What the visual exegesis describes is the new encounter with the text made possible by the image.”<sup>48</sup> This new encounter occurs when the beholder brings to the image his or her reading of the text in light of his or her life experience.<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason that some people are drawn to one particular piece of art and others gravitate toward another.

It may seem that such an approach to the art would lead to a relativistic and highly subjective exegesis of biblical texts, particularly if that exegesis employs art. We must emphasize, therefore, that exegesis is not the work of the beholder alone. Hans-Georg Gadamer refers to *Horizontverschmelzung*<sup>50</sup> or “fusion of horizons” to describe joining our experience with that of the author or, in this case, the artist.<sup>51</sup> I would add that with *The Saint John’s Bible*, the three horizons must come together: those of the biblical writer, the artist, and the viewer along with their respective experiences of God and the faith community.

*Postmodernism.*<sup>52</sup> Over the past fifty years, the rise of postmodernism, especially where it emphasizes deconstructionism, has contested modernity to the point that any absolute claim to truth is immediately suspect. Nearly

47. Paolo Berdini, *The Religious Art of Jacopo Bassano: Painting as Visual Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

48. O’Kane, *Painting*, 41.

49. *Ibid.*, 43.

50. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 358–59.

51. O’Kane, *Painting*, 37.

52. A full study of postmodernism is well beyond the scope of this book, and I have had to take many liberties to discuss it both accurately and succinctly. At the same time, postmodernism defies any ready or concise definition. It is better known for its characteristics than for its precision. Postmodernism, then, is predominantly recognizable by its rejection of any ultimate truth claim as well as anything that smacks of it and, consequently, any metanarrative such as the Bible. Modernity, on the other hand, seeks empirical, universal truth, and because that truth is absolute, it is not always open to nonrational claims of truth. Readers who wish to explore postmodernism in greater depth can find helpful resources listed in the bibliography for this chapter.

every department in every university has been affected, including theology and biblical studies. Among those who disagree with the postmodern argument, the response has gone in at least two directions. The first is to insist ever more loudly that the truth is found in the biblical text and that text does not vary—in a word: fundamentalism. The other is to engage and critique the postmodern assumption. This critique can agree with postmodernism that truth cannot be nailed down by any one particular text or school of thought or culture, but such an agreement does not mean there is no universal truth. This latter position maintains that it is possible to approach truth and arrive ever closer to it, but the text alone, or even scholarship of the text alone, is not going to accomplish it. This stance is the one taken by *The Saint John's Bible*.

From the perspective of hermeneutics, *The Saint John's Bible* tries to recover the metaphorical and symbolic counterweight to the biblical text lost during the Enlightenment, and it does so by emphasizing the sacramental quality of the transcendent text (metanarrative) in physical form (written text). For the Christian, the search for truth always involves an encounter with the sacramental, for all truth has entered the world through the incarnation.

### *Synesthesia*

The study of Sacred Scripture does not aim toward accruing knowledge; it is directed toward encountering Wisdom. Wisdom, in the Christian tradition is personified in the Second Person of the Trinity: the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Just as in life our encounters with people can be through letters, artifacts, meals, clothing, and even scents, so too can be the case with Scripture.

We categorize our perception of reality according to our senses of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, and despite attempts to avoid any overlapping of those categories in our descriptions, we usually do. For instance, when we go to a concert, are we listening to it or are we watching it? To listen to it, a radio would do. We can even think of watching that concert on television or through a live-stream download, but neither would satisfy the desire to be in the actual concert hall. There is something about the live performance that cannot be reproduced or substituted in any other way except by being physically present for the event. While this description of the experience of attending a concert, an experience that involves both watching and listening, only approximates the idea behind a synesthetic experience, the analogy, nonetheless, is not exact.

Clinically, *synesthesia* is a psychological term used to describe stimulation in one sensory pathway that prompts stimulation in another. In a synesthetic experience, a person might see certain colors when particular numbers are read or spoken. Another might taste a flavor or smell a certain scent upon hearing a musical note, or vice versa. While synesthesia has been a technical

field of study from the late nineteenth century, I refer to it here as a broader and less technical experience, in which there is a blending of senses by which one informs the other.<sup>53</sup> For purposes of the interpretation arising from the interplay of image and text, synesthesia serves a most useful purpose. Our interpretation of Scripture is bathed in the senses. Smells, tastes, music, and poetry intermix in providing an experience of the sacramental metanarrative, and these sensory experiences also tie into the monastic practice of *lectio divina*.

In the ancient mystical tradition, the reading of Scripture and the participation in the sacramental life were the primary ways of humans endeavoring toward a union with Christ. These means are still open to us today, and we should avail ourselves of them.

### *Ever Old, Ever New*

We have become accustomed to relying on a particular system to impart meaning. Up until the birth of modern biblical criticism, the fourfold interpretation held sway. Historical criticism has its own set of rules, and in the case of textual criticism, these rules go back to the time of Origen. We might be tempted, as some are, to reject all organized systems of biblical interpretation, because no single system can deliver on producing the final word on what a text means. I am not at all convinced, however, that dropping a school of interpretation, such as historical criticism, is the way forward in biblical studies.

Biblical research and interpretation are not an exact science. Even in chemistry, with all variables constant, a repeated experiment does not always yield the same results as every other. Just because something cannot produce the final word, however, does not mean that such a system is wrong, false, wanting, or bad. Biblical criticism, unlike chemistry, has a myriad of changing variables at any given time. While this statement may seem to suggest that all is chaos in biblical studies, it is truer to the mark to maintain that biblical studies is enormously rich with an abundance of ways to arrive at an understanding as well as an abundance of understandings. As we read Sacred Scripture, we are encountering nearly twenty-five hundred years of accumulated meaning even as we add another level of interpretation upon it. What forms the normative text, and what shapes the normative meaning of the text? For our discussion on interpretation of image and text, let us use the tradition to shape current and future understanding of Sacred Scripture. Specifically, let us turn to the fourfold sense.

53. For more information and further study, see the bibliography for this chapter.

The *literal* sense is the normative text. Historical criticism and related studies furnish us with the accurate version of the text. In addition, archaeology, history, linguistics—indeed, every science and skill that can provide us with a reading as close to the original as possible—contribute to forming the literal sense and, thus, the normative text.

From the literal arises the *allegorical* sense. Much wider and more varied than classical definitions of allegory, the allegorical sense encompasses the world of metaphor and a great range of other disciplines and experiences—that is, the realm of intra- and intertextuality. From this sense grows the experience of synesthesia. Because the allegorical sense is solidly based on the normative, literal sense, the meaning and interpretation that surface here are normative meanings of the text. The literal reading forming the normative text maintains the bond with the Christian tradition, and from it sprouts a variety of normative meanings, which in turn shape and increase that very same tradition.

The *moral* sense is evident in the application of the allegorical sense and its attendant normative meanings. At this point in time, the moral sense would include attention to life issues, social justice, environmental and ecological concerns, as well as what the church has often referred to as the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Our experience with Sacred Scripture should prod us to transform this world into the kingdom of God.

Finally, there is the *telos* or end point, the *anagogical* sense. The purpose and goal of all Christian endeavors—endeavors fueled and catalyzed by the sacramental life of which Sacred Scripture is an integral part—is union with Christ. Study of the normative text, the normative meanings that arise from it, the moral life that blossoms from a sacralized imagination, all lead to a relationship with Christ. As standing before the apse of an ancient church, we live, move, and have our being under the constant and loving gaze of the cosmic *Christos Pantokrator*, Christ the Almighty.

Reading *The Saint John's Bible* as the door to a great treasure trove places us in a good frame of mind to see the nuances of both the history of interpretation and our current experience with the images and text. Over time, we should expect our understanding to shift and change, if only slightly, with each reading of this Bible, as we notice certain phrases, verses, and words in combination with new forms, details, and colors on the pages. Troubling passages may become clarified, and favorite stories may become more challenging. We are dealing with God's living Word, after all. Using all the tools and senses in our reading and interpretation of Sacred Scripture maintains that ancient ideal of reading and viewing Sacred Scripture as union with Christ. Hence, science, study, art, and knowledge lead to the mystical experience of Holy Wisdom.

## SUMMARY

How to interpret Sacred Scripture is a question that reaches back to the very formation and canonization of the Bible itself. For Christians, people like Origen, Tatian, and Augustine loom large. In the Christian West, Augustine's *rule of faith* determined interpretation from the fifth century through the Reformation. The fourfold system of literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical was rooted in a strong sense of Christ's incarnation as well as a sacramental view of the universe. This reliance on metaphorical reality is best seen in the iconography of the Christian East in which invisible reality is made more perceptible.

The empirical worldview that entered the West at the Enlightenment sidelined nearly all other forms of knowledge and thought and, with it, the highly symbolic way of interpreting religious reality, particularly among Protestants for whom the printed Bible became the paramount, if not the singular, source of divine revelation. For Catholics, Christian art, icons, symbols, and metonymies remained, but their interpretation became highly circumscribed and constrained.<sup>54</sup> In the biblical disciplines, the historical-critical method takes root at this point.

Because *The Saint John's Bible* employs premodern methods and genre at this point in the twenty-first century, it must call forth earlier ways of interpreting text through image while simultaneously recognizing and respecting the postmodern world in which we now find ourselves. *Lectio divina* has become a viable means in which new and seemingly unrelated thoughts are folded into the biblical narrative. *Lectio divina* views Sacred Scripture as a sacrament, that is, the Christian transcendent metanarrative in concrete form. The flow of ideas and inspiration, both intra- and intertextually, therefore, also becomes sacramental.

The fullness of such biblical interpretation can lead to a synesthetic experience whereby all the senses—taste, touch, sight, smell, and hearing—can both inspire and resolve an exegetical question. This experience, either partially or fully, acts as a counterweight to the overly literal and fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible. With such a mind-set, reading and viewing *The Saint John's Bible* connects with the mysticism of the Christian tradition: reading and studying the Bible is union with Christ.

54. As seen in baroque architecture, which despite all its flights of fancy controlled and guided the human imagination toward a definite and sanctioned end.