Document generated on 08/16/2024 12:43 p.m.

Science et Esprit

Science et Esprit

DISCERNMENT, ETHICS AND THE BIBLE

Patrick H. Byrne

Volume 75, Number 1, January–April 2023

Lonergan, Ethics and the Bible
Lonergan, l'éthique et la Bible

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094623ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1094623ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Collège universitaire dominicain, Ottawa

ISSN

0316-5345 (print)
2562-9905 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Byrne, P. H. (2023). DISCERNMENT, ETHICS AND THE BIBLE. *Science et Esprit*, *75*(1), 25–50. https://doi.org/10.7202/1094623ar

Article abstract

This essay discusses the relationship between Ethics and the Bible and draws on Lonergan to show how the *Torah* understood as "Teaching" promotes an "ethics of discernment" rather than an ethics of law and obedience. It shows how Lonergan's approach to *Method in Theology* points to a synthesis between the work of critical-historical Biblical scholarship and the exercise that Ignatius of Loyola called "composition of place."

Tous droits réservés © Science et Esprit, 2022

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

Science et Esprit, 75/1 (2023) 25-50

DISCERNMENT, ETHICS AND THE BIBLE

Patrick H. Byrne

In this contribution to the conference on "Ethics, the Bible and Lonergan Studies"[1] I hope to show how Lonergan's functional specialties are a development of what St. Ignatius of Loyola called "composition of place" in his *Spiritual Exercises*, and how this relates to biblical ethics. Ignatius intended "composition of place" as an aid to individuals, so that through their reading of scripture, they might come to discern the will of God for them in the concrete situations in which they find themselves. Such discernment, I believe, is central to what Lonergan meant by the "ethics of achievement," which I have come to call the ethics of discernment.[2] My goal in this essay, therefore, is to show how Lonergan's method of eight functional specialties provides a way to think of critical biblical scholarship as a form of composition of place, and therefore as a way of contributing to the growth of an ethics of achievement and discernment in individuals and communities.

The Bible and the Ethics of Achievement and Discernment

There is a widely shared assumption that the connection between the Bible and ethics consists of law-giving and law-obedience. The Lord God, through the Bible, giveth the laws, and ethics consists in obeying those laws. This conception of the relationship between ethics and the Bible is echoed in the way that Christians tend to translate the Hebrew word, *torah*, as "law." By way of contrast, Jews tend to translate *torah* as "teaching" or "instruction." It seems to me that Jews hold something extremely important that tends to get lost in the Christian emphasis on *torah* as law. The Jewish understanding comes, no doubt from the fact that they have been at the tasks of living and wrestling with *torah* through times of enormous adversity for two thousand years longer than Christians. Out of that struggle, Jews have come to understand that *torah*

1. Paper presented at the Conference *Ethics, the Bible and Lonergan Studies*, Concordia University, Montreal, May 11-12, 2017.

2. Patrick H. Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment: Lonergan's Foundations for Ethics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2016. Cited hereafter as Byrne, *The Ethics*.

is instruction in how to live in fidelity to the One who made and repeatedly renews the Covenant with them.

Torah of course designates the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, which are shared by Jews and Christians. Just looking at the texts themselves, it really does not make sense to characterize those books of the Bible, the *Torah*, solely in terms of law. While it is true that the Pentateuch contains 613 laws, still the actual listing of laws takes up much less than half of the pages contained in the Pentateuch. If the ethics of the Bible is about law, then what is going on in the great bulk of the rest of those pages? Jews understand that the *torah* as a whole is there for the sake of teaching and instruction, and that this teaching is indispensable to comprehending and living out the true intent of the laws. To a great extent, that teaching consists of the telling, retelling, debating and revising of stories. Indeed, all the laws in the *Torah* are set within the context of stories which give the laws their meaning and depth. There are stories of creation, of calamity, of dysfunctional families, of tender loves, seductions, infidelities, and betrayals, of deceit, of murder, stories of injustices, oppression, destruction, wars, defeat, yet also of escape and salvation. While the stories tell in rich and lyrical detail of the lives of human beings, they especially narrate the undying faithfulness of God throughout it all, no matter what. These stories set the context within which the laws of *torah* are to be received, contemplated, understood, taken to heart, practiced, enforced and lived out.

These stories are unique in the history of religious literature, for they testify to the in-breaking of God into the ebb and flow of human historical existence, not just once, but over and over, and especially at key, dramatic moments in the history of Israel. Each time that happened, the people of Israel had to rethink their understanding of God and their understanding of themselves. With each new revelation about God, they had to rethink and rewrite the stories and laws they received from their forebears.

Jonathan Sacks, the late great British public intellectual and for twelve years Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, has this to say about *torah* as teaching: "The Bible is more concerned with cultivating habits of responsibility than merely prescribing rights."[3] As he points out, the Hebrew Bible teaches that "A decent society (…) is one in which people at the margins, the poor, those from fractured families, and the stranger (what we would now call a member of an ethnic minority) are not to be excluded from communal celebrations."[4] This is especially true of the Passover, the festival of the creation of the community of Israel, whose celebration is enjoined by *Torah*. According to Sacks, the study of *Torah* and celebration of its stories cultivate

3. Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together*, New York NY, Continuum, 2017, p. 133. Cited hereafter as *Home Together*.

4. Jonathan Sacks, *Home Together*, p. 127.

habits of *chessed* ("loving kindness" or "covenant love") such as hospitality for the stranger, care for the widowed and the poor, etc.[5] Yet this cultivation of habits toward one's neighbor is inextricably bound up with rituals that also cultivate habits of reverence before God. Without vividly participating in and recalling the stories and worship services, the laws that are intended to cultivate habits of *chessed* become mere enforcements of outward behavior without giving rise to any real habits endowed with the meaning or commitment that is taught by *torah*.

This reflection on the reverent Jewish regard for *torah* as teaching has a strong affinity with Bernard Lonergan's contrast between an ethics of law and an ethics of achievement. Lonergan wrote:

> There *is* an ethics of law and it is essential, but it does not make saints and it does not make heroes. There is also an ethics of achievement (…). An ethics of achievement is suggested, taught, insofar as one gives some idea of the good.[6]

Lonergan's distinction between an ethics of law and an ethics of achievement arose within his reflections on the challenges and opportunities for moral education posed by the turbulences of adolescence. He wrote:

> The intellectual crisis of adolescence is a period in which adolescents reject the set of precepts and evaluations that were imposed externally through precepts at a time when they were not able to think for themselves (…) they commence to reconstruct for themselves the precepts, the evaluations, the ideals that they really accept, that are theirs. They become themselves (…). They are not going to throw out everything (…) but if they are to be themselves, their actions cannot be simply the results of the spontaneous tendencies and images that were necessary to control them in childhood. They have to move to some autonomy of their own (…), the more their education has been a broadening of horizon towards a real apprehension of the human good in all its dimensions, the better they will be prepared.[7]

By an "ethics of achievement," therefore, Lonergan means an ethics of persons – persons who are on the path of developing authentic autonomy. The achievement is their growing ever more into authentic autonomy. Such persons are autonomous because their actions result from "precepts" (or laws) that they have made their own. They are not obeying laws merely to please their parents or out of fear of punishment. Still, mere autonomy is not the same as authentic autonomy. Many people do things that go against the commands of their parents, their society and religion. But simply doing what deviates from the norms of others is not enough to constitute authenticity. Autonomy

5. Jonathan Sacks, *Home Together*, p. 126.

6. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Topics in Education* (Collected Works 10), Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (eds.), Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p. 103. Cited hereafter as Lonergan, *Topics*.

7. Lonergan, *Topics*, pp. 101-102

becomes authentic only if it is guided as Lonergan puts it by "a broadening of horizon towards a real apprehension of the human good in all its dimensions."

There are four main points of emphasis in Lonergan's remark. First, so far Lonergan is only addressing the kind of authentic autonomy that is to be achieved in a limited field of goodness, the field of the *human* good. At this point he has not yet taken up the transcendent goodness that embraces and uplifts the human good to a still higher level. To that I will turn later in this essay.

The second point of emphasis is that authentic autonomy has to be guided by an apprehension of "the human good *in all its dimensions*." We are all born with a very limited sense of the good that is not yet a comprehension of all that is good. This sense of goodness is bequeathed to us by biological evolution and tends to promote higher probabilities of survival of the species. This sense of goodness has to do with the things that we desire which would satisfy our bodily needs and propagate the species. It also has to do with our fears of those things that would harm our bodies and possibly result in death. These natural desires and fears tend to promote our survival, if not individually in every case, then as a species over the broad sweep of time.

Yet although as animals we are born with desires for goodness (and fears of harms) in this sense, there is more to goodness than falls within this evolved animal sense of goodness. According to Lonergan, this greater understanding of goodness has to do with "first, ascending from the particular goods that [people desire, up] to the order they can see within and conditioning those particular goods; next, going from that order to the notion of value, which they can see by comparing different orders."[8] Lonergan elaborates what he means by this in great detail. But very briefly, he is identifying the goodness of the cooperation among people in the ways they go about getting things done (i.e., the good of order), and the goodness of the vision that guides and motivates their cooperative efforts, customs, and institutions (i.e., the good of value).

The third point is that authentic autonomy is possible only to the extent that human beings have a "*real* apprehension" of the human good in all its dimensions. I have endeavored to spell out in some detail what I think Lonergan meant by "real apprehension" of the human good in terms of what I have called the ethics of discernment. Very briefly, real apprehension of the human good comes about as people endeavor to respond seriously to questions about what they should do and why they should do it in all kinds of concrete situations. No set of universal laws can reasonably hope to anticipate all complexities of all the human condition, but human ethical questioning does have the capacity to interrogate each human situation in all its concreteness as it arises. Real apprehension also involves reaching genuine answers

8. Lonergan, *Topics*, p. 102.

to those questions and not resting until one has done so. It further involves taking seriously the intimations that our feelings about values offer to us as we engage in seeking answers to our ethical questions, make decisions and act upon them. I would go so far as to say that, while feelings alone do not suffice to give us a real apprehension of the good, there is *no* real apprehension of the good unless a person feels the values of what is at stake in any situation calling for ethical response and feels the values (or evils) of possible courses of actions. Real apprehension of the good also involves being attentive to the tensions and conflicts that reside within our feelings, and in seeking resolution to those conflicts. These questions, answers, and feelings are the sources of real self-transcendence, which pushes us out of the limits of our evolved biological sense of goodness into the rich and complex realm of uniquely human goodness of cooperation and ulterior purpose. Finally, while real apprehension of the human good only goes as far as *apprehending* the human good in all its dimensions, authentic autonomy involves taking the final step of *acting* on the basis of the wholeness of the human good that one has discerned[9].

The fourth point of emphasis is that this broader and real apprehension of goodness has to be developed. We are not born with it in the way we are born with evolved bodily desires and fears. Human authenticity is never a permanent achievement. Human authenticity is always developing. It is an illusion to think that human beings in this life ever reach a point of ethical maturity where they can stop and rest on their laurels. As humans we are born with an orientation toward discerning goodness in all its dimensions, but that orientation needs be fleshed out. This happens when we are given images, exemplars and heroes, as well as insights and knowledge, skills and virtues that begin to enlarge and strengthen our orientation toward the good in all its dimensions. So our real apprehension or discernment of the human good is ever developing. And if we stop developing in our discernment of the human good, we will cease to be authentically autonomous and begin to stagnate and decline as ethical persons. This is the primary reason why Lonergan speaks of an ethics of achievement. Developing into an authentically autonomous person, someone who discerns and commits to the human good in all its dimensions is an enormous achievement. Nor is this achieved solely by the individual alone. The achievement of authentic autonomy, when it does happen, is as much the achievement of the community that fostered individual developments as it is of the individuals themselves.

In *The Ethics of Discernment* I have argued the moral conversion is a shift in the horizon of feelings that underpins our acts of valuing. That shift, I proposed, is from a limited set of values to the "much larger whole universe of

9. For details, see Byrne, *The Ethics.*

values, replete with its true rankings of value priorities."[10] At the time I wrote the book, I did not recognize that Lonergan had already said essentially the same thing in *Topics in Education*: that the ethics of achievement is a growth in the real apprehension of the human good in *all* its dimensions. Lonergan was describing the reality of moral conversion well before he hit upon that phrase to denote it.

What I have been offering so far is a kind of philosophical account of what is involved in real apprehension of the human good in all its dimensions, and how it is related to authentic autonomy. Lonergan, however, quickly observes that real apprehension of the human good does not necessarily begin with a philosophical account.

> The real apprehension need not be philosophic, scientific, analytic. It can be symbolic, global, synthetic, aesthetic … Whitehead [remarked] that moral education is impossible without the constant vision of greatness. Moral education communicates that vision in unnoticed ways. The vision gathers the way dust gathers, not through any massive action but through the continuous addition of particles that remain.[11]

This is such a great image – the almost completely unnoticed ways in which discernment of the good in all its dimensions only gradually accumulates, like particles of dust, in our ethical consciousnesses. It would be virtually impossible to give a complete inventory of each and every source that touches us (or harmed us) as our ethical consciousnesses forms. Those sources are stories, works of art, and especially the exemplary or repugnant deeds of real people. Real ethical education comes out of being immersed in the ongoing, incarnate flow of human activity in communities, and no philosophical account can hope to completely supplant the ways that such immersion promotes genuine development of ethical authenticity. The symbols and narratives that are passed along by being immersed in the activities of such immersions gradually add dust-like particles to our real apprehension of the human good. This is again why the ethics of achievement is the achievement of communities as well as individuals.

Thinking of ethics in this way is dramatically different from thinking of an ethics of law, insofar as law is understood to be imposed upon the individual from outside by the community. Law in this sense is enforced behavior. Law in this sense is effective only because it is ultimately backed by social (or divine) sanctions. An ethics of law in this sense does not enlist in its service the freedom of persons who have made their own the vision of the human good in all its dimensions through discernment and "real apprehension."

10. Byrne, *The Ethics*, p. 230.
11. Lonergan, *Topics*, p. 102.

But we can think of an ethics of law in a different sense. Law in this other sense still does involve sanctions, but it does so with an ulterior purpose in mind. It takes the narrow, biologically inherited sense of the good from birth, and uses it to direct young people into activities where they will begin to accumulate the particles of the human good in all its dimensions. An ethics of law in this richer sense is knowingly oriented toward activities which will develop habits of justice, kindness and *chessed* until there was no more need for those disciplinary measures – until they were doing what others originally wanted them to do, but now because they want to.

When people develop a real apprehension of the human good in all its dimensions, this discloses possible goods for choice that would not have otherwise come to mind. Once this broader vision and framework of the good is really apprehended, people are able to say, "of the several things I could do in this situation, which one or ones are really meeting the vision of the human good in all its dimensions?" This is accomplished, not by having some sort of chart or map or conceptual system that lays out all of the human good before our eyes and minds, and then selecting the item in that chart that fits the occasion. Rather, choice of what to do that contributes to the human good is accomplished by discerning what questions are being posed by the present situation, being intelligent in coming up with possible responses, and discerning which one or ones of these best respond to our questions and feelings regarding the human good in all its dimensions.

While a real apprehension of the human good in all its dimensions need not begin in a philosophical (or even a theological) account such as the one I have just outlined, nevertheless, sooner or later, each person will inevitably raise certain kinds of further questions in the pursuit of their authentic autonomy, and questions which are properly philosophical. Western philosophy originated with Socrates' troubling revelation that, if Athens was to ever embody a truly just and good way of life, it would have to confront philosophical questions. This was so unsettling a revelation that Athens put him to death. But that did not quell the nagging questions, for they were not questions that were idiosyncratic to Socrates. They were and are the questions that inevitably trouble the consciousness of every human being who is striving to be authentic. The failure to satisfactorily answer such questions will ultimately undermine and vitiate the authentic ethical dust that has accumulated from stories, symbols, and classic works of art.

Today we find ourselves in a much more complicated situation than Socrates. The importance for answering philosophical questions to the pursuit of authentic autonomy remains with us. But now we also find ourselves in a culture which has incorporated influential philosophical ideas into the institutions and rhythms of our social, economic and political interactions. Relatively few people are aware of the fact that much of the dust that has accumulated

in their ethical formations has derived from such philosophies. Some of these philosophies have set forth a narrow view of the human good with powerful arguments. Hence, there is a need to offer a counter-philosophy and a counter-theology that supports the real apprehension not only of the human good, but the unrestricted good in all its dimensions.

Ethics of Achievement and Composition of Place

This observation now leads me to show how I think Lonergan's account of the method of the eight functional specialties helps to meet the problem of the impact of conflicting ethical philosophies and theologies on our contemporary real apprehension of the good in all its dimensions. In particular, I want to show how that method promotes the study of the Bible along the lines that Jonathan Sacks called the cultivation of habits of *chessed*, loving kindness, as well as other related virtues, both natural and supernatural. But in order to do so, I must first take a side journey to describe Ignatius of Loyola's exercise of composition of place. This tangent will make it possible to argue that Lonergan's method is a refinement and an extension of the sort of thing intended by Ignatius' composition of place.

After many years of paying attention to his own spiritual growth and observing the spiritual development in his companions (i.e., the first Jesuits), Ignatius worked out what we now call his spiritual exercises. The primary objective of these exercises is to assist a person in making decisions in conformity with God's will. But Ignatius came to realize that it is God's will to give *us* greater glory, which means God wills for us to participate in, indeed to be in union with, unconditional love and goodness, the "uncreated glory" which God is.[12] Ignatius' exercises were constructed to help those performing them to really apprehend that participating in God's glory is also their own deepest desire, that this is the good that they themselves most profoundly wish to freely choose as well.

Ignatius also came to understand two other things. First, that God's will for the greater glory of a person goes beyond the limited or immediate goods that an individual might conceive of. A person might well embark upon something authentically good, but this might not contribute to the *greater* good, the *greater* glory that God envisions for all humankind. As Ignatian scholar Jules Toner puts it, "the *greater* glory is not to be thought of merely in terms of the immediate consequences of a choice or even in terms of the clearly envisioned long-range consequences, but in terms of the consequences for the

12. Jules J. Toner, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision Making*, St. Louis MO, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991, p. 15; cited hereafter as Toner, *God's Will*.

ultimate glory to be achieved through the whole of history."[13] What Lonergan calls the ethics of achievement will indeed give guidance to the humanly good that might be done. But Ignatius realized that God often wants something "greater" – what Jesuits call "the *magis*." This might be a choice and action that is a special, maybe improbable, contribution to the human good – something one would not have come up with on one's own. But most essentially it will be a choice that would cooperate with God's lifting the human good up into the glory of God. Thus, for Ignatius, what God wishes for greater glory is situated in the context of "an incomplete universe, an unfinished created glory" which is brought to realization through "the great glory of persons who have the amazing destiny and dignity of being [God's] intelligent, loving and free co-workers."[14]

Second, in addition to realizing that the human good is situated in something still greater, Ignatius also came to realize that his feelings (what he called "spirits") might deceive him as much as guide him in discerning what God wanted of him. So he developed his spiritual exercises so as to help himself, his companions, and many generations of people ever since in discerning the feelings that are transcending toward the *magis*, *versus* feelings that are heading toward corruption and decline.

Among the exercises that Ignatius developed to assist this discernment is the one called "composition of place." The idea of composition of place is set forth in a general way at the very beginning of the First Exercise. This idea is gradually elaborated as the exercises unfold. The person following the exercises is invited to "see with the sight of the imagination" how a scriptural scene would appear to her or him.[15] Ignatius' instructions for developing this form of discernment reach their height in the exercise where a person is invited to contemplate of the Nativity of Jesus.[16] Here Ignatius encourages the one undergoing the exercises to allow the enrichment of the imagination beyond merely visual images, adding also the imagination of sounds, smells, tastes and feelings of touch.[17] These exercises of the imagination are always accompanied with prayerful petition asking for "the grace which I want."[18]

---

13. Toner, *God's Will*, p. 29, emphasis added.

14. Toner, *God's Will*, p. 18.

15. Composition of place: "Here it is to be noted that, in a visible contemplation or meditation – as, for instance, when one contemplates Christ our Lord, Who is visible – the composition will be to see with the sight of the imagination the corporeal place where the thing is to be found which I want to contemplate (…) a Temple or Mountain where Jesus Christ or Our Lady is found, according to what I want to contemplate." David L. Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading*[2], St. Louis MO, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978, p. 32 [47]. Cited hereafter as Fleming, *Exercises*.

16. Fleming, *Exercises*, pp. 74-82 [110-131].

17. Fleming, *Exercises*, pp. 78-79 [120-126].

18. Fleming, *Exercises*, p. 64 [91].

Once having learned this exercise, a person can use it in relation to any biblical text. That is to say, composition of place invites persons to immerse themselves into the scene of a biblical passage, and to let their imaginations flow freely in all the sensible directions. Consider for example, Exodus 1:15-20, which describes the Hebrew midwives and how they protect newborn infants from Pharaoh's decree that the male babies should be put to death. With whom in the scene does one identify? With the Hebrew midwives? With the babies or mothers threatened by Pharaoh's decree? With an Egyptian soldier? With a bystander watching as the midwives try to discern what to do? What does the scene look like? What sounds and smells are there? What does it feel like to touch or be touched in moments of birth and the clandestine protection and hiding of the newborns? And so on. This is what is meant by composition of place.

Still, this imaginative reconstruction is not an end in itself. It is an exercise to discern what will serve the greater glory. And this is where Ignatius shows what an extraordinary psychologist he was. Out of his own experiences of reading and contemplating, he came to the firm conviction that, if people truly open up to God and allow their imaginations to follow, then the Holy Spirit will guide the composition of one's imagination in these exercises. Sometimes a person will identify with one character in the passage, but with other characters on different occasions. Sometimes attention will be directed toward this image, but to other images at other times. Ignatius trusted that if one enters into the exercises really desiring grace, that the Holy Spirit will work along with the present state of a person's psyche to compose images that are needed at that moment to move her or him toward discernment of what would achieve greater glory. Most importantly, feelings of different sorts will arise in response to the images being composed during the exercise. Those feelings will be what Ignatius called the "spirits" and are the real point to the exercise. His rules of discernment direct the person to attend to and think about these feelings or spirits. How does the imaginative entering into the biblical scene heighten and transform one's feelings about good and evil? How does it augment one's real apprehension of the human good by lifting it up into the goodness of God's greater glory?

In a manner of speaking, then, Ignatius thought of the Holy Spirit as gradually dusting particles of the great glory of God into the psyche of the person performing the exercises. This means that the community of persons that is fostering the ethics of achievement and discernment is broadened by enlisting the participation of the Divine persons in addition to the human persons who influence the development of the real apprehension of the all that is good in all its dimensions.

Functional Specialties, Biblical Scholarship, and Composition of Place

Against this background it is now possible to say how I think that Lonergan's method of the eight functional specialties is an extension and a refinement of the composition of place, and how it can contribute to a broader ethics of achievement rather than merely to an ethics of law.

First, then, what is the method of the eight functional specialties? This method can be introduced schematically by means of the following diagram:

Eight Functional Specialties *Method in Theology*	
4. Dialectics	5. Foundations
3. History	6. Doctrines
2. Interpretation	7. Systematics
1. Research	8. Communications

Lonergan refers to the left-hand column as the first or "indirect discourse" phase of the method, while the right-hand column he refers to as the second or "direct discourse phase." Lonergan envisions the first four functional specialties on the left to be a scholarly retrieval of the meanings and values that have been passed along by those who come before us. Scholars using the first four specialties are engaged in what Lonergan called "indirect discourse" – receiving and studying the meanings and values of the past. The second four specialties on the right have to do with what he called "direct discourse" – personally and communally taking responsibility for the future, on the basis of what has been received from the past.[19] Of course the meaning of each of the eight terms in this diagram needs to be explained further. Although Lonergan devoted 10 chapters in his book *Method in Theology* to elaborating each component in this method, as well as the structure as a whole, I can only provide a rough approximation in the present context.

First, then, Lonergan never thought of his method as a complete replacement for the methods used by biblical and other scholars. Rather, he thought of his eight functional specialties as offering a framework for forging connections among specialized scholarly work that is all too often isolated in academic "silos." He also saw his method as, in some cases, adding certain procedures that are lacking in current scholarly practices. The addition of these procedures would be needed to facilitate breaking down the silos and forging the new connections.

---

19. Bernard LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, New York NY, Herder and Herder, 1972, p. 133. Cited hereafter as LONERGAN, *Method*. Both because biblical scholarship operates almost exclusively in the first phase of Lonergan's method, and for considerations of length, this article will focus almost entirely on the first four functional specialties.

Second, the gravitational center of these eight functional specialties is personal encounter and conversions. That is to say, the method with its eight components is designed to organize the vast wealth of modern, critical theological scholarship into a pattern that brings about a personal encounter. As Lonergan put it, the first three functional specialties, Research, Interpretation, and History

> approach but do not achieve an encounter with the past. They make the data available, they clarify what was meant, they narrate what occurred. [But] Encounter is more. It is meeting persons, appreciating the values they represent, criticizing their defects, and allowing one's living to be challenged at its very roots by their words and by their deeds. Moreover, such [a Dialectical] encounter is not just an optional addition to interpretation and to history. Interpretation depends on one's self-understanding; the history one writes depends on one's horizon; and encounter is the one way in which self-understanding and horizon can be put to the test.[20]

Here we can begin to see a parallel between the first four functional specialties and Ignatius' exercise. In Ignatius' composition of place, the person also engages in a personal encounter with the characters in biblical passages, with her or himself, and with God. These encounters are mediated through the words of the bible and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But in Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, the manner in which the scene is composed depends upon the resources available to the individual – how she or he understands the words and meanings. The individual's understandings and words will be limited to a certain extent by the resources of their upbringing in their own culture. With Lonergan's first three functional specialties, those resources are vastly expanded. The limited resources of the individual's own culture are expanded outward toward a richer composition of the setting (or "place") of the text – *if* the meanings and values of the cultural context that informed its original composition are also brought to awareness.

Let me make Lonergan's idea more concrete by offering an illustration from my own background. I once took a course in Johannine literature from the late New Testament scholar, George MacRae. When we reached the crucifixion scene in the 19th chapter of the *Gospel According to John*, he drew our attention to verses 29-30:

> There was a vessel filled with common wine. So they put a sponge soaked in wine on a sprig of hyssop and put it up to his mouth. When Jesus had taken the wine, he said, "It is finished." And bowing his head, he handed over the spirit.

Fr. MacRae then explained to us a then-current debate among scholars about the word, *hyssop*. The controversy stemmed from the fact that the hyssop plant has a very thin and pliable stem, and could never support the weight of

20. Lonergan, *Method*, p. 247.

a sponge soaked in wine. So some scholars proposed there must have been a corruption of the text. The original word must have been *hyssos*, a Greek word for javelin, which would have been strong enough to support a soaked sponge. However the word *hyssos* does not appear in any of the ancient documents of John's gospel.

Fr. MacRae then went on to show that John's chronology for the passion narrative differs from that of the Synoptic gospels, so that in John's gospel Jesus' crucifixion coincides with the time in that particular year when the lambs were being ritually slaughtered in preparation for the Passover. Moreover, the *Book of Exodus* reports that God instructed Moses to tell the Hebrew slaves in Egypt to use hyssop to smear the blood of lambs on their door lintels so that the Angel of Death would spare their families. The addition of this scholarly knowledge helped us, his students, "compose" a far richer "place." Through the text enriched by scholarship we encountered a proclamation by the author of John's gospel that God was doing in Jesus' crucifixion something like, but much more mighty, than what God had done in saving the Hebrew slaves from the oppression in Egypt. Jesus was being portrayed as the sacrificial lamb who saves God's people.

The scholarship that Fr. MacRae made known to us greatly enriched our understanding of the context of this passage. That scholarship involved, first, what Lonergan called the specialty of Research, whose job it is to settle which are and are not authentic texts – in this case, whether the word *hyssos* rather than *hyssop* ever occurred in any authentic manuscript. Second, it also involved Interpretation. Once one is confident that the text itself is authentic, the next challenge is to understand it. This requires retrieving the original context that underpins the set of meanings that went into the text, as well as the meanings available to the original audience to which it was addressed. For the Johannine passion narrative, this would involve knowing the specialness of the hour of the preparation for the Passover as identical with the hour Jesus' execution.

Lonergan writes that among other things, the functional specialty, Interpretation, has four main aspects: understanding the object to which the text refers, understanding the words employed in the text, understanding the author, and understanding oneself. Lonergan's phrase, "understanding the author" is actually an abbreviation that includes not only "understanding the author himself," but also extends to include understanding the author's setting, place, "nation, language, time, culture, way of life, and cast of mind."[21] In other words, most of what scholars think of as historical-critical method is incorporated within what Lonergan calls Interpretation – though only as part of what he thinks of as the work of this functional specialty.

---

21. Lonergan, *Method*, p. 160.

This means, therefore, that what Lonergan calls History is *not* what is usually called historical-critical scholarship. That is already included as a part of the functional specialty of Interpretation. When it comes to the functional specialty, History, Lonergan has something different in mind. History as a functional specialty is not a matter of critically retrieving the meanings that formed the immediate historical context of the text. It is, rather, a matter of situating both the text and its immediate context within a much wider and longer narrative over decades or centuries or even millennia. Scholars speak of understanding a text *Sitz im Leben* – situating the text in the immediate lived setting of its composition. By way of contrast, the functional specialty History is dedicated to *Sitz in die Geschichte* – situating the text in the long flow of human history, which reveals broader and deeper dimensions of the meaning and value of the text. Investigating this broader sweep of history is not the work of Interpretation. Rather, the functional specialty of History involves discovering the relationships among a text and its interpretations in relation to both earlier and later texts and their interpretations. History is concerned to identify the narrative of "what was going forward" (or downward) in communities over long periods of historical time.[22] Historical scholarship in this specialized sense has to begin with texts and interpretations that are initially quite diverse and disconnected, and eventually finding a narrative that truly makes coherent sense of their connections across long stretches of time.

The *Gospel of Luke* gives a hint of what is meant by situating texts in history. The last chapter of that gospel includes the story of the appearance of the Risen Jesus to two disciples who were on their way to the town of Emmaus. The salient passage in this story reads as follows: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures." (Luke 24:27). The Christian classification of "prophets" covers the books of *Amos*, *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, *Micah* and so on. But in the Jewish classification, "prophets" also includes the books of *Joshua*, *Judges*, *1* and *2 Samuel* and *1* and *2 King*s – books that Christians classify as "histories." This means that Jesus was not merely offering an interpretation of the books of scripture. He was offering the two disciples an alternative version of "what was going forward" in the history of Israel and Judea. He was offering an historical narrative that was different from anything they had ever previously encountered. Jesus' version was dialectically opposed to the alternative versions of what was going forward in the history of Israel and Judea (and the role of the Messiah) that they had absorbed one way or another, like dust, from their immediate cultural and religious environments. He was situating the texts and interpretations into a radically new historical setting, which was needed in order to make

22. Lonergan, *Method*, p. 178.

sense of his own teaching, passion and Resurrection. It was also a historical narrative that included a radically new future.

The disciples' response to this new historical narrative was transformative. They exclaimed, "Were not our hearts burning while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). Lonergan himself once remarked on this passage, saying that the disciples' words, "did not our hearts burn" was evidence that this was "God's love poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit," (Romans 5:5), what he called the dynamic state of being-in-love in an unconditional fashion.[23] In other words, the composition of historical place offered to the disciples by Jesus was the stimulus for a personal encounter, and that encounter transformed and expanded their real apprehension of the good, human and transcendent, in all its dimensions. And in turn, their conversion provided the foundation on the basis of which they could believe and affirm as true Jesus alternative version of history.[24]

Lonergan's way of conceiving the functional specialties can be seen as a framework for integrating biblical scholarship into a continuation and critical elaboration of the trajectory that Jesus modeled in his teaching to the disciples on the road to Emmaus. That is to say, biblical scholarship holds the potential for personal encounter and transformation both of those who are touched by the results of the scholarship, as well as within the scholars themselves. For there is a connection between a person's ability to do respectable scholarship and the ethics of achievement. Just as the ethics of achievement is the result of a long process of growth in the real apprehension of the good in all its dimensions, something very similar is true of biblical and other scholars. Lonergan remarked that scholarly acumen is the result of a long "process of learning and even at times as a result of a conversion."[25] By this long process of learning, he meant primarily that scholars who are contributing to Research, Interpretation and History have to spend years acquiring insights into languages and cultures that form the backgrounds of the texts they study. In doing so, scholars are acquiring what Lonergan called "historical sense," a vast inventory of insights, judgments, images, feelings and values that approximate to the ways that the people of that time would have thought and felt about things.[26] The process is analogous to the gradual accumulation of dust particles by means of which people acquire a real apprehension of the human good.

---

23. See Lonergan, *Method*, p. 162.

24. The functional specialty, Doctrines, focuses on methodically arriving at scholarly judgments about which among the alternative products of History is to be affirmed on the basis of the conversions.

25. Lonergan, *Method*, p. 155.

26. Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Collected Works 3), Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (ed.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 587. Cited hereafter as Lonergan, *Insight*. See also Lonergan, *Method*, pp. 81 and 233-234.

Vast as this scholarly learning must be, this alone might not be enough. Sometimes in order to truly come to terms with the meanings and values offered by texts, scholars might also have to undergo what Lonergan called conversion. He was speaking from personal experience. He reported that his own efforts to "reach up to the mind" of Thomas Aquinas in his own scholarly studies changed him profoundly.[27] Lonergan recognized that just as his own scholarly work led up to conversion, and that he subsequently operated on the basis of that conversion, so also this might be a recurring possibility, even a necessity, for authentic scholarly work in general.

The conversion that Lonergan underwent during his studies of Aquinas was what he would come to call "intellectual conversion." He later recognized that something similar happens in the realms of ethical and religious encounters – so he identified moral and religious conversion in addition to intellectual conversion. Later on Robert Doran, S.J. also identified a further psychic conversion, about which Lonergan expressed approval.[28]

Thus, just as the ethics of achievement and Ignatius' composition of place can lead a person at times to the realization that her or his horizon must be transformed, so also the method of eight functional specialties is designed to both promote and accommodate just such conversions. This is incorporated into scholarly work principally through the functional specialties of Dialectic and Foundations.

> the purpose of dialectic is to invite the reader to an encounter, a personal encounter, with the originating and traditional and interpreting and history-writing persons of the past in their divergences (…) understanding texts is relevant to the dialectic that invites or challenges the theologian to conversion.[29]

Lonergan wrote, for example, that it is only through intellectual, moral and religious conversion that

> the theologian overcomes [her or his] own conflicts, [and thereby] can hope to discern the ambivalence at work in others and the measure in which they resolved their problems. Only through such discernment can [one] hope to appreciate all that has been intelligent, true, and good in the past even in the lives and the thought of opponents. Only through such discernment can [one] come to

27. LONERGAN, *Insight*, p. 769. "After spending years reaching up to the mind of Aquinas, I came to a twofold conclusion. On the one hand, that reaching had changed me profoundly. On the other hand, that change was the essential benefit. For not only did it make me capable of grasping what, in the light of my conclusions, the *vetera* really were, but also it opened challenging vistas on what the *nova* could be."

28. For a summary of the conversions and why they are neither arbitrary nor merely subjective, see BYRNE, *The Ethics*, pp. 223-238.

29. LONERGAN, *Method*, p. 168. Importantly, Lonergan also insisted that this method cannot *produce* conversions. It can only facilitate and increase the likelihood of conversions. "I hold that that conversion occurs, not in the context of doing theology, but in the context of becoming religious." LONERGAN, *Method*, p. 170. See also BYRNE, *The Ethics.*

> acknowledge all that was misinformed, misunderstood, mistaken, evil even in those with whom [one] is allied. Further, however, this action is reciprocal. Just as it is one's own self-transcendence that enables one to know others accurately and to judge them fairly, so inversely it is through knowledge and appreciation of others that we come to know ourselves and to fill out and refine our apprehension of values.[30]

Let me now summarize the main points of this essay thus far:

First, the ethics of achievement involves an expansion of a person's real apprehension of the human good in all its dimensions. This is primarily accomplished by immersion in the social interactions of communities in which the human good in all its dimensions is being practiced. It is most especially through stories and incarnate exemplars that individuals gradually grow into people who are capable of discerning and acting according to the human good. Sometimes, however, real growth in apprehension of the good requires a dramatic, radical reorientation of the person's sense of the good. Sometimes conversion is necessary. In communities constituted by religious traditions, the meanings and values drawn from encounter with their sacred writings play an enormously important role in promoting conversions that go beyond gradual growth in the real apprehension of the human good. This is certainly true in communities constituted by biblical traditions. Personal encounters with biblical texts, their meanings and values challenge those who ponder these texts to go beyond the limitations of their formations to more profound, real apprehensions of the good.

Second, Ignatius developed his exercise of composition of place in order to intensify the capacity of biblical passages to facilitate growth in the real apprehension of the good. This exercise can lead to a conversion toward real apprehension of the human good in *all its dimensions*, but is especially intended to promote conversion toward the divine good, the greater glory of God.

Third, Lonergan envisioned a way of unifying the work of biblical scholars so as to expand the kind of composition of place that is ordinarily available to people based solely on the resources of her or his own immediate culture. Interpretation adds the understandings, images, and feelings that would have been in play in the original setting of the biblical text. History expands this setting to include potentially the whole of human history. History situates the original text, its culture, and the many meanings and interpretations that it has influenced within the broader sweep of their influences and consequences. Moreover, just as ordinary growth in the ethics of achievement and growth through Ignatius composition of place sometimes lead to conversion toward a broader and deeper apprehension of the good, both human and divine, so also the method of eight functional specialties can facilitate moments of

30. LONERGAN, *Method*, p. 253.

conversion in biblical scholars and those to whom they communicate their scholarly findings.

Functional Specialties and Biblical Scholars

Before concluding this article, I feel obliged to address the question, "But what do real biblical theologians make of Lonergan's proposal for a method of functional specialties?" For it is true enough that very few biblical theologians even know about Lonergan's work, and among those who do, fewer still have actually adopted it in their scholarly work. Fortunately, this question has been addressed extensively and admirably by Ian Henderson in his article in this issue of *Science et Esprit*, "Lonergan, *The Aims of Jesus* and Social Memory."[31] In this section I merely supplement Henderson's essay by adding some further reflections on the work by two additional biblical scholars: Sean McEvenue and Pheme Perkins.

First, however, I wish to re-emphasize a point made earlier in this essay. Lonergan did not envision his method as a replacement for the methods that have been developed over centuries by biblical scholars themselves. Rather, he regarded his method as a way of integrating those methods, and supplementing them so as to foster encounter and conversion. This means that Lonergan's method of functional specialties, at least many parts of it, were already in practice even before he arrived at his final version of theological method. In addition, Lonergan may have anticipated some of the specialized methods (at least in a heuristic, general way) that have been developed since the publication of *Method in Theology*, as well as other specialized methods that are yet to be devised. He was able to do this by focusing his attention on the operations and structures of consciousness that are used by scholars in devising scholarly methods, rather than on the particular guiding principles that have been devised over the centuries. Lonergan would claim that such guiding principles are the products of the operations and structures of consciousness that form the backbone of his method of eight functional specialties. This would mean that his eight functional specialties offer ways of integrating even the results of future specialized methods with those of the past.

Second, Sean McEvenue invoked Lonergan's method of functional specialties explicitly in several essays where he reflected on Hebrew bible scholarship. He took Lonergan's work on method to heart, yet he also raised some important criticisms of Lonergan's method. Therefore his perspective is of special interest to the aims of this essay.

31. Cf. Ian Henderson, "Lonergan, *The Aims of Jesus* and Social Memory," *Science et Esprit*, 75 (2022), pp. 5-23.

In a 1989 essay McEvenue praises Lonergan for rejecting "any simple, direct link between theology as we know it and biblical texts."[32] He elaborates his point by arguing that "Lonergan has made two massive contributions to the use of the Old Testament in theology." He continues:

> First he has enabled us to understand the author aright, as a dramatic subject. In particular, as against the bias of most of what one reads, he has established the primacy of judgment in knowing and affirming what is real, and hence the primacy of the author's affirmation of truth (rather than the history of ideas, or the meaning of the text as text) in the interpretation of meaning.[33]

In other words, McEvenue recognizes the importance of intellectual conversion (in addition to moral and religious conversion) to the work of biblical scholarship. Intellectual conversion dramatically changes a person's assumptions about what can and cannot be real, as well as what can and cannot be known and what is or is not true. Intellectual conversion arrives at the conviction that the genuine criterion of reality is true, reasonable judgments, that are grounded in reflective understandings which grasp the virtually unconditioned grounds for those judgments. Intellectual conversion abandons both less demanding and more restrictive criteria, such as: "unless something can be seen or touched, it is not real." In McEvenue's view, intellectual conversion restores proper respect for the author and the integrity of his or her conscious processes of knowing, meaning and truth, rather than reducing the meaning of the expression to a product of external cultural forces.[34]

Lonergan's second massive contribution, according to McEvenue,

> separates interpretation from doctrines (propositional truths) by four distinct successive operations (…). Thus he has removed all need to produce propositional meaning out of biblical texts by reductive interpretation.[35]

McEvenue's analysis of the value of Lonergan's method to biblical scholarship lends support to the central point that I have made in this essay. That is to say, he likewise recognizes that the focus of Lonergan's method of eight functional specialties is on personal encounter and conversion. He writes that Lonergan "invites us to enter a dialectic with biblical texts in order to affirm positions and reverse counterpositions, [*via*] the presence or absence of conversion in their authors."[36] In a later essay he adds that biblical texts "are crafted in ways which engage the personal reaction of the reader to the acts of meaningful

32. Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines and the Old Testament: Lonergan's Contribution," in Sean E. McEvenue and Ben F. Meyer (eds.), *Lonergan's Hermeneutics: Its Development and Application*, Washington D.C., The Catholic University of America Press, 1989, pp. 133-154. Cited hereafter as Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines."

33. Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines," p. 153.

34. Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines," p. 152.

35. Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines," p. 153.

36. Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines," p. 153; see also pp. 139 and 144.

historical persons"[37] and that readers are "challenged either to accept or reject hope [for a society intended by God] as a way of living."[38] He explains how recent developments in biblical scholarship have moved decisively in directions to deal with this crucial fact. In particular he observes that because of such methodological adaptations,

> the exegete must communicate to theologians not "theologies" or messages, but rather clues toward experiencing the biblical text. Such clues are of many sorts: for example indicating what in the text is original, or what is emphasized by the structuring; or by identifying analogous complexes of meaning in contemporary experience; or by showing what a text does not say so that the reader wonders again what it does say; or by uncovering the sub-text where it is not obvious (…). Such clues are the product of scholarly research, of theological insight, and of interpretation theory.[39]

McEvenue illustrates his point by considering the biblical narrative of Jacob's journey to Bethel (Genesis 27:41-28:22). He first surveys historical-critical renderings of this passage by several other scholars. He argues that these historical-critical interpretations arrive at commandments that are merely specific to the time of their origination, but have "no spiritual value for us."[40] After analyzing the work of these other scholars, he then offers his own alternative, scholarly exegesis of the text. This involves "attentive listening, with respect for what the author did know and did want to have us hear (…) interpretation should not be so much a question of thinking and judging, but rather of feeling into and becoming."[41] With such an approach, he continues, "Jacob is there, and he is incarnate meaning as patriarch of the Jewish people (…) [but] left emphatically human in size (…). Jacob is ordinary, like you and me, but chosen by God like you and me." Through the text the reader encounters the testimony that "God cares about us humans on earth" and that "a demand for conversion will be there."[42]

McEvenue also touches briefly on the main topic of my essay – that the personal, converting, and scholarly encounter with a biblical text can foster the development of an ethics of achievement. As he puts it, the scholarly com-

37. Sean McEvenue, "Scholarship's Impenetrable Wall," *Lonergan Workshop*, 16 (2000), p. 127. Cited hereafter as "Impenetrable Wall." See also "Theological Doctrines," p. 148.

38. Sean E. McEvenue, "Theological Doctrines," p. 144.

39. Sean E. McEvenue, "Impenetrable Wall," p. 129. See also "Theological Doctrines," p. 136.

40. Sean E. McEvenue, "Impenetrable Wall," p. 133.

41. Sean E. McEvenue, "Impenetrable Wall," p. 133. A recurring theme in McEvenue's writings is that the meaning of the final author/redactor should be respected and taken seriously, and that the attempt to get behind the "distortions" introduced by later authors back to the "pristine" meaning of the "original" text or speech is seriously misdirected.

42. "Impenetrable Wall," pp. 135-137.

position of the place of a biblical text "implies moral demands. For example, it demands that we be attentive to the spiritual, that we trust God."[43]

McEvenue acknowledges that this approach "can be dismissed as pious reading." He responds that while it "is not historical-critical (…) it is academic, as it follows the academic procedures of literary criticism. It is critical (…) and the meaning it finds is much closer to what the author actually did mean than were the truncated ideas found in historical critical interpretation."[44]

In the terms I have been developing in this essay, McEvenue is claiming that the scholarly work of the exegete is directed toward enhancing the composition of place for a personal encounter with the biblical text by providing "clues" that enrich readers' encounters with the text. He even explicitly compares his approach to that of Ignatius in the spiritual exercises.[45] McEvenue approvingly references Lonergan's emphasis on the role of conversion, not only for readers, but also for scholars themselves as well. "Conversion is needed day after day as the theologian reverses counterpositions, defines doctrines and devises systems and communications."[46]

By way of contrast, McEvenue is quite critical of historical-critical method, because in his view it has overreached its limits. He argues that this method had the effect of confining the meaning of a text to its *Sitz im Leben* context, thereby separating its meaning from contemporary readers. Historical-critical method thereby "built an impenetrable wall" between biblical texts and the way people live their lives today.[47] Because of this and other difficulties, the historical-critical method has been severely criticized and subsequently has receded in importance in biblical scholarship. McEvenue concedes that historical-critical method still forms "a crucial first step," but it alone "no longer define[s] biblical interpretation."[48] Instead, form criticism and reader-response theory have displaced historical-critical method from its former dominance in the field.

Yet McEvenue is also critical of Lonergan, who he believes was too much influenced by historical-critical method as his model when he composed his method of eight functional specialties – especially his structuring of specialties of Interpretation and History.

> Lonergan, in *Method*, (…) did not formulate the relation between Theology and our literary-artistic Scripture. Instead he himself joined scholarship in building an impenetrable wall, by pacing scripture within that operation which he called

43. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 137.
44. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 137.
45. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 136.
46. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 129. McEvenue is referencing the second phase in this statement. While he does not explicitly reference it for the first phase, the place of conversion is in the work of the exegete as well.
47. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 133.
48. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 121.

> interpretation rather than within foundations, and by thus implicitly reducing it to a preparation for history, and even subjecting it to dialectics.[49]

McEvenue's criticism is quite important up to a point, for he makes a convincing case that there needs to be much greater emphasis on certain dimensions of meaning – especially "elemental meaning – which do not receive proper emphasis in *Method in Theology*. As he puts it, Lonergan's "own focus has been in the realm of theoretic and scientific and methodical truth, and as a result he has given biblical scholars little help in discussing the kind of truth which is affirmed through aesthetic forms."[50] Nevertheless, while agreeing with him on this point, I think that McEvenue went too far in his criticism, because I believe that he misunderstood Lonergan on a couple of points.

First, where McEvenue sees Lonergan as structuring both of the functional specialties of Interpretation and History too much on the model of historical-critical method, I have already argued that Lonergan merely incorporates historical-critical method into just one of those specialties, Interpretation, and as only part of that single specialty. In effect, Lonergan was circumscribing historical-critical method in exactly the same way that McEvenue himself proposes: as "a crucial first step" within the functional specialty of Interpretation, to be supplemented by additional steps. Moreover, Lonergan's functional specialty of History is designed to overcome exactly what McEvenue regards as one of the greatest drawbacks of the historical-critical method. That is to say, historical-critical method tends to confine the meaning of a biblical text to a *Sitz im Leben* historical period so remote from the present that it cannot speak to a contemporary audience. But the specialty History is intended precisely to overcome that limitation, and to situate texts and interpretations in a broad historical sweep (*Sitz in die Geschichte*) that in principle can reach all the way to the present.

Second, McEvenue argues that Lonergan's conception of Interpretation places inordinate emphasis on "conceptualization," and "paraphrase" of the meaning of the text.[51] This, he says, reduces and impoverishes the "elemental meaning" of the text, which cannot adequately be put into conceptual words, but must be experienced in all its richness.[52] This is all quite correct, and I think Lonergan would agree whole-heartedly. Yet even in the section of *Method in Theology* devoted to "Stating the Meaning of the Text" (Chapter 7, section 8), Lonergan never mentions conceptualization, paraphrase or anything of the sort. Lonergan thought not of conceptualizing, but of understanding (insight) as the paradigmatic operation for the second functional

---

49. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 131; see also pp. 121-122.
50. "Theological Doctrines," p. 153.
51. "Impenetrable Wall," p. 129.
52. McEvenue is employing Lonergan's category of elemental meaning in his analysis. For Lonergan's explanation of this term, see *Topics*, pp. 215-217.

specialty, Interpretation. Even McEvenue himself acknowledges over and again the important role that understanding plays when exegetes are endeavoring to bring readers into an enriched experiential encounter with a biblical text. He wrote for example: the "author's or artist's *understanding* of something cannot be conceived (…). Pre-conceptual *understanding* often occurs with an inner shock (…) of 'getting' a joke, or suddenly *understanding* a poem."[53] Therefore Lonergan is actually in fundamental agreement with McEvenue that Interpretation is the search for the kind of understanding that will enrich, not detract from, experience, personal encounter and conversion.

In my opinion, these are relatively minor misunderstandings on McEvenue's part. They do not detract from McEvenue's strong agreement with what I take to be Lonergan's most important contribution toward the growth in understanding the relationship between the study of biblical texts as instruction, *torah*, toward an ethics of achievement and discernment. That is to say, the "clues" that scholars can discover and communicate to theologians and lay people have great potential to enrich their composition of the place of a biblical passage.

Finally, McEvenue does explicitly employ Lonergan's account of theological method in his direct studies of biblical texts and his indirect reflections on scholarly method. He does not, however, explicitly address the question of the relationship between biblical scholarship and ethics. For this I turn to an essay by New Testament scholar, Pheme Perkins, which does address that relationship explicitly. While she does not refer to Lonergan's theological method, nevertheless, I believe that her essay shows how scholarship about biblical ethics can be integrated within the framework of Lonergan's method of functional specialties.

In her essay "New Testament Ethics" for *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Perkins echoes a theme from both McEvenue and Lonergan, observing that "the teaching of Jesus was not preserved as an ethical or legal system."[54] Indeed, "Attempts to divorce NT [New Testament] ethics from its context and the particularity of its treatment of ethical topics usually result in generalities which fail to describe the ethical data."[55] Rather, ethics in New Testament times can more adequately be understood as a way of life that one enters into only by conversion.

Perkins situates the ethical dimensions of the New Testament against a background of teachings from both the Hebrew scriptures and Greek philosophical thinkers.

53. "Impenetrable Wall," pp. 129-130. The words "understand" or "understanding" appear ten times in exactly the paragraph where McEvenue is arguing that elemental meaning, not conceptual meaning, is the objective of scholarly exegesis.

54. Pheme Perkins, "New Testament Ethics," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 2, New York NY, Doubleday, 1992, p. 657. Cited hereafter as Perkins, "N.T. Ethics."

55. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 656.

> Diversity in its sources, lack of systematization in its arguments, and ambiguity about the weight attached to the warrants for concrete ethical recommendations make the NT difficult to use as the basis for a synthesis of Christian moral philosophy. A descriptive approach to NT ethics traces the sources, particular themes and dominant perspectives of individual NT writers or schools. One may also attempt to trace recurring themes in several strands of the NT.[56]

Yet in spite of this diversity, early Christianity inherited a set of common ethical evaluations, upon which its diverse sources emphatically agreed. This is due, in part, to the fact that Jewish writers found themselves as a minority in an increasingly Hellenic culture and "sought to show that their tradition embodied the best of the insights of Greek thought."[57] Indeed, "there was widespread agreement [among Jews and Greeks] about the type of behavior that was considered 'good' even among those who disagreed about how persons came to lead a virtuous life."[58] For these reasons, "The content of NT ethical teaching cannot be described as innovative; nor do NT authors claim uniqueness for their teaching."[59]

Therefore, early Christian ethical thought took the Hebrew Scriptures as "a guide to how human conduct is evaluated by God even though the Christian community is not devoted to Torah observance. Its stories served as *exempla* in ethical exhortation." Yet at the same time, New Testament writers also drew "on ethical material from popular philosophical preaching (…) the philosopher is 'God's gift' to awaken humanity."[60] Indeed, "Conversion to Christianity can be described in terms of the moral reform and conquest of passions advocated by philosophers (1Pet 4:2-5)."[61]

Perkins also shows that the moral exhortations of the gospels are situated within an awareness that breaking free of evil and living a completely ethical life is nigh impossible. This awareness had been growing during the two centuries before the ministry of Jesus among serious thinkers from diverse backgrounds. They recognized "that no human efforts can overcome the pervasive effects of evil" without God's intervention, and that human beings require divine assistance if they are to do so.[62]

Therefore, the great ethical novelty introduced by New Testament texts was to show that "salvation in Jesus makes it possible for those addressed to lead lives worthy of the Lord (…) that the decisive salvation humans expect from God has already been realized in Jesus."[63] This realization comes only

56. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 656.
57. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 653.
58. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 654
59. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 656.
60. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 655.
61. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 654.
62. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 655.
63. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 656.

through conversion: "Without radical change in one's orientation, a person could not be saved."[64] Hence, the converted are "expected to achieve a life which expresses that reality." Furthermore, New Testament texts offer witness to an "ongoing process of communal exhortation, forgiveness and reconciliation [which] shows that transformation of persons presented a continuing process of moral conversion."[65]

In terms that have been developed earlier in this essay, Perkins draws together the findings of many scripture scholars (including her own) to provide an enriched "composition of place" for reflecting on New Testament ethical passages. She enriches the understanding of the setting and context of scriptural passages, as well as knowledge of "what was going forward," as a source for dialectical encounter. That enrichment reveals encouragement and promise of God's assistance to those trying to persevere and live ethically against the larger, seemingly overwhelming context of evil in the world. She shifts the focus from Jesus as providing new laws to Jesus as God's gift to humanity, providing the hope for living ethically. Even in the passages concerning the Great Commandments of love there are renewals of ethical sources from Jewish scripture.[66] But now the focus is on Jesus as the *exemplar* of love.[67]

This kind of scholarly enrichment, approached from the perspective of Lonergan's method of functional specialties, has the capacity to deepen and intensify a person's real apprehension of the good in all its dimensions. But that deepening and intensification can only occur in persons who are open to the biblical exhortations as calls to personal encounter and conversion. Such growth in real apprehension is simultaneous growth in authentic autonomy. I believe this is a most fruitful way of thinking of the relationship between ethics and the bible, one that is likely to promote "life to the full" that surpasses an approach that emphasizes only an ethics that is an uncomprehending obedience to law.

Philosophy Department
Director, Lonergan Institute
Boston College

64. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 657.
65. Perkins, "N.T. Ethics," p. 656.
66. Mark 12:29-31, Matthew 22:37-39, Luke 10:27.
67. John 13:34-35.

SUMMARY

This essay discusses the relationship between Ethics and the Bible and draws on Lonergan to show how the *Torah* understood as "Teaching" promotes an "ethics of discernment" rather than an ethics of law and obedience. It shows how Lonergan's approach to *Method in Theology* points to a synthesis between the work of critical-historical Biblical scholarship and the exercise that Ignatius of Loyola called "composition of place."

SOMMAIRE

Cet article porte sur la relation entre l'éthique et la Bible et explore la pensée de Lonergan en montrant comment la *Torah* comprise comme « enseignement » promeut une « éthique du discernement » plutôt qu'une éthique de la loi et de l'obéissance. Il montre comment l'approche de Lonergan dans *Method in Theology* pointe vers une synthèse entre la démarche historico-critique dans son application à la Bible et celle qu'Ignace de Loyola désignait comme « la composition des lieux ».