On the Interpretation of Scripture

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Abstract: This article focuses on examining a particular method of Biblical Interpretation. This specific method is that of the Patristic Method of Biblical Interpretation, proposed by Richard Swinburne. The Patristic Method faces a specific issue, 'the Authority' Issue, which will thus be dealt with within this article by utilising the notion of epistemic authority, as conceptualised by Linda Zagzebski, and restating it within a Catholic interpretative framework. Doing this will thus enable the Patristic Method to be presented as a robust and cogent contemporary method of Biblical Interpretation that offers a unified and accurate understanding of God's revelation in the Bible.

1. Introduction

According to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE), God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, 'spoke through the prophets', which, throughout ecclesiastical history, has been understood as that of him having inspired the Christian Scriptures: the Bible. This specific view of the inspiration of the Bible coincided with the view that the Scriptures require interpretation in light of certain methods, and thus, we can state this position succinctly as follows:

(1) (Interpretation)   The Christian Scriptures, the Bible, is inspired by God through the work of the Holy Spirit and requires certain interpretative methods in order for the message that is expressed by it to be correctly ascertained.

Over the course of time, certain influential methods of interpretation of the Bible have emerged that reflect different theological and historical perspectives. One such method is that of the 'allegorical method of interpretation, which has its roots in early Church Fathers—specifically that of Origen of Alexandria. Origen's theological work in the 3rd century—namely, that of *De Principiis* CE—laid the foundation for viewing the biblical texts as having multiple layers of meaning, beyond their literal sense—including moral, allegorical, and analogical interpretations. This method thus allowed for a richer, more diverse understanding of the Scriptures,[1] especially in the context of the developing doctrines of the early Church. However, the main critique of this method is that it can lead to highly subjective interpretations, as the allegorical approach often relies on the individual insights of the interpreter, potentially veering away from the original meaning and context of the text. Another method that emerged subsequent to that of the allegorical method is that of the 'literal method of interpretation', which played an important role in the 16th Century Protestant Reformation, proposed by individuals such as John Calvin (1559) and Martin Luther (1525), who advocated for a plain reading of the Scriptures—ultimately, arguing that the Bible is clear in its meaning and accessible to all believers. The primary criticism of this method is that it may overlook the depth and richness of the text by ignoring cultural, historical, and literary contexts that can offer deeper insights. Additionally, a strictly literal approach may struggle to adequately

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[1] There will be an interchanging between the terms 'Scripture' and 'Bible' throughout this article.

address metaphorical, poetic, or symbolic passages. In contemporary times, a more influential approach has been that of the 'historical-critical method'—defended most prominently by scholars such as Julius Wellhausen (1878) and Rudolf Bultmann (1958). Wellhausen (1878), in particular, was instrumental in the development of the Documentary Hypothesis, a critical analysis of the Pentateuch's composition. Whereas, Bultmann (1958), on the other hand, is known for his approach to demythologising the New Testament, seeking to uncover the message of the scriptures apart from their mythical and supernatural elements. These scholars emphasised understanding the Bible within its historical and cultural contexts, seeking the original intent and setting of the biblical texts. Critiques of this method often point out that it might reduce the Bible to a mere historical document, neglecting its spiritual and theological dimensions. It also risks fragmenting the text, losing the sense of the sacred and the divine inspiration believed to underlie the Scriptures. A further influential method of interpretation in contemporary times has been that of the canonical approach, which views the Bible as a unified whole, was significantly influenced by Brevard S. Childs (1970). Childs' (1970) work emphasised the final form of the biblical canon as the context for interpretation, rather than focusing solely on the historical origins of individual texts. This approach seeks to understand the overarching narrative and theological themes that tie the biblical texts together. The critique here is that the canonical approach may sometimes gloss over the complex history and diverse origins of the biblical texts, potentially ignoring the nuances and contradictions that arise from the diverse authorship and historical contexts of the individual books.

Each of these approaches has influenced both academic study and religious practice worldwide; however, as noted above, they face their specific challenges. It will thus be helpful for another approach to biblical interpretation to be put on the table. This approach is the 'Patristic Method of Biblical Interpretation', which has been proposed, within a contemporary context, by Richard Swinburne (2007). This approach, which is grounded in patristic history,[2] shares certain similarities with the more influential approaches noted above; however, as will be argued below, without facing the same challenges raised against them. For this reason, and the overall cogency of this approach, one should adopt this method as the best working model of biblical interpretation in contemporary theological theorising. However, before this conclusion can be truly affirmed, an important issue that can be raised against this method— which we can term the 'Authority Issue'—will need to be dealt with. The central focus of this article will thus be on doing that through further precisifying the Patristic Method, in light of the notion of 'epistemic authority', proposed by Linda Zagzebski (2012), which will provide a philosophical foundation for understanding and justifying the authority of the Church in interpreting Scripture. Thus, doing this, in light of further reasons provided in support of God bestowing this method of biblical interpretation upon his 'Church', and a resituating of this method within a Catholic framework—will help to ground this method of biblical interpretation on a robust foundation, in a way that can ultimately enable it to ward off the Authority Issue, and provide good reason for individuals to adopt this model of biblical interpretation.

Thus, the plan is as follows: in section 2 ('The Nature of the Patristic Method'), the Patristic Method of Biblical Interpretation, as proposed by Swinburne, will be fully explicated, the manner in which this method escapes the challenges raised by the other available methods of Biblical Interpretation will be detailed, and the Authority Issue that can be raised against this method will be stated. Then, in section 3 ('The Nature of Epistemic Authority'), the notion of epistemic authority, as conceived of by Zagzebski, will be unpacked, which will provide the needed grounds for dealing with the Authority Issue. However, further issues against this notion will be raised, which require a further precisification to be proposed. Thus, in section 4

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[2] And this is not a new approach as such—though its specific explication in the work of Swinburne (2007) renders it, in part, as such.

('A Catholic Interactive Framework'), the notion of epistemic authority, detailed in the previous section, will be applied to the Patristic Method, resulting in a solution to the Authority Issue being made available. Additionally, further a priori reasons in support of God bestowing this method upon his Church, and solutions to the issues that can be raised against the notion of epistemic authority, will be identified, ultimately, resituating the Patristic Method within a Catholic framework—which one will be able to see is the best way forward for this method of Biblical Interpretation within a contemporary setting. In section ('An Application to Scripture'), there will be an application to some paradigm 'challenging' verses in scripture, which will demonstrate the utility in providing a means for one to interpret scripture holistically as the unified word of God. of this method Finally, after this section, there will be a concluding section ('Conclusion'), which will summarise the above results and conclude the article.

2. The Nature of the Patristic Method

According to Swinburne (2007),[3] the Patristic Method (hereafter, PM) centres on a specific conception of the authorship of the Bible, its intended audience, and what the implications of this are for one's interpretation of a particular biblical passage. That is, the nature of the PM can be understood more succinctly as follows:

(2) (Patristic Method) (i) *Interpretation Thesis*: The Bible, which has God as its ultimate author and the Church (of present and future centuries) as its intended audience, is to be interpreted in light of central Christian doctrines and scientific and historical truths.

(ii) *Correspondence Thesis*: If a particular biblical passage can be interpreted without contradicting these central Christian doctrines and scientific and historical truths, then it should be interpreted literally, and if not, then it should be interpreted metaphorically.

In further understanding the nature of the PM, it will be important to first grasp certain philosophical principles concerning interpretation—specifically, those concerning metaphor and context. A literal meaning of a word is typically one of the established propositions or meanings readily found in the language, identifiable through the use of comprehensive grammar and an extensive dictionary, and applicable in the appropriate context. However, a token sentence can acquire a context-specific meaning not pre-established in the language and not identifiable from standard grammar and dictionary resources, which will force a metaphorical meaning of a sentence. In a specific context, the use of the word 'ϕ' is metaphorical, as Swinburne (2007), if it is employed not to denote 'ϕ' things directly, but rather to represent a feature that is distinctively or commonly linked with the objects, activities, or entities typically indicated by 'ϕ' in its established senses. In other words, metaphor arises when language is used figuratively, often when literal interpretations of words seem inappropriate, irrelevant, or false—it designates a feature believed to be distinctive of the objects or activities denoted by the word in its 'literal' sense. And it is the context, as Swinburne (2007) notes, in

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[3] The terminology for this method: 'The Patristic Method', is not used by Swinburne (2007)—nor in his shorter work (Swinburne, 2008)—but is introduced in the later work (Swinburne, 2010).

Penultimate draft, please cite or quote from published version. Forthcoming in *Perichoresis*.

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which a word is used that often determines the features that become distinctive and thus the metaphorical meaning. Unlike literal language—where the context helps distinguish between possible meanings—metaphor, according to Swinburne (2007), requires a broader context to reveal its intended meaning. If metaphors are used frequently, their sense can become established, and their use may no longer be metaphorical. To illustrate this, as noted by Swinburne (2007), one can consider the following examples: Wittgenstein paints in oils rather than watercolours. Cynthia proved to be a hedgehog. Computer failure will often lead to your take-off being aborted. Each of these sentences has a literal meaning but can acquire a new meaning in different contexts. For instance, "Cynthia proved to be a hedgehog" could metaphorically describe Cynthia's appearance or behaviour. Similarly, "Computer failure will often lead to your take-off being aborted" could metaphorically describe various human activities. When a sentence's literal meaning is inappropriate, one searches for a metaphorical meaning. This involves, as Swinburne (2007) notes, considering features believed to be distinctive of the objects or activities denoted by the words used. The true meaning of a metaphorical sentence becomes apparent in the relevant context—that is, the context in which a sentence is uttered or written plays a crucial role in determining its meaning. Now, according to Swinburne (2007), there are three main types of context that influence the meaning of a token sentence: literary, social, and cultural. First, the literary context refers to the immediate surrounding sentences. The literary context, as Swinburne (2007) notes, helps remove ambiguities in word meanings and contributes to identifying the genre of the sentence. For example, determining whether the sentence "Larry is an elephant" is from a zoo guide or a children's story requires an understanding of the literary context. However, understanding the genre and how it impacts the truth value of individual sentences also depends on the wider cultural context. Second, the social context, encompasses the authorship and intended audience of the sentence. The social context, according to Swinburne (2007), clarifies the reference of indexical expressions like 'I', 'you', 'now', and 'here'. It also defines the reference of proper names, such as which 'John' or 'Aristotle' is being referred to, based on how the speaker and listener typically use these names. Additionally, the social context, informed by the author's and audience's beliefs, assists in determining whether sentences should be taken literally or metaphorically. It also sets the standard of accuracy for assessing the truth of a sentence. Third, the cultural context, is crucial in defining the genre of the work to which a sentence belongs and influences the distinction between statement and presupposition. Cultural context, combined with knowledge of the social and literary context, further aids in distinguishing between literal and metaphorical sentences. This is due to the fact, as Swinburne (2008) notes, that understanding whether a sentence should be interpreted metaphorically often depends on the beliefs of the author and the audience about what is considered false or irrelevant. That is, if a statement is obviously false or irrelevant to the author and a significant portion of the intended audience, it prompts a metaphorical interpretation. However, not all members of an audience may share the same beliefs about what constitutes falsehood. In such cases, according to Swinburne (2008), if many in the intended audience find a statement obviously false, this can still lead to a metaphorical reading—a lack of familiarity with the subject matter can prevent some audience members from understanding metaphors.

In addition to this, when speech or writing is presented in a different context, its meaning can also change significantly. This shift often occurs when a speech or letter is directed at a new audience. For instance, a message where the speaker or writer tells 'you' that you are mistaken and should act differently, when received by a new audience, can have an entirely different implication. The 'you', as Swinburne (2007) notes, now refers to someone else, altering the statements made, even though the underlying propositions remain unchanged. Similarly, when a speech, letter, or other form of writing is taken over by another person, the context shifts again. The new person might deliver the same speech or use the same words, but

now the 'I' in the content refers to a different individual. This can also extend to literary works like poetry, where a poem written in one situation can be used to comment on a completely different circumstance. An example of this, as noted by Swinburne (2007), is Winston Churchill's use of A.H. Clough's poem during World War II—as Churchill's intention in quoting the poem was not to convey Clough's original meaning but to encourage a particular perspective on Britain's situation in the war, particularly highlighting hope from the West, symbolising the United States' support in defeating the Nazis. Another relevant aspect of how context can change meaning is when a written work becomes part of a larger compilation. This, according to Swinburne (2007), can happen in several ways. One, speeches and documents may be quoted verbatim—where what was originally a speech expressing certain views becomes a mere citation of those words. Two, a preface or appendix might be added, where the author explicitly or implicitly states changes in their stance since the original publication. This could mean they no longer affirm some content or wish them to be understood differently. A modern example, as Swinburne (2008) notes, is an author republishing previous papers with a preface explaining changes in their viewpoints or understanding. In such cases, the papers do not express the views they initially did but are being quoted with the new context provided by the preface. The meaning of the entire work becomes what the author now says in the preface, even if it differs from the original publications. Thirdly, footnotes can also alter the meaning by providing corrections or unusual interpretations to the text. Taking this all into account, one can now understand the nature of Biblical Interpretation within the PM, as follows: the Church's recognition of the creeds as expressing the essence of revealed theological truth is closely tied to its understanding of Holy Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, as the core of the 'deposit of faith.' This understanding, as Swinburne (2007) notes, shapes the interpretation and derivation of doctrinal claims. As the core of the deposit of faith, the New Testament regards the Old Testament as divinely inspired and useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, as noted in 2 Timothy 3:16. However, early Christian hostility towards some Old Testament teachings—notably exemplified by Marcion of Sinope in the second century—led to an orthodox reassertion of the Old Testament—albeit, according to Swinburne (2007), with an emphasis on the metaphorical nature of certain parts. Turning to the smallest units of the Bible, modern 'form criticism' emphasised the importance of original social and cultural contexts in understanding these units. That is, the meaning of a sentence within the Bible depends on the larger unit it belongs to and the author of that unit. And, as Swinburne (2007) notes, when considering these smaller units, issues such as genre, historical context, and metaphorical language play a crucial role in interpretation. Moreover, for individual books of the Bible, issues of genre, authorship, and historical context are equally important. Importantly, by inserting the smallest units of the Bible into the context of individual books can significantly alter their meanings, as this process is influenced by the genre, authorship, and historical context of these larger units. Further, when these individual books are integrated into the context of the entire Bible, their meanings change yet again, shaped by the overarching literary, social, and cultural contexts of the Bible as a whole. That is, the incorporation into a broader work results in the sentences of a smaller unit adopting a new literary context, a shifted social context—where the creator of the larger entity becomes the author, and the target audience changes—and an altered cultural context, which, as noted by Swinburne (2010), reflects the culture of the new author and their audience. It is thus clear that the Bible is a vast compilation of smaller books that are woven from even smaller units of writing, with each originating from distinct literary, social, and cultural contexts at every stage of its creation. Consequently, many sentences in the Bible possess multiple meanings, each derived from their belonging to different-sized units: a small unit, a larger unit within it, and so on. This layered structure gives each sentence a unique meaning at each level of the textual hierarchy.

Traditionally, that is, in line with historical-critical scholarship, when one discusses the truth conditions of the Bible's individual books, one assumes the authors were normal humans who wrote or compiled these books. The Church, however, as Swinburne (2010) notes, declared these books as Holy Scripture, inspired and authorised by God. That is, it selected these books, believed to be from prophets or apostles, as God's revelation to humanity. Hence, while acknowledging human authorship—which is evident in personal references and stylistic differences—the Church affirmed the fact of divine inspiration and authorisation of the Bible, and thus making God the ultimate author of it. Ultimate authorship, according to Swinburne (2010), can have two forms. Firstly, the ultimate author, A, might directly instruct another, B, to convey a message. B might orally relay or write down A's message. Secondly, ultimate authorship can be indirect. A authorises B to communicate on his behalf with general guidance, and B delivers messages or writes as A's representative. For instance, a boss dictating a letter to a typist is the first form, while an ambassador acting without specific instructions but within known guidelines is the second form. Both involve inspiration, but inspiration alone does not always imply ultimate authorship. For example, an older philosopher might inspire a younger one without being the actual author of the younger's work. The Church claimed, as noted by Swinburne (2007), that God is the ultimate author of the Bible—where some books explicitly report God's messages, like the Old Testament prophets declaring 'Thus says the Lord'. However, most do not directly state God's commission; yet, the Church recognised these as Scripture, implying they were written on God's behalf, with him as the ultimate author in the indirect sense. That is, Christians saw the Bible as authored by God and intended for a global audience. Each book's meaning is influenced by its literary, social, and cultural contexts. The Church, spanning centuries, is the intended interpreter. The Bible's canonical status and interpretation were influenced by early Church teachings and later interpretations. More precisely, the meaning of a sentence in the Bible depends on its literary context—that is, the larger book it is now part of)—its cultural context— that is, the shared presuppositions and genres between God and his audience—its social context—that is, its author being God, and the intended audience—which appears, at first glance, to the be the world. However, the world, as noted by Swinburne (2007), is too vast to share a common culture for understanding the Bible, and thus, it is the Church—spanning from early centuries to the present and beyond—which is to be seen as the more precise audience intended by God, and which has been the vehicle that shaped the process of understanding and canonisation of the Bible over many centuries. Thus, as its author, biblical sentences are to be interpreted in the context of God's revealed beliefs and the Church's central beliefs about Christ's teachings—that is, central Christian doctrines, which were established before much of the New Testament was canonised. Additionally, God holds true beliefs about science and history,[4] and some biblical passages seemed to conflict with scientific understandings accepted by the educated Fathers and learned Greeks. And thus, the early Fathers recognised many biblical passages that, when interpreted literally, were either ambiguous, inconsistent with established Christian doctrine, science (or history) or irrelevant. And thus, given that the interpretation of a biblical sentence is to correspond to God's true beliefs— any biblical sentence that, when taken literally, contradicts established Christian doctrine or science or history, it thus must be interpreted differently— which is to say that it must be interpreted metaphorically.

In applying this all now of the components of the Bible: the Old and New Testament: the Old Testament, as Swinburne (2007) notes, was seen as God's evolving revelation to Israel, suggesting passages should be interpreted naturally unless Christian doctrine or other truths suggest otherwise. This natural interpretation, or 'understanding it straight', as Swinburne (2007) terms it, means interpreting as if a human author, guided by God, wrote to their

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[4] And other subjects such as Geography.

contemporaries. However, some Old Testament passages contain scientific and historical inaccuracies (Genesis 1; Genesis 5) or seemingly immoral commands by God (Deut. 7.1-2; Psalm 137:9).[5] Hence, the Church, following Irenaeus and later Fathers, interpreted such passages metaphorically when straight or historical interpretations were unedifying. This metaphorical interpretation was not to make individual passages coherent, but to integrate them into Christian Scripture. As noted previously, the process for identifying metaphor indicates that a biblical sentence should be interpreted figuratively if its literal meaning is evidently false or unsuitable in context—and the metaphorical meaning stems from the literal word meanings and the literary, social, and cultural context, including central Christian doctrines and New Testament developments. Origen, in the third century, outlined these interpretive rules in "On First Principles," highlighting many scriptural passages that are untenable if taken literally. His approach significantly influenced biblical interpretation.

Now, central to forcing metaphorical interpretations on the Old Testament are the moral teachings of Jesus, such as those in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, the seemingly vengeful sentiments in Psalm 137, if taken literally, contradict Christian doctrines. This necessitates a metaphorical interpretation, a stance, according to Swinburne (2007), that was adopted by early Christian theologians. Likewise, passages suggesting a limited conception of God should be understood metaphorically—where Origen and Augustine, among others, often interpreted passages, as noted by Swinburne (2007), both literally and metaphorically. That is, metaphorical interpretation was common in a culture accustomed to finding allegories in religious texts. The shared beliefs of God and the Church, which, importantly, include secular scientific and historical truths, also influence metaphorical interpretations. This is that, as Swinburne (2007) notes, in interpreting Scripture to align with Christian doctrine and secular knowledge, a passage may be taken literally but differently from its usual understanding—as Augustine's De Genesi ad Litteram discusses various literal interpretations compatible with Greek science. However, as Swinburne (2007) further writes, issues arise with the 'days of creation' in Genesis 1, and thus Augustine, recognising scientific implications, viewed these 'days' metaphorically. A plausible metaphorical interpretation of Genesis 1, as Swinburne (2007) notes, suggests 'days' as long periods, with creation unfolding over time through natural laws. Augustine, however, offered a different metaphorical interpretation, viewing 'days' as stages in angels' understanding of creation. However, interpreting 'days' as long time periods, as Swinburne further notes (2007), aligns more closely with their literal sense. Nevertheless, Augustine's approach in De Genesi ad Litteram demonstrates the compatibility of Genesis with various scientific theories, underscoring the interpretive flexibility of Scripture. Within this type of interpretative context, Early Christian Fathers utilised symbolic meanings from Jewish allegorical interpretations, the Mishnah, and Philo's work, applying these to the Old Testament. Thus, metaphorical readings of passages became natural, such as interpreting Psalm 137's blessing on those who defeat Babylon as a metaphor for overcoming evil through Christ.

Corresponding to this method, the New Testament books, like the Old Testament, gained canonical status through the Church's recognition of their divine authorisation. Consequently, according to Swinburne (2007), these texts must be interpreted in light of central Christian doctrines, which the Church has defined as encapsulating the essence of Christian Revelation— with these doctrines being derived from the simplest systematisation of New Testament passages, influencing how specific passages should be interpreted relative to others. For instance, as Swinburne (2007) highlights, some New Testament passages clearly suggest Jesus Christ's divinity and eternal existence, such as the opening of John 1:1-3. However, other passages seem to present a less exalted view of Christ, such as Romans 1:4, which includes the important word 'ὁρισθε´ντος', which might be read as suggesting Christ's exalted status was

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[5] More on these verses in section 5.

affirmed post-Resurrection, and thus appears to support a lower Christology. Now, this passage, interpreted in isolation, might imply a different view of Christ's status than that in John. Yet, considering both texts as authored by God and guided by the Church to form the creeds, the interpretation of Romans must align with central Christian doctrine, including Christ's divinity. This, as Swinburne (2007) notes, might mean translating ὁρισθέντος as 'recognised as' rather than 'made', which aligns with the doctrine of Christ's divinity—thus, it is possible that St Paul, while writing Romans, had a lower Christology, but was divinely inspired to convey a meaning slightly different from his understanding. Now, as noted previously, historical and scientific knowledge can also necessitate metaphorical interpretations of the New Testament—with a notable example being the Book of Revelation, which, when studied in its historical context, seems to predict the world's end in the early second century CE. However, according to Swinburne (2007), the fourth-century Church, recognising its canonical status, would not have endorsed this interpretation—with Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century, as Swinburne (2007) notes, having admitted his confusion about its meaning, suggesting it might need metaphorically interpretation—and thus this lead to a tradition of treating Revelation metaphorically for over a millennium. Thus, if God is considered the ultimate author of Scripture and also the authority behind the central claims of Christian doctrine as outlined in the creeds, these doctrines necessarily guide the interpretation of Scripture. Furthermore, any truth known to both the speaker (or writer) and the audience, which contradicts a sentence's normal or literal meaning, necessitates a metaphorical interpretation of that sentence. This principle holds regardless of whether the truth is documented in another work by the same author, and thus includes scientific and historical truths. For example, early Genesis chapters suggest the origin of humans around 4000 BC with long lifespans like Methuselah's, but modern scientific knowledge contradicts this. Hence, according to Swinburne (2007), these passages should be interpreted metaphorically, with Genesis viewed as separate narratives symbolising key human development stages, and lifespans indicating extended periods. Moreover, historical research also influences the understanding of biblical authorship. For example, If Moses didn't literally write the Pentateuch, a more liberal interpretation of authorship is required, even if this liberal interpretation, as Swinburne (2007) writes, was not the original intent, the belief in God as the ultimate author and the evolving knowledge of the Church over centuries dictate this broader interpretation of authorship—with the interpretation of biblical passages often ultimately relying on future context, with new scientific and historical insights revealing their true meanings at a later time. In all, the method of interpreting Scripture, assuming God as the ultimate author and the Church of present and future centuries as the intended audience, adheres, as noted by Swinburne (2007), to general textual interpretation rules: identifying the author and audience, understanding the genre, recognising conventions of that genre, using a guide for interpretation, and adopting metaphorical meanings where literal interpretations are implausible—with the rules for metaphor in all contexts, as noted previously, involving considering the normal meanings of words and associated objects or properties, choosing the closest connected interpretations that fit the context. These general rules, while not unique to the Bible, yield unexpected results when applied to biblical texts, making the Bible distinct in its structure and interpretation.

An important aspect of the PM, as expressed by Swinburne (2007), is that of it addressing the criticisms of the traditional methods of biblical interpretation through providing a nuanced and context-sensitive approach to biblical interpretation. This method, as noted previously, centres on the understanding that the Bible, authored by God and intended for the Church across centuries, should be interpreted in light of central Christian doctrines, scientific truths, and historical knowledge. This approach provides a framework that balances literal and metaphorical interpretations based on their correspondence with these foundational truths—

and it does this without facing the issues raised against the other methods on offer, which can be seen as follows: first, in addressing the allegorical method's criticism of subjectivity, the PM introduces a more structured approach to metaphorical interpretation. By grounding the metaphorical interpretation in central Christian doctrines, and scientific and historical knowledge, the PM ensures that interpretations are not purely subjective or based on individual insights but are informed by a broader, consistent theological and empirical understanding. This mitigates the risk of diverging from the original intent of the biblical texts, a key criticism of the allegorical method. Second, concerning the literal interpretation method, the PM acknowledges its value but also recognises its limitations. That is, the PM proposes that literal interpretation is appropriate only when it does not contradict established Christian doctrines, scientific findings, or historical truths. This approach addresses the criticism that a strictly literal interpretation may overlook the depth and richness of the text by failing to consider cultural, historical, and literary contexts. The PM thus offers a more comprehensive understanding of the Scriptures, integrating literal meanings with deeper theological and moral insights where necessary. Third, with regard to the historical-critical method, the PM appreciates the importance of understanding the Bible within its historical and cultural contexts. However, it also emphasises that interpretation must not reduce the Bible to a mere historical document, neglecting its spiritual and theological dimensions. By considering the Bible as a divine text intended for the Church throughout history, the PM incorporates a spiritual and ecclesiastical dimension into the historical-critical analysis, addressing the criticism that this method might overlook the sacredness and divine inspiration of the Scriptures. Fourth, in comparison to the canonical approach, the PM recognises the significance of viewing the Bible as a unified whole. However, it expands on this by emphasising the importance of interpreting individual texts not just within the broader context of the entire canon, but also in light of the central doctrines of Christianity, and the scientific and historical knowledge available to the Church over time. This approach addresses the criticism that the canonical approach might gloss over the complex history and diverse origins of biblical texts, by acknowledging the multifaceted nature of biblical authorship and interpretation. The PM of biblical interpretation, as practised by the early Church Fathers, and explicated by Swinburne (2007), presents a a comprehensive and balanced framework for biblical interpretation—in that it incorporates the strengths of various traditional methods while addressing their criticisms, thereby providing a more holistic and contextually informed approach to understanding the Scriptures.

However, despite the benefits to be had by this method, one can raise significant questions about the authority of the Church in determining the correct approach to biblical interpretation—which we can term the 'Authority Issue'. The PM, as noted previously, interprets the Bible by considering it as authored by God, intended for the whole human race, but practically interpreted by the Church. This raises the Authority Issue: why should an individual accept the Church's interpretation as aligning with God's beliefs, especially concerning central Christian doctrines? Why is the Church considered an authority in determining the meaning of biblical passages? As was noted previously, the Church's recognition of the creeds and its role in shaping the canon of Scripture have historically influenced how biblical texts are interpreted. For the Old Testament, this involves interpreting passages naturally unless they contradict Christian doctrine or known truths. And the New Testament, forming the core of the 'deposit of faith', also requires interpretations aligning with central Christian doctrines, as these doctrines are seen as encapsulating the essence of Christian Revelation. The Authority Issue thus arises when considering that the Church's understanding of these doctrines was formulated before much of the New Testament was canonised. Thus, the interpretation of Scripture is heavily influenced by these pre-established doctrines. The Church, in claiming divine inspiration and authorship of the Bible, assumes a role in defining

its interpretation. This leads to a situation where metaphorical interpretations are often employed to reconcile passages that are inconsistent with established doctrines or scientific understanding. However, this reliance on the Church for interpretative authority can be contentious. It presupposes that the Church correctly understands God's beliefs and intentions, which may not always align with an individual's understanding or interpretation. This raises questions about the legitimacy of the Church's interpretative authority and whether such an authority can be universally accepted, especially given the diverse beliefs and interpretations within Christianity itself. Thus, while the patristic method offers a structured approach to biblical interpretation, it inherently relies on the Church's authority to determine the correct understanding of Scripture. This reliance raises the authority issue, questioning the legitimacy and universality of the Church's interpretative authority in the face of individual understanding and diverse Christian beliefs. The focus now will be on dealing with the Authority Issue by exploring the notion of epistemic authority, as posited by Zagzebski, and then applying it to the issue at hand.

3. The Nature of Epistemic Authority

According to Zagzebski (2012), an epistemic authority is one that possesses normative power to generate reasons for others to do or believe something pre-emptively. We can state this thesis succinctly as follows:

(3) (Epistemic Authority)	A given individual believes a certain proposition p, on epistemic authority, if it is the case in which that individual has a content-independent reason to believe p based on the fact that the authority believes p (or tells them that p), and that reason pre-empts their other reasons for and against believing p.

At the centre of this thesis are two important concepts that are at the heart of this notion of epistemic authority: content-independence and the pre-emption thesis—with both of these notions being applications to the realm of belief of well-known general conditions on authority proposed by. It will be helpful to explicate these two notions within the context of practical authority first, and then proceed, in turn, to show how it applies to the important notion of epistemic authority as well. First, the notion of content independence, expresses the case when (within the domain of action) a given utterance is authoritative, according to Zagzebski (2012), it provides the individual with a reason to adhere to the instruction, wherein the link between this reason and the action it justifies is not directly related. Thus, for an epistemic authority— in the case when he has directed a certain action—might have directed a different action, and if he had done so, the subjects of the directed action would have had a reason to perform that other action instead. Importantly, the notion of content-independence is compatible with the need for one to have reasons to accept a specific authority as an authority—and so under the assumption that a given subject has reason to accept the legitimacy of this authority, the subject thus has reason to do what the epistemic authority says—and to do it simply based on the fact that the epistemic authority has said so. The notion of content-independence can now be extended to epistemic authority. That is, if there is an epistemic authority that parallels practical authority (i.e. authority in the domain of action), the authoritative person, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), it provides the individual with a basis for belief that does not rely on what (i.e., the content) the authority believes. Hence, as an epistemic authority, if the epistemic authority had believed a different proposition, his subjects would have had reason to believe that other proposition instead. Second, the notion of pre-emption, or more specifically, the pre-

emption thesis, within the domain of action, expresses the fact, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), the demand by an authority to carry out an action serves as the reason for its execution, rather than just being an additional factor alongside other pertinent reasons. This specific thesis emphasises the important point that for an individual to act on authority, that individual must take a specific authoritative directive as their reason for doing the action, and replace their other reasons for and against doing the action (Zagzebski, 2016). Thus, an individual—such as a Roman Catholic—might have reasons for and against campaigning against abortion—in favour of campaigning, it will publicly make the pro-life position heard by the masses, and in favour of not campaigning, it might curtail the liberty of a woman to have an abortion— if the Catholic was to take each of these reasons into account, gave them each a certain weight, and then decided once all things were considered to campaign, they would not be acting on authority (Zagzebski, 2020). Rather, acting on authority would only occur, in this specific case (and others like it), if the fact that the epistemic authority (such as the Pope), says that one should campaign, is then the reason that the Catholic does campaign. Hence, as Zagzebski (2016) notes, authority is the specific normative power to give others pre-emptive reasons. Now, as with the notion of content-independence, the pre-emption thesis can also be extended to epistemic authority. That is, if there is epistemic authority, then there will be situations in which the fact that the authority has a belief that p is a reason for an individual to believe p that pre-empts their own reason for believing in p or its negation—that is, the individual does not add the fact of the authority's belief to their own considerations for and against that specific belief. More precisely, as Zagzebski (2016) notes, the pre-emption thesis for epistemic authority expresses the 'fact that the authority has a belief p is a content-independent reason for me to believe p that replaces my other reasons relevant to believing p and is not simply added to them'. Importantly, however, the pre-emption thesis does not say whether or not an individual should believe on authority; thus, one can ask what the justificatory grounds would be for an individual believing in a pre-emptive way? An answer to this question can be provided by an additional thesis termed the Normal Justification thesis. The Normal Justification thesis states that the normal way for one to demonstrate that an individual has authority over another individual is to show that the subject under question is more likely to act for their own ends if they accept the directives of the authority under question and tries to follow them, rather than them trying to act for those ends directly (Zagzebski, 2012). In other words, as Zagzebski (2016) notes, since every self-guided individual has their own reasons for acting, it is rational for them to act upon these reasons in the most effective way possible. In our theological context, it could be the case that the best way that this individual can act is to adopt an indirect strategy: do what the Pope says to do. If the individual can act on their own reasons better by doing what the Pope says to do rather than by acting independently—acting on the authority of the Pope is what self-direction is telling them to do (Zagzebski, 12. By acting on the Pope's directive pre-emptively, the individual is allowing this authority to stand in for her in reaching her ends. These ends can also be of an epistemic nature—such that individuals are seeking truth in a number of domains of inquiry, and we have reason to believe that there are other, specific individuals whose authority in these specific domains can be justified by a certain specification of the Normal Justification thesis, that can be stated—in an 'individualised format'—according to Zagzebski (2012), as such:

(4) (Individual Justification)   Justification Thesis for the Authority of Belief: The epistemic authority of an individual is justified for a certain individual by the subject's conscientious judgment that they are more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief if they believe what the authority tells them than if they try to figure out what to believe themselves.

In the present theological context, the general principle expressed by the Epistemic Normal Justification thesis—which is the central thesis of our argument here—is that of it being the case that as long as an individual can judge that the Pope's process of figuring out the truth about issues concerning, for example, faith and morals, is better than theirs—i.e. that the Pope's belief will survive that individual's conscientious self-reflection better than the belief that they get on their own—then the individual should let the Pope stand in for them in determining whether a proposition in the relevant domain is, in fact, true—in other words, if one can conscientiously judge that the Pope's belief is likely to be better than theirs, then one should make the deference—with the dereference that is made here being able to serve the truth-seeking goals of the individual under question. Now, despite the clarity of this justificatory thesis, certain issues can be raised against the truth-seeking process at the heart of it: first, issues can arise concerning this process when there are competing authorities, who are more likely to obtain the truth concerning a certain matter than the subject under question, but also are in disagreement with one another—with the subject under question also not being in a position to judge which one is, in fact, more authoritative. In this specific situation, it seems to be the case that the most reasonable thing would be to withhold judgment concerning the matter —let's term this issue the competing authorities problem. Second, issues can also be raised against this process when an individual is in a situation where the putative authority is more likely to get the truth concerning a matter than the subject under question—given the experience, skills and background knowledge of the authority—yet the authority is only slightly more likely to do so (Zagzebski, 2012). This is especially evident in cases where an individual has already formed a certain belief on the matter, and thus, they would (plausibly) be less certain that the authority is superior to them in this case (and their judgement concerning this issue is correct) then they are certain of the truth of the belief that they have affirmed. There is thus an evident difficulty in a given individual being confident that another individual really is superior to themselves in the relevant respect, and thus, the rational option would not be to defer to the authority in such a situation—let's term this issue the superiority problem.

Turning from these issues now to an explication of epistemic authority within a communal context. That is, what has been said here for individual epistemic authority can now be extended to that of 'communal authority'—and specifically that of religious communal authority. As Zagzebski (2012) notes, the concept that a community functions as an 'extended self' is crucial to understanding how authority is manifested within communities. Why A community, such as a religious group, is akin to an extended self is because it shares many characteristics with a person, and its members interact with it similarly to how they would with themselves. Moreover, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), a community possesses a collective consciousness with various components for members to reflect upon, much like an individual's self-reflection process. This collective consciousness includes a shared history of experiences, communal beliefs, and possibly communal emotions, which are often communicated and nurtured through the community's narratives. Frequently, a community, according to Zagzebski (2012), will have aspirations and plans for the future, embrace certain values, and act as a collective agent. A community member will refer to these aspects of the communal consciousness as "our" experiences, beliefs, values, etc., and consider the community's actions as "our" actions. Now, the justification for the community's method of forming beliefs rests on its conscientiousness. This system is meticulously and conscientiously crafted—such that, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), by adhering to this system, with its inherent structure of authority, one is more likely to uncover truth than by employing any alternative. Although truth is not guaranteed, one can see this system as more reliable in the long run than other methods, and one holds this belief with a sense of conscientious responsibility. Thus, according to Zagzebski (2012), a conscientious individual may regard the beliefs of her community as credible and justified, in line with two similar theses to ENJ:

| (5) (Communal Justification) | (i) | *Justification of Communal Epistemic Authority 1* The authority of my community is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that I am more likely to believe the truth and avoid falsehood if I believe what We believe than if I try to figure out what to believe in a way that is independent of Us. |
| | (ii) | *Justification of Communal Epistemic Authority 2 (JCEA 2)* The authority of my community is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that if I believe what We believe, the result will survive my conscientious self-reflection better than if I try to figure out what to believe in a way that is independent of Us. |

The fact that 'We' believe something provides one, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), with a pre-emptive reason to believe it too, but since I am part of the community and regard it as an extension of themselves, its authority is not foreign to them—unlike the authority of a political state. Ultimately, the supreme authority over an individual remains themselves—and what they consider as authority is an extension of their own being. Now, the beliefs of a community are determined in various ways. A key decision, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), for a community is the choice of its authority structure. However, epistemic authority in a community is justified by the community's conscientious judgment that it is more likely to attain truth or beliefs that withstand communal reflection through its chosen method than by other means. In long-standing communities, the method can be progressively refined through communal reflection, thus being influenced in part by the authority established in the past. In some communities, according to Zagzebski (2012), the collective belief of the majority is trusted more than the belief of any single individual—leading to democratic structures of authority. In these communities, authority stems from a process involving the entire community rather than being vested in an individual or group tasked with upholding, developing, and transmitting the community's beliefs. However, communities with different structures exist. As communities, according to Zagzebski (2012), that endure over multiple generations might less frequently adopt democratic structures, as such structures tend to favour the present over the past. But regardless of the structure chosen, it is justified by the communal judgment that following this structure is more likely to lead to the truth than other methods. This judgment, borne out of conscientiousness, is justified by one's collective conscientiousness—just as their personal judgment justifying their acceptance of authority is backed by their own conscientiousness. Thus, as Zagzebski (2012) notes, when an individual takes their community as an extended part of themselves, they gain reasons to trust what their extended self believes. The justification for the community's beliefs lies in its conscientiousness, and the justification for my acceptance of the community's authority is that my acceptance withstands my critical self-reflection. Thus, one acquires reasons to adopt beliefs based on the authority of their community.

Now, if one's understanding that a community represents an expanded self is correct, then as Zagzebski (2012) notes, placing trust in it equates to an extension of self-trust. The key distinction is that self-trust is unavoidable, while trusting in the collective, or 'Us', is optional. A person can decide to dissociate from a community, and such a conscientious decision typically arises when an individual realises that the community's beliefs no longer stand up to her conscientious self-reflection, nor are they likely to do so in the future, given their past failures. Yet, for some, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), community membership constitutes a profound aspect of their identity. For these individuals, the community's beliefs are likely to continually withstand their conscientious self-reflection, as they have done so consistently.

Moreover, certain beliefs within the community might play a crucial role in shaping what other beliefs meet her conscientious self-reflection standards. One can propose within this context, as Zagzebski (2012) does, that individuals possess two innate desires concerning the self: to align their states with their respective objects, and to ensure these states are congruent with one another. The ultimate measure for the former is the latter. In certain areas, it is challenging to ascertain whether one's community is more adept at discerning truth than oneself or another community, especially when the criteria for truth are strictly epistemic. For instance, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), the conviction that a specific religious tradition offers the optimal route to truth partly hinges on the belief that it embodies the pinnacle of human spirituality in relation to God. To hold this view, one must possess non-epistemic trust in the tradition and conclude that its teachings fulfil conscientious reflection on one's comprehensive set of psychic states, not solely on one's set of beliefs. Therefore, the more foundational principle for justifying religious epistemic authority, as noted by Zagzebski (2012), stems from JCEA 2, which can now be stated succinctly as follows:

(6) (Religious Communal Justification)   *The Justification of Religious Epistemic Authority Thesis*, The epistemic authority of my religious community is justified for me by my conscientious judgment that if I believe what We believe, the result will survive my conscientious self-reflection on my total set of psychic states better than if I try to figure out what to believe in a way that is independent of Us.

The epistemic authority of one's religious community is justified if the adoption of what We believe the outcomes will better endure my conscientious self-reflection on my entire range of psychic states than if that individual independently determines what to believe—the authority of a community is thus justified by a conscientious judgment that these desires are more likely to be satisfied through participation in the community.

   Now, in the context of community authority, the superiority problem emerges again when the collective knowledge or insight of the community is only marginally better than that of the individual. This slight superiority raises doubts about the rationality of replacing individual judgment with communal consensus. The individual may struggle to justify why the community's slightly better understanding should pre-empt their own reasoning, especially in cases where their personal belief or knowledge is strong. This dilemma is amplified in communities with diverse and rich pools of knowledge, where the collective wisdom, though valuable, may not always significantly surpass that of an individual member. When considering religious community authority, the superiority problem takes on additional dimensions. In many religious communities, the authority is not just a matter of knowledge but also of spiritual insight and moral guidance. Here, the superiority problem is not only about the comparative knowledge or insight but also about the spiritual authority of the community. An individual may find it challenging to accept that the religious community's understanding of spiritual matters is sufficiently superior to their own, particularly when personal spiritual experiences or revelations come into play. In addition to this, the competing authorities problem in community authority arises when different communities, each with its own set of beliefs and values, offer conflicting guidance or perspectives on the same issue. An individual who identifies with multiple communities or is exposed to various communal beliefs might struggle to reconcile these differences. The problem is figuring out which community to prioritise or whether to synthesise these different viewpoints into a personal stance. This issue becomes particularly complex in multicultural or pluralistic societies, where individuals are often part of multiple overlapping communities with varying beliefs and values. In religious community authority, the competing authorities problem is heightened due to the often exclusive nature of religious beliefs. When different religious communities provide contradictory teachings or

interpretations on moral, spiritual, or theological matters, an individual faces a profound challenge. This conflict is not merely intellectual but also deeply personal and spiritual, as religious beliefs are closely tied to an individual's identity and worldview. The challenge lies in discerning which community's teachings to embrace, especially when these teachings shape one's understanding of fundamental aspects of life, morality, and the divine. Both the superiority and competing authorities problems highlight the inherent complexities and challenges in assessing epistemic authority within individual, community and religious contexts. They underscore the need for careful discernment and critical reflection when adopting beliefs and values from communal or religious authorities. We will focus on addressing these issues once we have applied the notion of epistemic authority to the task at hand.

4. A Catholic Interpretive Framework

In further precisifying the PM in light of the notion of epistemic authority, it will be important for us to now resituate this method of Biblical Interpretation within a particular ecclesiastical interpretative framework: a 'Catholic' interpretive framework, that will help to provide grounds for dealing with the specific issues that have been raised against this method and philosophical notion. We can state this framework succinctly as follows:

> (7) (Interpretation*)   The Christian Scriptures, the Bible, is inspired by God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, and requires certain interpretation through the utilisation of the Patristic Method, by the singular authority of the magisterium, the head of which is identified as the Pope, who possesses the charism of infallibility.

It will be helpful to slowly unpack this framework now from an a priori perspective—which will thus also provide further (a priori) reasons in support of it. From this basis, we will then be able to explicate the specific way in which the issues raised against the PM and the notion of epistemic authority that was previously applied to it, ultimately enabling one to have a robust and effective method of Biblical Interpretation available for further theological theorising.

In unpacking the framework expressed by (7), from an a priori perspective, we can thus first understand that the existence of the universe gives us reason to believe in an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good God who desires individuals to live morally good lives, with the potential for Heaven. As the creator, God grants the capacity for moral living, and as omniscient, he knows all moral truths. And thus his perfect goodness leads him to help individuals achieve this through free choice. Instead of creating inherently good individuals, God allows for the development of moral character through choice; however, to make such choices, individuals need guidance on living a morally good life. Therefore, a perfectly good God would provide necessary revelatory information to assist in this moral pursuit. That is, more specifically, to ensure individuals lead moral lives, God would provide a *propositional revelation* containing essential moral and theological truths, important historical and eschatological information. This revelation, which Christians recognise as the Bible, would articulate general moral principles to solidify one's understanding and practice of good over evil. It would also elucidate the nature and existence of God, allowing for a more profound relationship and appropriate worship. Furthermore, it would recount the historical truth of God becoming incarnate to atone for human sins—which is a crucial aspect of the Christian faith that allows individuals to attach their repentance to a divine act of atonement. Lastly, it would reveal the existence of an afterlife—with Heaven and Hell serving as ultimate incentives for pursuing a virtuous life. In this way, through the Bible, God provides a comprehensive guide

to achieving moral excellence, supported by his perfect goodness. However, to guide humanity towards moral excellence, God would provide a revelation that is not immediately obvious, but rather require human effort and discernment to uncover, thus promoting an intentional choice towards virtue. That is, this revelation would be intentionally less overt to promote genuine commitment under uncertainty. Moreover, it would be 'culturally relative'—where a culturally-relative revelation is a disclosure of divine truth that is framed within the language, concepts, and situational ethics of a specific culture, whereas a 'culturally-independent' revelation is a form of divine truth presented in a manner that transcends cultural specifics and is universally understandable across different societies and times. And thus, this revelation would be expressed in the vernacular and understanding of its recipients, addressing their specific moral and spiritual needs without extending to universal or future concerns. It would use familiar analogies and avoid complex or culturally distant concepts, focusing on the essentials for attaining Heaven. The limitation is that such a revelation wouldn't easily translate across cultures or generations without additional interpretation. To mitigate this, God wouldn't provide a culturally-independent revelation, which might be too abstract or prone to misunderstanding, but rather an *authoritative mechanism* to correctly interpret the revelation and maintain the revelation's relevance and clarity over time. Thus, God's provision would be a propositional revelation in the form of the Bible, accompanied by an authoritative mechanism to ensure its ongoing interpretation and application.

In practice, this authoritative mechanism—which we can term the 'magisterium'—a teaching authority (that at least for now is) broader than the specific Roman magisterium—would serve as the enduring guide, clarifying and interpreting the Bible as a propositional revelation from God, and discerning its message from cultural assumptions. This authority ensures the revelation remains alive and applicable within the Church, preventing theological fragmentation over time. If, for instance, the Bible were lost for centuries and rediscovered, without a magisterium, interpretations could vary widely. Hence, the magisterium's role extends universally, necessary for the revelation to be meaningful to all people across various cultures and eras. This magisterium must then decide its structure for effective governance. It could be a 'Singular-Authority' with one individual at the helm, a 'Partner-Authority' shared between two equals, or a 'Group-Authority' with decisions by consensus.[6] Through elimination, a 'Singular-Authority' seems most plausible, avoiding the stalemates of equal partnership and the unreliability of group consensus. That is, 'Singular-Authority' is preferred because it circumvents the deadlock that can occur when partners with equal authority disagree on interpretations (known as the 'stalemate problem') and sidesteps the challenges of achieving and maintaining a reliable consensus within a group, where majority opinion may not reflect accuracy (termed the 'reliability problem').[7] This singular authority would thus provide a consistent interpretive voice, creating unity of belief and practice, which is essential for the Church to function cohesively across time and space. That is, it would ensure the Bible's teachings are not just historical teachings but *living instructions* that are effectively communicated and applied in the lives of believers within the Church of the present and future centuries. Now, to effectively exercise its role, the magisterium must possess a certain form of epistemic authority, which is grounded in its normative power to generate reasons for belief that pre-empt other reasons. This concept of epistemic authority, as noted previously, allows the magisterium (and other types of entities) to issue directives that believers should follow, not because of the content, but because of the authority itself. This authority is content-independent, meaning the specific teachings of the magisterium are to be adhered to regardless

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[6] For a fuller unpacking of the a priori reason for a propositional revelation that has been detailed—which is grounded in part upon the work of Swinburne (2007)—and the distinction between forms of authority/an argument in favour of Single-Authority, see (Sijuwade, 2023).

[7] For these problems see, (Sijuwade, 2023).

of their substance—based on the belief in the magisterium's divinely ordained role. Additionally, the magisterium's directives pre-empt other reasons for belief, effectively replacing other considerations with the magisterium's position. The magisterium's epistemic authority, then, is justified by the Normal Justification thesis, which suggests that one is more likely to achieve their goal—in this case, truth in matters of faith and morals—by following the magisterium's guidance rather than relying solely on personal judgment. This model suggests that deferring to the magisterium, in the context of its role accompanying God's propositional revelation, is justified when the magisterium is judged to be more likely to lead one to true beliefs. Moreover, in the context of communal authority, the magisterium can also be seen as a form of the 'extended self.' As was noted previously, this concept is grounded in the idea that a community, such as the Church, forms a collective consciousness that mirrors the individual consciousness in many ways. Members of the Church, therefore, interact with the magisterium not just as an external authority but as an integral part of their 'spiritual identity'. That is, the teachings and interpretations of the magisterium are not perceived as mere directives from an external source but as reflections of the collective wisdom and spiritual insight of the Church as a whole. This perception of the magisterium as an extended self is significant because it implies a deeper, more intrinsic relationship between individual believers and the authoritative mechanism established by God. As trusting in the magisterium's authority is similar to trusting in a part of oneself that is deeply connected to a broader community of faith. That is, this trust is built on the understanding that the magisterium—through its historical depth, theological expertise, and spiritual discernment—is better positioned to navigate the complexities of Scripture and doctrine than any individual member of the Church could be on their own. Furthermore, just as individuals rely on personal judgment and discernment, the Church, as a community, relies on the magisterium to distil and interpret the collective understanding of Christian teachings. Hence, this relationship underlines a particular type of 'reciprocal dynamic' where the individual's faith journey is informed and enriched by the communal wisdom of the Church, and in turn, individual experiences and insights contribute to the living tradition of the Church. Thus, the magisterium's function as a form of extended self in the context of communal authority emphasises the deep interconnection between individual believers and the epistemic authority that it possesses as the authoritative mechanism established by God to interpret his propositional revelation—and ultimately guides believers in the faith. With this understanding to hand concerning the form of epistemic authority possessed by the possessed by the magisterium—as the accompanying mechanism for interpreting God's propositional revelation found within the Bible—we can now restate in light of the notion of biblical interpretation expressed by the PM.

God's intention in establishing the magisterium as the accompanying authority of his propositional revelation, and thus the interpreter of the Bible, can be understood as an effort to preserve the intended meaning and ensure the correct application of the Scriptures throughout the ages. Now, the PM aligns with this specific divine intention by advocating for interpretations that honour both the literal and deeper metaphorical understandings of biblical texts—which are always to be understood in light of central Christian doctrines and scientific and historical truths. That is, by adopting the PM, the magisterium exercises its authority in a manner that respects the complexities and the contextual nature of the Bible. As noted previously, the Bible, which is considered to be ultimately authored by God, encompasses a vast array of literary genres, and was written across diverse cultural and historical periods. Thus, a rigidly literal interpretation could misrepresent God's message, while an overly metaphorical one could detach the Scripture from its grounding in historical reality and doctrinal truth. The PM thus provides a balanced approach, by recognising the need for metaphor when literal interpretations conflict with established truths or doctrines. In doing so, it ensures that the Bible remains a living and relevant document that speaks to believers in

every generation. God's desire for the magisterium to use the PM also corresponds to the goal of maintaining a unity of faith and a coherent doctrinal framework within the Church. That is, by interpreting the Bible through the lens of central Christian doctrines, the magisterium preserves the core tenets of the faith as understood from the earliest times of the Church—which fosters continuity and stability in belief and practice. That is, this method respects the work of the early Church Fathers and theologians who have contributed to shaping these doctrines in response to the revelatory act of God through the Scriptures. Furthermore, God's endowment of the magisterium with the authority to interpret the Bible using the PM addresses potential conflicts between Scripture and the evolving body of scientific and historical knowledge. This is that, by allowing for metaphorical interpretations when necessary, the magisterium can affirm the truth of scientific and historical findings without compromising the theological and moral truths of the Bible. This thus demonstrates a respect for the integrity of various fields of human knowledge and acknowledges God's ongoing revelation through the natural world and human inquiry. God's establishment of the magisterium as the authoritative interpreter of the Bible with the adoption of the PM thus underscores his commitment to guide the Church in truth through all ages. That is, it is a reflection of God's perfectly good will that seeks to safeguard the Scripture's integrity, ensure its doctrinal consistency, and engage constructively with human knowledge, thus, ultimately facilitating the moral and spiritual growth of individuals and the entire faith community across the many generation.

Now, the magisterium, in its capacity as the teaching authority accompanying the propositional revelation of the Bible, is not only tasked with guiding the interpretation of Scripture but also holds the authority to establish central Church doctrines—with this authority being taken to be grounded in the principles concerning epistemic authority detailed previously, which provide content-independent and pre-emptive reasons for belief. That is, as noted previously, the magisterium's directives are to be accepted based on the recognition of its role, rather than the content of its teachings. This content-independence means that the belief in the magisterium's declarations is based on its standing as the authoritative interpreter established by God, rather than on a direct engagement with the content it presents. The pre-emption thesis implies that the magisterium's interpretations and declarations replace other reasons individuals might have for or against certain beliefs. Thus, when the magisterium declares a doctrine, this directive pre-empts personal or alternative interpretations of Scripture and traditions, which provides the Christian community with a unified understanding. And in the context of biblical interpretation, this means that if the magisterium, seen as the epistemic authority within the Church, declares a certain interpretation of a Scripture passage, the rationale for accepting this interpretation lies not in the individual's direct engagement with the content but in their acceptance of the magisterium's authority. This acceptance is based on the presumption that the magisterium, in its role as a custodian of theological knowledge and tradition, is more likely to interpret Scripture correctly than an individual believer. The pre-emption thesis further strengthens this notion—it posits that the authority's directive replaces other reasons the individual might have for or against a particular belief. In the theological realm, this means that if the magisterium offers an interpretation of a biblical passage, or derives a specific doctrine from Scripture, this interpretation or doctrine pre-empts individual interpretations or understandings, regardless of how compelling they might be. This, however, is not to negate the role of personal discernment and reflection but to acknowledge the magisterium's role in guiding believers towards a more unified understanding of Scripture. The Normal Justification thesis provides a framework to justify why individuals should defer to an epistemic authority. It suggests, as noted previously, that an individual is more likely to act in accordance with their own goals (in this case, understanding the truth of Scripture) by following the directives of an authority (the magisterium) than by acting on their own. This is particularly relevant in religious contexts where the complexity of theological concepts and the

historical depth of biblical texts make individual interpretation challenging and potentially less accurate. In addition to this, in affirming central Church doctrines, the magisterium also implicitly affirms the authority of scientific and historical experts to discern truths in their respective fields. This acknowledges the PM's stance that if literal interpretations of Scripture conflict with established scientific and historical truths, a metaphorical interpretation should be sought. Therefore, while the magisterium establishes theological truths, it does not encroach upon the domains where expertise lies outside its purview, which addresses potential conflicts in authority by deferring to relevant experts. And, again, the Normal Justification thesis supports this approach by suggesting that individuals are more likely to fulfil their goal of understanding the truth of Scripture and doctrines by following the magisterium's guidance rather than relying solely on personal discernment. This thesis thus justifies the magisterium's authority based on the conscientious judgment that its positions are more likely to lead to truth. And when conceptualising these concepts within the communal aspect of religious authority, it's crucial to consider the magisterium not just as an external authority but as an extension of the believer's identity. That is, the magisterium's interpretations, teachings, and its establishment of central Christian doctrines, form part of the believer's religious consciousness and experience. Therefore, trusting in the magisterium's authority can be seen as an extension of self-trust, particularly when the community's beliefs have consistently withstood the individual's conscientious reflection and align with their spiritual aspirations.[8]

Now, in finally applying this to the Authority Issue, which arises from the question of why individuals should trust the magisterium's interpretations of Scripture and its establishment of doctrine over their own insights or those from various sources. This issue can be seen to have already been addressed through the application of the principles of epistemic authority, which have clarified and justified the magisterium's role. And thus it will be helpful now to recapitulate this within the context now of dealing with the Authority issue: by adopting principles of epistemic authority, the magisterium is recognised as having the normative power to provide reasons for beliefs that transcend the actual content of its teachings. Believers are thus guided to trust in the magisterium's interpretations because it has been established by God as the authoritative custodian of his propositional revelation. This trust is supported by the understanding that the magisterium, with its historical and theological depth, is more likely to interpret the nuances of Scripture accurately than individuals are on their own. The pre-emption thesis further strengthens this trust by suggesting that the magisterium's interpretations should take precedence over other personal or external reasons for belief. Hence, when the magisterium declares a doctrine, its directive is meant to guide the entire community of believers towards a cohesive understanding, thereby avoiding the fragmentation that individual interpretations could cause. Additionally, on the basis of the Normal Justification thesis— posits that it is more rational for individuals to act on directives from an established authority such as the magisterium than to rely on their own interpretations, which may be less informed. This is particularly pertinent in the context of religious belief, where the complexity of Scripture and doctrine often exceeds the interpretive capacity of the individual believer. And, again, by the magisterium also implicitly acknowledging the authority of scientific and historical experts in their respective domains, it avoids conflicts between theological doctrines and empirical truths, which could undermine the authority of the Church. This differentiation thus respects the magisterium's role in spiritual matters while affirming the validity of non-theological expertise. Finally, the incorporation of the magisterium's authority into the life of the believer is not seen, as also noted previously, as an external imposition but as an integral part of their faith journey. The magisterium's directives, when consistent with the community's

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[8] Thus, a Christina believer—such as a Protestant—who sees the importance of individualised positions within Christianity can find grounds, within their worldview, to affirm the authority of the magisterium.

spiritual experiences and when they survive conscientious reflection, are thus to be accepted as an extension of the believer's own search for truth. This integration helps to address the Authority Issue by presenting the magisterium's role as both essential and intrinsic to the believer's religious identity and community life. It thus validates the magisterium's position as a necessary guide in the quest for theological understanding and moral living according to God's propositional revelation. However, this approach is not without its challenges, particularly when considering the diversity within the Christian community, which, within this context, is the competing authorities problem. The competing authorities problem arises when different Christian denominations or theological schools, each with its own set of interpretations and understandings, claim authority. This can lead to confusion and conflict for believers trying to discern which authority to follow. Similarly, the superiority problem also emerges within this context when the authority's interpretive edge over the individual's understanding is marginal, making it difficult to justify the complete deference to the authority's interpretation.

Now, in response to the first issue, the competing authorities problem, is not, in fact, an issue within our present theological context, as, given that God has good reason to provide a propositional revelation, as noted previously, he will inevitably provide an accompanying magisterium that is to be conceived of as having a singular authority structure (i.e. Singular-Authority form)—with the individual who possesses this authority being the head of the magisterium—we can term this individual 'the Pope'. Hence, in assuming this specific singular structure (on the basis of a process of eliminating the other alternatives as valid options), there are *no* competing authorities available, as all other individuals would be subordinate to the Pope. And thus, even if there are individuals who might disagree with the Pope concerning the truth of a certain proposition, each of the members of the societies that the Pope has jurisdiction over—which is every society—would be in a position to judge who is more authoritative—which in every case would be the Pope—and thus defer to his judgement. In response to the second issue, the superiority problem, one can see that a plausible way to deal with this issue is to affirm—along with Christian (Catholic) tradition concerning the nature magisterium—the notion of 'infallibility'. This notion of infallibility applies again to the head of the magisterium established by God: the Pope, which focuses on expressing the fact that, within his authoritative teaching office, the Pope is preserved—by God—from erring when defining as divinely revealed certain doctrines concerning faith and morals (and other revealed matters). Why one should bring the notion of infallibility into play here to deal with this issue can be seen by understanding that, in a general context, as Nigel Warburton (1996, 132) notes, there are issues concerning believing something to be true on authority, as the 'principal difficulty for someone faced with an expert's opinion is to decide how much weight to give it. The main point to bear in mind is that even if you establish that someone really is an expert in the field, he or she is still fallible'. Though an individual might be an expert in a specific domain of inquiry, the fallibility of this individual—irrespective of their expertise—provides some grounds to doubt the truth of their belief, judgement and overall epistemic superiority—which would, therefore, also provide grounds for not seeking to hold their belief pre-emptively. However, if one was to take an individual to possess a charism of infallibility—as the Pope is taken here to possess—then, again, irrespective of the expertise of this particular individual, one would not be faced with a problem. That is, more fully, if the Pope is infallible in such a manner that he is preserved from the possibility of error when speaking 'ex-cathedra'—in respect to faith and morals (and other revealed matters)—then one cannot be in a situation where they are deliberating whether the Pope is less superior to them (and is correct concerning a certain judgement in this domain of inquiry) than they are about their own belief concerning the truth of the judgement that they have arrived at. As, given that Pope cannot err on this matter, one will be able to be certain about the veracity of his judgement. Hence, each culture and generation would be able to defer

to the Pope on these specific matters. That is, given the Pope's infallibility, the epistemic authority of the Pope, in the domain of faith and morals, would be such that each individual's conscientious judgment would result in them believing that they are more likely to form a true belief and avoid a false belief within this domain if they believe what the Pope declares than if they were to try to figure out what to believe themselves—each individual should thus allow the Pope to stand in for her in this specific domain. This would not be the case, however, if the Pope did, in fact, lack infallibility, as there would be no reason to privilege his judgement over that of one's own—especially in the case of one having greater expertise than him in this specific domain.[9] Thus, individuals could potentially be in a position of scepticism concerning the truth of declarations made by the Pope and thus seek regularly not to defer to the Pope's judgement in this even narrow domain. In other words, one would lack a justification for making a pre-emptive deference to the Pope's beliefs (and judgements) in the domain of faith and morals. Yet, if this is the case, then this would indeed be problematic, given the prior position reached of God having established him as the single authority that, within the hierarchical structure of the authoritative magisterium, is to correctly interpret his propositional revelation. Hence, there thus seems to be an intimate connection between the epistemic authority of the 'head' of the authoritative mechanism—that accompanies God's propositional revelation—and his infallibility. In other words, a charism of infallibility is needed to secure the epistemic authority required, and has shown to be justified by the theses above. Thus, by one affirming the veracity of infallibility, one can indeed ward off this potential scepticism and, instead, have a justification for making a pre-emptive deference to the Pope's beliefs (and judgements) in the domain of faith and morals—that is concerning God's propositional revelation found in the Bible—as one does not have to weigh the likelihood of the truth of the Pope's definitive judgement over one's own—due to the fact that in each case, when a definitive declaration has been provided by him, the truth of this declaration is guaranteed. This thus further strengthens the authority of the magisterium that accompanies God's propositional revelation, as by the Pope possessing the charism of infallibility, his declaration concerning the content of this revelation—must be given ascent by all, and thus he functions as an ultimate arbitrator and decision-maker who possesses a kind of 'normative epistemic power'—where what Pope believes (and declares) gives all other individuals reason to believe the same thing that replaces their other reasons relevant to that belief. In other words, it gives each recipient of God's revelation in Scripture reason to take the Pope's own beliefs (concerning faith and morals)—and the solemn declarations that express them—pre-emptively on the grounds that the Pope believes this (and has declared it to be so). This, however, is not to say that one must make this deference to the Pope's belief and judgement in every domain of inquiry as, according to infallibility, the Pope is not preserved from error tout court, but only in the domain of faith and morals (and concerning other revealed matters).[10] And thus, individuals can indeed resist believing pre-emptively on areas outside of this narrow domain—but should, and, in fact, must—if they are aiming to pursue the path of truth-seeking—affirm the veracity of the Pope's beliefs (judgements) concerning the matters of faith and morals, and seek to also adopt these beliefs themselves.

The superiority and competing authorities problems are thus addressed within the theological framework by the singular structure of authority that God is posited to have established in the magisterium, specifically in the form of the Pope. This singular authority eliminates the issue of competing authorities by positioning the Pope as the supreme arbiter in matters of faith and morals. As such, there are no competing authorities within the Church's

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[9] As a Pope does not have to be a theological expert.

[10] Though, given his epistemic authority, one should hold with great weight the position of the Pope concerning the matter.

structure because all members are expected to defer to the Pope's judgment, which is not based on his individual expertise but on the charism of infallibility granted by God.

Moreover, the concept of infallibility, as understood within Christian tradition, speaks directly to the superiority problem. It asserts that the Pope, when speaking ex-cathedra on matters of faith and morals, is preserved by God from the possibility of error. This divine preservation provides a solid foundation for believers to trust the Pope's declarations without the need to weigh his expertise against their own knowledge or that of others. It offers believers a reason to prioritise the Pope's judgment over their own, not because of his personal qualifications but because of his unique role. This, however, does not negate the need for personal discernment or the validity of expertise in other domains, such as science and history, but it does mean that in the domain of faith and morals, the Pope's authority is absolute and must be deferred to. As a result, believers are expected to give pre-emptive assent to the Pope's teachings in these matters, trusting that his declarations align with divine truth. In this way, the authority of the magisterium, and particularly of the Pope, is reinforced by a theological understanding that aligns it closely with the pursuit of truth. That is, it ensures that the Church remains united in its core beliefs and teachings and that the faithful can confidently follow its directives without fear of doctrinal error. This approach effectively resolves the potential scepticism and disunity that could arise from a multiplicity of authorities or from doubts about the magisterium's superiority in interpreting divine revelation.

In this theological framework, the Authority Issue is resolved by the magisterium's singular structure, led by the Pope, which aligns with its role in interpreting God's revelation. The magisterium, rooted in epistemic authority principles such as content-independence, the pre-emption thesis, commands adherence beyond its teachings' content, which ensures a unified Christian doctrine, needed for Biblical Interpretation through the PM. This structure thus eliminates confusion over authority, as all members are subordinate to the Pope, who, through his infallibility, guarantees error-free declarations in faith and morals. This infallibility thus provides grounds for believers in the Church to prioritise the Pope's judgment, ensuring alignment with divine truth and its maintenance of doctrinal continuity and coherence. And by the magisterium utilising the PM method, which are grounded upon its established Christian doctrines, it is able to exercise its authority to uphold the integrity of Scripture while also respecting the complexities of its various contexts. That is, as we have seen, the PM allows for metaphorical interpretations when literal meanings conflict with established doctrines or scientific (or historical) truths, and thus ensures that the Bible remains relevant across different cultures and generations. Hence, the magisterium's role, supported by the principles of epistemic authority, and exercised through the PM of biblical interpretation, ensures that there is no issue of authority when it comes to its fulfilment of it interpretive role concerning the Scriptures. The magisterium's, and thus the Church's teachings can, therefore, be seen as not merely historical records but as living instructions, interpreted and applied by the magisterium, and thus are able to fulfil the role of being a definitive guide for the Church of the present and future. This framework, which is ultimately that of a Catholic framework, thus allows the Church to confidently navigate through the complexities of interpreting God's biblical revelation while maintaining doctrinal unity and theological accuracy. Thus, one has the necessary grounds for considering the PM, situated within a Catholic framework, to be the best model for biblical interpretation in contemporary theological theorising.

5. An Application to Scripture

Now that we have fully explicated the PM, we can now apply it to certain verses that are ethically or historically 'challenging', specifically Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and 20:16-18 from the Old Testament, and Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4-6, from the New Testament. For the former,

Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and 20:16-18 present a significant ethical and theological challenge to Christian belief, as these passages depict God commanding the Israelites to completely destroy the nations they encounter in Canaan, leaving no survivors. This directive to annihilate—including the instruction to not show mercy and to completely obliterate their enemies—appears to contrast starkly with the broader biblical themes of compassion, love, and justice. That is, such texts raise difficult questions about the nature of God and the moral implications of divine commands that seemingly endorse violence and extermination. This is that these passages challenge Christians to reconcile the portrayal of a merciful and loving God with the harsh and uncompromising directives given to the Israelites as they enter the Promised Land, creating a tension between the character of God and the actions commanded to his people. Now, in interpreting these verses through the PM, it becomes clear that, as these verses fail to correspond with Christian moral teaching, the descriptions of the Israelites being commanded to engage in acts of slaughter are thus not to be interpreted literally—as historical events—but metaphorically. That is, these passages, rather than recounting actual events that occurred in the past, serve as metaphorical teachings aimed at conveying deeper moral and spiritual lessons. One way to understand this through a metaphorical perspective is to understand the call to eliminate entire nations as not that of a divine endorsement of violence but as a symbolic representation of the Christian believer's struggle against sin and the imperative to sever ties with all that is morally corrupting, if one is to enter God's kingdom. This is that, in a metaphorical context, the 'enemies' in Deuteronomy can be interpreted as personal vices or sins. And the command to obliterate these 'nations' reflects an inner call to eradicate sin and moral failings—and thus it is not an exhortation to physical violence—but a completely purification that is needed for a believer to enter into the kingdom established by Christ. This interpretation provided by the PM aligns with the Christian journey towards holiness and the struggle against personal sin, and resonates with the New Testament's emphasis on spiritual transformation and moral integrity. Moreover, this interpretation aligns with the broader Christian doctrine that emphasises spiritual warfare against evil, rather than that of physical conflict and supports the consistency of God's character throughout the Bible. That is, it reconciles the seemingly harsh commands of the Old Testament with the message of love and forgiveness taught by Jesus. Hence, just as Israel was called to separate itself from the corrupting influences of surrounding nations, Christians are called to distinguish themselves from sin and to live in a way that reflects their unique identity as God's people. The metaphorical interpretation provided by the PM thus underscores the idea that God's instructions in Deuteronomy are not about promoting violence but about the rigorous moral and spiritual discipline required to live in alignment with divine will.

Now, the application of the PM to the challenging verses in Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and 20:16-18—where it encourages a metaphorical rather than a literal historical interpretation—can similarly be applied to other complex and ethically challenging passages in the Old Testament. This is that this method provides a way to engage with texts that, at first glance, might seem to conflict with the overarching themes of justice, mercy, and love that are central to the biblical narrative. Take, for example, the various instances of divine wrath and judgment, such as the Flood in Genesis 6-9 or the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19:1–28. Rather than focusing solely on the historical and literal aspects of these accounts, the PM encourages us to see them as metaphorical expressions of the seriousness of sin and the fundamental need for righteousness and repentance. The Flood can be seen as a metaphor for the cleansing and renewal that comes through judgment, emphasising the importance of a new beginning grounded in righteousness. Similarly, as we have already seen with the book of Deuteronomy, the conquest narratives in the Book of Joshua, where, again, the Israelites are commanded to take over the land of Canaan, can be challenging when read in light of Christian moral teaching. Hence, in applying the PM, these narratives can, again, be interpreted metaphorically and refer

to the spiritual battle against sin and the call to establish a life that is dedicated to God's will, thus highlighting the need for purity and devotion in the spiritual journey. Furthermore, as also noted previously, the imprecatory psalms, which call for God's vengeance upon enemies, can be troubling if taken at face value. However, when interpreted metaphorically, these psalms can reflect the intense spiritual struggle against evil and injustice, expressing the deep longing for God's righteous rule and justice to prevail. By applying a metaphorical reading, as advocated by the PM, to these Old Testament texts, one is encouraged to look beyond the surface level to the deeper theological truths they convey. This approach thus allows one to reconcile the challenging aspects of these texts with the broader Christian moral teaching concerning God's love, justice, and redemptive plan for humanity. In adopting the PM, one thus has a method of interpretation that allows one to ward off the contemporary ethical challenges raised by individuals such as Thom Stark (2011) against a literal reading of these challenging Old Testament texts (specifically that of the texts of Deuteronomy and Joshua) and their moral justifiability, which has been done by Paul Copan (2011) and other individuals.[11]

Focusing our attention now on Matthew 2:1 and Luke 2:4-6, which are verses that concern Jesus' birth at Bethlehem. One can see that determining Jesus' birthplace is challenging due to contradictions between Matthew and Luke's accounts. That is, Matthew suggests Jesus was born in Bethlehem—where his parents lived before fleeing to Nazareth due to political threats. In contrast, Luke claims Jesus' parents were from Nazareth and travelled to Bethlehem because of a Roman census—a timeline, however, that conflicts with historical records— and thus as Matthew's narrative implies a move from Bethlehem to Egypt and back due to political threats, which is a journey not corroborated by Luke, who describes a different path from Nazareth to Bethlehem, there is a creatin here of a complex geographical puzzle in the birth story of Jesus. Furthermore, despite these narratives, other New Testament texts—such as that John 7:42— mainly associate Jesus with Nazareth. Now, again, in interpreting these verses through the PM, it becomes clear that, as these verses fail to correspond with history and geography, one is able to shift focus from a historical interpretation of these texts to that of a metaphorical interpretation. That is, the apparent contradictions between the two accounts invite one to explore the deeper metaphorical layers that these narratives offer. And thus, in employing the PM, one is to affirm, from a historical perspective, Jesus' actual birth at Nazareth, and, therefore, the testimony about his birth in Bethlehem is to be interpreted from a metaphorical perspective that emphasises certain theological truths aimed at conveying certain truths about Jesus' identity and mission. Hence, in Matthew's account, Jesus being born in Bethlehem and later relocating due to political threats can be viewed metaphorically, as Bethlehem, the city of David, symbolically connects Jesus to David's lineage, thus underscoring his messianic role. Moreover, the journey to Egypt and return can be seen as a metaphorical re-enactment of the Israelites' exodus, portraying Jesus as the new liberator for God's people. Thus, the geographical details serve as a figurative backdrop for the unfolding of Jesus' historical salvific journey, ultimately echoing the Old Testament motifs of deliverance and covenant fulfilment. Luke's narrative, however, with its emphasis on Jesus' humble birth and the inclusion of shepherds can be metaphorically interpreted to highlight Jesus' accessibility and mission to the marginalised. That is, the shepherds, who are often seen as lowly in societal hierarchies, can be understood as being the first to witness the divine event, which illustrates the Gospel's reach to all societal strata, and thus reflects Jesus' inclusive ministry. Moreover, the Roman census, while historically problematic, serves metaphorically to place Jesus within the broader context of world history, and thus asserts that the divine intervention through Jesus' birth is pivotal to the human story. Hence, both evangelists, while employing historical elements, are primarily

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[11] Though Copan's (2011) view is more nuanced than a simple literal reading of the text, as he does offer a range of options for interpreting these texts.

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focused on articulating theological truths through their use of metaphor in these narratives, as the birth in Bethlehem, despite the historical questions, metaphorically affirms Jesus as the rightful heir to David's throne, fulfilling the messianic prophecies and establishing his kingship in a spiritual sense.

Again, the application of the PM to interpret the birth narratives of Jesus, which emphasises the metaphorical over literal interpretation of them, provides a valuable approach that can be extended to other historically challenging passages in the Gospels. For example, consider the miracles reported in the Gospels, such as the feeding of the 5,000 or Jesus walking on water, which potentially may present challenges when viewed through a historical lens. That is, critics might question the feasibility or historical accuracy of these events. However, applying the PM allows one to see these miracles as metaphorical narratives that convey deeper truths about Jesus' identity, mission, and the nature of God's kingdom. For instance, the multiplication of loaves and fishes can be seen as a metaphor for God's abundant provision and Jesus' role as the bread of life. Similarly, consider the differing accounts of the resurrection appearances of Jesus. The Gospels vary in their details regarding who first witnessed the resurrected Christ, the sequence of events following the discovery of the empty tomb, and the locations where Jesus appeared to his disciples. A strictly literal approach might struggle to harmonise these accounts; however, a metaphorical interpretation through the PM can focus on the theological significance of the resurrection as the cornerstone of Christian faith, rather than the precise historical details of each appearance. That is, one can consider a specific account of the resurrection in one of the Gospels as historically accurate while viewing the contradictory elements in the accounts in the other Gospels as metaphorical enrichments to convey theological truths. For instance, if one opts to treat the detailed and intimate account in John's Gospel as the historical core (through, for example, the use of the 'Criteria of Authenticity', or some other historical methodology)—which emphasises personal encounters like Mary Magdalene's recognition of Jesus in the garden or Thomas' doubt and subsequent belief—the variances in the Synoptic Gospels can be interpreted metaphorically. These metaphorical interpretations are not concerned with conflicting details but aim to underscore the transformative power of the resurrection, emphasising themes like community (as seen in the collective appearances to the disciples), mission (Jesus sending his followers as described in Matthew), and the breaking of barriers (the road to Emmaus narrative in Luke). This approach allows for a harmonisation where the historical account lays the factual foundation, while the metaphorical narratives enrich the theological and spiritual understanding of the resurrection's impact on individual lives and the nascent Christian community, thus ultimately illustrating the multifaceted significance of this central Christian event within these specific texts. One can thus see how the PM allows one to ward off issues that have been raised by various scholars (such as that of Bart D. Ehrman (2009), John Dominic Crossan (1994), Gerd Lüdemann (1998) etc.) within the historical-critical tradition of Biblical Interpretation (or Historical Jesus studies) concerning the apparent contradictions found in the Gospels, and thus their unreliability. As one can simply take one of the apparently contradictory texts, that is taken to be more in line with our historical method (such as the criteria of authenticity), to be the one that contains the historical core, and the other contradictory texts and accounts can thus be interpreted metaphorically, which thus diffuses any apparent contradiction, and allows one to affirm the truth (and reliability) of all of the texts—the historical truth for one of them and the metaphorical truth for the others. This move, however, does not face the charge of being *ad hoc* due to the fact, as noted previously, that the PM, and its suggestion that passages that do not correspond to Christian doctrine, science or history (or geography) are to be interpreted metaphorically, is *the* method proposed by the Fathers who canonised the Christian scriptures, and thus it is not a *nuovo* method adopted simply to deal with the contemporary issues raised by these types of critical scholars.

In all, through a utilisation of the PM, various Old Testament and New Testament texts can be viewed not solely as mere historical documents but as theological narratives that use history, metaphor, and symbol to convey the profound truths of the Christian faith. This perspective thus aligns with the early Church Fathers' approach to Scripture, which, as noted previously, often embraced a non-literal interpretation to elucidate the spiritual and theological dimensions of biblical texts. Thus, by employing the PM in interpretating scripture, one can navigate the complexities of scripture while drawing out the rich theological and spiritual meanings that underpin the Christian faith.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the central focus of this article was to comprehensively explore the Patristic Method of Biblical Interpretation (PM), and argue for it being a robust approach that addresses the limitations and critiques of other methods. Thus, in section 1, the historical development and critiques of the allegorical, literal, historical-critical, and canonical methods of biblical interpretation were outlined. These methods were shown to have significantly influenced both academic and religious perspectives on Scripture, yet each faces specific challenges. Hence, section 2 thus focused on explicating the nature of the PM, as proposed by Swinburne (2007). This method was shown to be grounded in a specific understanding of the authorship and intended audience of the Bible, advocating for interpretations in light of central Christian doctrines and scientific and historical truths. The PM was thus presented as a solution to the challenges faced by other methods, offering a more structured approach to metaphorical interpretation and acknowledging the limitations of the other methods of interpretation on offer. In Section 3, the concept of epistemic authority, as outlined by Zagzebski (2012), was unpacked. This section explored how the notion of authority, can provide a framework for one addressing the 'Authority Issue'—the question of why one should accept the Church's interpretative authority—that is, it provides a philosophical foundation for understanding and justifying the authority of the Church in interpreting Scripture. Thus, section 4 applies the principles of epistemic authority to the PM within a Catholic framework. This section argues that the Church, understood as an extension of the believer's identity, holds a justified epistemic authority to interpret the Bible. Hence, the PM, interpreted through this lens, allows for a dynamic understanding of Scripture that respects both its historical context and its relevance to contemporary believers. In section 5, there is an application of the PM to challenging verses in Deuteronomy and the Gospels, which highlighted its utility in addressing certain theological and ethical dilemmas. That is, the PM interprets difficult Old Testament commands and the New Testament's birth narratives of Jesus metaphorically, revealing deeper spiritual truths. And thus, this approach enables one to transcend literal interpretations, aligning Scripture with core Christian beliefs and offering a cohesive understanding of God's message. One can thus take the PM to be the best model for biblical interpretation in contemporary theological theorising by it integrating the strengths of various traditional methods and addressing their critiques—and its own through the lens of epistemic authority—and thus, the PM offers a comprehensive, balanced, and contextually informed approach to understanding Scripture: God's revelation for the Church for of all ages.

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