

Holy Scripture
by Hans Urs von Balthasar

translated and introduced by

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Translator's Introduction

IN THE WORLD of hermetically sealed university departments, the theology department itself is subdivided by barriers of convention and practical necessity. Those who specialize in biblical studies are expected to know ancient history and languages, but may be excused if they are not thoroughly versed in Karl Rahner's theology. Those who specialize in systematic theology must know Rahner and Karl Barth, but depend on the historical theologians for their assessment of Peter Lombard and on the biblical experts for what is safe to say about Paul's letters. Within this world of elaborate symbiotic relationships, Hans Urs von Balthasar is read in courses that fall under the umbrella of "systematics," and is generally seen—despite his own protestations against any "system"—as a systematician. Judging from his reputation or from the occasional quotation in a secondary source, one could conclude that von Balthasar was not only outside the stream of contemporary biblical studies, but even opposed to it. In a protest against many who doubt the sufficiency of historical-critical exegesis, including Louis Bouyer, Henri de Lubac, and Yves Congar, Joseph A. Fitzmyer remarks that "One should note in particular H. U. von Balthasar, whose ranting against 'modern exegesis' was notorious."¹

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Scripture, the Soul of Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 59 n. 8. Cf. the similarly hostile comments on p. 90 n. 70. Contrast this statement from section 8 of von Balthasar's "Die Heilige Schrift" below: "Under no circumstances should such insufficiently proven hypotheses (necessary for research) be presented to the people in preaching, where they cause confusion. But to form one's estimate of the exegetical profession entirely on the basis of

The specialist in Scripture is therefore understandably surprised to discover in von Balthasar an accomplished student of modern biblical studies. In the current quest to rediscover a union between Scripture and theology, a way of reading Scripture theologically and theologizing scripturally, von Balthasar's work merits attention. The purpose of this translation of *Die Heilige Schrift* is to make available in English an essay in which von Balthasar reflects on Scripture as such. The present introduction has a very modest objective: to offer an outline sketch of what may strike a biblical specialist as remarkable as he approaches von Balthasar's corpus.²

The first outstanding feature of von Balthasar's use of Scripture is that he is thoroughly acquainted with modern methods and has a personal command of both Hebrew and ancient Greek. In the introduction to his volume on the New Testament in *The Glory of the Lord*, he remarks modestly:

One may also fear that the present volume will appear methodologically imprecise to the reader who is a professional theologian—indeed, that it will strike him as hopelessly amateurish. . . . [E]ven less of the scholarly literature that abounds on all sides will be quoted in this volume than in the preceding volumes: we shall restrict ourselves to indicating a few useful works, as these present themselves to our notice.³

The truth seems to be that he is well-acquainted with Old Testament studies, and yet more accomplished in the area of the New Testament. His citations of secondary literature in the Old Testament volume show a huge preference for Gerhard von Rad—understandably, as von Rad is one of the most theologically sensitive of the historical critics—but no one scholar dominates the New Testament scene. He cites G. Bornkamm, Rudolf Bultmann, Oscar Cullman, Joachim Jeremias, Ernst Käsemann, E. Lohmeyer, Rudolf Schnackenburg, along with many others of lesser fame, and displays the ability to sum up schools of thought in New Testament research. While he knows Hebrew and quotes it, he is more comfortable in Greek.

such abuses would be as ignorant as unfair. We have shining examples of Catholic and Protestant exegetes who do the best scientific work and at the same time are reverent hearers of the Word."

² Others with more expertise in von Balthasar's theology have described his biblical theology in more detail. See W. T. Dickens, *Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theological Aesthetics: A Model for Post-Critical Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003); Bevil Bramwell, "Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Scripture," *New Blackfriars* 86 (2005): 308–22.

³ *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 6, *Theology: The Old Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 9. All citations of *The Glory of the Lord* will be from the English translation.

His translations from Hebrew tend to resemble existing German translations, much the way an English speaker translating the Old Testament might sound like the RSV, but his renderings of New Testament Greek vary tremendously, and show only scattered resemblance to any existing translations. Within the New Testament, his primary area of interest is the Gospel of John: In his volume on the New Testament, John accounts for 20 percent of the New Testament citations, twice as many as any other book.⁴ Interestingly, von Balthasar's prose style resembles John's more than any other biblical author with his habit of circling around and around the subject, and his love of paradox.

The scholarly resources von Balthasar deploys are more than decoration. His approach to Scripture is very historical-critical, more so than many who today wish to retrieve a theological reading of Scripture. With regard to the Pentateuch, von Balthasar wholeheartedly accepts the Documentary Hypothesis: He comments first on the story as it stands in the *J* source and then separately on the Priestly writer's version, because he sees *J*, *E*, *P*, and *D* as independent (albeit interrelated) theological voices.⁵ With the other biblical scholars of his day, he sees *J* as presuming that the divine name is widely known while *P* holds that the tetragrammaton was first revealed to Moses. Disparity and even disagreement between these theological voices does not trouble him. The Sinai traditions are less than fully integrated in Exodus, "and this deliberately."⁶

He also accepts the entire system of dating the Old Testament books that has grown up within the scholarly community. For example, he comments: "We have seen how this form [of the mediator] became clearer from Hosea, through the Moses of Deuteronomy and the major prophets, up to the 'Servant of Yahweh.'" Here we see the early prophets (Hosea), who have mosaic traditions but not yet the Pentateuch as we know it; the Deuteronomistic editor responsible for our text of Deuteronomy and the portrait of Moses we find there; the later prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; and finally Deutero-Isaiah, the sixth-century prophet who

⁴ The leading percentages are as follows: John, 20.48 percent with 758 citations; Romans, 10.48 percent with 388 citations; Matthew, 10.11 percent with 374 citations; Luke, 9.4 percent with 348 citations; 2 Corinthians, 7.78 percent with 288 citations; 1 Corinthians, 6.48 percent with 240 citations; Mark, 5.24 percent with 194 citations.

⁵ This is actually an example of a theory which, to borrow a phrase from von Balthasar's essay, has "wandered past." Those who accept the Documentary Theory today are in the minority, as on the one hand historical critics move toward more extreme fragmentation of the text and on the other hand narrative critics seek a more holistic reading.

⁶ *Theology: The Old Covenant*, 42.

authored the “Servant Songs” of Isaiah 40–55. (Elsewhere von Balthasar uses the names “First Isaiah” and “Deutero-Isaiah.”)⁷

Von Balthasar’s discussion of Psalm 29 is a good example of his use of form-critical, traditio-historical, and redaction-critical approaches.⁸ He turns to the psalm in connection with a form-critical discussion of the “epiphany” or “theophany” form. He is sensitive to the connection between Psalm 29 and the myth of a primeval battle with chaos, and notes that the psalm derives from earlier hymns to a pagan “storm god,” both insights from tradition history. The last verse of the psalm he sets aside as inserted by a later redactor.

We find the same embrace of historical criticism in von Balthasar’s treatment of the New Testament. He assumes the validity of the two-document hypothesis with regard to the Gospels, commenting that Matthew and Luke “construct” an infancy story and place it before Mark’s abrupt beginning. As a consequence, he discusses the Baptism of Jesus before discussing his birth.⁹ He adopts without discussion the scholarly consensus that Matthew’s infancy story consists of haggadic expansions on a “historical kernel” that can be reconstructed by listing elements of the infancy story common to Matthew and Luke.¹⁰

Hans Urs von Balthasar is thus very historical-critical in his approach to Scripture. He does not just adopt certain conclusions or helpful insights from contemporary scholarship, but interiorizes historical criticism as a way of viewing the text. Despite disparaging remarks about those who attempt to “dissolve” Scripture in the “acid” of historical-criticism, he is unafraid of the acid, even willing to apply it himself. Scripture, in his view, needs no one to defend it. Fr. William Kurz, co-author with Luke Timothy Johnson of *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation*, once remarked to me in private conversation that “von Balthasar is even more historical-critical than what I’m calling for.”¹¹

In a remarkable way, however, von Balthasar transcends historical criticism even while he uses it. One can see this by setting his discussion of Psalm 29 in its larger context within *The Glory of the Lord*. He arrives at the psalm in the midst of a form-critical discussion, but his form-critical approach is rooted in the central theological theme of his work. The formal object of a believer’s perception of Revelation is “the glory of the Lord,” that which distinguishes him as God from creatures—his wholly-

⁷ *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7, *Theology: The New Covenant*, 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁹ Compare *ibid.*, 40 and 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹¹ My thanks for Fr. Kurz for allowing me to use this quotation.

otherness. Hence passages in which God's glory is made manifest—those falling under the genre of “theophany”—will inevitably gravitate to the center of von Balthasar's thought. Having arrived at a particular form in Scripture for theological reasons, he proceeds to go beyond what a form-critical technician can do to what a theologian can do: He looks at the theological meaning of the form itself. He notes that at decisive places in Scripture God's “glory” manifests itself *before* his word is heard: Sinai, the burning bush, the calls of Isaiah and Ezekiel, Tabor, Damascus, the beginning of the Book of Revelation. Moses falls to his knees and bows his face; Elijah veils his face; Ezekiel falls face-down; Daniel faints; the apostles on Tabor are “beside themselves” with fear; John falls down as though dead. The creature experiences its limit.¹² The implication of the “theophany” or “epiphany” form for our reading of Scripture is this: It is the spirit of God himself that puts man back on his feet—man hears God's word not in his own power, but through the power of God's grace. All our reading of Scripture (or doing of theology) is done under the influence of the Spirit, which makes us capable of enduring “the glory of the Lord.”¹³

But before the word comes, von Balthasar points out, “the appearance of the absolute Subject is never abstract or without a relationship to the human party or parties involved.”¹⁴ The glory of the God who disclosed himself always reveals his holiness as well, and thus it also discloses the full unholiness of the person who beholds his glory: Isaiah considers himself lost (Is 6:5), the apostles on Mt. Tabor are beside themselves (Mk 9:6), John falls down as if dead (Rev 1:17). The decisive factor that separates God's glory in the Bible from extra-biblical encounters with the Other is that together with God's glory there appears his holiness and sinful man falls to the ground. It is this important difference that leads into the reconciliation and redemption of the world. “No glory of the gods has as its opposite what is called ‘sin’ in the biblical sense.”¹⁵ With this insight, von Balthasar takes his reader beyond tradition history, setting his remarks about the mythical background of Psalm 29 in their larger theological context.

Finally, von Balthasar goes beyond historical criticism as a whole by focusing on the realities to which Scripture refers. A weakness in the historical-critical method is that by approaching Scripture from the perspective of history, it inevitably tends to encapsulate the words of Scripture in a bubble of “past time” and thus to read Scripture without sufficiently engaging the realities portrayed therein. This seems to be a betrayal of the very

¹² *Theology: The Old Covenant*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16; cf. 14.

nature of a word. Von Balthasar acknowledges in this regard that his study will not remain within the confines of historical criticism:

[N]o critical study concerning the meaning and development of the concept of *kabod* is intended, but rather a look at the reality to which this word points in the Old Testament, and this reality is not limited to the actual occurrence of the word (and certainly not to its sense in the priestly writings). The same thing is intensely discussed already by J and E, and much later, when the Septuagint translates *kabod* as *doxa*, it will retain the much richer content of its meaning.¹⁶

The idea of glory changes a good deal during the history of the composition of the Bible, “and yet the intermediate steps are so interconnected and they so clearly point to one another that in their very variety these phases constitute a whole, the parts of which support and substantiate one another.”¹⁷ The account of the epiphany at Sinai, taken in itself, is composed of various sources that seem to represent contradictory and heterogeneous images of mythical theophanies. But it is a mistake to take the account of Sinai by itself. The collage of impressions found in Exodus is presupposed by the story of Elijah’s return to the sacred mountain (which von Balthasar takes as having at least a basis in history); these two accounts are brought together at Tabor where Moses and Elijah are seen speaking with Jesus, reported in a way that makes it impossible to dismiss the theophany as merely theologized history; the sun is darkened and the earth quakes again at the climax of the Passion as at Sinai. Many other such threads can be traced, with one level of Revelation connecting to the next, and those together to the next, but von Balthasar sees all as connected by the central viewpoint of “the glory of the Lord,” and all as climaxing in the Gospel of John—“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (Jn 1:14).

***Holy Scripture* by Hans Urs von Balthasar**

What Kind of Book?!

It is the most widely read among men, the most admired, the most reviled, and despite prohibitions everywhere desired and secretly intro-

¹⁶ Ibid., 17. One can see von Balthasar’s indebtedness to the Old Testament Theology movement here, but at the same time his originality. He locates the “center” of Old Testament theology in a theme that brings one inexorably to the completion of the Old Testament in the Gospel of John. Cf. his discussion of the *argumentum ex prophetiae* in *ibid.*, 402–14.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

duced. Every copy and every letter suspected, criticized, and relativized a hundred times over. And nonetheless, although properly it is no book at all, but a bundle of seventy-two entirely different writings—primeval myths, law books, histories, love songs, complaints against God, wisdom collections, reprimands, letters, visions—again and again it stands there continuous and unbroken like a block of brass, one demolished a hundred times over and nevertheless an impregnable fortress. It stands defenseless against anyone who wants to pick it apart “historically-critically” (for the Muslim any criticism of the Koran is strictly forbidden), but the changing theories wander past, while it stands still. “Heaven and earth will pass away, my word will not pass away.”¹⁸ What presumption, from a human perspective, what seductive power! Again and again generations grow weary of the unchanging Word, but their children snatch it up again, greedy, curious about it, and begin again to meditate over it. Who speaks there, so inaudibly?

Wisdom Book, “Foolishness of God”

Let us say at once: God speaks. This is in contrast to the wisdom books of men, of the non-biblical religions. In these, an unusual, illuminated, inspired individual has found a “way” by which one may pass beyond the banal daily routine to the profundity of the absolute (that is, separated from the world), of the primal cause, of that which is sublime beyond every being. Socrates, Plato, Buddha, Lao-Tse. . . . This is why “renunciation” (asceticism) and “exaltations” (ecstasies) or “absorbtions” are needed. The wisdom books of men are ways pointed out that ascend from the world to the divine superworld, from what can be expressed to the inexpressible, which one can perhaps experience in a trance. God, Paul says to the sages of Athens, has placed men on the earth “so that they may seek God, if perhaps they might grope after him, and find him, for indeed he is not far from us” (Acts 17:26–27).

In the Bible, quite the opposite. Everywhere in it God has the initiative.¹⁹ God seizes Abraham, to set out and stake everything on the one card of obedience to God’s word, of the promise and the call (to the point of offering his son Isaac). The Bible calls this obedience “faith.” Nothing else was demanded from the people from whom Abraham descended and made

¹⁸ Mt 24:35.—trans.

¹⁹ The biblical religions are Judaism, Christianity, and, in a looser sense, Islam, which is greatly influenced by the Bible. After that, there is a radiance of the Bible in the area of the other religions that is not exactly identifiable; it is possible, e.g., that the most beautiful Indian book, the Bhagavad-Gita, was not formed without biblical influence.

his covenant with God. “He who believes will not rush ahead (by his own thoughts and plans)” (Is 28:16). God makes the covenant and gives his instructions (“Ten Commandments”) on how one must conduct oneself if one wishes to stay in this covenant. Again and again the people pursue their own political and religious schemes: They must pay the penalty for it. When the Babylonian stands before the gates of Jerusalem, God’s voice speaks through the prophet to the king: Hand yourself over, then you will be unharmed. The king thinks of something better—he seeks to form an alliance with Egypt. He will be blinded, the people deported, and the Temple with the Ark of the Covenant will go up in flames.

God alone directs, helps, delivers. “I, I alone am God, apart from me there is no one who helps. I am that which is from all eternity. No one can deliver out of my hand. I say it, I do it” (Is 43:12–13). Israel understands that this tremendous “I,” by the freest grace, allies and has engaged the people, “a little flea,” to himself. Thus it can summarize every burdensome command in an astonishing way: “You shall love the Lord, your God, with your whole heart, your whole mind, and all your strength” (Dt 6:5).

But is not this covenant, this attachment [*bindung*] of the author of the cosmos to a tiny, troublesome people the very opposite of wisdom, is it not foolishness? This reaches its peak when God’s Word and Wisdom draws near to the people in such a way as to become a man among men.

“God’s Foolishness Is Wiser Than Men” (1 Corinthians 1:25)

After all the prophets who were God’s spokesmen (“Thus says the Lord”), Jesus of Nazareth, the carpenter’s son, appears and in an incomprehensible way lays claim to the powerful “I” of God. “It was said to you, but I say to you.”²⁰ “My words are spirit and life.”²¹ “Before Abraham was, I am.”²² “Whoever believes in me will live, even if he dies.”²³ His own relatives think he is delirious. The leaders of the people see in him a blasphemer and finally kill him, despite his magnificent (and nonetheless humble) words and deeds. Yet he never said, “I am God.” He calls only God his father and designates himself as sent and certified by him. He speaks in the name of his father, indeed he is the incarnate voice of this father. Utter scandal! One of his disciples betrays him, the others flee; the Jews demand his crucifixion, the heathen government authority carries it out. And precisely this rejection by Christians, Jews, and heathen brings God’s plan to completion: “God has enclosed all in disobedience” (he passes over their

²⁰ Mt 5:21–22, 27–28, 31–34, 38–39, 43–44.

²¹ Jn 6:63.

²² Jn 8:58.

²³ Jn 11:25.

unbelief), “that he may have mercy on all” (Rom 11:32). “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to myself” (Jn 12:32).

Here we are in the center of the Bible: The son of God, the one who is “one with the Father” (Jn 10:30), has the power to take mankind’s “No” over on himself, to suffer through their darkest God-forsakeness on the cross (“My God, why have you forsaken me?”), and to reconcile them with the God of Israel—now the Father of all men. Or better: God loved the world so much that he handed over his own Son for them, for “everything comes from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ. He made him who knew not sin to be sin for our sake, that in him we might receive the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:12ff) and become children in the Son.

This “insanity” of God is the middle of the Bible—all else is simply their manifold interpretation and rewording. So much so, that in many places it says that the creation of the world could only be risked, and justified, and characterized by the creator as “very good,” because the whole plan rested on the self-surrender of the “Lamb” (1 Pt 1:19ff), who as one who is unique can at last interpret the meaning of the seven-sealed book of world history.

The Bible: “Word of God”?

Yes and no. The Word of God is undoubtedly Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father, who “interprets” (Jn 1:18) the Father to us through his entire humanity, his life, words, works, humiliation, suffering, death, and delightful resurrection, who “translates” the Father into the humanly understandable. All that the God of the World has to say, namely his highest love proven to her in the Son, is said to the full. But is it also understood? The only way it can be understood at all is if God gives us his Spirit (1 Cor 12:12), so that we may think and also act from the inner mindset of God. Therefore Jesus promises us this divine Spirit, who will not speak some other, new word, but rather again and again until the end of the world (Jn 16:13–15) will “interpret” the Son, who has interpreted the Father. One could say that he will interpret the interpretation of God (which is Christ) for us and in us. To this extent one can say of Scripture that it is God’s word. Because Christ is also the full truth of the Old Covenant and cannot be separated from it, the whole Bible is a book of the Holy Spirit, or in other words, given by the Spirit, inspired. What does this mean exactly?

The Word of God in Human Words

Now comes the puzzling thing: that God speaks to mankind through men. Otherwise they would not understand anything. But how do these

two things go together? One must remember two things: God is never a partial cause, but is always “all” and “greater than all his works” (Sir 43:27ff). Every creaturely cause with its received freedom stands at his service; even if they are imperfect, by no means all-knowing, limited in many ways, they cannot disturb his perfect work and speech. There can be some things in the Bible that are conditioned by time; this does not hinder God from expressing himself in it. The second is that God has uttered himself from the high-point of his self-offering, in Jesus Christ, without any obstacle, exactly and fully. In Christ we experience the innermost center of God: “God is love.” All his other attributes flow from this love—his wisdom, his righteousness, his omnipotence.

It is of this that the Bible speaks. It is not a book about cosmology, not a treatise on world history, about psychology or any other worldly wisdom. Seen from a worldly perspective, it can have historical inaccuracies in what it says, or things conditioned by time: This does not prevent God from expressing himself in it, fully sovereign and unhindered.

Jesus, who is the Word of the Father, has written nothing. The Word is infinitely greater than anything which can be captured in writing. And this is why the divine Spirit must interpret what has been set down in writing about the Son and the Father. If men find some limitation in Scripture and ask the corresponding question (did the construction of the Tower of Babel really happen as described?), they should next ask themselves instead: What does God wish to express to us by this (mythical) narrative? “Everything happened to them (the old Israel) in a symbolic, foreshadowing way and took place as a lesson for us” (1 Cor 10:11).

It is characteristic of things having to do with Christ that he, who is the Word of God in a simple way, cannot be captured in his simplicity by human words: Four different Gospels approach him from different sides, just as one must walk around a statue to see it correctly, and it continually shows a new aspect to the one walking around it. There is also a meditation of the first generation of the Church on his mystery, on the meaning of his becoming man, his life, death, and resurrection: Progressively new and deeper connections unfold themselves, and the variety of Scripture testifies to this. Yet it contains no contradictions.

Moreover one can perceive that the sayings about Jesus, indeed his own words [as] the authors of the Scriptures remembered them, could come from different times. Some could come from one time, since Jesus himself did speak, although the hearers understood them only imperfectly, since he was first able to give them a full understanding after Easter and Pentecost; others are rendered precisely on the basis of this later understanding, although this does not require that they be falsified or “painted over.”

Who Owns the Bible?

To understand this question, one must first think back over the aforementioned covenant of God with Israel. The word of God before Christ was understandably directed to the chosen people and “belonged” to it, precisely because it was the people who belonged to God. The fulfillment of this discourse of God to Israel, which is reached in Jesus Christ, is not at all meant to nullify God’s covenant, but rather to fulfill it in such a way that from the old, “fleshly” Israel there may arise a new Israel, the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), a “spirit-filled people,” so that now even non-Christians, the “heathen,” have equal access, because Christ has born the debt of all men before God. This new people consists of all who believe exactly this; and if Israel already represented all people before God (Gn 12:13; Is 49:6), all the more does the new community of Christ, called “Church,” which is explicitly sent to all the nations, because the reconciliation of God in Christ with the world concerns all men and should be made known to them. So we can say that the Bible belongs to the Church, but as such is open to all men.

It belongs to the Church because it is to this Church that the Holy Spirit was promised. The Holy Spirit had the books written to safeguard the truth and enabled the Church to choose and bring together the right books out of many false and insignificant ones.²⁴ Another reason Scripture belongs to the Church is that the Church, whose distinguishing mark is her faith in God and his Revelation, is also able to explain it most correctly for Christians and for all who seek an interpretation.

“Old” and “New” Covenant?

But is the “New Testament” not enough for a Christian? Why this long and complicated prehistory? Here we run into deep mysteries, which at root only God can lay bare.

Surely God has only one unique plan of salvation with mankind. He does not make several “covenants” with mankind unrelated to one another. What we tend to call the “Old Covenant” is one with the final, irrevocable covenant (cf. Rom 11:29), which runs on from Christ and is fulfilled in him. For this reason there are not two peoples of God, but only one, which consists of Israel and the Church. Israel has not recognized or

²⁴ In the list of the books belonging to the Bible (first officially enumerated at the Council of Trent) the Church does not distinguish as the Jews do between the more important and the less important nor (as the Protestants do) between the “canonical” and “deutero-canonical,” although naturally this does not mean that for the Church too some books, e.g., the gospels and the letters of Paul, cannot have more importance than others (e.g., the genealogies in the book of Numbers).

acknowledged its fulfillment in Jesus. It is like the thief on the cross who turned away from Jesus Christ. The Church has acknowledged the fulfillment of the covenant and resembles the thief who turned toward Jesus. A kind of ur-schism—a No and a Yes—affects the covenant. But it is now open to all peoples, although this does not mean that the solidarity of the Church with the “holy root” (Rom 11:16; “Salvation is *from* the Jews”: Jn 4:22) can or should be set aside. Jesus himself relates himself continuously to the “Old Testament,” indeed he came primarily “to gather the scattered sheep of Israel” (Mt 15:24). What becomes of a Church when it supposes that it can dispense with the Old Testament is quite evident in Hitler’s “German Christians.”

But the question remains very real if it has to do with the so-called “inculturation” of Christianity in foreign cultures, perhaps those of Africa or Asia. Some mean that their own religious tradition can serve as a foundation and preamble [*Vorgeschichte*] for faith in Jesus. While certainly some elements of it can be used profitably in a new interpretation for the Christian faith, the word of God remains unified and indivisible from Abraham to Christ, and for a right understanding of the “new covenant” one cannot abandon the essential elements of the “old covenant.” No matter how high their cultures may stand, from a theological perspective the “nations” can never be part on the same stage with Israel, or their holy writings with the Bible.

On a Correct Handling of the Bible

The Bible, we said, stands defenseless before all the world—one can buy it in a bookstore. But we also said it belongs to the Church, and there are two tasks that correspond to this. The first is the more important: She must read and contemplate it as the word of God and learn from it how to worship God rightly and to thank him. The second is secondary, but not for that reason unimportant: She must interpret it rightly for Christians and non-Christians and thus defend its true content, which must be accomplished by an appropriate exegesis—and this all the more as outsiders often misunderstand and falsely interpret it.

Regarding the first: For believers the Bible is God’s word, but a word spoken in [the context of] the covenant, which for this reason demands a corresponding answer. Israel occasionally answered in the best way, in the Psalms for example, so that its answer was able to be included in the inspired word of God. More than ever before, Christians must answer as correctly as possible. Jesus says: The right answer is given by the “little,” the “infants,” the “simple,” while the revelation of the Father remains hidden from “the wise and understanding” (Lk 10:21). Simplicity is a fundamental

word for Jesus: He praises the simple, clear eye, and likewise the simplicity, the unreflective confidence of children. In this simplicity we must let ourselves be addressed by the word of God and in the same simplicity of the Lord answer him. Our prayer should be an echo of the sound and content of this word. An example of this is Mary, who kept God's words and deeds "in her heart, always thinking over them" (Lk 1:19, 2:51). One can call this "contemplation," although this does not mean a mere gaze but rather a hearkening to the inexhaustible divine depth of "every word which proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:21). This can take place in the lonely "closet," ideally during a certain time every day, or together in the innumerable "Bible circles" around, where each participant relates what touched him for the profit of the others. It is sensible even in contemplation occasionally to use one of the footnotes that shed light on the meaning [of the text] (for example, those that the "Jerusalem Bible" offers so well), so as not to go astray, but without wandering off into a bare academic study of the text. Indeed, the essential thing in such contemplation is that I let myself speak personally with God's word, and the experience will teach each one that it is this.

As regards the second: The attitude of an exegetical scholar differs from [contemplation] insofar as he has to examine the text in its historical connection, its relations to others, to understand earlier and later texts, and to situate [the text] in its philologically most correct form. This last point is important, and applies to every scientific treatment of a text: What does the text itself wish to say? In the case of a biblical author it means to say something about God and his revelation. To disregard or marginalize this central character of being a witness would be unscientific. By witnessing, the text demands faith. To disregard this means to misunderstand it from the start. Unbelieving scholars can discover important things of an historical and philological nature and contribute to an understanding [of the text]; but they strike off center with their interpretations. A believing scholar can be very close to simple contemplation even in the application of strictly scientific methods, and his work can offer a great deal of help to one who practices contemplation and wishes to examine more closely the meaning of a passage. However, he must always distinguish between results that are well-grounded (for example, that the portrayal of the temple cult of Yahweh, which was read back into the time of the wilderness, originated nearly a thousand years later in the Babylonian exile), and the very numerous hypotheses that seem demonstrated to a scholar or to a generation of scholars, but then are disproved or drastically changed by those who come afterwards. Under no circumstances should such insufficiently proven hypotheses (necessary for research) be presented to the

people in preaching, where they cause confusion. But to form one's estimate of the exegetical profession entirely on the basis of such abuses would be as ignorant as unfair. We have shining examples of Catholic and Protestant exegetes who do the best scientific work and at the same time are reverent hearers of the Word.

Above all, they can protect us from falling into the opposite extreme as readers and contemplators of the Bible. Namely taking our personal "feeling" as the norm for right understanding: "This says something to me, this does not say anything to me: I feel this word this way," whereby the individual measures the word of God by his own narrow desires and expectations. Indeed, it is precisely this often stubborn narrowness that God's speech to me wishes to break open.

The Self-Evidence and Ecclesiality of Scripture

Only someone who is spiritually blind could assert that men could have written the books of Holy Scripture out of their religious feelings. They carry within themselves the evidence that this is impossible. Above all because in them man with his desires is rubbed against the grain. Israel must—for its salvation—always do that which it wishes to avoid. "They have ears, but hear not" (because they do not want to hear) what God says to them. If religions talk about gods dying and rising again (particularly because nature dies in winter and reawakens in spring), nonetheless no one has wanted to worship a god crucified with cruelty and mockery, who in addition was definitely a man (indeed the believing disciples had enough trouble coping with the cross and resurrection of Jesus). Which man had the "poetic inspiration" to invent Jesus' Sermon on the Mount or the words of the institution of the Eucharist? Or to depict Paul's conversion and to make the fate which followed and the man's letters believable? For this reason Scripture has an evidence of its truth within itself, whence one never evades it, so that one ignores it or turns one's back on it. Yet it does not thereby lose its strikingness, its character as "leaven" in mankind. Is Marx not a typical Judas, who, since the Messiah does not finally come, wants to build the Messianic Kingdom himself? In the end, has not Gandhi learned non-resistance—along with all the Indian preliminaries—from the Sermon on the Mount? "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and mixed into three measures of flour, until the whole mass was leavened" (Mt 13:33), that is, whether it wants it or not. Since Jesus, the only alternatives in the end [im Grunde] are a Yes or a No to him.

The Bible remains a book of the Church, however widely it may be disseminated outside of her. For according to the Bible itself, Jesus is not

separable from the Church (despite all her defects). He undoubtedly wanted his “cause” (and this is himself) to continue on. He who himself possessed “the Spirit without measure” (Jn 3:34) promised this Spirit to his disciples; and after his departure the Spirit would lead them on and guide them into his whole truth, which at the time, while Jesus was living among them, they were not yet ready to understand (Jn 16:12–15). The Church, which is made up of many sinners and a few saints, is not very believable for the world; but the word that she proclaims, and which is not separable from her, is believable and also makes its connection with her believable. The Bible is, as theology says, the “ruling rule” (*norma normans*), while ecclesial tradition through the millennia and the ecclesial office, which Christ established, also rule of course, but [only] insofar as they are ruled by the Bible (*normae normatae*). Because of this unbreakable connection one cannot say: Bible, yes—Church, no. The attempts of Protestantism to find the place in the Bible where “Catholic” begins, and to find the true teaching of Jesus *before* that, have failed. One would have to go back so far that one would destroy the substance of the kernel itself.

This is why the Second Vatican Council (in *Dei Verbum*) presented Bible, tradition, and office as so intertwined with one another that no one of the three can be made understandable without the other two, yet in such a way that Scripture as the word of God (or witness to the Word of God, which is Christ) retains primacy. The Holy Spirit interprets it ever anew through the millennia; but the office remains the guarantee that the interpretation does not lie at the mercy of each interpreter. Thus the word of God is not past history but rather speaks ever anew in each present age and into the future. “My word will not pass away.”²⁵

Two Dimensions of Reading

One can read Holy Scripture in two dimensions, namely horizontally and vertically. To read horizontally means to read through the length of it, as one reads a history book or a novel. One begins at the account of the creation of the world, hears a few things about the prehistory of mankind, meets Noah and the nations descended from him, then Abraham, with whom things get somewhat more concretely visible, his first descendents, their adventures in Egypt, in the wilderness, at the entry into the promised land, the wars with the Philistines, the exciting histories about Saul, David, and Solomon, the political chaos under the kings, who have to hold out against Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon, and later Greece and Rome. Then the man Jesus emerges, whose fate is described in great detail and

²⁵ Mt 24:35.

who becomes the occasion for a community which gradually separates itself from Israel, and whose beginning is depicted for us in an interesting history book and in many letters and epistles. It closes with a visionary look at the meaning of the whole of world history and leaves further depictions of historical events to the authors of Church histories, to them the history of Israel and world history as a whole. Undoubtedly such a horizontal reading is part of a right relationship with the Bible: On the basis of a history covering about two thousand years, it wishes to show us the significance of world history and of the historical existence of individuals within world history, what God actually intended by establishing history—be it the history of individuals or of nations, what significance the whole has in its ever-onward rolling. The meaning is doubtless clear enough in this snippet from the whole of history. Here one can think back again to the picture of the seven-sealed scroll, which at first no one can open, until it is handed over to the Lamb (Jesus Christ is meant), which breaks open one seal after another, because, as it says, the Lamb “has triumphed” by the fact that it “was slain,” and “by his blood he claimed men for God from every race and tongue, people and nation” (Rv 5:1–9). What should be said with these pictures is this: that Christ has opened the final meaning of the world and its history by his cross. On the one side the whole guilt of those in the world, to have rejected God’s leadership and put themselves in the place of God, on the other side God’s absolute love, who, taking on himself the guilt of the world, has reconciled the world to himself in Christ: his love was deeper than all the sins of the world and has triumphed over all that is closed in, dark and evil. One reads the Bible horizontally, and this central truth, the drama of the cross as the rejection of God by the world and as the reconciliation of the world by God, becomes clear already in the prehistory and more than ever in the histories that follow, faintly at first—one thinks of Abraham, of Moses, of David, the prophets, the Maccabees—then ever clearer, the more experience Israel gains. After the time of Jesus nothing else in the world is proclaimed by his messengers than the solution given by God. Paul says of the Church: “God has placed the word of reconciliation in us, so that we are now heralds of Christ. God urges you through us, in the place of Christ we say: Be reconciled with God!” (2 Cor 5:19–20).

But right here, where it is clear that the ambassador of Christ has only this one thing to proclaim, indeed that all history before Christ already approached this one thing in ever clearer pictures, one recognizes that the Bible should not be read only horizontally like a novel, but at the same time and even more essentially should be read vertically, in the depth. For the central fact, the event of the cross is such an unfathomable revelation

not only of the sins of the world, but of God's own self, that one cannot begin to plumb the depths of this utterance. At each individual word that refers to the central truth and discloses it before us, one can only stand still, dismayed, confounded, overwhelmed, and gaze into this depth, without ever coming to the bottom. However does it happen that this love of God proves itself as more definitive and more triumphant than all the absurdities and incomprehensible atrocities of the world? Each word of Scripture is like a well shaft whose bottom one does not see: One throws a stone down it, and one does not hear how it hits the bottom, whether on water or soil. One experiences the word of God in this way, and so it becomes clear why it is called the word of God: It is (to borrow a phrase from Nietzsche) "deeper than the day remembered." If one already experiences the real loving devotion of a man as a wonder and cannot understand it (simply because you are, I give thanks to you), then the absolute love of God for something as unlovable as mankind always seems incomprehensible. And it is not a platonic love, not a love that merely asserts itself in words, but rather a love that lets itself be hated by the beloved men, hunted down, betrayed, taunted in a cruel comedy, spat upon, nailed to a cross, and abused to the point of death, a love that does not suffer all this with a wise self-composure but in blood-sweating dread, and finally perishes, crying out in a loud voice, "My God, why have you forsaken me?"²⁶ Everything had to be exactly this way if God was to infiltrate men's loathsomeness. If this is so, who would dare to afterward read the Bible only horizontally, like a newspaper? Does not a bottomless depth open itself with every word, before which one stands still as before an abyss and must gaze down into the unplumbable?

Once one has experienced and understood this, one can no longer compare this report with any other book of mankind, no matter how full of wisdom. This book stands wholly unique in world history, alone, incomparable. This is also why men try again and again to cast it away, for it is inhuman, intolerable, it must be trampled down. One can get rid of it in two ways: Either one prohibits it as the most dangerous book (which indeed it surely is); or one represents it as out of date, one tries to dissolve it in the acid of "historical criticism" or make it laughable in every way in the mass media, in Jesus films. A few Christians may object, but what use is it now, when the multitude will have its perverse, obscene pleasure?

With this we come to one last thing: A man who asserts about himself, "I am the way and the truth and the life"²⁷ is simply intolerable in the world as it is. This was so once before and has remained so ever since. It

²⁶ Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34.

²⁷ Jn 14:6.

is entirely clear that such a one, who concentrates all religions of mankind in himself—"I am the door, whoever comes in by any other way is a thief and a robber" (Jn 10:7f)—provokes atheism. Very rightly did atheism appear in the world after Christ, because it was precisely the word of God that was unbearable for it. Occasionally it shows itself openly as anti-Christian; and its program could be nothing else than to replace the claim, the crazy assertion of Christ with something more meaningful and effective. "He has claimed to free mankind: What is going on here? Now, we will show him how one does that." One can even give this anti-Christianity some Christian trappings by twisting the words of Christ in his mouth to mean the opposite of what they say. But he knew and foretold all this: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth. I have not come to bring peace, but the sword. Whoever loves father or mother more than me, is not worthy of me. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it" (Mt 10:34ff). "The servant is not greater than the master. They have persecuted me, they will persecute you also. I have said this to you so that you will remember this when its hour comes. My peace I give to you, not as the world gives, do I give it to you. . . . Well then, let us go out!" (Jn 15:20ff; 14:27). NV