

Reflections on Professor Bockmuehl's “Bible versus Theology”

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I WISH to begin by citing a famous remark of George Steiner, who is discussing the anomaly of skepticism's use of language in order to make its case, thus accepting the very covenant it is determined to deny: “It is the break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few revolutions of spirit in Western history and which defines modernity itself.”¹ Steiner attributes the final expression of this broken covenant to Stéphane Mallarmé, who once wrote: “I am inventing a language which must necessarily burst forth from a very new poetics, that could be defined in a couple of words: Paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces.”² Presumed in this statement is the Kantian principle that the subject is determinative in the act of knowledge: “the thing” is subservient to “the effect it produces.”

It is in the light of the statement of Mallarmé that I wish now to reflect on Professor Bockmuehl's thoughtful article in this issue, since the questions he raises seem to be addressed principally to the dilemma caused by the influence of this broken covenant. The question as he poses it is: “Can we say to what extent Scripture and Christian doctrine are or should be related: are they entirely independent, is one dependent on the other, or is there some sort of interdependence?” Later in his study he makes two remarks that I consider fundamental to providing the answer

¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; pbk. reprint, 1991), 60.

² Letter to Henri Cazalis, 30 October 1864; Stéphane Mallarmé, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Henri Mondor and Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, 1974; originally published in 1945), 307. Translation from Rosemary Lloyd Mallarmé: *The Poet and His Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 48.

to his question. First, he says: “This secular constipation of biblical scholarship, including what Adolf Schlatter famously called its ‘atheistic methodology’ has accounted for much of its sterile, death-dealing effect in academy and church alike.” Later, on the same page Bockmuehl says: “In particular, we certainly need more of a conversation with two millennia of engagement with the text.” I will develop my remarks around each of these statements.³

Atheistic Methodology

Modern atheism arose when it became evident that, while religion seemed to need physics to establish its fundamental principle, namely the existence of a supreme cause, physics did not need religion. Thus, the Newtonian world was set on its head by men like Denis Diderot and Baron Paul d’Holbach, who correctly saw that a coherent explanation of the universe could be supplied by the use of Newtonian physics without any recourse to a Supreme Being. In the words of Michael Buckley, “Atheism came out of a turn in the road in the development and autonomy of physics.”⁴

Once the European mind became used to the idea that the universe was endowed with an autonomous intelligibility, the challenge of demonstrating the complementary truth, namely that the universe does not have an *independent* intelligibility, became more difficult. During a four-hundred-year period, from approximately 1300 to 1680, the accepted biblical view of the cosmos and a newer view based on observation and experimentation had been slowly drifting apart. The shift in thinking that I am describing, then, is not merely a matter of applying critical norms to the biblical text. It is rather the adopting of a radically different view of the reality about which the Bible is speaking. For nearly two thousand years, the Western mind had looked at the material universe through the lens of biblical revelation and a certain use of Greek thought. The gaps and inconsistencies in this view had been noted, particularly since the early

³ The material in the following section makes use of a previous study, Francis Martin, “New Testament Teaching on the Imitation of Christ,” in *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word*, ed. Francis Martin (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 43–71.

⁴ Michael Buckley, “The Newtonian Settlement and the Origins of Atheism,” in *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, ed. R. Russell, W. Stoeger, and G. Coyne (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1988), 81–102, at 96; this article is a summary of his larger work, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988). I am indebted in this portion of my article to both of these studies by Buckley. It strikes me that the atheism of a thinker like Stephen Hawking results from this thoroughgoing conviction that questions that move beyond the realm of physics are simply nonquestions. See Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988).

fourteenth century, but it required nearly three hundred years of observation and experimentation to bring the data to a point of a "critical mass."

The story of the impact on European thought of Sir Isaac Newton's *Philosophiae Naturalis Mathematica Principia* is well known and often told.⁵ This was the first complete paradigm providing an alternative to the Aristotelian view of mechanics offered in nearly two millenia. Because it presented both celestial and earthly phenomena as instances of an overriding set of mathematical principles, it provided, for the first time, a vision of what it would be like to understand all reality in terms of a single complex of laws.⁶ Basically, such an ideal derives from a Christian view of creation, one which sees that the universe as made by God can yield an autonomous intelligibility that allows the material universe to be developed for the good of human flourishing but not, as I have said, an intelligibility that explains its origin. As Thomas Aquinas already observed, created things have activities and causalities proper to themselves, but this also implies that the ultimate understanding of the goal and use of this universe depends upon understanding its origin from God.

Thus began, with the later help of the Kantian view of what is knowable, a very different approach to Scripture. This was particularly apparent in regard to the events narrated in the Bible.

The basic biblical view of event, a view that extended at least into the Late Middle Ages, saw each event as endowed with an "aura," what Jean Lacroix called its "mystery" or "vertical dimension." The basis of this view was a grasp on the intrinsic relation of all created reality to God.⁷ In a world in which most natural phenomena remained unexplained, the "mysterious" or vertical dimension of reality seemed to be replicated on this level as well. As the former dimension of reality yielded its intelligibility, it was not a long step for some to conclude that, at least in principle,

⁵ For the purposes of this aspect of our reflections, the most useful studies are those of Michael Buckley that were mentioned in note 4. Also very useful is the study by Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1, *The Rise of Modern Paganism* (New York: Norton, 1966), and ch. 9 ("The Transition to the *Philosophie* Movement in the Reign of Louis XIV") in Herbert Butterfield's *The Origins of Modern Science, 1300–1800* (New York: The Free Press, 1957).

⁶ The foundationalism inspired by the Cartesian anxiety played a large part in framing this ideal, but it need not have done so. A good analysis of this "anxiety" is provided by Richard Bernstein in *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

⁷ Instructive in this regard are the remarks of Joseph Pieper in *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. J. Murray and D. O'Connor (New York: Pantheon, 1957), concerning the awareness of createdness implied in every judgment concerning the things of this world. See particularly pages 57–67.

there was no more mystery in the universe. Thus, we can trace a trajectory in the understanding of the events recounted by the Scriptures that parallels that of the understanding of the material universe: what is explained in terms of horizontal causality is sufficiently explained and derives nothing from being seen in relation to the Deity.

My contention is this: as the vertical dimension of the biblical view of events faded from consciousness, the very nature of the biblical narratives themselves was misunderstood. This progressive misunderstanding paralleled the movement of thought in the physical sciences and in history more generally, though this latter remained an underdeveloped discipline until a later period. The result in our own day is well described by Louis Dupré:

Religion has been allotted a specific field of consciousness ruled by methods of its own, but the final judgment on truth has been withdrawn from its jurisdiction and removed to the general domain of epistemic criteriology. . . . *Truth*, if still granted to religious affirmations, no longer springs from within faith but is extrinsically conveyed to faith.⁸

From about 1750 onward, Germany became the leader in the application of historical methods to the biblical text. The newness of this approach lay not so much in a critical investigation of the biblical text, a thing even in its modern form as old as the work of Richard Simon (1638–1712) and Jean Astruc (1684–1766), but rather in the particular view of the nature of history that served as the basis of the critique. Briefly put, this view is that history possesses an autonomous intelligibility similar to that of the physical sciences and that any understanding of historical events is to be achieved by studying them in their chronological and “causal” context.⁹

The most notable achievements of the nineteenth century are to be found in the perfecting of the historical-critical approach to the Scriptures rather than in any significant advance in philosophical and evaluative understanding of the background and basic principles governing the approach. The interpretation of the text is done according to the meth-

⁸ Louis Dupré, “Note on the Idea of Religious Truth in the Christian Tradition,” *The Thomist* 52 (1988): 499–512, at 509.

⁹ Giambattista Vico pointed out in 1725 the tendency of the history writing of his day to strive for the same type of exactitude as the physical sciences. His critique, however, which paved the way for Wilhelm Dilthey, is bound by the same fascination with horizontal causality and the exclusive search for autonomous intelligibility in the historical sciences. See Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Image Books, 1959), vol. 6, ch. 8, “Bossuet and Vico”; also, J. Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 16–17.

ods governing any text, but the exclusive concentration of this general hermeneutics ignores (rather than disproves) the biblical teaching of creation and the consequent view of all human activity as having a vertical dimension. Partial success in achieving an understanding of the intrinsic dimension of reality has obscured the biblical view of creation as lying open to the action of God, whose imprint can be discerned as analogously realized, the prime analogue being Jesus Christ, in whose individual humanity God is uniquely present in a way that completes and gives meaning to his presence within human history. I wish now to explicate the consequences of this in greater detail.

What Needs Correcting by a "Theological Interpretation"

The refusal to take up the biblical teaching on creation, and the consequent ignoring of divine activity within this world, together constitute the underlying principle in much exegesis. This was well articulated by Joseph Ratzinger, who in this passage is discussing the rise of form criticism:

In my opinion, however, we must go a step deeper in order to understand the basic systematic option that generated the individual categories of judgment that Dibelius and Bultmann relied upon. The real philosophical presupposition behind the whole enterprise seems to me to lie in the Kantian turn. According to Kant, man cannot perceive the voice of being in itself; he can hear it only indirectly, in the postulates of practical reason, which remain so to say as the last narrow slit through which contact with the really real, with his eternal destiny, can still reach him. For the rest, for what the activity of his reason can substantively grasp, man can go only so far as the categorical allows. . . . The debate about modern exegesis is not at its core a debate among historians, but among philosophers.¹⁰

Perhaps the single most misleading and often unrecognized presupposition of much historical study of the Bible is that there really is no transcendent cause operative in history. This was clearly articulated by the pantheist Baruch Spinoza, who maintained that the Bible must be approached like any other imaginative literature.¹¹ Emile Durkheim,

¹⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretations in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary of Exegesis Today," in *Opening Up the Scriptures*, ed. Jose Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–29, at 18–19.

¹¹ See David Laird Dungan, "Baruch Spinoza and the Political Agenda of Modern Historical-Critical Interpretation," in *A History of the Synoptic Problem: The Canon, the Text, the Composition, and the Interpretation of the Gospels* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 198–260. For an expres-

who saluted the atheistic, positivist position of Auguste Comte and who is one of the founders of the sociological method, went further and maintained that religious expressions in a culture were due to social causes, principally the immanent, often unconscious, energy of the group.¹² Durkheim, along with some others, mostly adherents of the religio-historical approach, created an environment in which Herman Gunkel, later one of Rudolf Bultmann's professors, participated. Gunkel's influence upon Bultmann is undoubted despite some later differences in their approach.¹³ Thus, there has been a notion, which, knowingly or unknowingly and often influenced by a particular understanding of society, presumed that the Gospels, for example, are the result of a progressive sociological process of transmission.¹⁴ Information about what Jesus did and said has passed through a grid of communal interpretation, which often prevents any certitude as to the actual agent of what is recounted. Though some Christian commentators maintained that one could prescind from the sociological laws developed by the religio-historical school, it is a fact that very little genuine theology came from this type of historical approach. A quite astute critic of this interpretive procedure and the presuppositions upon which it was based was Pierre Benoit, who in 1946 wrote:

By the 'Community' is meant the mass of earliest Christians taken all together as a social group, and an anonymous one. An unknown quantity, and a very convenient one, which is made to endorse everything.

For eyewitnesses are an embarrassment. They have lived through the events. We hesitate before attributing reports that are too untruthful to them. If others ascribe to Jesus deeds and words of which he is not the author, it is open to us to say that they do so without realizing that they

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the dilemma experienced by historians of the Jewish people when faced with a non-transcendent understanding of historical events see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982; reprint, 1996), especially the last chapter, "Modern Dilemmas."

¹² See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1915; reprint, New York: Free Press, 1965); *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John Mueller, ed. George E. G. Catlin (New York: Free Press: 1964).

¹³ See Martin J. Buss, *Biblical Form Criticism in Its Context* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 209–62; 294–306.

¹⁴ "In the same way the literary 'category' or 'form' through which a particular item is classified is a sociological concept and not an aesthetic one, however much it may be possible by its subsequent development to use such forms as aesthetic media in some particular literary product." Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the*

are deceived by popular rumour. But for eyewitnesses it is different. The only thing that remains is to eliminate them. And that is what these critics do.¹⁵

In the same vein, several authors have recently challenged the position of form criticism and its consequences on a more historical level by returning to consider the existence and role of eyewitnesses and oral tradition. Among these are James D. G. Dunn,¹⁶ Richard Bauckham,¹⁷ Paul Rhodes Eddy, and Gregory Boyd,¹⁸ and from another perspective Markus Bockmuehl.¹⁹ These factual studies illustrate the dictum that the best antidote to bad history is good history.

The Example of Rudolf Bultmann

Though most of this material is familiar to biblical scholars, it will be useful to reflect upon it once again, since the theological interpretation school represents a reaction against the consequences of an historical approach that relies on the philosophical outlook I have been describing.

The word "myth," used by Joseph Ratzinger in the citation adduced above, opens the way to a discussion of the foundation of much biblical interpretation in the recent past. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most philosophically oriented of the founders of New Testament form criticism, and thus indirectly of the other forms of "criticism" that have appeared, found himself challenged in the basic approach he took to the biblical material, and that on two counts. First, he considered the biblical texts, those of both Old and New Testaments, as "mythic" expressions of the (collective) unconscious that had to be transposed into another context. Second, that new context for Bultmann is a combination of

Synoptic Tradition, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 4.

¹⁵ Pierre Benoit, "Reflections on 'Formgeschichtliche Methode,'" in Benoit, *Jesus and the Gospel* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 35.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, "Altering the Default Setting: Re-Envisaging the Early Transmission of the Jesus Tradition," *New Testament Studies* 49 (2003): 139–75, which challenges the concentration on written material in approaching the Synoptic material, and *A New Perspective on Jesus: What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), which accents the role of oral tradition.

¹⁷ Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

¹⁸ Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

¹⁹ See Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), especially ch. 6, "Living Memory and Apostolic History."

Marburg Kantianism, radical Lutheran rejection of human “works” of any kind (also “Marburgian” in orientation), and Heideggerian existentialism.

In regard to the first of these components, one remark of Bultmann may suffice:

The historical method includes the presupposition that history is a unity in the sense of a closed continuum of effects in which individual events are connected by the succession of cause and effects. The continuum of historical happenings cannot be rent by the interference of supernatural, transcendent powers and that therefore there is no “miracle” in this sense of the word.²⁰

In regard to “works” (I am here dependent upon the study of Roger A. Johnson),²¹ Bultmann follows the thinking of his mentor, Wilhelm Hermann, whose position is described by Johnson as a modified Lutheranism: “[I]n faith man receives the fulfillment of his being, passively not actively, in *Erlebnis* not in the *Schaffen* of *Gestaltung*.”²² The contrast between experience and the “creation of a production” is, in Hermann’s estimation, the difference between faith and works. Bultmann expresses the same thought: “Real religion is available only in the moments of experience, and we alternate between believing thoughts and operational thoughts.”²³ This position seems to have had the curious effect of rendering Bultmann rather indifferent to his own thought-out proposals in exegesis and elsewhere. Finally, as described by some of his commentators, Bultmann’s relation to Heidegger seems to be eclectic.

I have taken some time to look at the foundations of the move from the genuine theological interpretation practiced by the Church to the domination of exegesis by many different approaches that, ultimately, do not yield an understanding of the sacred text itself. I have maintained that the primary factor that all these various methods have in common is a Kantian epistemology variously understood and practiced, and that this approach constitutes the thinking subject as the dominant factor in the act of knowledge: hence the broken covenant. As an example of this thinking I selected Rudolf Bultmann, both because of the sincerity of his desire to

²⁰ Rudolf Bultmann, “Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?” in *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, ed. Schubert Ogden (New York: Meridian Books, 1960), 291–92.

²¹ Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

²² *Ibid.*, 84.

²³ Rudolf Bultmann, “Religion and Culture,” in *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology*, ed. James Robinson (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1968), 205–20.

make the word of God intelligible to his contemporaries and because his approach embodies most of the influences that are still, though in different forms, operative in much modern exegesis. What protects Bultmann personally is his peculiar type of Lutheran piety regarding "faith" and "works" in the intellectual effort. However, most of the influences upon his thought are inimical to the Christian faith. Form criticism depends upon a view of community dynamics that is originally materialistic; it also maintains that the primacy of the thinking subject is Kantian, and it proposes the New Testament message concerning the meaning of life in terms of Heideggerian philosophy. Others who have followed these and similar lines of thought were often not graced with comparable intellectual endowments, nor had they as intense a faith.

Reactions against the three elements I have just outlined are: (1) A return to a deeper understanding of oral tradition within a more adequate understanding of the role of faith in the early Christian community. (2) A search for a more adequate understanding of cognition. (3) An acceptance of the Christian understanding of the meaning of life, history, and the afterlife. Such reactions provide an example of *fides quaerens intellectum*, but, at least in my opinion, they have yet to come to grips philosophically with the central issue of our day, namely the foundation of the relation between revelation and language.

Revelation and Language

This part of my essay will be a brief reflection on a statement found in *Dei Verbum* §2:

This economy of revelation is brought about by actions and words intrinsically connected with each other (*gestis verbisque intrinsice inter se connexis*) so that the works accomplished by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm both the teaching and the realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the works and bring to light the mystery contained in them. In this revelation the intimate truth about God and about human salvation shines forth for us in Christ who is at one and the same time the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.

It is significant that the means of realizing the "economy of revelation" is described in the above paragraph by beginning with divine "actions" (*gesta*), which are said to manifest and confirm what is mediated by words, while the words proclaim the works and bring to light their mystery. The *gesta* themselves are, therefore, made present to us by verbal *poiēsis* in narratives that, by the very nature of narrative, are interpretations, in this case faith interpretations. These *gesta*, mediated by narrative, are the authoritative basis

for all the other words in Scripture, since the narratives provide a revealed knowledge and interpretation of those foundational acts of God that constitute salvation history. From these acts the laws, the prayers, the prophecies, exhortations and warnings, and even the wisdom reflections derive their intelligibility and authority.

Hans Urs von Balthasar has accented the fact that the Old Testament account of the events in Israel's past is the creation of the Holy Spirit:

The gradual clothing of the events within the folds of Scripture is not only an inevitable drawback (because the people of the Orient of that time did not know, in fact, a historiography in the modern understanding of the term), but assuredly also this corresponds unqualifiedly to a positive intention of the Spirit.²⁴

An example of reading within the world mediated by Scripture is provided by the work of Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*.²⁵ In a subsequent article Sternberg responds to a critique of his interpretation of the narrative relating the rape of Dinah (Gn 34:1–31).²⁶ He remarks that the position of his critics “amounts to tearing the Dinah example out of the poetic system, the part out of the whole.”²⁷ He later on reiterates: “If anything, a reader unable or unwilling to postulate the articles of faith (from God down) will forfeit competence as a hopeless counter reader, where one unequal to narrative finesse may still belong to the lower limit [of reader competence].”²⁸

Sternberg's whole approach, that of poetics, presupposes that the text is a medium of communication operating within a system which it both requires and activates in becoming intelligible. His critics, on the other hand, isolate the text from the matrix of its faith vision of reality, and from its author, and treat it as an object to be transported into a foreign thought system and made to serve a particular agenda. For them, the Bible is a neutral object lying between two value systems and moral judgments. A reading from either context is equally “competent.” In such a situation,

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Il Senso Spirituale della Scrittura,” *Ricerche Teologiche* 5 (1994): 5–9, at 7.

²⁵ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

²⁶ The critique is found in Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Tipping the Balance: Sternberg's Reader and the Rape of Dinah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991): 193–211. The response is found in Meir Sternberg, “Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics: From Reading to Counter-Reading,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 463–88.

²⁷ Sternberg, “Biblical Poetics and Sexual Politics,” 465.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 469.

"the text comes to figure as a kind of glorified Rorschach ink blot on which to project one's ideology, among other forms of licensed desire."²⁹

If we return to the statement in *Dei Verbum* §2, we see that "words" have a twofold role: they mediate the actions of God and, through inspired reflection, "bring to light the mystery contained in them." The narrative portions of the Bible perform both these functions because they mediate the actions of God and others in narrative which is, as is all narrative, already an interpretation. The rest of the Scriptures perform other functions by which, though in another manner, the mystery contained in the narrated action is brought to light. This will be made clearer from a brief consideration of narrative itself.

The Components of Narrative

Narrative is a literary presentation of a completed action.³⁰ An action may be *stated* in a sentence or *described* in a paragraph. Only, however, when it is articulated in a plot, is it *imitated*. There are many types of literature: lyric poetry expresses an interior emotion, description presents some reality, but not as it moves through time, chronicle gives a list of happenings, but it does not link them to form a story. Only narrative presents the whole event with its "beginning, middle, and end" in a way that recaptures the flow of the event and enables us to appreciate it. Good narrative presents the actor not merely as agent but also as subject, as person.³¹

Consider this example. St. Catherine of Siena was a woman of deep prayer, who had a flaming love for God and for others, who combined firm chastity with deep compassion, and who was courageous in her commitments. I have just given you a description of St. Catherine of Siena. I might also write a lyric poem about this saint, mediating to you the depth of my own admiration for her and the qualities God gave her. I might even give a list of the principal events of her life in a way that illustrates what I have said in my description, that is, I might give you a chronicle of her life. Suppose, however, I tell you this story.

²⁹ Ibid., 470. This discussion of Sternberg is an abbreviated form of some pages in my *The Feminist Question: Feminist Theology in the Light of Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), ch. 7, "Foundational Hermeneutics."

³⁰ This material is adapted from Francis Martin, "Truth in Narrative," in *The International Bible Commentary*, ed. William Farmer (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 121–25.

³¹ An important discussion, but one that cannot occupy us here, is the specification of "the subject" of these divine actions. Clearly, many Fathers of the Church speak, for instance, of the visits of the Logos to the patriarchs and prophets without prejudice to the principle of the unity of the divine operations *ad extra*. See Gilles Emery, *Trinity in Aquinas* (Ypsilanti, MI: Sapientia Press, 2003), 171–75.

Catherine used to visit a young man who was in prison for murder. At first he mocked her efforts to speak to him of God's mercy, but then, won over by her repeated visits and her care for him, he listened and was reconciled to God. On the day of his execution, Catherine accompanied him through the streets to the place where he was to be decapitated. As he mounted the stage he was overcome with fear. Catherine helped him kneel down and then held his head against her breast, consoling and strengthening him in his desire to give up his life in reparation to God. She thus held him as he died.

Catherine's gesture somehow reaches you through the words of my story, my narrative, and you can see for yourself what kind of a person she was. In that gesture you come to a direct and intuitive knowledge of this human being who manifests herself by her action. In the words of the Council, her deed and my words are "intrinsically connected with each other" and combine to reveal something of what God had made of this saint. A better storyteller might have mediated this action in more telling words, but the same deed, perhaps in that case more vividly represented, would reach you and affect you. This is the heart of narrative: it is, to repeat, a literary presentation of a completed action. Let us now consider other aspects of narrative.

It should be remarked that there are four levels in a narrative. The first is the "event," the action itself; this may be made up by the author, taken from the culture, or formed by the author as a means of interpreting an actual event. In our example, the event is the action of St. Catherine in winning the young man over, his reconciliation with God, and Catherine's consoling and helping him at his death. On the *second* level, this event must be given shape, that is, its *plot* must be discerned and presented. The action had to be lifted out of the lives of both Catherine and the young man. The narrator, myself in this case, had to determine the beginning of the narrated event; its middle and end had to be grasped and then made the framework of the narrative. To do this well is the art of storytelling, as Aristotle observed long ago.

Thirdly, there is *poetics*,³² the more complex layer lying just below the surface of the narrative text. Poetics refers to the whole complex of images, allusions, resonances and associations, flow of thought and feeling created by the words. It is at this level that the narrative interprets the event in an important way. If *event* may be compared to a room, then *plot*

³² While this term most often refers to the study or the composition of a literary piece, I am using it here as that level which gives a certain "character" to the narrative. Poetics is to narrative what tone of voice is to an utterance.

is the architecture of the room and *poetics* is its furniture, and the fourth level, the actually existing text, is the totality of the room itself.

The understanding of layers in narrative is very important in making out what the inspired authors are doing when they recount an event. Every narrator is an interpreter, and those whom the Holy Spirit instructed and inspired are no exception. In fact, the ancients, who had a much more sophisticated understanding of this law of narrative than we with our mechanical view of history writing, took their responsibility very seriously. It is where we can understand the author's theological interpretation of the event.

First, about revelation itself. We have seen that it is accomplished through the action of God, making known and communicating both himself and knowledge of his plan of salvation.³³ This action is transmitted to us by words; it is honored in praise, described in moral exhortation, and re-presented in narrative. The real significance of this light of revelation can be appreciated only in the power of another light, namely, that of faith, which is itself an act of God within us to which we yield. It is in this sense that the medievals understood the psalm verse: "In your light [of faith], we see light [of revelation]" (Ps 36:10).

Next, narrative, because it presents an action, is particularly revelatory, and this is the quality that makes it the most prominent form of literature in the Bible. Recall how St. Catherine "revealed" herself through the action told of her, and what is made known of God through narrative—for instance, his activity in the life of David, and so many others whose stories are told in the Scriptures. The very thing that Aristotle thought was unimportant, that is, individual actions, turns out to be the most important aspect of life and history. Human beings, and even God himself, communicate themselves most perfectly through individual actions and events.

The most important thing we must bear in mind about the Gospel narratives is that, even if we agree to classify them as a variant of *Bios*,³⁴ they were not written to enshrine, promote, or defend the memory of a dead and revered master, but to put us in touch with the living Lord. Because he is risen from the dead, stories about Jesus are different from stories about any other person. It is true that God is present in the narratives of the Old Testament, which recount his action through the people and events of Israel's history. Such actions were an anticipated participation in the mystery of Christ. Now, however, the presence of God in Jesus Christ is unique; and the fact that Jesus is alive means that he is both present to history and beyond it. All that makes his history is now part of his

³³ *Dei Verbum*, §6.

³⁴ Paul Rhodes Eddy and Gregory A. Boyd, *The Jesus Legend*, ch. 8.

glorified existence. That is why the book of Revelation speaks of him even now as a Lamb who still bears the marks of having been slain (Rv 5:6).

Interpreting and Mediating the Gesta Dei

Theological interpretation begins, therefore, within the Bible itself, both in narrative, as we have seen, and in the rest of the original interpretive tradition found in the whole of the sacred text itself.³⁵ Underlying this approach to Scripture is the position that holds the sacred text to be the instrument of revelation. It is the means by which God imparts knowledge “manifesting and communicating both himself and the eternal decrees of his will concerning the salvation of humankind.”³⁶

In his memoirs, Joseph Ratzinger describes a fundamental insight that he derived from the study of St. Bonaventure: “Revelation now appeared no longer simply as a communication of truths to the intellect but as a *historical action of God* in which truth becomes gradually revealed.”³⁷ The acts of a person (even or especially when this “person” is God) are revelatory; they manifest the person, the subject who acts, and not merely the source of the act as agent. These acts, which are intrinsically historical, must be passed on in literature. That is, act becomes word; the word does not merely report the act, but contains and mediates it. This is the essence of narrative: act is transposed to the level of word and exists as word but always exceeds it. An understanding of tradition starts here:

[R]evelation is always a concept denoting an act. The word refers to the act in which God shows himself, not to the objectified result of this act. And because this is so, the receiving subject is always also a part of the concept of “revelation.” Where there is no one to perceive “revelation,” no re-*vel*-ation has occurred, because no veil has been removed. By definition, revelation requires a someone who apprehends it. . . . [I]f

³⁵ An important study in this regard is that by Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985). In this regard, too, the studies of Christopher Seitz are valuable. One might consult Christopher R. Seitz, *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009). It is quite possible that the authors of the Gospels were aware that they were writing Scripture and proceeded in the manner of their predecessors. See Francis Moloney, “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 67 (2005): 454–78; D. Moody Smith, “When Did the Gospels Become Scripture?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 3–20. One may consult as well the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

³⁶ *Dei Verbum*, §6.

³⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 104.

Bonaventure is right, then revelation precedes Scripture and becomes deposited in Scripture but it is not simply identical with it. This means that revelation is always something greater than what is merely written down.³⁸

Scripture as the Model for Theological Interpretation

The primary realities to be interpreted are the acts of God themselves, and, as mentioned previously, these are interpreted first of all in the Bible, through narration, and then through re-writing, liturgical action, song, poetry, and precept. The result is that many revelatory acts of God in history that are re-written or otherwise variously presented in Scripture itself appear to be "greater than what is merely written down," even though these acts continue to cause by impressing themselves on the spirit of the listeners/readers.³⁹ You may note that I am speaking of the acts themselves and not merely of the *text*. This assertion returns us to the "broken covenant between word and world" with which the essay began. It would require another essay to justify adequately the position that words are not *signs* of a reality but the reality itself in another mode of existence: they do not represent, they reveal. I will, however, outline some principles that develop the notion that words are more than signs. I will then show that the reality mediated by narrative can also be expressed in other forms of speech, basically what the medieval authors termed *sententiae*.⁴⁰ *Sententiae* are statements theological in nature that articulate the content and theological significance of what is transmitted in narrative (e.g. the historical psalms) or develop their theological implications or conclusions (e.g. St. Paul, etc.). I say this to point out that "theology," even as a discursive function, begins in Scripture. I will return to this.

³⁸ Ratzinger, *Milestones*, 108.

³⁹ Recent studies have shown that the copying of manuscripts at Qumran and the composing of targums and other translations such as the Septuagint and Peshitta continued this process of ongoing interpretation. Further, we need only consult the examples given above of variations in the account of the failure to enter the land or of the healing of Peter's mother-in-law to have examples of this process represented in the sacred text itself. For examples of how a text's presentation can produce many different impressions in the life of the people, one may consider the career of some of the events told in the early chapters of Genesis. See Gary A. Anderson, *The Genesis of Perfection: Adam and Eve in Jewish and Christian Imagination* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). In another vein: Olivier-Thomas Venard, "'La Bible en ses traditions.' The New Project of the École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem Presented as a 'Fourth Generation' Enterprise," *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 142–58.

⁴⁰ I refer the reader to Gilbert Dahan, *L'exégèse Chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiévale XII–XIV siècle* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 284–96.

Repairing the Covenant

At its origin, the breaking of the covenant between word and world was made possible by the progressive ignoring or denying of the fact of creation. In a remarkable passage, obviously indebted to Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise on the divine names, Aquinas moves from the observation of the "generosity" of all beings to an understanding of the generosity of their Source. Note how this vision of reality follows upon the biblical teaching that God's act of creation is totally free and adds nothing to God:

For natural things have a natural inclination not only toward their own proper good, to acquire it, if not possessed, and if possessed, to rest therein; but also to diffuse their own goodness among others as far as possible. . . . Hence if natural things, insofar as they are perfect, communicate their goodness to others, much more does it pertain to the divine will to communicate by likeness its own goodness to others as far as possible.⁴¹

From the side of created realities, we may conclude from what Aquinas says elsewhere that they have the capacity to manifest themselves and thus play an active role in being known: "From the very fact that something exists in act, it is active."⁴² Building upon his own understanding of the Platonic principle that "good is diffusive of itself," St. Thomas reasons that, since the act of existence is the foundation of all other perfections, indeed "the actuality of all acts and the perfection of all perfections,"⁴³ the diffusiveness of the good is rooted in the existence of a being; and it is thus that whatever exists manifests itself in the act of its existing.⁴⁴ Disclosure, therefore, involves both the created reality manifesting itself in and through the act of its existence, and the creative receptivity of the mind that receives the act of the reality and gives it intelligibility, transposing it

⁴¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 19, a. 2. All quotations of St. Thomas in this section are from the translation of Norris Clarke, "Person, Being, and St. Thomas," *Communio* 19 (1992): 601–18.

⁴² Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, 1, 43.

⁴³ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 9. Translation is from W. Norris Clarke, "Action as the Self-Revelation of Being: A Central Theme in the Thought of St. Thomas," in his *Explorations in Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1994), 45–63.

⁴⁴ Later in the same essay (page 63, note 11) Clarke cites Karl Rahner: "Our first statement, which we put forward as the basic principle of an ontology of symbolism, is as follows: all beings are by their very nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature." See Karl Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), 221–52.

to the level of the knower. This energy, the capacity to receive and transpose, is what the ancient thinkers meant by the light of the mind. Aquinas says of this interior light of reason that it is itself a "certain participation in divine light" (*ST I*, q. 12, a. 11, ad 3); it is, in fact, "nothing else but the imprint of the divine light in us" (*ST I-II*, q. 91, a. 2). He also says that the intensification and elevation of this light, which is the heart of *sacra doctrina*, the reception and transmission of prophetic knowledge, is also "a certain imprint of the divine knowledge" (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 3, ad 2).⁴⁵

Thus, to become aware once again of the unbreakable covenant between word and world we should reflect on the fact that the very act of existing is a communicable perfection that is bestowed on the knower by what is known who then can give it another level of existence by a word. This understanding of the manner in which all entities can imitate God shows the universe to be a place characterized by relation: "Communication follows upon the very intelligibility (*ratio*) of actuality. Hence every form is of itself communicable."⁴⁶ The original truth, the union between the mind and what is known, is possible only because what is known is first received from the object's self-communication and then "imitated" by the mind. To imitate is to transpose a reality to another plane of existence. If, in response to a request that I imitate the chair in my room, I make another chair, I have not imitated, I have reproduced. To imitate the chair I must transpose it to the level of word, or line and color, or some other mode of being. Thus, in the act of knowledge, the energy by which being is imitated derives both from the dynamism of the substance in relation and from that particular way in which I, as a knower, share in the dynamic light of God, a light which, as we have seen, even apart from faith, St. Thomas does not hesitate to call "a certain imprint of the divine light in us."

The Verbum Interius and Language

In this very brief section, I wish merely to point to the other dimension of restoring the broken covenant, namely, the act of the knower in expressing, interiorly and exteriorly, what is known. A reinstatement of an understanding of the act of knowledge is as important as the rectification of historical investigation. The act of knowing is the echo of the

⁴⁵ For a development of this notion, one could consult Francis Martin, "Sacra Doctrina and the Authority of Its Sacra Scriptura in St. Thomas Aquinas," *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 84–102; reprinted in Martin, *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2006), 1–20.

⁴⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *In 1 Sent.*, d. 4, q. 1, a. 1.

activity by which the known imparts itself, an activity which, as we have seen, is also understood only in the light of creation.⁴⁷

Attracted perhaps by the Stoic overtones of the word *Logos* in John's Prologue, some of the early Fathers began to make a comparison between our interior word become exterior and that of the Word of the Father. Justin Martyr is an example.⁴⁸ Athanasius opposed this comparison as dangerous and heretical: "Whosoever calls the Son of God the mental or pronounced Word, be he anathema."⁴⁹ Despite the drawbacks of his Platonic gnoseology, Augustine, by observing his own mind in the act of knowing, was able to cut between the Stoic articulation of the *verbum prolatum* and the *verbum insitum*, just referred to by Athanasius, to discern a *verbum intus prolatum*. Aquinas was faced with the task of freeing this crucial insight from Augustine's Platonic understanding of the act of knowing and completing it through an Aristotelian cognitional theory. The key difference lies in the fact that for the Augustinian–Platonic view knowledge lies in vision, while in the Thomistic–Aristotelian understanding, knowledge takes place through identity: *intellectus in actu est intellectum in actu* (among several places, *ST* I, q. 87, a. 1, ad 3).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ In developing this necessarily schematic section I have been helped by four authors: Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 286–303. Olivier–Thomas Venard, *Littérature et théologie. Une saison en Enfer*, Thomas d'Aquin poète théologien I (Geneva: Ad Solem, 2002), 373–96; idem, *La langue de l'ineffable. Essai sur le fondement théologique de la métaphysique*, Thomas d'Aquin poète théologien II (Geneva: Ad Solem, 2004), 344–406; idem, *Pagina Sacra* (Paris: Cerf/Ad Solem, 2009), 789–852. Antoine Guggenheim, *Jésus Christ. Grand Prêtre de l'Ancien et de la Nouvelle Alliance. Étude de commentaire de Saint Thomas d'Aquin sur l'épître aux Hébreux* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2004), 681–724. Bernard Lonergan, *Verbum: Word and Idea in Aquinas*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, vol. 2, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998). Also Harm Goris, "Theology and Theory of the Word in Aquinas: Understanding Augustine by Innovating Aristotle," in *Aquinas the Augustinian*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 62–78.

⁴⁸ "For He can be called by all those names, since He ministers to the Father's will, and since He was begotten of the Father by an act of will; just as we see happening among ourselves: for when we give out some word, we beget the word; yet not by abscission, so as to lessen the word [which remains] in us, when we give it out: and just as we see also happening in the case of a fire, which is not lessened when it has kindled [another], but remains the same." St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 227.

⁴⁹ Athanasius, *De Synodis* 27, 8. For some remarks regarding Athanasius's position see Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 1.

⁵⁰ I am indebted here to the study by Lonergan, *Verbum*, especially 6–9 and 84–85, and in a particular way to Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person*, ch. 18.

In order to be brief, I will present here the sequence of acts involved in human understanding as described by Harm Goris, who says that the sequence is logical, not chronological.⁵¹

1. First, the agent intellect abstracts the potentially intelligible species from the material conditions it has in the phantasmata (I would add that these can be present as part of the living tradition, the Scriptures, a lecture, etc.).
2. Next, the potential intellect receives the abstracted, actually intelligible species, is informed and brought into act by it.
3. Then the intellect in act brings forth an *intentio*.

Finally, then, a view of the work left to be done in re-entering the world of the Word. As the timid beginnings of canonical criticism are discovering, the entire Bible is a word composed by the Holy Spirit. This word creates its world in the life and worship of God's people and that world is reciprocally the primary interpretive context for understanding the word. In such a world there is not only the intelligible relation of *verbum* to *res*, but also the relation of *res* to *res*—itself the foundation of the spiritual sense. To quote one of Aquinas's preferred texts from Gregory the Great's *Moralia*: "Sacred Scripture, in its very manner of speaking, is above all other sciences and teachings because in one and the same word, while it narrates an event, it sets forth a mystery." ("Sacra Scriptura omnes scientias atque doctrinas ipso etiam locutionis suae more transcendit, quia uno eodemque sermone dum narrat gestum, prodit mysterium.")⁵² Aquinas then develops this point:

The spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture is derived from the fact that realities, playing out their own actions (*cursum suum peragentes*) signify something else and that something is arrived at through a spiritual understanding (*sensus*). . . . Only in this Scripture whose author is the Holy Spirit and a human being is the instrument (can there be found a spiritual sense) as it says in Psalm 44 (45):2, "My tongue is that of a quickly writing scribe." (*Quodlibetum* 7, 2.6, a. 3)

To ignore this dimension of the biblical text is to cut oneself off from the very basis upon which the whole text moves. It suffices to read the work of Michael Fishbane mentioned earlier (in note 35) to understand that the Scriptures mirror and interpret an interconnected world. This is the foundation for all the Exodus terminology that Paul uses in mediating

⁵¹ Goris, "Theology and Theory of the Word in Aquinas," 75.

⁵² Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 20, 1 (PL 76, 135).

an understanding of Christ's Passion and for the fact that the whole of the New Testament constantly alludes to the Old Testament. It is because God is the creator of history, the effector of Redemption and the ultimate author of Scripture that there is a spiritual sense.⁵³

Toward the end of his essay Professor Bockmuehl describes the environment and challenges of his "day job" and reflects on whether or not there is a danger of a decidedly in-house tendency in the theological interpretation school that would impede fruitful dialogue with those who either do not accept this approach or do not share the Christian faith. I agree that there is such a danger, though I think some distinctions may help clarify the issue.

First, regarding historical study. At this level, the basis for dialogue with anyone who is striving for good history is to overcome bad history, as was discussed above. Often, however, the differences may occur because of a basic divergence in the underlying philosophical presupposition, and this moves the discussion to another plane. Much of my own study here dealt with the philosophical presupposition underlying many historical conclusions in the field of biblical studies. This work must precede any discussion that attempts to reach agreement on historical issues. Thomas Aquinas articulated long ago how one may proceed in the search for a starting point with non-believers, and his principles are applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, when applied to the philosophical underpinning of much historical study.

Now just as sacred doctrine is based on the light of faith, so philosophy is based on the natural light of reason. So it is impossible that the contents of philosophy should be contrary to the contents of faith, but they fall short of them. The former, however, bear certain likenesses to the latter and also contain certain preambles to them, just as nature itself is a preamble to grace. If anything, however, is found in the sayings of the philosophers contrary to faith, this is not philosophy but rather an abuse of philosophy arising from faulty reasoning.⁵⁴

There is a further function of philosophy, namely that of making the mysteries of faith more intelligible. As I pointed out earlier, the first step in this can be found in the articulation of statements or *sententiae* already

⁵³ For a more protracted treatment of this theme one may consult my article "Spiritual Sense" in the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, general editor (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 769–72.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, q. 2, a. 3, reply, in Aquinas, *Faith, Reason and Theology*, trans. Armand Maurer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1987), 48–49.

in the Bible. The medieval abuse of this function, still not absent from either Catholic or Protestant theology, often produced a domination of revelation by the mind's natural functioning without the aid of the light of faith. Omitting here a discussion of Karl Barth's problems with analogy, we must still consider the masterpieces of biblical interpretation. I think especially of the elaboration of statements (*sententiae*) done with the help of philosophy by so many of the Fathers of the Church. Among other protective formulations of the Mystery achieved by our Fathers in the faith through the use of philosophy, we may point to the term *homoousios* as of immense importance.

I wish to elaborate this point slightly in order to advance somewhat the remarks of Bockmuehl about the need to overcome the notion that theology as often practiced today is somehow an independent discipline, a notion completely foreign to the Fathers of the Church. Thus, in trying to describe the process by which the person moves to different levels of self-transcendence, Bernard Lonergan avails himself of the notion of "sublation," a concept that had been developed by Karl Rahner in attempting to articulate the role of philosophy in theology. I give Lonergan's description as being particularly clear:

What sublates [revelation] goes beyond what is sublated [philosophy], introduces something new and distinct, yet so far from interfering with the sublated or destroying it, on the contrary needs it, includes it, preserves all its proper features and properties, and carries them forward to a fuller realization within a richer context."⁵⁵

In a more picturesque manner, Aquinas once remarked: "[T]hose who use the work of the philosophers in sacred doctrine, by bringing them into the service of faith, do not mix water with wine, but rather change water into wine."⁵⁶ When once this insight is understood, there should result a much greater clarity in regard to two aspects of the interpretation of the Scriptures. First, the role of historical investigation can find its proper place as a subordinate discipline. Second, the irreplaceable role of personal faith and knowledge of tradition will once more be recognized as essential components in a hermeneutical method. "Faith" is not a norm elaborated by Church documents, it is a light given to the believer by God. This is certainly the approach of the Fathers of the Church to whom Professor Bockmuehl makes reference in the second of his

⁵⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 241.

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Commentary on the De Trinitate of Boethius*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5, in *Faith, Reason and Theology*, 50.

remarks I quoted above and to which I wish to address a few lines by way of conclusion.

A Conversation with Our Predecessors

I begin with these two remarks by Yves Congar, who is speaking of the attitude and practice of the Fathers of the Church:

The divine Scriptures are regarded as a kind of sacrament: a grace-bearing sign that effectively realizes communion with God, and salvation, when it is used in the right conditions. These conditions are obviously spiritual: humility, purity of heart, a true desire to seek God and a strong love of the Gospel. . . . The Scriptures do not surrender their meaning by the bare text; they surrender it to a mind that is living, and living in the conditions of the Covenant. . . . [I]n a certain way, Scripture possesses its meaning outside itself. In the categories of the Scholastic analysis of the sacraments, it would be termed the fruit of Scripture, its *res* (the spiritual reality resulting from the sacrament).

• • •

Before being a critical reference or an argument, the sacred Text is a sort of sacrament conveying the Gospel so that we may live by it. The Fathers say that it is a means of grace and not only of information and knowledge. . . . The text as such is not the living Word of God, but only its sacrament (or sign). The decisive thing is the *act* accomplished by God and its actual operation within us.⁵⁷ Let all sound of words cease, cease too all visual reading of printed characters on a page, and let God bring about the communion and presence, spiritual realities of which the former are but the envelope and means! The Bible is no more the reality of the religious relationship than is the Church: both of them are no more than its setting and means of transmission. All happens, finally, in the relationship between two living subjects: the Living God and the human heart. . . . Jesus himself wrote nothing; he did not give his apostles the mission to leave writings, but to preach. They were to preach and to transmit the message and reality of the Gospel.⁵⁸

That this understanding of the sacramental dimension of Scripture, its reality as more than a human word, was not restricted to the earliest centuries is clear from the statements of the medieval saints and mystics. St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, commenting on 2 Timothy 3:16, asks why only the Scriptures should be considered divinely inspired since, according to Ambrose, “anything true, by no matter whom said, is from

⁵⁷ Recall the similar remarks of Ratzinger quoted previously.

⁵⁸ Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. A. N. Woodrow (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1964; reprint, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 90–91 and 102.

the Holy Spirit." His response is that God works in two ways, one that is immediate and this pertains to him alone; such is the case with miracles. The other manner is mediate, that is, through the mediation of lesser causes, as is the case with natural operations. He then says: "And thus in man God instructs the intellect both immediately through the sacred letters and mediately through other writings."⁵⁹ This is not a chance expression. St. Thomas often attributes a unique causality (*auctoritas*) to Scripture. In commenting on Pseudo-Dionysius's treatise *On the Divine Names*, he says:

Dionysius, in his teaching (*doctrina*) depends upon (*innititur*) the authority of Sacred Scripture which has strength and power (*roborem habet et virtutem*) because the Apostles and Prophets were moved to speak by the Holy Spirit who was revealing to them and speaking in them.⁶⁰

Again, when commenting on Hebrews 5:12–14, where the audience is told that they need someone to teach them again the "oracles" (*logiōn/sermonum*) of God, and that they need milk, not solid food, Aquinas says:

For *sacra doctrina* is food and drink because it nourishes (*potat*) and satisfies the soul. The other sciences enlighten only the mind; this one, however, enlightens the soul. . . . This is a characteristic of the teaching of Sacred Scripture (*doctrina sacrae Scripturae*), that in it not only speculative things are handed on, but also those that are to be practiced through activity (*approbanda per affectum*).⁶¹

Finally, in commenting on Ephesians 6:13–17, Aquinas remarks:

In the third place are weapons for attacking. For not only must one defend oneself but it is also necessary to attack the enemy. Just as in bodily warfare this is accomplished by a sword so also is this accomplished by the word of God which is, spiritually, the sword of the Spirit which you must take up. As it says in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing through to the division between soul and spirit, joints and marrow; discerning the purposes and thoughts of the heart." Thus preaching is called the sword of the Spirit because it cannot reach the human spirit unless it be wielded by the Holy Spirit: "It will not be you speaking but the Spirit of your Father who is speaking in you" (Matt 10:20) . . . Thus we have weapons for fighting the demons themselves, namely the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. This happens frequently

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *In 2 Tim 3*, lect. 3.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *De Divinis Nominibus*, ch. 1, lect. 1.

⁶¹ Aquinas, *On Hebrews*, ch. 5, lect. 2.

in sermons in which the word of God, penetrating the hearts of sinners, drives out the tangled mass of sins and demons.⁶²

Professor Bockmuehl challenged us to take a closer look at a very important “movement” in modern Christian biblical studies. He began by rightly rejecting the notion that “the Bible and doctrine, like history and revelation, can have no formal connection.” He then points out that the alternative to this notion “emerges among those who insist *au contraire* that there is, or at least there *ought* to be, some sort of relationship between Bible and Christian doctrine, however imbalanced that may turn out in practice.”

I have tried to support his position by looking more deeply at the “broken covenant between word and world” that characterizes so much of modern Western thinking and has as its symptom the caesura pointed out by Bockmuehl. The roots of this split lie in the fact that there is little understanding of the truth that, once the notion of creation is lost, words become merely human creations given meaning by human willing. They are no longer expressions of a participation in the generosity of God made tangible to us in creation itself and discovered to possess a new splendor in the economy of the Incarnation. The broken covenant between word and world is a consequence of a deeper infidelity to another covenant: that between the Word and his creatures. Our very thinking is an imitative participation in the creativity of the Word:

The “light of men” can also be taken as a light in which we participate. For we would never be able to look upon the Word and light itself except through a participation in it; and this participation is in man and is the superior part of our soul about which the Psalm (4:7) says: “The light of your face, O Lord is marked upon us,” that is, of your Son who is your face, by whom you are made known.”⁶³

Further, I have tried to look more deeply at the “broken covenant between word and world” that characterizes so much of modern Western thinking. The roots of this split lie in our lack of understanding of the truth that, once the fact of creation becomes inoperative in our thinking, words become merely human artifacts given meaning by human willing. They are no longer expressions of a participation in the generosity of God, the generosity made tangible to us in creation itself and discovered

⁶² Aquinas, *On Ephesians*, ch. 6, lect. 4.

⁶³ Aquinas, on John 1:3. Translation adapted from Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980).

to possess a new splendor in the economy of the Incarnation. The broken covenant between word and world is a consequence of a deeper infidelity to another covenant: that between the Word and his creatures.

Though there be many participated truths, there is but one absolute Truth which by its own essence is Truth, namely the Divine Being itself, by which Truth all words are words. In the same way there is one absolute Wisdom, raised above all, namely the Divine Wisdom by participation in whom all wise men are wise. And in the same way the absolute Word by participation in whom all who have a word are said to be speaking. This is the Divine Word, which in Himself is the Word raised above all.⁶⁴

To use the light of our reason to prove that the source of this light does not exist is to insure our own blindness. That is why I suggest that the integration for which Markus Bockmuehl is searching (as indeed are all of us) must begin with a recovery of the realization of creation and transcendence.

But there is one more step in this process, one made urgent by our need to learn from "two millennia of engagement with the text." We must experience what the Fathers spoke of as the "visit of the Word." Basing himself on Augustine, Aquinas describes the ultimate formation of a word within: it is the action of the Holy Spirit in the full functioning of the gift of wisdom. It is in this action that the covenant is once again sealed. The discussion is found in the *Summa theologiae* I, question 43, which treats of the missions of the divine Persons, that is, their new presence to us as promised in Jesus' farewell message in John 14–16.⁶⁵ Article 5 of that question is concerned with: "Whether both the Son and the Spirit are sent?" It is built on the response to an objection found in the preceding question (*ST* I, q. 42, a. 5, ad 2): "The move (*exitus*) of the Son from the Father is by way of an interior procession as when a word (the *verbum interius* already discussed) (both) goes out from the heart and remains in it."

In the following question, Aquinas must respond to an objection that gifts perfecting the intellect belong to the level of charism, and they can be

⁶⁴ Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, ch. 1, lect. 33.

⁶⁵ For instance: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments; and I will ask the Father, and he will give another Paraclete to you, that he might be with you forever; the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive because it does not see him nor know him; you know him because he abides with you; and he will be in you" (Jn 14:15–17). Again, "If anyone love me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and we will make our abode with him" (Jn 14:23).

present without sanctifying grace. The Son, however, proceeds as the word of the intellect, and therefore “it seems unfitting for Him to be sent invisibly.” I wish to present Aquinas’s answer in full, because it sets forth for us the “world” the Word wishes to create in, and among us, and in the power of whom we can promote a genuine theological interpretation movement.

Grace renders man conformable to God. When one of the divine Persons has been sent to the soul by grace, it is necessary that the soul be conformed or assimilated to that Person through some gift of grace. Now the Holy Spirit is Love: it is therefore *the gift of charity that assimilates the soul to the Holy Spirit*, because it is in terms of charity that we speak of the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Son, for his part, is the Word—and not just any word, but one breathing forth Love (*spirans amorem*): “The Word that we try to make known, says Augustine, is a complete understanding of love” (*De Trin.* IX 10:15). The Son is not sent for just any perfecting of the intellect, but only where the intellect is instructed in such a way that it bursts forth in an affection of love (*prorumpat in affectum amoris*) as is written in the Gospel of John (6:45): “Whoever has heard from the Father and learned, comes to me,” and in Psalm 38:4, “In my meditation a fire will be enkindled.” And therefore Augustine worthily says: “The Son is sent when he is known and perceived” (*De Trin.* IV 20:28): the word *perception* means a *certain experiential knowledge*. This is, properly speaking, “wisdom” (*sapientia*) or “savory knowledge” (*sapida scientia*) according to the words of Sirach (6:23), “the wisdom of the teaching justifies its name.”⁶⁶

The wisdom of a theological interpretation will be vindicated by what it produces (Mt 11:19; Lk 11:49). N V

⁶⁶ ST I, q. 43, a. 5, ad 2; cited in Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 2, *Spiritual Master*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 91–92, translation slightly modified.