

Word and Event: A Reappraisal

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IN JANUARY 1982, six years before Cardinal Ratzinger delivered his Erasmus Lecture, I took a seat in Francis Martin's classroom for the first time. Francis's courses introduced me to a fascinating and inspiring world of biblical scholarship, serious exegesis in a genuinely theological mode. The Old and New Testaments were shown to be mutually illuminating. Origen and Aquinas were quoted alongside Gerhard von Rad and Emile Boismard. And a painstaking analysis of the biblical text beautifully disclosed the mystery of redemption in a way that directly nourished my prayer life. Years before I became aware of a crisis in biblical interpretation, I was exposed to the remedy. The following essay is dedicated to Francis Martin as a token of gratitude and affection.

For those who recognize much of real worth in modern biblical scholarship but at the same time find deeply problematic presuppositions at work within it, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's Erasmus Lecture of 1988 has been a guiding light for the last quarter century. At the heart of the Erasmus Lecture is the call for a new hermeneutical synthesis. The future pontiff describes this as a project in two stages. First there must be a self-critique of the historical-critical method and its philosophical foundations, and then there is "the positive task" of joining the tools of the historical-critical method to "a better philosophy," one that "contains fewer *a priori* foreign to the [biblical] text" and "offers more resources

for a real listening to the text.”¹ Ratzinger, moreover, closely correlates the “exegetical problem” to modernity’s broader “dispute over foundations.” The search for a new synthesis, as Ratzinger conceives it, must take modernity and modern questions as its starting point but must not confine itself to the philosophically “restricted horizon” of modern thought. Patristic exegesis and medieval philosophy in particular will play important roles in broadening our horizon beyond that of the positivistic worldview of modernity.² That is why Ratzinger also envisions the new synthesis as a sort of rapprochement between the patristic-medieval approach to Scripture and modern approaches.³

The last portion of the Erasmus Lecture is devoted to “Basic Elements of a New Synthesis.” Ratzinger offers nothing systematic or comprehensive here but attempts “merely to cut a few initial openings in the thicket.”⁴ Among these basic elements he gives considerable attention to the need for a fresh appraisal of “the relationship between event and word.” Ratzinger maintains that “the mainstream of modern exegesis” operates with a badly truncated notion of event, according to which

the event represents irrationality; it belongs to the domain of pure facticity, which is composed of chance and necessity. For this reason, fact as such cannot be the bearer of meaning. The meaning lies only in the word.⁵

This “dualism between word and event” not only “banishes the event into the realm of the word-less” and the meaningless, it “actually robs the word itself of its capacity to mediate sense, because the word then

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary of Exegesis Today,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sanchez-Navarro, Ressourcement (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 20.

² *Ibid.*, 19.

³ See Paul T. Stallsworth, “The Story of an Encounter,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 107–8. For a concrete example of how such a rapprochement might work, see Gregory Vall, “Psalm 22: *Vox Christi* or Israelite Temple Liturgy?” *The Thomist* 66 (2002): 175–200.

⁴ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

stands in a world from which all sense has been stripped.” Ultimately this dualism “cuts the biblical Word off from creation and undoes the coherence of sense between the Old and New Testaments in favor of a principle of discontinuity.”⁶

According to Ratzinger, this problem is at root philosophical, and its solution must be both philosophical and theological. Modern exegesis regards events as *bruta facta* because it holds as an unquestioned presupposition “the methodological principle used in natural science, that everything that occurs can be explained causally, on the basis of purely immanent functional connections.”⁷ Over against this view, which reduces intelligibility to the realm of efficient causality, Ratzinger recommends the teleological philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, according to which all things in creation “follow a certain course, that is, a movement toward a goal.” Only teleology can safeguard the biblical notion of the unity of creation and history under the aegis of a divine economy. In Scripture “God’s action thus appears as the principle of the intelligibility of history,” and all history, past, present, and future, finds its unity in the person and event of Jesus Christ. In Christ, the Word Incarnate, we see the most profound and perfect unity of word and event, and we come to recognize that “the event itself can be a ‘word.’”⁸

Ratzinger’s observations on word and event are profound and of great importance, but they need to be spelled out in a more systematic and thorough manner. Anyone who has made a serious attempt to bring modern biblical scholarship to the service of theological work carried out under the authority of the rule of faith will already have some awareness of the problem to which Ratzinger refers here and will appreciate what is at stake. For the sake of clarity, however, I begin with an example of how the dualism of word and event manifests itself in modern biblical scholarship. In the remainder of the essay I then attempt to sketch out, rather more fully than the Erasmus Lecture does, Scripture’s own theological vision of the unity of word and event. I consider creation and

⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *God’s Word: Scripture—Tradition—Office*, ed. Peter Hünermann and Thomas Söding, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 119.

⁸ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 24.

the *Imago Dei*; language and truth; God's word in human events; time, narrative, and history; and the Christ event and the Gospels.

The Dualism of Word and Event: An Example

After a brief preface, Vatican II's 1965 Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, turns almost immediately to the unity of word and event in the divine economy.

This economy of revelation is realized in deeds and words intrinsically interconnected (*gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis*), such that the works accomplished by God in the history of salvation manifest and corroborate the teaching and realities signified by the words, while, conversely, the words proclaim the deeds and illuminate the mystery contained in them.⁹

The complementarity between deeds and words of which this text speaks is evident throughout Scripture. For example, the wonders by which Yahweh wrought Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt lead directly to and are completed by the revelation of the law at Sinai. Again, the great chastisement of the exile both fulfills and is explained by the words of the prophets. Employing poetic parallelism, the psalmist confesses: "Yahweh is faithful in all his words, and loyal in all his deeds" (Ps 145:13).¹⁰ Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus's public ministry is comprised of mutually illuminating works of power and words of instruction, and each of the evangelists draws attention to this fact in his own way. Matthew, for example, dovetails narrative units with large blocks of the Lord's teaching in an architectonic fashion.¹¹ John, for his part, presents Jesus's miracles as "signs"—that is, inherently significant deeds—and typically couples a sign narrative with a discourse or dia-

⁹ *Dei Verbum* §2. "Haec revelationis oeconomia fit gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis, ita ut opera, in historia salutis a Deo patrata, doctrinam et res verbis significatas manifestent ac corroborent, verba autem opera proclamant et mysterium in eis contentum elucident." (My translation.)

¹⁰ The translations of Scripture throughout this essay are my own.

¹¹ See John P. Meier, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Matthew, Gospel of," 4:628–29; and the chart in Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 172.

logue that draws out the given sign's significance.¹²

In his 1967 commentary on *Dei Verbum*, Ratzinger suggests that in drafting the passage quoted above the fathers of Vatican II "were merely concerned with overcoming neo-scholastic intellectualism, for which revelation chiefly meant a store of mysterious supernatural teaching . . . in order to express again the character of revelation as a totality, in which word and event make up one whole."¹³ Whether it was intentional or not, however, the conciliar statement also guards against the opposite error, namely, that which would privilege events over words in the economy of redemption in order to play down the propositional content of revelation and the intellectual dimension of the act of faith, perhaps also in order to pit the intuitive, imagistic, and poetic elements in Hebraic thought against Greek rationality to the detriment of the latter.

In February of 1964, while the antepenultimate draft ("Form E") of what was to be called *Dei Verbum* was being prepared in Rome for consideration at the third session of the Council later that year, the Scottish biblical scholar James Barr was delivering his Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Texas. With characteristic "prosecutorial zeal," Barr undertook to dismantle the allegedly biblical concept of "revelation through God's acts in history," complaining that it had gained a status of unquestioned normativity in the "biblical theology" movement, which was then at the zenith of its popularity.¹⁴ Barr rightly points out that any attempt to locate revelation in God's historical

¹² As Robert Kysar notes, John combines narrative and discourse in a variety of ways, and he sometimes allows a sign to stand on its own and speak for itself. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "John, The Gospel of," 3:916. For an in-depth discussion of "the concept of 'sign' in Johannine theology," see Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to John*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Chapters 1–4*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 515–28.

¹³ Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 172. (Original German edition published 1967.) Ratzinger coauthored the commentary on *Dei Verbum* with Alois Grillmeier and Bédarix Rigaux, but he is solely responsible for the passage in question.

¹⁴ James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation: A Study of the Two Testaments* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), esp. 65–102, "The Concepts of History and Revelation." Cf. David Penchansky, *Historical Handbook of Major Biblical Interpreters*, s.v. "Barr, James," 423–27 (Penchansky's admiring reference to Barr's "prosecutorial zeal" is on p. 423). Barr had already presented a devastating critique of the exaggerated contrast between "Hebrew thought" and "Greek thought" in his first major work, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM Press, 1983 [1961]).

acts while dissociating it from verbal communication flies in the face of the biblical evidence. Referencing the many Old Testament passages in which Yahweh is said to have spoken to Moses and the prophets, as well as the words by which Israelite tradition itself was transmitted, Barr observes that “it is entirely as true to say that in the Old Testament revelation is by verbal communication as to say that it is by acts in history.”¹⁵ Thus on a certain level, the level of the content of Scripture itself, Barr too seems to affirm the inseparability of word and event.

To this point we have dealt with the relationship between word and event as these are found *within* Scripture. In specifying the locus and content of revelation, the neo-scholastics, whom Ratzinger identifies as the primary targets of *Dei Verbum*’s formulation about “deeds and words intrinsically interconnected,” give the words of the prophets and the teaching of Jesus and the apostles a certain priority over the events of the historical economy as such.¹⁶ But this is, at least in principle, a matter of privileging one part of the biblical record over another. Even if neo-scholasticism expresses the content of revelation in the postbiblical language of dogmatic propositions, these propositions are assumed to be accurate “translations” of what Scripture itself teaches. Conversely, the proponents of “biblical theology,” against whom Barr polemicizes, privilege the narrated events of redemptive history over biblical words of law, prophecy, and instruction. In either case, then, the alleged dualism of word and event is largely reducible to what we might call the intrabiblical level. The discursive teaching of the prophets, the Lord, and the apostles is given priority over Scripture’s narrative of events, or vice versa.

Indeed, whether this prioritization amounts to a real dualism, or merely an exegetical and theological imbalance, depends to a significant degree on how a given version of neo-scholasticism or of biblical theology views the nature of events in general and of the biblical events in particular. Provided that the neo-scholastic theologian and the “biblical theologian” could agree that events are not merely “brute facts,” and provided they could also come to a basic agreement about the sort of reference Scripture makes to the events of redemptive history, they

¹⁵ Barr, *Old and New*, 77.

¹⁶ René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation: Including a Commentary on the Constitution “Dei Verbum” of Vatican II* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1966), 210–12.

might be able to work toward a resolution of their differences by way of careful exegesis of the biblical text.

But this strictly exegetical and intrabiblical level, however important it may be, is not where the major difficulty lies. All parties should be able to agree that Scripture accords vital significance to words and events alike, that it presents these as inextricably bound together within the economy of revelation and redemption, and that any attempt to pit one against the other must therefore be misguided. As long as we remain on the merely exegetical level, therefore, the council fathers and James Barr both appear to be doing little more than stating the obvious. The real difficulties emerge when we press the philosophical question about the nature of words and events and their interrelation and the theological question about the nature of revelation and redemption and their interrelation.

Furthermore, we have yet to consider a second and potentially much more problematic dimension of the whole matter, namely, the relationship between Scripture itself as “word” (comprising both narrative and discourse) and redemptive history as “event” (an event that, of course, involves many words). The strong tendency of modern biblical scholarship, as we shall see presently, is to view the history of Israel, the life of the historical Jesus, and the first two generations of Church history as lying somewhere “behind” the texts of the Old and New Testaments, faintly discernible in the mists of the ancient world. While this problematizing of the relationship between Scripture (word) and history (event) was to some extent inevitable, given the archeological discoveries and philological progress of recent centuries, one would not be mistaken to detect the modern dichotomy between fact and value at work here as well.

To gain a concrete sense of how these tendencies manifest themselves in the deliberations of modern biblical scholars, we may return to the Currie Lectures. Here it is interesting to note that while Barr, ever the master debunker, is able to identify a host of “contradictions and antinomies” involved in the way his contemporaries bandy about the idea of “revelational history,” he offers precious little in the way of a positive counterproposal.¹⁷ He chides the leaders of the biblical theology move-

¹⁷ Barr, *Old and New*, 66–67.

ment for “treating so grossly uncertain a concept as *Heilsgeschichte* [salvation history] as if it was some kind of firm ground,” but the very real theological insight that this term crystalizes seems to escape him almost entirely.¹⁸ While not explicitly embracing the dichotomy between fact and value, he opines that “the acts of God [recounted in the Old Testament] are not really and strictly ‘revelatory,’ except in the trivial sense in which any act done, or any thing said, may be considered to ‘reveal’ something of the doer.”¹⁹

With unintended irony Barr here puts his finger on a phenomenon that many twentieth-century Catholic philosophers, from Blondel to Wojtyła to Sokolowski, have considered anything but trivial: the self-disclosure of the human person through action.²⁰ It is even less trivial to consider the possibility that the eternal and transcendent God might indeed act within space and time in a manner that is analogous to human action and that can thus be narrated as something like a matter of historical record. The cumulative claim of Israel’s Scriptures—namely, that the only true God, creator of heaven and earth, not only can act within human history but has in fact acted in very particular ways on behalf of a particular people, thus revealing himself to be a personal God, a knowable Who rather than an unknowable What—is of the greatest theological import. It is quite impossible to imagine Judaism or Christianity apart from this claim. Barr’s attempt to relegate the notion of God’s self-revelatory action within history to the margins of the biblical view of reality must in the last analysis be judged unconvincing.

Still, Barr’s broader project, to discredit the biblical theology movement, has been largely successful, at least among biblical scholars. The “contradictions and antinomies” to which he draws attention appear insoluble indeed, particularly to those who, like Barr, rule out of court any appeal to metaphysics or “mysticism” where the interpretation of the

¹⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹ Ibid., 82 (punctuation added for clarity).

²⁰ Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004); Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person: A Contribution to Phenomenological Anthropology*, *Analecta Husserliana* 10, trans. Andrzej Potocki (Boston: D. Reidel, 1979); Robert Sokolowski, *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Bible is concerned. One problem, which is the direct result of what Hans Frei famously tagged “the eclipse of biblical narrative,” seems especially intractable. Modern biblical scholars have become acutely conscious of two distinct and often quite divergent accounts of Israel’s history: the Old Testament’s own account, and the account that has emerged from historical-critical investigation.²¹ According to Barr, the proponents of *Heilsgeschichte* disagree among themselves, if they do not simply equivocate, when it comes to specifying which of these two accounts gives us access to God’s alleged self-revelation in history.²²

Barr apparently views the very attempt to resolve this problem as misguided. Responding to those who argue that the solution lies in approaching the whole question with an authentically “biblical view of history,” that is, one obtained from Scripture itself, Barr notes that they have reached no consensus regarding what this “biblical view of history” in fact is. He is confident in any case that the Old Testament’s narrative of events is quite incommensurable with what we moderns mean by “history.” This does not trouble Barr, however, since he contends that history is “not a biblical category” to begin with.²³ The biblical theology movement’s tragic flaw, in his estimation, has been to read the modern understanding and valuation of history back into the Bible. Barr is much more sanguine when it comes to the capacity of archeology and historical-critical research to give us a certain kind of reliable access to the “real history” of the ancient Near East. But this sort of investigation yields only “plain history,” which “cannot honestly be called ‘revelatory’ in any sense relatable to the actual intentions of the Old Testament texts.” Further, Barr scoffs at those who, unable to bridge the gap between Scripture and “real history,” take it upon themselves to invest the latter “with a kind of religious mysticism” and thus provide themselves with “a kind of theology-substitute.”²⁴

At this point in Barr’s discussion the dualism of word and event has unmistakably reared its head—not at the exegetical or intrabiblical level, but precisely at the level of the relationship between biblical

²¹ Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

²² Barr, *Old and New*, 66–67.

²³ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

word and historical event. It is tolerably clear that Barr has no expectation of finding any profound theological significance, much less God's self-disclosure, in "real" or "plain" history. Aside from the "trivial" case of persons revealing something of themselves in their deeds, the human actions and other events of ancient Israel's actual history appear to be essentially mute.

It should perhaps come as no surprise that the chasm that opens here between the Old Testament text and Israel's "real" history is accompanied by other similar dichotomies and leads to a significantly diminished sense of the Bible's divine origin and authority. "Scripture," Barr matter-of-factly informs us, "does not come into existence by direct action of God, but by a human action which is a reflex of contact with God." The logical corollary to this position is that the human action that produced the Bible "shares in the distortion and inadequacy which applies to other human acts, and especially to those human acts which claim to relate themselves to the will of God."²⁵ Ever the uncompromising opponent of "fundamentalism," Barr does not evince so much as a hint of nostalgia for the traditional doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, which in any case can only be sustained "by recourse to the sheer supernaturalism of miraculous divine intervention." As Barr views the matter, one must choose between an utterly infallible Bible that is the product of "sheer supernaturalism" and a radically human Bible that "meets the needs of sinful men just because it is itself not free from its sinful element."²⁶ The irony in all this is that, having excoriated the biblical theology movement for locating God's self-revelation in the non-verbal realm, Barr now reduces Scripture to a merely human "reflex," a partly sinful subjective response to something he vaguely terms the human authors' "contact with God."

Barr's assault on "biblical theology," in several major works throughout his career, has contributed not a little to the movement's long, slow decline. Writing a generation after the Currie Lectures, Thomas L. Thompson treats the dichotomy between Old Testament narrative and ancient Israel's actual history as self-evident and Barr's diagnosis of the biblical theology movement as beyond dispute. According to Thomp-

²⁵ Ibid., 163.

²⁶ Ibid.

son, the proponents of biblical theology have introduced “considerable confusion” by using the word *Heilsgeschichte* to refer both to the biblical narrative’s presentation of Israel’s past, which is no more and no less than “a form of theologically motivated *Tendenz*,” and to Israel’s actual history as (supposedly) revelatory and salvific. In Thompson’s opinion the latter use has been “largely discredited,” for it locates revelation in a realm that is “open in every way to historical-critical research,” and such a realm almost by definition cannot be viewed as “an object of faith alone.”²⁷ History and faith must be kept neatly separate.

Still, Thomson holds that the *Tendenz* of Old Testament narrative can be viewed positively as a locus of theology and faith—paradoxically, it can even be called “salvation history”—provided we ascribe no significant historicity or historiographical intentionality to it.²⁸ Elsewhere Thompson explains that Israel’s faith “is not an historical faith.” It “has its justification, not in the evidence of past events, for the traditions of the past serve only as the occasion of the expression of faith, but in the assertion of a future promise.”²⁹

Salvation history is not an historical account of saving events open to the study of the historian. Salvation history did not happen; it is a literary form which has its own historical context.³⁰

Following the trajectory of Barr’s thought well beyond Barr’s own conclusions, Thompson affirms a “biblical faith” that is invulnerable to historical-critical investigation because it is not really concerned with past events but only with present experience and future hope. It is Israel’s “experience” that is (to some extent) “communicated” and Israel’s “faith” that is “revealed” in the Old Testament, and this nonhistorical faith experience can become “our faith” too through an existential reading of the Old Testament.³¹ The Christian is thus able to maintain a “theology

²⁷ Thomas L. Thompson, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Historiography (Israelite),” 3:209.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁹ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), 329.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 328.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 330.

of the word” and of “existential experience” while he or she is freed from the burdensome and ultimately untenable notion that revelation and salvation consist in a series of divine interventions in history culminating in Jesus’s Resurrection.³² Thompson’s radical transformation of biblical theology, building on Barr’s critique, thus furnishes a consummate example of the dualism of word and event.

Creation and the *Imago Dei*

If the modern dualism of word and event “cuts the biblical Word off from creation,”³³ the place to begin our attempt to recover the true unity of word and event is with the biblical doctrine of creation. Scripture’s opening sentence shows us that the unity of word and event is rooted in God’s primordial act of creation (Gn 1:1–3).³⁴ The inspired narrative displays a perfect correspondence between God’s creative word—*yĕhî ’ôr* (“let there be light”)—and its immediate result—*wayĕhî ’ôr* (“and there was light”). What God says happens, with no remainder and no surprises. We do not read, “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was a chicken,” but “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” His word of creation is perfectly efficacious.³⁵ Moreover, God is neither compelled to create nor hindered from creating. The world is not the result of some combination of chance and necessity, nor is it the product of a battle among the gods.

Genesis presents God’s act of creation as a speaking-into-being and thus traces the unity of word and event back to a primordial act of divine performative speech. The phrase *yĕhî ’ôr* is a volitive speech act. As such, it is an expression of both knowledge and will. As rational discourse, *yĕhî ’ôr* has intelligible content. And because the verbal form *yĕhî* is grammatically a jussive, or third-person volitive, it is also a sort of command.³⁶ One speaks what one knows, and one commands what one

³² Ibid., 329.

³³ Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict,” 25.

³⁴ The first three verses of Genesis constitute a single sentence in Hebrew, though English translations usually break it into two or three sentences for the sake of readability.

³⁵ “The exact echoing of the command here emphasizes the total fulfillment of the divine word.” Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 18.

³⁶ Biblical Hebrew employs three classes of volitive verb forms: the cohortative

wills.³⁷ Furthermore, when one wills what is good, the volitional word is an expression of love. And the Priestly narrative of creation is emphatic in saying that everything God created is “very good” (1:31).

Creation flows forth from an eternal act of knowledge and love, or what Augustine calls God’s “eternal counsel and will.”³⁸ If the intrinsic unity of word and event that pervades the economy of revelation and redemption is rooted in God’s act of creation, this act, the word of love by which God speaks the world into being, is rooted in his inner life. The *oikonomia* flows forth from the realm of *theologia*. The unity of word and event, then, ultimately traces back to the eternal processions of knowledge and love within the Holy Trinity. Perhaps we should not too hastily dismiss the patristic tendency to find all three persons of the Trinity in the opening lines of Genesis.³⁹ In this context the Church Fathers also like to quote Psalms 33:6: “By the word (*dābār*) of Yahweh the heavens were made, by the breath (*rûah*) of his mouth all their

(first-person volitive), the imperative (second-person volitive), and the jussive (third-person volitive). See Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and rev. T. Muraoka (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993), 125 (§40b).

³⁷ In commenting on “the idea of creation by the word” in Gn 1:3, Gerhard von Rad places all the emphasis on God’s “personal will” at the expense of any notion of the word as possessing intelligible content and as divine self-communication. He is right to insist that the Priestly author affirms a “radical essential distinction between Creator and creature” and that creation “cannot be even remotely considered an emanation from God,” but he goes much too far in concluding that the created world is therefore in no sense a “reflection of his being.” *Genesis: A Commentary*, 2nd ed., trans. John H. Marks (London: SCM Press, 1972), 51–52. In order to uphold a biblical view of reality, one must certainly distinguish between emanation and reflection in this regard.

³⁸ *De civitate Dei* 11:4: *aeternum consilium voluntatemque*. Translations of patristic texts are my own unless otherwise indicated. Latin citations are from the Library of Latin Texts accessed through the Brepols Publishers website (www.brepols.net).

³⁹ E.g., Ephrem of Syria, commenting on Gn 1:2, writes: “It was appropriate to reveal here that the Spirit hovered in order for us to learn that the work of creation was held in common by the Spirit with the Father and the Son. The Father spoke. The Son created. And so it was also right that the Spirit offer its work, clearly shown through its hovering, in order to demonstrate its unity with the other persons. Thus we learn that all was brought to perfection and accomplished by the Trinity.” Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1-11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 6.

host.”⁴⁰ Both texts present creation as a perfectly unified action of God, his *dābār*, and his *rûaḥ*.⁴¹

The biblical doctrine of God’s creation by his word is developed in the Old Testament wisdom literature. In Proverbs 3:19, for example, we read: “By his wisdom (*ḥokmâ*) Yahweh founded the earth; he established the heavens by his understanding.” The category of *ḥokmâ* further discloses the unity of knowledge and love in God’s act of creation. Human “wisdom” includes both the theoretical and the practical among its essential aspects. It is the virtue by which one does the truth for the sake of the good. To say, analogously, that God created the world by his wisdom is to say that he has acted in intelligence and love. He orders everything toward an end that is good. This is what sets the authentically biblical notion of divine power apart from every defective notion of omnipotence. As Augustine puts it, “God is omnipotent, not by reckless power, but by the strength of wisdom.”⁴²

The world created by “the only wise God” (Rom 16:27) is itself intelligible and good, an expression of divine truth and love. Each creature, and creation as a whole, is ordered toward an end that is good. The physical universe is an event and a thing, but it is not irrational or mute. It is a word of truth and love rather than a brute fact. But for creation to speak its word of truth and love there needs to be a creature who possesses the capacity to hear and understand this word, a creature who is able to “interpret” the world. Man, created in the image of God, is endowed with precisely this capacity, and the created universe is “a gift addressed to man.”⁴³

According to the theological tradition that comes to us through Augustine and Aquinas, “all things which occur in time are certain similitudes of those things which have been from eternity.”⁴⁴ In this sense, ev-

⁴⁰ E.g. Ambrose, *In Hexaemeron* 1:8.

⁴¹ We need not suppose that the Hebrew authors possessed anything like an explicit conceptual knowledge of the doctrine of the Trinity, but only that, since the God whom they knew by revelation was in fact the true God, who is and always was three divine persons, it should not surprise us if the Old Testament contains here and there intimations of God’s inner life, intimations that come into a new light when read from the perspective of the fullness of revelation in Jesus Christ.

⁴² *De Genesi ad litteram* 9:17: “neque enim potentia temeraria, sed sapientiae virtute omnipotens est.”

⁴³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §299.

⁴⁴ *Summa theologiae* III, q. 23, a. 2, ad 3.

ery creature is made to the likeness of God. But man alone is made to the *image* and likeness of God. This same theological tradition locates the *imago Dei* in man's rational soul with its faculties of intellect and will. For present purposes it may be helpful to restate this interpretation of Genesis 1:26–27 in terms of the *analogia verbi*. God, creation, and man are all λογικός (“rational”), but each in its own way. God is supremely and properly speaking λογικός. In eternally generating his Logos and breathing forth his Spirit, he eternally knows and loves all things. Creatures too are, analogously speaking, λογικός—in a finite and somewhat passive sense, as the products and expressions of God's knowledge and love. They are intelligible and good, knowable and lovable. As a creature, man too is λογικός in this sense. At the same time, however, he possesses a participation in God's rationality that is more active and more perfect than that enjoyed by other creatures in the physical realm. He is not only intelligible and good but intelligent and capable of choosing and doing the good. He is not only knowable and lovable, but capable of knowing and loving.

Early in the history of Christian theology there emerged a strong and enduring tendency to identify the *imago Dei* in man with the faculty of reason (λόγος) and with the mind (νοῦς), but this did not always involve dissociating it completely from man's bodily form. The second-century *Epistle to Diognetus*, in presenting the biblical teaching on the *imago Dei*, emphasizes man's intellectual endowment but immediately complements this emphasis with the idea that man's upright posture also distinguishes him from other bodily creatures and reflects his special orientation to God and heaven (*Diog.* 10:2).

In his *De hominis opificio* Gregory of Nyssa develops the notion that it is the whole human person in the unity of body and soul that is made to the image of God, and not the mind alone. According to Gregory, we see in man's rational soul a kind of participation in God's incorporeal nature that we do not find in the body. Nevertheless, man is a single “compound nature” (σύνκριμα) and must be viewed as such.⁴⁵ The mind “would have been incommunicable and isolated if its motion were not

⁴⁵ *De hominis opificio* 16:9 (PG 44:181); trans. Henry Austin Wilson. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 5, *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, etc.* (1893; Reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 405.

manifested by some contrivance,” and so the Creator prepared the human body as the appropriate “instrument” (ὄργανον) for the exercise of reason. For example, the mouths of beasts are designed primarily for feeding and so produce only inarticulate sounds such as a bleat or bark, but the human mouth is configured to produce the much more varied sounds that are necessary for intelligible speech.⁴⁶ Similarly, the suppleness and dexterity of human hands make them apt for every art of human ingenuity and to do the bidding of reason.⁴⁷ In a word, the Creator endowed human nature with superior intelligence and a refined body “fit for the exercise of royalty,” so that human beings might be the “living image” of his kingship over all creatures.⁴⁸

The retrieval of an authentically biblical anthropology and somatology is of the utmost importance for our fresh appraisal of the relationship between word and event. Genesis places before our eyes God’s creation of a world that is ordered toward human life and human action. The body gives man a place within this world of space and time. Man exercises his intelligence and realizes his freedom in and through the body. Actions performed in the body, and thus in the world of time and space, have real consequences. In fact, strictly speaking, they are irreversible. If I become intoxicated, get behind the wheel of a car, and kill someone, many lives, including my own, have been altered forever. I cannot press CTRL + Z and reverse the course of events. Real life has no “undo” function. This is true, of course, not only in the case of vicious or irresponsible acts. It applies equally to acts of wisdom and virtue.

Because the physical universe has been created by a wise and loving God and thus bears the imprint of divine wisdom and love, there is no such thing as a brute fact, an event utterly devoid of rationality. Even events in which human beings are completely uninvolved, such as a volcanic eruption on a distant planet, must have some inherent significance. But our special concern, and certainly that of the biblical authors, is with events in which human beings *are* involved, events that engage human intellect and freedom, events with ramifications for human beings. In such events, human souls, acting through bodies that have been

⁴⁶ *De hominis opificio* 8:8–9:1 (PG 44:148–149); trans. 394–95.

⁴⁷ *De hominis opificio* 8:2; 8:8 (PG 44:144, 148).

⁴⁸ *De hominis opificio* 4:1 (PG 44:136); trans. 390–91.

created for the exercise of reason and the disclosure of personhood, leave as it were an indelible mark on the physical universe.

Though we cannot devote space to the topic here, it would be helpful in this regard to reflect on the myriad ways we take up the subhuman world into the fabric of human life and culture, and in so doing humanize and spiritualize the world.⁴⁹ In any case, this must not be viewed as an imposition of the sheer will to dominate. Even where the impulse to make the subhuman world serve anthropic ends is deeply tainted by sin, there takes place some authentic disclosure of the truth of things and a discovery of their true ends. Here, in the consideration of the relationship between spirit and matter, we approach the very heart of the problem, and here our modern minds stand most in need of the healing light of Scripture's own sacramental view of reality.

Language and Truth

Our reappraisal of the relationship between word and event also requires careful and extensive consideration of language itself and its place in human life. We tend to dive into questions about the nature of revelation and of Scripture under the assumption that we already pretty much know what language is and how it functions. It is premature, however, to attempt to describe the nature of divinely inspired words when we have not yet devoted serious thought to the mystery of language as such. As Cardinal Ratzinger notes in the Erasmus Lecture, the modern dualism of word and event is the result not simply of a deficient understanding of event but also of a truncated notion of word.⁵⁰ Biblical scholars and theologians tend to operate with an instrumentalist or merely functional view of language. Language for them is essentially a tool of the isolated, autonomous thinker who asserts his will over external reality and then utilizes knowledge as a means of power over against his environment (including other autonomous individuals). This view of things can never appreciate the true genius of language, which is fundamentally a

⁴⁹ For some initial thoughts, see Gregory Vall, "Man is the Land': The Sacramentality of the Land of Israel," in *John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed. David G. Dalin and Matthew Levering (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 131–67, esp. 140–41.

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict," 25.

mystery of truth and love, not of “knowledge as power.”

As noted above, among material beings man is uniquely endowed to “hear” the voice of creation and to “translate” it into rational discourse. Creation’s relation to the divine Logos is reflected in its intelligibility and goodness, while man’s unique relation to the same Logos is reflected in his intelligence and will, including his linguistic endowment. Jacques Maritain refers to this complementarity as the “nuptial relationship between mind and being.”⁵¹ Man’s vocation is to speak on behalf of the rest of creation, and in so doing to ascribe glory to the Creator. As Norris Clarke puts it, the human person is called to listen to the voice of being “with reverence” and to speak out “its meaning in a recreative human *logos*.”⁵²

Human language is closely bound up with man’s bodily nature and embeddedness in the physical universe. The brain and the organs of speech and hearing are physical. Spoken communication depends on sound waves moving through the air. Written communication depends on physical implements such as ink and paper, or computers. Yet language mediates intellectual and spiritual realities. Human language is thus an externalization of interior life, while at the same time it involves a spiritualization of material things. A book is at once a materialized idea and a spiritualized tree, as it were. Speaking, listening, writing, and reading are activities proper to man as a unity of physical body and spiritual soul. Human language can even be called “sacramental,” in the sense that it gives invisible realities a presence in the world of space and time.⁵³

Language is a function of man’s freedom and of his vocation to “subdue the earth” (Gn 1:28). According to the Genesis narrative, God brought the animals to man “to see what he would name them,” and “whatever the man called” each animal, “that was its name” (2:19). The seeming quaintness of this story should not lead us to overlook its pro-

⁵¹ As quoted (without exact citation of the source) in W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press), 18.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵³ Pope John Paul II describes the human body as “a primordial sacrament . . . a sign that efficaciously transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity.” *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 203 (emphasis removed).

fundity. Assigning names to the beings that surround him gives man real leverage to explore, organize, and master his environment. At the same time, Genesis does not suggest that human acts of linguistic denomination and predication constitute an *imposition* upon external reality. At the narrative's culmination, the man's naming of "woman" is presented rather as a response of wonderment upon his joyful *discovery* of her true identity and relation to himself (2:23). Language can be a way of receiving creation from the hand of God in gratitude and praise.

All man's subsequent words, however, will be spoken under the shadow of temptation and sin. They will be liable to duplicity and to various distortions of the truth of being. An adequate reappraisal of the relationship between word and event must therefore also consider the effect of sin on language as well as the manner in which human speech, marred by sin, is progressively purified and "redeemed" precisely by being taken up into the economy of revelation. Beginning with Genesis, the Bible presents human language as deeply involved in the drama of man's alienation from God and in the divine pedagogy by which God reconciles human beings to himself. This important topic has been given surprisingly little attention in fundamental theology and biblical hermeneutics.

If we wish to appreciate how biblical words communicate the truth of events (which really is the heart of the matter), we would do well to attend to what Scripture itself teaches us about the act of narration. This is a vast topic, and here we shall have to content ourselves with an observation or two. The truth of an event, the truth that really matters, runs much deeper than the mere facts of a case, for what we take to be "fact" is often only the most superficial dimension of an event or action. And so to judge the truth or falsehood of a speech or narration on the basis of how accurately it represents this superficial level of the event will yield a deficient notion of truth and falsehood.

Let us take an example. Under interrogation by Yahweh, Adam says, "The woman whom you gave to be with me gave me from the tree, and I ate" (3:12). In terms of its accuracy of representation of the facts (of the narrated story), this statement is absolutely inerrant. It is true that God gave the woman to the man to be with him, and it is true that the woman gave the fruit of the tree to the man. And yet, Adam's speech act is profoundly sinful. Rather than accept responsibility for his actions, he manages to point blame at both God and his wife in the same breath. He

speaks with ingratitude and attempts to deflect attention away from his own culpability.⁵⁴ A speech act may then accurately narrate the facts of the case and still fail to lead us closer to the truth of the event. Conversely, a fictional narrative can communicate real truth, not only a general moral truth, but even the truth of a specific event. For example, Nathan's parable enables David to face the sinfulness of his own actions on a specific occasion (2 Sm 12:1–15).

Language pertains to man's personhood and his call to interpersonal communion. It enables a person to reach outside his own solitude, to share something of his interiority with others, and to receive what they choose to share of themselves in return. Language enables us to make promises, ask favors, give commands, share knowledge, articulate feelings, or construct an argument. It permits human beings to share a common life and common projects. It makes possible both a personal and a communal sense of past, present, and future—a shared history. It enables “I” subjects to belong to “we” subjects and to participate in various human institutions.

Language comes to each of us as the heritage of the human community and it keeps us connected to that community throughout our lives. The individual realizes his or her freedom through language and action, but only within the realm of community, tradition, custom, and law. Indeed, it is by virtue of its communal dimension that language serves man in his ongoing discovery of the truth of things. Understanding comes via conversation. Hans-Georg Gadamer describes how an authentic dialogue is more than the sum of its parts and can take on a life of its own, leading its participants together toward a deeper understanding of the topic under discussion. Thus “the sphere of the ‘We’”—where language lives—mediates between the “I” subject and the objective reality that would disclose its truth.⁵⁵ As Augustine says, “Reasoning does not make things but discovers them. Before they are discovered, therefore, they abide in themselves; and when they are discovered, they renew us.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Von Rad, *Genesis*, 91.

⁵⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 65–66.

⁵⁶ *De Vera Religione* xxxix, 73: “Non enim ratiocinatio talia facit, sed invenit. Ergo antequam inveniuntur, in se manent, et cum inveniuntur, nos innovant.”

This principle applies not only to the reasoning of the individual but also to that of a community of persons in dialogue.

Ultimately, language is able to mediate between man and the truth of the created universe (including the reflexive truth of man himself) because each of these realities—man, language, and the universe—participates in its own way in the divine Logos and thus in the mystery of Trinitarian knowledge and love. This *analogia verbi* forms the basis for the very possibility of divine revelation and thus of our capacity for saying anything true about God in human language.

God's Word in Human Events

As we ponder the mystery of human language and action in general terms, we must also begin to consider the specific ways God has revealed himself “in deeds and words intrinsically interconnected” within the divine economy. The Epistle to the Hebrews tells us that during the Old Testament period God spoke to Israel “in many partial and varied ways” (1:1). Broadly speaking, these are reducible to law, prophecy, psalmody, and wisdom, but under each of these headings one might identify numerous more specific modes by which God's word came to Israel. For present purposes it may prove helpful to focus our attention on the way Israel sometimes discerned God's will in the unfolding of an event per se, without any of the usual intermediaries, and then gave this revelatory event a new verbal mode of existence through narrative artistry, so that a word-event became an event-word.

As an example of this let us briefly consider the betrothal of Rebekah in Genesis 24, aided by Meir Sternberg's masterful analysis of this Hebrew narrative.⁵⁷ At the outset of the story Abraham commissions a trusted servant to return to his homeland in northern Mesopotamia in order to fetch a suitable bride for his son Isaac. He promises the servant that Yahweh “will send his angel before” him (v 7), but as things turn out no angel appears in the story. Nor does the servant have a revelatory dream at a holy place en route. No prophet approaches him with an oracle. He meets no seer along the way. In order to discern God's will in the

⁵⁷ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 131–52.

affair, the servant is “thrown on his own devices” and “takes a twofold initiative that weds good sense to piety.”⁵⁸

In other words, he employs faith and reason together. Rather than contrive a designedly arbitrary test of God’s will, such as Gideon does with the fleece (Jgs 6:36–40), Abraham’s servant devises a rational test for finding a friendly, strong, and hospitable woman. A maiden who would grant his request for a drink of water and then go the extra mile by drawing water for his ten thirsty camels would be just the sort of woman he is looking for. Parking his camels near the well in the late afternoon, when he knows women will be coming forth to draw water, he prays, “Yahweh, God of my master Abraham, make things come together before me today, and keep steadfast love with my master Abraham” (Gn 24:12).⁵⁹

At this point, the narrator duly notes that before the servant even finishes this prayer, Rebekah makes her appearance at the well, suggesting that things are in fact already “coming together” (v 15). Rebekah’s great physical beauty makes her an especially attractive candidate for the test, which she passes with flying colors (vv 16–20). But for the servant the clincher comes when he learns that Rebekah is Isaac’s second cousin. Surely, he reasons, it was Yahweh who “guided” him directly to Abraham’s family (vv 24–27). This could be no mere coincidence. As Sternberg puts it, Rebekah “is, literally, God’s answer (in the medium of plot) to the servant’s prayer.”⁶⁰ Her timely arrival is a word from Yahweh.

Now the servant’s job is to convince Rebekah’s family, specifically her older brother Laban, that this is indeed a match made in heaven. He makes his pitch by way of a lengthy renarration of the sequence of events that led him to this juncture, in the course of which he takes quite a few liberties with the details (vv 34–49). He tactfully omits anything that may have given offense to the Mesopotamian family, rearranges the order of events slightly, and even modifies Abraham’s instructions in such a way as to give the impression that it was the patriarch’s intention

⁵⁸ Ibid., 137.

⁵⁹ The Hiphil of *Q-R-H* means “to cause to converge,” with connotations of divine providence working through apparent coincidence (cf. Gn 27:20 and other forms of the same root in Ru 2:3 and 2 Sm 1:6).

⁶⁰ Sternberg, *Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 137.

all along for Isaac to marry a close relative. Sternberg illuminates the way each of these changes serves a precise rhetorical end.⁶¹

His point, however, is emphatically not that the servant is a spin doctor who sacrifices truth on the altar of persuasion. Rather, taking into consideration the lower theological proficiency of his polytheistic audience, the servant tempers his narrative to meet them at their level of understanding and leads them to recognize that Yahweh, the god of Abraham, has manifested his will for Isaac and Rebekah in a remarkable confluence of events. As Sternberg phrases it, “the servant, like many novelists after him, resorts to invention in order to give the truth a more truthlike appearance,” for “the unvarnished truth would not [have carried] enough weight to induce [the family] to part with Rebekah.”⁶²

The servant has employed *mythos*, or “emplotment,” which always includes a fictive dimension, in order to give the providential and revelatory event a new verbal mode of existence. The word-event has become an event-word. When narrative artistry is used in this way by someone whose mind has been illumined by the Spirit of Truth to judge concerning the action of God in history, narration is a prophetic act.

Of particular interest for present purposes is Laban’s response (v 50), which indicates that he has been led by the servant’s narrative to draw precisely the correct conclusion about the event that has transpired. “The thing (*dabar*) has come forth from Yahweh,” he declares. “We cannot speak to you bad or good. Behold, Rebekah is before you. Take her and go, that she may become the wife of your master’s son, just as Yahweh has spoken (*dibber*).” The Hebrew noun *dabar* means “thing, event, or word.” The verb *dibber*, “to speak,” is its cognate. No angel, prophet, seer, diviner, or dream interpreter appears anywhere in the story, and yet, Yahweh has spoken! He has revealed his will in the course of events. He has *dibber*-ed through a *dabar*. The event-*dabar* is in itself already a word-*dabar* inasmuch as Yahweh has truly guided the course of events, but it takes on a new verbal mode of existence when the servant narrates it for Rebekah’s family and again, of course, when the inspired author of Genesis 24 narrates it for us.

⁶¹ Ibid., 145–51.

⁶² Ibid., 149–50.

Time, Narrative, and History

A serious reappraisal of word and event within the economy of redemption must also take stock of the biblical view of time and human temporality as well as the biblical narrative's relation to history. In the present context we can merely touch on these complex matters.

The Priestly Heptaameron, or first creation account (Gn 1:1–2:3), shows us that as soon as God speaks light into being and separates it from darkness, “the march and rhythm of time” is set in motion.⁶³ The “days” of Genesis 1, each with its evening and morning, represent real time, a temporality regulated by cosmic cycles and thus rooted in the created order. This temporality is comprised of the days and months and years with which Israelite readers were familiar and within which they lived their lives. It is not, however, a mere succession of moments. The unique character of the seventh day (2:2–3) gives creation's divinely instituted temporality a teleological dimension and indicates that it is ordered to man's vocation to work and rest in imitation of the Creator.

The seven-day sequence of Genesis 1:1–2:3 is the anchor for an elaborate Priestly chronology that includes the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 and extends throughout the Pentateuch. This chronological framework removes the primeval stories of fall, fratricide, and flood from the mythical realm of a time before time and places every event, from creation to the death of Moses and beyond, within a single historical sequence. This Priestly chronology does not, of course, supply us with anything like accurate historical information regarding the age of the cosmos, the lifespans of the patriarchs, or even the date of the exodus. It accomplishes something much more important. It teaches us that there is one seamless economy comprising creation and redemptive history. Israelite readers of Genesis, living during the crisis of the exile or the early postexilic period, would recognize that the events of their own lives fall within a single divine master plan. The story that Genesis narrates from its opening chapter is the story within which they live. In a homily given many years ago, Ratzinger aptly sums up the teaching of

⁶³ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 112.

the first creation narrative this way: "God created the universe in order to enter into a history of love with humankind."⁶⁴

As noted in the previous section, the act of emplotment or narration—the act by which an event is given a new verbal mode of existence—necessarily contains a fictive dimension. At a minimum, the author's selection, arrangement, and choice of words embody an interpretive judgment. But this fictive dimension does not necessarily compromise the truth of a real event. Even if it involves a significant element of literary license, the art of emplotment, with its fictive dimension, can serve the truth of an historical event. In a moment of "invention," the author draws forth and displays the inherent λόγος dimension of the event. As the term's etymology suggests, to "invent" is simultaneously to discover and to contrive.

What we have just said about the Priestly chronology, however, requires us to push the envelope a bit in this regard. Can a narrative that is not historical in anything like the usual sense of the term give us authentic revelation concerning a fundamentally historical economy? The short answer to this question is yes, at least when that narrative is part of a larger historical tradition and a unified, incipiently canonical testimony to history.

The Old Testament contains a remarkable variety of narrative genres and subgenres, each bearing its own sort of witness to historical events and to the historical economy. The book of Jeremiah, for example, contains a great deal of reliable historical information about the final years of the kingdom of Judah, information drawn from contemporary sources and verified in many cases by extrabiblical accounts. By contrast, the book of Daniel, which was written centuries after the events it purports to recount, intentionally flouts the historical record (beginning with its opening verse) and weaves a variety of legends into a highly artificial schema of political events.⁶⁵ Still, it would be quite mistaken to conclude that the authors of Daniel are unconcerned with history. Properly understood, this unusual book of Scripture bears a profound prophetic

⁶⁴ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *"In the Beginning . . .": A Catholic Understanding of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ressourcement (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 30.

⁶⁵ See John J. Collins, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Daniel, Book of," 6:2:29–37.

witness to the establishment of the kingdom of God within the real history of the ancient Near East.

The basic theological impulse behind the composition, compilation, and canonical shaping of the Hebrew Scriptures is historiographical. From the late preexilic period to the early postexilic period, the Holy Spirit prompted Israelite authors and redactors to gather the traditions of their people into a single coherent macronarrative. The result was the so-called Primary Narrative, which stretches from Genesis to 2 Kings, that is, from the creation of the world to Israel's great political and spiritual crisis, the exile. The redactors of the Primary Narrative joined the Priestly Tetrateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers) to the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings), with the book of Deuteronomy as the keystone of the arch.⁶⁶ Each of the remaining books in the biblical canon bears its witness to the divine economy by an explicit or implicit orientation to this macronarrative. For example, First and Second Chronicles, together with the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, constitute a kind of Secondary Narrative, a highly interpretive relecture of the Primary Narrative that carries the story forward into the postexilic period.

Neither the Holy Spirit nor the human authors and redactors seem to have been greatly troubled by the fact that the Primary Narrative is a hybrid with respect to the historiographical character of its sources. In composing their account of Israel's political history of the monarchic period, the inspired authors drew heavily upon the royal archives of Israel and Judah, but they also wove into their framework stories about Elijah and Elisha that must have originated in the circle of those prophets' disciples. For earlier periods, such as that of the judges, they had recourse to at least some legendary material, as is patently the case in the narratives about Samson, for example (Jgs 13–16). For still earlier periods, such as that of the patriarchs, the sacred authors seem to have worked with material that has a certain affinity to folklore or, in a few instances, mythology.

Throughout the age of the monarchy, the exile, and the postexilic

⁶⁶ In other words, the Primary Narrative comprises those books that in the Jewish canon belong to the Torah and the Former Prophets. The Book of Ruth, which was composed somewhat later, belongs to the Writings.

period, Israel continued to look back to the exodus and wilderness wandering as their historical point of reference and theological touchstone. Nothing that had happened in their history either prior to or subsequent to the Mosaic age made much sense if viewed apart from those founding events. But the exile did make sense as chastisement for sins against the Mosaic covenant, and the return from exile made sense as a new exodus and the promise of a new covenant.

Remarkably, however, at least to our way of looking at things, the Israelites never seem to have asked themselves questions such as: "Did the exodus really happen? How do we know whether or not it happened? Which of the many versions of the exodus story preserved in our tradition is the most factual?" They did not view past events as irretrievably past and as leaving behind only traces in the archeological strata and literary record. Nor did they suppose that the only valid access to the past is by way of historical-critical research. The redemptive and revelatory events of the past were present to them in and through sacred tradition, by which we mean the whole authentic life of the people of Yahweh as it was handed down from generation to generation and constantly enriched and deepened by new encounters with the word of God. For faithful Israelites there was no need to question the reality of the exodus. Their very existence and communal life as the people of Yahweh was the vital unfolding and trajectory of the founding events. No exodus, no Israel.

In exploring further the way the truth of Israel's past was carried over into their present and future by a living tradition, Gadamer's notion of *Wirkungsgeschichte*, or "history of effects," may prove helpful. As Francis Watson points out, *Wirkungsgeschichte* is not merely a matter of texts generating more texts. The "historic" event—that is, "the event that marks an enduring turning point in a historical process"—"generates its own *Wirkungsgeschichte* out of which it is constantly interpreted and reinterpreted."⁶⁷ Textual traditions and other elements of tradition play their role within this larger historical process, which in the case of biblical Israel is the very life of the people, lived in the presence of God.

⁶⁷ Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 51. On this point, see also Brice Wachterhauser, "Getting it Right: Relativism, Realism, and Truth," in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 65.

As Andrew Hayes has expressed it, the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of an historic event is “the temporally distended impression,” which that event leaves on the flow of history.⁶⁸

Maintaining a teleological view of salvation-historical events is crucial here. Israel’s many interpretations and reinterpretations of the exodus must not be viewed as so many layers of ideology superimposed upon the brute facts. The exodus event is from the beginning dense with inherent significance, but this significance only gradually unfolds and discloses itself within the subsequent history of Israel. The exodus, like every other event within Israel’s history, manifests its inner truth more and more fully as that history approaches its telos, or goal. The Christ event is as it were the final cause of the exodus, for “Christ is the end (τέλος) of the law” (Rom 10:4).

The Christ Event and the Gospels

In the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth we see the most perfect unity of word and event. Here the eternal Logos makes his definitive entrance into the realm of space and time, making the moment of his entrance “the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4). It is important to note that all the lower levels of the unity of word and event discussed above are taken up into this fullest manifestation of unity. Through the incarnation the eternal Logos takes to himself a created humanity of physical body and rational soul, made to the image of God, and makes it the instrument and sacrament of his divine personhood. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§470), the Son of God “communicates to his humanity his own personal mode of existence in the Trinity.” The eternal Word has spoken in human language and revealed the Father in historical deeds. Though the incarnation is a truly marvelous condescension, it is nevertheless true that the λογικός humanity of Christ was an apt instrument for the divine Logos to employ in this manner. (The Logos could not have been hypostatically united to some lower, irrational nature.) Furthermore, the “many partial and varied ways” by which God spoke to Israel in the Old Testament (Heb 1:1) have been taken up into this definitive personal entrance of the Logos into creation and history and, having reached their telos, have been transformed.

⁶⁸ Private communication to the author, 2004.

Through the glorification of his humanity in the Resurrection, all that Jesus Christ accomplished for our salvation in the days of his flesh has been given a suprahistorical presence and, through the mission of the Holy Spirit, has been made available to believers in all times and places through the Church's sacramental life and in a special way through the Holy Gospels. We do not access the saving words and deeds of our Lord's life by stripping away the layers of interpretation in order to get down to some supposed historical bedrock. Any attempt to do so gives a priori assent to the dualism of word and event. Rather, we must allow the four Gospels to lead us into the mystery of Christ on their own terms.

In recent years small but important steps have been taken, both by theologians and by the magisterium of the Catholic Church, to retrieve the biblical and patristic notion of the *mysteria vitae Iesu*.⁶⁹ It is vital that this work be carried forward, for in the last analysis only a robust and well-articulated understanding of *mysterium* can strike at the heart of the dualism of word and event. A *mysterium* is an event in which God has acted manifestly in order to reveal himself and to redeem humanity. It is a moment of divine disclosure, but it always retains an unfathomable plenitude. It is a moment of knowledge, but it is accessible only to one who loves.

The term *mysterium* is best understood in correlation with the term *oikonomia*, for a mystery is essentially an "economic" event. Because each mystery participates in the economy, it must be viewed in light of the economy as a whole, even as it also illuminates the economy as a whole.⁷⁰ The ultimate mystery is the "theological" mystery of God's inner life and his eternal counsel and will, and the divine economy may be defined as his master plan for "dispensing" a certain participation in this mystery to us in time and space. It is, in the Pauline phrase, "the economy of the mystery hidden from eternity in God, who created all things" (Eph 3:9). The centerpiece of this master plan, the definitive economic

⁶⁹ See, e.g., CCC §512–667; John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (2002), nos. 18–25; Christoph Schütz, "The Mysteries of the Life of Jesus as a Prism of Faith," *Communio* 29 (2002): 28–38; and Martin Bieler, "The Mysteries of Jesus' Public Life: Stages on the Way to the Cross," *Communio* 29 (2002): 47–61.

⁷⁰ The Lord's baptism in the Jordan is a good example of this. See Gregory Vall, "*Lucis Mysterium*: Ignatius of Antioch on the Lord's Baptism," *Nova et Vetera* 8 (2010): 143–60.

mystery, is the person and event of Jesus Christ. He contains the whole economy within himself, for he recapitulates creation, humanity, and Israel, while he “precapitulates,” so to speak, the life of the Church and the eschaton. The *oikonomia* is therefore “the economy of the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ” (1:10).

“Gospel” is a literary genre developed to present the mystery of Christ, and the mysteries of the life of Christ, precisely as economic realities. It is axiomatic in New Testament scholarship to note that the evangelists relate the story of Jesus to the Old Testament story by way of allusion and quotation while they simultaneously have the Church in mind as they narrate the events of Christ’s life. But their real reasons for doing this can only be grasped from within a theology of mystery and economy. In each discrete mystery of the life of Jesus the whole person and saving reality of Christ is truly present, and so the evangelists first of all narrate the individual events of Christ’s life in light of the Christ event as a whole. At the same time, because creation, man, and Israel are summed up in the person of Christ, the evangelists present the Christ event and the discrete moments within that event as the telos and fullness of the Old Testament economy. Finally, because the Church’s whole life of grace and glory is already present in Jesus of Nazareth—he who *is* our life (Col 3:4)—the evangelists narrate the past words and deeds of Jesus in light of his glorious presence at the Father’s right hand and his future coming.

As a convenient example of this manner of narrating, let us consider John 6:1–71. Structurally, this passage consists of four panels. First, there is the miracle of the loaves and fishes, which John narrates with considerable detail and characteristically presents as a “sign” performed for the benefit of “the people” (6:1–15). Second, there is the much shorter narrative of Christ’s walking on the sea, which John presents as a private theophany to the disciples rather than a public sign (6:16–21). In composing these first two panels, John seems to have relied heavily on a synoptic-like (perhaps presynoptic) source, since his account agrees with Mark’s in many particulars but does not appear to be directly dependent on the latter (cf. Mk 6:30–52).⁷¹ Third, there is a

⁷¹ See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 663–64, 671–72.

long dialogue between Jesus and “the people” (also called “the Jews,” especially when they begin to demonstrate doubt and hostility), which John presents as a synagogue instruction given at Capernaum (Jn 6:22–59). Fourth, there is a shorter dialogue between Jesus and his own disciples concerning their response to his teaching (6:60–71). While these last two panels do contain a few echoes of synoptic tradition, they appear more heavily dependent on distinctively Johannine tradition than do the first two panels.

John has put all this together with consummate skill. On the one hand, the chapter moves back and forth between Jesus’s interaction with the people and his interaction with his disciples, while, on the other hand, it moves from action to dialogue, in other words, from event to word.

vv 1–15	Jesus’s action on behalf of the people
vv 16–21	Jesus’s action on behalf of the disciples
vv 22–59	Jesus’s dialogue with the people
vv 60–71	Jesus’s dialogue with the disciples

Because the first and third panels are by far the longest, and both dialogues serve to unfold the significance of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the chapter is reducible to a synoptic-like sign followed by a characteristically Johannine discourse, much as the previous chapter is (cf. 5:1–47). In fact, chapter 5 has prepared us for chapter 6 by thematizing the importance of Jesus’s “works” and “words” (5:36, 47).

What, then, is the significance of the multiplication of loaves and fishes? In the first place, the miraculous gift of superabundant food, specifically “bread,” signifies Jesus’s teaching itself. A close association between Jesus’s teaching ministry and the miracle of the loaves is already hinted at in the Marcan account (Mk 6:34), and John develops this link in dependence on the way bread sometimes symbolizes divine revelation in the Old Testament.⁷² On one level, then, John 6 is a teaching about Jesus the teacher. The people call him “Rabbi” (v 25) and even acclaim him the long anticipated Moses-like “Prophet” (v 14), but neither

⁷² In the Old Testament, bread signifies divine revelation in three modalities: law (Dt 8:3; Neh 9:13–15), prophecy (Am 8:11–12; Is 55:1–3, 10–11), and wisdom (Prv 9:5; Sir 15:3).

of these titles rises to a true understanding of the qualitative difference between the Mosaic law and Jesus's doctrine.⁷³ During the synagogue discourse the Lord hints at the true nature of what is taking place in his teaching ministry by quoting a line from the prophets—"And they will all be taught by God" (v 45; cf. Is 54:13)—and later he tells his disciples, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (Jn 6:63). Finally, Simon Peter confesses that Jesus is "the Holy One of God," who alone offers "words of eternal life" (vv 68–69).

Of course, John has already informed his readers that Jesus not only speaks the word of God but is himself the eternal Word made flesh (1:1–2, 14). That is why Jesus is less concerned to refer the sign of the loaves to his teaching as such than he is to identify *himself* as "the bread of God, who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (6:33). The sign of the loaves quite naturally reminds Jesus's Jewish interlocutors of the miracle of the manna in the wilderness, but when they mention this Old Testament event in an effort to get another free meal from Jesus, they unwittingly provide him with an opportunity to compare and contrast himself to the Mosaic law. John has them quote a line from Scripture that actually combines elements of several Old Testament passages without reproducing any one of them verbatim: "Bread from heaven he gave them to eat" (v 31).⁷⁴ At least some of these texts associate the miracle of the manna with the law of Moses, which was "heavenly bread," that is, divine revelation, given to Israel in the wilderness. This Old Testament symbolism is presupposed when Jesus responds to their quotation by identifying himself as "the *true* bread from heaven," that is, the definitive self-revelation of God, far superior to the Mosaic law (v 32).⁷⁵ Starting with this exchange, the bulk of the bread of life dialogue develops the idea that the sign of the loaves points to the incarnation of the Logos, with the Old Testament manna/law symbolism as back-

⁷³ The Torah portrays Moses as enjoying "face to face" intimacy with Yahweh (Ex 33:11; Dt 34:10; cf. Nm 12:8) but also qualifies this claim by noting that, strictly speaking, neither Moses nor any human being can see God's face and live (Ex 33:20). The bread of life discourse locates Jesus's superiority to Moses and his uniqueness as God's definitive self-revelation precisely in the fact that he alone "has seen the Father" (Jn 6:46; cf. 1:17–18).

⁷⁴ Cf. Ex 16:4, 15; Ps 78:24, 105:40; Neh 9:15; Ws 16:20.

⁷⁵ See Keener, *Gospel of John*, 679–81.

ground (vv 31–51). Jesus himself is “the bread which has come down from heaven” (v 41).

The manna/law connection is, however, only one element in a rich texture of Old Testament echoes in John 6. The basic plot of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, as found in all four Gospels, recalls a similar miracle worked by the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 4:42–44), and John strengthens this reminiscence by specifying that the loaves multiplied by Jesus were made of barley, as was also the case in the Elisha story (Jn 6:9, 13). John’s concise narrative of the walking on the sea, like its synoptic parallels, echoes theophanic imagery from the Old Testament (v 19; cf. Job 9:8; Ps 77:19), and Jesus’s exclamation to the disciples in the boat—literally, “I am! Fear not!” (Jn 6:20)—recalls similar expressions of divine reassurance in the oracles of Deutero-Isaiah (Is 41:10; 43:5, 10). In the book of Sirach, Lady Sophia promises her devotees that the acquisition of wisdom engenders a desire for still more wisdom: “Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more” (Sir 24:21). In the bread of life dialogue, however, the Johannine Jesus turns this statement on its head in order to indicate that he is the definitive Wisdom, who gives perfect satisfaction: “The one who comes to me will hunger no more, and the one who believes in me will never again thirst” (Jn 6:35).

Though all the action in John 6 takes place in Galilee, the evangelist makes a special point of noting that these things occurred when “Passover, the feast of the Jews, was near” (v 4).⁷⁶ This statement hearkens back to the cleansing of the Jerusalem temple, which according to John’s chronology took place at a previous Passover at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry (2:13), while it simultaneously anticipates the later Passover in Jerusalem that is the setting of Jesus’s passion (11:55; 12:1; 13:1; 18:28, 39; 19:14). This two-way linkage contributes to the sense that the miracle of the loaves is a pivotal event in Jesus’s ministry—the fourth of seven “signs”—while it relates the events and words of chapter 6 to John’s overarching presentation of Jesus as the “Lamb of God” (1:29, 36; 19:36). The “flesh” that the Word takes to himself in the incarnation is the very flesh that he gives as “bread for the life of the world” on the Cross (1:14; 6:51).

⁷⁶ The availability of barley loaves and the abundance of green grass may also suggest a setting in early spring (6:9–10; cf. Mk 6:39).

As Christological sign, therefore, the miracle of the loaves simultaneously points back to the incarnation and ahead to the paschal mystery. John, then, relates the sign of the loaves to the entire career of the Son of Man, who “came down from heaven, not to do [his] own will but the will of the one who sent [him]” (v 38), and who is “ascending to where he was previously” in order to make available the “life-giving” Spirit (vv 62–63; cf. 7:39).

John 6 relates the sign of the loaves and fishes, not only to the story of Israel and to the Christ event as a whole but also to the life of the Church. “The twelve,” including four named members of the group, play an unusually prominent role in this chapter, which can be read almost as a kind of treatise on faith and discipleship. Jesus involves Philip and Andrew in the miracle itself, not because he needs their help but in order to “test” them (vv 5–13). Then, in the synagogue discourse he explains at some length that only those who are drawn by the Father can come to the Son, and only those who believe in the Son have eternal life (vv 37–40, 44–47). When “many of his disciples” are scandalized by his teaching and fall away, Jesus directly challenges the twelve concerning their commitment to him (vv 60–67). Speaking on behalf of the group, Peter makes his great confession of faith, but Jesus ominously points out that even within his specially chosen group of twelve there is “a devil” who will betray him (vv 68–71).

Moreover, by placing some emphasis on the Lord’s having “given thanks” (εὐχαριστήσας), John drops an initial hint that the multiplication of loaves and fishes is a type of the Eucharist (vv 11, 23) and thus prepares us for the explicit teaching on the Eucharist with which the synagogue discourse culminates (vv 52–58). The connection between miracle and sacrament lies not so much in the simple fact that both involve bread as it does in the fact that the former signifies the revelation and “life” that come into the world in the person and event of Jesus Christ, while the latter is the mode by which that life is available to the Church in all places and times. The crucial link between the two is the paschal mystery: Jesus gives his “flesh” as “bread for the life of the world” upon the Cross, so that his disciples may receive this same flesh in the Eucharist (vv 51–53).

In the last analysis, “life” is the unifying theme of John 6. In its mundane dimension the meal of loaves and fishes is merely “the food

that perishes,” but for those with faith it signifies “the food that remains for eternal life” (v 27). In the Fourth Gospel “life” designates the true and definitive revelation of the Father, which is uniquely present in and through the person and event of the incarnate Son. Revelation is “life” because it brings one into knowledge of “the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom [he has] sent,” and this knowledge is the very essence of eternal life (17:3). As Word made flesh, Jesus is “the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (6:33). This life or revelation is present in his teaching, which, because it consists in “words of eternal life” (v 68), is qualitatively superior to the Mosaic law. The latter had its own sign in the gift of the manna, which the ancestors “ate in the wilderness and yet died” (v 49). The life or revelation that is present in Jesus’s words is present also in the deeds, or “signs,” by which he does “the will” of the one who sent him (vv 38–40), above all in the great sign of the Son of Man’s being “lifted up” on the Cross (3:14–15; 8:28; 12:32, 34). Finally, it is sacramentally available to those who “eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood” in the Eucharist (6:53).

The gift of life or revelation that is definitive within the historical economy is by definition also eschatological, and so it should come as no surprise that eschatology is woven throughout John 6. The particular accent that John places on the superabundance of loaves and fishes may harken back to those prophetic oracles that present the eschatological blessing as a meal of great abundance (vv 11–13; cf. Is 25:6; 55:1–3).⁷⁷ Jesus himself is this meal, “the bread of life” (6:35, 48). As is well known, Johannine eschatology combines a realized dimension with a future dimension. The one who believes in Jesus already “has eternal life” (v 47), and Jesus himself “will raise him up on the last day” (v 40). These two complementary dimensions are frequently mentioned throughout the main part of the synagogue discourse, which presents Jesus himself as the bread of life and faith as the mode of access to that life (vv 32–51), but the same two dimensions of eschatology are, if anything, even more emphatically present in the Eucharistic portion of the discourse, and in the very same terms (vv 53–58).⁷⁸ “The one who chews my flesh and

⁷⁷ Keener, *Gospel of John*, 668.

⁷⁸ This suggests that faith in the historical Jesus and reception of the Eucharist are two equally essential, fully integral, and entirely compatible aspects of the disciple’s

drinks my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day” (v 54). The Eucharist is, then, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet (v 58).

In sum, the narrative of John 6 presents the multiplication of the loaves as a “sign” (vv 14, 26), a term that is for all intents and purposes the Johannine equivalent of *mysterium*. John illuminates this event’s place within a complex web of economically interrelated events and in the process spreads before our eyes almost the whole economy of redemption: from Mosaic law, to prophecy and wisdom, to Christ event, to the life of the Church, to “the last day.” The foregoing analysis is meant to provide an example of how the evangelists bring literary artistry to the service of the *mysteria vitae Iesu*, viewed precisely as “economic” realities.

According to *Dei Verbum*, “the Church unhesitatingly asserts” the “historical character” (*historicitatem*) of the four Gospels. At the same time, she recognizes quite clearly their literary character, noting that the evangelists “select[ed] some things from the many which had been handed on by word of mouth or in writing, reduc[ed] some of them to a synthesis, explain[ed] some things in view of the situation of their churches, and preserv[ed] the form of proclamation” (§19). A careful comparison of the four Gospels leads to the unavoidable conclusion that the evangelists exercised a considerable degree of literary license. For example, they could insert a saying of Jesus into an entirely new context, conflate two or more events into a single account, or even change one demoniac into two demoniacs!⁷⁹ To be sure, the evangelists “faithfully hand on what Jesus Christ . . . really did and taught” (*Dei Verbum* §19),

adherence to Christ. The particularly solemn negative formulation of v 53—“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life within you”—may well warn against treating the Eucharist as somehow secondary or unessential.

⁷⁹ E.g., Matthew reworks the logion about sitting with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God and inserts it into his account of the healing of the centurion’s servant in order to sharpen the contrast between gentile faith and Jewish unbelief (Mt 8:11–12; cf. Lk 7:1–10, 13:28–29). John’s account of the anointing at Bethany (Jn 12:1–8) combines elements from two rather different anointing stories from the Synoptic tradition (cf. Mk 14:3–9; Lk 7:36–50). Matthew changes Mark’s one demoniac to two (Mt 8:28–34; cf. Mk 5:1–20), just as he also turns blind Bartimaeus into two blind men (Mt 20:29–34; cf. Mk 10:46–52) and has Jesus enter Jerusalem on two donkeys rather than one (Mt 21:1–11; cf. Mk 11:1–11)!

but the Gospels are for all that very far from supplying us with raw video of Jesus's ministry.

It is quite understandable that faithful Christians would be put on the defensive by the shenanigans of the Jesus Seminar, but any attempt to "defend" the Gospels by means of the implausible harmonization of surface details is entirely wrongheaded, for such a procedure buys into the truncated notion of event that is the root of our problem.⁸⁰ The evangelists employ literary artistry, with its fictive dimension, in order to draw out and display something of the event's economic significance.

In order to draw these reflections to a conclusion, I shall attempt to sum up what is going on in John 6 in terms of the unity of word and event. In the incarnation the eternal Logos entered the world of space and time, the inherently λογικός world that he himself had created. In order to act personally within this world, he assumed a λογικός humanity, which was created *ad imaginem Dei*, and he made it the apt instrument of his divine personhood. In this concrete humanity, Israelite "flesh" drawn from a daughter of Israel, he entered the current of Israelite history and human history at a particular point in space and time. That current carried within it all that made Israel Israel: the cultural influences of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Canaan, and Greece; the virtues and vices of patriarchs, prophets, and kings; exodus, statehood, and exile; the exultant canticle of Hannah and the wordless martyrdom of Naboth; "many partial and varied" words of Yahweh, intrinsically interconnected with his marvelous deeds; a liturgical calendar replete with ancient rites and inspired psalms; and so forth. He walked among a people who were the product of this powerful current of history and culture, and he took upon himself their sins. Meanwhile every authentic trajectory of prophecy and piety from Israel's past found its telos in his ministry.

On the mountain in Galilee Jesus served this people a miraculously abundant meal, and in the synagogue at Capernaum he taught them the

⁸⁰ For a brief account of the work of the Jesus Seminar, see H. K. McArthur and R. F. Berkey, "Jesus, Quest of the Historical," in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, 2 vols., ed. John H. Hayes (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), 1:583–84. For a well-intentioned but wrongheaded attempt to defend the inerrancy of the Gospels by means of an implausible harmonization of surface details, see Karl Keating, *What Catholics Really Believe—Setting the Record Straight: 52 Answers to Common Misconceptions about the Catholic Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 34–36.

significance of the sign—words and deeds intrinsically interconnected. In fact, the barley loaves signify his teaching itself, “words of everlasting life” that are more truly manna from heaven than was the Mosaic law. The loaves signify the Logos himself, come down from heaven in the incarnation. They signify his flesh, which he gives as bread for the life of the world—historically in his passion, sacramentally in the Eucharist, eschatologically in the Resurrection on the last day.

Decades after the event, which by that time had already found its way into three Gospels, John the evangelist, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, composed his own unique account, combining pre-Markan, synoptic-like tradition with the unique perspective of the beloved disciple. John’s concern was not to represent the event *wie es eigentlich geschehen war* but to disclose and make available its vertical dimension and its economic character, and to this end he exercised literary license. But John’s narrative itself also has an economic character, for inspired Scripture plays its own proper role within the economy of redemption. In it the word-event of the multiplication of loaves and fishes is present in a new modality. It has become an event-word. The Holy Gospels are themselves living bread, the Church’s daily bread, because they put us in touch with the person and event of Jesus Christ. 