

# Two Steps to Go Beyond the Divide Between Theology and Exegesis

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Olivier-Thomas Venard

ÉCOLE BIBLIQUE ET ARCHÉOLOGIQUE FRANÇAISE

(ST STEPHEN'S PRIORY, NABLUS ROAD 83-85, IL— 9119001 JERUSALEM)

**RESUMEN** La Revelación Bíblica es histórica porque es literaria. Como literatura la Biblia se manifiesta de manera única como radiación de lo divino a través del lenguaje de verdaderos poetas: la encarnación del Verbo en Cristo redime el *verba* humano perdido en la mentira. Por medio de enseñanzas específicas, transmitió a sus discípulos la habilidad de hablar como él; ellos, a su vez, produjeron el Nuevo Testamento como clave para integrar los cánones de la escritura que lo precedían. Con una renovada conciencia de lo que significa hablar y escribir, la teología y la exégesis se podían unir de nuevo para constatar la presencia divina que atraviesa la escritura. Esto es de suma importancia para producir una poesía del Espíritu Santo o una poesía divina, la cual debería ser la base de cualquier teología respetable.

**PALABRAS CLAVE** Exégesis y teología, Revelación y poesía, Historia y literatura, Inspiración, Fenomenología de la lectura de la escritura, Cristología poética, Teo-lingüística, Teoría enunciativa, Cristología del AT.

**SUMMARY** *Biblical revelation is historical because it is literary. Qua literature the Bible it manifests in a unique way the radiation of the divine through the language of real poets: the incarnation of the Verbum in Christ redeems the human verba lost in lie. Along specific teachings, he was passing on to his followers the skill of speaking like him: they produced the New Testament, as the key to integrating the canon of scriptures that preceded it. With a renewed awareness of what speaking and writing mean, theology and exegesis could unite again to inventory the divine presence throughout Scripture. This is tantamount to producing a poetics of the Holy Spirit, or divine poetics, which should be the basis of any self-respecting theology.*

**KEYWORDS** *Exegesis and Theology, Revelation and Poetics, History and Literature, Inspiration, Phenomenology of Scriptural reading, Poetic Christology, Theo-linguistics, Enunciative Theory, Christology of the OT.*

## INTRODUCTION: "... VERBISQUE"

In order to overcome the divide between theology and exegesis, some of our colleagues rightly ask for changes in the attitude of the exegetes themselves. Some invite them to acknowledge their ecclesial setting. Others reflect on the very praxis of exegesis construed as a human *Antwort* to the divine *Wort*, hence producing "positive theology," not mere "historical theology." I propose here to take a step closer to the book of Scripture itself, and, beyond the readers and their readings, to focus on the text itself in order to rediscover its unique character as divine literature.

The dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* recalled that in the history of salvation transmitted by the Bible, God spoke *gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis*<sup>1</sup>. Bridging the gap between theology and exegesis implies a profound re-reading of this traditional account of *œconomia revelationis*: it means overcoming an inveterate denial of poetics as one of the means by which God reveals himself.

The *verba* in question are not only signs or representations of the *gesta*. By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., history had become the dominant discipline of Western culture, so that the words (*verba*) tended to be reduced to being (ideally) transparent to (historical) facts (*gesta*). At this time, what Hans-Georg Gadamer later on diagnosed as the "oblivion of language" was at its acme, that is: the cultural prejudice consisting in reducing words to be transparent signs of reality, *in privileging language as representation over language as power*<sup>2</sup>. Yet, Scripture inverts this hierarchy. It unfolds a universe where language dominates reality, speech action, and *verbum esse*, from the beginning of Genesis, where God creates the world through/in/by the Word, up to the end of Revelation, where God rips out heaven, earth and sea as one tears the page of a book, passing through its most incandescent point: the historical incarnation of the Word, His diffraction in human words and inscripturation in the Bible<sup>3</sup>.

1 CONCILE ŒCUMÉNIQUE VATICAN II, "Constitution dogmatique Dei Verbum sur la Révélation divine. 18 novembre 1965": *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis* 58 (1966) 817-830, 2.

2 H.-G. GADAMER, *Vérité et méthode: les grandes lignes d'une herméneutique philosophique* (*Wahrheit und Methode. Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik* [Mohr-Siebeck, Tübingen 1960]), transl. J. GRONDIN – G. MERLJO (Seuil, Paris 1996) 431-451.

3 Cf. G. LINDBECK, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville 1984) 118; O-Th. VENARD, *Pagina sacra: le passage de l'Écriture sainte à l'écriture théologique* (Thomas d'Aquin, poète-théologien 3; Cerf- Ad Solem, Paris 2009) 254.

The *gesta* in question refer as much to transmission of the *verba* throughout space and time, as to the very events told in texts. The irreducible diversity of textual versions, as well as, in each version, the “rustling” of the text<sup>4</sup> — from the plain lacuna to the most illogical passage, passing through all kinds of “corruptions” and other accidents in the oral or written handing over of the text— share in the Word of God in its historical communication<sup>5</sup>. These cultural “events”, unspectacular though they may be, belong to the historical communication of God’s Word. When Augustine says “*in manibus nostris sunt codices, in oculis nostris facta*”<sup>6</sup> he does not only present *codices* on the one hand and *facta* on the other one; he also points to *the fact of the codices*.

Oblivion of language prevents us from acknowledging the efficiency of the text itself. Exegetes and theologians like to remind that Scripture is but a (representative) trace of revelation; and that Christianity is not a religion of the book<sup>7</sup>— which is right. Yet, it is a religion *with* a Book. In Christianity, the books of Scriptures are not only an *expression* of faith, but also one of its major *constituents*. Ever since its earliest textual witnesses, resurrection is proclaimed “according to Scriptures”<sup>8</sup>: the Jewish idiom, already present in the most archaic form of the creed, links inextricably the word of Jesus, the word of the evangelists, and the word of God inasmuch as it is given in Scripture. The Bible is not a crystallized tool of revelation, but rather an interactive witness borne to it. Unfortunately, the oblivion of language, already deeply rooted in ecclesiastical circles, made its way to the magisterium, which downplays the sensory dimension of the construction of meaning and tends to treat revelation as a set of ideas enclosed in historical documents, only to be “actualized” through exegetical and pastoral strategies<sup>9</sup>.

4 Cf. R. BARTHES, *The Rustle of Language (Le bruissement de la langue* [Seuil, Paris 1984]), Engl. transl. R. HOWARD (University of California Press, Berkeley 1989).

5 J. K. GORDON, *Divine Scripture In Human Understanding. A Systematic Theology Of The Christian Bible* (Reading the Scriptures; University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame IN 2019).

6 AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, “Sermo sancti Augustini cum pagani ingrederentur”: *Sermones* 360 /B, 20.

7 GORDON, *Divine Scripture In Human Understanding*, esp. chap. 5-6. Yet G. G. STROUMSA, “Early Christianity: A Religion of the Book?” (“El Cristianismo en sus orígenes: Una religión del libro?": *'Ilu: Revista de Ciencias de las Religiones* 7 [2002] 121-139), in: M. FINKELBERG – G. G. STROUMSA (éd.), *Homer, the Bible and Beyond: Literary and Religious Canons in the Ancient World* (Jerusalem Studies in Religion and Culture 2; Brill, Leiden 2003) 153-173.

8 E.g. 1Co 15: 3-4.

9 T. ROWLAND, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (Routledge, Oxford 2003), stresses a cultural eclipse within the Catholic hierarchy: stuck in the modern and late modern periods, the Magisterium does not meet the challenge of the

In particular, the overall historical turn in biblical studies in the mid-20th c. led to the impossibility of fathoming literal meaning. Indeed, the expression “literal meaning,” born in a polemical context,<sup>10</sup> has no proper meaning: various factors have brought it closer to either history or literature like a curve between two asymptotes<sup>11</sup>.

Close to the historical asymptote, one understands the literal meaning as the referent simply intended by the text, read as a description of real things and events. Of course, one has to take into account the psychological factor involved in any statement: literal is the meaning that the author of the text wanted to convey to the recipients of his time... Close to the textual asymptote, the literal sense is potentially any meaning that the *litera* of the text produces. It is the whole of the effects of meaning elicitable from the signifiers organized in the text. Any utterance is loaded with multiple meanings which escape the conscious intention of its speaker, but to which the speakers consent by the simple fact that they agree to use language at all (one thinks here of the detestable words of Caiaphas in John, which, according to the evangelist, contained nothing less than the redeeming Word of God)<sup>12</sup>. The closer one gets to the psycho-historical asymptote, the more one looks for meaning in the off-text of a reconstructed referent (historical context, situation of the characters, communicative intention of the author), at the risk of dissolving the revelation in unverifiable historical reconstitutions. The closer one gets to the textual asymptote, the more one tends to lock oneself into the universe of the text itself, at the risk of confusing revelation with fiction.

By adopting the definition of the literal sense as the meaning that the human authors wanted to convey to readership in their time<sup>13</sup>—something that can at best be approximated as a historical/psychological reconstruction, often the occasion of the “intentional fallacy”—, while maintaining with Aquinas that

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post-modern era, by lack of a proper theory and theology of language and cultural mediations.

10 Cf. 2 Cor 3:6 as commented by G. TATUM, “The Letter Kills, the Spirit Gives Life (2 Cor 3:6)”, in: O.-Th VENARD (dir.), *Le sens littéral de l'Écriture*. (Lectio divina-hors série; Cerf, Paris 2009) 153-160.

11 For more details on this mapping of the meaning of literal meaning see our “Problématique du sens littéral”, in: VENARD, *Sens littéral*, 293-353.

12 John 11:48-52.

13 *Dei Verbum* 12.

the only sense on which sound theology must be built was the literal one, the magisterium weakened the whole of dogmatic theology<sup>14</sup>.

In fact, *gestis verbisque* revelation takes place both in history and in literature. Scripture mixes fictional and historical compositions. Biblical “truth” concerns the salvation of the soul, thus of humanity and the world<sup>15</sup>, and not historical or scientific accuracy. It has as much to do with the interiority of life (reflected and catalyzed by literary fiction), as with what we today call “historical truth” (conditioned by the exteriority of vestiges of the past in the world). This is why biblical exegesis must concern itself as much with literary questions as with historical ones.

Centered on the Incarnation of the divine *Dabar*, *Memra*, *Logos* or *Verbum* as the hinge between the two Testaments, the Bible as the Word of God emphasizes that revelation —the reciprocal involution of Scripture and Tradition— occurs in “literary space”<sup>16</sup>, neither external nor internal, neither subjective nor objective, neither purely material nor purely formal, in which form and matter, signified and signifiers, history and literature, all of which communicate with each other. It comes as no surprise that the adequate category one of the finest literary historians of the twentieth century coined to describe the Gospel is “a true myth,” or “a myth that actually happened”<sup>17</sup>.

Therefore, we propose here, first, to rediscover that the Bible is a literary text, it is poetically inspired; second, to rediscover Scripture how the Bible is divinely inspired, *qua* witness to- and provider of- divine revelation, that is: *qua* sacrament<sup>18</sup>. The first step is more theoretical, the second, more exegetical. In conclusion, we will try to clarify the epistemology, simultaneously scholarly and religious, of our exegetical and theological journey.

14 Fr. GONÇALVES, “Enjeux et possibilités de la quête du dens historique originaire. Est-ce la même chose que le sens littéral ?”, in: VENARD, *Sens littéral*, 47-74.

15 DV2.

16 Cf. M. BLANCHOT, *L'espace littéraire* (Gallimard, Paris 1955).

17 W. HAMILTON LEWIS – H. WALTER (eds.), *Letters of C.S. Lewis* (Collins/Fount paperbacks, London 1988) 286-289.

18 P. A. SEQUERI, “Recensione di: I. Carbajosa, *De la fe nace la exègese*”: *EstBib* 70 (2012) 272-274, here 274 alludes to this sacramentality of the text: “Exegesis would have much to say if it questioned the text witnessing to revelation] precisely in order to recognize the way in which it intends to make possible the faith that must understand it: to arouse it, to correct it, to instruct it [conform it?]. There is, in fact, a theology of the letter which, insofar as it is a doctrine of the Spirit who vivifies, ensures a more adequate respect for the text”.

## I. SCRIPTURE IS LITERATURE

The first three points Ignacio Carbajosa makes about hermeneutics applied to the Bible shed much light on the literary nature of Scripture. For example, saying that, as a witness to revelation, Scripture retains the nature of an event occurring *hic et nunc* and engaging the freedom of its reader<sup>19</sup>, is describing it as a literary text with its illocutionary effects and performative efficacy.

### 1. LITERATURE IS A QUESTION OF SIGNIFIER AND THE DIVINE

I derive here the adjective *literary* from the noun *literature*. I do not give it the sociological meaning it often has in exegetical circles — that of the textual production of a given social group. I define *literature* here as a textual production regulated by a poetics, for which the signifier and the language are values in themselves, and which supposes a kind of inspiration. To read and interpret literary texts is to deal with texts that, *primo*, implement techniques of verbal creation; *secundo*, beyond any technological or profane treatment of a set of verbal productions, keep the language under the pressure of the realism of the divine.

Literary methods using narratology or rhetoric obviously deal with the first characteristic, but the second is probably less familiar to most exegetes, imbued as they are with the secular mindset. To use a well-known title, “the love of letters” is linked to the “desire for God”<sup>20</sup>. Modernity and postmodernity have become aware of this in a sense of loss. For example, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century poets of genius such as Hölderlin, Rimbaud, and Bonnefoy<sup>21</sup> discovered in retrospect how profoundly the human word had been restored and consolidated in the Christian era, after the gospel had witnessed the incarnation of

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19 I. CARBAJOSA, *De la fe nace la exégesis. La interpretación de la Escritura a la luz de la historia de la investigación sobre el Antiguo Testamento* (Estudios Bíblicos 43; Verbo Divino, Estella 2011) 143.

20 J. LECLERCQ, *The love of learning and the desire for God: a study of monastic culture* (*L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* [Cerf, Paris 1957]), transl. C. MISRAHI (Fordham University Press, New York 1982).

21 S. GUERMÉS, “La poésie d'Yves Bonnefoy: une nouvelle alliance”, in: D. MILLET-GÉRARD (ed.), *Le Lys et la langue* (Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, Paris 1998) 45-58.

the Word. As the age of faith waned, these artists in search of the lost Word dreamed of a new incarnation<sup>22</sup>.

Literary critics too have been haunted by the question of God. The existence and presence of an ultimate normative instance of meaning that keeps human speech from arbitrariness and absurdity can be described phenomenologically. One of the last giants of Christian humanism in France, Alain Michel, summarized his journey through hundreds of authors from Antiquity to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. in these words:

All thought, all intuition, all image, all discourse of reason and all act of the intellect, carry together in themselves the infinite and the form, which coincide only in the divine being. We have to live this dialogue. Each of our thoughts carries within it this anguish and this joy. We cannot do without eternity...<sup>23</sup>.

Another witness to this real presence of the divine in literature is Georges Steiner. He detects it not only in literary works, but in any meaningful word:

Rarely observed is the act, the tenor of trust which underlies, which literally underwrites the linguistic-discursive substance of our Western, Hebraic-Attic experience. Often unregarded, because so evidently resistant to formalization, is the core of trust within logic itself, where “logic” is a *Logos*-derivative and construct. There would be no history as we know it, no religion, metaphysics, politics or aesthetics as we have lived them, without an initial act of trust, of confiding, more fundamental, more axiomatic by far than any “social contract” or covenant with the postulate of the divine. This instauration of trust, this entrance of man into the city of man, is that between word and world<sup>24</sup>.

22 O.-Th. VENARD, “Language that wanted to make itself as strong as the Word,” chap. 6, in: *Id.*, *A Poetic Christ. Thomist Reflections on Scripture, Language and Reality*, transl. by K. OAKES – FR. ARAN MURPHY (Illuminating Modernity, Bloomsbury, New-York 2019) 184-198.

23 A. MICHEL, *Théologiens et mystiques au Moyen Âge, La Poétique de Dieu, V<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Garnier-Flammarion, Paris 1997) 702.

24 G. STEINER, *Réelles présences: Les arts du sens (Real presences: Is there anything in what we say?)* [Faber and Faber, London 1989], transl. M. R. DE PAUW (Nrf essais; Gallimard, Paris 1991) 117.

Because they study biblical texts as literary works of art, not just as ancient documents, literary methods offer several ways to reconcile exegesis and authority. They provide exegesis in faith with four structuring principles. First, the principle of the unity of the Bible is the reading hypothesis demanded by the work itself, as the theory of Northrop Frye as well as the semiotics of François Martin<sup>25</sup> have shown; it does not only result from the disciplinary decisions on the Canon.

Yet the “structural reading” required by such a unity must be dynamically nuanced by canonical approaches, which link it to a second principle, that of the traditional reading: the reciprocal relationship of the Bible with the communities which produced and transmit it requires that exegesis go through the history of reception in order to inventory and devise its meanings<sup>26</sup>.

Thirdly, the principle of the reader’s responsibility has an epistemological value in secular literary criticism, well established by Steiner when he calls readers of literature masterpieces to “responsible reading” and “courtesy”<sup>27</sup>.

Lastly, literary methods allow to better establish the principle of typological reading. In fact, typology is considerably enriched by the redefinition of the “figurative reading” operated by semiotics. The passage from the Old Testament “figure” to the New Testament “reality” had been overly simplified in biblical hermeneutics marked by the positivist culture (practically, the first had become a kind of signifier of the second, conceived as its signified). The study of “figurativity” in the New Testament shows that in reality, it does not abolish, but rather disseminates, the figures of the Old Testament<sup>28</sup>. The New

25 Fr. MARTIN, *Pour une théologie de la lettre: L'inspiration des Écritures (Cogitatio Fidei)*, 193), (Cerf, Paris 1996) 113: “An internal movement in the Christian Bible is thus designated. What we have called ‘the letter’ above belongs essentially (though no doubt not exclusively) to the immanence of the Old Testament Scriptures. It is that which [...] supports the reading of any literary work beyond the circumstances of time and place of its own writing. [...] The Book, insofar as it is inspired, is built, among other things, around the problematic relationship of a signifying object (Old Testament) with its interpretation (New Testament). In short: the question of the inspiration of the Scriptures is posed because they raise at the same time the question of their reading: the impact of the letter on the subject who receives it”.

26 H. R. JAUSS, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik*, t.1: *Versuche im Feld der ästhetischen Erfahrung*. (Uni-Taschenbücher 692; Fink, München 1977).

27 STEINER, *Réelles présences*, 212-213.

28 J. DELORME, “Orientations of a Literary Semiotics Questioned by the Bible”: *Semeia. An Experimental Journal for Biblical Criticism* (Scholars Press, Atlanta 2000) 47: “What was revealed by the interplay of (semiotic) figures during their passage from the Old Testament to the New is less the ‘reality’ that would be hidden in the Old Testament than the veil that was covering these obvious ‘realities’ but which was not perceived. The warning against the temptation to identify a figure and



Testament does not pulverize the figures, but organizes them around the center of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ on the cross, the very “center of the figure” of revelation (Balthasar), the “point of anamorphosis” of the whole scriptural weaving of figures (François Martin). Like their Jewish fellows, Christians remain *viatores* until the eschatological Encounter.

## 2. CONSEQUENCES IN THE WORK OF THE EXEGETES

In our quest for a scientific exegesis that promotes faith, literary approaches have much to inspire us, both positively and critically.

### a. Positively

Many practitioners of “literary approaches” retain the same positivist mindset as when they perform historical criticism. Too often, still claiming to use scientific tools, simply substituting protocols from linguistics for those of historical criticism, they seek to determine *the* meaning of the text. To counter this rationalist prejudice, at least four fields of research can help us to better take into account all five functions of language<sup>29</sup>, without being obsessed with referentiality.

First, since literature is all about language and wording, historical critical tools such as textual criticism and comparison of versions help to recover a better sense of the importance of the signifier in matters biblical.

The diversity of biblical texts uncovered among the Dead Sea scrolls, and the fresh appraisal of traditional versions which ensued among textual critics invite us to celebrate the textuality of Scripture. They retrieve the traditional appreciation of the murkiness of the signifier beyond the neoclassicism inherited from St. Jerome who tended to favor the signified over the signifier

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what it represents is strong. This dialectic of the veiled/manifested affects in turn the manifested ‘realities’ of the New Testament. The detour by the Old Testament ‘types’ warns the reader that the veil can remain in their mind, as long as the promise of the Encounter remains, until they notice, like Jacob upon his awakening, ‘יְהוָה הוּא בְּמָקוֹם זֶה וְאֲנִי לֹא יָדָעְתִּי’.

29 Classically exposed by R. JAKOBSON, “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics”, in: Th. A. SEBEOK (éd.), *Style in Language* (MIT, 1960) 350-377, then *Essais de linguistique générale* (Paris 1963) chap. 11.

and to choose the clearest texts<sup>30</sup>, whereas ancient translators compiled the variants<sup>31</sup>. Providentially, the canon of inspired literature encompasses many Old Latin texts, not revised by Jerome or his followers: as if Tradition had made sure that “not a single crumb” (Jn 6:12) of the holy words be lost.

The rustlings of the sacred text are not always corruptions to be corrected, they may be bringing about revelation. The murkiness of literary communication (its polysemy resulting from quiproquos, enunciative ambiguities, and more generally from the sensorial dimension of any meaning making) actually echoes the inescapability of history, with all its relativity, in any reasonable speech about the living God, at the same time as, through dissemblance, it symbolizes His transcendence. There is a profound analogy between Jesus who refused any ‘all too human’ identification (*qua* messiah, king, master, or prophet), and Scripture *qua* Word of God which resists any human all too human reduction (be it ecclesiastic).

The original multiplicity of the biblical text is not a fate but a fact, it is not something to be overcome by magisterial or scientific authority, but something to be celebrated: indeed “God has spoken once, twice I have heard” (Ps 62:11)! This means that reading the Bible *qua* Word of God is listening to a polyphony, which must not be reduced to a simple melody. In order to reeducate our ears to listen to this rhapsodic beauty, it will be important to listen also to philosophers or literary artists who deal with the Bible. Over against the pretension to determine *the* meaning, they help exegetes to complicate, rather than explicate, the meanings of the texts. Up to the present day, the making of the Bible through continuous and diverse appropriations has always been interactive, from the ancient parchment to contemporary multimedia databases,

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30 Nuances in Ch. RICO, *Le traducteur de Bethléem: le génie interprétatif de saint Jérôme à l'aune de la linguistique* (Lectio Divina 270; Cerf, Paris 2016).

31 The Lucianic Greek text tends to conflate variants: J. TREBOLLE BARRERA, “Readings of the Old Latin (Beuron 91-95) reflecting ‘additions’ of the Antiochene text in 3-4 Kingdoms”, in: A. AEJMELAEUS – T. KALUHANEN (eds.), *The legacy of Barthélemy: 50 years after ‘Les Devanciers d’Aquila’* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, Bristol Conn. 2017) 120-145. So does the Old Latin, cf. J. TREBOLLE BARRERA, “The contribution of the Old Latin to the reconstruction of the Old Greek of Judges and Kings: ‘doublets’ and ‘additions’ of the Antiochene text missing in the Old Latin”, in: *Id.*, *Textual and Literary Criticism of the Books of Kings: Collected Essays* (Brill, Leiden - Boston Mass. 2020) 317-348, esp. section 2.1.1: “Double Readings of the Antiochene Texte Reflected in the Old Latin,” 33-34.

passing through the medieval gloss and the Renaissance polyglot. This is what a popular author has called the “liquidity” of the Scriptures<sup>32</sup>.

Second, phenomenology applied to the reading of Scripture helps us rediscover that the Bible itself, like any other work of art or particular objects “themselves call for a certain gaze”:

Even on a natural level, the gaze is never univocal or sovereign, for each thing establishes its own protocols of vision. The mastery dreamed of by modern subjectivity is unmasked even by mundane cases of the sense of sight. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty explains, “for each object, as for each picture in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it requires to be seen”<sup>33</sup>. The same is true of texts, according to Jean-Louis Chrétien: “any book contains indications about the appropriate way to read it; ‘readers are themselves read by the books they read’<sup>34</sup>.

As in all cases of reading, we cannot bring with us an *a priori* gaze; on the contrary, it is Scripture that teaches us how it should be read. This protocol for reading embedded in any literary work has been theorized as its “metaliterary dimension,” which is the expansion, at the scale of the text, of the metalinguistic function of language: its explicit and implicit self-thematizations as a piece of literature. What has still to be done is an inventory, a typology of the metaliterary passages of the Bible, book by book, from the most explicit auctorial statements to the mere plays on the signifier, going through the staging of acts of production or reception of words, oral or written and the lessons it brings to the reader. Such inventory has hardly started yet,

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32 P. THOME, *The Liquid Bible: Recapturing the Flow of the Great Story of God* (Booksurge Publishing, 2009). With its international, interdisciplinary, interreligious and interactive online workshops, after centuries of rather static “printed” communication, our research program in Jerusalem, The Bible in its Traditions, orchestrates that “liquidity” by inviting scribes and readers to transmitting them in digital communities interacting in real time with the text and with each other: see [bibletraditions.org](http://bibletraditions.org).

33 M. MERLEAU-PONTY, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, London 2005) 302. Cf. A. Y. WELLS (ed.), *Phenomenologies of Scripture. Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* (Fordham University Press, New York 2017); T. TROUTNER, “A Phenomenology of Scripture’s Gaze and the Blindnesses of the Historical-Critical Method”: *Church Life Journal, A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life* (Notre Dame University, IN); online <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu>, March 29, 2022.

34 J.-L. CHRÉTIEN, *Under the Gaze of the Bible (Sous le regard de la Bible* [Philosophie; Bayard, Paris 2008]), transl. J. MARSON DUNAWAY (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy; Fordham, New York 2008) 1, ix.

with a few exceptions<sup>35</sup>. It will help us to detect the pressure of the divine on biblical literature: from Genesis to Hebrews, textuality as such makes us sense eternity, by summoning an *bodie* transcending time and space<sup>36</sup>. Our ambition should be to elaborate the “poetics of God”<sup>37</sup>.

Thirdly, what is at stake, here, as Ignacio Carbajosa points out in his contribution to our symposium, is to help readers actualizing the original experience of revelation witnessed to by the inspired textuality. The Scriptures are not only poetry or narratives, the static products of ancient authors; they also entail a *poiesis*, an *ars poetica*, hence they invite their readers to experience their performativity. Before Philip called you, while you were exploring the Torah, I saw you (cf. John 1:48): when we read reading the Bible in the biblical way, our gaze is met by a gaze which awakens in the text and acts on us readers.

Here again, major contributions come from the borderlands of exegesis or theology with other disciplines. Agamben, after Derrida, describes the properly verbal consequences of faith in the messiah, in particular the textual fusion of apocalyptic and eschatology when the messianic word inaugurates the *parousia* of the glorified Christ in Paul<sup>38</sup> (cf. also John 21:22-23). Even more decisive is Michel Henry’s “phenomenology of life” dialoguing with historical criticism and patristics in John Behr’s recent book on John<sup>39</sup>.

Fourthly, reception history is more than an intellectual fashion of our time. By describing the actual effects of the text on its readers and on the world, it helps us to better approach Scripture as the interactive text that it indeed is (both produced by, and producing, faith).

35 J. P. SONNET, “Lorsque Moïse eut achevé d’écrire” (Dt 31, 24): une ‘théorie narrative’ de l’écriture dans le Pentateuque”: *Recherches de sciences religieuses* 90 (2002) 509-524; O.-Th. VENARD, “La parole comme enjeu narratif et théologique dans la passion selon saint Matthieu: un commentaire littéraire de Mt 26-28”: *Revue Biblique* 115/1 (2008) 56-96.

36 Heb. 3:7-8,12-13; VENARD, “The Rule of the Word over History: The ‘Textual Dimension’ and the Primacy of Language in the Gospels,” in: *Id.*, *Poetic Christ*, 25-32.

37 This is the subtitle of MICHEL, *Théologiens et mystiques*.

38 G. AGAMBEN, *Le temps qui reste. Un commentaire de l’Épître aux Romains (Il tempo che resta: un commento alla Lettera ai Romani)* [Saggi; Bollati boringhieri, Turin 2000], transl. J. REVEL (Rivages poche – Petite bibliothèque; Rivages, Paris 2000).

39 Cf. J. BEHR, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford University Press, New York – Oxford 2019), and O.-Th. VENARD, “On Flesh and Words,” in: Ph. CARY – P. SAIEG (eds.), *Symposium on John Behr, etc. Pro Ecclesia: A Journal of Catholic and Evangelical Theology* 29.3 (May 2020) 169-189 ; online <https://doi.org/10.1177/>.

Together with the comparison of versions mentioned above, the study of biblical intertextuality constitute the first two steps of a true history of biblical reception: it is necessary to rediscover that the “fulfillment of the Scriptures” was a practice, not an exegetical theme, in the various Jewish milieus that produced and transmitted the Bible, especially at the time of the birth of the New Testament<sup>40</sup>.

b. Critically: detect and resist literary idolatry

Dealing with Scripture as with a mere literary text is as reductive as treating it as mere historical document. Naively using new rhetorics, narratology, or semiotics can amount to introducing idols in the temple. Indeed, the literary methods do not only provide exegetes with instruments and procedures to analyze Scripture as structures (canonical studies, semiotics), narrative (narratology), persuasive speech (rhetoric), or results of a polyphonic transmission (analysis of enunciation)., they also convey preconceptions embedded with this analytical technology: about man, language, the world and God.

Especially in the materialist context of structuralism, the emphasis placed on language can lead to practically identifying revelation with one or more effects of meaning of the signifier itself. However, even though this fact is hardly known by his followers in the invention of historical Jesus, Ernest Renan started his research on the gospels with this reduction. Noting the unity of thought and language represented and underlined in the Bible in the form of God’s gift of language to Adam, he reduced it to a Judeo-Christian *topos* accounting for the revealing essence of language as such through the original unity of form and meaning<sup>41</sup>. This is still the problematic of deconstruction today, which asks, following Heidegger, what comes before, *Offenbabrung* or *Offenbarkeit*, revelability or revelation<sup>42</sup>. Such ambiguities lead either to

40 O.-Th. VENARD, “Literary Mediation of Knowledge and Biblical Studies”: *Nova et Vetera English Edition* 4 (2006) 761-786, here p. 767-772.

41 Fr. LAPLANCHE, “Introduction”, in: Id. (dir.), *Dictionnaire du monde religieux dans la France contemporaine, 9. Les sciences religieuses. Le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle, 1800-1914* (Beauchesne, Paris 1996) V-XXV, here VII.

42 J. DERRIDA, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion at the Limits of Reason Alone”, in: Id. – G. VATTIMO (eds.), *Religion*, 1-78, here 16. (cf. transl. S. WEBER [Stanford University Press, Stanford 1998]).

a demythologization of the rationalist type, or to a mythologization of the neo-gnostic type<sup>43</sup>.

In secular culture, particularly in literature, the repression of Scripture as source and norm of meaning has been compensated by new abstract mythologies of writing and language. Sacred and secular literature had never ceased dialoguing<sup>44</sup> since the advent of Christianity, but the phenomenon of communicating vessels between sacred Scripture and secular literature, biblical criticism and literary criticism, was initiated in Western culture by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> c.: at the same time that biblical exegesis “demythologized” Sacred Scripture using historical and positivist criticism, creators and critics attempted to penetrate the mysteries of the w/Word...<sup>45</sup>.

At the level of literary creation, the verbal invention of great modern poetry (after Mallarmé’s nostalgia for the Book or Rimbaud’s pursuit of the illuminations) sounds at best as a search for the lost Word, at worst as a parodic rivalry with it<sup>46</sup>.

At the level of critical reception, symmetrically, the exegetical procedures of biblical commentary were applied in profane literature, and developed with the advent of the new arts of the language derived from linguistics. Many issues in critical theory originate in biblical exegesis<sup>47</sup>: the “hermeneutical problem” as such results from a secularization of this discipline<sup>48</sup>. In the work of literary theorists, vestiges of the theology of the Word appear in the personification of linguistic abstractions: “language does this or makes that”, “speech says that”,

43 Cf. The *œuvre* of Y. BONNEFOY, in particular *L'improbable et autres essais* (Folio essais, Paris 1992).

44 The phenomenon is well known and studied for earlier times; see for example, the application of typology to Dante and its consequences on sacred exegesis and on secular letters presented in P. C. BORI, *L'interpretazione infinita: L'ermeneutica cristiana antica e le sue trasformazioni* (*Infinite Interpretation: Ancient Christian Hermeneutics and its Transformations* [Il Mulino, Bologna 1987] French trans. F. VIAL (Cerf, Paris 1991).

45 P. BÉNICHOU, *The Consecration of the Writer, 1750-1830* (*Le Sacre de l'écrivain : 1750-1830, essai sur l'avènement d'un pouvoir spirituel laïque dans la France moderne* [Seuil, Paris 1973], trans. Mark J. JENSEN (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln – London 1999). See also M. FUMAROLI, *L'âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et "res literaria" de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Albin Michel Paris 1994) 17.

46 See O.-Th. VENARD, *Littérature et théologie: une saison en enfer* (Thomas d'Aquin, poète-théologien 1; Ad solem, Genève 2003).

47 N. FRYE, *Le Grand Code: la Bible et la littérature* (*The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* [Routledge & Paul Kegan, London 1982]), trans. C. MALAMOU, (Poétique; Seuil, Paris 1984) 32; STEINER, *Réelles présences*, 66.

48 See the suggestive genealogy drafted by M.-J. LE GUILLOU, *Le Mystère du Père* (Fayard, Paris 1973) 16-17.

or “text produces that...”<sup>49</sup>. Even biblical semiotics is based on a very high construal of language<sup>50</sup>, which sometimes leads to a kind of negative theology, beautiful and suggestive, sometimes to a parodic gnosis.

Whoever knows the ancient theories of the Logos, the Christian theology of the Word and its repercussions in the theory of language, reads these expressions like profane rediscoveries of a certain magnetization of the language by the divine Logos that the writers have never ceased to feel, in spite of the decay of His celebration in our culture.

### c. Conclusion

What, then, is the significance of the rise of literary methods in contemporary exegesis? Literary creators and critics maintain a serious vision of language, word, and writing at the horizon of Western readers. They challenge exegetes with the realism of the divine: they invite them to acknowledge a contact between God and language. Somehow, biblical exegetes using literary methods to interpret Holy Writ are simply recovering what is theirs.

Yet this is not without ambiguity. Our situation resembles Jerome’s<sup>51</sup> or Augustine’s<sup>52</sup> stripping the “Egyptians” of their time, the masters of imperial high rhetoric. They themselves, as translators and exegetes of the Scriptures, conceived of their relationship with their pagan masters like that of the Israelites with the Egyptians upon leaving the land of servitude. It would be wrong if, having stripped our own Egyptians of their gold and silver tableware, we took one of their idols on board... Idolatry of language is as ruinous as idolatry of “historicity.” Neither resists deconstruction, since any sentence is relativized by its own language and cultural conditions: its very formulation contradicts any claim to universal truth.

Now, between the sheer indeterminacy of meaning (supported by radical linguistic deconstructionists, yet untenable logically) and the total determination

49 Cf. VENARD, “In Search of the Lost Word,” chap. 6, in: *Id.*, *Poetic Christ*, 199-228.

50 “Language, that is to say [...] this original, signifying material, where something of man is said”, wrote J. DELORME, “Table ronde sur l’apport des différentes méthodes d’exégèse”, in: J. DORÉ (ed.), *Les cent ans de la Faculté de théologie. Actes du colloque de décembre 1990* (Sciences théologiques et religieuses 1; Beauchesne, Paris 1992) 197-219, here 202.

51 Cf. Jerome’s famous “*ad nostrum dogma convertimus*”, in: *De clericorum institutione*, III, 18, *De arte grammatica, et speciebus eius* (PL 107, col. 396).

52 Cf. Exod. 3: 21-22; 12: 35-36 as commented by AUGUSTINE, *De Doctrina christiana*, II, XL, 60.

of the author's intention (retained by many historical or magisterial commentators, yet never provable), literary methods help to detect a "third way" in the very thickness of textuality, beyond any extrinsic authority (be it "scientific" or ecclesiastic). It is this middle way, both historical and transhistorical, that the divine Word himself took in Jesus Christ: using human words, he revived them with the fire of truth and love. What we propose, therefore, is not to substitute the idolatry of language for the idolatry of history, for it is not the "literarity" of the Bible which *per se* justifies the Bible's claims to truth, but its claim to reflect and trigger a visitation of the Logos in person.

## II. SCRIPTURE IS DIVINE LITERATURE

Scripture affirms that certain historical events are key to interpreting human history and the best way to illuminate the human condition in general. Indeed, the Archimedean lever that enables us to understand both the constitution of the biblical canon<sup>53</sup> and its theological understanding as a structured whole, is the advent of the Word in the flesh.

The apostolic generation was aware of the intimate relationship between Jesus and the letter of Scripture<sup>54</sup>. Several Church Fathers who were still close to the Jewish art of reading developed the analogy between the divine Word in Jesus and the divine Word present in Scripture, the Incarnate Word and the inscripturated Word<sup>55</sup>, so that they regarded Scripture as a kind of sacrament: a grace-bearing sign that effectively realizes communion with God<sup>56</sup>. Hence

53 Cf. our propositions in O.-Th. VENARD, "'Dans toutes les Écritures ce qui le concernait' (Lc 24,27): Une approche historico-christique du canon biblique": *Revue Biblique* 115/3 (2008) 396-420 ; 115/4, 516-545; "Del canon bíblico a la vida cristiana": *Scripta Theologica* XL/2 (2008) 433-458.

54 P. BENOIT, "Préexistence et incarnation", in: *ib.*, *Exégèse et théologie* IV (Cerf, Paris 1982) 11-61, 29.

55 Cf. ORIGEN, *Hom. Lev.* 1.1.; *Frag. Com. Matt* (PG 17:289). For a brief overview, see J. H. CREHAN, SJ, "The Analogy between *Verbum Dei Incarnatum* and *Verbum Dei Scriptum* in the Fathers": *Journal of Theological Studies* 6 (1955) 87-90.

56 Y. CONGAR, *The Meaning of Tradition (La tradition et la vie de l'Église* [Fayard, Paris 1963]), trans. A. N. WOODROW (Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2004) 91; *Tradition and Traditions: A Historical and Theological Essay (La Tradition et les traditions* [Le signe; Fayard, Paris 2 vol. 1960,1963]), trans. M. NASEBY – TH. RAINBOROUGH (Burns & Oates, London 1966) 403-406; *ibid.*, "Sur la valeur sacramentelle de la Parole": *La Vie spirituelle* 135 (1981) 379-389.



Jerome's famous "*ignoratio scripturarum est ignoratio Christi*," which is not as much a moral encouragement to read Scriptures as an ontological statement.

To produce an exegesis useful to faith, it is not enough to embrace their narrative, canonical and ecclesiastical dimensions: it is necessary to recover their Christic nature, the sense of intimacy of the Scriptures with Jesus Christ, using the analytical tools of our time. Our hypothesis is that the verbal dimension of Christ's relationship with the Scriptures echoes the *ipsissima vox Jesus* (which is his general stance towards language, his ways of using it, not to be confused with his inaccessible *ipsissima verba*)<sup>57</sup>.

#### 1. THE CHRISTIC RE-FOUNDATION OF SIGNIFICATION

In the 1<sup>st</sup> c. Palestinian Jewish context, many utterances attributed to Jesus (such as his calls to follow him absolutely, his exorcisms in his own name) only make sense (hence scandalize) if one presupposes that the speaker is God<sup>58</sup>. When he inchoately takes up the divine tautology of Exodus 3:14 using the phrase "I am," absolutely or in relation to his enigmatic Father or Spirit, he places the ineffable of the divine into his own union with God. Thus, the Gospel, insofar as it continues Jesus's preaching, amounts to a visitation of language by the divine voice — indeed to its Christological re-foundation. Let us suggest this in four points ordered chronologically from the ministry of Jesus to the reader of the Bible.

1. The presence of meaning in language, or verbal production or reception, is at the heart of Christ's mission in many passages of the gospels, so much so that the pedagogy of Christ amounts to a re-foundational practice of signification.

Jesus often uses non-linguistic signs. Not only does he teach in the form of symbolic acts, as ancient prophets did, but also, at the Last Supper, he takes up ritual symbols in order to insert his own tragic and glorious future

57 Cf. R. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, New York 1997) 373, as opposed to J. JEREMIAS, *Jésus et son Père* (Seuil, Paris 1972); E. LEMCIO, *The Past of Jesus in the Gospels* (Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 68; Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1991); J. DUNN, *Christianity in the Making*, t.1: *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Mich 2003) 226.

58 Cf. John 14:10; 12:49-50.

into the world of signs. At least as much as it is a message or a new doctrine, his teaching is made of *protocols* of signification<sup>59</sup>, into which it matters to enter and to remain (a precept ubiquitous in the Johannean corpus). Mostly, he establishes two signs which radicalize the dialectics between language and vision: the crucifix (the *aitia* 'Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews' juxtaposed to the tortured body) and the eucharist (the words 'body, blood', juxtaposed with the mere *formæ* of bread and wine). Thus Christ exhibits both the power and the vulnerability of language<sup>60</sup>.

Even more remarkable is his action on linguistic signs. From the preaching of Jesus (Mc 4,20), to the writing of his disciples (Jn 1:12-13; 1P 1:23; Js 1:21), the NT symbolizes language *qua* medium of revelation as a seed<sup>61</sup>. Jesus's pedagogy unites authority and reticence through the varied pedagogy of *mašal* (proverbs, parables and enigmas): his words as such have a value and a power of their own, they must be kept (repeated, memorized, obeyed, performed) because as a seed they *will* grow. As Jesus leaves his disciples, he announces that there will be a time lapse between their memorization, their reception of the Holy Spirit, their understanding and their future preaching. All will be united by the knowledge of the Name of the Father acquired through the words of the Son, preserved, amplified (John 14:10-12) and transmitted (John 17) thanks to the Spirit: the "new covenant" thus implies an intimate alliance between the incarnate Word and the disciples' ability to speak.

Even the written sign is restyled by Christ. In Mallarmée-an terms, one could say that he *rémunère* ['compensates for'] the defects of written words. By teaching on the written Law or by writing himself, Jesus promotes a surpassing of writing simply by his passing through the practice of reading and writing<sup>62</sup>.

2. The literary strategies of the authors of the NT continue the pedagogy of Jesus. Regarding writing, they promote a reception of the text that coincides with the disclosure of grace. The fourth gospel offers two ironical instances

59 Mt 13:10 insists on the *modus* instead of the *dictum*.

60 C. PICKSTOCK, "Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist": *Modern Theology* 15 (1999) 159-180.

61 Cf. O.-Th VENARD, "The Prologue of John and the Heart of Matthew (John 1.1-18 and Matthew 12.46-13.58): Does the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels really say nothing different from the prologue of John?", in: A. PABST – A. PADDISON (éd.), *The Pope and Jesus of Nazareth: Christ, Scripture and the Church* (The Veritas Series; SCM Press, London 2009) 134-158.

62 In Jn 8:1-11, Jesus draws his interlocutors away from fascination with writing by reminding them of its condition as an artifact and its relativity when compared to living humanity. cf. our analysis in

of this phenomenon by stressing the multifaceted meaning of any word once it is turned into a text, through the incasing of enunciations it enables: when the narrator transforms Caiaphas's dreadful statement into a divine prophecy (Jn 11:51-52), and when Pilate refuses the more "exact" enunciative reframing of the titulus of the cross demanded by his interlocutors (Jn 19:19-22)<sup>63</sup>.

More generally, they amplify Jesus's own ironical stance towards language in their own pragmatic strategies, the most spectacular being Mark's use of the "messianic secret" as a means to delay the disclosure of its ultimate meaning until the very end of the book, after the narrative is finished, in the witnesses to the Resurrected Christ. Throughout their recollection of Jesus' mission, the synoptic gospels bear witness to the fulfillment of Scripture in his deeds-signs and words-acts that continually renew wonder and search for meaning. Finally, they transport human language with the body of Jesus to the one (non-)place that has always annihilated the hope of any meaning: the tomb. John makes the "signs" or miracles of Jesus converge on the sign of the cross. But there is no regression to the infinite: for the reader of the New Testament, the body of Christ becomes both the (historical and narrative) starting point and the (existential and mystical) destination of all meaning.

Jesus qua incarnated Logos sets himself at the hinging point between history and fiction, verba and Verbum. Hence the literary genre of "myth that truly happened"<sup>64</sup> proposed by C.S. Lewis for the Gospels, insofar as they are literary works in which verbal invention springs from the "intractable [...] facts [...] of Jesus' life", especially his passion and death<sup>65</sup>. The Christian kerygma, while providing a meta-story able to frame each individual micro-story, affirms the quiet triumph of meaning over absurdity.

Because its ordinary vector for reaching people is words, the *supernatural mystery* of the resurrection —a "fact which is realized by its very announcement"<sup>66</sup>— cannot remain distant from the *natural enigma* of signifi-

63 As interpreted by Augustine, then Aquinas: see our analysis in VENARD, *Poetic Christ*, 368-371.

64 Cf. *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, cited supra n.17.

65 A. YARBRO-COLLINS, "From Noble Death to Crucified Messiah": *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994) 481-503, here 501. cf. Cf. J.-N. ALETTI, "Le Christ raconté: les Évangiles comme littérature ?", in: Fr. MIES (éd.), *Bible et littérature: L'homme et Dieu mis en intrigue* (Le livre et le rouleau 6; Lessius, Brussels 1999) 29-53.

66 H. SCHUIER, *Über die Auferstehung Jesu Christi* (Kriterien 10; Johannes, Einsiedeln 1968) 19.

ation<sup>67</sup>. The act of faith in the resurrected Christ encourages and encompasses the act of trust, not only in Scriptures and in his words (John 2:11), but more generally in linguistic signs.

3. “The age of the sign is essentially theological”<sup>68</sup>: for later readers of the NT, by proclaiming that the distances between God and humanity, life and death, have been crossed, the paschal *kerygma* provides an analogy that illuminates the radiation of the signified through the signifier. Eventually, Christ, who is morally “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6), or: the itinerary, the journey and the arrival, turns out to be so noetically as well: the signifier, the signified and the referent... *Qua* alpha and omega (Rev 1:8; 22:13) —in Hebrew: *alef we tav*, which reads ‘ot, meaning “sign”— he presents the sign *par excellence* which is his crucified and glorified body, *qua* divine dwelling<sup>69</sup>, source of all meaning, the Sign to which any other sign refers.

The preached and celebrated Resurrection provides a narrative framework for experiencing the covenant of sound and meaning in language: it rhetorically implies that the signifier-signified relationship is not isomorphic with the natural body-soul relationship (*sôma-sêma*), as much as with the supernatural relationship of a dead to a resurrected body. The resurrected life is *incommensurably* tied to life in the flesh<sup>70</sup> as meaning is to sound in language; at the same time the resurrection is the object of an act of faith on the part of a community, just as the sign is *conventional*<sup>71</sup>. On the metaphysical level in which the phenomenon of signification is grounded, even more profoundly than he restores *signum*, the risen Christ reestablishes *forma* in its interplay with *materia*, from the (in)visible *morphê theou* of the Torah<sup>72</sup>, to

67 Scriptures *spirant resurrectionem*: cf. Karl BARTH, alluding to “The Christian’s place in society”, in: *The Word of God and the Word of man*, trans. D. HORTON (Hodder & Stoughton, London 1928) 272-327, here 286.

68 Derrida, after STEINER, *Réelles présences*, 149.

69 Cf. John 2:19-21.

70 Cf. the Pauline analogy between resurrected versus dead body and seed versus plant (1 Cor 15:37) or Luke’s insistence on the continuation of bodily functions in the Risen one.

71 The Paschal mystery of Christ allows Thomas Aquinas to think of a certain bending of space (ST 3, 52, 2, c: *dicitur aliquid esse alicubi per suam essentiam per suum effectum*; ST 3, 52, 3, c: *Totus Christus tunc erat ubique, ratione divinae naturae*), or to imagine a movement without local motion (see ST 3, 52, 1 ad 3 and 1, 53, 1: the soul of Christ descended to hell, not according to corporal movement, but according to the genre of movement appropriate to angels), which echoes the ontology of writing.

72 Cf. its visibility in Ex 19:21; 24:9-12, as opposed to its mere audibility in Dt 4:12.

the “conformation” (*summorphizein*) of those who believe in him (Ph 3:10), passing through the *kenosis* of the *morphê theou* (Philippians 2:6-8) and of any form (Is 53:2)<sup>73</sup>.

It is not surprising, then, that resurrection and meaning are similar in their relation to the human mind: just as there is no witness to the resurrection, but only to the risen one, so the emergence of meaning escapes analysis: meaning is always already given. Life in Christ is analogous to life with language, and this leads to the reciprocal integration of Jesus and the book, of grace and the text.

4. At the end of the canon, NT authors make Jesus Christ the heart of the matrix of meaning which, in their culture, is Scripture<sup>74</sup>. The last book of the Bible explicitly presents Jesus not only as its subject matter (cf Ps 40:7; Hb 10:7) but also as its author<sup>75</sup> and its reader<sup>76</sup> *par excellence*.

The believing memory, whether in the Johanine or the Synoptic tradition, remembers that, as for language, Jesus bequeathed to the apostles a genuine *competence* at least as important as his own *performances*. He taught them how to teach by drawing from their memory things *new* and old<sup>77</sup>; their mission was not as much to repeat what he had said, as to teach even greater things<sup>78</sup>.

Eventually, the enunciative structure of the Gospel shapes the voices of the evangelists and the voice of Christ into a Möbius' ring, the famous geometric figure whose exterior *is* its interior<sup>79</sup>. It appears at the surface of the synoptic texts in metaleptic enunciative shifts, when Jesus himself speaks about Christ (e.g. Mt 23:10) or the Gospel which (will) tell about him (e.g. Mt 26:13). It appears also in the Johanine enigma: “He who is coming after me has come before me, for He was before me” (Jn 1:15). In S. Augustine's terms, John

73 Cf. O.-Th. VENARD, “Language of Form, Form of Language, and the Poetic Christ” (lecture for the D-Society, Oxford-Cambridge, oct 2021), to be published in *Modern Theology*, 2023.

74 J.-N. ALETTI, *Jésus Christ fait-il l'unité du Nouveau Testament?* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1994) 114-115, 266.

75 Christ dictates in Rev 1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 17, 18; 3:1, 7, 12, 14; and promulgates in Rev 22:18.

76 Christ reads in Rev 5:9.

77 In that order: Matt. 13:52.

78 John 14:10-12.

79 A ‘Möbius strip’ (from the name of its inventor in 1858, the German mathematician Auguste Möbius, born in 1870 and died in 1868) is a surface obtained by stitching together the two final points of a rectangular strip with a half turn. Somehow, the scroll “written within and without” of Rev 5:1 which only Christ can open and read, is reminiscent of this surface.

is to Jesus what the voice is to the meaning, the signifier to the signified, or the *verba* are to the *Verbum* — yet, it is John's preaching<sup>80</sup> which discloses Jesus as the only begotten Son: Jesus is both inside John's proclamation as its subject matter, and outside of it as its true cause. *Historically*, the messianic words and deeds of Jesus are only accessed through the words of his disciples, which were only triggered to preach by Jesus's own teaching activity: Jesus is both *inside* the Gospel as their object, and *outside* as their *auctor*, an amazing feature encapsulated by the double meaning of the genitive in the phrase "testimony of Jesus"<sup>81</sup>. *Ontologically*, though the divine *Verbum* is only accessed through the human *verba* —hence comes *within* and *after* them—, the *verba* only exist *qua* participations in the *Verbum* —*i.e.* *within* and *after* Him. Therefore, the mystery of Christ is both upstream and downstream of any language that claims to bear that mystery.

The poetics of the Gospel thus ensures a double continuity: from the enunciation of God to that of Christ, and from the enunciation of Christ to that of Christians.

### Conclusion

The NT is structured in such a way that as its readers make acts of faith in Christ, they make acts of trust in the cultural and linguistic mediations that make him known to them<sup>82</sup>. Insofar as language is a structure in which each corpus is connected to all the others, from the Gospel to the whole of literature and culture, it is the very worldview that is transfigured into God through Christ. By restoring human participation in the Logos, the New Testament illuminates the enigma of meaning and truth. Truth is that the world is full of meaning, of signification, of forms to be creatively *invented*, though not created by human mind; mankind is not the giver of meaning, rather the inventor of meanings. On the path towards (the origins of) meaning the poetic Christ, is ubiquitous. What is at stake, here, is to retrieve a sense of the specificity of Scriptures *i.e.* the Christic dimension, or sacramentality, of the very language of its text.

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80 John 1:36.

81 Rev 1:1; 19:9. and symbolized by the scroll "written within and without" of Rev 5:1 which he only can open and read).

82 Cf. Heb 3: 7-8.12 insisting on the mixture of faith and audition, necessary to get the promise.

## 2. CONSEQUENCES IN THE WORK OF THE EXEGETES

Against the oblivion of language, a renewed awareness of the literary nature of biblical revelation continued in the contemplation of the visitation of human language by the divine Word that occurred during the ministry of Jesus and in its reception up to our times, should have several consequences in biblical exegesis, especially in its historical questioning.

### a. Changing the Historical Gaze

On the one hand, it drastically relativizes the “historical question.”

To the historical deconstruction, often practiced as the preliminary step towards “critical” history, the metaliterary and theological (christological) load of the biblical signifier sets a limit. Any historical inquiry that embarks on a questioning of the ontology of Christ acquired by the first Christian generations in the dialectical movement of the composition of the NT and the canonization of the Scriptures<sup>83</sup> is profoundly contradictory, since it is the possibility of expressing the truth that it undermines from its outset. This is what M.-J. Lagrange in his *Historical Method* instinctively called the “dogma of the NT,” which he vehemently defended against any systematic methodological doubt<sup>84</sup>. Claiming to maintain faith while totally deconstructing the narratives and discourses of the NT, can be a commendable fideistic effort of the will, certainly not an intrinsic assent of intelligence...

As for historical reconstitution of the facts, little is needed to trigger the contemplation of the visitation of language by the Word in the NT and ensure the stability of the dogma: mainly the deployment of a “divine” authority in and beyond the life of Jesus of Nazareth, as it is attested by the gospels and Josephus.

On the other hand, the renewed awareness of the christological-literary dimension of revelation precludes any fundamentalism. Indeed, “fundamentalist hermeneutics actually shares a key assumption with the historical criticism

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83 Cf. VENARD, “The Prologue...”.

84 M.-J. LAGRANGE, *La méthode historique* (Études bibliques; Lecoffre, Paris 1904) 7-8; 29-33 and especially 39-42 and 51 insists that in the NT “dogma has reached its definitive state” (51). What he means by *dogma* here is the union of humanity and God in Jesus (42).

it opposes: both can only imagine the real within the confines of empirical space and time”<sup>85</sup>. This is the reason why, rather than dubbing the two types of studies necessary for the (Catholic) study of the Bible as “historical-critical” and “theological”<sup>86</sup>, it is preferable to call them “historical” and “theological.” This makes it possible, negatively, to reject the methodological skepticism claimed by the former to the point of making the exegete’s “bracketing of faith” a *sine qua non* of his or her seriousness as a historian<sup>87</sup>; and positively, to make more room for the literary conditioning of our access to the past.

However, “most historical critical tools such as studies of redaction history, dating and authorship, intertextual influence, and textual variations remain legitimate. The question is what gaze mobilizes their usage: the sovereign perspective of the critic or a regard obedient to the Word”<sup>88</sup>. What is at stake for criticism is to “reconceptualize her task; old tools will be put to new uses: [...] historical ‘criticism’ can survive a phenomenological reversal, becoming means of opening ourselves to the piercing gaze of the Word”<sup>89</sup>.

When accepted as key to integrating the copious textual, literary and historical data of the Scriptures, the deployment of divine authority in (the ministry of) Jesus leads exegetes to mobilize all sorts of analytical resources (philological, historical, phenomenological) in order to understand the literature that he caused. Here we can only briefly sketch two examples of this kind of research, one in the field of literary history, the other in the field of Christology.

#### b. History of Literature

Current historiography has already retrieved cultural history, in particular the history of the linguistic mediations of knowledge: it is all the more necessary for biblical exegesis to take an interest in the ancient conceptions of language, voice, speech, writing, text and book, which have been prevailing through the ages and cultures both before and after Christ.

Thus, metaliterary approaches to the biblical text such as those mentioned earlier remind us that “at its best, rather than mastery, historical con-

85 TROUTNER, “Phenomenology”, conclusion.

86 BENEDICT XVI, “Ap. exh. *Verbum Domini* (30 sep 2010)”: AAS 102 (2010) 681-787, n° 35.

87 GONÇALVES, “Enjeux”, in: VENARD, *Sens littéral*, 52.

88 TROUTNER, “Phenomenology”.

89 *Ibid.*



textualization can be a way of stripping away our defenses, defamiliarizing us before a text we thought we knew but into which we had projected modern prejudices. Its vigilance can dismantle lazy or distorted readings which only reflect ourselves, the strangeness of the ancient preparing us for fresh encounters with the Word which is ever new”<sup>90</sup>.

Here are several paths that exegetes and theologians could follow in order to recover the conception of the relationship between the order of language and the divine before and after Christ.

On a canonical level, it is fascinating to study how texts and books turned into mantic devices at the time of the proto-Masoretic recension by the apocalyptic scribes close to the Temple of the Hasmonean dynasty<sup>91</sup>; how the encounter between wisdom and apocalyptic literatures that happened in scribal workshops led to the figure of the heavenly scribe; and how it was accompanied by the supplementation of authoritative texts with fictions such as the additions in Daniel 12-14. It happened not long before the time of Christ and was amplified along the centuries through liturgical lectionaries.

On a theoretical level, we must continue to research the Jewish speculations on divine uni-plurality<sup>92</sup>, on protoctist entities<sup>93</sup>, the syncretist enigmas of the *Hermetic Corpus* (the study of which had only just begun when the discoveries of Qumran put it out of fashion, as it were).

On a practical level, re-evaluating techniques of oral composition with anthropologists; reassessing with epigraphists the actual cultural mediations of Scripture as the Word of God, the transition from *volumen* to *codex*<sup>94</sup>, as well as scribal practices such as *guematria* or *nomina sacra*, also provide

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90 *Ibid.*

91 Cf. H. VALLANÇON, “Le développement des traditions sur Élie et la formation de la Bible à la période hasmonéenne”, ch. 4, in: *Le développement des traditions sur Élie et l’histoire de la formation de la Bible* (Etudes bibliques 80; Peeters, Leuven 2019).

92 Cf. the works of Menahen Kister; more generally C. C. NEWMAN – J. R. DAVILA – G. S. LEWIS (éd.), *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 63; Brill, Leiden 1999).

93 G. GUY STROUMSA, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Studies in the History of Religions 70; Brill, Leiden 1996); J. NATI, *Textual criticism and the ontology of literature in early Judaism: an analysis of the Serekh ha-Yahad* (Supplements to the Journal for the study of Judaism 198; Brill, Leiden, Boston Mass. 2022).

94 L. WEIR HURTADO, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI 2006); *Id.*, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2003).

important clues about the elevated Christology at work in the first generations of disciples.

Lastly, these lines of research deserve to be followed up in the periods between Antiquity and our time: speculative grammar of the Gothic period, in particular, help us better understand the metaphysical and noetic consequences of the adoration of Christ as Name of God<sup>95</sup>.

### c. Christology of the Old Testament

Such researches could significantly renew Christology, especially in its most taboo part for historical-critical exegetes: the Christology of the Old Testament.

The same *Dei Verbum* which led many historical critical exegetes practically to ignore faith in their investigations, in fact recommended reading the entire Bible in the light of Christ<sup>96</sup>. Yet, the tendency to reduce the literal sense to the original historical meaning intended by human authors, combined with the methodological “bracketing of faith”, resulted in turning the Christological senses of Scriptures into *a posteriori* interpretations, not literal meanings.

It resulted in the sheer impossibility to teach a christology of the Old Testament. Several years ago, as Francesca Aran Murphy was looking for a colleague to write a piece on the subject for her *Oxford Handbook of Christology*, she had no choice but to ask me, though I am not an OT scholar<sup>97</sup>. During a doctoral seminar I attempted on that subject matter, I did a short survey among colleagues teaching the OT in several Catholic places: for many of them, “OT Christology” is simply chronological nonsense, unless what we call “Christology” is merely a description of ancient messianisms. Indeed: how could Jesus Christ be present before his incarnation?

95 Cf. our synthesis in O.-Th. VENARD, “Life, Language, and Christ Today”: *Church Life Journal, A Journal of the McGrath Institute for Church Life* (Notre Dame University IN): <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu>, mars 2019, with references to works by H. Schoot, I. Rosier and D. Turner.

96 DV 12 juxtaposes historical method and Christological claims; PBC, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) juxtaposes naive claims to objectivity for the historical critical method with the acknowledgement of the irrepressible subjectivity underlined by contemporary hermeneutics (II A 2)...

97 O.-Th. VENARD, “Christology From The Old Testament to the New”, chap. 2, in: Fr. ARAN MURPHY (dir.) – T. A. STEFANO (co-ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford University Press, 2015) 21-39.

In fact, the translators who “christianized” Scriptures in old Syriac or old Latin translations well beyond any typology or allegory, did not do something foreign to the biblical tradition: plays on the signifier are inherent in the Jewish art of transmitting Scriptures. Ancient translators continued the apocalyptic messianic way, uniquely unified by their acknowledgement of Jesus’s messiahship. In so doing, they amplified the presence of Jesus in the *litera* of Scriptures already detected by apostolic literature, for which Jesus of Nazareth is “the one *whom* (not *about* whom) Moses wrote”<sup>98</sup>.

Should one strive to detect literary links between the textual, grammatical and literary shaping of the Scriptures and the dogmatic teaching of the Church on Christ, many amazing “effects of meaning” may be brought to light, and an amazing inventory of the poetic traces of the divine inspiration and of the incarnation of the Word begin<sup>99</sup>. In particular the analysis of enunciation (already mentioned earlier) is a promising field the enunciative intricacy of many passages, especially in the prophets, invites to re-assess the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. The only major book on this subject is that of the late François Martin<sup>100</sup>.

### III. CONCLUSION: EPISTEMOLOGY OF “EXEGESIS IN FAITH”

Ignacio Carbajosa rightly insists that overcoming the gap between biblical exegesis and theology goes hand in hand with a correct conception of the relationship between faith and reason. With its metaphysical and linguistic implications, the scriptural-Christological refoundation of the reliability of language, explored heuristically in this article, is situated at the meeting point between reason and faith, nature and the supernatural.

98 Jn 1:45: *Hon egrapse Mōsēs*... Notice that the same Origen both founded textual critical comparison of versions with his *Hexaples*, and discovered Jesus Christ literally, not only typologically, present throughout Scriptures. As for a retroactive causality of Jesus Christ on Scriptures, see Origen, *De Principiis*, IV, 1, 6-7 (regarding inspiration).

99 The way was opened by P. CLAUDEL, *Le Poète et la Bible* (Gallimard, Paris 1998): cf. D. MILLET-GÉRARD, “Portrait du poète en exégète pieux”: *Revue des Lettres Modernes, Cahier Paul Claudel n°17* (Minard, Paris 1998) 131-159.

100 MARTIN, *Théologie de la lettre*.

1. Faith and reason are intertwined at all levels of the exegetical, theological and cultural journey we propose, far away from rationalism, fideism or fundamentalism.

Faith is obviously involved in admitting the major key for integration of history and theology. That there is a Word in God (over against positivism, and reduction of Sense to meaning effects of human language) is an issue of faith. Once one has accepted that *Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis*, either explicitly in a formal confession of faith and the theology that develops it, or implicitly in a set of practices that make it a concrete experience (such as *lectio divina*, adoration of the cross, or the celebration of the Eucharist)<sup>101</sup>, the substances and words of ordinary language are so-to-say stabilized.

Faith is also called upon to reach the historical fact itself, in two ways. On the one part, ancient historiography, according to the norms of Thucydides, relies mainly on the accounts of (eye)witnesses. Now any testimony triggers a dialectical reception: both critical (an invitation to “verify” or “check”) and trusting (the witness is not an ideologue who tries to impose his program on you by any means)<sup>102</sup>. On the other hand, experiences of divine revelation throughout the Scriptures promote a growing integration of event and vision<sup>103</sup>. It culminates in the case of the resurrection, a transhistorical event that historians know only through its witnesses, signs and consequences, so that the line between methodological sympathy (necessary for any good historian) and faith commitment, i.e., the line between the natural confidence and the supernatural grace of faith, becomes blurry.

As we recalled above with the founders of deconstruction, admitting the existence of reliable meaning radically implies an act of faith in a secret alliance between *res* and *verba*, sound and meaning. As its greatest poets testify, modernity seems to have become aware of the fact that the inner *verbum* (by which the mind grasps reality, by which also reality grasps the mind), is itself grasped only in the outer verb that makes it sensible, as if it were an illusion to be dispelled. The fact is that to discover the existence of this *verbum interius*, to access it, seems only possible thanks to its verbalization

101 We devote the last 9 chapters of our *Pagina sacra* to describing the effects of these three experiences.

102 Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI 2006).

103 H. U. VON BALTHASAR, “Revelation and the Beautiful” (“Offenbarung und Schönheit”, in: *Verbum Caro: Skizzen zur Theologie I* [Johannes Verlag, Einsiedeln 1960] 100-34), in trans. A. V. LITLEDALE – A. DRU, *Explorations in Theology*, vol.1, *The Word Made Flesh* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1989) 95-126.

in metaphor and similitude, which simultaneously presuppose and arouse a kind of *faith* on the part of the listener or reader — a *responsibility* rightly stressed by George Steiner<sup>104</sup>. Here we see how clairvoyant Joseph Ratzinger was when he diagnosed that “the debate on modern exegesis is not in its essence a debate between historians, but a philosophical debate. Only at this level can it be properly conducted; otherwise it remains a fight in the fog”<sup>105</sup>.

Yet the debate is not only philosophical, especially when dealing with Holy *scriptures*. It is first and foremost linguistic and therefore theological, because in all civilizations, language is linked to the deepest religious conceptions. “In this sense, the exegetical problem is identified with the fight around the foundations of our time”<sup>106</sup>. That which is at stake is a Copernican revolution in our conception of human being: “man is historical because he speaks, he does not speak because he is historical”<sup>107</sup>. What is called for, then, is a vivid revival of the theology of the *Verbum*.

## 2. *De Convenientia* logics

Because one cannot reason about language without using language, it will be necessary to renounce the old modern ideal of purely demonstrative rationality and to embrace the logic “*de convenientia*”. The foundations that we discover are not foundationalist: uncovering them supposes opening one’s heart to the beauty and the goodness of this *euaggelion*: the Origin of all made itself the smallest to restore all things.

Our insistence on the literary and linguistic fruitfulness of faith might have resembled the postmodern celebration of the irrational, but it reverses its logic. For Christians, reason is not so much determined by infra-rational factors as by a supra-rational call to reach the very principle of all possible reason through faith, hope and love. It rests on the fundamental humility of learned ignorance: the circle of faith and understanding, like the circle of freedom

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104 STEINER, *Réelles Présences*, 117.

105 J. RATZINGER, „Schriftauslegung in Widerstreit“ (Quaestiones disputatae 117), *Herausgegeben von Joseph Ratzinger* (Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1989) 15-44, cited according to the French transl. “L’exégèse biblique en conflit”, in: C. BARTHES (ed.), *L’exégèse chrétienne aujourd’hui* (Fayard, Paris 2000) 65-109, here 93.

106 *Ibid.*

107 MARTIN, *Théologie de la lettre*, 322: “Logically prior to thought, [language] is the founder of humanity, the foundation of man. [...] The definition of man as a speaking being [...] takes precedence over any other approach, and in particular over that which would define the human being as a historical being”.

and grace, is analogous to the circle of desire and knowledge in Augustine: there would be no desire if one did not have some knowledge of the desirable thing, but who would desire it if they already possessed it?

Ever since the 16<sup>th</sup> c. in the Catholic world, Scripture is rightly dubbed “the soul of theology”<sup>108</sup>. We understand today that this multilayered analogy of (studying) Scripture as the soul of theology must not be reduced noetically. Scripture’s role cannot be reduced to “inspiring” in a banal sense: providing with themes or ideas encapsulated in the garb of narratives, poems and all sorts of enigmas, taken over, refined and elaborated by theology. In the making of theology, the irreducibility of the signifier of the Scriptures echoes not only the inescapability of history, of incarnation, with all its cultural relativity, but also (even though paradoxically) the transcendence of the One who speaks through them.

It is the very existence of Holy Scriptures which obliges Catholic theologians to draw the consequences of the textual dimension of revelation. *Sacra doctrina* flourishes only when it is deeply rooted in *sacra pagina*. Theology must keep itself in the logical-verbal (not only conceptual-ideal) radiation of Scriptures. Scripture is not only the soul, it must once again become the *flesh* of theology.

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108 S. PONGA, *L'Écriture âme de la théologie. Le problème de la suffisance matérielle des Écritures* (Théologies; Cerf, Paris 2008) 109-181.