

THE DOMAIN OF THE WORD

Scripture and Theological Reason

T&T CLARK THEOLOGY

JOHN WEBSTER



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PREFACE

Holy Scripture is the sign and instrument of God's loving address of intelligent creatures. Its human words, formed and preserved by God, who moves their creaturely movement without violence to the integrity of its created nature, attest the divine Word, and give a share in God's knowledge of himself and of all things. By the illumination of the Holy Spirit, created intelligence is enlivened to apprehend and receive Scripture's testimony, and to answer divine revelation by coming to know and desire God. Christian theology is the *scientia* of what faith knows and desires. Such, in briefest outline, is the understanding of the nature and interpretation of Scripture, and of theological reason, set out in the essays brought together in this volume; a companion volume, *God without Measure*, assembles essays in dogmatic and moral theology, the two collections being intended to be read together.

Underlying the various essays is a judgement that present pursuit of well-ordered, intellectually and spiritually cogent Christian theology requires clear, calm attention to its principles or causes in God's knowledge of himself and his communication of that knowledge to creatures. In a remarkably judicious essay, Kenneth Schmitz argued that among the determining features of the history of metaphysical thought from the sixteenth century is the way in which 'widespread distrust of analysis by *principles* contributed to the acceptance of analysis by *elements*' – more precisely, 'the challenge to the validity and significance of analysis by *ontological* principles resulted in the use of analysis by *quantitative* elements'.¹ The redefinition of the interests and scope of philosophical inquiry which resulted when 'analysis by quantitative elements broke loose from the subordinate role it had played within an ontological scheme'² was, on Schmitz's account, immense and immensely damaging. The history of modern Protestant theology and biblical hermeneutics betrays similar features, their advance retarded but not finally resisted by the flowering of scholastic divinity in the post-Reformation era: a privileging of the elements of the biblical economy, and a reluctance or

¹K. L. Schmitz, 'Analysis by Principles and Analysis by Elements', in L. P. Gerson, ed., *Graceful Reason. Essays in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy Presented to Joseph Owens CSSR* (Toronto: PIMS, 1983), p. 315.

²Schmitz, 'Analysis by Principles and Analysis by Elements', p. 316.

inability to trace those elements to their cause in the fullness of God's own life. The reluctance left Protestant theology exposed to the naturalization of those same elements when viewed in detachment from their principles, of which the steady secularization of biblical science is only the most telling instance.

Appeal to the idiom of 'principles' in talking of Scripture and theological reason is an aspect of their reintegration into a theology of creation. That is, the nature of the canonical texts of the Christian faith, and of the acts by which those texts are made objects of intelligence, are to be understood not simply *ex ipsius historia*, but by reference to that by which they have come to be and are maintained, and which by their existence and activity they signify: the divine teacher and his teaching. The formal language of principles and causes is thus intended to resist the secularization of Scripture and reason. Its use commonly triggers anxieties in theologies in which the finality of the temporal economy in God has become eclipsed: anxieties about the supposed priority of the theoretical, for example, or about evasion of the history of God's self-enactment and self-naming in his dealings with creatures in time. But the anxieties are misplaced on at least two counts. First, the ontological idiom is secondary: not a replacement for the descriptive language of Scripture and theology but its analytic accompaniment. Second, and more important, created being, time and movement are just that: created. If this is so, they cannot be understood as self-standing elements. Their existence and nature must be understood by reference to their cause or origin, by virtue of which they have and are held in being and are directed to their perfection – that is, by reference to the missions of divine love undertaken in time by the eternal Son and the Holy Spirit, and to the inner divine love, wisdom and power on which those missions rest.

Much follows from this for a theology of Scripture. An immediate formal consequence is the necessity of a textual and hermeneutical ontology – parallel to a moral ontology in Christian ethics – which accounts for the activities of the production and interpretation of texts by referring them to divine revelation as their material, efficient and final cause. The Bible, its readers and their work of interpretation have their place in the domain of the Word of God, the sphere of reality in which Christ glorified is present and speaks with unrivalled clarity. As he speaks, he summons creaturely intelligence to knowledge and by his Spirit bestows powers of mind and will so that they may be quickened by that summons to intelligent life under the Word. This, in turn, suggests other matters for reflection in the theology of Scripture. Bibliology and hermeneutics are derivative elements of Christian theology, shaped by prior Christian teaching about the nature of God and creatures and their relations. Again, bibliology is prior to hermeneutics, because strategies of interpretation will be maladroit unless fitting to the actual nature of the text which they seek to unfold. A common thread running through a number of the essays is the restriction imposed on biblical study by theological inattention to the nature of Scripture, the

resultant vacuum often being filled by some kind of naturalism. The cogency (as much political as hermeneutical) of this strategy was that it appeared to recall attention to the fact that the Bible and the interpretation of the Bible are human cultural activities. The recall, however, was often coupled to a kind of nominalism, in which human signs were segregated from the divine economy of revelation, as, once again, elements without principles. The misstep here is the supposition that the properties of natural realities can be grasped without reference to createdness, and that only when so grasped can natural realities protect their integrity. But in a well-ordered Christian theology, the divine movements of revelation, inspiration and illumination do not compromise the human movements of authorship and interpretation. Showing that this is so, however, obliges theology to attend to doctrinal work on creation, providence and the Holy Spirit, in order to demonstrate that divine revelation is not a unilateral cognitive force but a compound act in which the creator and reconciler takes creatures and their powers, acts and products into his service. God speaks from his human temple.

The same principles obtain in a theology of reason, including theological reason. Theological reason is the exercise of redeemed intelligence within the economy of God's revelatory grace, and is understood by tracing its given nature and its antecedent conditions. It takes its rise in the overflow of divine benevolence in which God gives to creatures a share in his boundless knowledge of himself and all things. That movement of love takes form in the work of reconciliation, in which God judges and heals the ignorance of creatures, and makes them fit subjects of knowledge by his Word and Spirit. As God reconciles, he makes created intellect come newly alive by his instruction and enlightenment. Like every work of divine grace, revelation is effective; it generates actual knowledge, not just its possibility. Revelation is not merely an offer or initial manifestation which requires completion by a self-originating human act; rather, the scope of revelation includes the generation of acts of intelligence, the moving of creatures to the operation of their given powers. A theological description of created reason encompasses a dogmatics of divine knowledge and revelation, an anthropology of the powers of human creatures, a soteriology of the fall and reconciliation of intelligence and a theology of the Spirit's regenerative work. It is completed by an ascetics of reason, that is, a theology of the Spirit-produced discipline by which reason finds its way to truth and fulfils its contemplative and apostolic calling.

Readers of earlier volumes of essays (if such there be) may notice some changes of emphasis and idiom in the present collection: more consideration is paid to patristic and mediaeval authors and to their heirs in post-Reformation scholastic theology, and more is expected of the theology of the creation and of the Spirit. Perhaps most of all, I have found my attention arrested by the preponderance of God's infinitely deep, fully realized life in giving an account of the substance of Christian faith, particularly as it touches upon

the relations of God and creatures: God is *altissima causa totius universi*.³ Theological inquiry may be prompted by temporal occurrence, most of all, by the missions of God in time; but it may not terminate there; if it is truly to know created history, it must also look to the things that are unseen:

God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason; according to Isaiah, Eye hath not seen, O God, without thee what thou hast prepared for those that love thee. Now we have to recognize an end before we can stretch out and exert ourselves for it. Hence the necessity for our welfare [*salus*] that divine truths surpassing reason should be signified to us through divine revelation.⁴

Holy Scripture is the prophetic and apostolic sign of divine revelation, that is, of God's benevolence in granting rational creatures a share in the supreme wisdom proper to him alone; Christian theology is reason's recognition, contemplation and articulation of this divine wisdom ministered to us by these servants of God.

John Webster
Old Aberdeen
Epiphany, 2012

³Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia.1.6 resp.

⁴Ibid. Ia.1.1 resp.

PART ONE

Scripture

1

The domain of the Word

(1) The nature of Scripture

I

Holy Scripture and its interpretation are elements in the domain of the Word of God. That domain is constituted by the communicative presence of the risen and ascended Son of God who governs all things. His governance includes his rule over creaturely intelligence: he is Lord and therefore teacher. In fulfilment of the eternal purpose of God the Father (Eph. 1.9, 11), and by sending the Spirit of wisdom and revelation (Eph. 1.17), the Son sheds abroad the knowledge of himself and of all things in himself. He completes his saving mercies by making known to lost creatures their true end in the knowledge, love and enjoyment of God. In the domain of Christ's rule and revelation, Holy Scripture is the embassy of the prophets and apostles. Through their service, and quickened to intelligent and obedient learning by the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints is instructed by the living Christ. And so it is in terms of their occupancy of and function in this domain – in the economy of grace and revelation – that we are to consider the nature of Scripture and what may fittingly be expected of those who hear it in faith.

Some preliminaries: First, a prudent theology will treat questions concerning the nature and interpretation of Scripture indirectly, that is, as corollaries of more primary theological teaching about the relation of God and creatures: this, because Scripture is (for example) part of God's providential supplying of the life of the church, and we will remain unclear about Scripture as long as we are unclear about God, providence and church. Indeed, part of the strain evident in some modern conceptions of

Scripture and hermeneutics originates in their unhappy alienation from their proper doctrinal habitat: uprooted, they find themselves exposed, lacking the resources afforded by a larger theological and spiritual environment, and so unable to flourish. This fate they share, of course, with the doctrine of revelation which has suffered similar dislocation; in both cases, disarray is overcome in part by restoring them to their proper subordinate place.

Second, the order in which the two divisions of the topic are treated is of some consequence: bibliology is prior to hermeneutics. Theology talks of what the biblical text *is* and what the text *does* before talking of who we are and what we do with the text, and it talks about what the text is and does by talking of God as Scripture's author and illuminator.

Third, theology must keep alert to the spiritual dimensions of the topic, especially in reaching judgements about what we may perhaps consider present disarray in theology and exegesis. Accounts of Scripture and its interpretation which are governed by a theology of the divine economy were the common currency of the premodern church, but remain at the margins of some dominant tendencies in contemporary theological work. Their recovery in patristic and mediaeval historical theology and in some dogmatics is cause for gratitude and ground for hope. But the question remains: Why does this construal of Scripture and its interpretation still prove rather difficult of access? Why is it that a theological culture, which in other respects has shown itself so sophisticated and so eager to expose the pathology of modernity, is often unexercised over these matters? Much might be said in this connection about the retardant effect of intellectual custom and institutional arrangements such as the fourfold division of the theological curriculum. But more needs to be said, most of all about the *spiritual* history of modern theology. Over the course of that history, certain habits of thought – entered into, often enough, with a good will and a clear conscience, and with genuine desire to advance the work of the church and its theology – have in some measure benumbed theology, made it sluggish in conceiving and pursuing its proper end in fellowship with God. Whether done well or ill, theology and the study of Scripture are spiritual tasks, and the conditions for their flourishing include spiritual conditions. Pathologies of modern reason applied to the Bible must, therefore, do rather more than simply identify an *intellectual* fall from grace (such as those whose chief culprits are Scotus and Spinoza), for there is only one fall, that of Adam; all alike share his contempt for the Word of God, all our history – including all our theological history – suffers from what he unleashed into the world. In the matter of the theology of Scripture and its interpretation, the imperative of reconciliation with God needs to be kept in view.

Fourth, however, we ought not to approach these matters as if we found ourselves at a point of particularly acute declension in the history of theology and exegesis. This, because theology takes place in the domain of the Word of God, and in that domain the living Christ *rules*. He is not defeated by theological reason's defection. Theological and hermeneutical work is enclosed by the promise of Christ's instruction. It is a principle of

Augustine's hermeneutics that God, 'being asked, gives understanding, who gave his Word unasked'.¹ Despite our treachery against the divine Word, we may have 'hope and confidence' because we are 'invited to understand him'.² There is no need to proceed in gloomy or acrimonious fashion as if the gift of the Word had not been given and received by the church. The domain of the Word is the domain of grace; God has not 'abandoned us as contemptible'.³ Revealing grace is ruling grace, even now overcoming our resistance; the gracious divine Word enriches 'with all speech and all knowledge' (1 Cor. 1.5).

II

To simplify matters rather drastically: a dominant trajectory in the modern development of study of the Bible has been a progressive concentration on what Spinoza called interpretation of Scripture *ex ipsius historia*, out of its own history.⁴ Precisely when this progression begins to gather pace, and what its antecedents may be, are matters of rather wide dispute. What is clear, at least in outline, is that commanding authority gradually came to be accorded to the view that the natural properties of the biblical text and of the skills of interpreters are elements in an immanent economy of communication. The biblical text is a set of human signs borne along on, and in turn shaping, social, religious and literary processes; the enumeration of its natural properties comes increasingly to be not only a necessary but a sufficient description of the Bible and its reception.⁵ This definition of the text in terms of its (natural) history goes along with suspension of or disavowal of the finality both of the Bible and of the reader in loving apprehension of God, and of the Bible's ministerial function as divine envoy to creatures in need of saving instruction. To speak of the *historia Scripturae* is to say that Scripture is what human persons author, and that its interpretation is what human persons do to get at the meaning so authored. In describing authoring or interpreting, language about God is superfluous, or merely ornamental, or invoked only as the remotest background condition for human communication. Further, priority is given to the generic features of the biblical writings and their interpretation – the features which they share with other texts and acts of interpretation – over the particular situation in which they function – the

¹Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994) XXII.1.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴B. de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 97–117.

⁵On the rise of a 'cultural' (rather than 'theological') Bible, see J. Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible. Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), and M. C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

situation, that is, of divine instruction. That situation is epiphenomenal: most basically, the ontology of the Bible and that of its readers is that of pure nature. Thus, for example, the category of 'text', with its linguistic, semantic and literary properties, comes to play a different role in modern study of the Bible from that which it plays in Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. For Augustine, the text's linguistic, semantic and literary properties are *signa* mediating divine instruction, whereas for moderns they are not underlain by anything other than the processes of authorship or the history of religion. Even when the category of 'text' is supplemented by those of 'scripture'⁶ or 'canon',⁷ these refer largely to the use of and ascription of value to texts, and carry no metaphysical weight. Running parallel to the naturalization of the text there is the 'deregionalization' of practices of interpretation, a standardization of its operations and ends which takes its rise in a natural anthropology of the interpreter and interpretative reason. Nor are matters helped much by supplementary talk of 'God's "use" of the church's use of scripture',⁸ for here God's agency remains consequent rather than initiatory.

Countering the hegemony of pure nature in bibliography and hermeneutics requires appeal to the Christian doctrine of God, and thus of God's providential ordering of human speech and reason. Within the divine economy, the value of the natural properties of texts, and of the skills and operations of readers, does not consist in their self-sufficiency but in their appointment as creaturely auxiliaries through which God administers healing to wasted and ignorant sinners. What more may be said of this economy of revelation and redemption of which Scripture is a function?⁹

⁶As in W. Cantwell Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM, 1993).

⁷See, for example, J. Z. Smith, 'Sacred Persistence: Toward a Redescription of Canon', in *Imagining Religion. From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 36–52; J. Assman and A. Assman, eds, *Kanon und Zensur* (Munich: Fink, 1987); K. W. Folkert, 'The "Canons" of Scripture', in M. Levering, ed., *Rethinking Scripture. Essays from a Comparative Perspective* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 170–9; A. van der Kooij and K. van der Toorn, eds, *Canonization and Decanonization* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

⁸D. Kelsey, 'The Bible and Christian Theology', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 48 (1980), p. 396.

⁹For some rather earlier modern statements of the place of Scripture and interpretation in the divine economy, see, for example, Barth's extended treatment of the doctrine of Scripture in *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), pp. 457–740, or the opening section of his lectures on the fourth gospel, *Witness to the Word. A Commentary on John 1* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 1–9, or H. U. von Balthasar's succinct essay, 'The Word, Scripture and Tradition', in *Explorations in Theology 1: The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1989), pp. 11–26. The best more recent accounts include: D. S. Yeago, 'The Bible: The Spirit, the Church, and the Scriptures: Biblical Inspiration and Interpretation Revisited', in J. J. Buckley and D. S. Yeago, eds, *Knowing the Triune God. The Work of the Spirit and the Practices of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 49–93; T. Work, *Living and Active. Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); M. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis. A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); S. Swain, *Trinity, Revelation, and Reading. A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011).

III

When we speak of the divine economy, we say that finite being and acts (including textual and intellectual acts) are willed, governed and directed by God, who is their prime and final cause. The external works of the Holy Trinity are the orderly enactment of the absolutely original and antecedent purpose of God the Father, namely, his purpose that the eternal movement of God's own glory will include his glorifying of himself by glorifying creatures, that is, by giving, conserving and perfecting created life. Creatures are just that – *creatures*, having their being in this divine gift and the movement to which it gives rise. Created nature *is* this history, moved over time to its appointed perfection by the will and work of God.

The economy is constituted by the missions of the eternal Son and the Holy Spirit. In the Word made flesh – in the eternal Son who is intrinsic to God's very being, and who becomes a creature, so gathering to himself all created being – 'all things hold together' (Col. 1.17). By him creation is constituted as an ordered unity, because he is the one through and for whom all things were created (Col. 1.16); he prevents creation from disintegration, for through him God reconciles to himself all things (Col. 1.20); he is creation's end as the one in whom God will unite all things (Eph. 1.10). Further, created reality is animated by the life-giving Holy Spirit. As Lord, having like Father and Son life in himself within the fullness of the triune relations, the Holy Spirit is life-giver. He bestows and preserves creaturely being with its own proper powers and freedoms. In the Spirit's superintendence of creation, God works to quicken the forms of created life, and to move creatures to self-movement towards their perfection.

Created being, time, action and culture are given shape, made into an order, by the purposive activity of the triune God. Created being and activity are grounded in these *opera dei externae*, which are themselves grounded in the unfathomable plenitude of God's being in himself. This may seem hopelessly distant from questions concerning the nature and interpretation of the Bible. Not so: forgetfulness of this wider triune economy is a large part of the disarray of the church's apprehension of Scripture, and biblical study suffers in an acute way from the evaporation of the metaphysics of nature, history and culture ordered by and towards God in Christ in the Spirit's power. Reinstating biblical practice includes recollection of this triune economy in which both Scripture and its readers have their place.

IV

God's external works are communicative. The reconciling and perfecting missions which the Son and the Holy Spirit undertake at the Father's behest are both regenerative and revelatory, because the relation of the triune God to the world is that of a self-interpreting agent. God's action towards the world is personal: not merely the operation of a causal force, but intentional

action which establishes relations and proffers meaning. As God acts to reconcile and perfect, God addresses creaturely intelligence, summoning creatures to knowledge, trust, love and praise, and not merely making a blank determination concerning them. God, in short, *speaks*.

More closely, God speaks as in the Spirit Jesus Christ speaks. The eternal Word made flesh, now enthroned at the right hand of the Father, is present and eloquent. His state of exaltation does not entail his absence from or silence within the realm within which he once acted in self-humiliation; rather, his exaltation is the condition for and empowerment of his unhindered activity and address of creatures. This address takes the form of Holy Scripture. To accomplish his communicative mission, the exalted Son takes into his service a textual tradition, a set of human writings, so ordering their course that by him they are made into living creaturely instruments of his address of living creatures. Extending himself into the structures and practices of human communication in the sending of the Holy Spirit, the divine Word commissions and sanctifies these texts to become fitting vehicles of his self-proclamation. He draws their acts into his own act of self-utterance, so that they become the words of the Word, human words uttered as a repetition of the divine Word, existing in the sphere of the divine Word's authority, effectiveness and promise.

As an initial characterization of the way in which through the Spirit these texts are taken up into the service of the Word, we may talk of Scripture as the words of the prophets and apostles. The collective term 'prophets and apostles' is simply a loose convenience, referring to the writers of the Old and New Testaments, rather than to particular religious institutions or literary genres. Used in this general way, the term identifies the location of the biblical texts in a specific domain or economy of communication (that of the triune God) and the kind of 'authorship' which occurs in that domain. At least four things are thus indicated by the term. (1) These texts take their rise in God's history with the saints, in which persons are called and commissioned for service of the divine Word: God appoints prophets to Israel and the nations (Jer. 1.5), God sets apart and calls apostles (Gal. 1.15). (2) The prophets and apostles are called and commissioned to *speak*: God puts words in the mouths of his prophets (Jer. 1.9; Isa. 51.16), God sends the apostles to preach the gospel (Gal. 1.16). (3) Their speech is a creaturely accompaniment of and accessory to the divine Word, integrated into a divine movement; and so the reality of prophecy is that God is 'watching over [his] word to perform it' (Jer. 1.12); and again, the words of the apostles are a human presentation of 'the word of the truth, the gospel' (Col. 1.5), which is itself everywhere fruitful and growing (Col. 1.6). (4) In prophetic and apostolic speech the divine communicative mission is brought to bear upon creatures through creatures, in such a way that we may say of these human words that by derivation and appointment they are *Dei Verbum*: 'I have put *my* words in *your* mouth' (Jer. 1.9).

In this – in the fact that the Word accomplishes his act of self-utterance through these human auxiliaries – lies the basic *mystery* of Scripture. 'Those

moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God' (2 Pet. 1.21). That is, there is human speech (and so there are human texts) which speak ἀπὸ θεοῦ, and do so because this movement of human speech is grounded in and sustained by a movement of the Holy Spirit. This is mystery, first, because it cannot be grasped within the metaphysics of historicism or pure nature (according to which there can be no human speaking ἀπὸ θεοῦ); and, second, because describing this human communicative movement requires talk of God's free self-movement.

Naturalistic accounts of Scripture and its interpretation stumble over the mysterious character of the relation between God's revelatory presence and the biblical writings. Lacking a conception of the ways in which in the prophets and apostles divine speech takes creaturely form, and assuming that 'creaturely' is interchangeable with 'purely natural', such accounts of the Bible exclude from the beginning the actual conditions under which God's revelation makes itself present. If this is to be countered, then what is required of theology is both dogmatics and genealogy: well-instructed material conceptions of the modes and instruments of God's dealings with his intelligent creatures, and a theologically informed account of why these material conceptions have receded, and at what price.

It is important here to bear in mind the pathos which necessarily attends all theological work, including theological reflection on the nature of the Bible. Part of this pathos consists in the fact that we are instructed to receive the divine Word in these contingent forms – to hear, not God's own voice in unmediated force and power to persuade, but God's voice as it has been heard and then repeated by other creatures. Because it takes human form, the divine Word may be held in dishonour. The prophets and apostles express sheer inadequacy – 'I do not know how to speak' (Jer. 1.6; Exod. 4.10); 'not with eloquent wisdom' (1 Cor. 1.17) – and in so doing they testify to an enduring struggle for any theology of Scripture, namely coming to terms with revelation's embeddedness in the realm of temporal forms, including linguistic and literary forms. Whatever conceptual account of the matter we may be able to give will take us a certain distance, but cannot entirely eradicate the distress, which remains a permanent characteristic of our not-yet-redeemed state. Theology cannot resolve scriptural mediacy into revelatory immediacy; and it must not simply bear with it or kick against the goads, but learn to profit from it as that which God has designed. The divine Word speaks as this form.

V

Within these given limits, how may we conceive of the relation of *sermo divina* and *sermo humana*?

We may begin by speaking of the prophetic and apostolic words as *divinely instituted signs in the domain of the Word*. The human words of the

prophets and apostles are an order of signs whose *res* is the free, gracious and self-explicating work and word of the triune God. Properly to attend to these word-signs requires us to press on to the *res* which they serve. The signs of Scripture are therefore not to be treated as simply signifying – for example – the historical and religious conditions of their production. Although as human signs they necessarily do this, they do so only *en passant*, on the way to the matter which is the primary object of signification, namely, God himself ministering his Word to creatures.

To speak of these signs as divinely instituted is to say that they are brought into being by an impulse which simultaneously employs and sublates human authorship. This, we shall see, does not compromise the integrity of text or authorship and authorial intention, but it does set those realities and activities in a movement whose primary agent is God himself. God initiates and directs this movement; to say anything less would be to compromise the notion of revelation. This divine direction is such that the biblical signs bear the divine Word to their hearers. The speeches of the prophets and apostles are not simply a sort of linguistic wager, rather perilously reaching towards divine speech. They are the actual occasion and mode of its utterance, and the presence of its authority to judge, command and bless. And this, not by way of conversion or confusion – the prophetic and apostolic signs remain human, not divine or angelic words – but by way of the mystery of divine institution. Here, as Augustine puts it, God did not ‘broadcast direct from heaven’ but spoke ‘from his human temple’.¹⁰

There is, therefore, a relation between the *words* of the biblical text and divine speech. It is not that the *sermo humana* is just occasionally or accidentally related to the *sermo divina*, or that the divine Word is so loosely annexed to the fallible human word that all that we may legitimately discover in Scripture are traces of divine speech rather than God’s self-utterance. As a divinely instituted sign, Scripture is not a response to a distant Word, a Word which does not take determinate creaturely forms into its service; nor does Scripture signify the divine Word merely by traces of ‘excess’.¹¹ If scriptural signs do, indeed, constitute the temple from which God makes divine utterances, then we need not be overzealous in separating divine Word and human service, or too pessimistic about God’s capacity to sanctify human texts. God so acts as to make the text capable, fitting and fruitful in the publication of his Word. This is part of what is meant by verbal inspiration: God’s Word is not *at risk* when spoken through the ministry of the prophets and apostles.¹²

Second, the prophetic and apostolic signs are creaturely. This means that they are *created*: they have their being and function, not in and of themselves,

¹⁰Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) Preface, 6.

¹¹R. Williams, ‘Historical Criticism and Sacred Text’, in D. Ford and G. Stanton, eds, *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom. Scripture and Theology* (Lonson: SCM, 2003), pp. 226f.

¹²Work, *Living and Active*, pp. 64–7, 97.

but in the movement of divine institution which terminates in the hearing of the Word of God. In this, the prophetic and apostolic signs possess creaturely properties. Because the prophets and apostles are not angelic messengers, they instruct us through human words. 'The human condition would be wretched indeed,' Augustine notes, 'if God appeared unwilling to minister his Word to human beings through human agency.'¹³ But this creaturely agency and word are not purely 'natural', for in – not *despite* – the very humanity of these signs we are set in God's communicative economy, within which the signs serve as the authorized exponents of the divine Word.

Nevertheless, the question of the relation of the divine Word and human words remains a neuralgic point in modern bibliology. How may we speak of Scripture as the temple from which God makes his divine utterances, without compromise either of the integrity of natural speech-and-text-acts, or of the principle that 'God is known through God himself'?¹⁴ From one side or the other, modern biblical theory and practice has commonly resigned itself to the impossibility of so speaking. But if the impossibility is largely a misperception, generated by conventions of which we are able to become reflectively and critically conscious, then it becomes possible to think that within the providential and saving workings of God corrupt human creatures are healed and restored by divine love, and human signs become divine institutions.

To begin, a note on the pathology of the problem. The bifurcation of created signs and divine speech is often traced to what Olivier Boulnois calls 'the Scotist rupture'¹⁵ – that is, to the rise of nominalism, understood as a flight from allowing any intrinsic relation between natural or cultural forms and the reality of God. Once an earlier ontology of the participation of created forms in God is lost, those forms – so the argument runs – are extracted from a teleological or providential framework and come to be understood solely in terms of their historical facticity, only extrinsically related to God as their precipitating cause. Scripture comes to share in the resultant semiotic separations: scriptural signs no longer flow out from and participate in the reality signified, but are accidental, even arbitrary, representations. If there is a cure, it is the recovery of a participatory understanding of biblical semiotics and exegetical practice, in which Scripture is no longer imprisoned in a purely

¹³Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Preface, 6.

¹⁴K. Barth, *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), p. 48.

¹⁵O. Boulnois, 'Reading Duns Scotus: From History to Philosophy', *Modern Theology* 21 (2005), p. 604. See also O. Davies, *The Creativity of God. Word, Eucharist, Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*; and more generally, M. A. Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 19–43. For recent accounts more oriented to Enlightenment developments, see A. Wenz, *Das Wort Gottes – Gericht und Rettung. Untersuchungen zur Autorität der Heiligen Schrift in Bekenntnis und Lehre der Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1996); M. A. Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics. Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

natural history but is understood to partake in the unfolding of the realities which it depicts. 'Scripture stands at the heart of the self-communication of God in history since biblical texts present kinds of human speaking which are interpenetrated by and formed within the creative rhythms of revelatory divine speech.'¹⁶

Whatever one makes of the details, these kinds of narratives can at least serve to unsettle some of the habits which sustain much modern theology – by, for example, showing that historical criticism is as much a metaphysical as an historical or literary enterprise. But the pathologies are not unproblematic. At the doctrinal level, they can exhibit something of an imbalance towards the order of creation, and, within that locus, an unease about making much of the distinction between created and uncreated being; and, in at least some accounts, the order of creation outweighs the order of reconciliation. But a further point should be registered: the heart of the difficulty we face in attending to Scripture is not the conceivability of revelation's taking creaturely form but our antipathy to it. Lost creatures (and the not-so-lost in the church) make Scripture's humanity a ground for despising its embassy. We do not care for prophets and apostles, because they set before us the *sermo divina*; and so we spurn them – sometimes in high theory, but more often in baser ways. Once again, the history of conceptions of the Bible is spiritual as well as intellectual history, an episode in the wider course of the sinner's rejection of the folly of the gospel and preference for 'eloquent wisdom' (1 Cor. 1.17). Prophetic and apostolic speech is contested (Jer. 15; Ezek. 2.3); it occurs in the history of rebellion of creatures against the divine Word. Thinking our way out of nominalism may be a necessary part of reconceiving the nature of Scripture and scriptural interpretation, but it can only take us to the threshold, so to speak. Once we are there, the real contest begins: between the prophets and apostles and those who will not listen to them, because they will not listen to God (Ezek. 2.7).

How, then, are we to understand the relation of scriptural signs to the divine *sermo*? It is tempting to search for a master concept or pattern which will generate a comprehensive account of how prophetic and apostolic writings are a form of the divine Word. This ambition needs checking. Partly this is because no single concept is likely to prove sufficient to do all that is required, but it is more because the relation of human and divine speech is not a conceptual problem awaiting solution but a mystery which continues to unfold itself and which draws us towards itself. No wholly satisfactory conceptual resolution of the terms of the question is possible. There are conceptual pointers of greater or lesser adequacy, but even they do not tender solutions so much as restate the question. As in sacramental theology, so in bibliology: even after strenuous conceptual exercises, it is not easy to advance much further than reiterating what God does, in fact, do.

¹⁶Davies, *The Creativity of God*, p. 75.