

The Relationship Between Theology and Sacred Scripture

by Emilio G. Chávez

The nature and purpose of theology. Theology is a systematic reflection on what God has revealed. This definition presupposes that the theologian believes that there is a God who has revealed himself, and that we have access to this revelation by faith. For the Catholic theologian, God's revelation is made accessible to us through Sacred Tradition (*Dei Verbum* 7), and is "expressed in a special way" in Sacred Scripture (*Dei Verbum* 8). Theology, then, has as its object of reflection all that God has revealed, as known to us from Sacred Scripture and from Sacred Tradition, and seeks to work out (or explicate), and systematize, the many aspects of this revelation.

What God has revealed has to do with our salvation. God's revelation consists of his deeds in the history of Israel and their interpretation by inspired emissaries. At the center of the Christian faith is the belief that in "the end" (Mark 12:6; Heb 1:1), God culminated and perfected his revelation by sending his own beloved Son, Jesus Christ, to reveal the hidden mysteries of God and of his awaited Kingdom, and to save us from our sins by dying on the cross and rising from the dead, overcoming the power of evil and making possible for us who believe in him a new life as children of God. Theology is thus heuristically guided in its reflection by the belief that God wills us to know him and those truths which he has communicated in order to save us (cf. *Dei Verbum* 12, in regards to Sacred Scripture). The purpose of theology, defined by St. Anselm in the *Proslogion* as *fides quaerens intellectum*, is to better understand these salvific truths.

Corollaries. It follows from this that we can trust, by faith, this revealing God, that we can rely on the means, or witnesses, that he has used in order to reveal his saving truth. Ultimately, God cannot allow us to be fundamentally deceived or confused regarding the path we must follow for our salvation. In the Catholic tradition, two important aspects of this belief are the "analogy of faith" (the essential coherence and non-contradiction of all divinely-revealed truths; see *Dei Verbum* 12) and the compatibility of faith and reason. Our intellect and capacity for reason hold a preeminent place in the Catholic understanding of humanity's being created in the image and likeness of God, and the Thomistic school in particular emphasizes the

human faculty of knowledge. This knowledge, however, is in function of our unity with God, who is love.

Sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture holds a special place in God's revelation. In the Scriptures we encounter God in a unique way, which the Church venerates equally with the real presence of Christ in the eucharist (*Dei Verbum* 21). To describe this encounter, *Dei Verbum* uses two moving metaphors which apply especially to Sacred Scripture. In no. 2, it says that "the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks with men as friends and 'converses' (lives or keeps company) with them." In no. 8, it says that "God uninterruptedly speaks with the bride of his beloved Son." Sacred Scripture, then, is the *locus par excellence* wherein the God who reveals himself addresses us and, as such, it is called the "soul of theology" (*Dei Verbum* 24).¹

Christ, the center of the Christian Scriptures. For the Christian, God spoke of old through his efficacious Word (Isa 55:10-11), but in the End Time, his Word became flesh and dwelt among us, in Jesus Christ his only-begotten Son. God is Spirit whom no one has ever seen; it is the Son, who comes from the depths of his Father, who has "exegetized" (explained or interpreted) him to us. The Incarnation is the mystery of the invisible and ineffable God becoming human. The divine is totally beyond our comprehension (*Dei Verbum* 6); what is adequate to our capacity to know is the human, and in order to reveal himself to us, God has condescended (*Dei Verbum* 13) to come down and speak to us in a human way about himself and his saving deeds and purposes. We know God through the humanity of Jesus, the "icon" of God (Col 1:15) and the "character of his hypostasis" (Heb 1:3). In God's unitary plan of revelation and salvation, he has just one Word to speak, as St. John of the Cross said,² and that is Jesus. To the Christian, all the Scriptures speak of the Christ (Luke 24:27), and the veil of incomprehension which covers the Old Testament is removed only in him (2 Cor 3:14). But in order to know Christ, we must understand the Scriptures, as *Dei Verbum* 25 states, quoting St. Jerome's commentary on Isaiah.

Understanding Sacred Scripture. The task of biblical exegesis is to understand the Word of God as contained in Sacred Scripture. It is a theological endeavor, based on faith which seeks to understand, but it is also a human craft, more art than science (as

¹ See IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, "Il Concilio Vaticano II e la Bibbia," in *L'esegesi cristiana oggi* (Ignace de la Potterie et al., eds.) (Piemme: Casale Monferrato, 1991), 28-29, on the origin of this expression.

Hermann Gunkel remarked),³ using all the means available to the investigator. In the 1993 document entitled *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, the Pontifical Biblical Commission declares that the historico-critical method is indispensable, and is required to determine the original meaning of a biblical text (although this is not always possible).⁴ But once we have determined the original meaning of a passage, we must proceed to the study of the whole biblical book in its final form, which involves studying its structure and literary composition, how it was finally edited and put together, and what function it may have in the part of the canon in which it is placed. In this hermeneutical activity, one principal “rule of thumb” applies: Sacred Scripture must be studied in the same Spirit in which it was written (*Dei Verbum* 12). In order to discover what the holy authors meant, the exegete must think like a theologian, i.e., must do theology.⁵ As “deep calls to deep,”⁶ so do the Scriptures unfold themselves and are opened to the exegete who has the Spirit of Christ (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-12). But we must now distinguish between theology and exegesis.

The peculiar task of biblical exegesis in listening to the Word of God. When we listen to or read the holy Scriptures, it is God who mysteriously speaks to us, ever afresh and anew, for his Word is like the rain, which makes wet, fertilizes, washes away and even carries away. We are variously acted upon and come to see new and different things. It is peculiarly the task of biblical exegesis to penetrate deeply into the recesses

² *Subida del Monte Carmelo* 2,22,3-5, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 65.

³ “Exegese im höchsten Sinne ist mehr eine Kunst als eine Wissenschaft,” in “Die Grundprobleme der israelitischen Literaturgeschichte,” 14, in *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* 27 (1906) = *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1913), 29-38, quoted in JEAN LOUIS SKA, *Introducción a la lectura del Pentateuco. Claves para la interpretación de los cinco primeros libros de la Biblia* (Verbo Divino: Estella, 2001), 159.

⁴ See also, more recently, PONTIFICIA COMMISSIO BIBLICA, *Le peuple juif et ses Saintes Écritures dans la Bible chrétienne* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Città del Vaticano, 2001), 50-51 (no. 20); on page 51: “Hence the effort begun in contemporary theology, by different paths which have not yet converged in a consensus, to refound a Christian interpretation of the Old Testament devoid of arbitrariness and respectful of the original sense;” and on page 54 (no. 21): “It should thus not be said that the Jew does not see what had been announced in the texts, but that the Christian, in the light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the texts a surplus of meaning which was hidden there.” The Italian version, which supposedly was prepared jointly with the French original (the English version took much longer), has “in the light of Christ and of the Church.” Unless otherwise noted, I am responsible for the English rendition of citations from documents in other languages being quoted here, and for converting certain abbreviations into titles.

⁵ To be precise, as pointed out by IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, “L’esegesi biblica, scienza della fede,” in *L’esegesi cristiana*, 151, biblical exegesis is a species of the genus theology, and should, at “its level,” maintain its autonomy. As the science of the interpretation of Sacred Scripture, it is a theological science which should be integrated into the broader whole which is theology. Like theology, exegesis must be a “science of the faith.”

⁶ Ps 42:7.

of the Scriptures, at times excavating, at times hovering from a bird's eye view (analogously to the laboratory scientist and the astronomer, respectively).⁷ It will be more helpful to illustrate this with an example, that of my doctoral dissertation, on Jesus' so-called "cleansing of the temple." Certainly the tradition (with a small t) sees "the scene" as a protest against commercial activity. But which scene, in which gospel? Granting that in all four gospels it at least smacks of such a protest, it is much more than that in Mark, when this gospel is carefully studied as a whole. In Mark, we have a profound Christological and soteriological presentation of Jesus as the hidden Son of God who manifests himself as the Danielic Son of man cum Suffering Servant who gives his life as a ransom for many, and thus makes the temple obsolete. This gospel, properly understood, does not envision a period before the eschaton in which the temple should be purified so that the Gentiles may pray in a dignified manner. Rather, Jesus predicts that the temple will be totally destroyed, and when he dies this destruction is symbolized by the rent temple curtain. If I am correct, in the deep layers of Mark we have the *opposite* of a temple cleansing, for the elements of a real temple cleansing as so-described in the Maccabean accounts, some seven, seem to be found in reverse in the markan gospel: instead of cleansing the desolated sanctuary and the profaned altar, as in 1 Macc 4, Mark 13:14 predicts that the temple will be desolated and profaned; instead of the new vessels, a lamp stand and a table, Jesus in Mark prohibits the carrying of vessels, overturns tables and causes it to be dark at noon when he is dying. In Maccabees the temple curtains are spread out, in Mark the curtain is rent from top to bottom. In Maccabees, the people celebrate that the reproach of the Gentiles was removed, while in Mark the Gentiles are beneficiaries of the new eschatological order. Finally, the palm branches appear in Maccabees after the cleansing, while in Mark they occur before the temple act. The purpose of this brief illustration is simply to show that the holy Scriptures can be read arcanelly enough to uncover new insights which, when read theologically and within the broader Tradition (with a capital T), enrich our understanding of the Catholic faith, which grows; this is what *Dei Verbum* 8 teaches.⁸

⁷ Cf., however, the insistence of JOSEPH CARD. RATZINGER, in "L'interpretazione biblica in conflitto. Problemi del fondamento ed orientamento dell'esegesi contemporanea," in *L'esegesi cristiana oggi*, 101, that exegesis cannot approach the methodological precision and certainty of the natural sciences, which themselves are subject to the influence of the scientist himself (the "Heisenberg principle").

⁸ IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, "Reading Holy Scripture 'in the Spirit': Is the patristic way of reading the Bible still possible today?," *Communio* 4 (Winter, 1986), 323, discussing Heidegger's philosophy of

The mutual dependence of exegesis and theology. Exciting times lie ahead for the as yet only emerging *rapprochement* between exegesis and theology.⁹ Biblical scholars, among which those who are in the Catholic tradition have achieved a prominent place, are engaged in very promising methods of biblical study from an amazing variety of points of view. Increasingly stronger voices are calling for a reappropriation of the holy Scriptures as a book of faith for believers, written by believers and requiring a similar theological mind-set in order to be properly understood, and in order to be able to draw out as fully as possible the riches contained therein. A model may be found in the pioneer of modern Catholic biblical scholarship, the great Dominican friar Marie-Joseph Lagrange, who was well-trained theologically but attuned to the latest methods for the critical study of the Scriptures.¹⁰ As the 1993

interpretation, states that “To interpret a text is to disclose the virtualities that it conceals, ‘to liberate its interior forces.’ It is to disengage whatever *implicit* it contains, to bring to light its hidden riches. So one can say that Heidegger’s hermeneutical lesson for theologians and exegetes invites them to seek out ‘what is *unthought* in the Tradition, the *unsaid* in the Scriptures themselves’ (William Richardson). We can’t help but be struck by the resemblance between these formulas and those from the patristic texts on the ‘spiritual sense’ of the Scriptures. We can say that St. Hilary and St. Gregory demand that the reader of the Gospel seek out its ‘*interior* intelligibility.’ Or with St. Jerome that the ‘meaning’ of the Scriptures is found behind the ‘words.’ It is found ‘not on the surface, but in the *marrow* . . . , in the *root* of *understanding*, . . . in the *spirit* of Scripture.” On 324, he says that “On many different occasions, in his biblical commentaries, Gregory insists on the fact that ‘the divine words *grow* with him who reads them’ (*In Ezechielem homiliae*, 1.7.8).” Also in *Moralia in Iob*, 20, 1 (Patrologia Latina 76, 135 B-D), where he says that “Sacred Scripture in some way grows together with the readers” (*aliquo modo cum legentibus crescit*),” quoted in DE LA POTTERIE, “L’esegesi biblica, scienza della fede,” in *L’esegesi cristiana*, 147; in *ibid.*, 162, he quotes Ricoeur as often reminding us that there is always “a surplus of meaning” in texts. This “phenomenon” is discussed by PAUL RICOEUR in “The Nuptial Metaphor,” in ANDRÉ LACOCQUE – PAUL RICOEUR, *Thinking Biblically. Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies* (David Pellauer, trans.) (Univ. of Chicago Press: Chicago – London, 1998), 227 (“In this way are born interpretations that augment the meaning of the text, through a meaning that is, in a way, in front of the text, without necessarily claiming that this meaning preexisted in the text.”).

⁹ See WILLIAM M. THOMPSON, *The Struggle for Theology’s Soul. Contesting Scripture in Christology* (Crossroad: New York, 1996), especially pages 1-32.

¹⁰ “Father Lagrange, on the other hand [as opposed to both Blondel, who was unfamiliar with exegesis, and Loisy, who thought that “history” was self-sufficient] had a solid Thomistic formation, the fecundity of which had been manifested in the series of articles on the inspiration of Sacred Scripture which he published [in *Revue Biblique*, 1895-1896];” PIERRE GRELOT, *Los evangelios y la historia* (Editorial Herder: Barcelona, 1987), 36 (trans. of *Évangiles et histoire*, Desclée et Cie., Paris, 1986). JEROME MURPHY-O’CONNOR, in his article on Père Lagrange in *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation. K-Z* (John H. Hayes, gen. ed.) (Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1999), 43, states that “During the modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church, his rigorously critical approach, crystallized in his programmatic book *La méthode historique* (1903), won him enemies among the traditionalists, but his finely tuned sense of the responsibilities of faith and the rights of reason enabled him to combine loyal submission to the church with academic freedom. Eventually his vision of authentic research prevailed, and his combination of profound theology and stringent historical criticism became the model and inspiration of all subsequent developments in Roman Catholic biblical studies.” Pope Paul VI, in his first allocution to the Pontifical Biblical Commission on March 14, 1974, praised Lagrange for knowing how to combine critical sagacity with “faith and adhesion to the Church;” quoted and discussed in GRELOT, *ibid.*, 70-71.

document previously mentioned states, these pioneers “did not always receive in the past the encouragement that is given them today.”¹¹ Exegesis must once again become an eminently theological task, but as a highly specialized discipline, it must seek the collaboration of theologians rather than presume an independence that has shown itself to be unfruitful. The same goes for theology. Among the issues for which a collaboration between theologians and Bible scholars would be most necessary are: the theological appropriation of apocalypticism as an essential biblical category which raises difficult problems in the contemporary world;¹² the proper understanding of the concept and importance of historicity in biblical research (the Bible appears to be history and is read as such by most people, but clearly is something other than what we today call history; how do we formulate, or perhaps reformulate, what the Church holds to be the essential historicity of many biblical narratives?);¹³ the whole question of ethics and the Bible: how to distinguish between what is so culturally-dependent that it is not to be considered ethically binding (e.g., “women should be silent in the Church,” 1 Cor 14:34) and what is an authentic teaching on morals. Related to this is the question of “natural law” (or “the law of nature,” as Helmut Koester prefers), and the whole

¹¹ THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Città del Vaticano, 1993), 100 (III.B.3). Péro Lagrange’s cause for beatification is advancing.

¹² See SEÁN P. KEALY, *The Apocalypse of John* (Michael Glazier: Wilmington, 1987), especially pages 11-47, 234-250. He makes the fine point that ‘apocalyptic conditions’ already exist in many parts of the world today, that is, extreme, life and death situations of cataclysm and destruction.

¹³ See RAYMOND E. BROWN – THOMAS AQUINAS COLLINS, “Church Pronouncements,” *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1990), 1173; GRELOT, *Los evangelios*, 27-72. On pages 51-52, he cites Pope Pius XII in *Divino afflante Spiritu* as calling on exegetes to provide “a solid explanation” of the unresolved historical difficulties to be found throughout the Bible (*Enchiridion biblicum* 563), “in total accord with Church doctrine, especially that of biblical inerrancy, and at the same time capable of responding fully to the conclusions of the profane sciences” (*Enchiridion biblicum* 564). On page 27, Grelot points out that “As far as the relations between the Gospel and history are concerned, the ecclesiastical magisterium has not defined anything directly.” See IGNACE DE LA POTTERIE, “La vérité de la Sainte Écriture et l’Histoire du salut d’après la Constitution dogmatique «*Dei Verbum*»,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 88 (1966) 149-169 for a useful discussion of inerrancy in *Dei Verbum* 11, including other formulations which were rejected. DANIEL J. HARRINGTON, in “Catholic Interpretation of Scripture,” in *The Bible in the Churches. How Different Christians Interpret the Scriptures* (Kenneth Hagen et al.) (Paulist Press: New York – Mahwah, 1985), 40, discussing *Dei Verbum* 11’s “doctrine of inerrancy of Scripture” (‘Scripture teaches without error *that truth* which God wanted to be written for our salvation’s sake’), states that “This may sound like a statement of limited inerrancy —that is, only what pertains to our salvation, and not historical or scientific matters, in the Bible is free from error. But, in fact, the theologians who wrote this document and the council fathers who voted their approval deliberately sought to avoid approving either complete inerrancy or limited inerrancy as the church’s teaching . . . there is no attempt to explain in detail *how* inspiration and inerrancy function or what scope these terms may have. [footnote omitted] It was more a matter of reaffirming venerable theological teachings without specifying which interpretation of them is best.”

issue of biblical passages which extol violent actions, a topic recently dealt with by John J. Collins in his presidential address at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature.¹⁴

A practical note. The task of theologians and Bible scholars is to help believers understand and live their faith more authentically and deeply. There should be no essential spiritual or intellectual dichotomy in the Church between the learned and the unlearned, between those who know the real truth and the masses who must be given myths and controlled by moral teachings which have no supernatural basis, as has happened in other religions. The leaders and the faithful must be in the same boat.

Conclusion. We encounter God's revelation in a special way in the Sacred Scriptures. These we must approach theologically, with a knowledge born of connaturality, as St. Thomas Aquinas would say.¹⁵ Theology is the science that, through faith, accesses God's own knowledge. As a human science, it must use reason and all the means available to human reason. It is the combination of these two, faith and a loving affinity with the sacred texts, and the right use of reason, that enable us to make wise judgments about the meaning of the Bible, for the enrichment of the life of the Church. And so our study of the Bible will conform to the nature of the Bible itself, which is both divine and human, the divine known by faith, and the human by reason, the two inseparably working together. Ultimately, the task of Scripture study is theological, but it is essentially an attentive activity, carefully listening to the Word of God which speaks from the spiritual sphere to us who are mere flesh.

¹⁴ Entitled "Phinehas, the Bible and the Legitimation of Violence."

¹⁵ Perhaps St. Thomas' most pregnant statement regarding connaturality is found in the *Summa theologiae* 2-2 q. 45 a.2, in the response, where he says that "wisdom has to do with a certain correctness of judgment according to divine reasons." This can occur in two ways: one is by the "perfect use of reason," the other "on account of a certain connaturality with those things of which it is presently to be judged" (*propter connaturalitatem quandam ad ea de quibus iam est iudicandum*). Thus, regarding things pertaining to chastity, one may judge correctly by learning "moral science" or by possessing the habit (virtue) of chastity. Correct judgment concerning divine things by way of the "examination of reason" (*ex rationis inquisitione*) belongs to wisdom as an intellectual virtue, while such judgment "according to a certain connaturality" belongs to wisdom as a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Aquinate cites what Dionysius says about Hierotheus, that he "is perfect in divine matters 'not just learning, but also experiencing, divine things'" (*non solum discens, sed et patiens divina*). This "'sympathy' (*compassio*) or connaturality with divine things takes place through charity, which indeed unites us to God. . . . Thus, therefore, wisdom which is a gift indeed has its cause in the will, namely, charity, while it has its essence in the intellect, whose act is to judge correctly, as was treated above (1 q.79 a.3)."