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BIBLICAL INSPIRATION AT THE CROSSROADS OF HISTORY
AND THEOLOGY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

PAOLO COSTA

ARQUITECTURA DE UN RELATO SACRIFICIAL.
ESTRUCTURA DE GN 22,1-19 A PARTIR DEL ANÁLISIS DEL DISCURSO

AGUSTÍN ÁLVAREZ

LA DISTANCIA NARRATIVA EN EL EVANGELIO DE SAN JUAN.
UNA PROPUESTA DE ESTUDIO DEL PUNTO DE VISTA DEL NARRADOR

JI YOUNG EMILIANO HONG

LOS CUATRO CONFLICTOS QUE DIERON LUGAR AL NUEVO TESTAMENTO.
UNA LECTURA TEOLÓGICA DE LA FORMACIÓN DEL NUEVO TESTAMENTO

ALFREDO DELGADO GÓMEZ

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BIBLICAL INSPIRATION AT THE CROSSROADS OF HISTORY AND THEOLOGY: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract: This article presents an updated analysis of the hermeneutical debate on biblical inspiration, focusing on key dimensions such as the relationships between inspiration and incarnation, inspiration and history, and inspiration and ecclesial life. The study aims to show how recent developments in historiography contribute valuable perspectives for a nuanced hermeneutics of inspiration. These insights underscore the essential role of the historical-critical method in conducting exegesis that remains theologically aligned with the doctrine of inspiration.

Keywords: hermeneutic, inspiration, incarnation, historical-critical method.

La inspiración bíblica en la encrucijada de la historia y la teología: algunas consideraciones

Resumen: Este artículo presenta un análisis actualizado del debate hermenéutico sobre la inspiración bíblica, enfocándose en dimensiones clave como las relaciones entre inspiración y encarnación, inspiración e historia, e inspiración y vida eclesial. El estudio tiene como objetivo demostrar cómo los desarrollos recientes en historiografía contribuyen con perspectivas valiosas a una hermenéutica matizada de la inspiración. Estas perspectivas destacan el papel esencial del método histórico-crítico en la realización de una exégesis que se mantiene teológicamente alineada con la doctrina de la inspiración.

Palabras clave: hermenéutica, inspiración, encarnación, método histórico-crítico.

Introduction¹

Marc Bloch (1886–1944)², one of the most notable historians of the 20th century, co-founded the journal *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*³ with Lucien Febvre in 1929 and played a key role in transforming modern historiography. Marc Bloch broadened the scope of history to include not only ‘grand history’ (*histoire événementielle*) – the actions of military leaders, kings, and rulers – but also social and economic history, focusing on the lives of ordinary people. At the Sorbonne, where he taught from 1936, he founded the Institut d’histoire économique et sociale. In 1944, during the Second World War, Bloch, a veteran of the First World War and of Jewish descent, was executed after three months of torture following a Nazi raid on the Lyon resistance leadership. In 1949, a posthumous work by Bloch was published in Paris: *Apologie pour l’histoire ou Métier d’historien*. The *incipit* of the book is remarkable and well-known: “Papa, explique-moi donc à quoi sert l’histoire?”. A few lines later, Bloch writes:

Le christianisme est une religion d’historiens [...]. Pour Livres Sacrés, les chrétiens ont des livres d’histoire, et leurs liturgies commémorent, avec les épisodes de la vie terrestre d’un Dieu, les fastes de l’Église et des saints. Historique, le christianisme l’est encore d’une autre façon, peut-être plus profonde: placée entre la Chute et le Jugement, la destinée de l’humanité figure, à ses yeux, une longue aventure, dont chaque destin, chaque ‘pèlerinage’ individuel présente, à son tour, le reflet; c’est dans la durée, partant dans l’histoire, qu’axe central de toute méditation chrétienne se déroule le grand drame du Pêché et de la Rédemption⁴.

¹ This essay is a revised version of a paper first delivered at the “Festival Dei Verbum di Sanremo. Nel 60° anniversario dell’apertura del Concilio Ecumenico Vaticano II”, held at the Istituto Teologico Pio XI in Sanremo on August 30, 2023. I am pleased to dedicate, with great gratitude, this work to Prof. Dean P. Béchar, S. J. on the occasion of his 65th birthday.

² Among the many publications on the life and works of Marc Bloch, see FINK, *Marc Bloch*; ATMSA – BURGUiÈRE, *Marc Bloch aujourd’hui*; FRIEDMAN, *Marc Bloch*; DUMOU-LIN, *Marc Bloch*; RAULFF, *Marc Bloch*; TOUATI, *Marc Bloch*.

³ Throughout its nearly century-long history, the journal has undergone several title changes: *Annales d’histoire sociale* (1939–1941), *Mélanges d’histoire sociale* (1942–1945), *Annales. Économies. Sociétés. Civilisations* (1946–1993), and *Annales. Histoire, sciences sociales* (since 1994). For an examination of the journal’s 20th-century development and its epistemological choices, see BURGUiÈRE, *L’École des Annales*.

⁴ BLOCH, *Apologie*, ix.

In this answer, some aspects intersect with our concerns as I intend to examine biblical inspiration at the crossroads between history and theology. As Bloch noted, Christians' books are *Livres sacrés*, they originate from God and represent the first result of a gratuitous and incommensurable divine self-communication (cf. *Dei Verbum* 6)⁵. These sacred books are simultaneously *Livres d'histoire* in a plural sense. They are historical in terms of their composition, the identification of individual and community authors, the convergence of traditions in their redaction, the concrete stories they narrate, and the historical events they recount or allude to. These books are also historical when considering their manuscript traditions and their *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Furthermore, biblical books have "made history", inspiring late antique, medieval, and modern literature and art to such an extent that the Bible is often referred to as the 'Great Code', recalling Northrop Frye's seminal work *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*⁶.

Thus, the Bible is both a *book of history* and a *book of stories* where the narrated stories and the narrating story intertwine in a theological and historical framework⁷. Here, the 'story' of God – or at least the story of God's revelation – becomes interwoven with the history of humanity⁸.

Starting from this preliminary viewpoint, it becomes evident that diachrony and synchrony are inseparable for the interpretation of the Bible, and this aspect, in my view, is crucial even in relation to highly critical positions⁹ on the very value of inspiration as a theological principle still useful for the development of Christian theology¹⁰.

This perspective will be central to this modest study, which addresses – from a 'bird's-eye' perspective – the topic of inspiration with the sole aim of offering a (very partial) update on the ongoing exegetical and theo-

⁵ See MÜLLER, *Katholische Dogmatik*, 222–248; O'COLLINS, *Inspiration*, 89–93.

⁶ See FRYE, *The Great Code*. Also BOITANI, *The Bible*, guides the reader through the discovery of how biblical stories have underpinned narratives by authors as diverse in time and space as Dante, Saramago, Shakespeare, Faulkner, Orwell, Tournier, Milton, and Mann.

⁷ On narrative analysis and its development over the past few decades, I will mention only a few key methodological works: ALTER, *The Art*; SKA, *"Our Fathers"*; MARGUERAT – BOURQUIN, *Pour lire*; ZAPPELLA, *Manuale*.

⁸ I refer to Karl Rahner's observations, which emphasize that the history of revelation is coextensive with the evolution of humanity's spiritual history as such ("geistigen Geschichte der Menschheit überhaupt"); see RAHNER, "Bemerkungen", 16.

⁹ See e.g. LORETZ, *Die Wahrheit*; LUZ, "Kann die Bibel".

¹⁰ From a different point of view see some responses to this denial of the value of inspiration in SÁNCHEZ-NAVARRO, "The Inspiration".

logical debate, along with some points for discussion. Let me clarify from the outset that the cursory considerations presented here are those of an *outsider*, who is not a scholar of fundamental theology or hermeneutics, but rather of New Testament history and Roman law. Additionally, I fully acknowledge the limitations inherent in an analysis that adopts an explicitly Christian – indeed, Christological – approach to biblical inspiration, without engaging the significant philosophical issues, which would demand a broader and more thorough investigation.

1. Inspiration and the Dynamics of Incarnation

The inseparability between diachrony and synchrony on a theological level is consistent with the dynamics of the Incarnation. *Dei Verbum* (§ 13) affirms:

Dei enim verba, humanis linguis expressa, humano sermoni assimilia facta sunt, sicut olim Aeterni Patris Verbum, humanae infirmitatis assumpta carne, hominibus simile factum est¹¹.

Therefore, the *analogatum princeps* for understanding theologically the Bible as an inspired text, for shaping its epistemological hermeneutics, and for orienting its pastoral reading is always the Incarnation of the *Verbum*, his assumption of *humanae infirmitatis caro*.

Indeed, *Dei Verbum* begins (§ 2): *Placuit Deo in sua bonitate et sapientia Seipsum revelare*. At the origin of this dynamic lies an act of divine benevolence, of freedom and grace, which takes place through a *modus conversationis* (“*cum eis conversatur*”), as affirmed by the conciliar constitution, likely in reference to Thomas Aquinas (*S.Th.* III, 40, I ad 1)¹². Revelation precedes inspiration, and inspired texts are not the only way God communicates¹³. Nevertheless, it is the character of Revelation that informs the characteristics of Inspiration.

Alcuin of York, one of the key figures of the Carolingian Renaissance, revitalized the *Schola Palatina* at Charlemagne’s court, promoting the study

¹¹ DV 13: “For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the word of the eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like men”. See also Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* § 19.

¹² See A. Fernandez’s observation on the *Schema De Fontibus* in HELLÍN (ed.), *Constitutio*, 336–337; see also THEOBALD, *Le concile Vatican II*, 159–180.

¹³ See BLOESCH, *Holy Scripture*, 57.

of the classic works throughout the empire. He spent his final years as the abbot of Tours, where he revised the Latin text of the Bible, producing what became known as the “Alcuin Bible”, which held great importance throughout the early Middle Ages, emerging as the official text for the court school¹⁴. Alcuin, an attentive reader of the sacred text, even in its philological details, was acutely aware of the radically oblique nature of inspiration. In a profound formulation, he wrote:

Condascendit enim sancta Scriptura nostrae infirmitati, nostraeque consuetudini, quatenus imbecilla instrueretur humanitas, quando usque ad illam secretam gloriam divinitatis hominum non poterat pervenire¹⁵.

Through an elegant personification¹⁶, the Holy Scripture is presented as the agent of a benevolent act that stoops to human frailty and adopts human modes of expression. This *condescensio*, according to Alcuin, serves a lofty purpose: to elevate humanity to divine glory. Thus, for Alcuin, Scripture carries out the task of divinizing the one who reads and listens to it. Sacred Scripture is ontologically marked by a unique dignity, directed toward a noble goal, and animated by an irresistible efficacy. This is consistent with what *Dei Verbum* proclaims (§ 21): “Divinas Scripturas sicut et ipsum Corpus dominicum semper venerata est Ecclesia”¹⁷. Just as *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* *vivit* (the title of John Paul II’s last encyclical from 2003) and venerates the Eucharist, so too does she live by the Sacred Scriptures and venerate them. Indeed, during the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451), the Evangeliary was enthroned at the opening of the sessions to signify the presence of the Risen Christ in the assembly – a gesture that was also repeated at the inauguration of the Second Vatican Council¹⁸.

The inspired composition of the Bible, as well as its interpretation, is characterized as a relational act. Recently, Pasquale Basta published a study¹⁹, in which the concept of *relationship* – a central theme in modern personalism – is proposed as the key to understanding inspiration. *Dei Ver-*

¹⁴ See FISCHER, *Die Alkuin Bibel*.

¹⁵ Alcuinus, *Super III epistolas Pauli* (PL 100, 1068B) [“Sacred Scripture, in fact, lowers itself to our weakness and our customs so that fragile humanity might be instructed, for otherwise, it would not have been able to reach the hidden glory of divinity of mankind”].

¹⁶ Regarding this rhetorical figure, see LAUSBERG, *Handbook*, 369–372 (§§ 826–829).

¹⁷ DV 21: “The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord”.

¹⁸ See DE MAIO, *The Book*.

¹⁹ See BASTA, *Il carattere*.

bum had already made this clear²⁰. In § 13, the first theological principle defining the status of Sacred Scripture refers directly to a relational act: divine condescension (*aeternae Sapientiae admirabilis condescensio*). This concept refers to the theological idea of *synkatábasis*, first coined by John Chrysostom²¹ and later incorporated by *Dei Verbum* from the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*²². The *relational, personal* aspect of inspiration should always take precedence over the *propositional* aspect. The latter serves the former²³. Indeed, the inspiration of Scripture is not only a profoundly theological process but also an eminently spiritual and ecclesial one. It is impossible to overlook the teachings of Karl Rahner on this subject, whose relevance has recently been highlighted by Paolo Monzani²⁴. In a brief essay²⁵ published in Freiburg in 1958 as the first volume of the *Quaestiones disputatae* series and described by Farkasfalvy as “the most important book of the century on biblical inspiration,”²⁶ Rahner made a clear distinction between divine and human authorship. He emphasized that God is truly the Author of Scripture (as affirmed by the Council of Florence in 1442 [DH 1334]), but in an indirect and mediated way. According to Rahner, what God authors first is the *Urkirche*, of which the New Testament is a constitutive component. The early Church is divinely willed – effectively, absolutely, historically, and eschatologically – and for it to possess a normative dimension, this original reality must be objectified in a communicative *medium* accessible to humanity: a book.

Some aspects of Rahner’s approach can be debated. His views sometimes seem to downplay the role of individual inspired authors, if we adopt this language while being mindful of the limitations inherent in applying

²⁰ I will mention some contributions on inspiration published since the conclusion of the Council: GRELOT, *La Bible*; ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *La Palabra*; VAWTER, *Biblical Inspiration*; MARSHALL, *Biblical Inspiration*; GABEL, *Inspirations*; MARTIN, *Pour une théologie*; LAW, *Inspiration*; IZQUIERDO (ed.), *Scrittura*; GIBERT – THEOBALD (eds.), *La réception*; KÖRTNER, “Rezeption”; DUBOVSKÝ – SONNET (eds.), *Ogni Scrittura*; FARKASFALVY, *A Theology*; O’COLLINS, *Inspiration*.

²¹ The text of John Chrysostom mentioned in DV 13 is taken from *Homilia in Genesim XVII* (PG 53, col. 38); see CAPIZZI, “Parola”, 397–410.

²² See GRILLMEIER, “*Constitutio*”, 543–545.

²³ See BRÄNDLE, “Συγκατάβασις”.

²⁴ See MONZANI, “Karl Rahner”.

²⁵ See RAHNER, *Über die Schriftinspiration*.

²⁶ FARKASFALVY, *A Theology*, 1.

modern notions of authorship to biblical texts²⁷. Moreover, Rahner's perspective should be reconsidered in light of recent theological developments, especially regarding dialogue with Judaism and the deeper understanding of Israel's role and its Scriptures (recognized as inspired even before Jesus)²⁸ in the *historia salutis*. Nevertheless, I find Rahner's proposal to view inspiration as an expression of a theological-ecclesial relationship – thereby avoiding any 'miraculous' framework²⁹ – entirely convincing.

On this point regarding the organic unity of Scripture and Church, Rahner and Ratzinger notably agree. The latter writes:

Scripture is not a meteorite fallen from the sky [...]. Scripture carries God's thoughts within it: that makes it unique and constitutes it an 'authority.' Yet it is transmitted by human history. It carries within it the life and thought of a historical society that we call the 'People of God,' because they are brought together, and held together, by the coming of the divine word³⁰.

Indeed, drawing on Bonaventure's theology, Ratzinger's model of inspiration is also remarkably relational and ecclesial³¹.

The 2014 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Inspiration and Truth of Sacred Scripture*, adopts precisely this relational perspective³². Inspiration is described (§ 7) as "the action by which God enables certain persons, chosen by Him, to transmit his revelation faithfully in writing". Sacred Scripture is presented, even from the subtitle, as "the word that comes from God and speaks of God for the salvation of the world". The heart of the document lies in identifying the phenomenology of the relationship between God and the human authors. The text delineates "the many ways" and "at different times" – quoting the opening of *Hebrews* – by which God has spoken: through the patriarchs, through Moses, through the prophets, and ultimately, through the incarnate Word, which is the *foundation and criterion* for Christians in understanding the theology of inspiration. *Foun-*

²⁷ See CONGAR, "Inspiration"; O'COLLINS, *Inspiration*, 110–117; MONZANI, "Karl Rahner", 569–571.

²⁸ See LOHFINK, *Der niemals gekündigte Bund*; GRILLI, *Scritture*.

²⁹ See RAHNER, "Buch Gottes", 284

³⁰ RATZINGER, "What in Fact Is Theology?", 33.

³¹ On Ratzinger's theology of inspiration see the recent works by PÍDEL, "*Christi Opera*"; ID., *The Inspiration*.

³² For some discussions, occasionally critical, of the document, see FARKASFALVY, *A Theology*, 97–110; REASONER, "An Introductory Survey"; BOVATI, "Ispirazione"; CAVICCHIA, "Ispirazione"; MAGEE, "*The Inspiration*", 22–50. For the English translation of the document see ESPOSITO – GREGG (eds.), *The Inspiration*.

dation first. In the New Testament, it is the personal relationship with Jesus that forms the foundation of inspiration³³. Rahner observes that the core of inspiration lies in the clear awareness of the authors that what they were writing was a coherent transmission of the unique experience of the early Church, profoundly shaped by the event of Jesus' life³⁴. The experience of contact with the *Ursakrament* – Christ incarnate³⁵ – enabled the apostles and evangelists to communicate His message (*Inspiration and Truth*, § 8). And then, the *criterion* for discerning whether a word, conveyed in human form, comes from God is living faith in Jesus, viewing His person as the culmination of God's self-communication in accordance with the various forms of the economy of revelation (§ 10).

2. Inspiration and Christology

There are many ways in which God reveals Himself (creation, history, the life of Jesus of Nazareth) (*Inspiration and Truth* § 52). However, central and decisive is the Christological criteria that informs the Christian evaluation of inspiration. These criteria are found in the words of Jesus, recalled in their normative sense by the document (§ 56), taken from Luke 24, the heart of the episode of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. This episode also represents the icon chosen by Pope Francis in the Apostolic Letter *Aperuit illis* (AAS CXI 10 [2019]) to establish the Sunday of the Word, issued on September 30, 2019, at the beginning of the 1600th anniversary of St. Jerome's death³⁶.

In this narrative gem³⁷ that concludes the first part of Luke's diptych, a stranger is shown as he meets two disciples of Jesus who, disillusioned, are leaving Jerusalem. He converses with them, shows that he is unaware of what has happened in the city, and asks one single word: "*poīa*" ("What sort of things?"). Thus, the overwhelming disappointment of the two on the road to Emmaus is expressed – an emblem of every frustrated following of Jesus, clouded by unfulfilled expectations. Their understanding of Jesus'

³³ See ALONSO SCHÖKEL, *La palabra*, 177–180.

³⁴ See RAHNER, *Über die Schriftinspiration*, 70–72; see also O'COLLINS, *Inspiration*, 125–127.

³⁵ See SCHILLEBEECKX, *Christus sacrament*.

³⁶ See PITTA, *Quando arde*.

³⁷ The reading of DUPONT, "Les pèlerins"; *Id.*, "Les disciples", remain illuminating. See also BOITANI, *The Bible*; *Id.*, "Something"; ALETTI, *Le Jésus*, 185–205.

identity is immediately made clear: it is the Christology of Cleopas and his companion (Luke 24:19–24)³⁸. It is a theological reading rooted in the Old Testament but incomplete: “He was a prophet mighty in deed and word”. And then: “We were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel”. The centuries-old Davidic expectation, crystallized in this phrase, is shattered by the reality of Jesus’ death, condemned by the religious authorities of the People and executed by a foreign power. The real drama of the two on the road to Emmaus is not that they fail to recognize the Risen One, who approaches them as a stranger, but that they had never truly known Jesus during His ministry and preaching because they had imposed their own expectations, preconceptions, and prejudices upon Him.

The answer to this erroneous interpretation of the Christological event is found in Jesus’ words in Luke 24:25–28: Jesus’ Christology. What the two on the road to Emmaus failed to understand was the belonging of the Messiah’s suffering to God’s plan (*dei* – v. 26)³⁹ in order to reach glory. They did not understand that the rejection by the authorities of Israel, and by themselves, was part of a complete Christological *anagnōrisis*. And what hermeneutic procedure does Jesus follow (and therefore normatively proposes, though narratively) in response? He begins with Moses – from the *Torah* – and passing through all the prophets, explains how all the Scriptures refer to Him. The Hebrew Bible is thus considered inspired by the most credible and theologically normative speaker. One cannot help but think of the transfiguration episode with Moses and Elijah speaking with Jesus (Luke 9:30 and parallels). The hermeneutic challenge that defeats the two on the road to Emmaus is the same one that underlies all Christian speculation. It is the challenge of *theologia crucis*, in which an ignominious scaffold (cf. Deut 21:23 in Gal 3:13)⁴⁰ becomes a royal throne (cf. Rom 3:25–26)⁴¹ to manifest divine wisdom superior to any human logic (cf. 1 Cor 1:18–25)⁴². Indeed, Luther affirmed: *Crux sola nostra theologia* (WA 5, 176, 32 s.). To face this challenge requires an extraordinary armor, one that comes from God: understanding, in the light of the Spirit, those Scriptures that, through the Christological vehicle, the Gospel itself proposes as inspired.

³⁸ See RASTOIN, “Cléophas”.

³⁹ See COSGROVE, “The Divine *Δεῖ*”.

⁴⁰ See CORSANI, *Lettera ai Galati*, 202–212; VANHOYE, *Lettera ai Galati*, 90–92; ALETTI, *Justification*, 61–80.

⁴¹ See ZUMSTEIN, “La croix”.

⁴² See PITTA, *Il paradosso*; *Id.*, *Romans*, 65–89.

Inspiration concerns both the individual parts and the whole of the Sacred Writings of ancient Israel. But it is not an inspiration to be understood in a theologically ‘aseptic’ way. The Hebrew Bible is indeed interpreted in the light of the Christology that Jesus Himself is proposing. This is a very important hermeneutic point that requires an appropriate framework for the Christian doctrine of inspiration. In Luke 24:13–35, we encounter a configuration – possibly the most qualified – of inspiration, according to a dynamic that combines Scripture and its reading. It is the self-communication of God and the human reception of that communication, in this case, by the Son Himself, the incarnate Word⁴³.

Thus, we are faced with a problem of interpreting the text considered inspired that already engaged the early Christian community and still engages us today. This hermeneutic problem also becomes a problem of the theology of inspiration because it concerns the status of the Scriptures of Israel as well as the editorial process of the New Testament. The question is: does the event of Jesus constitute a distortion or a fulfillment of the Scriptures? How to read the Hebrew Bible in order to have a real understanding of Jesus, especially His death as a impious, was the great problem of the early Jesus community. The literary device used to answer this question was typology⁴⁴.

The inescapability of this theme, both then and today, is clearly seen by reading what follows in the encounter on the road to Emmaus. In Luke 24:13–35, the two disciples do not recognize the stranger; the Christological explanation of the Scriptures follows, and then the recognition in the breaking of bread and the *anamnesis* of the heart that burns precisely during the experience of exegesis performed by the Risen One. Immediately after this episode, Jesus appears in the upper room (Luke 24:36–43) – this is a true post-Paschal appearance, not the previous one – and He is immediately recognized. He grants the fullness of *šālôm*, shows His wounds, and eats roasted fish to indicate the continuity between pre- and post-Paschal times and His real corporeality. Nonetheless, in Luke 24:44–46, Jesus again states: “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and in the Prophets and Psalms must be (again *deī*) fulfilled...”. The three parts of the Hebrew canon (*Tanàkh* - TNK) are thus enumerated, and then it reads: “He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” and again: “Thus it is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead”.

⁴³ See THEOBALD, “*Dans les traces*”, 57–89.

⁴⁴ See ALETTI, *Le Messie souffrant*.

Thus, even in this case, although He had already been recognized, Jesus performs His own Christological exegesis. It is not enough to have known Jesus or even to have recognized the Risen One. One must listen to His exegesis of the Scriptures, eidetically summarized around the element of the Messiah's suffering, to adequately understand the identity of the Master from Nazareth and to be equipped for testimony. This is why the mandate follows immediately in Luke 24:48: "You are witnesses of these things". And then in Acts 1:8: "You will be witnesses *of me*"⁴⁵. Now, the Christological nature of the testimony is complete, but it was first necessary to correctly interpret the Scriptures, as proposed by Jesus, without which there can be no testimony or apostolate, because the object of the proclamation would be a wholly human image of Jesus, marked by preconceptions, expectations, prejudices, interests, and distortions.

In His self-exegesis, Jesus refers to God – indeed, to what God says about Him in the Scriptures – and in this way, He definitively authenticates the event of Revelation. Theobald uses the effective image of the *périple révélateur*⁴⁶. Cavicchia recently wrote:

Oggetto formale della conoscenza veicolata dalla Scrittura è il mistero di Dio e il giudizio operato dalla comunità compie un discernimento su ciò che è accettato e ciò che è respinto come non corrispondente alla realtà soprannaturale⁴⁷.

In such process, inspiration contains this element of discernment, which can only be Christologically marked⁴⁸. This discernment concerns the authors, the editors, and also the communities in their process of recognizing a text as inspired.

A step forward. If one of the objectives in composing the portrayal of Jesus in the Gospels was to demonstrate His fulfillment – and simultaneous surpassing – of Old Testament expectations, a central issue, following the Ascension, concerns another continuity – namely, that between Jesus and the disciples, between Jesus and the Church. This is a crucial problem that also touches upon inspiration. Indeed, *Dei Verbum* 7 asserts:

Christus Dominus, in quo summi Dei tota revelatio consummatur, mandatum dedit Apostolis ut Evangelium [...] predicarent [...]. Quod quidem fideliter factum est, tum ab Apostolis, qui in praedicatione orali, exemplis et institu-

⁴⁵ See MANICARDI, "La terza apparizione"; COSTA, "Sulla via di Emmaus".

⁴⁶ THEOBALD, "*Dans les traces*", 25.

⁴⁷ CAVICCHIA, "Ispirazione", 274.

⁴⁸ See SKA, "Ispirazione", 84. BOVATI – BASTA, *Ci ha parlato*, 78–137.

tionibus ea tradiderunt quae sive ex ore, conversatione et operibus Christi acceperant, sive a Spiritu Sancto suggerente didicerant, tum ab illis Apostolis virisque apostolicis, qui, sub inspiratione eiusdem Spiritus Sancti, nuntium salutis scriptis mandaverunt⁴⁹.

From the very origins of Christian reflection, divine self-communication is manifested through the dynamics of *accipere* and *discere*. Reception and learning – definitive revelatory presence, and the contingency of historical individuality – are inextricably interrelated. The literary device that responds to this dynamic is the *sýnkrisis*. The Risen One, by means of His Spirit, continues to act through His disciples, whom Luke portrays in the *Acts of the Apostles* as following the model of Jesus⁵⁰.

The parallel pericope to Luke 24:13–35 is Acts 8:26–40: the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on the road descending from Jerusalem to Gaza. In this episode, Philip reiterates the actions of Jesus. The same narrative mode is employed in *Acts* to depict Peter, Stephen, and then Paul. Clear intertextual – *rectius*: intratextual due to the unity of Luke’s *Doppelwerk* – signs demonstrate these literary and theological relationships, which cannot be elaborated upon here. I will only note that also in Acts 17:1–10a, a brief pericope that exemplarily condenses the features of Pauline evangelization⁵¹, we find (v. 3) the apostle explaining “from the scriptures” that “the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead,” and that “This is the Messiah, Jesus” whom Paul proclaims. The schema is the same as that of the Emmaus narrative, but here the role of Jesus is assumed by the evangelizer.

Scripture thus appears inspired insofar as it inspires the recognition of the identity of Jesus – the historical Jesus – as the Christ awaited by Israel. Rahner emphasizes, with a rather assertive expression, that the Church did not receive the Scriptures from the Synagogue in a heteronomous manner, but that the Old Testament, Christologically mediated, belongs to the

⁴⁹ DV 7: “Christ the Lord in whom the full revelation of the supreme God is brought to completion commissioned the Apostles to preach to all men the Gospel [...]. This commission was faithfully fulfilled by the Apostles who, by their oral preaching, by example, and by observances handed on what they had received from the lips of Christ, from living with Him, and from what He did, or what they had learned through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The commission was fulfilled, too, by those Apostles and apostolic men who under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit committed the message of salvation to writing”.

⁵⁰ See ALETTI, *Quand Luc*; ID., *Jésus*.

⁵¹ See COSTA, *Paolo*; ID., “*Urbs celeberrima*”.

very formation of the Church⁵². Significantly, in his latest essay on the theme of inspiration, also Ratzinger adopts a Christologically oriented perspective regarding the inspired value of the Old Testament⁵³. In this light, Christianity can rightly be interpreted not as a ‘religion of the Book’, but as an experience of faith in the incarnate Word of God – thereby also revealed and transmitted – which is Jesus Christ, the full exegesis of the Father (cf. John 1:8)⁵⁴. For this reason, Henri de Lubac could conclude a paragraph – significantly titled *Verbum abbreviatum* – of his monumental study on the four senses of Scripture with the assertion: “Le christianisme n’est pas ‘la religion biblique’: il est la religion de Jésus-Christ”⁵⁵.

2.1. Inspiration and History (A): Challenges (and Gains) of Postmodernity

Having briefly framed the Christological dimension of biblical inspiration⁵⁶, I now touch on a pressing issue. The relationship between the inspired word and history. I do not intend to dwell on the issue of the truth of the Bible – the old question of inerrancy. This has been widely addressed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 2014 document⁵⁷. Instead, I find it more relevant to highlight here the concrete and historical dynamics of inspiration. *Dei Verbum* 11 states – drawing on *Providentissimus Deus* by Leo XIII and *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by Pius XII – that the biblical books

Deum habent auctorem, atque ut tales ipsi Ecclesiae traditi sunt. In sacris vero libris conficiendis Deus homines elegit, quos facultatibus ac viribus suis utentes adhibuit, ut Ipso in illis et per illos agente, ea omnia eaque sola, quae Ipse vellet, ut veri auctores scripto traderent⁵⁸.

⁵² See RAHNER, *Über die Schriftinspiration*, 55–57, 61–62.

⁵³ See RATZINGER, “Gnade”.

⁵⁴ See RAHNER, *Grundkurs*, 275–276.

⁵⁵ DE LUBAC, *Exégèse Médiévale*, III. I, 197.

⁵⁶ Recently, a prominent Anglican exegete, Alex Irving, reaffirms the relational and Christological nature of the Christian notion of inspiration, responding to R. BROWN, “Which Books?”, 429–438, and clarifying that the truth-value of the biblical text is not found in verbal inerrancy but in its reference, beyond itself, to the true self-revelation of God in Jesus, which God adopts as the permanent mode of His revelation through the Spirit; see IRVING, “One Word”.

⁵⁷ See PIÉ-NINOT, “Teologia”; APARICIO VALLS, “L’ispirazione”.

⁵⁸ DV 11: “The books of both the Old and New Testaments [...] have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself. In composing the sa-

Furthermore, *Dei Verbum* § 12 presents the reflection of this on the interpretative level:

Oportet porro ut interpres sensum inquirat, quem in determinatis adiunctis hagiographus, pro sui temporis et suae culturae condicione, ope generum litterariorum illo tempore adhibitorum exprimere intenderit et expresserit. Ad recte enim intelligendum id quod sacer auctor scripto asserere voluerit, rite attendendum est tum ad suetos illos nativos sentiendi, dicendi, narrandive modos, qui temporibus hagiographi vigeant, tum ad illos qui illo aeo in mutuo hominum commercio passim adhiberi solebant⁵⁹.

For a correct understanding of what the sacred author wished to assert in writing, one must take into account both the ways of thinking, speaking, and narrating that prevailed in the times of the human authors and those commonly used in human interactions at that time.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (§ 32)⁶⁰, Benedict XVI states:

Historicus eventus constitutiva dimensio est christianae fidei. Historia salutis non est mythorum collectio, verum historia genuina, quam ob causam studium ope viarum severae historicae indagationis est peragendum⁶¹.

The document *Inspiration and Truth* (§ 4) notes the challenges that biblical interpretation faces due to the development of historical sciences, aiming to avoid both fundamentalism and skepticism⁶². Now, if the rela-

cred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted”.

⁵⁹ DV 12: “The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. For the correct understanding of what the sacred author wanted to assert, due attention must be paid to the customary and characteristic styles of feeling, speaking and narrating which prevailed at the time of the sacred writer, and to the patterns men normally employed at that period in their everyday dealings with one another”.

⁶⁰ For a presentation of the document, see APARICIO VALLS – PIÉ-NINOT (eds.), *Commento*.

⁶¹ VD 32: “The historical fact is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history, and it should thus be studied with the methods of serious historical research”. On this point, see CAVICCHIA, “Ispirazione”, 259–260.

⁶² The document (§ 106), in introducing the examination of significant texts, poses several decisive questions: “The passages are diverse in nature, but for all of them, even though in different forms and for specific reasons, we can ask the question: of

tionship between the Bible and history was initially approached from a strongly rationalist and rather skeptical perspective regarding the credibility of the data the biblical text conveys – skepticism that obviously affects the status of inspiration – today, the state of exegetical research is much calmer, with significant reconciliation between methods and a lessening of the tension between diachrony and synchrony that has characterized many stages of modern exegesis.

This reconciliation has at least two main reasons. One is very general: within the context of an increasing recognition of the partial, provisional, and contingent nature of all scientific knowledge⁶³, the historiographical reflection of the second half of the 20th century increasingly clarifies the overcoming of that merely positivist-rationalist notion of history that characterized the 19th century. It is now widely accepted that history cannot be reduced to a mere account of *bruta facta*, with the ambition of reconstructing what “really happened”⁶⁴. The presumption of a history without interpretation, without narrative, and without a goal – *lato sensu* ideological and even theological – proves to be a vain attempt. This is even more evident when considering ancient historiography. It can be observed from a simple reading not only of Herodotus but also of Thucydides, Polybius, Livy, or Tacitus. This is consistent with the principles of ancient historiography, as can be gleaned from programmatic ancient works such as *Quomodo Historia conscribenda sit* by Lucian of Samosata or *Epistula ad Pompeium Geminum* by Dionysius of Halicarnassus⁶⁵.

Obviously, today we do not have direct access to the events of antiquity, but rather to sources that represent them linguistically and reflect ideological perspectives⁶⁶. The studies of Paul Ricœur⁶⁷ and Paul Veyne⁶⁸ were

that which is narrated, what actually happened? In what measure are the texts able and willing to attest facts that actually took place? What do they wish to affirm?”.

⁶³ It is sufficient to recall the pioneering scope of Popper’s studies on the subject; see POPPER, *The Logic*.

⁶⁴ See CARR, *What is History?*; CHABOD, *Lezioni*; IGGERS, *Historiography*; ID., “Reflections”, 149–158; C. G. BROWN, *Postmodernism*. See also CAVICCHIA, “Ispirazione”, 251–257, where further bibliography is provided.

⁶⁵ See BETTALLI (ed.), *Introduzione*.

⁶⁶ See BARTHES, “Le discours”, 74; ID., *The Rustle*, 141–149; IGGERS, *Historiography*, 123–124; MUSTÈ, *La storia*, 12.

⁶⁷ See RICŒUR, *Histoire*.

⁶⁸ See VEYNE, *Comment*. He clearly states: “[L’histoire] n’est pas une science, mais un art. Les historiens racontent des événements vrais qui ont l’homme pour acteur; l’histoire est un roman vrai” (p. 10).

pioneering in this respect. Some even speak hyperbolically, as Hayden White⁶⁹ did, of the ‘death of historiography’⁷⁰. Arnaldo Momigliano responded with an exemplary balanced position, defending the possibility of historiography even today⁷¹ and showing the full inclusion of biblical historiography within the framework of ancient historiography, while recognizing the peculiar characteristics of this literary genre in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman worlds and avoiding any form of retrojection or epistemological self-projection⁷².

This path would lead us far afield, but for our purposes, it is useful to consider one aspect: historiography as the reconstruction of past events in light of available sources and applying an epistemologically defined method is certainly possible but remains a human activity – discovery, reading, and interpretation – an activity, therefore, incapable of absolute and vain objectivity. A well-known Italian historian of the Ancient Near East, Mario Liverani, in his bestselling book *Israel's History and the History of Israel*⁷³, establishes a rather provocative distinction between “a normal history” and “an invented history”⁷⁴, but also affirms that even the former is marked by ideological readings, and the latter is not devoid of references to real events.

Therefore, contemporary reflections on the epistemological peculiarities of ancient historiography and its modern counterpart represent the foundation for one reason for reconciliation between synchrony and diachrony, and consequently, between critical exegesis and theology.

Another reason for reconciliation comes from archaeological discoveries, particularly since the late 19th century, which have allowed a much better appreciation of the credibility of the data that the biblical text provides. This applies to Galilee and the city of Jerusalem⁷⁵, the eastern provinces of the early Roman empire and their administration⁷⁶, Jesus’ trial⁷⁷,

⁶⁹ See WHITE, *The Content*.

⁷⁰ About this topic, see WINDSHUTTLE, *The Killing*.

⁷¹ See MOMIGLIANO, *Storia*; Id., “The Rhetoric”.

⁷² See MOMIGLIANO, “Biblical Studies”.

⁷³ See LIVERANI, *Israel's History*. See also FINKELSTEIN, *The Bible Unearthed*; Id. *The Forgotten Kingdom*; FINKELSTEIN – MAZAR, *The Quest*.

⁷⁴ About this distinction see the remarks of SKA, “Review”.

⁷⁵ See CHARLESWORTH (ed.), *Jesus and Archeology*; TESTAFERRI, *Galilea*.

⁷⁶ See SHERWIN-WHITE, *Roman Society*; BRÉLAZ, “Mettre en scène”; Id., “The Provincial Contexts”; COSTABILE, “Il principio”; COSTA, *Scoppiò*; Id., “*Urbs celeberrima*”; Id., “*La πρόνοια*”.

⁷⁷ See R. E. BROWN, *The Death*, but also several relevant historico-legal studies: AMARELLI – LUCREZI (eds.), *Il processo*; MIGLIETTA, *I.N.R.I.*; SCHIAVONE, *Ponzio Pilato*; GAROFALO, *Gesù*; CAIMI, “Il processo”; PELLOSO – ZAMBOTTO (eds.), *Il processo*.

Paul's trial⁷⁸, and many other minor details that emerge from the New Testament text.

Therefore, at an academic level and in the most authoritative commentaries, an integrated approach to Scripture is increasingly proposed, one that balances and harmonizes different layers in true respect for the doctrine of inspiration⁷⁹. In fact, a well-executed historical-critical exegesis cannot – and should not – be in conflict with synchronic exegesis, and *vice versa*. This integrated approach was also that of the pioneers of the historical-critical method at the end of the 19th century. For the New Testament, one thinks of William Mitchell Ramsay, the first professor of Classical Archaeology at Oxford, who was appointed to a chair created specifically for him at Lincoln College⁸⁰. For the Old Testament, one thinks of Hermann Gunkel, one of the most important exponents of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* and, at the same time, a fine interpreter of the narrative strategies characterizing biblical stories⁸¹.

This more serene perspective enables a more fruitful engagement with the theme of inspiration. Perhaps in this direction, we can attempt to find a way to overcome what Pierre Gibert, in 2007, called a “divorce”⁸², an irreducible rift between the practice of critical exegesis and the classical doctrine of inspiration. Inspiration – do not forget that the *analogatum princeps* is the Incarnation – is an event that is certainly metahistorical but also happens in history. It is therefore something both metahistorical and intra-historical. In many cases of inspired texts, it can be said that, considering the linguistic act at play, we are in the realm of *noviter* rather than *novum*, using a distinction found in adjacent theological fields⁸³.

⁷⁸ I would like to highlight here some historico-legal contributions from the last decade: RAVIZZA, “Καὶ ὁ Πάυλος”; SANTALUCIA, “*Praeses*”; MAROTTA, “St. Paul's Death”; SANTALUCIA, “Paul's Roman Trial”; MANDAS, *Il processo*; GAROFALO, *San Paolo*; PEPPE, *Il processo*; SANTALUCIA, “Sul processo”; PEPPE, “I ‘processi’”; GAROFALO, “Ancora sulle vicende giudiziarie”; COSTA, “Un *constitutum*”; ID., “Paolo”; ID., “*Ipse est nostra Pax*”.

⁷⁹ From this perspective, the studies collected in DUBOVSKÝ – SONNET (eds.), *Ogni Scrittura è ispirata* serve as exemplary.

⁸⁰ See OHANNES, *William Mitchell Ramsay*.

⁸¹ See KLATT, *Hermann Gunkel*; GIBERT, *Une Théorie*; EISEN – GERSTENBERGER (eds.), *Hermann Gunkel*.

⁸² GIBERT, “La différenciation”.

⁸³ See INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of Dogma 1989*, III.

2.2. Inspiration and History (B): Concrete Applications

Regarding the dialectic between *novum* and *noviter*, I propose a concrete example of a lexical nature.

In 27 BCE, Augustus became the emperor of the *oikouménē*, the Roman Empire – the new institutional configuration of the *res publica* – which was undergoing a significant constitutional transformation⁸⁴. Rome administered Italy, Gaul, the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, Egypt, and then the Balkans, Achaëa, Syria, and Asia Minor. An important transformation was the gradual extension of a new calendar, the Julian calendar, to all the provinces of the empire. In 9 BCE, this calendar (solar-based) replaced the local (lunar-based) one⁸⁵ in the province of Asia, probably the most important Greek-speaking province. There is an extraordinary epigraphic source for this event that records the edict of the proconsul of Asia, Paulus Fabius Maximus, who received the deliberations of the *koinón* of Asia, which had authority over such matters⁸⁶. Multiple copies of this decree have been found through archaeological research, inscribed on large stone blocks in the main cities of the province. It is worth noting that during the High Empire, only the epigraphic copies of the *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* – the posthumous autobiographical account that Augustus had engraved about his life and military and political activities – had greater dissemination, according to the available sources⁸⁷.

The best-preserved inscription on the introduction of the Julian calendar in Asia was discovered in Priene, a city halfway between Ephesus and Miletus. In the decree of the *koinón*, the emperor is honored as one who brought peace to the entire *oikouménē*, a savior, a liberator, the fulfiller of all hopes. It reads⁸⁸:

Providence, which has divinely disposed our lives, having employed zeal | and ardor, has arranged the most perfect [culmination] for life | by producing Augustus, whom for the benefit of mankind (*eis euergesian anthrōpōn*) she has fill|led with excellence, as if [she had sent him as a savior (*sōtēra*)] for

⁸⁴ The reference, of course, is to the classic study by SYME, *The Roman Revolution*, but see also the title of the study of WALLACE-HADRILL, *Rome' Cultural Revolution*.

⁸⁵ See HANNAH, *Greek and Roman Calendars*.

⁸⁶ For the recent critical edition presenting the various epigraphic documents attesting to the decree, see BLÜMEL – MERKELBACH (eds.), *Die Inschriften von Priene I-II*, no. 14 (pp. 39–46).

⁸⁷ See SCHEID (ed.), *Res Gestae*.

⁸⁸ For the English translation see SHERK, *Rome*, 124 (n. 101).

us and our descendants, | [a savior] who brought war to an end and set [all things] in order (ll. 33–36).

And then:

[Since] with his appearance (*epifaneís*) | Caesar exceeded the hopes of [all] those who received [glad tidings] (*euangélia*) before us, | not only surpassing those who had been [benefactors] before him, | but not even [leaving any] hope [of surpassing him] for those who are to come in the future (ll. 36–40).

Moreover: “His birthday was the beginning of good news (*euangelíōn*) for the world” (l. 40). The tone is soteriological and eschatological. Augustus’ birth, on September 23, is presented as the beginning of the “good news” (gospels) and marks the beginning of the new year. The “good news” is Augustus’ victory, his empire, indeed his very person. The *princeps* is a new creator: while everything was decaying, falling, and degenerating, Augustus gives the cosmos a new form⁸⁹.

This inscription was published in 1899 and was widely analyzed by Adolf Deissmann in his pioneering work *Licht vom Osten* (1908), which explored the New Testament’s lexicology in relation to documentary sources⁹⁰. The interest ignited by this source was profound⁹¹, especially given the occurrence of the term “gospel”, considering as well that this usage is not unique to this document alone. Indeed, Philo of Alexandria, a writer closely related to the New Testament authors, uses the term ‘gospel’ in his *Legatio ad Caium* (§ 231–232) to refer to the advent of Caligula as a savior and benefactor who brings blessings to Asia and Europe. Flavius Josephus, also from a *milieu* not far from that of the New Testament authors, employs the same language to describe the military victories of Emperor Vespasian (*Bell.* 4.618). This continuity in language is striking: even in a papyrus letter dated around 238 CE, the term “gospel” is used to refer to the proclamation to Caesar of Gaius Julius Verus Maximus (*SB* 421.2)⁹².

Thus, when looking at the use of such an important and identity-defining word as “gospel”, we notice that the Christian authors choose to use a language that does not require inventing something *novum* but adopts a term already in use and reassigns to it – *noviter* – an unheard-of theological and political meaning. The early Christian community subverts the imperi-

⁸⁹ See DANKER, *Benefactor*, 216–217; COSTABILE, *Caius*, 98–158; LICANDRO, *Augusto*, 37–41, 119–122.

⁹⁰ See DEISSMANN, *Licht*. See also EVANS, “Mark’s *Incipit*”; PEREA YÉBENES, “Dios”.

⁹¹ See BURROWS, “The Origin”.

⁹² See STANTON, *Jesus*, 32.

al ideological framework and announces another *kýrios* (Lord) of all peoples (cf. Acts 10:36), walking a paradoxical line of loyalty to the administration of the empire while simultaneously proclaiming a radically alternative *Weltanschauung*⁹³. On the other hand, for this same word, there is also a complete revival of concepts from the Hebrew Bible: it is enough to recall the value of the Hebrew verb *bśr* at the beginning of the second part of the scroll of Isaiah (Isaiah 40:1–12). The good news to be proclaimed here is the sovereign kingship of YHWH: a linguistic usage rich with eschatological meanings and, in a broad sense, political implications⁹⁴.

In relation to this dynamic, which is evident in numerous New Testament texts⁹⁵, inspiration is realized as the conferring of a Christological form to material that belongs to the development of the understanding of God's revelation to His people but also exists within a well-defined social, political, and cultural horizon that, in turn, gives meaning and significance to the language and content it conveys⁹⁶. It is a horizon that must necessarily be reconstructed with epistemological rigor, using historiographical methods in accordance with their most accurate hermeneutical principles.

The term “gospel”, just mentioned, also refers to the four foundational books of the Christian faith. For a long time, handbooks taught that the Gospel was a *genus sui generis*⁹⁷. This thesis was as widespread as it was fragile in light of ancient literary theories and their conventions⁹⁸. Today, an increasing number of scholars, despite their heterogeneous perspectives, recognize that the four Gospels were not works *sui generis* but, at least in tendency and with differences among them, belong to a well-known literary genre in ancient literature: the *bíos*. Richard Burridge, who served as dean

⁹³ See PORTER, “Paul”. For further bibliography see COSTA, *Scoppiò*, 321–333.

⁹⁴ The relationship between the Hellenistic-Roman uses of the term and those in Jewish contexts, interpreted together, is the subject of an extensive monograph recently published by Morten Hørning Jensen. This work clearly demonstrates the decisive importance of understanding these historical dimensions for exegesis; see JENSEN, *The ‘Gospel’*.

⁹⁵ See COSTA, “La ἐλπίς”.

⁹⁶ DEISSMAN, *Licht*, 289, noted: “Man muß doch nicht denken, Paulus und seine Glaubensgenossen seien mit geschlossenen Augen durch die Welt gegangen, unberührt von dem, was damals in den großen Städten die Gemüter bewegte. Ich denke, auf diesen Blättern ist doch an manchen Beispielen gezeigt worden, wie sehr das Neue Testament ein Buch aus der Kaiserzeit ist”.

⁹⁷ For example, BECKER, *Das Markus-Evangelium*, 64–65, also refers to the Gospel as “ein Werk *sui generis*”.

⁹⁸ See AUNE, *The New Testament*; AUNE – BRENK (eds.), *Greco-Roman Culture*; WALSH, *The Origins*.

of King's College, London, for nearly thirty years, was awarded the Ratzinger Prize in 2013 – as the first non-Catholic laureate – for his book *What Are the Gospels?*, which precisely explores the biographical literary genre of the Gospels. Jean-Noël Aletti has strongly supported this view and published a concise and very useful essay titled *Jésus une vie à raconter*⁹⁹.

Noting this aspect does not only satisfy the goals of taxonomy for exegetes but has significant theological implications. Regarding Jesus, it is not only important what he said, how he died, and that he was seen and testified as Risen, but also his life experience in its entirety. This is easily understood when one establishes a comparison with what is known about the contemporary or immediately subsequent rabbis. We have extensive collections of rabbinic sayings – gathered, for example, in the *Talmud* – as well as accounts of their martyrdoms¹⁰⁰, but not true biographies of rabbis. The focus, however, is on the *Torah*: its actualization and fidelity to it. In contrast, when referring to Jesus, it is significant not only that he proclaimed the Word of God or remained faithful to it but how he embodied this Word. His life and message are inseparable; each is validated by the other and *vice versa*. It should be noted, *in limine*, that, from this perspective, a Christology based on the hypothetical Q source does not seem to hold any genuine theological significance.

Thus, what is relevant regarding Jesus is the narrative of a historically situated life told in a source that is also historically contextualized. How did inspiration operate in this case? By completely renewing a prevalent and well-known literary genre: the *bíos*¹⁰¹. Once again, it is *noviter*, not *novum*.

⁹⁹ See BURRIDGE, *What are the Gospels?*; ALETTI, *Jésus*.

¹⁰⁰ See BOYARIN, *Dying for God*.

¹⁰¹ In exegesis, the importance of literary genres should never be overlooked. CADBURY, *The Making*, 127, wrote (about Luke-Acts): "The character of a writing is partly determined by the class or genre to which it belongs. The writer will work quite differently if his subject is to be expressed in poetry or prose, as an argument or a narrative, a novel, a biography, a textbook, a sermon, a letter, an apocalypse, or a tragedy. And the reader of each work will form a more understanding judgment about it if he can place it in its proper literary setting and identify the literary class to which it belongs. To classify Luke's work, therefore, is the beginning of wisdom".

4. Inspiration and the Historical-Critical Method

It is useful to note that these examples, with their clear theological repercussions, derive from a correct use of the historical-critical method and its various operations: text criticism, tradition criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism¹⁰². The historical-critical method appears, *prima facie*, indispensable for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts. Since Sacred Scripture, as the “Word of God in human language”¹⁰³, was composed by human authors in all its parts, and since all traditions within it are human, its correct understanding not only admits but necessitates the adoption of this method. Sometimes, the historical-critical method has been considered, either explicitly or implicitly, to be inappropriate for inspired texts, and its limits have been overemphasized¹⁰⁴. However, Church documents are unanimous in considering it necessary¹⁰⁵. One can look at Pope Leo XIII’s Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), Pius XII’s *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), the Constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965), the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), and Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010). Leo XIII strongly recommended the historical-critical method in his Apostolic Letter *Vigilantiae studii*, which founded the Pontifical Biblical Commission on October 30, 1902 (*EB* 142)¹⁰⁶, and this was echoed by Pope John Paul II in 1993 when he solemnly approved the document in the presence of members of the Cardinal College, the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and the Professors of the Pontifical Biblical Institute. Pope John Paul II explicitly explained the sense of this strong recommendation: at stake, he said, is the realism of

¹⁰² On the historical-critical method in general, see first the section dedicated to it in the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) [*EB* 1259–1560 [esp. 1275–1290]] (for English translation and bibliography on this document, see BÉCHARD, *The Scripture*, 244–317). For an overview of the method, its strengths, and its limitations, among many, see GUILLEMETTE – BRISEBOIS, *Introduction*; SKA, “Les vertus”; *Id.*, “Note”; *Id.*, “Ispirazione.” For its specific application in New Testament exegesis, see EGGER – WICK, *Methodenlehre*, 68–87, 222–276.

¹⁰³ PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) I.A (Engl. trans. by BÉCHARD, *The Scripture*, 249).

¹⁰⁴ For a presentation of the various scholarly positions and a clear defense of the value of the historical-critical method, see FITZMYER, *The Interpretation*.

¹⁰⁵ See CASTELLUCCI, “La recezione”.

¹⁰⁶ BÉCHARD (ed.), *The Scripture*, 62–66.

the Incarnation and the harmony with this mystery (*EB* 1246)¹⁰⁷. Therefore, the theological reason precedes even the scientific reason.

For the Pontifical Biblical Commission, the historical-critical method signifies fidelity to the realism of the Incarnation, which necessarily involves the idea of mediation. Once again, the theme that has been shown to be decisive in understanding the dynamics of inspiration emerges. A careful look reveals that recourse to the historical-critical method does not represent just one of many options in academic discourse. It is a preliminary step before any other further and subsequent hermeneutical operation. It is a necessary choice because it signifies fidelity to God's way of acting. Christianity (and Judaism) is defined only in relation to history. Therefore, this exegetical demand is, first of all, a matter of fundamental theology and is linked to a proper understanding of the doctrine of inspiration.

Of course, as with any method or approach, its results should not be absolutized, as they are always limited. Nonetheless, even in the face of this *caveat*, one must adopt a mature and not superficial position. I suggest a few examples. Regarding the Pentateuch, the documentary hypothesis – emerging from 19th-century interpolationism – now appears outdated if taken *stricto sensu*. The foundations of the sources *Y* and *E* have deteriorated to the point of vanishing, and scholars now commonly refer to *P* and *non-P* sources, focusing especially on *post-P* traditions, in addition to the *dtr* tradition¹⁰⁸. Similarly, the so-called “two-source theory” of the Synoptic Gospels – the *Q* source and the Gospel of Mark – is frequently questioned today, especially if understood in the strict sense of two written sources known to Matthew and Luke, with each unaware of the other's work¹⁰⁹. This being said, it should not escape us that the documentary hypothesis for the Pentateuch and the “two-source theory” for the Synoptics have certainly shown their limitations, shortcomings, and inability to solve every issue, and they have been critiqued. But it is precisely in the light of this critique that an unequivocal fact emerges with even greater clarity. The Bible contains a plurality of traditions, documents, and sources, of which one must be acutely aware. Thus, when one highlights the limitations of the historical-critical method by critiquing some of its specific conclusions, it should si-

¹⁰⁷ See BÉCHARD (ed.), *The Scripture*, 175.

¹⁰⁸ Lastly, see SCHMID, *The Scribes*.

¹⁰⁹ Recently ADAMCZEWSKI, *Q or Not Q?*, offers a critical examination of the “two-source” theory. He surveys alternative models that challenge the necessity of *Q* as an independent document, exploring theories that propose direct literary dependence between Matthew and Luke or suggest alternative compositional frameworks.

multaneously be acknowledged that these limitations emerge precisely because the method itself is effective – its findings are continually revised, refined, and subjected to scrutiny. Moreover, it must be recognized that critiques of hypotheses generated by the historical-critical method have contributed to a clearer understanding of the Bible's editorial structure, aligning with foundational insights this method has revealed since its inception. Therefore, rather than diminishing the method's value, an awareness of its limitations underscores its necessity and effectiveness¹¹⁰.

I am reminded of the clear words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in the 1984 document *De Sacra Scriptura et Christologia* (1.3.3; *EB* 990):

Revera complura problemata adhuc obscura manent, quod attinet ad processum compositionis librorum sacrorum per auctores inspiratos, quales in fine proponuntur. Quamobrem ii qui, parcendo investigationibus huius generis, leviter Sacras Scripturas attingerent, perperam aestimantes hunc legendi modum esse 'theologicum', fallacem ingrederentur viam: solutiones quae nimis faciles sunt, nullo modo solidum fundamentum praebere possunt investigationibus de theologia biblica, cum plena fide adhibendis¹¹¹.

Only such an approach to Scripture can lead to the "*christologia integralis*" that the Commission sets forth as the goal.

Therefore, it is faithful to the incarnate nature of inspiration to adopt an integrated approach to the biblical text, fully aware of its polyphonic and multifaceted nature. Jean Louis Ska, borrowing a well-known image from Umberto Eco¹¹², presents the Bible not as a uniform sphere but as a forest in which one can wander. A forest in perpetual change, with hidden recesses, paths to be discovered, new roads to be traced, unexpected views to be admired, and discordant sounds to be listened to. A forest to penetrate more

¹¹⁰ In his general discussion of the epistemology of historiography, WINDSHUTTLE, *The Killing*, 78-80, observes that various postmodern positions, which deny the possibility of historiography, arrive at such conclusions by demonstrating the limitations of historical reconstructions, thereby overlooking the fact that it is precisely the application of the historical method that enables the critique of prior hypotheses.

¹¹¹ "Many issues remain unresolved concerning the process of composition that culminated in the present form of the sacred books by the inspired authors. For this reason, those who, in order to avoid such a study, limit themselves to a superficial reading of the Bible, regarded as 'theological', would be treading a misguided path: overly simplistic solutions cannot provide a solid foundation for research conducted with full faith". For a commentary on this passage of the document, see FITZMYER, "The Biblical Commission", 476; *Id.*, "Historical Criticism", 257-258.

¹¹² See Eco, *Sei passegiare*.

and more deeply with the aid of the right equipment¹¹³. There are many biblical books, and even within a single book, there are different literary genres and forms¹¹⁴. This requires the adoption of different methods or at least different approaches. It is the Bible itself that has not wished to erase this diversity, even in the face of a centuries-old process of revisions, reinterpretations, and updates. A process marked by inspiration in all its development, as James Barr was one of the first to clarify¹¹⁵. It is not a single book, but a library. The Biblical Commission (*The Inspiration and Truth* § 52) rightly – and courageously – noted that inspiration is not uniform for all the authors of the biblical books: “[the] inspiration is analogously the same for all the authors of the biblical books (as indicated in *Dei Verbum* n. 11) but with various facets owing to the plan of divine revelation”.

5. Inspiration and the Community of Faith

The final point I want to touch upon concerns the relation between the inspired text and the community that receives it. If one rightly understands the nature of the inspired text, it can be made truly inspiring. I draw this ‘Word pun’ from a significant contribution by Christoph Theobald, titled “*Dans les traces*” de la Constitution “*Dei Verbum*”, which offers useful ideas for our discussion from the perspective of a fundamental theologian¹¹⁶. Theobald adopts an appropriately broad and communal understanding of inspiration, which also encompasses the contemporary experience of the believing and ecclesial reading of the biblical text in the same Spirit in which it was composed¹¹⁷. This is, in fact, the pneumatological path proposed by *Dei Verbum* 12, following the traces of Benedict XV’s 1920 encyclical *Spiritus Paraclitus*¹¹⁸. The same Holy Spirit who inspires the composition of the sacred text also inspires its ecclesial reception and can – and must – inspire its interpretation *in corde ecclesiae*¹¹⁹. A proper understanding of the

¹¹³ See SKA, *Il libro sigillato*; ID., *Specchi*.

¹¹⁴ For a preliminary framework regarding the New Testament, see BERGER, *Formen*.

¹¹⁵ See BARR, *Holy Scripture*, 27.

¹¹⁶ See Theobald, “*Dans les traces*”, 83–88.

¹¹⁷ It should be noted in passing that this implies the overcoming of the overly rigid distinction between inspiration and permanent assistance that marked the Roman school of the 19th century; see KASPER, *Die Lehre*.

¹¹⁸ See BÉCHARD (ed.), *The Scripture*, 81–111.

¹¹⁹ See RATZINGER, “Biblical Interpretation”.

doctrine of inspiration is not, therefore, merely a scientific objective but a means to a more fruitful Christian life.

These reflections lead us to notice the paradoxical character of the Bible in its entirety. This applies both to the formation of the biblical text (consider the critique of traditions and forms) and to its manuscript transmission. We are all aware of the fragility of our knowledge of the context – both the setting of the biblical stories and the circumstances of their redaction, as well as, in fact, our very own context of reception. There is certainly not just one *Sitz im Leben*, but several *Sitze im Leben*. On the other hand, there is also an awareness of the absolutely extraordinary status of this text, recognized by faith as inspired. In the Bible, the notes of God's power resonate alongside the fragility of the human composition, human understanding, and human history. This resonance is nothing other than the dynamic of the Incarnation, the first theological note of the biblical text to be indicated by *Dei Verbum*.

In a recent publication, stemming from the interdisciplinary dialogue on the theme of justice between a biblical scholar, Antonio Pitta, and a jurist, Nicolò Lipari, the former proposed the image of the oboe, with its two reeds, to symbolize the human condition between good and evil, strength and weakness, life and death, the divine and the human. "The sound you hear is unique, but the melody it produces is twofold". The first notes resound on the Son of David according to the flesh; the second, that He is the Son of God according to the Spirit. "The source of the gospel that breathes in an oboe orchestra is the paradox". The solutions the gospel proposes do not resolve all questions but bear them. "The truth of the gospel is never univocal; it sounds like a perpetual oboe, submerged yet ever-present"¹²⁰.

Thus, it is a theandric symphony that resonates when opening the Bible. Luke, in the prologue of his Gospel, programmatically affirms that he intends to present in order "the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1–4)¹²¹. It is both culpably and superficially negligent to overlook this very short pronominal phrase: "among us". The events of salvation did not occur in another world, in a timeless space. They happened in a community. Think of Peter's first act in the Acts of the Apostles: it takes place in the midst of a crisis, the deadly wound inflicted upon the early community by Judas' betrayal and death. Jesus has already risen and ascended to heaven, and the community is wounded by the unfaithfulness of an apostle

¹²⁰ See PITTA, "Giustizia, fede," 25–26. For the volume by Lipari and Pitta, I refer to my review in *RivBib* 80 (2022), 337–341.

¹²¹ See CRIMELLA, "Poiché molti".

who, instead of being the *hodegós* of evangelizers (cf. Acts 8:31), has become the *hodegós* of those who came to arrest Jesus (cf. Acts 1:16). This first act, in which Peter, in *synkrisis*, takes Jesus' place, unfolds according to a dynamic of ecclesial discernment guided by the Scriptures¹²². Peter identifies the role of the apostle in proceeding to the replacement of Judas:

It is necessary (*dei*) that of those who have been *with us* for the whole time the Lord Jesus has lived *among us*, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up *from us*, one of these become a witness *together with us* of his resurrection (Acts 1:21–22).

“With us”, “among us”, “from us”, “together with us”. No solitary “free agent” can be an apostle, nor someone who knows Jesus only by hearsay. The personal experience of the evangelizer and participation in the community's life are part of the evangelization. And they are equally part of the ability to interpret the biblical text. This is the core of the reading according to the Spirit (cf. DV 12).

Today, it is important to update this “among us,” which means participation in the life of the community where those revelatory and saving events occurred, where the face of the Son was revealed so that our face might also be revealed (cf. GS 22), where the proclamation of generation after generation of the features of that face unfolds, that is – to use the language of *Dei Verbum* – where Tradition is developed.

Virginia Woolf began one of her little essays, *On not Knowing Greek*, with a significant consideration:

For it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we would be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys. We do not know how the words sounded, or precisely where we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only a difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition¹²³.

“A tremendous breach of tradition”. The faithful, both by faith and through theological science, know that in the Church, there is no such “tremendous breach of tradition”, and *Dei Verbum* affirms the integration within the economy of Revelation between Scripture and its transmission. An integration that does not represent merely a dogmatic deposit but doctrine, worship, and the life of the Church intertwined, as *Dei Verbum* 8 affirms. The merciful and saving power of God continues to act in the fragile fibers

¹²² See COSTA, “Il primo ‘atto’ di Pietro”.

¹²³ WOOLF, *The Common Reader*, 39. On this Woolf's pamphlet see FOWLER, “‘On Not Knowing Greek’”; ID., “Moments”; DALGARNO, *Virginia Woolf*, 18–37.

of humanity, and indeed, as *Dei Verbum* 8 further states, over the course of history “*crescit enim tam rerum quam verborum traditorum perceptio*”¹²⁴.

Thus, the church – in an extraordinary diachronic continuity made possible by the Spirit – remains, even today, the community in which those events occurred and continue to unfold¹²⁵.

Therefore, the stories told in the Bible are fragile, dealing with the concreteness of human experience, an experience of redeemed fragility. Fragile is the biblical man¹²⁶; fragile is the language used by Scripture; fragile is the narrative of the biblical text; fragile is its manuscript transmission, with the textual uncertainties caused by two thousand years of work¹²⁷; fragile is the translation¹²⁸; fragile is the interpretation¹²⁹. Since Christianity’s identity is historical, it is inherently fragile – always incomplete, situated between the *already* and the *even more* to come.

Respecting this fragility means respecting the holiness and divinity of the Word of God, understanding the reality of inspiration.

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 2:13: “In receiving the word of God from hearing us, you received not a human word, but, as it truly is, the word of God, which is now at work in you who believe”. In the earliest text of the New Testament, Paul clearly sees the role of the evangelizer and the status of a Word that is both inspired – “it is truly the word of God” – and inspiring – “it is at work in you who believe”. But notice what immediately follows. In verse 18, the apostle speaks of the impossibility for him to return to Thessalonica. Historically, this likely refers to a very human impediment – probably an administrative measure by the city’s authorities, the politarchs, who prevented Paul from returning to the Macedonian metropolis. In Thessalonica, due to Paul’s preaching, a riot had broken out (cf. Acts

¹²⁴ DV 8: “There is a growth in the understanding of the realities and the words which have been handed down”. See Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience “Communion in Time: Tradition” (April 26, 2006) [English trans. in *L’Osservatore Romano* 39, n. 18 [May 3, 2006]: 11]: “This communion, which we call ‘Church’, does not only extend to all believers in a specific historical period, but also embraces all the epochs and all the generations. Thus, we have a twofold universality: a synchronic universality – we are united with believers in every part of the world – and also a so-called diachronic universality, that is: all the epochs belong to us, and all the believers of the past and of the future form with us a single great communion”.

¹²⁵ See KASPER, “Die Verhältnis”; Id. “*Prolegomena*”.

¹²⁶ See PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION, “What is Man?”.

¹²⁷ See PISANO, “Critica testuale”.

¹²⁸ See BARTON, *The Word*.

¹²⁹ See BOVATI – BASTA, *Ci ha parlato*, 281–302.

17:1–10a), which was looked upon unfavorably by the authorities, who feared a repressive intervention by the Roman proconsul, which could cancel the privileges of the *libertas* the city enjoyed¹³⁰. The power of the divine word is thus realized alongside the fragility of the evangelizer, restrained by a very human ‘exit order’.

It is this holy fragility – this power of the infinite divine Word in the fragment of the human word – that enables faith. Theobald writes:

La mise en œuvre de la raison en exégèse et en théologie a pour but, en dernière instance, de rendre possible l’expérience de la liberté de la foi, à savoir un accès libre à la foi et une foi libre: c’est là sa *forme ultime*, garantie par la *forme même de la révélation* d’un Dieu qui ne vient pas par effraction ou en vue d’un rapt, mais qui suscite, chez le croyant, l’*obsequium* sous la *forme* d’un *obsequium rationabile*¹³¹.

Thus, our discourse is so decisive that it touches the very core of faith but also of pastoral action. It is critical exegesis that can truly liberate the freedom of faith¹³². The dynamics of veridiction in Scripture, when understood in its original strategies, can authentically flow – not ideologically – into the ‘school of humanity’ that is our shared existence and multicultural societies. These societies, though often unaddressed thematically, are modeled on the Son and remain, as Rahner says, *Hörer des Wortes*.

A mature fidelity to the inspired and inspiring Scripture means an actual concordance between *fides quae* and *fides qua*. It also means a transformative practice of the world. Indeed, one cannot think of the *great code* of the biblical library as a grand confessional history or as a grand theology of history, nor even as a *historia salutis*, if one does not assume its transformative power.

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¹³⁰ See COSTA, “Semantica giuridica”; ID., “*Urbs celeberrima*”.

¹³¹ THEOBALD, *Dans les traces*, 92.

¹³² See BOVATI, “Ricerca esegetica”. See also Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* § 38.

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