SJT 65(1): 34–63 (2012)
doi:10.1017/S0036930611000834
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T. F. Torrance on Scripture

John Webster
University of Aberdeen, King's College, Aberdeen AB24 3UB, Scotland
j.webster@abdn.ac.uk

Abstract

Although it was never completed and has had only slight impact, T. F. Torrance's work on the nature and interpretation of scripture is a primary element in his theology, though largely unstudied. For Torrance, a theology of scripture and its interpretation derive from a theology of revelation; revelation takes creaturely form in the incarnate Word, out of which is generated the apostolic community and its witness, which in turn generates scripture, the human word which ministers the divine Word. Scripture is the divine Word accommodated to human form, and so a sacrament or sign which refers to revelation; its social location is the life of the apostolic community. Interpretation of scripture is properly 'depth-interpretation', following the semantics of scripture by which reference to divine reality is made, rather than terminating on scripture's syntactical surface. Fitting interpretative practice follows the text's reference, penetrates to the thing signified, indwells its subject matters and listens to the divine Word. The interpreter is summoned to mortification of prejudice and constantly renewed attentiveness. Torrance's most impressive contribution to bibliology and hermeneutics was his insistence that both are ingredients within a theology of God's economic presence. There are some historical limitations to his work, along with a lack of interest in the Christian literary culture and lack of extended exegesis. However, his writings in the field constitute one of the most impressive Protestant accounts of the field in the last half-century.

Introduction

Torrance did not bequeath to his readers a fully elaborated doctrine of holy scripture or a body of commentarial materials on the Bible. We have neither a complete systematic theology of the Word of God in scripture, nor anything by way of a *Römerbrief* or a *Resurrection of the Dead*. The reflections on scripture which are scattered throughout his published works commonly focus on biblical terms and themes; there is little by way of extended cursive exegesis. His primary interests in the matter of scripture were in its mediating relation to the divine Word, and in the epistemological and hermeneutical questions which arise when giving a theological account of the several divine and human acts which compose the economy of revelation. Moreover, Torrance was strongly convinced that generating such an account requires the

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theologian (1) to develop an anatomy of modern reason, in order to expose a 'damaging breach in the ontological bearing of our minds upon reality',[1] and (2) to make an attempt at 'repairing the ontological relation of the mind to reality, so that a structural kinship arises between human knowing and what is known'.[2] His writings on these matters constitute one of the most promising bodies of material on the Christian theology of the Bible and its interpretation from a Protestant divine of the last five or six decades – rivalled but not surpassed by, for example, Berkouwer's magisterial study *Holy Scripture*.[3] Yet what he wrote on the nature and interpretation of scripture, with his characteristic spiritual and theological intensity and imbued with a sense of cutting against the grain of modern theological convention, has had only a slight impact and, until relatively recently, has not been granted the attention which it deserves.[4] Though Torrance was about something of the same task as, for example, de Lubac in *Mediaeval Exegesis*[5] or Hans Frei in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* [6] – namely, interrogating modern hermeneutical assumptions by depicting earlier practices – his work has not found its way into the canon of modern literature on biblical hermeneutics, even with the recent exponential growth of interest in retrieving patristic and other pre-modern reading habits, and in 'theological interpretation'.[7]

[1] T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Evangelical Theology: The Realism of Christian Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003), p. 10.

[2] Ibid.

[3] G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975).

[4] The more important treatments include: T. Langford, 'T. F. Torrance's *Theological Science*: A Reaction', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 25 (1973), pp. 155–70; B. J. Gray, 'Towards Better Ways of Reading the Bible', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 (1980), pp. 301–15; J. D. Morrison, *Knowledge of the Self-Revealing God in the Thought of Thomas Forsyth Torrance* (New York: Lang, 1997), pp. 285–352; E. Colyer, *How to Read T. F. Torrance. Understanding his Trinitarian and Scientific Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 107–9, 227–9, 345–51; E. Colyer, *The Nature of Doctrine in T. F. Torrance's Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), pp. 55–91, 152–65; K. Richardson, 'Revelation, Scripture, and Mystical Apprehension of Divine Knowledge', in E. Colyer (ed.), *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), pp. 185–203; D. Sarisky, 'T. F. Torrance on Biblical Interpretation', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 11 (2009), pp. 332–46.

[5] H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998–2000).

[6] H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).

[7] Torrance's work on patristic exegesis is almost completely passed over in major revisionary accounts of the territory such as F. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997); F. Young, L. Ayres and A. Louth (eds), *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge: CUP, 2004); L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004). His work

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There are at least a couple of internal reasons for this relative lack of attention. First, the project on hermeneutics which spun off from his 1959 Hewett Lectures (published a decade later as *Theological Science*) was never completed, the material finding its way into print over the years in a large number of separate studies of varying length and character, some collected in or adapted for the volumes which Torrance published in retirement.[8] In these hermeneutical studies, historical concerns loom large, and Torrance's own dogmatic and hermeneutical proposals have to be extracted from a surrounding mass of detail about patristic, mediaeval, Reformation or modern theologians. The process of extraction is made somewhat easier by a few sustained pieces of writing on the nature of scripture and its interpretation, such as the 1981 Payton lectures at Fuller Seminary, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, or the introductory chapter to *Space, Time and Resurrection*,[9] and by other books and essays,[10] as well as by the recently published New

on the theology of scripture and on theological hermeneutics is scarcely mentioned in recent accounts such as T. Work, *Living and Active. Scripture and the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); M. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2008); D. J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008); T. Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). A. Paddison makes some use of Torrance in 'Scriptural Reading and Revelation: A Contribution to Local Hermeneutics', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006), pp. 433–48.

[8] T. F. Torrance, 'Scientific Hermeneutics according to St Thomas Aquinas', *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 13 (1962), pp. 259–89; T. F. Torrance, 'Hermeneutics According to F. D. E. Schleiermacher', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 21 (1968), pp. 257–67; T. F. Torrance, 'The Hermeneutics of John Reuchlin, 1455–1522', in J. E. Bradley and R. A. Muller (eds), *Church, Word and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W. Bromiley* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 107–21; T. F. Torrance, *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988); T. F. Torrance, 'The Hermeneutics of Erasmus', in E. A. McKee and B. G. Armstrong (eds), *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), pp. 48–76; T. F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1995).

[9] T. F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 1–26.

[10] T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology* (London: SCM, 1962), pp. 118–24; T. F. Torrance, 'The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology', in *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM, 1965), pp. 128–49; T. F. Torrance, *Theological Science* (Oxford: OUP, 1969), pp. 191–3, 332–7; T. F. Torrance, 'The Word of God and the Response of Man', in *God and Rationality* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), pp. 137–64; T. F. Torrance, '"The Historical Jesus": From the Perspective of a Theologian', in W. C. Weinrich (ed.), *The New Testament Age: Essays in Honor of Bo Reicke* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 511–26; T. F. Torrance, *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), pp. 82–93; T. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990), pp. 83–120; T. F. Torrance,

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College lectures on the doctrine of the atonement.[11] Second, in casting his bibliological and hermeneutical ideas in historical form, Torrance did not always show himself to best advantage. For all his formidable command of tracts of the Christian tradition, Torrance did not possess the skills of a professional historian. His overwhelmingly theological way of handling the materials does not commend him to (for example) more recent students of the Christian literary culture of late antiquity or the early modern period, and his impact on the history of biblical interpretation has been negligible.

Most theological accounts of scripture and its interpretation treat three topics: the economy of divine revelation, the nature of the biblical writings and their place within that economy, and the nature, acts and ends of interpreters. Much can be discerned about a theological proposal concerning scripture by observing the sequence in which these topics are addressed and the proportions allotted to each, as well as by probing the material claims made about them. Part of Torrance's achievement was that he insisted that thinking about scripture must be ordered from a trinitarian and incarnational theology of revelation, through an ontology of the prophetic and apostolic texts to a hermeneutics of repentance and faith. What follows is an attempt to lay out Torrance's thinking in that sequence, beginning from his commitment to a theology of the communicative economy of the divine Word, moving to his understanding of the biblical writings as complex textual acts of reference to revelation, and thence to his presentation of biblical interpretation as that work in which rational creatures follow the indications of the prophets and apostles as they direct their readers to the Word of God.

Revelation

For Torrance, questions about the nature and interpretation of scripture are subordinate to questions about divine revelation; bibliology and hermeneutics are derivative from principles about the active, intelligible presence of the triune God to his rational creatures. This way of ordering matters not only explains a certain reluctance on his part to spell out much by way of a doctrine of holy scripture (attempts to do so, he fears, risk isolating scripture from its setting in the divine economy), but also sheds light on the fact that what he has to say about the nature and interpretation of the Bible is concerned only secondarily with scripture as literary-historical

Preaching Christ Today: The Gospel and Scientific Thinking (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 1–40; T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2001), pp. 32–72.

[11] T. F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), pp. 315–40.

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text and primarily with scripture as sign – that is, with scripture's ostensive functions rather than with its literary surface or the historical processes of its production. A theological account of the nature of scripture and its interpretation takes its rise, not in observations of immanent religious and literary processes, as if the texts could be understood as self-articulations on the part of believing communities, but in the doctrine of the self-revealing triune God.

Torrance is unhesitatingly and unrelentingly a *positive* dogmatician at this point, in a couple of senses. First, and most generally, he takes revelation as a given condition for the exercise of theological intelligence, not as a matter about which intelligence is competent to entertain possibilities or deliver a judgement. The deceptively simple sentence at the beginning of *Space, Time and Resurrection* says it all: 'I make no apology for taking divine revelation seriously'.[12] Second, more specifically, Torrance's positivity concerns the way in which knowledge of God, including knowledge of God through holy scripture, arises within the specific modes in which God deals with rational creatures. The principle here is that knowledge of God may not abstract itself from 'the actual historical ground which divine revelation has established for itself in the personal coming of God in our world of space and time in Jesus Christ who is the incarnation of his eternal Word within the field of human existence, speech and understanding'.[13] Or again, a little more fully:

> The source of all our knowledge of God is his revelation of himself. We do not know God against his will, or behind his back, as it were, but in accordance with the way in which he has elected to disclose himself and communicate his truth in the historical-theological context of the worshipping people of God, the Church of the Old and New Covenants. That is the immediate empirical fact with which the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are bound up.[14]

Such statements could be multiplied many times from Torrance's writings. What ought to be noted in them is the line of thought, from intelligible revelation to creaturely texts and acts of knowing, rather than a reverse direction in which creaturely knowing and communicating set the conditions under which revelation can take place and be received. Crucially, this enables Torrance to develop an account of revelation in which the relation of divine communication to the biblical texts is not fundamentally problematic, since creaturely media can fittingly perform a service in relation to the intelligible

[12] *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 1.
[13] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 34.
[14] *Divine Meaning*, p. 5.

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speech of God. In effect, attention to the actual course taken by divine revelation as it annexes and makes use of created communicative acts enables theology to move beyond the dichotomy of intelligible and sensible, of *res* and *signum*, of the divine and the textual, which has afflicted Christianity throughout its history, and of which the naturalisation of scripture in modern biblical scholarship is only a late instance.

God's eloquence and intelligibility condescend to creaturely form. The problem which so troubled Barth in his early years in Göttingen – how can the divine Word be mediated if it is to retain its majestic incomparability? – is not one over which Torrance agonises, precisely because of his confidence in speaking of God's active presence in and through the mundane. Like some of his Roman Catholic contemporaries in *la nouvelle théologie*, Torrance managed to find his way out of the antithesis of nature and supernature, of uncreated and created being. It was this, perhaps more than any other factor, which led to his estrangement from mainstream British theological culture, preoccupied as it was both in biblical and doctrinal work with the supposedly self-contained realities of Christian texts, beliefs and morals, struggling to move beyond historical immanence, and weakened by a largely inoperative theology of the incarnation. Torrance was able to overcome the inhibitions of his contemporaries by letting a theology of the divine economy instruct him in the way in which God acts in the temporal and intelligible domain of the creature.

The point is one which he rehearses tirelessly throughout his writing: a presentation in *Reality and Evangelical Theology* may serve as an example. Here he argues that the setting of all theology, including our theology of scripture, is 'a triadic relation in which God, man and world are involved together in a movement of God's personal and creative interaction with man whereby he makes himself known to him within the objectivities and intelligibilities of the empirical world'.[15] Notice how revelation is not mere supernatural intrusion, an obscure and impersonal causal force only loosely related to modes of human communication and intelligence. Rather, as Torrance continues, revelation is 'an intelligible, articulate revealing of God by God whom we are enabled to apprehend through the creative power of the Word addressed to us, yet a revealing of God by God which is actualized within the conditions of our human thought and speech'.[16] Only God speaks of God; but revelatory speech is not pure but mixed. The ultimate ground for this is the Word's assumption of flesh, which is not an absolutely segregated event but carries with it the election and sanctification of creaturely form:

[15] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 84.
[16] Ibid., p. 85.

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'[W]ithin the hypostatic union there is included a union between uncreated and created rationality and between uncreated and created word, so that it is in the rational form of creaturely human word that Jesus Christ mediates God's Word to all mankind'.[17] To be sure, the Word comes from above, does not abandon his deity; but as such he 'had to create room for himself and operate within the horizontal dimensions of human existence in order to continue his speaking and acting throughout history'.[18]

This horizontal reality Torrance identifies as the corporate life of the apostolic community and its witness, from which scripture arises.

> It was out of this corporate reciprocity centred in and creatively controlled by Christ through the outpouring of his Spirit of Truth upon it that the New Testament Scriptures were born and took shape within the church. They constitute, therefore, the divinely-provided and inspired linguistic medium which remains of authoritative and critical significance for the whole history of the church of Jesus Christ. Its purpose in this written form . . . is to enable us to stand with the original witnesses under the creative impact of the Word which they received and obeyed, and to be drawn into the sphere of its effective operation in the world.[19]

Torrance gives a good deal more attention than many Reformed theologians to the role of the apostolate in the 'effective operation' of the Word, emphasising that it is through the apostolic kerygma that the Word reaches its term in what might be termed the application of its communicative benefits. The argument runs thus:

> Jesus Christ is God's self-address to man, but this self-address in order to achieve its end had to penetrate, take form and domicile itself within the address of man to man, as the Word of Christ abiding among men. The reciprocity established between God and man in Jesus Christ had to create room for itself within the reciprocities of human society, and the Word of God which had come 'plumb down from above' had to deploy itself in the horizontal dimensions of human existence in order to continue its speaking and acting throughout history. This involved the formation of a nucleus within speaker-hearer relations of men, corresponding to and grounded in the communion between God and man embodied in Jesus Christ, as the controlling basis among believers for the extended communication of the Word of God, and the translation of the self-witness

[17] Ibid., p. 91.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., pp. 92–3.

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> of Christ into witness to Christ, answering to the normative pattern of his obedient humanity, as the specific form for the proclamation of God's Word to all men.[20]

Torrance's presentation of the 'social reciprocities' does not include much by way of a socio-pragmatics of Christian discourse: beyond recording the importance of the 'horizontal dimensions', he shows little interest in empirical analysis of the temporal and social processes through which the Christian kerygma is disseminated. A good deal of attention is devoted, on the other hand, to the Spirit as the motive power of the transition from Jesus Christ as the Word of God to Jesus Christ as the 'word of man to man, communicable within the medium of man's exchange in thought and word with his fellow man'.[21] The point was made at some length in the New College lectures. 'The inner meaning . . . of the apostolic witness is that through the gift of the Spirit the apostolate is given to echo and reflect Christ's self-witness in the world, and thus through the Spirit-relation with Christ the apostolate is given to be the foundation of the church, the body of Christ in history through which Christ makes his own image to appear, his own voice to echo, his own witness to be effectively operative among mankind.'[22] There is here something similar to Barth's late reworking of the *munus propheticum*, namely a theology of the risen Christ as in himself supremely eloquent, and of the Spirit as the agent by whom that eloquence sounds through the church and on into the world. But Torrance has more to say than Barth of the apostolic extension of, and instrumentality in, Christ's work: 'he himself through the gift of his Spirit completed his self-disclosure within the apostolic mind and understanding'.[23] This extension of the communicative presence of Christ in the apostolic kerygma is basic to the ontology of scripture.

> As the written word, the New Testament assumes form in our human language and thought and as such is the counterpart on earth to the incarnate Word risen and ascended to the right hand of God. Thus the whole of the New Testament forms on earth and in history the *lalia*, the speech of Christ who is himself the *Logos*, the Word in his own person. By reason of their apostolic authority, by reason of their power as God's special revelation and word, these documents of the New Testament canon have imposed themselves on the mind and conscience of the church as

[20] 'The Word of God and the Response of Man', pp. 151–2.
[21] Ibid., p. 151.
[22] *Atonement*, p. 322.
[23] Ibid., p. 328.

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> no others have done, as the specially formed and selected means whereby Jesus Christ the Lord continues to speak.[24]

The economic trajectory of revelation thus runs: the divine Word as the intelligible presence of the uncreated one – the divine presence takes creaturely form, primarily and controllingly in the incarnation, derivatively in the apostolic community as it refers back to Christ – holy scripture emerges as the intelligible articulation of this reference back to the creative Word. In sum (this time from *The Christian Doctrine of God*): the coming of God at the incarnation effected 'a profound revolution in knowledge of God . . . a radical reorganisation of people's consciousness and the redirection of their rational approach to God' such that 'a new thought-world came into being'.[25] That is, 'God's unique trinitarian self-revelation created the framework of thought and speech within human existence in which alone it is to be understood and interpreted by us';[26] and from this there emerges 'the unique genre of literature handed down to us in the gospels and epistles of the New Testament, upon which God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit has imprinted itself'.[27] In effect, Torrance is refusing to be trapped either by a revelatory supernaturalism in which the Bible is unproblematically identical with the divine Word, and so effectively replaces the hypostatic union, or by a naturalism in which the Bible mediates nothing because it is secularised, considered to be without residue a product or bearer of immanent religious culture. We now turn to look a little more closely at the effects of this theology of revelation on his understanding of the nature of holy scripture.

Scripture

Torrance has no full-dress treatment of the nature of scripture, and some of the central preoccupations of classical Reformed accounts of the scripture principle (inspiration; *sola scriptura*; *claritas scripturae*) hardly appear in what he has to say. Nearly all the important questions about the nature of scripture can, on his account of the matter, be resolved into that of its relation to divine revelation. Grasping this relation aright requires a range of historical and dogmatic strategies, using dogmatic perception of revelation's annexation of creaturely texts to unpick the long history of distancing divine speech from creaturely forms. Only as we discern the function of scripture in the economy of revelation are we able to move to speak of its ontology. Put differently, the doctrine of scripture is a function of the doctrine of God and of God's inner

[24] Ibid., pp. 334–5.
[25] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 34.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., p. 35.

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and outer intelligibility in his communicative and reconciling presence to creatures.

Torrance's understanding of the nature of scripture revolves around two principles which are remarkably economical and possessed of remarkable explanatory power. The first: 'We acknowledge the Scriptures to be the written form of the Word of God because in and through them we hear the Word of God in his divine Majesty and Grace';[28] the second: 'In the Bible we hear the Word of God speaking through the mouths of men'.[29] Reconstructed in somewhat skeletal form, Torrance's expansion of these two principles may be set out in the following way.

There is a positive relation between the divine Word and the human words of scripture; there is no *crisis* about the possibility of human text-acts serving in God's personal activity of self-presentation to intelligent creatures. On Torrance's account, the doctrine of scripture exhibits some of the same formal features as the doctrine of the hypostatic union. Though, as we shall see, there are all-important differences to be borne in mind, both tracts of Christian teaching only yield themselves to theological understanding when we free ourselves from the contrasts of the intelligible and the sensible. Greek patristic hermeneutics – supremely, of course, Athanasius, the subject of the centrepiece of *Divine Meaning* – had to overcome that dichotomy in its Platonic version. In modern culture, the same separations surface in what Torrance identifies as 'phenomenalism' in biblical studies:[30] the extraction of the biblical texts from their intelligible connections with the revealing activity of God, and the assumption that because biblical texts are natural entities they can have no ontological depth or backward reference to divine speech. By contrast, Torrance proposes, the scriptures 'cannot be divorced from [their] revelational framework, or from the form which the Word and Spirit of God created in the testimony of the disciples and apostles for the actualisation of that revelation'.[31] For, as he puts it elsewhere, Jesus Christ 'does not come to us apart from our modes of existence in space and time, or apart from the modes of being which he assumed in our space and time, and therefore he comes to us through the personal and historical communication of his Word deriving from the protocol reports and statements immediately in touch with him in the apostolic witness and scriptures'.[32] Here again we have the essential stages of the economic sequence which Torrance commonly traces

[28] *Divine Meaning*, p. 6.
[29] Ibid., p. 7.
[30] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, pp. 36–7.
[31] Ibid., p. 36.
[32] *Theological Science*, p. 192.

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in explicating the nature of the Bible: revelation – incarnation – apostolic testimony – holy scripture, in each of which there is seen the asymmetrical yet real mode of relation between the divine Word and natural forms.

Torrance amplifies this basic proposal in a number of ways, three of which may be identified here: (1) scripture as an accommodated divine Word; (2) scripture as sacrament; (3) scripture's expressive or referential relation to the divine Word. All three furnish ways of overcoming the separation of 'historical and ontological factors or ingredients in God's triune self-revelation'.[33]

A theology of accommodation is a way of overcoming the potential agnosticism or scepticism which may lurk within strong teaching about the ineffable majesty of God. Doctrines of divine transcendence can paralyse theological speech, severing the connection between *theologia in se* and *theologia nostra*, and cause theology either to retreat into silence or to resign itself to the referential incapacity of secular human words. If, however, we think of divine revelation actively accommodating itself to creaturely forms, we make use of language about divine action, but without the assumption that divine action can only be efficacious and trustworthy if it is direct and immediate, uncontaminated by any created element. We retain, that is, a measure of trust that divine communicative activity is uninhibited by creaturely media, which it can take into its service and shape into fitting (though never wholly adequate) instruments. Certainly a doctrine of holy scripture needs to take account of the conflict-laden character of the relation between the Word and *fallen* language; 'dictation' theories of inspiration, for example, arrest the process in which language is being redeemed by the Word 'pressing its way through the speech of our fallen flesh'.[34] Though we do not receive the Word of God directly and instantaneously, but only 'in the limitation and imperfection, the ambiguities and contradictions of our fallen ways of thought and speech',[35] nevertheless we do have the divine Word. Creaturely limitation, imperfection, ambiguity and contradiction do not constitute an unsurpassable barrier to the Word as it makes itself present to created intelligence. In accommodating itself to fallen forms, the Word sanctifies them.[36]

[33] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 35.

[34] 'The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology', p. 139.

[35] *Divine Meaning*, p. 8. The closing of the eschatological gap between the Word and the words troubled Torrance as he read Warfield (a theologian of whose excellence he was by no means unappreciative): see his review of Warfield's *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 7 (1954), pp. 106–7.

[36] See *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, pp. 104–5.

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If the concept of accommodation inhibits principled separation of revelation from textual form, the concept of scripture as sacrament serves to indicate that the relation of the divine Word and the biblical words is 'asymmetric'.[37] Unlike the hypostatic union of deity and humanity in the incarnation, 'in the Bible the divine Word and the human word are only united through dependence upon and participation in Christ, that is, sacramentally'.[38] This edges towards what Torrance regards as the essential operation of scripture in the divine economy, which is ostensive or referential: scripture is not itself the location or comprehensive inscripturation of the divine Word, but the sign by which that Word in its free majesty is indicated. Torrance's assessment of what he calls (rather loosely) 'fundamentalist' accounts of the nature of scripture often fastens on this point. As with Barth's criticism of what he judged to be Protestant scholastic reifications of scripture, so in Torrance's critique of some later and much debased versions of the same theological ideas: there is in fundamentalism 'a marked failure to acknowledge the unique reality of God in its transcendent authority and majesty over all the contingent media employed by God in his self-revelation'[39] and, further, a failure to grasp that revelation is event, not manipulable object: 'revelation must be continually given and received in a living relation with God'.[40] If the force of accommodation, then, is to lay emphasis on 'without separation', the force of sacrament is to emphasise 'without confusion'.

As accommodated divine speech standing in a sacramental relation to the divine Word proper, scripture *refers*. The referential or signifying function of scripture is, as we shall see, a primary element in Torrance's understanding of biblical interpretation. For the present, we note that his chief concern here is not to analyse in detail the several modes of reference to be found in the biblical writings, so much as to make a point about the *movement* of divine self-communication in which scriptural signs are caught up. Because scripture is a natural sign, generated out of apostolic testimony to the self-declaration of Jesus Christ as the truth, it does not possess truthfulness *in se*. Scripture's truthfulness consists in its indication of that by which it is brought into being, to which its literary forms testify, but which they do not contain. The principle here is: 'thing is not subjected to speech but speech to thing'[41] – the tag is taken from Major, but it opens into an entire doctrine

[37] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 94.

[38] *Divine Meaning*, p. 7. See also the discussion of the *communicatio idiomatum* in the doctrines of incarnation and scripture in *Atonement*, pp. 336–9.

[39] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 17.

[40] Ibid., p. 16.

[41] *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, p. 50.

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of scripture and hermeneutics. It is this, for example, to which Torrance returns at a number of points in his account of Athanasius' understanding of biblical language: 'the meaning of the words written is not found in the letters as such but in the divine actions which they express'.[42]

One of the most striking features of Torrance's thinking here is its confidence that the referential or expressive relation between divine Word and human words is secure, not endangered either by the sheer difference of created from uncreated speech, or by the fragility and fallenness of creaturely acts of producing meaning through texts. Torrance does not brood over the potential occlusion of revelation by the biblical writings, or their infection by ideology, simply because revelation outbids carnal deception and, as it were, sanctifies created signs by appointing them and equipping them to be its servants. Because Torrance explicates every stage of the revelatory economy, including the production of created literary forms, by talking about the ways and works of God, the referential relation between scripture and divine Word is not defeated on the creaturely side. The gap between revelation and human speech is thus once again filled by a theological affirmation about 'the divine condescension . . . of the Word eternal to man'.[43] '[I]n and through Jesus Christ certain human forms of thought and speech are laid hold of and adapted for knowledge of God'.[44] Divine appropriation, moreover, brings with it the transformation of creaturely speech, its transposition into a new field of operation and its being granted a new set of semantic functions. '[I]f human terms are to be used for divine revelation they must somehow be brought into a parallel relation to the divine realities, even if they have no inherent likeness in being to them'[45] – this is the paradigmatic character of scripture in relation to divine revelation which is its material, efficient and perfecting cause. The ground of this function of scripture lies in the divine economy: 'the *human economy* of the Word and Son of God represents the *logic* of God's acts of grace, and therefore in *accordance with that economy* . . . describes the *analogic* of biblical and theological statements or their faithful reference back to their source in the divine acts of grace'.[46] Revelatory grace, we may note, does not overcome nature but naturalism; taken into the divine service, scripture as a set of natural signs is made capable of testimony to its divine *res*, the *viva vox dei*.

[42] *Divine Meaning*, p. 232.
[43] Ibid., p. 250.
[44] Ibid., p. 252.
[45] Ibid., p. 54.
[46] Ibid., p. 272.

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A final element in Torrance's understanding of the nature of scripture is its ecclesial character. Much modern biblical scholarship, of course, inquires into the biblical texts in terms of their social matrices; but it is commonly immanentist in its analysis, content to describe the socio-pragmatics of biblical literature and its place in the history of common religious life. Torrance, too, readily speaks of the 'social coefficient'[47] of the knowledge of God in scripture; but his analysis is theological, that is, he talks of the social dimensions of scripture by talking about God. We have already seen how the concept of apostolicity does a good deal of work, furnishing him with a bridge between the revealed truth of the gospel and the social forms and practices by which it is appropriated and transmitted. '[W]ithin the church which is founded upon the apostles and through them upon Jesus Christ himself faith and mind and language are brought into conformity with the nature of Christ and change'.[48] The fruit of this change is 'the apostolic mind' which 'arises compulsively out of the nature of the Word and his saving action, rather than out of any conception which we form on our own'.[49] The reality of the apostolic community, theologically described as a set of social forms in which Christ clothed with his gospel is received under the power of the Holy Spirit, is thus an ingredient within a doctrine of scripture. Isolated from this reality – abstracted from the 'embodied form' of the larger reality of the deposit of faith in the life of the church[50] – scripture is quickly resolved into a body of statements organised as a 'logico-deductive system'.[51] But for Torrance, such a description of the nature of scripture is ecclesially too thin: the apostolic community is not merely an empty social space to which the divine Word bears a purely extrinsic relation, but is intrinsic to the event of revelation and reconciliation, for the display of divine truth brings with it the redemption of social forms, including the redemption of created forms of communication and their textual bearers. 'The doctrine of the Apostolate . . . belongs also to the doctrine of Holy Scripture.'[52]

To draw the threads together: for Torrance, teaching about the nature of scripture proceeds indirectly, setting the biblical texts within the wider field of God's activity as revealer and reconciler. A doctrine of scripture

[47] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 46. See also the account of the ecclesial and doxological elements of knowledge of God through scripture in *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 83–5.
[48] *Divine Meaning*, p. 241.
[49] Ibid.
[50] T. F. Torrance, 'The Deposit of Faith', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983), p. 3.
[51] Ibid., p. 7.
[52] 'The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology', p. 137.

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requires theological depiction of the elements of this field: God the Word making himself present and intelligible; the church in which created intellect is reconciled to divine truth; scripture as testimony to the divine Word, a Word which accommodates itself to natural forms and so transfigures them. And all this by way of a rejection of separation of the revealed and the natural, a rejection made possible by thinking through the metaphysics of the hypostatic union. The final element of this gracious movement of divine revelation is the reception and interpretation of its biblical correlate; to this we now turn.

Hermeneutics

Torrance's primary interest in his writing on biblical interpretation is with giving a portrait of Christian hermeneutical intelligence. What, he asks, is its most characteristic posture before the divine Word? What is the general tenor of its activity? From whence does it come, and to what end does it move? How does it come to learn to dispose itself fittingly in the domain of the divine Word? Torrance's recommendations about exegetical practice rarely go beyond the conventional: be aware of the text's modes of speech, read what lies in the text, resist imposing alien frameworks, and so on. What animates his presentation of hermeneutics is its epistemological and semantic dimensions. The governing rule for interpretation is thus that the scriptures 'are to be interpreted in terms of the intrinsic intelligibility given them by divine revelation, and within the field of God's objective self-communication in Jesus Christ'.[53]

To tease this apart a little: for Torrance, both general and biblical hermeneutics are properly realist in orientation, that is, they are activities in response to the shaping of intelligence by intelligible objects. Hermeneutical activity in any field of inquiry seeks 'to penetrate into the intrinsic intelligibility of the field in question in order to let it disclose or interpret itself to us'[54] – reality, we note, is actively self-disclosing, and acts of interpretation 'let' this self-disclosure happen. Because of this, hermeneutics is not a poetic activity. The interpreter is not a co-creator of meaning by the work which he or she undertakes with the text. And so, in biblical hermeneutics the interpreter's task is more than anything to receive with the right kind of pliability the gift of meaning which the divine Word extends through the text's service. It is this all-important alertness to the text's relation to the reality which it signifies which constitutes the scientific character of biblical

[53] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 43.
[54] *Divine Meaning*, p. 1.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930611000834 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hermeneutics, whose task is, quite simply, 'the interpretation of texts related to the Word of God'.[55] Grasping that relation is hermeneutically basic.

One general rubric under which Torrance's account of biblical hermeneutics may be set is that of 'depth-interpretation' (the term is borrowed from William Manson;[56] sometimes Torrance speaks of 'interpretation *in depth*'[57]). In acts of interpretation, he says, 'we penetrate through the literary surface of the scriptures, without divorcing them from their historical actuality, to the truth content of their contents, the dynamic objective reality of the living Word of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit'.[58] This mode of interpretation Torrance believes to be operative among the Greek fathers, who 'sought to understand the biblical writings in the light of the divine realities to which they refer'.[59] Depth interpretation is the hermeneutical correlate of Torrance's determination of the nature of scripture out of its referential function. If the all-important property of the Bible is the semantic relation between divine Word and created text, the all-important hermeneutical activity is that of probing behind or beneath literary phenomena in order to have dealings with that which the phenomena indicate. The 'depth–surface' language, that is, goes hand in hand with what has already been said of scripture as sign or sacrament: the movement of which the Bible is part does not terminate in itself, and the interpreter must not be arrested by the merely phenomenal, but instead press through the text to the Word of which it is the ambassador. This may now be analysed in a little more detail.

First, interpretation functions well when it attends to basic patterns of meaning in the text by which it refers to its *res*. As we 'penetrate beneath the

[55] Ibid., p. 11.

[56] In his 'Introduction' to Manson's posthumous *Jesus and the Christian* (Edinburgh: James Clarke, 1967), Torrance writes that 'it was Manson's "persistent spiritual judgement" [H. R. Mackintosh's characterisation of Manson] that enabled him to penetrate through the surface treatment of pattern and form to the "substance" of which they were but the "shadow", and so to see the deeper involutions of truth that come to light in the pages of the New Testament rather than what comes to view when the literary forms are held to be little more than the modes in which the creative spirituality of the primitive Christian community expressed itself. Hence for all its undoubted importance Manson found Form-criticism finally superficial and called for a "depth-exegesis" in which the literary forms are interpreted in their historical actuality, without divorce either from the spiritual realities to which they refer us or from the prophetic religion and culture stemming from the Old Testament to which they go back' (p. 10). See here D. Sarisky, 'T. F. Torrance on Biblical Interpretation'.

[57] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 37.

[58] Ibid.

[59] *Divine Meaning*, p. 1.

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surface of the words', he says, we discover their 'inner logic', or 'coherent pattern of meaning'.[60] This is attention to the *scope* of scripture – to the 'basic pattern of meaning that is perceived when the interpreter not only looks at the written words but looks through them at the objective centre of reference'.[61] Biblical hermeneutics is required to operate in this fashion because 'the language of scripture points away from itself to independent realities and is to be understood by acts in which we look through it, refer it back to its source, discriminate the realities indicated and so determine the meaning of what is written according to the nature of the thing signified'.[62] Built into the notion of a 'pattern of meaning' are a number of assumptions, not all of which Torrance makes explicit: the Bible is a canonical whole; interpretation has an eye to scripture in its totality; the Bible's meaning is stable across literary genres, languages, vocabularies and occasions; most of all, interpreters *discover* rather than *invent* meaning. He is, perhaps, rather grudging in his admission of hermeneutical productivity. Though he thinks it important to recognise the indispensability of natural signs to the Word's self-communication, he is a good deal more cautious in affirming ways in which readers might be said to 'make' meaning. There is not much by way of a creaturely *hermeneutical* coefficient to revelation, parallel to revelation's *textual* and *social* coefficients. This rather curious lacuna says a good deal about how Torrance conceives of the hermeneutical act, but before proceeding to look at that in more detail, one further general feature of his theological hermeneutics needs to be identified.

In biblical hermeneutics, semantics has interpretative primacy over syntactics. This hermeneutical rule is a corollary of a prior rule concerning the nature of holy scripture, namely: 'It is not just the grammatical connection of the words that gives them their meaning but the nature of the reality to which they refer'.[63] Certainly the reader cannot afford to ignore the connotative or syntactical dimensions of the text. But interpretation cannot terminate in clarification of 'the grammatico-syntactical sense of passages';[64] because 'it is finally through metasyntactic references that syntactic systems may be coherently organised'.[65] Theological interpretation is, therefore, a matter of 'subjecting the language used to the realities it signifies and attend[ing] to

[60] Ibid., p. 282.
[61] Ibid., p. 235.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., p. 236.
[64] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 115.
[65] Ibid., p. 116.

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the bearing of its coherent patterns upon the self-revelation of God which it manifestly intends'.[66]

Torrance believed that neglect of the semantic openness of the text as it directs its readers to the divine Word was rife in modern biblical scholarship, and he was vocal in his protest against what he judged its nominalism. In theological interpretation, 'we are not concerned . . . with thinking statements but with thinking realities through statements'.[67] As with Barth's early protests against the hegemony of historical-critical methods, so with Torrance: the critique is directed, not so much against specific exegetical practices as against theologically ruinous conceptions of the place of the biblical texts in God's revelatory economy. If biblical scholarship stumbles, the failure is usually epistemological: critical investigation becomes prey to 'a phenomenalist and dualist theory of knowledge',[68] which disallows any idea that 'what is mediated to us in the Holy Scriptures is epistemically and ontologically grounded in God's own Word'.[69] The lines of Torrance's critique could be multiplied many times: his worry that much biblical scholarship is observationalist, interpreting the texts in terms of their appearances to us rather than their relation to the divine Word; his reproach that historical Jesus research strips Jesus of his proper intelligibility and depth, ignores 'the *energeia* and *logos* intrinsic to him',[70] and issues in the 'semantic disintegration'[71] of our apprehension of Jesus; his concern that holy scripture be understood as 'a *transparent medium*';[72] and his criticism that biblical scholarship commonly focuses 'upon the words and statements themselves' rather than '*through* them on the truths and realities they indicate beyond themselves'.[73]

This last point proved especially contentious in the dispute with James Barr. Barr's assault on Torrance and others in *The Semantics of Biblical Language*[74] did much to extend the distance between Torrance and the biblical-theological establishment, and made plain how difficult it was for mainstream British theologians of the period to figure out, let alone sympathise with, what

[66] Ibid., p. 117.
[67] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 44.
[68] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 56.
[69] Ibid., p. 57. See further the critique in *The Ground and Grammar of Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001[2]), pp. 110–19.
[70] 'The Historical Jesus', p. 524; *Preaching Christ Today* presents the same objection in a distinctly hectoring tone.
[71] *Space, Time and Resurrection*, p. 168.
[72] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 64.
[73] Ibid.
[74] J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961).

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Torrance was doing in his theology of the Bible. The dispute turned on sharply divergent views of the nature and operation of language in speaking of God, but this was not immediately evident, largely because Barr eschewed theological comment on Torrance's work (his chief target was the short ecumenical study *Royal Priesthood*[75]) and restricted himself to exposing what he took to be linguistic incompetencies: illegitimate correlations of grammar and forms of thought; deriving meaning from etymological sequence; allowing theological judgements or undisciplined associations across the biblical corpus to determine semantic matters; scant attention to language use. Barr's disdain was only just suppressed; he clearly thought Torrance's linguistic arguments worthless. What Barr did not grasp was that the engine of Torrance's word studies was a theology of biblical language as a sign of revelation, possessed of a depth by virtue of its relation to the realities to which it testifies and not simply terminating in its syntactic surface.[76] It is this theme which Torrance seizes upon over thirty years later when he addresses Barr's criticisms in the second edition of *Royal Priesthood*. He concedes some of Barr's linguistic points, but on the essential theological issue he is unrepentant. 'I believe that [Barr's] basic approach and line of argument was misleading and unfortunate, for it treated language as something having significance in itself, to be interpreted through the interrelation of words and statements and the syntactical patterns of continuous discourse, and not primarily by reference to the realities beyond which they are meant to direct us', he writes; and so Barr's approach 'inevitably widens the gap between language and being by reducing the semantic function of language to the syntactic relations linguistic units have with one another. This is a peculiar form of nominalism which rejects the relation of language to knowledge and culture, and which to get any kind of sense out of theological language treats it as some kind of description of religious phenomena.'[77] This may not entirely dispose of Barr, to whom Torrance attributes a grander theory of language and meaning than Barr proposed; and contrasting the syntactic and the semantic is not without its risks. But what the mutual incomprehension of Barr and Torrance does show is that for Torrance biblical semantics is not just a natural or 'horizontal' field, peopled by texts and intentional authors considered *per se*, but one in which the divine *res* of biblical discourse is

[75] T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1955).

[76] Barr might be excused on this score by the fact that Torrance had published little on this matter when *Semantics of Biblical Language* appeared, though his contribution to the 1956 English-language Barth Festschrift, 'The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology' made a start.

[77] T. F. Torrance, *Royal Priesthood* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993[2]), p. x.

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determinative of meaning. An essay from the mid-1960s written in honour of Gerrit Berkouwer puts it thus:

> in our handling of Holy Scripture we have to respect its *perspicuity*, and must not interpret biblical statements or the forms of thought they express merely as they are in themselves as linguistic or logical facts, not only in subjective reference to their human authors – important as that is to discover their proper intention – but ultimately in their objective reference to God.[78]

As the ultimate *res* of scripture presents itself through the instrumentality of human language, it transfigures forms of speech, the divine use bestowing new and distinctive meanings and effecting semantic coherence and regularity across the canon. What Barr judged faulty historical semantics is for Torrance a theology of the sanctification of language *in divinis* as it serves to enable encounter with the divine Word.[79] This made Torrance alert to what he took to be the danger of converting 'semantic relations without remainder into syntactical relations',[80] forgetful of a basic hermeneutical principle: '*no syntactics contains its own semantics*'.[81] By way of an alternative, he proposes 'a basically *theological* exegesis and interpretation of the Bible, in which we learn to understand what it says through its function in mediating to us knowledge of divine truths which are what they are independently of the Bible'.[82]

What does semantically orientated interpretation look like? Once again, Torrance's descriptions are fuller on stance and orientation than on reading practices. We may take note of four verbs which Torrance uses to present basic hermeneutical activities and attitudes. Interpretation is a matter of 'following'. Partly what is intended here is that the interpreter must grasp

[78] T. F. Torrance, 'The Epistemological Relevance of the Holy Spirit', in *God and Rationality* (Oxford: OUP, 1971), p. 186.

[79] It is not insignificant that Torrance is attracted by Reuchlin's notion of *veritas hebraica*, the distinctive idioms of Hebrew and what they express, because 'through study of the *idiomata* and *proprietes* of the Hebrew scriptures we are paying attention to the sign language which they employ to direct us beyond to the unique and ineffable speech of God . . . We can get the Word of God no more through etymological or philological examination of the Hebrew than through the logical argumentations of the Schoolmen. But we must allow ourselves to be guided by the nature of what is actually and literally written to *hear* God speaking – it is in that act of hearing, which is essentially a miracle, that we really hear the Word of God': 'The Hermeneutics of John Reuchlin', p. 113.

[80] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 73.

[81] Ibid., p. 74.

[82] Ibid., p. 69.

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the nature and meaning of the biblical text by plotting its place and function within the unfolding sequence of God's self-communication. To interpret is to 'follow the economic line of action that gave rise to [biblical statements] in space and time and continues to govern their meaning'.[83] But 'following' is also a matter of allowing interpretative intelligence to be directed by the text towards that which the text indicates. Biblical interpreters are properly not concerned with reconstructing the subjectivities of the authors whose texts they treat but with responding 'to their call to share with them the same objective orientation toward the living, speaking and acting God as they have found themselves obliged to adopt'.[84] Accordingly, interpreters must 'try to follow through the semantic reference of [the biblical authors'] witness and reports so that we may also experience and apprehend the living God in the reality of his own words and acts for ourselves'.[85] Interpretation, we should note, is not so much a following of 'the way the words run' (*circumstantia litterae*) – for Torrance that might suggest terminating the hermeneutical exercise in the syntactic – but rather a following of 'the semantic reference of biblical statements to the divine realities upon which they rest'.[86]

Second, interpretation 'penetrates' to the essence of that which the text signifies. In a lengthy essay on Aquinas' hermeneutics, Torrance seizes on the idea that biblical hermeneutical intelligence involves *intus legere*, a perception of the causes of the text in which 'we have to penetrate to the divine intention through the literal sense and the intention lying behind it'.[87] Interpretation moves *through* signs or seeks to grasp that which lies *behind* signs. It ought by now to be clear that by this Torrance does not mean to leave behind literal, sensible realities in order to move to an intelligible realm only extrinsically related to textual signifiers. 'Penetration' is, rather, a term to describe a movement of reason in which textual signs enable readers to perceive 'Christ himself as the one Word of God behind all the speech of Holy Scripture'.[88]

If 'follow' and 'penetrate' speak of interpretation as a rational motion through or behind the Bible to its matter, 'indwell' indicates the way in which interpreters come to acquire an overall understanding of the meanings which scripture tenders. 'As our minds dwell in the scriptures we find diverse

[83] Ibid., p. 109.
[84] Ibid., p. 104.
[85] Ibid., pp. 104–5.
[86] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 43.
[87] T. F. Torrance, 'Scientific Hermeneutics According to St Thomas Aquinas', p. 263. In this connection, Torrance argues that Erasmus' failure was precisely that he 'never managed to penetrate far behind organized language to the inner connection of the realities denoted' ('The Hermeneutics of Erasmus', p. 49).
[88] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 281.

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passages coming together in our meditation and resonating with one another so that a spontaneous organisation of natural coherences running through them arises and a crystallisation of the truths to which they conjointly direct us takes place in our understanding of them'.[89] 'Indwelling' is the condition for discernment of the fact that scripture is a coherent, if complex and discursively ordered, set of meanings given by that which scripture signifies and which it is the interpreter's task to assemble by attending to scriptural signs. 'Indwelling' is thus an acquired habit of

> looking *through* the various books and passages of the scriptures and allowing their message to be interiorised in the depths of our mind. In this way a structural kinship becomes built up between our knowing and what we seek to know, which enables us intuitively to grasp the conjoint meaning latent in the biblical texts which we could not derive simply from the particularities and explicit features of the documents themselves.[90]

Finally, and most comprehensively, interpretation 'listens'. Torrance frequently insists on the auditory rather than visual character of revelation in the Christian sense: 'the outstanding characteristic of theology is that it operates with a direct act of cognition in *hearing* God and engages in the act of conception through *audition*'.[91] The visual terminates on surfaces, whereas the auditory retains 'the dimension of depth'.[92] This contrast is, admittedly, a little odd: it is not clear why Torrance believes visual perception goes no deeper than phenomenal surface. That aside, the hermeneutical dimensions are clear:

> What is required . . . are ways of interpreting . . . appropriate to the distinctive nature of God's self-revelation through his Word, by *listening* to his *viva vox* or living voice resonating through the New Testament witness and not just through linguistic and grammatical analysis of the New Testament documents guided by proper historico-scientific methods, important as that is for rigorous exegesis.[93]

This portrait of hermeneutical reason is exegetically somewhat unspecific. In part, this is because for Torrance 'the really *fundamental questions*' in hermeneutics, as in theology generally, 'are those which penetrate to the

[89] Ibid., p. 37.
[90] Ibid.
[91] *Theological Science*, p. 23.
[92] Ibid.
[93] *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 39.

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ultimate assumptions and regulative beliefs governing all knowledge in the world'[94] – questions about the relation of sign and thing signified, and about how divine speech annexes creaturely forms. Partly, again, it is because the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of scripture is not simply cursive reading or exposition of the text so much as the generation of theological concepts. 'Theological interpretation', Torrance proposes, is a matter of 'subjecting the language used to the realities it signifies' in order to 'attend to the bearing of its coherent patterns of meaning upon the self-revelation of God which it manifestly intends'.[95] Out of this, the interpreter begins to build up 'an initial interpretative framework of theological concepts'[96] which both guide subsequent reading and are corrected and revised by it, so that 'true and faithful interpretation of the Bible involves the construction of a consistent line of theological statements through which the "inner logic" of the biblical message becomes disclosed'.[97] The supreme example of this is the *homoousion*. It would be relatively easy to criticise Torrance for thinking of dogmatic concepts as improvements on the Bible; he himself is at times unguarded on this score ('theological activity . . . is not concerned merely with biblical exegesis or with the kind of biblical theology that builds up what this or that author in the New Testament taught about the Gospel'[98]). But at its best, his argument is that concepts function as summaries of what has been discerned in the process of following, penetrating, indwelling and listening to the biblical witness.

> Theological statements, that is, reflective statements as to the message and content of the biblical statements, are made, not by stringing together biblical citations, but rather by hard exegetical activity in which we interpret biblical statements in the light of the divine Truth to which they direct us from all sides. In this activity we compare the different *paradeigmata*, gathering together from them what they have to say and summarising them in exact and disciplined (but open-structured) propositions by which we point to the basic pattern of truth in the objective reality and at the same time allow that objective reality to impose its own rationality upon our thinking and articulation of it.[99]

[94] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 53.
[95] Ibid., p. 117.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid., p. 118. See also the account of theological knowledge in *Reality and Scientific Theology*, pp. 85–6.
[98] *Divine Meaning*, p. 385.
[99] Ibid., p. 377.

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Such, then, is Torrance's portrait of the act of interpretation. What of its agent? He is generally reluctant to devote much attention to the skills or virtues of interpreters, fearing to break the rule that hermeneutical discernment is 'an epistemic and not a psychological operation'.[100] When he does address himself to the question of the interpreter's character, Torrance often speaks of the need for mortification, whose cognitive form is the stripping away of projections and false constructions in order that truth can be grasped. The Word of God can be heard 'only in crucifixion and repentance';[101] interpretation is an act in the domain of revelation, and the domain of revelation is equally the domain of conflict and reconciliation. A passage from Torrance's little book on Calvin's hermeneutics serves to draw the threads together. What happens when we interpret a biblical text?

> We engage in a movement of the mind in which we refer everything to God in accordance with his own nature and his prior acts and not to ourselves or our own prejudices. We allow God to retain his own majesty in our knowing of him and to preside in all our judgements of him . . . we advance in understanding God's self-revelation in the Holy Scriptures and in our knowledge of him only as we allow what we learn of God to strip us of our own inventions and presuppositions. God is certainly to be known only in an intimate act in which our awareness of him is given along with our awareness of ourselves, but we may know him, understand his Word and grasp his truth only as we repent of our distorting preconceptions and images of him.[102]

[100] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 104. Torrance believed Schleiermacher failed to observe the rule, and countered him by proposing that 'interpretation of a biblical text involves the setting up of a polar relation to a subject-matter which by its very nature entails a polar relation between the witness and God himself. No hermeneutical method or art can be justified which neglects the objective pole in the text and absorbs the subjective pole into its own polar movement': 'Hermeneutics According to F. D. E. Schleiermacher', p. 265. Erasmus is criticised along similar lines for interiorising meaning, thinking of language 'not so much . . . as significant of things or events but as expression of mental states and moral attitudes' ('The Hermeneutics of Erasmus', p. 51), such that he is 'the great forerunner of liberal and romantic hermeneutics' (p. 72).

[101] *Divine Meaning*, p. 8; the permanently conflict-laden character of our dealings with scripture is a pervasive theme in Armin Wenz's (unjustly neglected) book *Das Wort Gottes: Gericht und Rettung. Untersuchungen zur Autorität der Heiligen Schrift in Bekenntnis und Lehre der Kirche* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996).

[102] *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin*, p. 164.

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Reflections

Well before current enthusiasm for pre-critical hermeneutics, Torrance pondered classical Christian modes of interpretation and discovered in them resources for extricating the interpretation of the Bible from captivity to historical and literary phenomenology. Most of all, he drew attention to what he believed to be the motive power of classical Christian hermeneutics: a theology of the Word's majestic freedom and condescension in appropriating and adapting created speech to revelation. Because he possessed well-formed dogmatic instincts, Torrance grasped what has not always been perceived by enthusiasts for theological interpretation of the Bible: that hermeneutical theory and interpretative practice properly derive from a theology of scripture, which rests in turn upon the doctrines of God, revelation and the church. Post-critical theological interpreters often counter the hermeneutical sufficiency of historical reconstruction by appealing to the ecclesial community as the proper location of scripture and its interpretation, and to the cultivation of virtue as its chief end. Torrance, similarly, gave weight to the apostolic nature of scripture and to the doxological culture in which it is received. But, at the same time, he pushed much more deeply into trinitarian and incarnational teaching about God's self-revelation as the setting for a theology of scripture and its interpretation, and demonstrated a much more finely tuned sense of the real yet asymmetrical relation between revelation and created forms. Moreover, he grasped that a genealogy of exegetical and interpretative reason is imperative, not only to give a pathology of hermeneutical defect but also to retrieve a set of useable dogmatic, metaphysical and spiritual principles by which to direct the interpretative exercise.

Some of the most fruitful recent work on the nature and interpretation of the Bible has set bibliology and hermeneutics in the context of a theology of divine action[103] – whether in straightforward dogmatic fashion[104] or more obliquely, appealing, for example, to extra-theological theory about speech acts.[105] Torrance also gave an account of scripture and its functions, and of the responsibilities of its readers, by portrayal of the redemptive economy

[103] For recent overviews, see M. Bowald, *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics: Mapping Divine and Human Agency* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); A. Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009).

[104] Wenz's *Das Wort Gottes* is, again, a striking example.

[105] For example, N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995); K. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998); K. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002); T. Ward, *Word and Supplement: Speech Acts, Biblical Texts, and the Sufficiency of Scripture* (Oxford: OUP, 2002).

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of signs which encloses both text and reader. 'Everything depends on the actual bearing of the signs or symbols upon the realities they stand for or refer to.'[106] The 'everything' there is deliberate. In terms of the doctrine of God, it locates the Bible in the sphere of divine revelation through Word and Spirit, which has its centre in the incarnation, and which extends itself through the apostolate into the time of the church. In terms of scriptural interpretation, it derives hermeneutics from a theological semiotics centred neither on the use of scripture nor on scripture's literary features *per se*, but on the referential relation of textual sign to thing (event, divine communicative act) signified. Accounts of the nature and interpretation of the Bible are in Torrance's judgement more likely to succeed when pursued along such lines, and more exposed to failure when they isolate text and interpreter from this economy or do not allow the natural properties of the sign to conduct us into the presence of the divine Word.

Torrance's writing on these matters was in some measure inhibited by its historical limitations. He chose to cast much of what he had to say on scripture and hermeneutics in an historical idiom, immersing himself in Christian authors of classical stature in order to reconstruct and commend paradigmatic instances of Christian theological hermeneutics (most of all, the Greek fathers and Calvin). He also sought to identify modern distortions of earlier patterns of thought, urging his readers to climb out of an entire theological and hermeneutical culture by attending to a coherent pre-modern tradition in which created words serve to mediate divine revelation. The studies are neither critical nor comprehensive, short on contextual considerations, and usually read the material under the tutelage of an overarching narrative; they make their case, not so much by close commentary as by an overall reading of patterns of thought, filled out by a mass of quotation, paraphrase and allusion. The constructive interests which guide his interpretations readily discover deep convergences between widely different thinkers (Athanasius, Hilary, Calvin and Barth share a great deal). And they also lead to a curious lack of attention to the *use* of scripture in the pre-modern Christian tradition, and to its commentarial modes of theology (there is, for example, no extensive treatment of either a patristic biblical commentary or one from Calvin).

All this may readily be excused (or lamented) as the technical shortcomings of a *grandes lignes* thinker who did not pretend to exercise

[106] T. F. Torrance, 'Theological Realism', in B. Hebblethwaite and S. Sutherland (eds), *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology: Essays Presented to D. M. MacKinnon* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 170.

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the critical historian's craft.[107] But there is a deeper issue to be explored. Torrance's declared dogmatic commitment to revelation in space and time and in social contingencies obligates him to pause over the historical and exegetical processes by which revelation is received – that is, to say more about the rhetorical and hermeneutical culture in which scripture happens. His aversion to hermeneutical immanentism, coupled with his insistence on reference as primary in determining meaning, puts him at a large distance from inquiries into the pragmatics of scripture and Christian literary culture. He would doubtless fear that, in the absence of theological guidance, exploring Christian literary culture risks reducing the apostolic transmission of revelation to a self-enclosed system of religious signs, or falling back into what Amos Funkenstein termed 'contextual reasoning',[108] in which the discursive economy of scripture is a purely natural one which can be analysed without reference to a divine speaker. For Torrance, history, like syntax, is *surface*, that through which intelligence moves. His resistance to making the natural history of scripture basic to textual and hermeneutical ontology, and his grounding of both scripture and interpretation in the history of revelation, is both unfashionable and remarkably prescient, in view of the fact that much work on the nature and interpretation of scripture continues to have a largely inert view of God. But in order to carry, it needs to be supplemented by a more spacious account of the creaturely coefficient of revelation. What weakens Torrance's bibliology and hermeneutics is not that he is opposed by theological principle to such an account – quite the contrary, his doctrines of the incarnation and the apostolate require it of him. The weakness is descriptive rather than principled. He is content to record the fact of there being a creaturely coefficient, but goes little further in portraying textual culture: how texts are produced, disseminated and appropriated. Yet this may suggest that the promised integration of Word and words, *res* and *signum*, has not been fully achieved.

The curious absence of much by way of extended exegesis reinforces this impression. It is not simply that Torrance's work as a whole is exegetically light, but that so firm is his conception of the ostensive nature of scripture that he does not linger over the textual sign, fearing, no doubt, that this may arrest the movement of hermeneutical intelligence in pressing through to the *res*. To be sure, he often insists that in biblical interpretation

[107] A comparative reading of *Divine Meaning* and Frances Young's *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* displays this point.

[108] A. Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 206–10.

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> we are not concerned . . . with the Word of God *in abstracto*, i.e., in abstraction from the *lalia*, but we are concerned with the Word of God *in concreto*, and . . . as a result we have to give the most rigorous attention to the actual text of the scriptures and to their actual setting in history . . . Arduous exegetical study is the foundation for all theological discipline in the Church.[109]

But there is an immediate and telling qualification: because scripture is witness to revelation, 'we are not concerned . . . with the human speech of the Bible as an independent theme of study, that is, with the humanity of the original witnesses in themselves'.[110]

A comparison with Barth is apt. Torrance comments that in Barth's theology the function of biblical statements 'is not symbolic or conventional but significative or semiotic, one which they fulfil in objective or ontological reference to the truth of God beyond themselves'.[111] But he presses Barth in a direction which suggests that the biblical sign is dispensable – the *occasion* for the event of revelation but not intrinsic to its content: 'the quest for theological understanding begins strictly where biblical citations end'.[112] This Torrance calls Barth's 'rather deeper'[113] sort of Biblicism: not simply 'organising together biblical quotations and working out their conceptual content into some kind of systematic order',[114] but something less literary.

> [F]or Barth true Biblicism meant accustoming himself to breathe the air of divine revelation, and learning to think instinctively and speak naturally within it. Hence he was concerned above all to steep himself in the biblical witness, and to indwell its message in such a way that the truth of divine revelation became built into the very walls of his mind, and gave inner form to all his dogmatic conceptions and formulations of material content.[115]

Barth certainly sought to avoid making the divine Word and the scriptural word consubstantial; but he retarded the occasionalist potential of this by exegesis and by the suffusion of his rhetoric by biblical idioms. Torrance

[109] 'The Place of Christology in Biblical and Dogmatic Theology', pp. 141–2.
[110] Ibid., p. 142.
[111] *Karl Barth: Biblical and Evangelical Theologian*, p. 116.
[112] Ibid., p. 116.
[113] Ibid., p. 117.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., pp. 117–18.

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lacks these compensations, and so gives the impression that the exegetical has only interim significance: it is a little odd to hear Erasmus chided for failure to get beyond 'descriptive, paraphrastic interpretation'.[116]

As with the historical limitations, so here: the deficiency is largely (though not wholly) one of execution, not principle. To attribute the paucity of exegesis to a 'transcendentalism' in which 'God seems to recede from the historical into non-objectivity for space-time human existence', or to some 'Nestorian' idea that the human word is only extrinsically related to revelation, is considerably to overstate matters.[117] But nevertheless there is something in this criticism, perhaps best phrased by saying that applying the 'without separation' formula to the relation of *res* and *signum* only carries weight if the sign is presented in its literary density as *verbum externum*, not simply as an interstice or opportunity for the Word's operation. And literary density evokes exegesis and commentary. As often in Torrance's work, the intensity with which he concentrated on a particular set of epistemological issues and their historical and dogmatic extensions brought with it the threat of some disproportion and incompleteness. Because the semantic relation between the Word and the words loomed so large, and because he was so concerned with 'scope', he tended to view biblical interpretation as an epistemic activity whose end is concept formation: 'staying with' the text, descriptive tracing of its surface, is for him only an interim operation. Yet commentary is not necessarily mere syntactical report; it may be the attempt to hear and repeat the divine Word in the created literary forms and sequences which the Word has made its own. Torrance does not always protect himself against the charge that he distinguishes too neatly between syntactic and semantic, or that he promotes a kind of figural reading which is not adequately tethered to the text's grammatical features. If it is true that '*no syntactics contains its own semantics*';[118] it is also true that inquiry into the syntactical features of the text is not only a necessary condition for grasping its semantic features but is itself the means of discerning its semantics. The *res* chooses to present itself in this *signum*, the biblical text in all its grammatical, literary and historical features. The sign *is* the availability of the matter. The text does not, of course, make the Word comprehensively available or transparent; but the Word's relation to the text is more than asymptotic, and so to read the text as natural sign *is* to hear the divine Word

[116] 'The Hermeneutics of Erasmus', p. 66.

[117] Morrison, *Knowledge of the Self-Revealing God*, pp. 286, 318. Morrison's genealogy of this in Kierkegaard and the early Barth is insecure.

[118] *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, p. 74.

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in (not only behind or beneath) its textual surface. And if this is so, then, once again, theology may be encouraged to adopt a more commentarial rhetoric, to 'notice the sequence of the words' and so to be vouchsafed divine revelation. It was Torrance's achievement to have expounded – with characteristic zeal and decisiveness – the dogmatics, semiotics and semantics of scripture, the commentarial application of which remains an unfinished task.

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