

# Scripture



Scripture:  
A Unique Word

By

Francis Etheredge

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P U B L I S H I N G

Scripture: A Unique Word, by Francis Etheredge

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## FOREWORD

It is with admiration and regard that one welcomes the appearance of a new book on the Bible by a devoted teacher and researcher. Francis Etheredge's volume presents a series of some 15 essays on various topics relating to the Scriptures and how one reads, studies and interprets them. He begins at the beginning with the book of Genesis, and returns to it magnetically as the foundational document of so much that we speak of and think about in Christian theology.

This collection explores origins, the nature of being, the implications of an anthropology derived from the divine creation story, how this affects our view of God's role in human life, informs our views of fundamental relationships (sexual, conjugal), and has implications for the transmission and propagation of life. Etheredge places these recurring concepts in the context of a divine salvific plan unfolded in revelation, and sustained through the ages in the concept of covenant.

The author also raises crucial concerns and presuppositions about science, ethics, eschatology and the disciplines of analytical reading (exegesis) and interpretation (hermeneutics). Indeed, after the protology of Genesis, it is the challenge of methodology, and its crucial place in responsible scholarship and theology, that emerges as the secondary emphasis of this collection ('making sense of Scripture'). A pertinent New Testament concern focuses on the Letter to the Hebrews and the constant challenge this epistle presents in the relationship of text and ideas.

The second part of the book reverts to the author's special concern with a view of Christian anthropology. Here he uses modern papal teaching in the context of contemporary ecumenism and bioethics. Pope John Paul II's theology of the body and modern conceptions of personhood carry the arguments back to Genesis, where Pope Benedict XVI's call for a stronger catechesis of creation provides a very contemporary contribution. This relates the anthropological discourse with the language of the body and the author's ultimate and strongest theme—that of marriage, its relation to the great concepts of covenant, to the liturgical life of the Church and to a special final consideration of the relationship between physical and spiritual fecundity.



These essays see the Scriptures as profoundly truthful reflection on the mystery of life—in light and darkness, joy and pain. The Word of God resounds with the great questions of life. There is a contingent, cumulative notion to these investigations, which involve an extensive range of historical, theological and philosophical reference, and review different methods of study and modes of approach—covering the Fathers of the Church, ecclesial magisterial authority (especially the teaching charism of the papacy), the actions and symbolism of the liturgy, and a profound and ever-developing personal response to the Word. This Word speaks to us in all the personal encounters and situations of our lives.

Whether or not one agrees with the author on all points he raises, these essays, born out of reflection on many different circumstances and questions, represent a thoughtful response to the variety of life seen in the context of divine revelation, the study of Scripture, and the witness of the Church. This collection seeks to explore the multifarious challenges and experiences of human life through eyes informed by faith.

Robert Ignatius Letellier  
Cambridge  
5 June 2014



# SCRIPTURE IS A UNIQUELY “WILD”<sup>1</sup> WORD

FRANCIS ETHEREDGE<sup>2</sup>

‘God’s word is unpredictable in its power’ and has an ‘unruly freedom ..., which accomplishes what it wills in ways that surpass our calculations and ways of thinking’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 22<sup>3</sup>); and, moreover, it is about preaching ‘a word which disrupts, which calls to conversion and which opens the way to an encounter with the one through whom a new humanity flowers’ (*Verbum Domini*, 93<sup>4</sup>).

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<sup>1</sup> The Lion, Aslan, in C.S. Lewis’ book, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, is being discussed by the children and Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, when it is explained that “He’s wild, you know. Not like a tame lion.”

<sup>2</sup> Although much of my study and teaching experience is at the Maryvale Institute, Birmingham, this work is not an exposition of this Institute’s thinking, as such, although I would hope that what is good is a fruit of my long association with this place of lay formation. Secondly, I am indebted to Mr. Martin Higgins, MA, who has painstakingly proof read the entire script and challenged me to be clearer, less repetitive and more grammatically consistent. Nevertheless, any faults that remain are simply mine. Finally, punctuation and spelling in quotation marks are generally left as *per* the original.

<sup>3</sup> The Magisterial texts, whether Conciliar or Papal, are referred to in a way familiar to people; for it is possible that there might be a variety of readers of this work. In general, however, this work is directed at the relative beginner and, therefore, more help is given to identify sources. Thus sometimes one uses the Latin and sometimes the English title, according to what seems common usage. After the title of the work comes the paragraph number. Although translations vary, except where there is a key point to do with translation, many Papal and Conciliar documents can be found at [http://www.vatican.va/phome\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/phome_en.htm). Similarly, with the text of Scripture, the assumption is that it will be the *Catholic Revised Version*. If a particular point requires the discussion of a different translation, the required version will be noted. In general, when it comes to academic sources, the full reference is given the first time and then, subsequently, author, title and page number.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. also *Verbum Domini*, 96, 102, 122-24; and, in general, the whole emphasis in modern magisterial and theological teaching on us being both ‘witness and teacher’ (cf. Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41); and cf. *Dignitatis Humanae*, 11; also cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11, 21, 23-26; and cf. Kiko Arguello, the announcement

On the one hand, the study of the sacred word of God is an apprenticeship into service, requiring immersion, instruction and perseverance; but on the other hand, just as God Himself is not bound by His sacraments, nor is He bound by our apprenticeships and can speak to us at any time, in any way (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120), in such a way that it will always *lead to the Liturgy of the Eucharist* (cf. *Verbum Domini*, 52-55), *to the mission of meeting God in others*<sup>5</sup> and *to eternal life*. In these essays, then, there is no attempt to oppose these approaches to the word of God; for, human and limited as I am, the *word of God participates in the mystery of the majestic love of God for each one of us and for all of us!* Nevertheless, let this tension between a “living word” and the life it brings about, *and the discipline of study*, be a dynamic and challenging encounter with Jesus Christ (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1 etc).

Having discovered faith to be about believing that if God can create all that exists, then He can create a new beginning for a sinner like me (cf. CCC, 298<sup>6</sup>), and having experienced the words of Christ to the woman caught in adultery, “go, and do not sin again” (Jn 8: 11), are both words which have been fulfilled in my life, through marriage, eleven children, three of whom are in heaven, and family friendly work<sup>7</sup>, and having laboured for years in many dialogues with the multi-faceted mystery of the word of God, I know that just as there is no conflict between faith and reason, there is nothing but complementarity between a word that acts and the study of it (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120-121).

‘The light of faith is unique, since it is capable of illuminating *every aspect of human existence*’ (*Lumen Fidei*, 4); and, therefore, however imperfectly and inadequately, these essays reflect a glimpse of that multifaceted dialogue on different aspects of our existence. What immediately follows is a brief account of three, intersecting themes (I), followed by an impressionistic account of the word (II), which then leads on to a note about the five main parts and their chapters (III).

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of the *Kerygma*, the saving event of Jesus Christ appealing to God the Father to help us, eg. Methodist Central Hall, 13/12/13.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 272 etc.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

<sup>7</sup> This is elaborated more fully in the third part of Chapter two.

## **General Introduction: The Word of God; the Covenant is Christ; and the Uniqueness of Scripture**

**The Word of God.** The title of this collection of essays speaks of Scripture as a unique word: a word, the inspiration of which is at once wholly human and wholly divine (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11-13); and, in a wonderful comparison, the Fathers of the Council say: ‘the words of God expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men’ (*Dei Verbum*, 13). Thus Christ is identified as *the* centre of the analogy of faith<sup>8</sup>, both here and elsewhere<sup>9</sup>, such that it becomes clear that ‘The most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation’ (*Dei Verbum*, 2). What emerges, then, is a particular relationship between the word and the Word: ‘Christianity ... perceives *in* the words *the* Word himself, the *Logos* who displays his mystery through this complexity and the reality of human history’ (*Verbum Domini*, 44).

**The Covenant is Christ.** In the very language, then, of the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, *Dei Verbum*, and the Pope Benedict XVI text on the word of God, *Verbum Domini*, there is a kind of hermeneutical clue to the title of this collection, linking the unique word of Scripture with the theme of the Covenant<sup>10</sup>. For the Covenant is not just one among many themes of the Scripture: the Covenant is Christ (cf. Mt 26: 28; and cf. Is 42: 6<sup>11</sup>): the Covenant is an outward sign, a manifestation, of the inner reality of God’s relationship to creation – *from*

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. CCC, 114.

<sup>9</sup> In other words, in the documents of the *Second Vatican Council* the mystery of the Incarnation is used to illuminate other, similar mysteries of our salvation; for example just as the Incarnation is a union of the human and divine nature, so is the mystery of the Church a union of the human and the divine (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8).

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Robert Letellier’s varied response to a sample of essays which have now become the basis of this collection; and, in particular, he pointed out: ‘Your writing on covenant seems the most valuable and interesting aspect’ (email, 13/7/12). While, however, we do not agree on every point, Fr. Robert’s comments set me thinking about how further to express the relationship between Scripture and Covenant.

<sup>11</sup> On the one hand the ‘God, the Lord,’ speaks of his work of creation, giving human life (Is 42: 6) and then of redemption: ‘I have given you as a covenant to the people ...’ (Is 42: 6).

*the perspective of all eternity.* In other words, the Covenant is an expression, progressively universal and personal, of the inner reality that creation is made (cf. Jn 1: 3), redeemed and glorified in Christ. The Covenant makes explicit what was implicit “in” the act of creation: that the Word made flesh is mercy<sup>12</sup>: that the same love which was made manifest in the graced creation of Adam and Eve was enfleshed in Christ and “embodied” in the Church.

Creation manifests, *in deed*, the mystery of God’s “impress” (cf. Heb 1: 3<sup>13</sup>) in the very act of creation, so His word manifests the unique reality which is characteristic of each and every act of God, namely, that God *makes Himself inseparable to the act of creation, just as in Himself He contemplated creation from all eternity and just as outwardly, His word is inseparably human and divine.* When ‘the Word became flesh’ (Jn 1: 14) and ‘by his incarnation, he, the Son of God ... in a certain way united himself with each man’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22), we begin to glimpse the imponderable reality that *creation is as intimate an expression of the mystery of the Blessed Trinity as the Incarnation reveals it to be intimately personal to God and to each one of us*; and, therefore, there opens up to us horizons at once characteristic of the inner nature of reason and, at the same time, beyond unaided reason: ‘the Lord Jesus, when praying to the Father “that they may all be one ... even as we are one” (Jn. 17: 21-22), has opened up new horizons closed to human reason by implying that there is a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24). In other words, although the Council Fathers envisaged, particularly, ‘a certain parallel between the union existing among the divine persons and the union of the sons of God in truth and love’, they also indicated a kind of perspective of the interrelationship of the parallel

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. The Liturgy of the Hours, vol, III, Psalter Week IV, Wednesday, Morning Prayer, Concluding Prayer: ‘Remember, Lord, your solemn covenant, renewed and consecrated by the blood of the Lamb, so that your people may obtain forgiveness for their sins, and a continued growth in grace’ p. [442]; and Week 19, Psalter Week III, Wednesday Morning Prayer, Benedictus Antiphon: ‘Show us your mercy, O Lord; remember your holy covenant’ p. [321].

<sup>13</sup> BibleWorks 6 gives the translation of *καρᾶκτηρ* as ‘impress or exact likeness’; and, even if it is applied to Christ as bearing ‘the very stamp of his nature [i.e. the nature of God]’ (Heb 1: 3), it follows that we can understand *all creation as bearing the “stamp” of the Creator*, just as an artist’s work bears the characteristics of the artist e.g. Van Gogh’s very different expressionism to that of other artists. Cf. also *The Navarre Bible: Hebrews: Texts and Commentaries*, translated by Michael Adams, Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1991, p. 54.

between the Blessed Trinity *and* creation; and, therefore, this parallel opening ‘up new horizons closed to human reason’: a perspective particularly evident in the reflections of Pope John Paul II on relationship between the Blessed Trinity and the creation of man, male and female, whereby man is made in the image of the Blessed Trinity in the very mystery of being man, male and female<sup>14</sup>. Thus reason needs the fullness of Revelation to mature, as it were, its own capabilities (cf. *Faith and Reason*, 16-17, 22-23, 41, 48).

**The Uniqueness of Scripture.** *This mystery, the likeness between the Incarnation and the Holy Scriptures, is directly or indirectly the subject of every essay; however, it is fitting at the outset to comment further on this theme that Scripture is a unique word in two, if not three particular ways.*

Scripture is a word which is ‘living and active’ (Heb 4: 12) and, as such, is in the very nature of a companion, illuminating life in a way unique to the word as an “action of God”: a word capable of ‘discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart’ (Heb 4: 12): a word which accomplishes what it is sent to do (cf. Is 55: 10-11): a word which, to adapt a phrase, ‘passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God’ (Wis 7: 27): a word which is in ‘dialogue’ (*Verbum Domini*, 6) with us, both revealing who God is and who we are (cf. Lk, 24: 13-35; Acts 2: 36-38): a word which is of its time and transcends its time – rooted in the past but open to the present<sup>15</sup>.

Secondly, Scripture is a word which Pope John Paul II recognises as possessing, through its authorship, a unique identity: ‘What is distinctive in the biblical text is the conviction that there is a profound and indissoluble unity between the knowledge of reason and the knowledge of faith’ (*Faith and Reason*, 16). The Scripture, then, is in its own way a “paradigmatic” illustration of that unitary discourse to which we are called: a dialogue which takes account, as wholly as possible, of the things of reason and of Revelation (cf. Vatican Council I, *Dei Filius*, 131-133).

Thirdly, Scripture is evidently structured in a way that begins with (Gn 1: 1), progresses through, completes and transcends the abilities of individual authors. It moves from the opening dialogue characteristic of

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<sup>14</sup> *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 8; and cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 11 and *Letter to Families*, 6; but see also Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 8-9.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *The Infancy Narratives: Jesus of Nazareth*, translated by Philip J. Whitmore, London: Bloomsbury, 2012, p. xi: ‘to ask what the ... authors intended to convey through their text in their own day’ and then, in view of the ‘fundamental author, according to our faith, is God himself, the question regarding the here and now of things past is undeniably included in the task of exegesis.’

God Himself (cf. Gn 1-2<sup>16</sup>), to the creation of Adam and Eve, the explicit progress of people and peoples in the light of the covenant which multiplies until there is a new resolution of meaning in Christ, to the wonderful consummation of the marriage of the Lamb in the book of Revelation. Within this amazing multiplicity of lives, we find that the meaning of marriage is not only particular to individuals and their marriages, but that marriage itself opens out a particular perspective on the whole of creation<sup>17</sup>: creation as “constituted” in union with the Creator – both as gift and task<sup>18</sup>.

### **One Word, One purpose, One Fruit and an Inexhaustible Multiplicity of Factors**

Pondering the word of God, as Mary taught us to do (Lk 2: 19), gives us a glimpse of a many splendored thing, a multi-coloured glass, a single and uniquely diverse account of the history of a people, of all people, of each one of us and, at the same time, Scripture proves to be a word open to the depths of philosophical speculation about the beginning of life, the action of God, the intricacies of human authorship, the interrelationship of Tradition, Sacrament and Word and, finally, a word constantly capable of “speaking” to our situation, whether it be unemployment, marriage, suffering, the meaning of life, evil, sin or God’s redeeming love of each one of us.

In the course of these various essays, then, there is a constant beginning to the task of engaging with the word in the fullness of which it is capable and, at the same time, never coming to the end of the exploration of even a fragment of its riches; indeed, there is a certain sense in which one comes to the word, each time, at different times, with similar or different questions, and the one word of God “resounds” again with the great questions of life, with all the previous encounters, with all the

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<sup>16</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger, (now Pope Benedict XVI). “Concerning the notion of person in theology”, *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 17 (Fall, 1990): p. 439.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. For example, Cardinal Angelo Scola’s volume, *The Nuptial Mystery*, translated by Michelle K. Borras, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: English Translation 2005.

<sup>18</sup> Gift and task are a pair of terms beloved of Pope John Paul II. Although I have not read *The Nuptial Mystery* from cover to cover, it has been used on numerous occasions and expresses, in a far more developed form, thoughts of his which go back, at the very least, to a conference led by him, to which I briefly contributed, in 1998, at the Catholic Chaplaincy, Oxford, on the Nuptial Mystery.



difficulties of engaging with so complex and, at the same time, so absorbing a work.

While it is true, then, that one comes to the study of the Scriptures over and over again, there is something cumulative about these investigations, sometimes involving a review of methods, authorship, the Fathers of the Church, the Magisterium, the Liturgy, the personal word which illuminates our lives and, at the same time, the word which is universalizable, such that it can speak to every person and situation (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11), taking up in the course of our investigation any number of aspects and approaches of the one word of God.

This collection of essays is offered, then, out of a variety of contexts and questions and, at the same time, as an account of the incredible richness which arises out of that intermingling of the gift and task of the study of Scripture, the life of the Church and the many and various needs which are characteristic of the multi-faceted nature of human life. For the word of God is at once written through the raw and the rich experience of human life in such a way as it opens our hearts to the mystery of the Blessed Trinity, of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and man, male and female, made in the image and likeness of the mystery of God.

Let us not forget, however, that the Scripture expresses ‘that truth which God, for the sake of our salvation, wished to see confided to the sacred Scriptures’ (*Dei Verbum*, 11); and, therefore, there is at the heart of the uniqueness of this word, the mystery of its relationship to our salvation. Therefore, we need a knowledge of the events of salvation history in order to appreciate that just as God leads salvation history, so He leads our history. Thus, it is in the events of salvation history that we will see the evidence of the relationship between God and each person and God and His people. Just as there was an exodus from Egypt, which involved the particular relationship to Moses, so there is an exodus from the Egypt that enslaves each one of us, which also involves the work of the one God has sent; and, just as the original exodus was expressed in the concrete facts of a particular people, so our own exodus will be expressed in the concrete facts of our life. If my Egypt was a place of enslavement to work, then my exodus will show how God has ordered my relationship to work and the family, allowing me to work sufficiently to provide for the family but not excessively and to the point of being absent from the family or unable to found a family.

In a word, it is through the history of salvation that God has taught us how He teaches: ‘he uses human events and words to communicate his plan; he does so progressively and in stages, so as to draw even closer to

man’<sup>19</sup>. Indeed, it says in the Second Vatican Council’s document on Scripture, *Dei Verbum*: that God ‘moves among them’, bringing about ‘deeds and words [in the history of salvation], which are intimately bound up with each other’ culminating in the coming of Christ (2; cf. also CCC, 53). Similarly, the same Fathers spoke of how God had adapted “his language with thoughtful concern for our nature.” Indeed, the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the Eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men’ (*Dei Verbum*, 13). God teaches, then, in terms of the events which constitute human experience and, in such a way, as to communicate with us One who is among us. Thus Christ, in particular, not only ‘is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation’ (*Dei Verbum*, 2) – but is the *living expression of God drawing close to His people to communicate with them*<sup>20</sup> (cf. also CCC, 53-55).

The overwhelming emphasis of the history of salvation is that God acts in history: at the beginning of time and, subsequently, in chronological time; and, therefore, it is natural that that there is at least an indication of this in one of the essays (the latter parts of Chapter 2). For just as the word of God was fashioned out of the unique “event” of word and life, so does the word of God bring about in every generation a kind of recapitulation of its own nature (cf. Is 55: 11; Wis 7: 28): a new synthesis of word and event.

Nevertheless, even in view of the uniquely creative nature of this word, it is a word susceptible to investigation and displays an inexhaustible array of facets and factors which run throughout, weave between word and event or have a bearing on the great and profound questions of life, death and the destiny of mankind. This word, then, is no less unique in its capacity to stimulate thought as it is in bringing life to the sinner and causing things to exist that did not exist; and, just as St. John speaks of the books that would fill the whole world if all the actions of Christ were recorded (cf. Jn 21: 25), so this word is a unique stimulus to the cultures of the world.

### **A brief account of each essay**

The individual essays were written over a long period of time; and, therefore, while they could be put in chronological order, they are arranged

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<sup>19</sup> *General Directory of Catechesis*, 38, quoted in the Catechetical Conference on the Pedagogy of God, Dr. Petroc Willey, *Introductory Paper*, Rome, p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *General Directory of Catechesis*, 38, quoted in the Catechetical Conference on the Pedagogy of God, *Introductory Paper*, Rome, p. 8.

in an order that makes sense of their subject matter. Nevertheless, given the tendency for this work to spread out from more particular to more general studies, there is a tendency for it to be in a roughly chronological order. There are two clear exceptions to this: the first is the autobiographical reflection (Chapter 1); and the second is the more philosophical piece, from “Person to Person” (Chapter 2). These come first for reasons of illustrating the *unique power of the word of God* and to address, however briefly, the philosophical issue of what makes communication possible, taking account of our inter-subjectivity.

In general, there is some repetition of material; however, in so far as the context of the discussion changes, a different context can bring a new insight and take the discussion forward: what is Scripture and how does it illuminate our life and activities<sup>21</sup>. For example, early discussions on the covenants centred on them as a sequential development in the canon of the bible. This leads, in another context, to the concept of the ‘covenant of the flesh’, in the discussion of the creation of each one of us. The theme of the covenant is then taken up and developed, later, by the covenant’s relationship to the sacrament of marriage and the development of the tradition and the teaching of the Magisterium on marriage.

The essays express something of the varied aspects of the investigation of Scripture, Tradition and the teaching of the Magisterium of the Catholic Church; however, it is not as if it can be claimed that there is another way of understanding and investigating the Scripture – *for it is the Church* who has inherited the ancient discernment of Israel as to what is the word of God. Just as Israel did not “make” a word, the word of God, but through a sacred Tradition revered texts recognised to be sacred<sup>22</sup>, so the Church does not make the word of man, a word of God (cf. First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*, 216); rather, the Church, through the progress of Tradition (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 8) and the Councils of the Church are guided in her discernment about which writings *are* the word of God (cf. Council of Trent, 211-12; Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*; CCC, 120).

The unity of Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 10), is pre-eminently witnessed in the development of the liturgy of the Church, a *kind of perpetuation of the presence of the Lord*: a perpetuation which takes up the life and Paschal Mystery of the Lord (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 1-13), His deeds and words and how this was transformed into the *life and practice of the Church*. In other words, the sacrament of marriage, as we shall discover and discuss later, is as *natural an outcome*

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<sup>21</sup> This draws on the scholastic adage: being manifests activity.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. for example, *The Jewish People: Their History and Their Religion*, by D.J. Goldberg and J.D. Rayner, London: Penguin Books, 1989, pp. 196, 287.

*of the whole interrelationship of Scripture, Tradition and the service of the Magisterium, as the growth of medicine has arisen out of the properties of the natural world, the practice and experience of remedies and the interrogation of reason. In other words, the Catholic understanding of Scripture is rightly understood as a uniquely full account of the whole that manifests, by implication and participation, the integrity and truth of the three constituent elements: Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium.*

Overall, then, there is an essay *per* chapter and there are three chapters to each part and five parts to the whole collection. Part I is philosophical, experiential and about opening up the field of questions. Part II is more formally about setting out the relationship between terms, types of investigation and relevant philosophical questions. Part III looks again, in more depth, at the opening lines and chapters of Genesis and considers creation as conceived on an analogy with the unfolding of a week. Part IV takes us to the development of a dialogue between Scripture and the question of the beginning of each one of us. Part V takes up the more overarching theme of the covenant and the sacrament of marriage. Finally, there will be an Epilogue, drawing out some overall points and impressions.

What follows, then, is a more detailed introduction to the each of the five parts of this collection and to each of the three chapters that belong to them.

## **Introduction to Part I: A Preamble to the Question of Scripture being a Unique Word**

This first part brings together essays from a very wide period of time; and, as such, helps us to see that Scripture is a living word, a word which challenges us personally and philosophically and which opens up in all kinds of directions. However, we live in times when not everyone is convinced that we can communicate with each other, that there is either a common human nature or experience of life upon which to draw; and, therefore, to assist in the task of advancing the value of witness, of showing what God can do for another by sharing what God has done for me, it is necessary to consider how truth overcomes the problems of “subjectivity”. Thus later, (in Chapter 2), when it comes to a witness about the creative effect of Scripture, there is already a kind of foundation, philosophically, for the possibility of there being more than points of contact between us; indeed, not so much points of contact as a whole experience of life *through which our nature passes as it progresses in the living truth of the word of God*. Then the third essay looks at how we can

come with all our questions and make a beginning with searching the wealth of the word of God.

**Chapter 1: “Person to Person”: A reflection on the possibility of interpersonal communication.** This is a kind of summary of the philosophical position of Pope John Paul II, drawing on the concept of the Person, Thomistic insights and integrated with consciousness; but then it is also an application of this line of thinking to the question of the possibility of interpersonal communication.

Coming to Scripture, then, is about coming to this investigation in the full possession of the whole range of reality that it is possible to recognise as relevant. In the first place, then, there is no objectivity without subjectivity and no subjectivity without objectivity; indeed, to paraphrase Pope John Paul II, we cannot but begin with a recognition of our point of departure as entailing consciousness – bearing in mind that consciousness derives from, reflects, and is intrinsically ordered to the development of the human person. Furthermore, it is not consciousness of itself, but consciousness as an intrinsic expression of human being and, therefore, “the place” of meeting of conscience, truth, freedom, psycho-physiological processes, relationships and the whole mystery of human being. In other words, recognising that objectivity depends on a profound recognition of our subjectivity, it is possible to be more completely open to the full dimensions of the mystery of Scripture, neither spiritualising it completely nor reducing it to a purely human reality.

**Chapter 2: “The Word became flesh (Jn 1: 14): this poor man called and the Lord heard him” (Ps 34: 6)”<sup>23</sup>.** There are broadly three parts to this Chapter. In the first part there is a general account of the situation of men today; however, it is set in the broad context of a number of changes in society and a movement, within the Church, which ever seeks to address the identity of man foundationally. Thus there is a kind of continuation of the previous account of the work of Karol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II, as it is understood to be the development of the *Church’s adequate anthropology*: a “modernisation” of the ancient, anthropological and theological truths pertaining to the mystery of man, male and female. There is, however, an additional and more specific direction to this philosophical account: it goes from the general nature of man to the particular expression of a man, husband and father.

In the second part, there is an attempt to set out a general framework within which to understand a general tendency for a more and more

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<sup>23</sup> The material in this chapter is principally from a dissertation, which itself is a part of an MA in Marriage and Family, Maryvale Institute, July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013. The dissertation was supervised by Dr. Stephen Milne.

concrete expression of the Christian life. On the one hand, it is in the nature of the word of God to bring things to exist: first creation (cf. Gn 1: 1 and 27) but then the change in the heart called conversion (cf. Ps 51: 10); but on the other hand, conversion is coherent with an anthropology of man open to the truth and called into a relationship to *the* Truth (cf. Jn 14: 6).

In the third part of this chapter, then, there is an autobiographical account of the influence of the Word of God in my life; indeed, “in my life” is a more apt expression than on my life. For the word of God can be planted in us and bear fruit (cf. Jas 1: 21). Thus it is an intrinsic part of the whole uniqueness of Scripture to “witness” to its power to bear fruit within us. For it is a marvel in itself that sharing this word with a community of brothers and sisters in the *Neocatechumenal Way* has transformed a life, desolate of fruit, to a life of abundant fruit; however, while the timescale for some may well be different, the Lord has been especially patient with me and this account reflects over twenty years of “listening”: ‘Listen, Israel’ (Dt 6:4): the Lord listens to us!

The third part of this Chapter also goes on to give a more detailed reflection on the work of a father as a catechist; indeed, on the work of this father as a catechist of his children. One of the many benefits of the word of God is the “multiplication” of its meaning, that the same word can resound in different ways. Thus, while *the word about stealing the portion of God* (1 Sam 29) is in the context of the behaviour of the sons of Eli and the judgement that befalls Eli and his family, this word can resound in the family in which it is read and challenge us “not to steal the portion of God”. In other words, to give time to prayer, sharing the word of God, disposing ourselves to recall the wonders God has done among us (cf. Lk 1: 46-47) and to recognise, resist and reject the temptations to think well of ourselves, to dwell on the faults of others and to be generally so irritable as to “steal the portion of God”.

Now it can be asked: why begin an investigation of the unique richness, diversity and fructifying goodness of Scripture, with an autobiographical account of the benefit of the word of God in one’s life? The principle is this: we come to the Scripture in our entirety: one in body and soul (*Gaudium et Spes*, 14): both as an individual and in the fullness of our relationships: both as embedded in the human family and as inseparable to creation – our work bearing the “impress”, as it were, of our whole life’s struggle to come to our senses (cf. Lk 15: 17), to understand reality and to recognise and advance the truth, however imperfectly, of what exists and the love that saves. We cannot avoid, in other words, the very nature of our involvement in what we do; rather, objectivity arises out

of the very recognition of this, as awareness is a part of the very transcendence of the things that “fill our vision” and falsify it (cf. Lk 6: 42).

In the end, the perfect hermeneutical principle, the perfect principle of interpretation, is the principle of ‘the truth in love’ (Eph 4: 15; and cf. 1 Jn 4: 7); it is love which makes it possible to interpret the work of God, who is love ( 1 Jn 4: 8); and, therefore, the more our hearts are turned to the Lord in love, the more clearly we see His work of Creation, Redemption and Glorification, in the light of the love they express and the love that God Is. As Pope Benedict XVI says: “The Fathers of the Church ... tell us that love understands better than reason alone”<sup>24</sup>. In other words, to be completely objective about the word of God is to be completely honest about it as a word which continues the word of creation.

**Chapter 3: Contemporary Questions with which to begin: what kind of account is the opening chapters of Genesis; what is the relationship between science and these early chapters of Genesis; and how does the study of the covenant help us engage with what Scripture is?** As we come to the investigation of Scripture, we come with a mixture of questions, some more concerned with what Scripture is and some that are to do with the relationship between what Scripture engages with, such as an account of particular events *and* what is involved in the biblical author’s account or reflection on such events.

Even the question of what Scripture is, however, cannot be separated from the question of an act of God, in this case the act of God called a covenant; for example, the fact that there is a series of covenants and the possibility that this series has a developmental significance. In other words, the fact that there are a series of covenants, *implies and expresses* a more overarching meaning to the covenant. Over time, then, a series of covenants indicates that the biblical authors turn and return to the covenant-event and, at the same time, indicates a Divine consistency which is analogous to that manifested by the grain of reality which makes possible scientific investigations.

Finally, starting out on these questions is both about making a beginning and, as with any inquiry, discovering the multitude of questions which ensue on the few with which one began; and, at the same time, discovering that there are answers from the past that assist us in the present.

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<sup>24</sup> General Audience 14/01/09: On St. Paul’s Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians.

## **Introduction to Part II: Gathering Insights and Methodological Principles.**

The following three chapters, however inadequately, grew out of an MA in Catholic Theology with the Maryvale Institute<sup>25</sup>, and demonstrate the continuing help of going back to first principles and seeking, in all that we do, to find a basic structure and order to our activity; and, on the other hand, it is ever necessary to let the “life” of the word of God constantly challenge us to that dialogue with the Scriptures and with scholarship which obviates against a “routine” reading of either.

The structure of this simple introduction to the principles and the practice of biblical interpretation was an attempt to follow the order as indicated by the late Rev. Dr. John Redford, of the Maryvale Institute, in his lecture notes on the *Letter To The Hebrews*: define your terms<sup>26</sup> (becomes Chapter 4 in this collection); consider in an introduction questions of authorship, literary genre and ‘those circumstances which occasioned the writing of that particular text of scripture’<sup>27</sup> (becomes Chapter 5 in this collection); and, if you can, identify ‘an as yet unproven but at least plausible idea gained from study of scripture’<sup>28</sup> (becomes Chapter 6 in this collection).

**Chapter 4: “Making Sense of Scripture: A Unique Word”<sup>29</sup>.** This essay was the earliest overview of Scripture and, in its own way, helped to crystallise this whole project *from the point of view of reflecting, increasingly, on the unique nature of this word.*

This essay was largely based on a work which sought to bring some order out of the bewildering variety of terms in biblical studies; for example, to name but a few: inspiration; Revelation; exegesis; literal and spiritual sense; authorship.

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<sup>25</sup> This course has now been superseded by an MA in Apologetics, which was equally indebted to the unstinting work of the Rev. Dr. J. Redford who, following cancer, has recently died. May the Lord take Fr. John into His eternal care and reward him handsomely for his labours in the vineyard.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. Dr. J. Redford's MA lecture notes on Hebrews, private circulation only, Birmingham: Maryvale Institute, pp. 5-8.

<sup>27</sup> Rev. Dr. J. Redford's MA lecture notes on Hebrews page 9; cf. also 9-15.

<sup>28</sup> Rev. Dr. J. Redford's MA lecture notes on Hebrews page 4.

<sup>29</sup> An original version of this article was published by the *Homiletics and Pastoral Review*, January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012, reused with permission, email 19/4/2013; the article was published online at:

<http://www.hprweb.com/2012/01/scripture-is-a-unique-word/>



This study was written, then, in the context of a number of questions. The first was the need to develop a more rounded grasp of the field of biblical studies, such that it became clearer in a what a biblical type investigation consists; indeed, in this respect, there is an almost inevitable growth out of a certain simplicity in one's appreciation of Scripture, while at the same time still *being drawn on by the amazingly intricate mystery of the word of God*. Secondly, there is a need for a certain realism about the task of Scriptural investigation and, indirectly, the need to grasp things in a way that helps us to know in what way to dialogue with the biblical reality. Finally, the final version of this essay was developed in response to assisting with the training of deacons, which really illuminated the whole task of preaching with a view to the *power of the word* to change a person's life.

**Chapter 5: On the interrelationship of text, authorship and destination of the *Letter to the Hebrews*.** In a sense, this essay is almost about being converted to the task of a biblical investigation; for, initially, it had seemed an almost completely "irrelevant" type of study: the kind of study which almost had no possibility of being relevant to life or even interesting. What surprised me, then, was how engaging the whole interrelationship between text, authorship and destination became; indeed, what surprised me further was the sense in which it was not possible to simply discard the possibility of Pauline authorship. In other words, while it may be possible to find all sorts of reasons why St. Paul did not write this Letter, a constant engagement with the evidence and the text continually surprised me with the *persistence of the possibility of Pauline authorship*. This has definitely contributed to a sense of "authorial tradition" linking "author" and "text"; and, in a later essay in this collection, the same *persistence arises with respect to Mosaic authorship and Genesis*. Thus it is not so much about taking these "authorial traditions" as incontrovertible as, nevertheless, being open to the textual and circumstantial arguments which seem to constantly *confirm them*.

What emerges, too, is an incredible sense of the interrelationship between text, authorship and destination and the way that cultural knowledge does not destroy the integrity of this interrelationship but, rather, constantly enhances it; indeed, it might even be argued that this is a part of the very wonder of Scripture: that on the one hand it does seem to be so incredibly "immersed" in all sorts of historical links and, on the other, this very "locating the text in time" does not destroy its power to transcend time – rather it seems to make it more luminous.

Finally, a close reading of this Letter raises the question about the *structure of the Letter embodying a kind of incarnational understanding of*

*text and content*; and, therefore, again challenges our grasp of the *intimate* connection between human and divine authorship and, at the same time, makes one wonder at the ingenuity and pondering that must have gone into what was, ostensibly, a *Letter*. Does *Letter*, in this instance, take on a new meaning; for example, could *Letter* be so self-effacing as to imply that labour to communicate which stops at nothing to insinuate the truth of its content in every aspect of its construction: a kind of literary testament to the tremendous zeal of St. Paul to reach his audience?

**Chapter 6: The *Letter to the Hebrews*: Starting to form hypotheses about the purpose of a “part” of Scripture and beginning to engage in the dialogue between “idea” and “text”.**

In this third essay, constituting a kind of methodological *triduum*, there is an attempt to consider the dialogue between a plausible idea and the actual text itself. In some way, however, the plausible idea, in this case the relationship between the *Letter to the Hebrews* and the sacrament of confirmation, has to be inspired and rooted in the text itself even if, as was found here, there seems to be all sorts of contra-indications which make it difficult to assert a clear conclusion about confirmation and the purpose of this *Letter*. It may be that part of the difficulty one encounters in coming to a definite outcome is the degree to which familiarity with the original language, which in my case is very limited, proves to be a real obstacle to certain kinds of Scriptural investigation. Nevertheless, the inevitable “warp and weft” of such dialogues, is a kind of training or apprenticeship in the work of Scriptural study.

Secondly, as with all kinds of investigations, there is a need to let the evidence of what the *Letter* as a whole is about to qualify and challenge the motivation of this encounter with the word of God; indeed, in the end, the *Letter* is more about the great and awesome culmination of the history of salvation in the high-priesthood of Christ, than it is about proving particular theories or displaying cleverness or a kind of superficial originality, where all these things are an actual obstacle to reading the *Letter as addressed to our need to know the truth that leads to our salvation* (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11). In the end, then, even an investigative hypothesis would seem to have to have some bearing on the reality of our salvation if it is indeed to conform to the *salvific purpose of Scripture*.

Finally, it is again unavoidable that the question of authorship comes into the discussion; indeed, in this instance, it leads one to think of the *integrity of life and work: of living and writing*. For example, as simple and slight as it is, when the author says to his reader, ‘God spoke to our fathers’ (Heb 1: 1) and again ‘in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son’ (Heb 1: 2), we cannot avoid the significance of the pronouns ‘our’

and ‘us’: the relationship between ‘our’ past and the present ‘us’. Of course the very inclusiveness of this language could indicate a number of authors, not to mention an open-ended embrace of us all.

**Introduction to Part III: Ranging further afield,  
both in terms of further biblical studies and the question  
of how to draw on the Scripture to assist with a particular,  
bioethical question: how to understand the beginning  
of each one of us**

The first two of these essays were written against a different background to many others in this collection, although the next section has others that were also written in this period. Having gone to the University of Gloucestershire to study Biblical Hebrew and to explore the relationship between a study of the Old Testament and the question of the help to reason of a biblical understanding of the beginning of each one of us, it became clear that reading and writing in the context of a university course with a Protestant foundation, brought a whole new field of factors to the task of biblical investigation.

**Chapter 7: Philosophy, Ecumenism and Biblical Criticism *and* the Faith of the Biblical Author as Evidenced in the Scriptural Text<sup>30</sup>.** On the one hand there is the question of the “confessional” approach of the biblical student, which entails such things as what kind of philosophical presuppositions are entailed in the study of the Scriptures: Are miracles automatically precluded as possible? Is a prophetic word only prophetic for its own time; and, therefore, the prophet is like a “social” seer? If the Scriptures are a truly human word: are they only a human word; indeed, how can the Scriptures exist without the Church receiving them as the word of God?

On the other hand, there is the engagement with the field of Biblical Studies in its own right and, therefore, the sense in which it was necessary to take up the questions that arose with respect, for example, to the early chapters of Genesis, their authorship and the faith of the biblical writer. Furthermore, it was necessary to forestall any examination of questions to

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<sup>30</sup> This and other investigations originated around the time of both a Postgraduate Certificate of Biblical Studies, at the University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham (January 2004) and, subsequently, a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education, also at the University of Gloucestershire. I am particularly grateful to Professor Gordon McConville and Professor Gordon Wenham, for their help, advice and openness to discussion.

do with how biblical authors wrote about the beginning of each one of us, while one began to understand the genre of the open chapters of Genesis and, as I say, the questions which arose in connection with it.

**Chapter 8: Creation: The Archetypal Action of God: The Opening Pages of Genesis: an Amazingly Fruitful Text.** The account of creation presupposes an act of creation; and, as such, it is clearly a part of that natural desire on the part of human beings to understand their origin and development. What is particularly striking, however, is that the “word” is chosen as an “instrument” of the divine creativity. In other words, the account of creation involves depths which both express and draw upon what the people of God came to recognise as a characteristic property of the divine word: the power to bring to exist what did not exist.

There is also the question of the development of the human person to the point where, culturally, both the question of our origin and an answer to it can be brought to fruition. This involves questions, both of authorship and of how, in retrospect, we investigate textual indications of authorship.

Part of the unique nature of Scripture, however, is that Scripture is a word which brings things to exist. Scripture is a word uttered, as it were, by God and, as such, expresses the creativity of God: a creativity both ordered to the mystery of God Himself and to the action to be accomplished. The word of Moses, for example, that brought about the miraculous events that led to the deliverance of the Hebrew people, was first a word of God to Moses (cf. Ex 3: 10, 14-15, 20; 4: 21); and, therefore, when Moses repeated (cf. Ex 4: 30-31) what he was told to say, it was in obedience to God to whom the word “belonged” as to its origin and goal. Thus, Moses’ believing in God, led to Moses speaking a word which God recognised as His; and, we might say, Moses’ belief in the power of the word of God, did not make a human word to be a word of God but constituted *the occasion of a word of God being expressed in the divine-human dialogue of the history of salvation*.

Furthermore, the witness of Moses to his meeting with God, the ‘miracles’ which God put in the power of Moses (Ex 4: 21), the grasp of sacred history which this gave him and, finally, the incredibly detailed dialogues between Moses and God, make Moses an exceptionally apt and suitable candidate for writing a sacred history of the acts of God which, in a way, have the focus of the “week” of creation, the unfolding sequence of covenants and, ultimately, the central significance of the covenant of Sinai.

Finally, it became clear that if there was a Scriptural, foundational help to understanding the beginning of the person, it lay in the direction of understanding creation as a “typical” act of God: typical in the sense of

conceiving the whole, in all its “parts”, in an integrated way. Thus, if Scripture offers a help to grasping the beginning to each one of us, it lies not only in discreet texts but also in a certain conception of the creativity of God. Thus it is not just a matter of the initial act of creation and how it is expressed, it is also a matter of entering into, as it were, the dialogue between the first and second account of the creation of man, male and female: discovering in the dynamism of these different accounts: a dynamism generative of the mystery to which it gives flesh: the mystery of the Blessed Trinity.

**Chapter 9: Cardinal Ratzinger’s call for a restoration of the Catechesis on Creation, with particular reference to Genesis 1-2 and the Catechism on Creation<sup>31</sup>.** This essay was written more recently than many others in this collection and takes up the theme of the significance of a catechesis on creation. Almighty God is Creator. This is not just a theoretical possibility but a fruit of Israel’s faith in God; indeed, a faith that meets reason and its questions and brings about a marvellous synthesis which, again, is able to enter into a fruitful dialogue with reason. Nevertheless, there is a trace of the “dialogue”, as it were, in the very coming to be of this work, such that it does not stand at the head of Scripture accidentally; but, rather, reflects a certain maturity on the part of its author, grasping as it does a complex interplay between event and mystery, between literary genre and analogy, between things in creation and the real pattern of which they are a part.

Moreover, the faith of Israel unfolds into the history of salvation, bearing fruit in the God who can make the barren fruitful and bring about the resurrection.

## **Introduction to Part IV: A dialogue with Scripture, Tradition and the Magisterium on the Conception of the Person**

There are five essays in this part of the collection. Three of these essays come at the beginning, in Chapter ten, under the heading of the language of the body; and two of these three are explicitly on Mary, the Mother of the Lord: one more immediately relevant to the question of the beginning of life and a second, more wide ranging, considers our *participation in Christ through Mary’s motherhood*. In other words, even

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<sup>31</sup> This essay was first given as a presentation in Dominica, May, 2013.

reflection on Mary’s motherhood passes by way of the body *and brings to light the deep significance of the fact that we are bodily beings.*

More widely, in terms of the question of the beginning of life, the benefit of reflecting on Scripture is that it raises the question of the design of creation; and, therefore, it is not just a matter of *embryological information*, although this is considered in the fifth of these essays (in Chapter 12), it is also about how to understand the *integrity of the whole human person*. Thus the “word” of God, expressed in human embryology, is in the context of our understanding of the whole person.

More fundamentally, there is the question of the “natural knowledge” that is presupposed by the sacred author and, as such, the question of what natural truth can be legitimately drawn from the Scriptural account even though this is a subsidiary element in the work as a whole.

Finally, however, there is the whole dialogue between different ideas and authors of Scripture, ways of interpreting them and modern scientific discoveries. In other words it is not so much about “expecting” answers from Scripture about particular, scientific questions, as it is about engaging in a full dialogue with the whole variety of ways that the beginning of the human person has been understood<sup>32</sup>.

**Chapter 10: Part I: A Reflection on the Language of the Body**<sup>33</sup>. In this short piece, there are three main ideas: the Scriptural author has observed that life is transmitted through the male line; secondly, that human fecundity is an image of the divine fecundity; and, finally, that openness to life is openness to God.

**Chapter 10: Part II: The First Instant of Mary’s Ensoulment.** This discussion continues, as it were, the reflection on the language of the body with a simple recognition that the conception of Mary is both ordinary and extraordinary: ordinary in the sense of “shares” the natural, human characteristics of the transmission of life established by God; extraordinary in the sense of being, like Christ, not just free from original sin but positively graced from conception. Examining this dogma more closely, in the light of Tradition and Scripture, it seems to offer an assistance to the question of the beginning of each one of us.

**Chapter 10: Part III: Mary is the Choice of God.** In one sense, we could say, this is not obviously related to the theme of the conception of the person; however, in another obvious sense, *Mary, who is chosen from all eternity, is precisely able to illuminate our identity as “chosen by*

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<sup>32</sup> Go to the website: [www.whendoesthepersonbegin.info](http://www.whendoesthepersonbegin.info) for more than the sample of work presented here.

<sup>33</sup> Article first published in *Communio*, vol 24 (Summer 1997), used with permission, *International Catholic Review*.