

# Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theology of Scripture

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The vast written corpus of Hans Urs von Balthasar represents a unique and underappreciated step in biblical scholarship towards a theology of Scripture that can respond to modern questions. In the words of John Riches, von Balthasar

is a man so deeply engaged in dialogue with the metaphysical tradition, the theological tradition, recent biblical scholarship, literature and drama, with those sympathetic to him and those whom he passionately opposes, that only the closest reading of his text will do justice to it.<sup>1</sup>

This article is concerned with von Balthasar's synthesis of these elements. The heart of von Balthasar's theory is a formal argument for the Scriptures being a unity. He can thus counter the results of the often-fragmenting process of the scientific analysis of texts. The argument for treating Scripture as a whole is subtle yet at its heart it is based on the nature of God's revelation and the gracing of his human dialogue partner.

This article has two parts. The first summarizes some basic concepts in von Balthasar's theology of Scripture and the second presents some of his results of applying them to Scripture.

## 1. The Form of God's Revelation

The fundamental point is that God has revealed himself in history:

At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, in the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything that is. (Hebrews 1: 1–2)

Our concern is God's manifestation of his glory. Von Balthasar simply cites Karl Barth's list of the characteristics of God's glory. First "God's glory is 'the dignity and justification proper to God, not only to assert that he is who he is, but to demonstrate this and make

<sup>1</sup> John K. Riches, "Towards a Biblical Theology: Von Balthasar's The Glory of the Lord," *Text as Pretext. Essays in honour of Robert Davidson*, (Sheffield England: JSOT Press, 1992), 264.

it known... in a certain measure to make it obvious and not overlooked”<sup>2</sup> Second as a result, God is acknowledged. Third, God does this through an exercise of his power.

These attributes coincide neatly with the three aspects of form identified in the traditional theory of the metaphysics of form. Von Balthasar describes a form as follows:

the parts or aspects [of a form]... are distributed and adapted (*pro-portio*) to one another, but in such a way that the parts do not have their ultimate measure from themselves but from the whole, that is at the same time, both the distributor and the ultimate consumer of its own measuring.<sup>3</sup>

The ‘adaptation’ in terms of the ‘ultimate measure’ corresponds to the intrinsic nature of God’s dignity to manifest itself and make itself known in a way that is ultimately successful. This would also apply to the Father’s generation of the Word. The ‘whole’ form which is the work of God (see for example Ephesians 1:9–11) refers to God’s dialogue with mankind which is being brought about by God through his divine power and being brought to a successful conclusion. The whole is both ‘a distributor and consumer of its own measuring.’ The ‘ultimate measure’ is the Word of God through whom all comes into being. (John 1:3)

It is worth noting that the traditional notion of ‘aesthetic’ recovered in the work of von Balthasar, has both objective and subjective dimensions and is not merely subjective. The Fathers and the Scholastics held that a form has an objective reality where the qualities of the form are internal interrelationships which are independent of whether an observer perceives them as such.

Turning to the Scriptures: according to von Balthasar, “Scripture is the word of God that bears witness to God’s Word.”<sup>4</sup> This sums the long-held understanding of the connection between the Word of God and Scripture. The Scriptures witness to the divine form in the world. The relationship between ‘word’ and ‘Word’ will occupy us for the remainder of the article.

### 3. The Scriptures:

To start with, “it is not Sacred Scripture which is God’s original language and self-expression, but rather Jesus Christ.”<sup>5</sup> Given the

<sup>2</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord VII*, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis and Brian McNeil C.R.V. trans., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 21. The volumes of this series will be referred to by the abbreviation GL followed by the page number.

<sup>3</sup> GL I, 468.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Word, Scripture and Tradition,” *Explorations in Theology I. The Word made Flesh*, A.V. Littledale with Alexander Dru trans., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 11. This article will be referred to as WST.

<sup>5</sup> GL I, 29. Cf. TD II, 111.

priority implicit in the word 'origin', the Scriptures cannot stand autonomously over against this revelation in Jesus Christ, rather they are the testimony about this revelation. The centrality of Christ is in fact the organizing principle of the theory of Scripture that von Balthasar offers. He argues from texts such as Jesus' words: "If you really believed him [Moses] you would believe me too, since it was I that he was writing about." (John 5:46)

Now the testimony or the word of Scripture is the human response, the graced human response to the act of the Word. Given the success of the manifestation of God's glory, which is to say that "the event lets itself be seen correctly," we must acknowledge the operation of grace in the witness.<sup>6</sup> In other words, "man perceives God by being transported outside of himself. He hears and grasps God in God and through God."<sup>7</sup> This means that although the word about the Word is inescapably situated in its historical context, it is still not possible to construct a theory of Scripture 'from below' based solely on an understanding of the nature of human responses or how humans express themselves or indeed from a study of history.

The connection between Scripture and event is complex. The text has been 'on the move' for a considerable period. There is evidence of the rereading, editing and reinterpreting of the text to be found in all parts of the text. But if the premise of the operation of the Word is correct, then behind all of these processes lies the Word revealing itself. In this sense, Scripture is the Word journeying with us. The activity of the divine Word is to be found in both the Old and the New Testaments. But how is exegesis of the text to be done?

#### 4. The Exegesis of Scripture

Historically there are two distinct groups of methods in biblical scholarship. One group of exegetes take the text literally as the Word of God. The other group examines the text by methods that are more defined by historical and scientific criteria. For von Balthasar the two sets of methods ultimately form a unity. He can say this because of his understanding of the form of being. As was said earlier, a form has three characteristics, its radiance or that which it manifests, its *proportio* or the interrelation between the elements of the form, and its wholeness or integrity.<sup>8</sup> The first group of exegetes starts from the radiance of the text. It is the Word of God that shines forth from the text of Scripture. The second group of exegetes simply starts from a different aspect of the form namely the different elements and their interrelationships comprising the *proportio* mentioned above. As explained earlier, the historical text is an

<sup>6</sup> GL VII, 115.

<sup>7</sup> GL VII, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. "Theological A priori of the Philosophy of Beauty" in GL IV, 317ff.

essential part of the form but it does not contain the entirety of its meaning, so studies of linguistic forms and the histories of peoples appearing in Scriptures are very useful but they do not exhaust the meaning of the text and in fact, they are not necessary to grasp the meaning of the text.

The unity of the two approaches means that the text is the fruit of the people's faithful reflection on God's revelation in history and the faithful response to the revelation which is itself a graced part of the revelation. In other words: "what has to be seen is the fact that divine revelation has been received into the womb of human faith, a faith effected by the grace of revelation itself."<sup>9</sup> Von Balthasar recalls the Alexandrian conception of the *corpus triforme* of Jesus Christ where Christ has a human body, but then also a body of Scripture and a body of the Church and all of these are realized through the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup> For von Balthasar, having faith means being part of the Church and it is only within the believing community that the believer truly gets to grips with the Scriptures.<sup>11</sup>

The underlying unity of scriptural exegesis as faithful study of the 'word' about the 'Word,' also indicates how the question addressed to Scripture is to be structured. For example, the 'right approach' to the New Testament text is to ask what did Jesus do to cause the Christian community to describe his words, deeds and titles in the way that it did.

For von Balthasar, this way of posing the question does not move away from the relationship between the phenomenon and the noumenon. Very simply, exegesis is to bring everything (that has been developed into the historical form we know as Scripture) back to the light of the Word, which is its ultimate origin.<sup>12</sup> The original light is the archetype that gives form to everything in revelation. It is the manifestation of the glory of God in Christ who is the heart of the Scriptures. Exegesis situates each part of the text within the totality of the scriptural form so as to get to the reality that gave it its form. God is intimately part of this process, as Paul reminded us: "It is the *same* God that said: 'Let there be light shining out of darkness,' who has shone in our minds to radiate the light of the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ." (II Cor 4: 6) (Emphasis added!)

## 5. Scripture and Tradition

The strict unity between the physical body of Christ and the mystical body which is the Church (Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:16), means that there

<sup>9</sup> GL I, 536.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. GL I, 528. Also WST, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Aidan Nichols writes of the "circumincession of Tradition, Scripture and Apostolic Office" in von Balthasar's vision. Aidan Nichols O.P., *Say it is Pentecost – A Guide through Balthasar's Logic*, (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2001), 175.

<sup>12</sup> Mark A. McIntosh calls this an "exegetical christology." See Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 30.

are two ways that Christians are incorporated into the ultimate form of the history of salvation. These are the celebration of the Eucharist and the encounter with Scripture. These are two interlinked ways in which the Word continues his form in history and incorporates the believer into his form through the offers of divine life and divine truth respectively. Both come about through the action of the Spirit which makes the Word both universal and yet particular to moments in the history of the life of the community and thus also the individual. Then the Spirit-driven operation of the Church in its reflection on Scripture, its celebration in liturgy and its conversation with the world can collectively be called Tradition.

Von Balthasar offers another set of images that illuminate the relationship between the Scriptures and Tradition. He examines the place of the Scriptures in the relation between Jesus Christ and the Church, or to use the scriptural terms between the Bridegroom and his Bride. The Scriptures are the "gift" given by the Bridegroom to his Bride.<sup>13</sup> Then Tradition is the way "in which the Church exercises control over Scripture, but only insofar as God's Word allows her to do so," because God's Word is the Head of his Body, the Church, and so is above the Church.<sup>14</sup>

Historically, the Scriptures and the Church have frequently been seen as distinct, with the Scriptures fallen from heaven and the Church subject to the vagaries of history. The deepening of the historical sense in the analysis of the Scriptures means that theories of the Scriptures and Tradition have drawn closer to each other. One indication that this is appropriate thinking lies in the *Gospel of John*: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of [his] disciples that are not written in this book." (John 20:30)<sup>15</sup> So the Word of Revelation is "infinitely richer than what can be drawn from Scripture."<sup>16</sup> It is the Tradition that offers more of this infinite richness.

## 6. The Unity of Scripture

For von Balthasar, the principle of the unity of Scripture cannot be reduced to a simple notion of promise and fulfilment where the makers of prophetic utterances were supposed to have had Jesus Christ in view. Rudolf Bultmann had already shown the weakness of the idea of promise as simple prediction. For von Balthasar, the relationships that give Scripture its unity are summarized in the announcement in the *Letter to the Hebrews* cited above. More formally the two testaments have a common foundational element that

<sup>13</sup> WST, 17.

<sup>14</sup> WST, 17.

<sup>15</sup> See also John 21:25.

<sup>16</sup> WST, 17.

is crisply summarized by Oetinger: "God's glory constitutes not only the chief content but also the foundational character of Scripture."<sup>17</sup>

There is a qualitative difference between the Old and New Testaments and it has three dimensions. The first is the distinction found in Hebrews, between the 'many and various ways of God's speaking in the Old Covenant and the manifestation in the 'Son' of the New Covenant. This is crucial to von Balthasar's description of the Old Covenant as the place where the different manifestations of God and his will do not simply complete one another to make a single form. The project of the biblical theologian is that of 'integrating a cipher' so as to find some part of the meaning of the Christ event and also of the meaning of the other events and ideas in Scripture by seeing the connection between the two. Nevertheless, the Christ-event itself is always ungraspable in its totality as will become apparent.

Secondly, the nature of the manifestation of the glory of God is qualitatively different in the two testaments. In the Old Testament, it is 'abstract-sensuous' while in the New Covenant it is 'concrete and personal.' This radical transition becomes clearer in the presentation of the notion of 'incarnation' below.

Third, the notion of 'promise' and 'fulfilment,' applies particularly to the totality of the two testaments and especially to the transition from the one testament to the other. The terms 'promise' and 'fulfilment' do suggest a caesura between the two covenants. It is probably his crowning accomplishment to have articulated a detailed theological argument for how and why this is so through an analysis of the biblical text. This relationship appears in the 'Truth of the New Testament' section below.

These three dimensions illustrate how the testaments are related and suggest that whatever the historical problems that arise with individual texts (Is *The Book of Job* historical?) and whatever structural complications are discovered (there are three prophets in the *Book of Isaiah*), all of the books form a unity. The heart of unity that gives it its form and meaning is the Christ-event.

This proposition can be illustrated from the treatment of a book chosen at random, for example the Book of Job.<sup>18</sup> The arguments over the historicity of Job are secondary to von Balthasar. Instead he seeks the function of the book, both for its own time and as a part of the larger whole. Regarding the content of the book, it lies between Ezekiel and Lamentations on the one hand and Deutero-Isaiah on the other. The ideas in the book lie "between the departure of the glory of God, leaving behind burnt-out ruins, and the mystery of the night of the 'Servant of Yahweh', although there is as yet no intuition of this figure."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Cited in GL VI, 10.

<sup>18</sup> GL VI, 281ff.

<sup>19</sup> GL VI, 281.

Von Balthasar's method is to identify the contours of the scriptural form. He traces the history of ideas underlying the Old Testament along the line of how the glory of God is expressed theologically. In sum, his literary-theological method is able to situate both the poetic works and the historical works within a unity that recognized as being primarily a work of God who reveals himself and makes himself understood in the incarnate Word, as he helps those witnesses to understand through the power of his Spirit. Clearly, the structure of the totality called 'the Scriptures' is ultimately Christological. Another analysis of the interrelationship between the Old and New Testaments can be found in his offer of a new *argumentum ex prophetia*.

### 7. The New *Argumentum ex Prophetia*:

One of von Balthasar's contributions to the theology of Scripture is to offer a new *argumentum ex prophetia*. He asks:

Does this history [of the Old Covenant]... remain only a touching fragment of human struggle and failure, or does it amount to a form that is found nowhere else in the realm of history? And if this form exists, where does it lie, in Israel itself or beyond Israel?<sup>20</sup>

This question faces anyone who studies the Old and New Testaments in a more than fragmentary way. Evidently his answer will be that it lies beyond Israel in Christ.

According to him, the Historical-Critical Method has disposed of the earlier form of the *argumentum* where the sayings of the Old Testament were held to refer directly to Christ. This view was very naive according to von Balthasar. It ignored the characteristics of the manifestation of form and by identifying its flaws, the Historical-Critical Method "left space for something more important and splendid."<sup>21</sup>

This 'something' is the fundamental unity of the Testaments in Christ. Christ cannot be understood except in the light of the Old Testament, which, of course, is the hermeneutic used by the writers of the New Testament itself! Every attempt to understand Christianity fails unless it can evaluate itself "precisely in its closeness to and its distance from the old covenant."<sup>22</sup> Here the phenomenology of form comes into its own. The two 'parts' of Scripture together comprise one form. So:

The particular mode of formlessness which is Israel's, transcends itself objectively in such a way that it comes truly into its own in the particular

<sup>20</sup> GL VI, 402.

<sup>21</sup> GL VI, 402.

<sup>22</sup> GL VI, 402.



mode in which the Christian Church knows that it is a form, and is also legitimated as such on the basis of Israel.<sup>23</sup>

This is the new *argumentum* that will withstand the historical-critical critique.

This argument has three elements that correspond to different features of the religious phenomena in Israel prior to Christ. First, the religious history of Israel contains various constellations of ideas and events. They include all of the historical and sociological and textual and other factors that were involved in the manifestation of God's glory in history and that patterned the people's response to it as well. These factors have left their traces in the scriptural text. These constellations – continuing the spatial metaphor – 'converge' on a point in the future. He has his own meaning of 'convergence' that does not permit identification of the point of convergence in any clear qualitative way and 'convergence' is the characteristic of a constellation. He amply demonstrates this convergence in his analyses of each of the books of the Old Testament.<sup>24</sup> The fact that the point of convergence cannot be identified is where he surpasses the old argument and the valid critique of it by the historical-critical method.

The lack of convergence within the text itself means that some parts of the Old Covenant stand in direct contrast to others. Thus individual moments of Israel's history are accepted to be enormously important for Israel. This is a consideration that simply was not entertained in the older form of the argument, which simply ignored the historicity of these events and ideas. For example in his analysis of the *Book of Ezekiel*, von Balthasar concludes that God lays hold of the bodily dimension of the prophet, which had already happened after a fashion with Hosea. The eating of the scroll by the prophet indicates a very physical kind of communion with the message of God. This cannot be reduced to an instrumental possession of Ezekiel since his own responsibility expands with his commission and he becomes both "the personified word of God for the people and also the one who has totally entered into its destiny of destruction and is thus fully in solidarity with the people."<sup>25</sup> Von Balthasar is cognizant of the role and message of Ezekiel for his time but at the same time there are formal elements in his life and work that converge on a 'union of two natures' that will only occur in Christ.

The example of Ezekiel leads us to the final element of the argument namely the issue of subsequent interpretation of events and texts. This brings us to the complex interrelationship between the Christ event and the events of the Old Testament. Von Balthasar

<sup>23</sup> GL VI, 403.

<sup>24</sup> See GL VI.

<sup>25</sup> GL VI, 268.



knows that the real question is not the 'lining up of texts' in terms of promise and fulfilment. This is always "partly time-conditioned as regards the understanding of the words and unsuitable as regards the selection made."<sup>26</sup>

The key to subsequent interpretation is a Spirit-driven awareness on the part of the authors of the New Testament. An example is Paul's statement: "I taught you what I had been taught myself namely that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the Scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:3ff.) This "presupposes beyond all individual quotations, a total vision of the relationship between the old and new covenants," according to von Balthasar.<sup>27</sup> The New Testament writers are in contact with the Risen Lord. Once again it is John's notion of "what we have seen with our own eyes." (1 John 1) It is the Risen Lord who explains the Scriptures. (Cf. Luke 24:27ff.) The Word is the source of the word and the light of the Word shines through the form (the Old and New Testaments!)

Consequently the meaning of the Old Testament message that is indicated by the text itself is transcended. The ultimate transcendence and expansion of the Old Testament messages reaches the point where the new centre (Christ) gives them their final definitive meaning. Christ is the Word of God and thus definitive. (Cf. John 1) If this is so then what does the Old Testament itself mean?

## 8. The Truth of the Old Testament:

The central idea of von Balthasar's theology is a covenant whose form was evident only as a partially achieved reality at various points in history. Yet despite this partial achievement, the 'perceptions' of God were not seen as basically flawed by the people of the period when they were formed. But even in their own time, they did understand them to be intrinsically incomplete precisely because:

it is subjectively experienced to be more than fulfilling... [and] man is and remains wholly inadequate for it" which again is one of the characteristics of the glory of God.<sup>28</sup>

Hence incompleteness is an intrinsic feature of the Old Covenant manifestations! The superabundance of the subject leads to the trajectory of always expecting more. The 'more' is to be found in the

<sup>26</sup> GL VI, 406. As Nichols explains in his longer and more substantial analysis: "A theological aesthetics cannot do justice to such a grace on the basis of the Old Testament alone for only in its successor covenant does the image of God come to coincide (in Jesus) with God's Word and thus become 'subsisting grace.'" Aidan Nichols O.P., *The Word has been Abroad: A Guide through Balthasar's Aesthetics*, (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1998), 190.

<sup>27</sup> GL VI, 406.

<sup>28</sup> GL I, 320.

New Testament. (Cf. Luke 12:28; Romans 11:24; Hebrews 9:14.) In addition, biblical salvation history is part of the history of a people. So each book can be analyzed according to its notion of the glory of God at a given moment in history. Von Balthasar's analysis is obviously extremely detailed and so only a few comments can be made in an article such as this.

First, the Old Testament offers material that predates the period of the covenant, namely the texts referring to the prehistory and the patriarchs. In von Balthasar's view, these are opaque and can only be approached dialectically. With his literary background von Balthasar pays due homage to the complexity of the texts about the primeval period. He was aware that the patriarchal religion did make use of already existing religious forms. Further, the religious history of Israel is an integration of these elements and their slow penetration and transformation by the Jewish experience of revelation. The Jewish understanding of revelation is born out of a struggle with the mythical Canaanite world. This was a struggle, which involved frequent capitulation. Analogous dialectics occurred during the period of the kingdoms and the Hellenistic period. In each case there is a long slow transformation of the mythical material. He proposes that Hosea is a classic example of the transformation of the Canaanite myths on sexuality to the theological point where God is the husband and Israel is the wife. The historical evidence for this kind of transformation parallels the nature of the development of a form in salvation history where the transcendent source of the form uses elements from history to be the material of its own expression.

The events at Sinai were an actual theophany but the literary treatment of what happened is more complex than a simple report of events. The editors of P material have synthesized the earlier descriptions of the theophany to create a dialectical understanding of these elements since "the subject of this manifestation cannot be given unequivocal expression within the human sphere."<sup>29</sup> The positive aspect of the work of the P editors is that their synthesis is one that can best point to the meaning of the glory of God.

Following the historical sequence leads von Balthasar into a treatment of the period of the kingdoms. Here lies the historical realization of the notion of "image" that would come to be expressed as the image of God in the *Book of Genesis*. Human beings have to establish themselves in the world that God created. So for example, the David cycle demonstrates that man himself has to live by developing either in a positive relationship to God or in guilty opposition to God who is the archetype of the human image. Looking at each kingdom in

<sup>29</sup> GL VI, 53. The abbreviation P refers to the Priestly Source in the 'Four Source Theory' of the origins of the Pentateuch. Historically P is the last reworking of the earlier Pentateuch material. The other sources in the theory are known as 'J,' the Yahwist; 'E' the Elohist and 'D' the Deuteronomist.

turn: David shows the 'great theater of the world' while Solomon shows 'the splendor of power.' Each king attempts to reflect the divine *kabod* that is the epitome of expression and power. They both demonstrate the notion of being caught up in the manifestation of glory, which is a neat explanation of the place for the Jewish kingship as the delegate of God in this period.

Besides the detailed treatment of the theme of glory and human response (of which the previous comments are a meager summary), von Balthasar's work on the Old Covenant contains two further sections: 'The Stairway of Obedience' and 'The Long Twilight.' In these he turns to the covenant, the supreme element of the history of Israel's encounters with God. The fact of the covenant means that the history of Israel has to be interpreted in terms of infidelity. In fact evil is a real turning away from God. The Yahwist's 'golden calf story' "is pitilessly set... right in the middle of the event of the making of the covenant."<sup>30</sup> This particular story is the Yahwist's basic judgement on historical man as guilty and gave the Yahwist his starting point when he wrote of a primeval time offering one of the components that went to make up Genesis.

The section, 'The Stairway of Obedience,' contains the two key features of the period of the kingdoms. The image of the 'stairway,' indicates von Balthasar's contention that through the prophets "God wills to construct for himself a stairway in the men he has chosen."<sup>31</sup> This 'stairway' is God's initiative to reach out to the realms of the godless and 'obedience' is the central characteristic of how Israel's bond to God. (Cf. Wisdom 1:16) The key to understanding the great founders is their obedience rather than the fact that they had authority. The history of obedience can be traced through from the period of the judges. In each case, the *anawa* or poverty expressed in their obedience, "becomes the vessel in which God's *anawa*, his condescension (Psalm 18:36; 45:55; 2 Samuel 22:36) is received."<sup>32</sup> Here the self-transcendence of the human respondent comes into play. This transcendence is the foundation for the literary and theological analysis of the prophetic books that follows.

The key to the period of the prophets is that God no longer manifests himself in the forms of nature. He now begins to 'incarnate' his word into his chosen ones. From the texts, von Balthasar draws out a nuanced meaning of 'incarnation', which has some obvious parallels with the New Testament notion but is not identical with it.<sup>33</sup> On one

<sup>30</sup> GL VI, 216.

<sup>31</sup> GL VI, 223.

<sup>32</sup> GL VI, 232.

<sup>33</sup> Von Balthasar argues that Paul himself notes a "radical caesura between the sphere of the promise and the sphere of fulfilment" this is based on his exegesis of 2 Corinthians 3:7–11. (GL VII, 26).

level, the texts give him the warrant for using the term. On another level, he is working from the metaphysics of form based on the text.

The text of the *Book of Lamentations* can serve as an example of how 'incarnation' was realized in this period. The laments are based on the people's knowledge of the suffering induced by turning away from God. "The one who laments and implores, stands in this reality, determined and judged by it."<sup>34</sup> For example, "Yahweh is in the right, for I have rebelled against his word". (Lamentations 1:18).

The period from the end of prophecy up to the coming of Christ is labelled the 'Long Twilight.' Even Malachi and Zechariah in the post-exilic period are dismissed as not particularly significant because their interests were merely in the cult and the priesthood respectively. The promises of salvation have not been fulfilled. In the twilight, without new prophets emerging, it is painfully apparent that man cannot form the synthesis of the idea of the covenant and its reality in history. Nevertheless these five hundred years of Judaism do demonstrate profound theological developments when taken together. The Messianic, Apocalyptic and Wisdom theologies that were laboriously developed in this period, "permit[ted] the historical form of Israel to become transcendent in three directions."<sup>35</sup> They also provided the 'theological climate' in which the New Testament writers would understand Jesus.

Detailed analysis of each book of the Old Testament demonstrates von Balthasar's proposal that the Old Testament is in a real sense 'formless'. It is composed of profound texts that speak of the covenant and yet they do not form a composite whole. Von Balthasar takes the *Letter to the Hebrews'* description of the Old Testament literally, namely that there God spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion." (Hebrews 1:1)<sup>36</sup>

## 9. The Truth of the New Testament

Von Balthasar takes pains to safeguard the "divine uniqueness" of what is presented in the Scriptures and more particularly in the New Testament.<sup>37</sup> To this end, he formulates the laws which govern 'the transposition of horizons'. He is referring to the horizon or world view of the time of Jesus and the world view of the present day. Any hermeneutics that tries to move between these differing views is bound by certain laws.

<sup>34</sup> GL VI, 279.

<sup>35</sup> GL VI, 303.

<sup>36</sup> He reads *polumeros* (Hebrews I: 1) as 'fragmentary'.

<sup>37</sup> TD II, 99.

The first law is the work of the Holy Spirit who universalizes the Christ-event for all of history.<sup>38</sup> This is the precise meaning of Pentecost when each understood what was being said in his own language. (Acts 2:7ff.) The fruit of the Holy Spirit is faith and faith is indispensable to really see what is in the New Testament. "The Truth of the event of Jesus, in order to be known in its authentic character, presupposes faith as the vessel which alone is capable of accommodating its interpretation."<sup>39</sup> One qualification must be included here! The foregoing argument does not say that the meaning of the Christ event is easily attainable in a final way for believers. In keeping with Scripture and the theory of form based on it, Christ is and always will be the appearance of the invisible God. Nor is von Balthasar saying that the meaning of the Christ event has no need of Old Testament expressions and images. On the contrary, in the New Testament, the images of the Old Testament are 'polarized' by their reference to the New Testament events even as they throw some light on them. The relationship of Old Testament images to the New Testament is initially extra-textual since the images are used by New testament writers as they reflect on the Christ-event after the resurrection and the Holy Spirit is behind this reflection.

The second law challenges any attempt to study the Scriptures without faith. In the Scriptures, God's manifestation of his glory is primary and the time-bound aspects that accompany the manifestation and make up the perceptible aspect of its form are secondary. Approaching the Scriptures without faith simply concentrates on the secondary features. Attempts to 'demythologize the text' and make it relevant for modern man, miss the way in which the text was constructed. Since God is the primary author of the text, the very choice itself of the elements that seem to be out of date, has a meaning and it is not merely a meaning that can be replaced by deductions from what is held to be universally human. In other words, the apparently secondary is intimately at the service of the primary divine revelation. This can serve as a formulation of this 'law' of Scripture. This law is a consequence of Scripture being a form where the surface or appearance of the form is totally dependent on the depths that it manifests.

Thirdly, interpretations or transpositions of the scriptural text must not lose any of revelation's 'substance or weight.' These terms are reminiscent of the nature of God's *kabod* or glory. Their loss often only becomes evident when the interconnections between the

<sup>38</sup> Nichols notes that "von Balthasar is curiously negative about both the capacity of the Old Testament materials to carry us any distance towards the specifically Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit." Aidan Nichols, *Say it is Pentecost*, 135.

<sup>39</sup> GL VII, 115. Note particularly his footnote on the "false theology which rejects faith as methodologically dubious and irresponsible and subsumes the truth of the phenomenon which discloses itself, under and anthropological truth." (Note 2 in GL VII, 115).

modified concept and other parts of revelation are considered. The *proportio* and integrity of the form of Scripture are the guides here. Von Balthasar cites the 'virgin birth' as an example when proposing this 'law'. The question that he raises is how would Jesus realize the fourth commandment if Joseph was his father? Do these two elements coincide in the larger scheme of Scripture?

A positive example of how apparently disparate elements are interconnected in the gospels is shown in his analysis of the references to God's glory in the New Testament. There is a radical difference between the treatment of the presence of glory in the Old Testament and the New Testament. The gospel accounts of Jesus' life use the Old Testament theology as background but it is "increasingly subordinate to the reflection after Easter which sees the redemptive character of the event already shimmering through its juridical character."<sup>40</sup> This reflection takes time, so much so that even the Synoptic gospels do not routinely use 'glory' in a present sense. Von Balthasar argues that this is a clue to the newness of the manifestation. The writers refer instead to specific qualities of glory such as Christ's power and authority (*Gospel of Mark*) instead of referring to his glory. Only in the *Gospel of John* is the claim finally made on the term *doxa* (glory) in a complete way. (1 John 1)

In other words, all of the texts have to be seen together, since they are part of a single form with each text contributing some essential features of the manifestation of God's glory in Christ. Paul's insight about the relationship between glory and righteousness merits "the central place, because with it, the presentation of the contents of glory attains its highest point."<sup>41</sup> This theological conjunction of Paul and John is justified because of the way John develops his Christology. John's treatment of the glorification of Jesus is "dominated by a notion of justification that includes in itself the believers too."<sup>42</sup> So John and Paul deal with the same phenomenon (i.e. with parts of the same form) even though they themselves are separated chronologically.

These three laws indicate the privileged place of the New Testament since they point to a form created by God, centred on his complete revelation of himself, in Jesus Christ. The centre-point of the form of the New Testament is the death of Christ. In that event, God manifests his glory. Von Balthasar's most pregnant statement on the crucifixion is that "the true subject who acts on the Cross is . . . God, and the instrument he employs in acting is sin. But the one who was God's Word in the world is dumb."<sup>43</sup> Here the grandeur of *doxa* as the manifestation of an immense subject comes to the fore. The divine is concealed in the silence. The different aspects of the

<sup>40</sup> GL VII, 223.

<sup>41</sup> GL VII, 297.

<sup>42</sup> GL VII, 298.

<sup>43</sup> GL VII, 209.

form of the Word that is to say his claims, his poverty and his self-abandonment reach their most concrete realization in the death of Jesus.

This formulation of the theology of the death of Jesus means that von Balthasar can dispose of the theories of mere juridical imputation and simple physical solidarity in favour of the action of divine love. He follows Origen's notion of 'saving righteousness' already argued for as the 'centre' of God's *doxa*.

The last section of his volume on *Theology: The New Covenant*, illustrates the nature of the human response to the manifestation of the glory of God. Appropriately it is entitled: "Glorification as assimilation and return of the gift." Both the gospels and the Christian's love for his brother are presented as examples of the glorification of God by man. Von Balthasar has illustrated Barth's notion that God indeed finds acknowledgment for himself and empowers man so he may give glory to God.

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The fullness of von Balthasar's theory of Scripture can at best merely be hinted at in a short article such as this, but it is a masterful attempt to bring Scripture back into the heart of theological reflection and to recover it as a unified self-expression of God into history and who uses elements from the fabric of history and transforms them to be part of his self-expression. According to McIntosh, von Balthasar is "very knowingly challenging contemporary scholarship...to consider the powerful theological assumptions at work, though they often go unrecognized or unadmitted."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 29.