

T.F Torrance on Scripture¹

John Webster

I

Torrance did not bequeath to his readers a fully elaborated doctrine of Holy Scripture or a body of commentarial materials on the Bible. We have neither a complete systematic theology of the Word of God in Scripture, nor anything by way of a *Römerbrief* or a *Resurrection of the Dead*. The reflections on Scripture which are scattered throughout his published works commonly focus on biblical terms and themes; there is relatively little by way of extended cursive exegesis. His primary interest in relation to Scripture lay in epistemological and hermeneutical questions – in giving a theological account of the nature of the biblical writings and of the several divine and human acts which compose the economy of revelation. Moreover, Torrance was strongly convicted that generating such an account requires the theologian (1) to develop an anatomy of modern reason, in order to expose a ‘damaging breach in the ontological bearing of our minds upon reality’ (RET 10), and (2) to make an attempt at ‘repairing the ontological relation of the mind to reality, so that a structural kinship arises between human knowing and what is known’ (RET 10). His writings on these matters constitute in my judgement one of the most promising bodies of material on a Christian theology of the Bible and its interpretation from a Protestant divine of the last five or six decades – rivalled but not surpassed by Berkouwer’s magisterial study *Holy Scripture*. Yet what he wrote on these matters, presented with his characteristic spiritual and theological intensity and

¹ The following abbreviations to Torrance’s works are used in the text: CDG: *The Christian Doctrine of God. One Being, Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 2001); DF: ‘The Deposit of Faith’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 36 (1983), 1-28; DM: *Divine Meaning. Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 19095); HC: *The Hermeneutics of John Calvin* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1988); RET: *Reality and Evangelical Theology. The Realism of Christian Revelation* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003); SHA: ‘Scientific Hermeneutics according to St Thomas Aquinas’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 13 (1962), 259-89.

imbued with a sense of cutting against the grain of modern theological convention, has had only a slight impact, and is only now beginning to receive the attention which it deserves. Though Torrance was about the same sort of task as, for example, de Lubac in *Mediaeval Exegesis* or Hans Frei in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* – namely, interrogating modern hermeneutical assumptions by depicting earlier practices – his work has only rarely found its way into the canon of literature on biblical hermeneutics, even with the exponential growth of interest in retrieving patristic and other pre-modern reading habits.

There are some internal reasons for this relative lack of attention. The project on hermeneutics which spun off from his 1959 Hewett Lectures (which were published a decade later as *Theological Science*) was never completely finished, the material finding its way into print over the years in a large number of separate studies of varying length and character, some collected in or adapted for the volumes which Torrance published in retirement. In these hermeneutical studies, historical concerns loom large, and Torrance's own dogmatic and hermeneutical proposals have to be extracted from a surrounding mass of detail about patristic, mediaeval, Reformation or modern theologians. The process of extraction is made somewhat easier by a few sustained pieces of writing on the nature of Scripture and its interpretation, such as the 1981 Payton lectures at Fuller Seminary, *Reality and Evangelical Theology*, or the introductory chapter to *Space, Time and Resurrection*. In the historical studies, Torrance immerses himself in Christian authors of classical stature (most of all the Greek fathers and Calvin), in order to reconstruct and commend a set of paradigmatic instances of Christian theological hermeneutics. As he represents his chosen thinkers, he tries along the way to identify modern distortions of earlier patterns of thought, urging his readers to find their way out of an entire theological and hermeneutical

culture by attending to a coherent pre-modern hermeneutical tradition in which created words are adopted by God to serve in the mediation of revelation. The studies are immensely learned, the fruit of a mind saturated with the language and ideas of the subject-matter, reading – for example – the patristic texts under the tutelage of an overarching narrative in which Nicene orthodoxy triumphed (and continues to triumph) by sheer intellectual and spiritual cogency. What Torrance has to say is, doubtless, exposed to the criticism of historical specialists. The studies are inevitably somewhat dated; the concentration on the history of ideas is such that Torrance does little to set the material in its social and cultural historical contexts; some of the historical claims are not beyond challenge. Moreover, the powerful constructive interests which Torrance brings to bear on the material tends to lead him to schematise thinkers, giving an overall reading of deep patterns of thought supported by a mass of allusion and quotations from across a corpus of writing. The same constructive interests readily discover convergences between different thinkers (Athanasius and Hilary look pretty much the same). There is an inevitable selectivity (exacerbated, of course by the incompleteness of the project) – among the ancients, the most striking absence is Augustine, among the moderns, Spinoza. And there is a curious inattention to the *use* of Scripture in the Christian tradition, and to its exegetical and commentarial modes of theology, in favour of an essentially conceptual account of a framework of thought. In a lesser thinker, these might prove fatal weaknesses; in Torrance's case they do not, because the explanatory power of the constructive claims exceeds any historical limitations.

Most theological accounts of Scripture and its interpretation treat three topics: the economy of divine revelation, the nature of the biblical writings and their place within that economy, and the nature, acts and ends of interpreters. Much can be

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

II

For Torrance, questions about the nature and interpretation of Scripture are subordinate to questions about divine revelation; bibliology and hermeneutics are derivative from principles about the active, intelligible presence of the triune God to his rational creatures. This way of ordering matters not only explains a certain reluctance on his part to spell out much by way of a doctrine of Holy Scripture (attempts to do so, he fears, risk isolating Scripture from its setting in the divine economy), but also sheds light on the fact that what he has to say about the nature and interpretation of the Bible is concerned only secondarily with Scripture as literary-historical text and primarily with Scripture as sign – that is, with Scripture's ostensive functions rather than with its literary surface or the historical processes of its production. A theological account of the nature of Scripture and its interpretation takes its rise, then, not in observations of the immanent religious and literary

processes, as if the texts could be understood as self-articulations on the part of believing communities, but in the doctrine of the self-revealing triune God.

Torrance is unhesitatingly and unrelentingly a *positive* dogmatician at this point, in a couple of senses. First, and most generally, he takes revelation as a given condition for the exercise of theological intelligence, not as a matter about which intelligence is competent to entertain possibilities or deliver a judgment. The deceptively simple sentence at the beginning of *Space, Time and Resurrection* says it all: ‘I make no apology for taking divine revelation seriously’ (p. 1). Second, more specifically, Torrance’s positivity concerns the way in which knowledge of God, including knowledge of God through Holy Scripture – arises from the specific modes in which God deals with rational creatures. The principle here is that knowledge of God may not abstract itself from ‘the actual historical ground which divine revelation has established for itself in the personal coming of God in our world of space and time in Jesus Christ who is the incarnation of his eternal Word within the field of human existence, speech and understanding’ (CDG 34). Or again, a little more fully: ‘The source of all our knowledge of God is his revelation of himself. We do not know God against his will, or behind his back, as it were, but in accordance with the way in which he has elected to disclose himself and communicate his truth in the historical-theological context of the worshipping people of God, the Church of the Old and New Covenants. That is the immediate empirical fact with which the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New testaments are bound up’ (DM 5). Such statements could be multiplied many times from Torrance’s writings. What ought to be noted in them is the line of thought, from intelligible revelation to creaturely texts and acts of knowing, rather than a reverse direction in which creaturely knowing and communicating set the conditions under which revelation can take place and be received. Crucially, this

enables Torrance to develop an account of revelation in which the relation of divine communication to the biblical texts is not fundamentally problematic, one, that is, in which creaturely media can fittingly perform a service in relation to the intelligible speech of God. In effect, attention to the actual course taken by divine revelation as it annexes and makes use of created communicative acts enables theology to move beyond the dichotomy of intelligible and sensible, of *res* and *signum*, of the divine and the textual, which has afflicted Christianity throughout its history, and of which the naturalization of Scripture in modern biblical scholarship is only a late instance.

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

relation in which God, man and world are involved together in a movement of God's personal and creative interaction with man whereby he makes himself known to him within the objectivities and intelligibilities of the empirical world' (RET 84). Notice how revelation is not mere supernatural intrusion, an obscure and impersonal causal force only loosely related to modes of human communication and intelligence. Rather, as Torrance continues, revelation is 'an intelligible, articulate revealing of God by God whom we are enabled to apprehend through the creative power of the Words addressed to us, yet a revealing of God by God which is actualized within the conditions of our human thought and speech' (RET 85). Only God speaks of God; but revelatory speech is not pure but mixed. The ultimate ground for this is the Word's assumption of flesh, which is not an absolutely segregated event but carries with it the election and sanctification of creaturely form: '[W]ithin the hypostatic union there is included a union between uncreated and created rationality and between uncreated and created word, so that it is in the rational form of creaturely human word that Jesus Christ mediates God's Word to all mankind' (RET 91). To be sure, the Word comes from above, does not abandon his deity; but as such he 'had to create room for himself and operate within the horizontal dimensions of human existence in order to continue his speaking and acting throughout history' (RET 91). This horizontal reality Torrance identifies as the corporate life of the apostolic community and its witness, from which Scripture arises. 'It was out of this corporate reciprocity centred in and creatively controlled by Christ through the outpouring of his Spirit of Truth upon it that the New Testament Scriptures were born and took shape within the church. They constitute, therefore, the divinely-provided and inspired linguistic medium which remains of authoritative and critical significance for the whole history of the church of Jesus Christ. Its purpose in this written form ... is to enable us to

stand with the original witnesses under the creative impact of the Word which they received and obeyed, and to be drawn into the sphere of its effective operation in the world' (RET 92f.). The economic trajectory of revelation thus runs: the divine Word as the intelligible presence of the uncreated one – the divine presence takes creaturely form, primarily and controllingly in the incarnation, derivatively in the apostolic community as it refers back to Christ – Holy Scripture emerges as the intelligible articulation of this reference back to the creative Word. In sum – this time from *The Christian Doctrine of God* – the coming of God at the incarnation effected 'a profound revolution in knowledge of God ... a radical reorganisation of people's consciousness and the redirection of their rational approach to God' such that 'a new thought-world came into being' (CDG 34). That is, 'God's unique trinitarian self-revelation created the framework of thought and speech within human existence in which alone it is to be understood and interpreted by us' (ibid.); and from this there emerges 'the unique genre of literature handed down to us in the gospels and epistles of the New Testament, upon which God's self-revelation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit has imprinted itself' (CDG 35). In effect, Torrance is refusing to be trapped either by the kind of revelatory supernaturalism in which the Bible is unproblematically identical with the divine Word, and so effectively replaces the hypostatic union, or the kind of naturalism in which the Bible mediates nothing because it has been secularised as without residue a product or bearer of immanent religious culture. We now turn to look a little more closely at the effects of this theology of revelation on his understanding of the nature of Holy Scripture.

III

Torrance has no full-dress treatment of the nature of Scripture, and some of the central preoccupations of classical Reformed accounts of the Scripture principle

(*inspiration; sola scriptura; claritas scripturae*) hardly appear in what he has to say. Nearly all the important questions about the nature of Scripture can on his account of the matter be resolved into that of its relation to divine revelation. Grasping this relation aright requires, as we've already seen, deployment of a range of historical and dogmatic skills, using dogmatic perception of revelation's annexation of creaturely texts to unpick the long history of distancing divine speech and creaturely forms. Only as we discern the function of Scripture in the economy of revelation are we able to move to speak of its ontology. Put differently, the doctrine of Scripture is a function of the doctrine of God and of God's inner and outer intelligibility in his communicative and reconciling presence to creatures.

Torrance's understanding of the nature of Scripture revolves around two principles which are remarkably economical and possessed of remarkable explanatory power. The first: 'We acknowledge the Scriptures to be the written form of the Word of God because in and through them we hear the Word of God in his divine Majesty and Grace' (DM 6); the second: 'In the Bible we hear the Word of God speaking through the mouths of men' (DM 7). Reconstructed in somewhat skeletal form, Torrance's expansion of these two principles may be set out in the following way.

There is a positive relation between the divine Word and the human words of Scripture; there is no *crisis* about the possibility of human text acts serving in God's personal activity of self-presentation to intelligent creatures. On Torrance's account, the doctrine of Scripture exhibits some of the same formal features as the doctrine of the hypostatic union. Though, as we shall see, there are all-important differences to be born in mind, both tracts of Christian teaching only yield themselves to theological understanding when we free ourselves from the contrasts of the intelligible and the sensible. Greek patristic hermeneutics – supremely, of course, Athanasius, the subject

of the centrepiece of *Divine Meaning* – had to overcome that dichotomy in Platonic form. In modern culture, the same separations surface in what Torrance identifies as ‘phenomenalism’ in Biblical studies (CDG 36f.): the extraction of the biblical texts from their intelligible connections with the revealing activity of God, and the assumption that because biblical texts are natural entities they can have no ontological depth or backward reference to divine speech. By contrast, Torrance proposes, the Scriptures ‘cannot be divorced from [their] revelational framework, or from the form which the Word and Spirit of God created in the testimony of the disciples and apostles for the actualisation of that revelation’ (CDG 36). For, as he puts it elsewhere, Jesus Christ ‘does not come to us apart from our modes of existence in space and time, or apart from the modes of being which he assumed in our space and time, and therefore he comes to us through the personal and historical communication of his Word deriving from the protocol reports and statements immediately in touch with him in the apostolic witness and Scriptures’ (*Theological Science*, 192). Here we have the essential stages of the economic sequence which Torrance commonly traces in explicating the nature of the Bible: revelation – incarnation – apostolic testimony – Holy Scripture, in each of which there is seen the asymmetrical yet real mode of relation between the divine Word and natural forms.

Torrance amplifies this basic proposal in a number of ways, three of which may be identified here: (1) Scripture as an accommodated divine Word; (2) Scripture as sacrament; (3) Scripture’s expressive or referential relation to the divine Word. All three furnish ways of overcoming the separation of ‘historical and ontological factors or ingredients in God’s triune self-revelation’ (CDG 35). A few brief comments on each are in order.

A theology of accommodation is a way of overcoming the potential agnosticism or scepticism which can lurk within strong teaching about the ineffable majesty of God. Doctrines of divine transcendence can paralyse theological speech, severing the connection between *theologia in se* and *theologia nostra*, and cause theology either to retreat into silence or to resign itself to the referential incapacity of secular human words. If, however, we think of divine revelation actively accommodating itself to creaturely forms, we make use of language about divine action, but without the assumption that divine action can only be efficacious and trustworthy if it is direct and immediate, uncontaminated by any created element. We retain, that is, a measure of trust that divine communicative activity is uninhibited by creaturely media, which it can take into its service and shape into fitting (though never wholly adequate) instruments. In terms of the doctrine of Holy Scripture, this means that, although we do not receive the Word of God directly but only ‘in the limitation and imperfection, the ambiguities and contradictions of our fallen ways of thought and speech’ (DM 8), nevertheless we do have the divine Word. Creaturely limitation, imperfection, ambiguity and contradiction do not constitute an unsurpassable barrier to the Word as it makes itself present to created intelligence.

If the concept of accommodation inhibits principled separation of revelation from textual form, the concept of Scripture as sacrament serves to indicate that the relation of the divine Word and the biblical words is ‘asymmetric’ (RET 94). Unlike the hypostatic union of deity and humanity in the incarnation, ‘in the Bible the divine Word and the human word are only united through dependence upon and participation in Christ, that is, sacramentally’ (DM 7). This edges towards what Torrance regards as the essential operation of Scripture in the divine economy, which is ostensive or referential: Scripture is not itself the location or comprehensive inscription of the

divine Word, but the sign by which that Word in its free majesty is indicated. Torrance's critique of what he calls (rather loosely) 'fundamentalist' accounts of the nature of Scripture often fastens on this point. As with Barth's critique of what he judged to be Protestant scholastic reifications of the Scripture, so in Torrance's critique of some later and much debased versions of the same theological ideas: there is in fundamentalism 'a marked failure to acknowledge the unique reality of God in its transcendent authority and majesty over all the contingent media employed by God in his self-revelation' (RET 17), and, further, a failure to grasp that revelation is event, not manipulable object: 'revelation must be continually given and received in a living relation with God' (RET 16). If the force of accommodation, then, is to lay emphasis on 'without separation', the force of sacrament is to emphasise 'without confusion'.

As accommodated divine speech standing in a sacramental relation to the divine Word proper, Scripture *refers*. The referential or signifying function of Scripture is, as we shall see, a primary element in Torrance's understanding of biblical interpretation. For the present, we note that his chief concern here is not to analyse in detail the several modes of reference to be found in the biblical writings, so much as to make a point about the *movement* of divine self-communication in which scriptural signs are caught up. Because Scripture is a natural sign, generated out of apostolic testimony to the self-declaration of Jesus Christ as the truth, it does not possess truthfulness *in se*, but has it in its indication of that by which it is brought into being and to which its literary forms testify but do not contain. The principle here is: 'thing is not subjected to speech but speech to thing' (HC 50) – the tag is taken from Major, but it opens into an entire doctrine of Scripture and hermeneutics. It is this, for example, to which Torrance returns at a number of points in his account of Athanasius' understanding of biblical language: 'the meaning of the words written is

not found in the letters as such but in the divine actions which they express' (DM 232). One of the most striking features of Torrance's thinking here is its confidence that the referential or expressive relation between divine Word and human words is secure, not endangered either by the sheer difference of created from uncreated speech, or by the fragility and fallenness of creaturely acts of producing meaning through texts. Torrance does not brood over the potential occlusion of revelation by the biblical writings, or their infection by ideology, simply because revelation outbids carnal deception and, as it were, sanctifies created signs by appointing them and equipping them to be its servants. Because Torrance explicates every stage of the revelatory economy, including the production of created literary forms, by talking about the ways and works of God, the referential relation between Scripture and divine Word is not defeated on the creaturely side. The gap between revelation and human speech is thus once again filled by a theological affirmation about 'the divine condescension ... of the Word eternal to man' (DM 250). '[I]n and through Jesus Christ certain human forms of thought and speech are laid hold of and adapted for knowledge of God' (DM 252). Divine appropriation, moreover, brings with it the transformation of creaturely speech, its transposition into a new field of operation and its being accorded a new set of semantic functions. '[I]f human terms are to be used for divine revelation they must somehow be brought into a parallel relation to the divine realities, even if they have no inherent likeness in being to them' (DM 54) – this is the paradigmatic character of Scripture in relation to divine revelation which is its material, efficient and perfecting cause. The ground of this function of Scripture lies in the divine economy: 'the *human economy* of the Word and Son of God represents the *logic* of God's acts of grace, and therefore in *accordance with that economy* ... describes the *analogic* of biblical and theological statements or their

faithful reference back to their source in the divine acts of grace' (DM 272). Revelatory grace, we may note, does not overcome nature but naturalism; taken into the divine service, Scripture as a set of natural signs is made capable of testimony to its divine *res*, the *viva vox dei*.

A final element in Torrance's understanding of the nature of Scripture is its ecclesial character. Much more than biblical scholarship, of course, inquires into the biblical texts in terms of their social matrices; but it is commonly immanentist in its analysis, content to describe the socio-pragmatics of biblical literature and its place in the history of common religious life. Torrance, too, readily speaks of the 'social coefficient' (RET 46) of the knowledge of God in Scripture; but his analysis is theological, that is, he talks of the social dimensions of Scripture by talking about God. Here the notion of apostolicity does a good deal of work, furnishing him with a bridge between the revealed truth of the gospel and the social forms and practices by which it is appropriated and transmitted. '[W]ithin the church which is founded upon the apostles and through them upon Jesus Christ himself faith and mind and language are brought into conformity with the nature of Christ and change' (DM 241). The fruit of this change is 'the apostolic mind' which 'arises compulsively out of the nature of the Word and his saving action, rather than out of any conception which we form on our own' (DM 241). The reality of the apostolic community, theologically described as a set of social forms in which Christ clothed with his gospel is received under the power of the Holy Spirit, is thus ingredient within a doctrine of Scripture. Isolated from this reality – abstracted from the 'embodied form' of the larger reality of the deposit of faith in the life of the church (DF 3) – Scripture is quickly resolved into a body of statements organised as a 'logico – deductive system' (DF 7). But for Torrance, such a description of the nature of Scripture is ecclesially too thin: the

apostolic community is not merely an empty social space to which the divine Word bears a purely extrinsic relation, but is intrinsic within the event of revelation and reconciliation, for the display of divine truth brings with it the redemption of social forms, including the redemption of created forms of communication and their textual bearers.

To draw the threads together: for Torrance, teaching about the nature of Scripture proceeds indirectly, setting the biblical texts within the wider field of God's activity as revealer and reconciler. A doctrine of Scripture requires theological depiction of the elements of this field: God the Word making himself present and intelligible; the church in which created intellect is reconciled to divine truth; Scripture as testimony to the divine Word, a Word which accommodates itself to natural forms and so transfigures them. And all this by way of a rejection of separation of the revealed and the natural, a rejection made possible by thinking through the metaphysics of the hypostatic union. The final element of this gracious movement of divine revelation is the reception and interpretation of its biblical correlate; to this we now turn.

IV

Torrance's primary interest in his writing on biblical interpretation is with giving a portrait of Christian hermeneutical intelligence: What, he asks, is its most characteristic posture before the divine Word? What is the general tenor of its activity? From whence does it come, and to what end does it move? How does it come to learn to dispose itself fittingly in the domain of the divine Word? Torrance's recommendations about exegetical practice rarely go beyond the conventional: Be aware of the text's modes of speech, read what lies in the text, resist imposing alien frameworks, and so on. What animates his presentation of hermeneutics is its

epistemological and semantic dimensions. The governing rule for interpretation is thus that the Scriptures ‘are to be interpreted in terms of the intrinsic intelligibility given them by divine revelation, and within the field of God’s objective self-communication in Jesus Christ’ (CDG 43).

To tease this apart a little: for Torrance, both general and biblical hermeneutics are properly realist in orientation, that is, they are activities in response to the shaping of intelligence by intelligible objects. Hermeneutical activity in any field of inquiry seeks ‘to penetrate into the intrinsic intelligibility of the field in question in order to let it disclose or interpret itself to us’ (DM 1) – reality, we note, is actively self-disclosing, and acts of interpretation ‘let’ this self-disclosure happen. Because of this, hermeneutics is not a poetic activity. The interpreter is not a co-creator of meaning by the work which he or she undertakes with the text. And so, in biblical hermeneutics the interpreter’s task is more than anything to receive with the right kind of pliability the gift of meaning which the divine Word extends through the text’s service. It is this all-important alertness to the text’s relation to the reality which it signifies which constitutes the scientific character of biblical hermeneutics, whose task is, quite simply, ‘the interpretation of texts related to the Word of God’ (DM 11). Grasping that relation is hermeneutically basic.

One general rubric under which Torrance’s account of biblical hermeneutics may be set is that of ‘depth-interpretation’ (the term is borrowed from William Manson; sometimes Torrance speaks of ‘interpretation *in depth*’ (CDG 37)). In acts of interpretation, he says, ‘we penetrate through the literary surface of the Scriptures, without divorcing them from their historical actuality, to the truth content of their contents, the dynamic objective reality of the living Word of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (CDG 37). This mode of interpretation Torrance believes to be

operative among the Greek fathers, who ‘sought to understand the biblical writings in the light of the divine realities to which they refer’ (DM 1). Depth interpretation is the hermeneutical correlate of Torrance’s determination of the nature of Scripture out of its referential function. If the all-important property of the Bible is the semantic relation between divine Word and created text, the all-important hermeneutical activity is that of probing behind or beneath literary phenomena in order to have dealings with that which the phenomena indicate. The ‘depth – surface’ language, that is, goes hand in hand with what has already been said of Scripture as sign or sacrament: the movement of which the Bible is part does not terminate in itself, and the interpreter must not be arrested by the merely phenomenal, but instead press through the text to the Word of which it is the ambassador.

This may now be analysed in a little more detail.

First, interpretation functions well when it attends to basic patterns of meaning in the text by which it refers to its *res*. As we ‘penetrate between the surface of the words’, he says, we discover their ‘inner logic’, or ‘coherent pattern of meaning’ (DM 282). This is attention to the *scope* of Scripture – to the ‘basic pattern of meaning that is perceived when the interpreter not only looks at the written words but looks through them at the objective centre of reference’ (DM 235). Biblical hermeneutics is required to operate in this fashion because ‘the language of Scripture points away from itself to independent realities and is to be understood by acts in which we look through it, refer it back to its source, discriminate the realities indicated and so determine the meaning of what is written according to the nature of the thing signified’ (DM 235). Built into the notion of a ‘pattern of meaning’ are, of course, a number of assumptions, not all of which Torrance makes explicit: that the Bible is a canonical whole; that interpretation has an eye to Scripture in its totality; that the

Bible's meaning is stable across literary genres, languages, vocabularies and occasions; most of all, that interpreters *discover* rather than *invent* meaning. He is, perhaps, rather grudging in his admission of hermeneutical productivity. Though he thinks it important to recognise the indispensability of natural signs to the Word's self-communication, he is a good deal more cautious in affirming ways in which readers might be said to 'make' meaning. There is not much by way of a creaturely hermeneutical coefficient to revelation, parallel to revelation's textual coefficient. This perhaps rather curious lacuna says a good deal about how Torrance conceives of the hermeneutical act, but before proceeding to look at that in more detail, one further general feature of his theological hermeneutics needs to be identified.

In biblical hermeneutics, semantics has interpretative primacy over syntactics. This hermeneutical rule is a corollary of a prior rule concerning the nature of Holy Scripture, namely: 'It is not just the grammatical connection of the words that gives them their meaning but the nature of the reality to which they refer' (DM 236). Certainly the reader cannot afford to ignore the connotative or syntactical dimensions of the text. But interpretation cannot terminate in clarification of 'the grammatico-syntactical sense of passages' (RET 115); this, because 'it is finally through metasyntactic references that syntactic systems may be coherently organised' (RET 116). Theological interpretation is, therefore, a matter of 'subjecting the language used to the realities it signifies and attend[ing] to the bearing of its coherent patterns upon the self-revelation of God which it manifestly intends' (RET 117).

Torrance believed that neglect of 'intention' – inattention to the semantic openness of the text as it directs its readers to the divine Word – was rife in modern biblical scholarship, and he was vocal in his protest against what he judged a species of nominalism (the spat with James Barr is only one rather heated example). In

theological interpretation, ‘we are not concerned ... with thinking statements but with thinking realities through statements’ (CDG 44). As with Barth’s early protests against the hegemony of historical-critical methods, so with Torrance: the critique is directed, not so much against specific exegetical practices as against theologically ruinous conceptions of the place of the biblical texts in God’s revelatory economy. If biblical scholarship stumbles, the failure is usually epistemological: critical investigation becomes prey to ‘a phenomenalist and dualist theory of knowledge’ (RET 56) which disallows any idea that ‘what is mediated to us in the Holy Scriptures is epistemically and ontologically grounded in God’s own Word’ (RET 57). The lines of Torrance’s critique could be multiplied many times: his worry that biblical scholarship is observationalist, interpreting the texts in terms of their appearances to us rather than their relation to the divine Word; his concern that Holy Scripture be understood as ‘a *transparent medium*’ (RET 64); and his criticism that biblical scholarship commonly focuses ‘upon the words and statements themselves’ rather than ‘*through* them on the truths and realities they indicate beyond themselves’ (RET 64). More than anything the danger exists that we convert ‘semantic relations without remainder into syntactical relations’ (RET 73), forgetful of a basic hermeneutical principle: ‘*no syntactics contains its own semantics*’ (RET 74). This, in effect, is another version of the ‘surface vs. depth’ critique which we’ve already heard from Torrance. By way of an alternative, he proposes ‘a basically *theological* exegesis and interpretation of the Bible, in which we learn to understand what it says through its function in mediating to us knowledge of divine truths which are what they are independently of the Bible’ (RET 69).

What does semantically-oriented interpretation look like? Once again, Torrance’s descriptions are fuller on stance and orientation than on reading practices.

We may take note of four verbs which Torrance uses to present basic hermeneutical activities and attitudes. Interpretation is a matter of ‘following’. Partly what is intended here is that the interpreter must grasp the nature and meaning of the biblical text by plotting its place and function within the unfolding sequence of God’s self-communication. To interpret is to ‘follow the economic line of action that gave rise to [biblical statements] in space and time and continues to govern their meaning’ (RET 109). But ‘following’ is also a matter of allowing interpretative intelligence to be directed by the text towards that which the text indicates. Biblical interpreters are properly not concerned with reconstructing the subjectivities of the authors whose texts they treat but with responding ‘to their call to share with them the same objective orientation toward the living, speaking and acting God as they have found themselves obliged to adopt’ (RET 104). Accordingly, interpreters must ‘try to follow through the semantic reference of [the biblical authors’] witness and reports so that we may also experience and apprehend the living God in the reality of his own words and acts for ourselves’ (RET 104f.). Interpretation is, we should note, not so much a following of ‘the way the words run’ (*circumstantial litterae*) – for Torrance that might suggest terminating the hermeneutical exercise in the syntactic – but rather a following of ‘the semantic reference of biblical statements to the divine realities upon which they rest’ (CDG 43).

Second, interpretation ‘penetrates’ to the essence of that which the text signifies. In a lengthy essay on Aquinas’ hermeneutics, Torrance seizes on the idea that biblical hermeneutical intelligence involves *intus legere*, a perception of the causes of the text in which ‘we have to penetrate to the divine intention through the literal sense and the intention lying behind it’ (SHA 263). Interpretation moves *through* signs or seeks to grasp that which lies *behind* signs. It ought by now to be

clear that by this Torrance does not mean to leave behind literal, sensible realities in order to move to an intelligible realm only extrinsically related to textual signifiers. ‘Penetration’ is, rather, a term to describe a movement of reason in which textual signs enable readers to perceive ‘Christ himself as the one Word of God behind all the speech of Holy Scripture’ (CDG 281).

If ‘follow’ and ‘penetrate’ speak of interpretation as a rational motion through or behind the Bible to its matter, ‘indwell’ indicates the way in which interpreters come to acquire an overall understanding of the meanings which Scripture tenders. ‘As our minds dwell in the Scriptures we find diverse passages coming together in our meditation and resonating with one another so that a spontaneous organisation of natural coherences running through them arises and a crystallisation of the truths to which they conjointly direct us takes place in our understanding of them’ (CDG 37). ‘Indwelling’ is the condition for discernment of the fact that Scripture is a coherent, if complex and discursively ordered, set of meanings given by that which Scripture signifies and which it is the interpreter’s task to assemble by attending to its signs. ‘Indwelling’ is thus an acquired habit of ‘looking *through* the various books and passages of the Scriptures and allowing their message to be interiorised in the depths of our mind. In this way a structural kinship becomes built up between our knowing and what we seek to know, which enables us intuitively to grasp the conjoint meaning latent in the biblical texts which we could not derive simply from the particularities and explicit features of the documents themselves’ (CDG 37).

Finally, and most comprehensively, interpretation ‘listens’. Torrance frequently insists on the auditory rather than visual character of revelation in the Christian sense: ‘the outstanding characteristic of theology is that it operates with a direct act of cognition in *hearing* God and engages in the act of conception through

audition' (*Theological Science* 23). The visual terminates on surfaces, whereas the auditory retains 'the dimension of depth' (*ibid.*). This contrast is, admittedly, a little odd: it is not clear why Torrance believes visual perception goes no deeper than phenomenal surface. That aside, the hermeneutical dimensions are clear: 'What is required ... are ways of interpreting ... appropriate to the distinctive nature of God's self-revelation through his Word, by *listening* to his *viva vox* or living voice resonating through the New Testament witness and not just through linguistic and grammatical analysis of the New Testament documents guided by proper historico-scientific methods, important as that is for rigorous exegesis' (CDG 39).

This portrait of hermeneutical reason is exegetically somewhat unspecific. In part, this is because for Torrance 'the really *fundamental questions*' in hermeneutics, as in theology generally, 'are those which penetrate to the ultimate assumptions and regulative beliefs governing all knowledge in the world' (RET 53) – questions about the relation of sign and thing signified, and about how divine speech annexes creaturely forms. Partly, again, it is because the ultimate aim of theological interpretation of Scripture is not simply cursive reading or exposition of the text so much as the generation of theological concepts. 'Theological interpretation', Torrance proposes, is a matter of 'subjecting the language used to the realities it signifies' in order to 'attend to the bearing of its coherent patterns of meaning upon the self-revelation of God which it manifestly intends' (RET 117). Out of this, the interpreter begins to build up 'an initial interpretative framework of theological concepts' (*ibid.*) which both guide subsequent reading and are corrected and revised by it, so that 'true and faithful interpretation of the bible involves the construction of a consistent line of theological statements through which the "inner logic" of the biblical message becomes disclosed' (RET 118). The supreme example of this is the

homoousion. It would be relatively easy to criticise Torrance for thinking of dogmatic concepts as improvements on the bible; he himself is at times unguarded on this score ('theological activity ... is not concerned merely with biblical exegesis or with the kind of biblical theology that builds up what this or that author in the New Testament taught about the Gospel' [DM 385]). But at his best, his argument is that concepts function as summaries of what has been discerned in the process of following, penetrating, indwelling and listening to the biblical witness. 'Theological statements, that is, reflective statements as to the message and content of the biblical statements, are made, not by stringing together biblical citations, but rather by hard exegetical activity in which we interpret biblical statements in the light of the divine Truth to which they direct us from all sides. In this activity we compare the different *paradeigmata*, gathering together from them what they have to say and summarising them in exact and disciplined (but open-structured) propositions by which we point to the basic pattern of truth in the objective reality and at the same time allow that objective reality to impose its own rationality upon our thinking and articulation of it' (DM 377).

Such, then, is Torrance's portrait of the act of interpretation. What of its agent? He is generally reluctant to devote much attention to the skills or virtues of interpreters, fearing to break the rule that hermeneutical discernment is 'an epistemic and not a psychological operation' (RET 104). When he does address himself to the question of the interpreter's character, Torrance will often speak of the need for mortification, whose cognitive form is the stripping away of projections and false constructions in order that truth can be grasped. The Word of God can be heard 'only in crucifixion and repentance' (DM 8); interpretation is an act in the domain of revelation, and the domain of revelation is equally the domain of reconciliation. A passage from

Torrance's little book on Calvin's hermeneutics serves to draw the threads together. What happens when we interpret a biblical text? 'We engage in a movement of the mind in which we refer everything to God in accordance with his own nature and his prior acts and not to ourselves or our own prejudices. We allow God to retain his own majesty in our knowing of him and to preside in all our judgements of him ... we advance in understanding God's self-revelation in the Holy Scriptures and in our knowledge of him only as we allow what we learn of God to strip us of our own inventions and presuppositions. God is certainly to be known only in an intimate act in which our awareness of him is given along with our awareness of ourselves, but we may know him, understanding his Word and grasp his truth only as we repent of our distorting preconceptions and images of him' (HC 164).

V

Well before the recent revival of interest in pre-critical hermeneutics and in theological interpretation of Scripture, Torrance was pondering classical Christian modes of interpretation and discovering in them a resource for extricating the interpretation of the bible from captivity to historical and literary phenomenology. As he did so, moreover, he did not simply draw attention to interpretative practices but tried to discern that by which such practices were driven: a theology of the Word's majestic freedom and condescension in appropriating and adapting created speech to revelation. Further, Torrance grasped what has only rarely been perceived by enthusiasts for theological interpretation of the bible, namely that such interpretation is contingent upon a theology of Scripture, which in turn rests upon a doctrine of God and revelation. Post-critical theological interpreters have sometimes been tempted to counter the pretensions of historical reconstruction by appealing to the ecclesial community as the proper location of Scripture and its interpretation and to the

cultivation of virtue as its chief end. Torrance pushed much more deeply into the structure of Christian doctrine, most of all into trinitarian and incarnational teaching about the self-revelation of God as the setting for a theology of interpretation, and did so with a much more finely-tuned sense of the real yet asymmetrical relation between revelation and created forms. Moreover, he grasped that a genealogy of exegetical and interpretative reason is imperative, not only to give a pathology of hermeneutical defect but also to retrieve a set of useable dogmatic, metaphysical and spiritual principles by which to direct the interpretative exercise.

As often in Torrance's work, the intensity with which he concentrated on a particular set of epistemological issues and their historical and dogmatic extensions brought with it the threat of some disproportion and incompleteness. Because the semantic relation between the Word and the words looms so large, it tends to become the red thread running all through the history which he traces, and so tends to make the history somewhat less complex and varied than it is. Moreover, Torrance pays very little attention to the literary forms used by interpreters of the bible – most of all, of course, the commentary. His inattention to this matter is a consequence of the fact that he views biblical interpretation as an epistemic activity whose end is concept formation: 'staying with' the text, descriptive tracing of its surface, is for him only an interim operation. Yet commentary is not necessarily mere syntactical report; it may be the attempt to hear and repeat the divine Word in the created literary forms and sequences which the Word has made its own. Much might be learned about the history of biblical interpretation by tracing not only the fate of semantics in a phenomenalist culture but also the career of the commentary genre.

In his dogmatics of Scripture and Scriptural interpretation, Torrance demonstrated greater range. The possible exception here is pneumatology, of which

he has relatively little to say. Most of the work is undertaken by a theology of the Word. In particular, the relation between divine revelation and created speech forms and their interpretation is generally conceived by analogy of the relation of deity and flesh in the hypostatic union. In itself, of course, this is quite unexceptionable. But appeal to the work of the Spirit as the perfecting cause of created realities enables theology to speak rather more fully of the divine superintendence of Holy Scripture, both in its production – by talking of the Spirit’s work of inspiration – and in its reception – by talking of the Spirit’s work of illumination. Such a move might counter-balance the occasionally extrinsicist air of some of Torrance’s characteristic moves in hermeneutics, such as his ‘surface – depth’ distinction which – for all he tries to distinguish himself from Origenist bifurcation of letter and Spirit – can sometimes sound as if the text is the outer occasion for divine communication which is more securely grasped by concepts.

This relates to a final set of questions, concerning the relation of the semantic and the syntactic. Torrance does not always protect himself against the charge that he distinguishes these two levels of the text too neatly, or that he promotes a kind of figural reading which is not adequately tethered to the text’s grammatical features. If it is true that ‘*no syntactics contains its own semantics*’ (RET 74), it is also true that inquiry into the syntactical features of the text is not only a necessary condition for grasping its semantic features but is itself the means of discerning its semantics. The *res* chooses to present itself in this *signum*, the biblical text in all its grammatical, literary and historical features. The sign *is* the availability of the matter. The text does not, of course, make the Word comprehensively available or transparent; but the Word’s relation to the text is more than asymptotic, and so to read the text as natural sign *is* to hear the divine Word in (not only behind or beneath) its textual surface.

And if this is so, then, once again, theology may be encouraged to adopt a more commentarial rhetoric, to ‘notice the sequence of the words’ and so to be vouchsafed divine revelation.