Encountering the Living God in Scripture

Theological and Philosophical Principles for Interpretation

William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin
In Memoriam

Fr. Francis Martin
(1930–2017)

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.
—Daniel 12:3

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.
—John 14:23
Contents

Foreword by Robert Sokolowski ix
Preface xv
Abbreviations xvii
Introduction 1

Part 1: Fides
1. The Word of God: Power and Presence 13
2. The Word of God in the Inspired Speech of the Prophets 37
3. The Word of God in the Inspired Speech of the Apostles 53
4. The Word of God in Inspired Written Discourse 79
   Conclusion to Part 1 101

Part 2: Quaerens Intellectum
5. God and the World: The Distinction 109
6. The Metaphysics of the Created World 127
7. Creation, the Bible, and the Question of Transcendence 147
8. Creation and the Communion of Mind, Words, and World 161
9. The Mediation of Divine Reality through the Biblical Text 191
10. Encountering the Living God in Scripture: The Holy Spirit and Spirituality 217
    Conclusion to Part 2 245

Index 249
Foreword

Reading and Responding to the Word of God

Robert Sokolowski

This book is written to show how we can read the Scriptures as being addressed to us, not only by their particular authors, such as the psalmist or Saint Paul, but also by their primary author, God himself, whose words the Scriptures ultimately are. The book also shows how we can read the Scriptures as our response to the God who speaks to us through them; we may not respond to the particular authors, to the evangelists or to Saint James, but we can and should use the words that have been authored by God when we pray to him, whether in the community of the church or by ourselves. The way God uses the words of Scripture is different from the way its human writers use them, and the best and only correct way for us to read them is in the light of that difference. If we did not read the Scriptures as God’s Word to us, we would not be reading them as the Scriptures themselves say that we should. This is the point made by William M. Wright and Fr. Francis Martin in their book, and in their work as authors they help us fulfill the obligation that they describe.

Toward the end of the book the authors give us four examples of people who read the Scriptures in this way: Saint Antony of Egypt, Saint Augustine of Hippo, Saint Francis of Assisi, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. These readers lived at different times in the history of the church—the patristic, the medieval, the modern—and each of them is identified not only by their proper name...
but also by the place they are from, which locates them in a particular human
and Christian community that provided them with the Scriptures and with a
context for hearing and reading them. In each case, this personal encounter
with the words and their author led to achievements that influenced the lives
of countless others. The four instances are presented not just as anecdotes
but as rhetorical paradigms. As examples of what has been done, they show
what we might do on a smaller but still appropriate scale in our time and
place. They are tangible instances of what this book is about, and they show
us that such things, such readings, do happen; and they imply that we should
go and do likewise.

The rest of the book is more theoretical. It is divided, elegantly, into two
parts: *Fides*, which is based more immediately on passages from Scripture,
and *Quaerens Intellectum*, which involves philosophical and theological
reflections.

Part 1, *Fides*, is subdivided into four chapters. First, God’s own words are
shown to be creative and effective. God achieves the existence of things effort-
lessly by simply speaking them; he speaks and it is done; what is said comes
to be. There is no need for struggle or conquest. Also, God guides people and
events through history and brings about coherence in unexpected ways, de-
spite human folly, malice, and disobedience. Second, we are shown that God’s
Word can be spoken, not just by God, but also by inspired human speakers,
the prophets (and lawgivers, narrators, and psalmists) of the Old Testament.
They do not speak only in their own voice; when the psalmist, for example,
repents for what he has done or praises God’s benevolence, he speaks not just
as a human poet whose skill we might admire but as someone who speaks
the way God wants him to. We can therefore use what he says when we strive
to place ourselves in the presence of God. Third, this coordination between
God’s Word and human words is recapitulated in the New Testament, where
the apostles take the place of the prophets, in an adjustment that is appropri-
ate for what occurred when the eternal Word of God became incarnate and
brought about a new creation in his redemptive death and resurrection. John
the Baptist was a prophet but the apostles were not, because the presence
and action of God in the world had changed. The apostles were more than
the prophets and were only analogous to them. It was their remembrances,
not their anticipations, that were to be the *euangelion*, and their inspiration
was different as well. The Holy Spirit, having been promised by Christ, has
come and now works in a new, sacramental way. Finally, chapter 4 deals with
the transformation of the remembrances of the apostles into a written form,
along with the old covenant’s prior commitment to writing. This shift from
speaking to writing was also carried out under the guidance of the Holy
Spirit. God is not only the author but also the primary editor and publisher of the sacred Scriptures, as well as the one who guides those who read and hear the Scriptures as they were meant to be received. The Word of God has gone through the spoken stages of prophecy and apostolic proclamation and has settled into writing, which is the way it will remain, as read and spoken in the church, for the duration. The development of writing was part of the *praeparatio evangelica*.

Part 2, *Quaerens Intellectum*, uses resources from philosophy and theology to clarify how the Scriptures can truly be what we believe them to be. The authors make use of two forms of philosophy, phenomenology and metaphysics, and in both cases the philosophical style is adjusted to deal with biblical things. It morphs into theology. Thus, we deal not just with the phenomenology of things in the world, but with the understanding of God as radically distinguished from the world as a whole; God is understood as capable of being, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if there had been no world, and he is disclosed to us as being in this way. This is the background against which the Scriptures must be understood; it is the background described in the Scriptures, and we have inklings of it even apart from them. Ontologically, this understanding of things can be expressed by speaking of God as sheer unqualified existence, with all other things understood to participate in God’s activity of being. The core perfection in all entities is their existence, which actualizes each of them in their limited and modified way. What entities are and what they can do depends on and reveals their natures, which in turn reveal the perfection of their being, and this perfection in turn is now seen to have been chosen and granted by the one who is existence itself, *ipsum esse*. Human reason can reach such an understanding of things; it is, therefore, not extinguished when it reaches this kind of transcendence. Rather, it is enlarged and strengthened as it glimpses that which is most worth knowing and most to be loved.

The philosophical and theological material in this book helps us deal with two approaches that raise serious obstacles to a Christian reading of the Scriptures. The first would secularize such reading; it would interpret Scripture simply in the way that we would interpret any human historical or poetic writing; it would take Scripture as a human composition and judge it simply according to standard historical and hermeneutic principles. As the authors show, this way of reading the Bible was initiated in the modern world by Spinoza. The second approach that would derail our reading of Scripture is Kantian; it considers the objects of human knowledge to be human constructs, meanings that we project onto our experience rather than entities that truly show up to us. Kant would claim that we construct the appearance of things
according to the a priori forms of human understanding, while a neo-Kantian approach would say that the constructs are historically developed patterns that we inherit from the communities in which we live. In either case, the things themselves are not truly presented to us. Such projections also occur in the case of scriptural belief. The authors deal with such epistemological challenges by showing that we are in fact capable of identifying things of different kinds, and that each kind of thing has its own way of being given to us precisely as an identity in a manifold of appearances. The philosophical and theological task is to clarify what sort of manifold is proper to the kind of thing in question. Such a clarification helps validate the substance or the entity of the thing itself, even in the case of religious belief. Indeed, this entire book could be seen as an effort to spell out various ways in which Christian realities can be intended, experienced, identified, and spoken about.

The authors claim that a proper reading of the Scriptures can occur only if the reader has a personal encounter with Jesus himself as the risen Lord. They present a memorable interpretation of chapter 20 of the Gospel of John to show what this means. So long as Mary Magdalene only sees the stone removed and the tomb as empty, and so long as Peter and John see only the empty tomb and the cloths placed aside, and so long as Thomas the apostle has just heard from others but has not yet heard Jesus speak to him, none of them have reached a full faith in Christ. As the authors say, even the apostle John did not yet have complete faith at this point; the word used to describe his reaction should be translated not as “he believed” but as “he started to believe”; episteusen ought to be read as an “ingressive aorist.” But once Jesus says “Mary” to Mary Magdalene, and once he addresses the disciples (except Thomas) and says, “Peace be with you,” and once he speaks to Thomas directly, they do believe, in the new way that is expressed by Thomas when he says, “My Lord and my God.” The Lord whom they now recognize is the one they knew before; he is the one who was able to command the wind and the sea (Mark 4:41); but he is now seen more truly than he was before, from a new perspective, as the Lord God himself, in the person of the Son. And, as the authors observe, just a few lines later the evangelist addresses his readers and speaks about the written word: “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” The words of Scripture can mediate the truthful presence of the risen Lord in the way his immediate presence did for the first witnesses of his resurrection. But, the authors say, this mediation cannot occur unless the reader is willing to recognize the Lord and accepts the grace to do so. We might add that this encounter need not require an apparition, and the felt experience and emotion can depend on many contingent
factors. However, it does essentially require that the reader believe that he
or she can address the Son of God and be addressed by him, whether in the
Scriptures, in the sacraments, or even in things that happen in life.

One of the most vivid examples of the encounter with the risen Lord
is found in the conversion of Saint Paul. Paul was not a replacement for a
fallen apostle, as Matthias was, nor did he know or accompany Jesus in his
ministry from the beginning, as Matthias did (Acts 1:21–26). Paul was added
to the apostles. Also, he did not originally receive the gospel from them, even
though he experienced the witness of Stephen and others whom he persecuted.
Like Mary Magdalene and Thomas the apostle, Paul was called by name by
Christ himself, which enabled him to read the Scriptures in the light and the
authority of the risen Lord (Acts 9:1–9; 26:12–18; Gal. 1:11–17; Phil. 3:4–11).
Perhaps the very fact that he persecuted the followers of Jesus gave him a
distinct perspective on the law and on how it found its fulfillment in Christ.

In the preface, William Wright speaks about his coauthor, Fr. Francis Mar-
tin, and about the origins of this book. They had worked together on projects
in the Catholic Biblical Association and on a commentary on the Gospel of
John, and Fr. Francis proposed that they jointly write a book on the more
general biblical questions that they had discussed during their collaboration.
As the years went on, Fr. Francis’s health deteriorated, and he passed away
on August 11, 2017. He was not able to see the final text of the book he had
inspired. Fr. Francis was an extremely learned and insightful biblical scholar.
He taught at many institutions, wrote and lectured extensively, and made use
of the internet to help people understand the Scriptures and to assist priests
in preaching their Sunday homilies. He served for decades as chaplain at the
Mother of God Community in Gaithersburg, Maryland, and was a friend,
counselor, and source of strength for numerous priests, religious, and laity.
He dealt with severe illness and adversity with courage and peace, and helped
others to do so. At the core of his relationships with other people was the Word
of God as expressed in the Scriptures. His humor, as well as his charismatic
spirit, was epitomized in a remark he would make on occasion during his
teaching, when he would announce that in this course “we are going to heal
your epistemology.” May this book, written by him and his devoted friend and
colleague William Wright, bear joyful witness to our faith in the risen Lord.
Throughout this book, we speak of Scripture as putting people “in living and life-giving contact with the divine realities mediated by the sacred text.” This expression comes from the introduction to Francis Martin’s edited commentary on Acts of the Apostles in the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. He used these words to describe the powerful encounter with the Word of God, given in Scripture, which the fathers of the church enjoyed in experiential faith. Through their close, spiritual connection to the Word of God, they were able to transmit the life-giving power of the Word. They are “fathers” because through them, life comes into the church.

Fr. Francis Martin, a man of great learning and profound holiness, enjoyed this same kind of faith experience of the Word of God. He knew its reality and sought to share it with others through his preaching, teaching, ministry, and writing. Shortly before beginning my own graduate studies in Scripture, I met Fr. Francis in the summer of 1999 at the Annual Meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. By that time, I was acquainted with his writings, and I also shared many of his interests in modern biblical criticism, the theological tradition expressed in the doctrine of the fourfold sense of Scripture, and the theoretical underpinnings of biblical exegesis. During my graduate studies in Scripture and beyond, I participated in the task force that he started in the Catholic Biblical Association on the integration of historical criticism and the spiritual sense. I continued to work with Fr. Francis for several more years on our commentary The Gospel of John in the Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture.

As work on that volume was winding down, Fr. Francis proposed that we write a book on what we had been discussing for many years and he had been reflecting on (and living) for much longer: how Scripture enables people to...
encounter and experience the life-giving reality of God’s Word and how we might give a theological and philosophical account of this capacity of Scripture. Shortly after work began, Fr. Francis’s health worsened, and though we continued to have many conversations about the project, he was unable to contribute to the composition work on this text. When the draft of the whole manuscript was completed, I planned to deliver the text to Fr. Francis in person. A few days before the very weekend that I had planned to visit, Fr. Francis went to meet the Lord face-to-face.

On behalf of Fr. Francis, I would like to thank the many people who helped in various ways in the composition of this book. In particular, I thank Duquesne University for granting me a sabbatical leave at the outset of this project and the McNaulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts for the award of an internal grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities in support of this project. For their input and assistance, I thank Bogdan Bucur, Michael Deem, Edward Feser, Andrea Grillini, Ann Hartle, Carl Holladay, Michael Krom, and Fr. Jared Wicks, SJ. I also thank Bob and Nancy McCambridge and their family as well as the Mother of God Community. I am very grateful to Matthew Levering for reading the entire manuscript and offering helpful feedback. I thank Fr. Guy Mansini, OSB, for sharing a copy of an unpublished paper. Dr. Jim Swindal, dean of the McNulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts at Duquesne University, has been an excellent dean and Catholic intellectual colleague. I thank him for our readings in Aquinas and W. Norris Clarke’s interpretation of Thomistic metaphysics. I offer special thanks to Robert Sokolowski. Not only did Fr. Sokolowski graciously contribute the foreword to this book, but he also shared the text of an unpublished paper and offered some helpful suggestions on the manuscript. I am grateful for the help of these and many others, and any mistakes in this text remain my own.

Jim Kinney and his staff at Baker Academic provided excellent editorial and production work, and James Ernest helped get this project started. Many thanks are due to my wife, Michelle, and my son, William, for their constant love, support, and encouragement.

This book is dedicated to Fr. Francis Martin. Those of us who were blessed to have known him can attest that he was a good friend and colleague, a spiritual father, a brilliant scholar, and a holy priest. May the Lord Jesus Christ in his great love and mercy receive Fr. Francis into the house of our heavenly Father.

William M. Wright IV
Feast of St. Athanasius, 2018
## Abbreviations

### Old Testament

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William M. Wright IV and Francis Martin, Encountering the Living God in Scripture
### Abbreviations

#### Apocrypha
- Bar. Baruch
- Sir. Sirach
- Wis. Wisdom of Solomon

#### Other Abbreviations
- BZNW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neustamentliche Wissenschaft
- DV Dei Verbum
- EV English version(s)
- LXX Septuagint
- STGM Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters
Introduction

This book is a study of the Christian belief that Scripture can put its readers “in living and life-giving contact with the divine realities mediated by the sacred text.”¹ This belief entails that God makes himself known and present to people through sacred Scripture such that properly disposed readers can genuinely encounter his reality and experience his transforming power. This faith-filled understanding of Scripture is grounded in the biblical witness and has been developed in subsequent Christian tradition. As an introduction to our topic, let us consider a few examples from both Scripture and the Christian tradition that display aspects of this belief.

A First Look at Biblical and Traditional Witnesses

“Is Not My Word like Fire?”

Throughout Scripture, the image of fire often indicates the presence and power of God. The association of the divine presence and fire is especially prominent in the narrative of the exodus from Egypt and the Sinai covenant. When the Lord first appears to Moses on the mountain and calls him to be his instrument to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the Lord reveals himself “in a flame of fire out of a bush” (Exod. 3:2). After the Israelites leave Egypt, the Lord guides them through the wilderness in a column of cloud by day and of fire by night (Exod. 13:21–22). Once the Israelites arrive at Mount

Sinai, the Lord offers a covenant relationship to the whole people and declares that he will manifest himself to the whole nation in three days’ time. When Exodus describes this theophany at Sinai, it states, “Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire” (19:18). Deuteronomy speaks in similar terms of the Lord delivering the Torah to Israel: “The Lord spoke to you out of the fire” (Deut. 4:12). Exodus also speaks of “the glory of the Lord”—a sensible display of God’s awesome presence—as “a devouring fire” (24:17; cf. Deut. 4:24), which manifested on Mount Sinai and in the wilderness tabernacle (Exod. 40:38).

Deuteronomy continues this figuring of God’s presence at Sinai as fire and makes explicit an association of the fires of God’s presence with God’s speaking. Recounting the awesome gift that God should reveal himself to Israel in this way, Moses asks rhetorically, “Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived?” (Deut. 4:33; cf. 5:26). Moses later adds, “On earth he showed you his great fire, while you heard his words coming out of the fire” (4:36). The prophet Jeremiah, in terms redolent of Deuteronomy, describes the Word of God as “something like a burning fire shut up in my bones” (Jer. 20:9). The same image appears in an oracle subsequently spoken by Jeremiah: “Is not my word like fire, says the Lord?” (23:29).

These associations between God’s presence, his Word, and the imagery of fire inform another story more familiar to Christian readers of the Bible. On Easter Sunday afternoon, two of Jesus’s disciples had left Jerusalem for Emmaus, discussing the report of Mary Magdalene and others that Jesus’s tomb was in fact empty. The risen Jesus, withholding recognition of his identity, starts to walk with the two disciples. While they are on the way, Luke writes, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Jesus] interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). That evening, after the two disciples were given to recognize the risen Jesus, they reflect, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us” (24:32, emphasis added).

Later, on Easter Sunday evening, the risen Jesus appeared to the apostles and some other disciples in Jerusalem. As he did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, the risen Jesus here reveals himself and interprets the Scripture (Luke 24:46–47). He tells them, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and psalms must be fulfilled” (24:44). Just as rabbis used the exegetical practice of “stringing pearls,” the risen Jesus takes the disciples through the three sections of the Bible—“the law of Moses” (the Torah), “the prophets,” and “psalms” (the Writings)—and interprets them as
speaking of himself: “He opened their minds to understand the scriptures” (24:45).²

In these resurrection narratives, the risen Jesus becomes present to his disciples and interprets the Scripture—God’s Word—in light of himself. As Jesus does so, the disciples have within themselves the experience of the burning fires of revelation. This manner of interpreting Scripture is not simply an intellectual exercise but rather a transforming encounter with the Lord. The disciples encounter the risen Jesus in connection with the Scriptures, and he sets their hearts on fire with his presence and power. These episodes from Luke’s resurrection narrative give particular expression to the belief that Scripture mediates divine reality to people who can experience the power of that reality.

**Tasting the Word: Lectio Divina**

This biblically founded understanding of Scripture as mediating divine reality and power receives further expression in subsequent Christian tradition. A hallmark example is the Christian practice of lectio divina, a mode of praying with Scripture that has flourished (and continues to flourish) within the setting of monasticism and monastically informed spirituality.³ Although this way of reading Scripture has an ancient Christian pedigree, its four stages were famously articulated by twelfth-century Carthusian monk Guigo II of Chartreuse in his “The Ladder of Monks” (Scala Claustralium).⁴

The first stage, “reading” (lectio), is, as Guigo puts it, “the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one’s powers on it.”⁵ It is the slow, careful, and attentive reading of the biblical text as it plainly reads. In this stage, the reader ponders the words carefully and prepares to hear the Lord speaking to him or her. Throughout his work (and in keeping with the known monastic metaphor), Guigo compares the slow, prayerful reading of Scripture to the

2. The Jewish exegetical tradition of “stringing pearls” (i.e., interpreting Scripture by connecting texts between the Torah, Prophets, and Writings) could likewise be mentioned in this regard. This tradition, along with its subtle resemblances to the Emmaus narrative in Luke 24, is discussed in Francis Martin, “Spiritual Understanding of Scripture,” in *Verbum Domini and the Complementarity of Exegesis and Theology*, ed. Fr. Scott Carl (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 12–14.


eating and enjoying of food. Accordingly, Guigo likens this first stage to putting food in one’s mouth.

The second stage, “meditation” (meditatio), is “the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s own reason for knowledge of hidden truth.” Here, the prayerful reader uses his or her intellectual abilities to ponder the meaning of the words and what they are disclosing to the reader. In this stage, the Holy Spirit is at work in the properly disposed reader to open up for him or her the inner depths of the biblical contents. In keeping with the imagery of eating food, Guigo likens this stage to chewing slowly.

The third stage (oratio) is “the heart’s devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good.” The reader chews on the words and contents of Scripture, and this stage, Guigo remarks, is like tasting its flavor. The faithful reader here converses with the Lord, asking him for greater understanding both of God’s own self (mediated through the biblical text) and of the reader’s own self. The reader prays that his or her knowledge and love of God will increase, but such an increase also entails a greater awareness of the reader’s own sinfulness and that of which the reader must repent. The Lord enflames our desire for him, and having been so enticed to know him more, we realize that we must give up our sins in order to draw closer to him. Through this praying, the Lord also reveals that of which we must repent, and as we give up our sins, we get to know him better.

The fourth stage (contemplatio) is “when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness.” This is where the reader rests in the Lord’s presence and peace, having been affected and changed through the prayerful reading experience. Contemplation, Guigo writes, “inebriates the thirsting soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness.” It is the swallowing of the food and savoring of its goodness. It is, in a sense, being given a small taste of heavenly blessedness.

As he reflects on the movements and experiences of the soul during this practice, Guigo connects this prayerful reading of Scripture to Luke 24 and the familiar imagery of fire: “When you break for me the bread of sacred

7. Guigo, Ladder 2 (Colledge and Walsh, 68; Latin from PL 40:998).
8. Guigo, Ladder 5 (Colledge and Walsh, 71–72), states that such fruits of meditation are a divine gift to the reader: “A man will not experience this sweetness while reading or meditating ‘unless it happened to be given him from above.’”
10. Guigo, Ladder 2 (Colledge and Walsh, 68; Latin from PL 40:998).
Scripture, you have shown yourself to me in that breaking of bread, and the more I see you, the more I long to see you, no more from without, in the rind of the letter, but within, in the letter’s hidden meaning. . . . So give me, Lord, some pledge of what I hope to inherit, at least one drop of heavenly rain with which to refresh my thirst, for I am on fire with love.”12 Guigo thus identifies the faith experience of the monk who practices lectio divina with the experience of those disciples on the road to Emmaus, who were instructed by the Lord through Scripture and whose hearts were consequently set on fire. It is this capacity of Scripture to mediate an encounter with God and his life-giving power that we explore in this book.

Charting a Course

With respect to this belief that Scripture can put people in living and life-giving contact with divine reality, we look to do two things. First, we will set forth the biblical substance and warrant for this belief by examining various biblical witnesses pertaining to the Word of God. Second, we will seek a deeper understanding of this biblical teaching through a series of philosophical, theological, and spiritual reflections. That is, we will explicate some basic principles that are appropriate to this understanding of Scripture and help us grasp its intelligibility.

We have structured this book in two parts according to Anselm’s famous definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding” (fides quaerens intellectum).13 Part 1, Fides, takes up the biblical witnesses that mediate to us the revelation of God in the divine economy. In these chapters, we provide a representative (though not comprehensive) survey of witnesses from both Testaments that pertain to our study of the Word of God.

Chapter 1 focuses on the Word of God as spoken directly by God in the Old Testament and by Jesus in the New Testament. We highlight two related aspects of the Word of God that appear in these texts and that will in turn shape our study. First, the biblical witnesses present the Word of God as having divine causal power. By speaking, God produces a divinely caused effect, such as in creation, in his providential governance of the world, and in the events of salvation history. Second, the Word of God has associations with notions of presence. Admittedly, this second aspect is a bit more nebulous. Under this second aspect, we group together a variety of texts that variously associate the Word of God and modes of presence: for instance, God becomes present

12. Guigo, Ladder 6 (Colledge and Walsh, 73).
to people as he reveals himself and his will through his Word; God causes something to become present by his speaking; the Word of God is a personal reality in its own right (e.g., the personified Word of God as an agent figure).

Chapters 2 and 3 continue this examination of the Word of God but as mediated through inspired human speech. The preeminent cases for study here are the inspired speech of Israel’s prophets and the preaching of the apostles, as discussed in Acts and select New Testament epistles. The witnesses examined in these chapters give evidence that the Word of God and its aspects of power and presence can be mediated through the inspired speech of human beings. Chapter 4 extends this line of inquiry one step further. Here, we consider in detail evidence from two texts—the Letter to the Hebrews and the Gospel according to John—that present the Word of God as being mediated through the inspired written discourse of the Scripture to people in their present moment. Taken together, these biblical witnesses provide substance and warrant for the belief that Scripture can mediate divine reality and power to people in their present moment.

Part 2, Quaerens Intellectum (“seeking understanding”), reflects theologically and philosophically on these biblically warranted teachings about Scripture. These chapters explore some basic theological and philosophical principles that illumine this biblical teaching and help us grasp its intelligibility. Although the discussion in these chapters delves into some fundamental and technical matters, we look to make our exposition accessible to nonspecialists.

We firmly believe that it is very important for interpreters of Scripture to be familiar with philosophical and theological thinking. All understandings of the Bible and its interpretation depend on various philosophical and theological principles of one sort or another. All biblical interpreters, whether or not they know it (or admit it), are influenced by some forms of philosophical thinking. Moreover, not all philosophical claims are equally truthful and thus equally valuable. Some ideas are better (i.e., more truthful) than others, and faulty premises lead to faulty conclusions. Theologically speaking, not all ideas and related understandings of Scripture are conducive to understanding Scripture as mediating divine reality. Accordingly, if we are going to appreciate and understand more deeply this capacity of sacred Scripture, we must attend to the philosophical and theological principles that show forth its intelligibility and mystery. As we give a positive account of these principles, we will identify and critique certain ideas in modern thought that hinder or obscure reception of this teaching.

It may be helpful to conceive of the exposition in part 2 as a ladder or staircase, with each chapter as a rung or step. We begin at the bottom, with the most basic and fundamental topics, and then ascend each step of the
exposition, with new elements building on the previous ones and the application to Scripture becoming more and more focused.

We begin our ascent in chapter 5 (the first step) with the most basic setting for all theological thinking: the doctrine of creation. Drawing largely on the theological writings of Robert Sokolowski, we will focus on the particular understanding of the relationship between God and the world that the biblical doctrine of a free creation entails. This understanding, which we, following Sokolowski, will refer to as “the Distinction,” provides the setting for thinking about all theological topics, including Scripture and how it puts people in living contact with divine reality. The Distinction calibrates our thinking so that we do not misconstrue God as a kind of “thing” that exercises causal power in the world in the way that created things do. The Distinction is thus essential for preserving and respecting the mystery of the sacred text, as well as for providing a larger horizon for our reflections on other related topics.

Chapter 6 (the second step) heightens these theological reflections on the world-as-created by reflecting philosophically on some basic structures and dimensions of created reality as such (i.e., metaphysics or ontology). Drawing largely on Thomas Aquinas and some of his interpreters, we will set forth some basic metaphysical principles of the world-as-created, including notions of participation and relationality. Having set forth an account of the Creator-creation relationship, entailed by the Distinction and the conceptually congruent Thomistic metaphysics, we then offer some initial reflections in chapter 7 on what these metaphysical reflections have to do with how we understand the Bible, and we do so with special attention to the notion of transcendence.

These ontological insights about participation and relationality, which are essential to created reality as such, also provide direction for thinking about how human beings can both encounter external reality through words (i.e., cognition) and, specifically, encounter the mystery-bearing realities of salvation history that the biblical text mediates. Accordingly, we ascend to the next step in chapter 8 and bring our reflections on the world-as-created to bear on the relationship between human knowing, words, and the world. Here, we give an account for how human beings can come into cognitive contact with external realities by integrating elements from W. Norris Clarke’s analysis of Aquinas on the self-communication of being through action and Robert Sokolowski’s phenomenological analyses of intentionality, words, and things. This integration, we suggest, also provides the conceptual means for preserving the connection between human knowing, words, and the world, which much modern philosophy severs.
From here, we move up another step and bring these philosophical and theological reflections to bear on Scripture proper. Given our concern with Scripture as putting people in contact with God and his transforming power, chapter 9 focuses on Scripture in terms of mediation. Scripture mediates God to its audience, but it does so by bearing witness to the mystery-bearing realities of the divine economy. Thus, by putting its audience in cognitive contact with the various realities of the economy, Scripture puts its audience in genuine contact with the mystery of God, which those realities bear.

Although the biblical realities are temporally past, the mystery that they bear is divine: it is eternal and thus ever present. These divine mysteries are available to people in their present moment through Scripture, but a living encounter with these divine mysteries requires both the action of the Holy Spirit and readers properly disposed to the Spirit’s action in them. Accordingly, we reach the top of the expository ladder in chapter 10, which treats the personal assimilation of the divine realities mediated by Scripture. Drawing on biblical texts, such as the parable of the sower, as well as other theological resources in the tradition, such as the lives of the saints, we take up how, through the power of the Holy Spirit, the audience of Scripture can experience the divine realities and their life-transforming power that the biblical text mediates. Proper to this faith experience of the Word of God are certain moral and spiritual dispositions by which people are disposed to the action of the Holy Spirit, who impresses the Word of God onto their spirits.

Further Clarifications

In closing, we clarify a few things about what this project does (and does not) seek to accomplish. First, this book is not so much about method or “how to read the Bible” as it is about “how the Bible works”—or, at least, the way in which the Bible facilitates an encounter with the living God. We address many aspects of this complex topic, but we also acknowledge that much more can be said about it. Other, related areas do not receive substantive consideration in this book (e.g., biblical inspiration, the relationship of the Bible and the liturgy, how to deal responsibly with difficult or problematic passages in Scripture). Therefore, we do not regard this book as a comprehensive statement on the matter. Furthermore, we do not claim that our account is the only viable way for exploring and explicating these teachings about Scripture. Nevertheless, we do offer our account as being congruent with the biblical testimony, philosophically cogent, theologically illuminating, and spiritually resourceful.
By reflecting on this understanding of Scripture and exploring its intelligibility, we look to contribute to biblical and theological studies. This understanding of Scripture as putting people in living and life-giving contact with divine reality is very much ingredient to the classic Christian understanding of the Bible and can be regarded, we think, as an important component of Christian heritage.\textsuperscript{14} While we are making a case for this classic understanding of Scripture, we are not rejecting modern biblical criticism—even if we do argue that some of its elements need a better conceptual footing. Historical-biblical criticism is an important component of Christian biblical interpretation today, but it is not the sum total of Christian biblical interpretation.\textsuperscript{15} This work on Scripture seeks to open the conceptual space to recognize the legitimacy of other modes of reading Scripture and encountering God through it. At the same time, we do not advocate a wholesale or uncritical retrieval of premodern exegesis either. For a variety of reasons, such an attempt would be both impossible and undesirable.\textsuperscript{16} We do, however, believe that much of value remains in the classic understanding of the Bible and in the theology and spirituality that attend it. In the words of Henri de Lubac, “Without either a return to archaic forms or servile mimicry, often by totally different methods, it is a spiritual movement [in traditional Christian exegesis] that we must reproduce.”\textsuperscript{17} The contemporary church only stands to benefit from a philosophically and doctrinally sound integration of the wisdom of the Christian past with the genuine insights of the present.

Finally, we hope that this book will serve a practical and pastoral purpose. A key component of our exposition is that through Scripture, people can genuinely encounter the living God and his life-giving and life-changing power as people consent to God’s work in them. By introducing and explicating the understanding of Scripture as mediating divine reality and God’s transforming power, we hope that our readers will come to experience the life-giving power of God’s Word in their own lives and transmit it among their families, relationships, communities, and the world.

\textsuperscript{14} So too Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash and Juvenal Merriell (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), 431. 
\textsuperscript{15} See Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, “(Mis)Reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 527–28. 
\textsuperscript{16} We might cite in this regard the impossibility of contemporary Christian biblical interpretation ignoring the advances and challenges offered by modern biblical criticism as well as the limits and defects in much premodern exegesis (e.g., textually loose interpretations, anti-Jewish polemics); cf. Martin, introduction to *Acts*, xxii–xxiii.  
\textsuperscript{17} De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 450.
PART 1

Fides
The Word of God

Power and Presence

We begin with the biblical witness concerning the Word of God. This chapter focuses specifically on the Word spoken directly by God as distinguished from God’s Word given through human intermediaries (e.g., prophets and apostles). Two overarching motifs come to light in these texts. First, the Word of God has causal power. Through his Word, God produces a divinely caused effect in the world, such as in creating, his providential governance of the world, and his immediate acts of divine power in the world. Second, the Word of God has associations with forms of presence. For instance, the Word of God can cause something to be or to occur (e.g., God creates by his Word). The Word of God also puts people in cognitive contact with divine reality or truth by imparting knowledge of God (e.g., God reveals himself and his designs by his Word). Moreover, some texts present the Word of God as an agent figure, a form of presence. Given the volume of material pertinent to this topic, the survey in this chapter (as well as the others) is representative, including texts from different historical periods and literary genres to show that these teachings about the Word of God span the entire canon.

Old Testament Witnesses

God’s Word and Creation

An appropriate place to begin this study of Old Testament teaching about the Word of God is with creation. The seven-day account of creation in
Genesis 1:1–2:4a depicts God creating and ordering the world (i.e., “everything that is not divine”) by spoken commands. Although this account is not the oldest biblical evidence (historically speaking) for the power and presence of God’s Word, it certainly is quite prominent in terms of both its dramatic depiction and its placement at the opening of the canon.

Four aspects of the creation narrative’s depiction of God’s Word stand out for present purposes. First, God brings everything into an ordered existence by his speaking. The phrase “God said” opens each of the six days of creation, and thus it introduces the creation of each thing that God makes part of the cosmos (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26). Moreover, all the other Hebrew verbs employed in this account for God’s creative action—“make” (ʿāšâ), “create” (bāraʾ), “separate” (bādal)—never appear without reference to God’s speaking. So prominently does God’s Word figure into this narrative that God’s creating cannot be conceived of apart from it.

Second, the Genesis narrative presents God’s Word as an exercise of his almighty power. The narrative depicts God’s creating as being veritably effortless and as happening in perfect accord with his Word. Scholars have pointed out that the creation account in Genesis 1:1–2:4a reflects (and, in some cases, subverts) certain stock images and motifs common to other ancient Near Eastern accounts of creation. The significance of God’s creating by his Word in Genesis 1 can be appreciated when compared with the ancient combat myth of creation such as that given in the Babylonian account of origins, Enuma Elish. This famed Babylonian account depicts creation as stemming from battle between gods: the Babylonian hero god Marduk and the sea monster Tiamat and her cohort. In contrast with the violence in the Babylonian myth of origins, Genesis 1 narrates creation as resulting from the simple, placid fiat of the one almighty God, not a violent contest between rival deities. Not only does the Genesis narrative lack any hint of contest or


3. Westermann (Genesis 1–11, 111–12) points out that the idea of creation by divine command is also present in Egyptian Memphite creation theology.


5. Westermann, Genesis 1–11, 80. While the Genesis account and other ancient Near Eastern creation stories do contain real differences in content and emphasis, they should not be taken as hermetically sealed off from one another. Thus, other biblical texts (e.g., Pss. 74:12–17; 89:5–18;
struggle; it also subtly rebuts the combat myth by counting “the sea monsters” among God’s creatures (1:21).

The Genesis narrative also underscores that creation happens in perfect accord with God’s Word. This point comes to light in two ways through the language of the narrative. First, the text frequently follows God’s creative speech with the simple phrase “And it was so” (1:7, 9, 11, 15, 24, 30). The terseness of this expression reinforces the uncontested nature of God’s creative activity and the perfection with which the divine fiat is executed. Second, the narrative frequently repeats the language used in the divine creative command in the description of a thing’s coming-to-be. For instance, on the first day (1:3), God issues the creative pronouncement “Let there be light” (yəḥî ʾôr), and the description of the resulting, created state of affairs both follows immediately and is given in the exact same language as God’s speech: “and there was light” (wayəḥî-ʾôr). The repetition of language between God’s spoken pronouncement and the creation of a particular thing indicates that there is no disconnect between what God says and what results. God creates effortlessly by a spoken command, and what results happens in perfect accord with God’s Word. These two features—the effortlessness of God’s creating by his Word and the perfectly corresponding result—point to the almighty sovereignty of God. God’s Word is an exercise of the divine will and power, and as Gordon Wenham writes, the Word of God “brings into existence what it expresses.”

Not only is God’s creating by his Word an exercise of the divine will, but it is also revealing of God’s wisdom and intention—a third aspect of God’s Word in Genesis 1. As the passage describes God’s creating by his Word, it not only declares that God speaks (“Then God said . . .”) but also gives the content of what God says (“Let there be light”; 1:3). The text spells out the divine intention to create by articulating it in the direct, declarative speech of God himself. By providing the reader with the content of God’s pronouncement, the narrative presents God’s Word as revealing his intention to create and his intentions for various creatures: the heavenly lights are “to separate the day from the night . . . and . . . be for signs and for seasons and for days and years” (1:14); human beings are to “have dominion” over the birds, the fish, and the creeping things on the land (1:28); the green plants and fruit are to serve as food for both human beings and other creatures (1:29–30). God’s

114; Isa. 51:9–11) employ the imagery of the combat myth when talking about God. The biblical authors thought and wrote in an ancient Near Eastern context and idiom, and therefore it should not be altogether surprising that they should appropriate conventional religious imagery and motifs in their compositions.

speech reveals him as one who provides for the well-being and sustenance of his creatures. Not only is God’s Word an exercise of the divine will, but it is also revealing of God’s wisdom and his intentions for creation. 

Fourth, God imparts blessing by his Word. On two occasions in Genesis 1, God “blesses” his creatures, and the declaration of blessing is connected with God’s speech (1:22, 28). God blesses his creatures as he instructs them to “be fruitful and multiply,” a command given to the birds, the fish, and the human beings. God blesses these creatures by endowing them with the capacity for reproduction. In doing so, God allows creatures to participate in God’s own creative activity.

The creation account of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, with its distinctive emphasis on God’s creating by his Word, is verbally and thematically echoed in Psalm 33. The psalm, a hymn of praise, celebrates God’s providence and sovereignty over all things. The hymn contains a subsection (33:6–9) that speaks of God’s action as the Creator. Mention of God’s creating by his Word both opens and closes this subsection, forming an inclusio. This movement of the psalm opens with the statement “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (33:6). The psalmist then exhorts the world’s population to stand in awe before the Lord and cites as the warrant for such reverence the Lord’s creating the world by his powerful Word: “For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm” (33:9). References to the Lord’s creating by his Word—either as a noun (dābār) or as a verb (ʾāmar)—frame this section. Like the creation account in Genesis 1, Psalm 33 depicts God effortlessly creating the world by his Word, a simple and powerful fiat that instantiates his will. This connection between God’s Word and his activity is anticipated in verse 4, which reads, “For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.” The parallel construction of the two lines aligns the Lord’s Word and his working. As Terence Fretheim puts it, “The word of God is the vehicle for the will of God;
the word expresses what God intends.” Just as in Genesis 1, God’s creative Word was revealing of his wisdom and intentions for created things, so here too, his Word reveals him as being “upright” and “faithful.”

God’s Word and His Providential Governance

The hymn in Sirach 42:15–43:33 associates God’s Word with his creating and his providential governance of the world. The hymn opens, “I will now call to mind the works of the Lord, and will declare what I have seen. By the word of the Lord his works are made; and all his creatures do his will” (42:15). Reminiscent of Genesis 1 and Psalm 33:6, Sirach 42:15c mentions God creating by his Word and seemingly envisions God speaking things into being. The chiastic structuring of 42:15c–d also associates God’s Word and his will:

By the word of the Lord

his works are made;

and all his creatures do

his will.

This literary-rhetorical structure implies that God both creates the world and providentially governs the world by his Word. The “creatures” that “do his will” are the various created things that follow God’s wise, providential arrangement. This point receives further support from this hymn’s other references to created things that follow God’s Word. Ben Sira speaks of the sun as following God’s Word: “At his orders [logois] it hurries on its course” (Sir. 43:5); and similarly the stars: “On the orders [logois] of the Holy One they stand in their appointed places” (43:10). After his review of various created things that are governed by providence, Ben Sira concludes, “By his word [logō] all things hold together” (43:26). It is because God creates, orders, and governs all things by his providential Word that creation can be said to be suffused with and reflective of God’s glory (42:16–17, 25; 43:1, 9, 12) and beauty (43:9, 18). Both Psalm 33 and Sirach 42:15–43:33 thus speak of created things obeying God’s Word by living out their essential natures and activities (e.g., the motions of heavenly bodies), which the Creator’s wise providence ordains.

Other texts likewise display the connection between God’s Word and his providential governance of creation. There are affirmations of God’s Word as holding sway over the angels in the concluding movement of Psalm 103, a hymn of praise to God the benevolent and merciful Savior. After setting the heavenly scene with an introductory remark, “The LORD has established

his throne in the heavens” (103:19), the psalmist exhorts the angels to bless God the heavenly King. He addresses the angels as “you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word [dābār; LXX: logos]” (103:20; LXX 102:20). This identification of the angels as those who carry out the commands of the heavenly King is reaffirmed in the next verse: “Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will” (103:21). The parallelism between these two verses points to the familiar association with God’s “spoken word” and “his will.” Psalm 119:89 likewise declares the heavenly permanence of God’s Word: “The LORD exists forever; your word is firmly fixed in heaven.” The psalmist associates the permanent rule of God’s Word with God’s very life, as well as his governance of the world and his faithfulness (119:90). Precisely because God’s Word is so permanent and reliable, the psalmist can speak of it as his “delight” (v. 92), source of life (v. 93), and hope (v. 95).

Another kind of association between God’s Word and his providential governance appears in texts that present God causing things to happen in the world by his Word. Especially significant in this regard are three aspects of Psalm 147. First, the psalmist speaks of God’s Word in terms of his providential governance of nature. Psalm 147:15 introduces a unit of the psalm (vv. 15–18) that discusses God’s providence in terms of the example of cold-weather phenomena.11 The movement begins, “He sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly” (v. 15). The psalmist then lists the effects of this command with three meteorological examples: God “gives snow,” “scatters frost,” and “hurls down hail” (vv. 16–17). After a rhetorical declaration of the power of God manifested in the cold weather, “who can stand before his cold?” (v. 17b), the psalmist follows up with the meteorological reversal of these frozen states, which is likewise brought about by God’s Word, “sent out” by him: “He sends out his word, and melts them; he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow” (v. 18; cf. v. 15).

Second, Psalm 147 speaks of God’s Word in connection with his providential activity in the history of Israel. Immediately after speaking of God reversing the cold-weather conditions by his Word, the psalmist shifts to God’s Word in the history of Israel: “He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel” (v. 19). By repeating the term for “word” (dābār) in verses 15, 18, 19, the psalmist identifies the Word by which God providentially governs nature as the same Word given to Israel in the Torah.12 As in Genesis 1,

11. McCann writes, “The mention of God’s ‘word’ in verse 18a makes it clear that these phenomena cannot be subsumed simply under the category of meteorology. For the Psalms, because God rules the world, even the weather is a theological matter!” “Psalms,” 1268.
12. God’s Wisdom is also identified with the Torah in Bar. 3:36–4:2; Sir. 24:22.
God’s Word not only enacts God’s providential power but also is revealing of who God is. As J. Clinton McCann writes of Psalm 147:19–20, “God’s word—formerly addressed to snow and hail and wind—is now addressed to Israel. To know God’s word is to know God’s will and, indeed, God’s very self.”13 By associating God’s providence with his being both Creator and Savior, the psalmist creates an inclusio with the opening of the psalm, where this same association also appears (cf. vv. 2–4).14

Third, the poetic discourse of the psalm speaks of God’s Word as an agent or a subject who acts. The parallelism in Psalm 147:15 associates God’s “word” (דָּבָר) with his “command” (ʾımра).15

He sends out his command to the earth;

X

bis word runs swiftly.

Just as God “sends out” (šālaḥ) “his command” (v. 15) to bring about the cold-weather phenomena, so too God “sends out” (šālaḥ) “his word” to undo those conditions (v. 18).

Having been dispatched, the Word of God “runs swiftly” (Ps. 147:15) on a mission in the world, and the Word carries out God’s providential will. Through this poetic discourse, Psalm 147 coheres with the more substantive personification of God’s Word as an agent in other biblical texts.

The Wisdom of Solomon speaks of God’s creating by his Word, but here, God’s Word is spoken of in more substantial terms. Wisdom 9:1–18 is a prayer that amplifies Solomon’s petition for God to send him wisdom to assist in his service as king (cf. 1 Kings 3:6–9). The prayer opens with an address: “O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word [logos], and by your wisdom have formed humankind” (Wis. 9:1–2). The chiastic construction clearly associates God’s Word (logos) with his Wisdom (sophia), which are said to be, respectively, that by which God made “all things” and that by which he made “humankind.”

who have made all things by your word [logos],

X

and by your wisdom [sophia] have formed humankind

14. Psalm 147:2, 4 reads, “The LORD builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel. . . . He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names."
15. The Hebrew noun ʾımра can be a synonym for God’s Word (e.g., Deut. 33:9).
While the prayer does not again speak of God’s Word specifically, it goes on to explicate the various roles and functions of God’s personified Wisdom. Wisdom “was present when [God] made the world” (Wis. 9:9) and “sits by [God’s] throne” (v. 4), from which God sends her (vv. 6, 10). Solomon prays for Wisdom, “who knows [God’s] works, . . . understands what is pleasing in [his] sight and what is right according to [his] commandments” (v. 9). He prays that God will send Wisdom to teach, direct, and protect him (vv. 10–11), just as Wisdom did for Israel’s great ancestors from Adam to Moses (10:1–11:4).

The identification of God’s Word with his wisdom, which is personified at length here and elsewhere in the Wisdom literature, imparts a kind of substantiveness (or hypostatization) to God’s Word. Whereas Genesis 1, Psalm 33, and Sirach 42:15–43:33 focus on God’s act of speaking creation into being, Wisdom 9:1, by identifying his Word with personified Wisdom, presents God’s creative Word as an instrumental agent, a “who” by whom God creates and acts. In this way, Wisdom 9:1 coheres with other texts that speak of God’s Word as an agent and thus a kind of presence.

The author of Wisdom depicts God’s Word as an agent even more dramatically in 18:15–16. We have already seen how the author identified God’s Word with God’s Wisdom personified (9:1–2) and spoke of God’s Wisdom (or Word) as coming from heaven and at work in the history of Israel’s ancestors (10:1–11:4). Continuing this theme, 18:15–16 presents the Word of God as an acting subject, who descends to earth to carry out God’s judgment on the Egyptians in the exodus. The author thus describes the climactic tenth plague, the death of the firstborn: “Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed” (18:15; cf. Exod. 12:29). The text continues by calling God’s Word “a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword” of God’s “authentic command”; this Word “stood and filled all things with death” (Wis. 18:15–16). By serving as the heavenly agent of God’s will on earth, the Word has a kind of intermediary role: the Word “touched heaven while standing on the earth” (v. 16). This presentation of the divine Word as an intermediary figure has much in common with other Jewish speculation about the personified Word of God, such as in the Logos figure in Philo of Alexandria as well as the memra in the Aramaic Targumim.16

God’s Word and His Action in History

As some texts identify God’s Word and the Torah (e.g., Ps. 147) and others present God’s Word as a substantial agent in the exodus (e.g., Wis. 18:15–16), other texts associate the Word of God with his action in the history of salvation—past, present, or future.

A variety of biblical texts speak of God’s Word in connection with the past events of the exodus. Psalm 105 recounts God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel in building up the descendants of Abraham and rescuing them from slavery in Egypt. When discussing the plagues—the “signs” (v. 27) that God worked through Moses and Aaron—the psalmist twice speaks of plagues being accomplished by God’s speaking. Psalm 105:31 reads, “He spoke [ʿāmar], and there came swarms of flies, and gnats throughout their country” (cf. Exod. 8:16–24). A similar description is given with regard to the plague of locusts: “He spoke [ʿāmar], and the locusts came, and young locusts without number” (Ps. 105:34; cf. Exod. 10:3–6). As with creation, God’s speaking enacts God’s will by virtue of his almighty sovereignty.

Sirach 39:16–21 also speaks of the events of the exodus as being accomplished by God’s spoken Word. This text appears within a hymn (vv. 12–35) that praises God for his providential arrangement of the world as a whole and for the individual things within it by which God accomplishes his purposes. The hymn predominantly focuses on created things, but verse 17 suggests a subtle allusion to the exodus. The text reads, “At his word the waters stood in a heap, and the reservoirs of water at the word of his mouth” (v. 17). The expression “the waters stood in a heap” echoes the description of the parting of the sea in Exodus 15:8: “The floods stood up in a heap.”17 Subsequent biblical texts employ the same language with respect to the exodus sea crossing either in recounting it (e.g., Ps. 78:13: “He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap”) or through a deliberate typological allusion (e.g., the parting of the Jordan in Josh. 3:13, 16). Significant for our purposes is Ben Sira’s explicit claim that the exodus sea parting came about by God’s Word (en logō autou) (Sir. 39:17).

The Wisdom of Solomon also reflects on the power of God’s Word that was made manifest during Israel’s time in the wilderness. In Wisdom 11–19, the author deploys a series of contrasts between what God did to the Egyptians in the exodus and what he did for the Israelites.18 For instance, God

17. The Hebrew expression in Exod. 15:8 speaks of “waters” (mayim) as standing or being dammed up in a single place (kāmō-nēd).
struck the Egyptians through “the bites of locusts and flies” (Wis. 16:9; cf. Exod. 8:24; 10:14–15), and he afflicted the Israelites with snakebites in the wilderness (cf. Num. 21:6–9). But whereas “no healing was found for [the Egyptians]” (Wis. 16:9), God did heal the repentant Israelites of their bites. The author explicitly speaks of God healing the Israelites through his Word: “Neither herb nor poultice cured them, but it was your word, O Lord, that heals all people” (16:12).

The author also recalls the fire that fell on the Egyptians in the hailstorms of the exodus and destroyed their crops (i.e., their food) (Wis. 16:16–19; cf. Exod. 9:22–26). In contrast, the author cites God’s gift of manna to Israel and its relation to God’s Word. Developing the description of the manna being “as fine as frost on the ground” (Exod. 16:14), the author of Wisdom evidences a Jewish interpretation of the manna as being like snow. Despite being snow-like, the manna was not destroyed by fire (Wis. 16:22), although it would melt in the sun (vv. 27–28). The behavior of the manna vis-à-vis natural forces attests to creation’s being subject to God’s will. Thus, in addition to being a food source to sustain the Israelites in the wilderness, the manna taught them. “It served your all-nourishing bounty,” the author writes, “so that your children, whom you loved, O Lord, might learn that it is not the production of crops that feeds humankind but that your word sustains those who trust in you” (vv. 25–26). This statement recalls Deuteronomy 8:3, which likewise discerns a pedagogical purpose in the manna: “He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna . . . in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

The Old Testament books provide a variety of other examples that speak of God helping people in present times of need by his Word. Psalm 107 describes a series of perilous situations from which God delivers the afflicted. In one such situation are those who are mortally ill, and their illness is attributed to their own sinfulness (vv. 17–22). The psalmist states that these sick people cry out to God for help, and God responds by healing them through his Word: “He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction” (v. 20). The book of Proverbs praises God’s Word for its reliability and security: “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him” (30:5). Moreover, one can also point to Psalm 119, the longest of the

psalms, which praises God for the gift of the Torah, his Word. Within this
psalm, God’s Word and its role in daily life are praised many times: among
other things, God’s Word is cause for “delight” (vv. 14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77,
92, 143, 174); it contains “wondrous things” (v. 18) and is a “word of truth”
(v. 43; cf. v. 160); it is the source of strength and life (vv. 25, 28, 107); it is full
of God’s faithfulness (vv. 89–90). God’s Word is to be loved (vv. 47–48, 97,
113, 119, 127, 159, 163, 167), contemplated (vv. 15, 23, 48, 97), and observed
(vv. 4–5, 8, 32–35, 57, 166). God’s Word is a sure source of guidance and direc-
tion for life: “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (v. 105).

Previously, we noted the identification of God’s Word with the Torah given
to Israel at Mount Sinai (Ps. 147). This identification informs the place of
God’s Word in the eschatological future as set forth in the new-covenant oracle
a larger section of Jeremiah (30:1–31:40) that speaks of the eschatological act
of salvation that the Lord will work for Israel, who had been sent into exile
and scattered among the nations as punishment for their sins. Among the
things God promises to do for his people in this eschatological action are the
following: to regather all Israel from their state of exile (30:3, 10; 31:8–11) and
return them to the promised land (30:3); to restore the Davidic monarchy to
rule over restored Israel (v. 9); and to provide a time of great joy and abundant
prosperity (31:12–14). God’s promise to make a new covenant with restored
Israel is another component in this vision of eschatological salvation.

The element in this oracle that is most pertinent for our purposes is God’s
promise to put his Torah (i.e., his Word) inside his redeemed people: “I will
put my law [tôrâ] within them, and I will write it on their hearts” (Jer. 31:33).
This statement encapsulates the continuity and discontinuity between the
Sinai covenant and the eschatological new covenant. On the one hand, God’s
gift of the Torah is at the heart of both the Sinai covenant and the new
covenant.20 However, the Lord contrasts the eschatological new covenant with
the Sinai covenant: “[The new covenant] will not be like the covenant that I
made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out
of the land of Egypt” (v. 32). As Jack Lundbom notes, in the Sinai covenant,
the Torah was written on stone tablets, and Deuteronomy teaches that it “was
supposed to find its way into the human heart.”21 These aspects imply a kind
of exteriority of the Torah to the people Israel. But in the new covenant, God
will act on people’s interiority by writing his Torah “on their hearts” (v. 33).

But since, as Jeremiah puts it, “sin . . . [was] engraved on the tablet of their hearts” (17:1), hearts in restored Israel would need to be changed in order to receive the Torah, which God would write on them. Thus, the Lord says through Jeremiah, “I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God” (24:7). God promises to change the hearts of his redeemed people, making them able to receive this interiorized Torah.

God promises to so internalize his Torah within people, enabling it to sink in and permeate his people’s lives. Resulting from this action of God on his people’s interiority is a profound, intimate knowledge of God and newly enabled covenental obedience: “No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:34). By putting his Torah, his Word, within his people, God will create with his people a new relationship of intimacy and close, personal knowing. The indwelling Word of God will be a kind of presence within the new-covenant community.

New Testament Witnesses

The same overarching motifs of the Word spoken by God—its associations with power and presence—continue into the New Testament writings. The associations of the Word of God and presence are even more profound in the New Testament, with its identification of the Word of God not only as intrinsic to the “identity of God” but also as a person who becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The divine Word speaks directly and humanly in Jesus. Accordingly, since his are the words of the divine Word, the words of Jesus possess divine causal power—the other focal aspect of the Word of God.

The Personal Reality of the Word: Jesus Christ

Christian theological reflection on the Word of God must be centered on the New Testament’s identification of the Word of God as the person of Jesus Christ. With the incarnation, the reality of the Word of God is expressed most robustly. While only two New Testament texts explicitly designate Jesus as

24. Our use of “identity” here and elsewhere is indebted to Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*. 

God’s “Word” (John 1:1–18; Rev. 19:13), many New Testament writings affirm the preexistence of the Son or Word of God, who became incarnate in Jesus. Very often this teaching appears in texts that speak of Jesus as the agent by whom God created the world. To articulate this identification of Jesus as the preexistent agent of creation, New Testament writers appropriate the biblical language and imagery of God’s personified Word or Wisdom, who was present when God created the world.

The most prominent identification of Jesus as the preexistent Word (or Son) of God is the prologue of the Gospel according to John (1:1–18). The prologue begins with a deliberate allusion to the creation narrative in Genesis 1, with its phrase “In the beginning” (John 1:1). The Gospel begins by rereading, in light of the revelation in Jesus, Genesis 1 and its presentation of God creating all things by speaking. In this way, John signals that he is looking anew at all (creation, history, God’s activity in them, and even God himself) in light of Christ. Through the revelation in Christ, John teaches that the Word by which God creates is a divine person. The Word is both one with God the Father (“the Word was God”) and yet distinct from God the Father (“the Word was with God”) (v. 1). Moreover, God (the Father) and the Word (the Son) exist in a dynamic relationship with each other. While the Greek phrasing in 1:1b is accurately translated as “the Word was with God,” the Greek preposition used here, pros, also connotes dynamic movement toward something. The subtle hint at dynamism here coheres with the Fourth Gospel’s larger presentation of the life of God as the eternal exchange of life and love between the Father and Son—that is, the divine communion.

The Word (or Son; cf. John 1:14, 18) is the agent by whom God the Father created the world: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (v. 3). All that exists, therefore, exists in relation to (and by virtue of) God and his Word. Moreover, as the psalmist praises God’s Word as “a light to [his] path” and as a source of “life” (Ps. 119:105, 107), so, similarly, does John speak of the divine Word as the source of “life” and spiritual “light of all people” (John 1:4).

Daniel Boyarin has offered a thought-provoking and illuminating analysis of John’s prologue along similar lines. Boyarin argues that John’s prologue reflects the interpretive dynamics of Jewish homiletic midrash, in which a text from the Torah is interpreted in light of another, related text from another part of the canon. In the case of John’s prologue, Boyarin argues, the evangelist is reading Genesis 1 (where God creates by speaking) in tandem with Proverbs 8:22–31 (a poetic account of God’s Wisdom being present at creation). Emerging from these intertextual dynamics is the hypostatization of the divine Word (Gen. 1) along the lines of personified Wisdom (via Prov. 8). The prologue also incorporates the conventional motif of Wisdom seeking a home in the world (cf. Sir. 24:1–12) as it narrates the activity of the preincarnate divine Word in the world (John 1:9–13). According to Boyarin, the prologue makes the decidedly Christian turn when it speaks of God’s Word/Wisdom becoming incarnate in Jesus (v. 14). Among the merits of Boyarin’s case is his demonstration of how John’s prologue is deeply embedded within Jewish thinking about God’s Word and Wisdom, while at the same time taking a new turn in light of the Christian belief in the incarnation.

Paul also identifies Jesus’s person as a preexistent, divine figure through whom God the Father created all things. In 1 Corinthians 8, Paul begins his discussion over whether it is permitted for Corinthian Christians to eat meat that came from animal sacrifices to pagan gods with a strong affirmation of biblical monotheism. In a Christian rereading of the famous “Shema, Israel” (Deut. 6:4–9), Paul writes, “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:6). Here, the “identity” of the Lord God is articulated as consisting of the Father, the source of all things, and Jesus, the agent of creation. Similarly, the hymn in Colossians 1:15–20 contains a series of profound affirmations about Jesus, beginning with his being “the image of the invisible God” (v. 15). To underscore the sovereignty and ultimacy of Christ, who “is before all things” (v. 17), Paul writes, “In him [or ‘by him’] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible. . . . All things have been created through him and for him” (v. 16). The Colossians hymn also speaks of Christ as an agent or instrument of God’s activity to reconcile a sinful world to himself. In both 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Colossians 1:16, therefore, Christ is spoken of as the

32. See Bauckham, Jesus and the God of Israel, 26–30.
one “through” whom all things have been created, but not without some reference to God the Father.

The Letter to the Hebrews begins with a similar set of claims. The text begins by recounting the history of God’s revelation: “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets” (Heb. 1:1). This history of divine communication culminates in the eschatological revelation through God’s “Son,” whom the author identifies as “the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (vv. 2–3). The Son also has a role in God’s creation and preservation of the world. The author identifies the Son as the one “through whom [God] created the worlds” (v. 2), and the one who “sustains all things by his powerful word” (v. 3).

Such appropriation by New Testament writers of biblical imagery for God’s Wisdom or Word also appears in the Gospel presentations of Jesus’s earthly life. For purposes of illustration, we will comment briefly on two Gospel texts that identify Jesus as the Word or Wisdom of God made flesh.

First, the bread of life discourse (John 6:35–59) uses biblical traditions pertaining to God’s Word and Wisdom to present Jesus as the bread of life, the revelation of God in the flesh, which he in turn gives to people in the Eucharist. In verse 27, Jesus sets up the discourse by speaking of “the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give.” These words about food enduring for eternal life run throughout the discourse and reflect biblical traditions in which God’s Wisdom and Word—that is, the Torah—were likened to food and drink. The psalmist prays, “How sweet to my palate are your words, sweeter than honey to my mouth” (Ps. 119:103, translation ours). Proverbs depicts God’s Wisdom inviting people to understand her as a woman making a dinner invitation: “Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed!” (Prov. 9:5). Sirach likewise uses the imagery of food and eating to describe learning from God’s Wisdom and law: “Whoever fears the Lord [and] . . . holds to the law will obtain wisdom. . . . She will feed him with the bread of learning, and give him the water of wisdom to drink” (Sir. 15:1, 3).

In Sirach 24, God’s Wisdom likewise invites people to come and learn from her, and she does so with the imagery of food: “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruits” (v. 19). Here, the imagery of eating food points to learning from God’s wisdom teaching, taking it in, making it a part of one’s life. Wisdom says that those who partake of her will want

33. See Martin and Wright, Gospel of John, 123–31.
34. The remainder of this paragraph appears in Martin and Wright, Gospel of John, 120–21, with the biblical translations adapted to reflect the NRSV.
35. God’s Word is also likened to the manna in Philo, Allegorical Interpretation 3.162. Cf. Genesis Rabbah 70:5.
more: “Those who eat of me will hunger for more, and those who drink of me will thirst for more” (v. 21). In the bread of life discourse, Jesus issues similar declarations, inviting people to partake of him—that is, receive in faith his revelation of God as Father and himself as Son (John 6:35, 47–51). But unlike personified Wisdom in Sirach 24, Jesus promises eternal satisfaction for those who eat and drink of him: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35).

Along similar lines, Jesus identifies himself in terms of the manna in the wilderness to show that he is both like and unlike the manna.36 Like the manna, Jesus speaks of himself as “bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:51). But unlike the manna, Jesus promises eternal life to those who eat of him: “Unlike your ancestors who ate and died, the one who eats this bread will live forever” (v. 58, translation ours; cf. v. 49). As Jesus is both like and unlike the manna, so too is Jesus the divine Wisdom but something more. Jesus not only imparts divine wisdom and teaching (as does personified Wisdom) but also gives his crucified and glorified flesh and blood in the Eucharist. By partaking in Jesus’s resurrected flesh and blood in the Eucharist, Jesus’s disciples will share his life (“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them”; v. 56) and partake also in the reality of his resurrection on the last day (“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day”; v. 54).

Another Gospel passage that presents Jesus as the divine Word or Wisdom made flesh is the “Father and Son” saying in Matthew 11:25–27 (cf. Luke 10:21–22). The larger narrative context of this saying (we focus on Matthew’s here) is important for discerning the associations with God’s Wisdom. Having instructed the twelve apostles for their missionary endeavors (Matt. 10:1–42), Jesus continues his preaching and teaching in Galilean towns (11:1). The narrative material that follows deals in large part with the messianic authority of Jesus and the various responses of people to him. The opening sequence of scenes in Matthew 11 concerns the identity of Jesus as the promised Messiah, who performs the messianic tasks set forth in Isaiah (cf. Isa. 35:5–6; 61:1), and the identification of John the Baptist as the eschatological return of Elijah (Matt. 11:7–14; cf. Mal. 4:5–6). Jesus then speaks of the rejection and slander that both he and John the Baptist have received: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating

and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’” (Matt. 11:18–19).

Jesus then follows up by saying, “Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds” (Matt. 11:19). With these words, Jesus seemingly identifies himself with divine Wisdom. He appeals to the good deeds performed by divine Wisdom as vindicating him against the slander leveled at him. He similarly identifies himself as the Messiah to the disciples of John the Baptist indirectly by citing his miracles: “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news brought to them” (11:4–5). These miracles are among those Jesus has already performed in the Gospel narrative. W. D. Davies and Dale Allison thus articulate the import of this, saying: “Despite the poor response of people, the works of God in Jesus have made plain to all Jesus’ identity (cf. 11.2–6) and the need to respond to him favourably.”

After pronouncing woes of condemnation on those cities that did not repent and receive him in faith, despite having seen his miraculous works (Matt. 11:20–24), Jesus offers a prayer of praise to the Father for those disciples who have in fact received him in faith (vv. 25–26). The Father has “revealed [apokalyptein]” sacred things to “infants” (v. 25), and this revelation comes by way of the Son: “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal [apokalyptein] him” (v. 27). Jesus’s identification of himself as the Son, the only one who knows and reveals the Father, echoes certain things said of divine Wisdom. For instance, Wisdom 9 (a text discussed above) speaks of Wisdom as knowing God: “With you is wisdom, she who knows your works” (9:9). Solomon then asks God to dispatch Wisdom from heaven so that Solomon himself might learn from her: “Send her forth from the holy heavens . . . that I may learn what is pleasing to you. For she knows and understands all things” (9:10–11).

Jesus then invites weary people: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me” (Matt. 11:29). The image of the yoke is common in Jewish tradition as

38. Already in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus has healed the blind (9:27–31), cured the paralyzed (9:2–8), made lepers clean (8:1–4), raised the dead (9:18–26), and proclaimed the gospel (4:23–7:29). The only task Jesus has not performed thus far in Matthew is making the deaf hear (cf. Mark 7:31–37).
a symbol of the Torah (God’s Word), and those who study Torah take this yoke upon themselves. The prophet Jeremiah castigates those who know God’s ways and still reject them: “Then I said, ‘. . . surely they know the way of the Lord, the law of their God.’ But they all alike had broken the yoke” (Jer. 5:4–5). The Mishnah also records a saying of Rabbi Nehunya ben Ha-Kanah that encourages the man “that takes upon himself the yoke of the Law.” Since God’s Word and Wisdom are effectively synonymous, yoke imagery can also be applied to God’s Wisdom. As has been pointed out, Jesus’s words in Matthew 11:29 echo the invitation issued in Sirach 51 to learn from divine Wisdom, whose teaching is likened to a “yoke.” Ben Sira invites his audience, “Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction” (Sir. 51:26). Moreover, as Jesus says, “My yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28), so does Ben Sira speak of the ease of taking upon himself the yoke of Wisdom: “I have labored but little and found for myself much serenity” (Sir. 51:27).

Taken together, Jesus’s words about Wisdom in Matthew 11:19, his self-identification as the Son who alone knows and reveals the Father, and his invitation to take on his “yoke” and “learn” from him all point to Jesus as the incarnation of God’s Word (Torah) or Wisdom. Davies and Allison summarize it well: “The identification of Jesus with Torah makes Jesus the full revelation of God and of his will for man. . . . [Jesus] is the perfect embodiment of God’s purpose and demand and the functional equivalent of Torah. Law-giver and law are one.”

**The Power of Jesus’s Word: A Case Study from Luke**

Throughout his Gospel narrative, Luke uses “the word of God” (and some related expressions) to designate *that which Jesus speaks*. When Jesus first begins his public ministry, he tells his disciples, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God [*euangelisasthai . . . tēn basileian tou theou*] to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose” (4:43). To proclaim the gospel of the kingdom is central to what Jesus says and does. Immediately after this saying, Luke describes Jesus’s proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom in two similar phrases. First, Luke adds that Jesus describes Jesus’s proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom in two similar phrases. First, Luke adds that Jesus “continued

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41. For references, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 289n241.
proclaiming the message [kēryssōn] in the synagogues of Judea” (4:44). For Luke, the Greek verb kēryssēn, referring to Jesus’s preaching in general, is a veritable synonym for euangelizein, “proclaim the good news.” For Luke uses the verb kēryssēn to present Jesus as (1) doing what he had just identified as his mission (to “proclaim the good news”) and (2) indicating what he planned to do next (to do so in “other cities”).

A second phrase related to proclaiming the gospel appears in the very next narrative scene. After an unspecified passage of narrative time, Luke reports that Jesus was teaching beside the Sea of Galilee and that “the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God” (5:1), and this crowd leads Jesus to begin teaching them from Simon Peter’s boat. Luke explicitly identifies that which Jesus teaches as “the word of God” (v. 1), and presumably Jesus continues to teach from the boat (cf. v. 3). This identification of Jesus’s teaching as the Word of God is further corroborated by Luke’s language in the episode of Jesus with Martha and Mary (10:38–42). Luke introduces Mary as the one who “sat at the Lord’s feet and listened to his word” (10:39, translation ours), and this posture identifies Mary as a student of Jesus the Teacher. Given that “Lord” (kyrios) is a title articulating Jesus’s divine identity in Luke, the designation of Jesus’s teaching as “the word” of the “Lord” further supports the identification of Jesus’s teaching as “the word of God.”

By aligning these three articulations—“proclaiming the good news” (euangelizein), “proclaiming the message” or preaching (kēryssēn), and “the word of God”—in such close sequence, Luke invites us to take them as equivalents. That is, “the word of God” is synonymous with the gospel of the kingdom of God; it is that which Jesus teaches and preaches.

Luke presents Jesus’s teaching the Word of God as an essential component to his messianic ministry and identity. As such, Jesus’s teaching the Word is related to his being anointed with the Holy Spirit and power. From the beginning of the Gospel, Luke presents Jesus as being in intimate and constant contact with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit brings about Jesus’s virginal conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary upon her acceptance of God’s invitation, spoken by the angel Gabriel (1:35, 38). John the Baptist says of the Messiah, the one to come after him, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (3:16). That is, he will be the one in whom God will make good on his promise to pour out his Spirit in the end time. At the baptism of Jesus, Luke reports, “The Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form

like a dove” (3:22). The Father’s voice from heaven is a revelation of Jesus’s identity as the Messiah, God’s beloved Son (in the multiple dimensions of that term), and the Suffering Servant: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (3:22). After the baptism, Luke states that “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit . . . was led by the Spirit in the wilderness” (4:1) to confront Satan. Having overcome Satan’s temptations in the wilderness, Jesus goes back to Galilee, “filled with the power of the Spirit” (4:14).

The first major event of Jesus’s public ministry in Luke is the so-called Nazareth inaugural (Luke 4:16–30). The Nazareth inaugural is a telescoping of Jesus’s public ministry into a single episode, for much of what Jesus says in this scene, he does elsewhere in Luke’s narrative—and does so in the power of the Spirit. In this scene, Jesus reads from the Scripture (a combination of Isa. 61:1–2; 42:7; 58:6) and pronounces this prophetic text to be fulfilled in his audience’s present. Jesus uses the Isaiah text to identify himself as the Messiah, the promised bringer of salvation, who is anointed by the Holy Spirit. By declaring to his audience, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21), Jesus indirectly identifies himself as the one spoken of in the Isaiah text. By using the words of Isaiah, Jesus thus says of himself, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me” (Luke 4:18, quoting Isa. 61:1). As the Messiah, Jesus has been anointed with the Holy “Spirit of the Lord.”

Continuing to so employ the Isaiah text, Jesus implicitly identifies many of the activities that he will perform in his ministry as the Spirit-anointed Messiah. What the Isaiah text lists as activities performed by the anointed one, Luke presents Jesus performing in his public ministry. For instance, Isaiah 61:1 lists as the first task of the Messiah “to bring good news [euangelisasthai] to the oppressed” (cf. Luke 4:18, with “to the poor”). Shortly after the Nazareth inaugural, Jesus says that his “purpose” is to “proclaim the good news [euangelisasthai] of the kingdom of God” (4:43). Isaiah 42:7 says that the Servant of the Lord will “open the eyes that are blind” (cf. Luke 4:18: “proclaim . . . recovery of sight to the blind”), and in a summary statement, Luke mentions that Jesus “gave sight to many who were blind” (7:21). Isaiah

47. The expression “You are my Son” recalls multiple texts that speak of the Davidic king (e.g., Ps. 2:7) and the people Israel (e.g., Exod. 4:23; Hosea 11:1) as God’s son. The use of the modifier “beloved” with “Son” links Jesus to Isaac, who is Abraham’s beloved son (Gen. 22:2). The phrase “with you I am well pleased” recalls Isa. 42:1, where similar language is predicated of the Servant of the Lord.


58:6 speaks of the anointed one’s commission “to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). Arguably, in Luke’s narrative, this phrase refers to Jesus’s ministry of exorcism (cf. 4:31–37, 41; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2, 29; 9:42; etc.), for later, in Acts 10:38, Peter speaks of Jesus as “healing all who were oppressed by the devil.”

When Luke presents Jesus performing the messianic works of healing the sick and driving out demons, he speaks of Jesus’s “power” (Greek: dynamis). Luke has already established that Jesus’s “power” is the power of the Holy Spirit, which he possesses as Messiah and Lord (cf. Luke 2:11; 4:14). The power of the Spirit animates and infuses all aspects of Jesus’s messianic ministry. Luke introduces the episode of Jesus healing the paralytic (5:17–26) by stating that “the power of the Lord was with him to heal” (v. 17). Likewise, Luke speaks of a crowd of the infirm and afflicted seeking to touch Jesus, “for power came out from him and healed all of them” (6:19; cf. 8:46). Similar expressions appear in Luke’s accounts of Jesus’s exorcism ministry. In the scene that immediately follows the Nazareth inaugural, Jesus goes to teach in the synagogue at Capernaum (4:31–37). Provoked by the “authority” of his teaching (v. 32), a demon that has taken possession of a congregant manifests itself and tries to assert power over Jesus by using his name (v. 34). Jesus immediately silences and exorcizes the demon by simple command. Upon witnessing what Jesus has done, the synagogue congregation marvels at the power of Jesus’s word: “What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come” (v. 36, translation ours). When he commissions the Twelve, Jesus gives them a delegated share in his ministry and power: he “gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal” (9:1–2).

This pairing of “Spirit” and “power” and their association with Jesus’s messianic ministry likewise appear in Peter’s speech to Cornelius’s household in Acts 10. In recounting Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection, Peter begins with John the Baptist and states, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (10:38). Then immediately Peter summarizes Jesus’s healing miracles and exorcisms: “He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (10:38).

Since Luke uses the language of “power” with reference to Jesus’s messianic tasks of healing and exorcism (both of which he performs by his speaking), it seems warranted to view his messianic task “to bring good news” (Luke 4:18) as likewise infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus proclaims

50. Note, however, that different Greek verbs are used for “oppressed” in Luke 4:18 (thrauein) and Acts 10:38 (katadynasteuein), respectively.
the good news (or teaches the Word of God), he does so in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’s word has causal power because it is his word as the Lord and Messiah, and as such, it is infused with the power of the Holy Spirit.

A further point is that the Word of God proclaimed by Jesus makes present the reality that it articulates. To clarify, we turn again to the Nazareth inaugural. When Jesus interprets the Isaiah texts as speaking of him and his ministry, he declares that that which the Isaiah texts are talking about—the messianic age—is now, in a very real respect, a present reality: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Moreover, the fact that Jesus performs in his ministry those tasks that the Isaiah text prophesies of the messianic age further corroborates the presence of that age in Jesus. Luke thus invites his audience to recognize the kingdom of God—God’s eschatological coming in power to rule as King and exercise that power in healing, forgiving, and delivering his people—as present in the world in Jesus and his ministry.51 In his words, deeds, and very self, Jesus makes the kingdom of God a present reality in the world.

Particularly illustrative of the presence and power of the kingdom of God in Jesus’s ministry are his exorcisms.52 Like Matthew and Mark, Luke records a controversy over the source of power whereby Jesus exorcized demons, with some accusing Jesus of manipulating occult powers (Luke 11:14–28; cf. Matt. 12:22–30; Mark 3:22–27). Within his account of this controversy, Luke—like Matthew—features a Q saying [Q is a hypothetical source used by Matthew and Luke] in which Jesus specifies the source of his exorcistic power: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20). The Matthean version of the saying reads “the Spirit of God,” whereas Luke’s version has “finger of God” (Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20). But even without recourse to the Matthean version, Luke’s insistence that the Spirit’s power infuses Jesus’s words and deeds strongly suggests that we are to take “the finger of God” as referring to the Holy Spirit. The import of the saying, therefore, is that the kingdom’s presence and power are instantiated in Jesus’s exorcizing demons by the power of the Holy Spirit. Put differently, in Jesus, God is now coming in power as King to deliver his people, heal them, and defeat their demonic enemies—“to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18).

As Luke invites his audience to see Jesus’s exorcisms and healings as instances of the presence and power of the kingdom, so too does he invite his audience to understand Jesus’s teaching the Word of God in the same terms.

To “bring good news” is a task for the Spirit-anointed Messiah as much as to give “recovery of sight to the blind, [and] to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18). They are all instances of the presence of the messianic age, which has arrived in Jesus. Taken in this light, the kingdom of God becomes present in the act of Jesus’s preaching and teaching. That is, Jesus’s Spirit-infused preaching of “the good news of the kingdom of God” (v. 43) makes God’s ruling in power as King a manifest and powerful reality in the world.

We might, therefore, conceive of the Word of God spoken by Jesus in the power of the Spirit as making present the divine reality of the kingdom that his words articulate. Jesus’s word is a linguistic means, a vehicle, by which the kingdom comes into the world and its power becomes operative. In a sense, “the good news of the kingdom of God” is the reality of the kingdom in verbal form. The Word makes present the divine reality of which it speaks.

Looking Back and Looking Forward

This survey of texts from both Testaments of the Christian Bible gives evidence for conceiving of the Word spoken by God as having associations with power and forms of presence. The review of Old Testament texts points to a number of associations between God’s Word and his being the Creator and providential governor of all things. By depicting God as creating by a simple word of command, these selected texts underscore the almighty sovereignty of the Creator over his creation. God’s creative Word not only brings things to be, but also reveals God’s intentions for creation. By the same Word, God providentially governs the created world and the events within it. Biblical witnesses present God acting by his Word in the course of events, such as the past events of the exodus, the present life of his covenant people Israel, or the eschatological future of the new covenant. Through the works and words, God reveals some of his attributes—his fidelity and righteousness (Ps. 33:4), his glory and beauty (Sir. 43)—as well as his being Israel’s savior and provider. Through his Word, God reveals something of himself and his designs for the world, and in doing so, he becomes present to people in the modality of being known. Some texts also present the Word of God in personified terms as an agent figure. The Word can be sent by God on a mission, instruct people in God’s ways, and carry out his will.

The survey of New Testament witnesses provides further teaching about God’s Word and its associations with power and presence. Multiple New Testament writings teach that Jesus is the preexistent One through whom God the Father created all things. Jesus is the Son, the Word/Wisdom/Torah...
of God, made flesh—the Word of God present in the world as a human being. To articulate this teaching, New Testament writers employ the resources provided by the biblical wisdom tradition. Focusing on the presentation of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, we see that the Word of God, that which Jesus teaches as part of his ministry as Messiah and Lord, has causal power. The power of the Word of God, proclaimed by Jesus, is closely connected with the Holy Spirit. In Luke’s Gospel, the Holy Spirit rests upon Jesus as the Messiah and infuses his messianic ministry with power. The Spirit-anointed Word, proclaimed by Jesus, also mediates the reality of which it speaks. Jesus’s proclamation of the kingdom of God makes the kingdom of God present and operative in the world.

This chapter has focused on the Word of God, spoken directly by God. In the next two chapters, we expand the focus to consider the Word of God as spoken by human intermediaries: the biblical prophets and apostles. As we will see, the Word of God, proclaimed in the inspired (or Spirit-touched) speech of prophets and apostles, continues to have these same associations with causal power and presence.