

Sacred Scripture



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I. Sacred Scripture and the Scientific Vision of the World: the Major Historical Points of Reference.

The relationship between Sacred Scripture and the scientific vision of the world constitutes a particular and very relevant aspect of the problem concerning the relationship between science and faith. In the first place, the correct understanding of the relationship between Sacred Scripture and the scientific vision of the world depends on the meaning attributed to the word "science." At the same time it also depends upon a right understanding of the word "faith," recognized as signifying an act of a rational nature, i.e., a "reasonable" act and not a kind of irrational impulse stemming solely either from emotion or the will. Comprehension of this specific nature of faith is possible when one grasps the relationship between truth, faith, and reason. From a conceptual point of view, a useful point of departure in this regard is suggested by what is affirmed in the encyclical [Fides et ratio \(1998\)](#) [2]. There, human reason and faith are presented as two "wings" on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth (cf. *Prologue*).

Human reason is manifest in a privileged form in two areas: philosophy, understood as the search for the ultimate principles that are the foundation of reality, including what is immediately observable; and science, understood above all as a rigorous knowledge rooted in experimental evidence and formulated in laws of a mathematical nature. It is necessary to clarify immediately that the concept of science is applied in a general and broad sense not only to the so-called “positive sciences,” e.g., to physics, chemistry, or biology, but also and above all to the philosophical disciplines based on the first principles of knowledge, as well as to the historical sciences, whose criterion of truth is rooted in moral certitude.

As regards the notion of Sacred Scripture, one must refer back to the more general notion of Revelation: Sacred Scripture is, in fact, defined as a font of Revelation (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 7). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines Sacred Scripture in the context of the manifestation of God in history and in Revelation, emphasizing at its center the event of the Incarnation of the Word, second Person of the Most Holy Trinity: “In order to reveal himself to men, in the condescension of his goodness God speaks to them in human words: ‘Indeed the words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men (*Dei Verbum*, n. 13)’ ” (CCC 101). Therefore Sacred Scripture is at the same time the work of God and of men, and preserves a close relationship with the Incarnation of the Word: God expresses Himself in Scripture through human words that always refer back to that perfect Word in which God has always and forever expressed Himself.

Consequently, we define “Revelation” as the self-manifestation of the mystery of the will of God, “by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature (see *Eph* 2:18; *2Pt* 1:4)” (*Dei Verbum*, 2). Within this free and gratuitous self-manifestation, God expresses Himself in Sacred Scripture with human words, taking up the language of men in such a way that “in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them” (*ibidem*, n. 21). Sacred Scripture is therefore the Word of God, and in its every expression the Word of God as a Person, namely, the Word Incarnate, resounds (cf. CCC 101-104).

1. Historical Profile of the Relation between Sacred Scripture and the Sciences. The relationship between Sacred Scripture and the scientific vision of the world began to manifest elements of a lively debate already in the 3rd and 4th centuries due to the nature of certain philosophical currents, such as the skeptical relativism of Celsus (2nd century) and the neo-platonic theosophy of Porphyrius (233-305). Both Celsus and Porphyrius cast doubt upon the divine nature of Christ on account of certain variances found within the [Gospels](#) [3]. Their theories were refuted by Origen (ca. 185 - ca. 253) and Augustine (354-430), respectively.

However, when one thinks about the relationship between science and Sacred Scripture, one immediately thinks of the case of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). The roots of the problem posed by the scientist of Pisa began to sprout near the end of the 14th century when, on account of the decline of theology and scholastic philosophy, a separation arose in Western thought between science and philosophy, and then between faith and reason. The causes of this separation are multiple, but fundamentally can be traced back to the pessimistic view of Nominalism and to the “subjectivist” turn given to gnoseology. The fruit of this separation was twofold: on the one side, even as reason was declaring its [autonomy](#) [4], it saw itself quickly —already with Montaigne (1533-1592)— fall prey to skepticism. To avoid the skepticism of nominalism, human thought sought refuge in faith as the sole means to know the truth with certitude. But in the very same circumstances the autonomy of reason also provoked the opposite effect, that of rationalism, understood as the effort to “rationalize,” i.e., to make evident and demonstrable both faith and Revelation. Such an effort found its first radical exponent in Spinoza (1632-1677).

Within this calling into question of Revelation, and therefore also of Sacred Scripture, we can distinguish various phases marked by prominent personalities such as Luther, Descartes, and Kant (for the role played by these authors, cf. J. Maritain, *Three Reformers: Luther, Descartes, Rousseau* [Westport: Greenwood Press, 1970]). The times of Luther (1483-1546) were a troubled period of thought, in which, on account of the skepticism of the late scholasticism of authors like William of Ockham and Nicholas of Autrecourt in the 14th and 15th centuries, human reason at times took refuge exclusively in faith (*sola fide*) and in the content of Revelation. Luther was a vigorous anti-intellectual who rejected metaphysics and defended the free examination of Sacred Scriptures, convinced that the Holy Spirit assists and guides the intellect of all the faithful. In those same decades at the beginning of the 16th century and especially with F. Bacon (1561-1626), the experimental and logical sciences, were decisively taking a position against Aristotelian physics (although some of its conceptual context remained in force). This also drew with it a critique of metaphysics, now understood reductively, as by this time the mediation of Thomistic thought and of the best of the Scholastics had been lost.

Further developments in the formation of the problem of Sacred Scripture were due to the rationalism of Descartes (1596-1650) and, above all, to the Enlightenment, with their pretext of elevating human reason as the measure of all things. The rationalistic currents of that period influenced the interpretation of Sacred Scripture due to the of Richard Simon (1638-1712). Next, flowing from the debate between rationalism and empiricism, the critical philosophy of Kant (1724-1804) also entered into the discussion in virtue of his interpretation of the Gospels, above all from a moral point of view, giving rise to the study of the figure of Jesus as the great master of morality.

In the 19th century, while human reason was undervalued in France by [fideism](#) [5] and traditionalism (with the works of L.E. Bautain and A. Bonnetty), which based human certitude solely on divine Revelation, reason was assumed as the absolute and universal rule of knowledge by the pantheistic rationalism of the German idealists, especially Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and—in Catholic theology—Hermes, Günther, and Frohschammer. It is in this period that the foundations of the historical and literary sciences were laid. In this context, the interpretation of Sacred Scripture became problematic, because the question of the “inspiration” of Sacred Scripture and of its truthfulness was being posed with particular radicality in view of the data furnished by the natural and historical sciences, which were seeking to specify the historical and literary context of the Bible. Thus arose the so-called “biblical question,” above all with the work of the followers of the idealists, including Schleiermacher, Baur, Strauss, and Wellhausen. For all of these authors, initiators or supporters of what was called “liberal Protestantism,” Revelation is just one moment within the process of the self-knowledge of the Absolute, who is, therefore, the author of Revelation. In this sense, human reason not only can understand the mysteries of God, but also can demonstrate them. Concerning Sacred Scripture, liberal Protestantism advocated an implacable historical critique, together with a literary critique, which oscillated between two extremes: the history of oriental literature and the reconstruction of a “national spirit.” If the first extreme caused the Bible to be considered as one of many literary works of the ancient Middle East, the second dissolved inspiration into a generic permeation of the spirit of a people.

Both fideism and idealistic rationalism were examined and rejected by the First Vatican Council (1870) in the constitution [Dei Filius](#) [6](cf. DH 3008-3020). The Council decisively affirmed that between the two orders of knowledge, that of faith and reason, there can be no opposition, since God is as much the author of Revelation as He is the first agent cause of human thought. Reason and Revelation cannot but converge towards a sole object (God, the highest Truth) considered from two points of view: a) for that which concerns the hidden mysteries of His intimate nature and His providential design, accessible only to the light of faith (Lat. *lumen fidei*); b) for that which can be known departing from creation, in as much as it

is accessible to reason with its natural light (Lat. *naturale rationis lumen*).

2. *The Birth of the Scientific Method and the Galileo Affair*. In dealing with the relationship between faith and reason in its fourth chapter, the encyclical [Fides et ratio](#) [2](1998) dedicates a section to the history of the separation of faith and reason that came about in the culture of the West. The encyclical points out that such a separation coincided with the birth of scientific, physical-mathematical thought (cf. nn. 45-46). The initial fissure widened more and more to the point of finally transforming itself, with the rise of Cartesian critical rationalism, into a true and proper opposition.

In fact, starting with Descartes, the project arose to reconstruct all philosophical knowledge on the foundation of the empirical-mathematical method: in other words, the cognitive methodology of mathematics and physics was elevated to the paradigm of human knowledge in general. Even if the first defenders of the new method were not aware of it, all of this brought about a rejection of metaphysics, and therefore the negation of the intelligibility of faith. This sorrowful separation was favored by various factors, among which can be mentioned two: the defense by certain “theological” sectors to the bitter end of an antiquated method irremediably characterized by recourse to the *auctoritates* and by the defense of the Ptolemaic astronomical system, which seemed indissolubly bound to certain metaphysical theses that could not be renounced; and, on the side of the *novatores*, the exigency, also felt to be indispensable, to establish a domain of knowledge beyond all possible doubt, one based on the certitude and universality which the knowledge furnished by the empirical-positive method seemed to enjoy.

As Maritain pointed out (cf. *Sept leçons sur l'être*, Paris 1933), this was equivalent to substituting the search for [truth](#) [7] with the desire for certitude, and thus to place the ideal of philosophical knowledge no longer in the contemplation of “being,” but in the affirmation of evidence (*more geometrico demonstrata*), both in its empirical aspect and in its deductive *a priori* dimension, starting from principles universally accepted. The passage from this position preoccupied with getting evidence to the subjectivity of the principle of immanence is easily understood: once the principle of immanence is accepted, it is then all too easy, on the one hand, to reject metaphysics, and on the other to consider Revelation as a self-knowledge and no longer as a self-giving that transcends the world.

In this calling into question of human knowledge and the nature of Revelation, the controversy brought about by Galileo has, when all is said and done, a secondary role. Nonetheless, it is instructive and exemplary concerning the formulation of the relationship between biblical exegesis and the sciences. One perceives in the Galileo controversy the inevitable conflict that was necessarily going to arise between the experimental sciences and the totality of convictions derived from that simplistic interpretation of natural phenomena offered by the physics inherited from the Classical period, e.g., the existence of four fundamental elements (earth, water, air and fire) or a *vis vitalis* to distinguish animated things (plants, animals) from the inanimate. In the course of the centuries, several of these convictions had become points of reference for daily life. Indeed, the immobility of the earth and its centrality within the whole of the seven heavens above it were the astronomical expression of a philosophical idea. The earth was the culmination of divine [creation](#) [8], but it was at the same time distinct and distant from the sky. The earth was the lowest point of the universe and above it, at a great distance, the diverse mobile celestial spheres opened up, and thus the “empyreum” was considered the seat of the blessed. The discovery that this was not the case, brought about by the progressive affirmation of the Copernican model, did not represent solely an astronomical revolution, but also a change in vital points of reference. The earth was seen to be in the skies, more exactly, in the third heaven from the sun, with the sun occupying the central place.

So the astronomical discoveries achieved by the use of the telescope by Galileo had an immediate repercussion on cosmology and, therefore, on Sacred Scripture, which seemed to favor the ancient

cosmology. The data gathered by the scientist of Pisa not only rendered the Ptolemaic system improbable and hence also Aristotelian metaphysics, but it also seemed to contradict the literal interpretation of certain biblical passages, which up to that point had been undisputed (cf. *Gn* 10:12-13; *Ps* 19:5-7; 92:1 and 104:5; *Jb* 10:12-13; *Eccl* 1:4-5; *Sir* 46:4; *Is* 38:7-8). Judged by the outlook of the time, the controversy made evident the scarce capacity on the part of the established cultural structures to assimilate the new scientific ideas, and the epistemology which accompanied it. The distrust with which the scholastic philosophers and theologians received the new cosmology indicates the extent to which scholasticism had lost its characteristic as *philosophia perennis* in the 16th century. Such a philosophical apparatus not only was no longer a service to scientific knowledge, but also to Revelation, which was now understood with less profundity than had ever been the case in the patristic and medieval epochs.

On the other hand, to make a well-balanced judgement it is necessary to consider that the European cultural context was in a state of commotion, under the shock, not yet overcome, of the Protestant Reformation. The reformers had not hesitated to consider metaphysics and Aristotle's school of thought as responsible for the legalistic vision of ethics. This led Roman Catholics to seeing seeds of Protestantism in whatsoever new thing presented itself as anti-Aristotelian. One also cannot forget that, in fact, a few decades before Galileo, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was condemned to the stake, and the echoes of that condemnation were still alive.

The case of Galileo is, as it is said, paradigmatic, because it shows in action the cultural components of a separation that continues to the present day. It is the clash between an excessive "theologism" (that is, the absolutization of a certain theological school) and a vision of science unaware of its philosophical and gnoseological premises. Under the pressure of events —suspicions of Lutheran reformism, the upheaval of traditional astronomical physics, polemics against the whole Aristotelian system— a rushed solution was brought forward, which did not respect the just exigencies of the science it was condemning and abjuring, even if Galileo, contrary to what a certain historiography of the 18th century had ideologically put about, was treated with great humanity and toleration.

The background of the question, therefore, is not devoid of interest, because in it three problems of great importance appear to merge together. The first concerns the necessity to establish hermeneutic criteria for the Bible in questions that apparently contrast with data of the natural sciences. The second problem was to establish the gnoseological premises (the method) that would permit the incorporation of the new astronomical theories into an universally valid gnoseology. The third and most thorny problem was to maintain the gnoseological continuity between the new scientific method and the foundations of metaphysics. In brief, in the case of the theories of the scientist of Pisa, at stake were the definition and lasting relevance of a *philosophia prima*.

3. Galileo's Statements on Biblical Hermeneutics. The thought of Galileo on Sacred Scripture is principally found condensed in two letters, one to [Father Benedict Castelli, dated December 21, 1613](#) [9], and another [to the Grand Duchess Maria Cristina of Lorena, finished in June, 1615](#) [10]. Both letters were written before the disciplinary measures of the Holy Office of February, 1616, and in a certain way they represent the preparation of his defense. In the two letters, more extensively in the one addressed to the Grand Duchess, Galileo expounds his conviction of the compatibility between Sacred Scripture and the Copernican system. The scientist begins with a fundamental affirmation: there can be no contradiction between two truths. As he said in the letter to the Grand Duchess: "With regard to this argument [the Copernican system], I think in the first place that it is very pious to say and prudent to affirm that the Holy Bible can never speak untruth —whenever its true meaning is understood. But I believe nobody will deny that it is often very abstruse, and may say things that which are quite different from what its bare words signify" (*Opere*, edited by A. Favaro [Firenze: Giunti Barbera, 1968], vol. V, p. 315); and in a

more theological way to Castelli: “proceeding such questions equally from the divine Word of the Holy Scripture and from Nature, the former as dictated by the Holy Ghost and the latter as the observant executrix of God’s order [...], it appears that physical effects placed before our eyes by sensible experience, or concluded by necessary demonstrations, should not in any circumstances be called in doubt by passages in Scripture that verbally have a different semblance” (*ibidem*, pp. 282-283). The solution therefore resides in interpreting Scripture in a sense that diverges from the immediate and literal one, as in the case when one says that God has eyes, hands, and fingers, or that He repents, gets angry, or feels compassion.

The biblical hermeneutics proposed by Galileo therefore rests on two firm points: the inerrancy of Sacred Scripture and the impossibility always to attribute an absolutely literal meaning to biblical texts (see below, III). In addition, Galileo implicitly holds the compatibility of science and Revelation when he affirms that one cannot have recourse to the latter in questions that are not of faith. In the end, the Italian scientist affirms that, when it is not possible to attribute an absolutely literal meaning to the Scriptural expressions, we must conclude that the holy author has adapted his language to the common and ordinary way of speaking and thinking.

II. The “Biblical Question” and the Development of the Natural Sciences

1. The Context of Scientific Knowledge during the 18th and 19th Centuries. The question raised by Galileo and the matters accompanying it having settled down, the inerrancy of Sacred Scripture was again called into discussion during the second half of the 18th century and even more in the century that followed. In giving a response to both rationalism and fideism, the First Vatican Council also established the “fundamental truth” of every interpretation relies upon the “inspiration” of Sacred Scripture. “Furthermore, this supernatural revelation, according to the faith of the universal Church, as declared by the holy synod of Trent, is contained “in the written books and in the unwritten traditions which have been received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself; or, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit have been handed down by the apostles themselves, and have thus come to us.” And, indeed, these books of the Old and New Testament, whole with all their parts [...] are to be accepted as sacred and canonical. But the Church holds these books as sacred and canonical, not because, having been put together by human industry alone, they were then approved by its authority; nor because they contain revelation without error; but because, having been written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and, as such, they have been handed down to the Church itself” (DH 3006). The reference to the “canonicity” of the sacred books means to indicate that the Church, by means of a process of continual comparison with the testimony of the apostles and of their successors, from the first centuries took care to identify which texts belong to the deposit of apostolic Tradition, separating them from other writings that did not give evidence of such a guarantee.

The conclusions regarding the “inerrancy,” or truth, of the Bible drawn from this premise were expressed in the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII (November 18, 1893), which established the proper criteria of interpretation in the face of the opinions of liberal Protestantism and the excesses of rationalism. This document affirms that between the physical sciences and Sacred Scripture there can be no contradiction: “Indeed there should be no real disagreement between the theologian and the physicist, provided that each confines himself within his own territory, watching out for this, according to St. Augustine’s warning “not to make rash assertions, and to declare the unknown as known” (*De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber*, IX, 30: PL 34, 233). But, if they should disagree, a summary rule for how a theologian should conduct himself is offered by the same author. “Whatever,” he says, “they can demonstrate by genuine proofs regarding the nature of things, let us show that it is not contrary to our

Scripture; but whatever they set forth in their volumes contrary to our Scriptures, that is to Catholic faith, let us show by some means, or let us believe without any hesitation, to be most false” (*De Genesi ad litteram*, I, 21: PL 34, 262)” (DH 3287).

The encyclical further establishes the proper criterion for understanding how Sacred Scripture speaks of natural phenomena. The point of departure once again is a text of St. Augustine: “Let us consider, first, that the sacred authors, or more truly “the Spirit of God, who spoke through them, did not wish to teach men these things (namely the innermost constitution of the visible universe) as being of no profit to salvation” (*De Genesi ad litteram*, II, 9: PL 34, 270)” (DH 3288). The solution consists in holding that the holy authors had written either in a metaphoric sense (*quodam translationis modo*) or according to a way of speaking proper to their epoch (*sicut communis sermo per ea ferebat tempora*). Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, the encyclical adds that the hagiographers followed that which appears to the senses (*ea quae sensibilibus apparent*) (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 70, a. 1, ad 3um).

2. The Questions Posed to the Scriptures by the Sciences in the 20th Century. The first decades of the 20th century saw the influence of the criteria of liberal Protestantism on several Catholic authors under the spur of a claimed exigency to update the Church to make her fit for the times. The positions of the modernists, as the proponents of this updating of the Church were called, were particularly close to the theses of Harnack, Norden, and Gunkel, i.e., of representatives of historical, philosophical, and literary currents tied to liberal Protestantism. The pontificate of St. Pius X (1903-1914) progressed marked by a precise clarification of the errors contained in many modernist theses, by now already introduced into various Catholic fields. For those concerning Sacred Scripture, the decree *Lamentabili* (July 3, 1907) and the encyclical *Pascendi* (September 8, 1907) are of particular importance. Among other things, *Pascendi* explicates a synthesis of the various forms of modernism. The Pontiff makes evident the immanentist presupposition of the new critics, who considered faith as something that flows solely from the subjective religiosity of human beings and who hence denied its objective dimension and, in a certain way, also its rational dimension. Such an apriorism united to a reconstruction that is itself also an a priori of the evolution of religious feeling leads to the practical denial of inspiration and therefore of inerrancy, reducing it simply to a literary inspiration (a capacity to express the religious feeling of one’s own epoch).

Pascendi and the decree *Lamentabili* have above all a character of defense and of denouncing the errors and consequences of the new ideas. The same can be said of the various responses of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) given in those years. The positive response to the challenge of modernism came with a second encyclical dealing with exegetical arguments, that of Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus* (September 15, 1920). In that document, the Roman Pontiff points to St. Jerome (ca. 347-419) as an example for exegetes and, confirming what Leo XIII had said, clarified that regarding the biblical narrations of an historic character, one could not apply the principle valid for natural phenomena, i.e., that the human author had written following the opinions of the times. All the same, the encyclical did not offer the necessary indications to resolve the doubts, but simply limited itself to setting forth general criteria. A more complete and exhaustive response in light of the progress of the auxiliary sciences (archaeology, history, philosophy, comparative history of literature, etc., see below, IV) was offered by a third biblical encyclical, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of Pius XII (September 30, 1943). With this encyclical, the decisive criterion for resolving the doubts concerning inerrancy was established. It was necessary to keep in mind in the various cases the norms of the “literary genres” in use at the time of redaction, with their rules, stylistic precepts and rhetorical devices. By confirming what the previous documents had taught, the encyclical was aiming for a greater collaboration of the auxiliary sciences with exegesis properly so-called, such that the thought and mind of the human author could be reconstructed with greater probability. Exegesis thus remains open to all the scientific conclusions compatible with the

supernatural character of Sacred Scripture. Several years later, in 1950, a new encyclical, *Humani Generis*, confirmed the whole of the teaching in the three preceding documents, highlighting with vigor, against the rationalistic excesses of the *nouvelle théologie*, the infallibility of the whole Bible, the value of its literal meaning, and the importance of the criteria derived from the particular nature of Sacred Scripture: the analogy of faith, recourse to Tradition, and the interpretation of the Magisterium (cf. DH 3887-3889).

The exegetical critique of the Bible developed much due to the foundation of literary and historical criticism. Thus the problem was posed of establishing the measure, the devices, and the precautions that a Catholic exegete ought to use in applying the historical-critical methods to the study of the Bible. A first response to this problem was given by the instruction *Sancta Mater Ecclesia* of the PBC of April 21, 1964. The instruction dealt with the historical truth of the [Gospels](#) [3], but its affirmations had a more general scope. Always keeping in mind the link present between Scripture and Tradition as this develops in the *tria tempora traditionis*, i.e., in the preaching of Christ, the preaching of the apostles, and the preaching of their successors in the episcopacy (DH 4402-4407), the document maintains the legitimacy of using the methods of historical and literary criticism, including those employed by the “History of Forms” (Ger. *Formengeschichte*), yet calls for caution due to the dependence of the historical-critical methods on philosophical premises incompatible with Revelation and faith.

The intellectual opening toward all the historical-critical and literary methods, united to an adhesion to Tradition, was solemnly sanctioned in the same period by the Second Vatican Council in the dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* (1965). The fundamental text is the following: “However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to 'literary forms.' [...] But, since Holy Scripture must be read and interpreted in the sacred spirit in which it was written, no less serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the harmony which exists between elements of the faith (*analogia fidei*)” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 12).

The period after the Second Vatican Council furthered two main phenomena: on the one hand, the incessant following, one upon the other, of different methods of historical and literary criticism (the sociological method, the cultural anthropological, the psychological, and the psychoanalytical), none of which seemed to offer a convincing and definitive solution; and, on the other hand, the diffusion of linguistic methods based upon the study of language, semiotics, and narrative theory. All these factors merged together in the document of the PBC of April 15, 1993, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. In this document, the openness of the Catholic Church to all methods compatible with the supernatural origin of the Bible was affirmed, as well as the necessity of the use of the historical-critical method as an important instrument of exegesis.

3. The Compatibility between Sacred Scripture and Science in the Context of the Relation between Faith and Reason. Among the principal truths to be held, one is reminded in *Dei Verbum* that Sacred Scripture is the word of God in as much as it was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; that Tradition and Scripture constitute the sacred deposit of the word of God entrusted to the Church; and, finally, that the Revelation which Sacred Scripture contains and offers, was put into writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (cf. nn. 9-11). Revelation is the way God manifests Himself: “In His goodness and wisdom God chose to reveal Himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of His will (see *Eph* 1,9) by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and

come to share in the divine nature” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2). There exists a natural Revelation, in which God manifests Himself through the works of [creation](#) [8], and a supernatural and positive Revelation, which was given in human history.

Supernatural Revelation consists of both words and deeds: “This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2). This design of salvation corresponds to a pedagogical plan, which arranges the revelation of the Old Testament as a preparation and “figure” of the New Testament. Christ, as the Word of God incarnate, is the summit and fullness of Revelation. After Christ, God has no other word with which to speak to us, because in Him He said all. Christ is “both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation” (*ibidem*). The understanding of Scripture therefore leads one back to the understanding of the mystery of the Word Incarnate in the sense that all Scripture speaks of Him and in the sense that Scripture is nothing other than a “prolongation” of the Incarnation, in which the divine and human natures unite without being altered or confused.

III. The Content of Sacred Scripture in the Light of Contemporary Historical-Critical Analysis.

The term “hermeneutics” comes from the Greek verb *hermeneúo*, “translate, interpret.” Hermeneutics is that part of historical and literary science that seeks to establish the meaning of documents or texts, i.e., attempts to make evident and comprehensible what an author wanted to say or what a document meant in a determined historical and social context. Given that the Bible is a book written by human authors and with human language, the norms of general hermeneutics can be applied to it. But at the same time the Bible is the work of a principal and divine author: As *Dei Verbum*, 11, says, “The books of both the Old and New Testaments in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and canonical because written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself.” Given that the divine intellect is infinitely superior to the human intellect, this peculiarity must be kept in mind when one wishes to propose an interpretation. Therefore there exist certain hermeneutical rules proper and exclusive to the Bible on account of its divine origin. Biblical hermeneutics studies the whole of all these rules, both the common and general, and the specific and particular.

1. The Problem of Hermeneutics. In human language, the meaning of a text, written or oral, is usually one. To affirm the contrary would be a source of errors and would cause uncertainty in the reader or listener. Nonetheless, in the case of Sacred Scripture, one cannot exclude that God had wished to communicate “more than one sole meaning.” This does not contradict the fact that the literal meaning is only one, because the multiplicity of meanings is rooted in the fact that they are entirely coherent, not contradictory, and are found at diverse levels of profundity. In every case there must be, in the text itself or in the tradition which accompanies it, sufficient indications of such polysemy. The richness of a biblical text thus is not exhausted by the “literal” sense or meaning, which refers to what the words in themselves indicate (*prout verba significant res*), but can be found in a plurality of analogous meanings, giving rise to the polysemy of the Bible, which is a reflection of the analogous character (neither univocal or equivocal) of biblical language.

Thus the requirement of interpretation or hermeneutics is twofold: on the one side, it is necessary to establish the true literal meaning of the words; on the other side, it is necessary to discover what and how many are the true meanings of a text at its various levels and to demonstrate their coherency and lack of

contradiction. In addition, from the point of view of the correctness of a text, hermeneutics is necessary to rule out erroneous meanings that are proposed, and so to make the literal meaning appear clearly in its aspect as the primitive text.

The necessary point of departure for biblical hermeneutics is the notion of inspiration: with it, the believer realizes that the text is a divine and a human work at the same time. God in fact acts in the sacred authors and through them in such a way that the writing reflects all and only that which He wishes to reveal for our salvation. The criteria of interpretation therefore correspond to this twofold nature, divine and human, of Scripture (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 12). In this way, we can distinguish certain criteria that come from the supernatural nature of the Bible and which we can consider as specific or particular to it in as much as they are not applied to any other book. Necessary also are general and common criteria that derive from Sacred Scripture considered as any other literary work, and thus susceptible to being examined with the criteria of a literary kind.

2. Plurality of Meanings. In human language, words possess a natural meaning, determined by conventions active in every historic moment and by relationships with the context. This meaning, which depends on the grammar of a language and on its habitual use, is called the “literal meaning.” It can be the “proper literal” meaning if one is dealing with a direct and simple discourse and there is no need to use particular literary devices. It could also be a “figurative literal” meaning, also known as “metaphoric,” if the use of rhetorical figures such as the parable, allegory, or comparison is present. The proper literal sense is the normal meaning of historical narrations; in contrast, the figurative literal meaning is much more frequent in the poetry and other literary genres of a parabolic or metaphorical kind belonging to the sapiential and prophetic books, though it can also be present sporadically in the historical books. The literal meaning indicates that which the author wished to say directly, through the immediate signification of the terms used.

In Sacred Scripture, the literal meaning is always present: if it were not thus, the principal author would have written words disconnected and devoid of meaning, something clearly incompatible with the truthfulness and holiness of God. The literal meaning is understood and intended by the human author and is the basis upon which any other “meanings” or “senses” are founded. Besides being universally present, this literal sense is also unique, because otherwise the language would become equivocal and considerable uncertainty would result at the moment of establishing the meaning of a text.

However, there are other senses besides the literal sense. One should keep in mind the “*plenior* sense” or “*eminent* sense,” which only some texts present beyond the literal sense. This sense either completes and specifies the literal sense, ascribing it to a specific subject chosen from a multiplicity (which explains the name “*eminent*”), or gives to the particular term a profundity and special fullness. An example is that of a property affirmed of many individuals, but applied in a more proper and complete sense (which explains the adjective *plenior*) to only one among them. This is the case in Genesis 3,15, when God announces that He will establish enmity between the serpent and “the” woman (with the article), between the descendants of the serpent and those of the woman. This “woman” refers directly and immediately to Eve, but is also a collective name indicating all women in as much as they can have descendents. And yet the presence of the article leads one to think of one woman in particular. If one keeps in mind the New Testament, in the Letter to the Galatians St. Paul affirms that Christ was born “of a woman” (*Gal* 4,4). The name “woman” is attributed therefore in an eminent and more perfect way to the Mother of Jesus Christ. The *plenior* sense can be unknown to the human author and come to be manifest only *a posteriori* from the unity of Sacred Scripture and from the connection of the mysteries of faith (*analogia Scripturarum* and *analogia fidei*). In fact, to affirm that a text possesses a *plenior* sense it is necessary that it refer to what is known through other sources, which can be other scriptural texts or even the teachings

of apostolic Tradition.

The “typological” or “figurative” sense is another biblical meaning or sense that runs alongside the literal: in some cases it is connected to the parallelism existing between persons, things, or events in the Old and New Testaments. The persons, things, or events of the Old Testament are “figures” or “types” (Gr. *typoi*) of the realities of the New Testament. The correlation can be established if it is revealed by Scripture or by Tradition, or if there was unanimous consent about it among the Fathers of the Church. From the various examples of the typological sense, one can cite the discourse of the Lord in the synagogue of Capernaum (cf. *Jn* 6:22-65) when He revealed that manna was the figure of the true bread of heaven or of the bread of life, i.e., of the Eucharist. At another time in His preaching (cf. *Mt* 12:38-40; *Mk* 8:11-12; *Lk* 11:29-32), Jesus Himself establishes a parallelism between the events of Jonah (that is, the three days passed in the stomach of the whale) and that of His death and resurrection. In the same way, the Letter to the Hebrews affirms that everything referring to the construction of the tabernacle or the ark were “shadows,” or figures, of the reality that is the Body of Christ, His Sacrifice, and the Church (cf. *Heb* 8:5; 9:9; and 9:23). St. Paul himself reveals that the episodes narrated in the book of Exodus were figures of Christian reality, namely, of the Church and the sacraments (cf. *1Cor* 10:6.11). Again, for example, among the Fathers, the ark of Noah was constantly interpreted as a figure of baptism, and the sacrifice of Abel and that of Melchizedech as prefiguring the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. For the Fathers of Church, many personages in the Old Testament are figures of [Jesus Christ](#) [11], among whom, the more common ones are Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jeremiah, and Job. This obviously doesn’t mean that all the aspects of their life were a “figure” of Christ, but that the most significant aspect of their existence finds in Christ its most complete unfolding.

The three senses considered up to now —namely, the literal, the *plenior*, and the typological sense— are senses of the “text” in as much as they are intended by the human author (literal sense) or by the divine author (*plenior* and typological). The Fathers of the Church were also accustomed to speak of a sense of Sacred Scripture that goes beyond the letter of the text and permits one to penetrate the divine reality. This sense is usually called the “spiritual sense” to distinguish it from the literal. At times, the spiritual sense coincides with the typological, but in other occasions it is a sense that the interpreter discovers in the light of the totality of the content of faith. In this case, one is dealing with a sense which derives from the application of a biblical text to an actual situation, with certain shades of symbolism or of allegory. In this sense, for example, all the prescriptions regarding purity and impurity as found in the Law, especially those which refer to the distinct forms of leprosy, can be interpreted as symbols of sin in general and especially of sins against chastity. To this category belongs also numerical symbolism. For example, St. Augustine sees in the sending of the disciples “two by two” a symbol of the twofold precept of charity. Or again for the bishop of Hippo, the fact that the number of disciples was 72 is a symbol of the perfection of the New Testament compared to the Old Testament: 72 is in fact the result of the sum of 70+2, i.e., seven (symbol of perfection) times ten (the commandments of the Old Law) plus the twofold precept of charity. It is evident that this sense needs to be used with prudence and moderation, always respecting the literal sense. Within these limits, the spiritual sense can be useful for its applications of a pastoral nature.

3. Methods and Criteria to Discover the Meaning of a Text. The fundamental principle the interpreter must have in mind is that Sacred Scripture is a part of Revelation and that it was entrusted to the Church. The meaning of a text is therefore bound to the totality of Revelation in a twofold direction: a) there can never be contradictions between two texts, and b) an obscure text receives light from texts that are clearer or from truths of Revelation that are better known. In addition, the text is not disconnected from the Church, because it was received by her and transmitted by her. Moreover, as the Second Vatican Council recalls, it is necessary to turn to Tradition, given that Scripture and Tradition constitute the sole fount of

Revelation.

In regard to Scripture, Tradition has an explicative, defensive, and diffusive function. Therefore, in interpreting the sacred text, it is always necessary to know what Tradition says about a passage of Sacred Scripture by consulting the appropriate sources. Among them, it is necessary to cite the works of the Fathers of the Church and of ecclesiastical writers. Among the declarations of the First Vatican Council it was also stated that it was not licit to interpret a text against the unanimous consent of the Fathers (cf. DH 3307). The successive Magisterium confirmed such an assertion and extends its bearing, clarifying that the opinion even of one single Father merits trust in the case of an author who is repeating or defending the doctrine received and not one of his personal opinions. This is the case, for example, of St. Athanasius, St. Basil, and St. Gregory Nazianzen in the controversy with the Arians; of St. Cyril of Alexandria before the Nestorians; of St. Augustine against the Pelagians; of St. Leo the Great against the monophysites; and of St. Maximus the Confessor against the iconoclasts. The unanimous consent of the Fathers (*quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, as St. Vincent of Lerins affirmed) is the certain criterion of Tradition, as is the unanimous consent of the Doctors of the Church and of theologians across the centuries. The ancient liturgies can also be mentioned as sources of Tradition, as much in the East as in the West, and holy art. In addition, we recall that there exists an infallibility of the Church *in credendo*: a truth believed by all and everywhere, in an uninterrupted way, from time immemorial, in union with the legitimate pastors, certainly belongs to the deposit of faith, even if it has not been defined by the Magisterium. One is speaking, in this case, of the *sensus fidei* of the people of God (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 12).

According to the Second Vatican Council II, Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium of the Church constitute such a unity that one of them could not exist without the others (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 10). The deposit of faith, contained in Revelation, was entrusted to the Church so that she might preserve it intact, know it with ever greater profundity, defend it from erroneous interpretations, and announce it to men and women of all times. This is particularly the case for Sacred Scripture, as part of the same Revelation. Its correct sense is that which the Church maintained and maintains, as thought by means of its [Magisterium](#) [12], whether in its solemn and extraordinary forms (ecumenical councils and *ex cathedra* definitions of the Roman Pontiff) or through the forms of its ordinary and universal exercise, as in the encyclicals and the other documents issued by the Pope or by the bishops in communion with him (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 25).

There are very few cases in which the Catholic Magisterium has proposed the sense of a biblical text in a definitive way. One might mention, for example, the decree on original sin promulgated by the Council of Trent (June 17, 1546; cf. DH 1510-1516), in which it is affirmed that the text of *Rom* 5:12 refers to the original sin committed by Adam, a sin that is present in each human person as one's own, a sin transmitted not by imitation but by propagation (cf. DH 1512). And then there is the affirmation of the First Vatican Council that the passages of *Mt* 16,16-18 and *Jn* 21,15-17 explicitly refer to the universal primacy of the apostle Peter over the whole Church, a primacy that also includes the infallibility of the Magisterium of his successors (*Pastor Aeternus*, July 18, 1870, DH 3053). More often it is the case that biblical texts are cited as support for teaching a truth of the faith, but without the intention of defining their meaning: here examples would be the texts of the greeting of the archangel Gabriel to Mary (*Lk* 1:28: "Hail, favored one!") and of the so-called proto-evangelium (cf. *Gn* 3:15), which were adopted as the biblical foundation of the immunity of Mary from original sin, i.e., of her "Immaculate Conception" (cf. Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, December 8, 1854). In more recent times, the Catholic Magisterium has especially played the role of orienting biblical studies, yet without the desire to limit the field of studies or the freedom of research of the exegetes. In this regard, the two interventions already cited of the PBC in 1964 and 1993 are particularly significant.

Sacred Scripture is inserted into the global context of Revelation, i.e., into the whole of all the truths that are objects of faith. Because God is its principal author, Sacred Scripture constitutes a unity precisely on account of the unicity of its divine Author. This means that in order to clarify the meaning of a biblical passage, one can have recourse to other truths of the faith or to other passages of the same Scriptures. This way of proceeding, which constitutes a real hermeneutic principle, is known as the “analogy of faith” (Lat. *analogia fidei*) and, in the case of having recourse to other texts within the Scriptures, it is called the “analogy of scriptural faith” (cf. DH 3016, 3887, see [Analogy](#) [13]).

The theological criteria having been established, the field remaining to exegetical research is quite ample. This research must develop according to the rules of literary and historical criticism. The first task thus is to establish a text that is critically secure (the proper task of textual criticism). Once the text is established, it needs to be subjected to a very careful and attentive reading. Such a reading must take place on the original text and needs to resolve the various problems of a grammatical and lexical nature: the structure of the phrases and of the period, the order of the words, and the meaning of the terms utilized. In short, one is concerned to discover with the greatest possible accuracy what the human author wanted to say.

The fundamental norms of literary criticism establish that the meaning of a text can be extracted, and must be extracted, not only by the reading of the text, but also by the consideration of the “context”: the proximate context that precedes and follows the text; and the remote context, i.e., the structure and the finality of the whole work or of the particular book, the historical circumstances in which the text was conceived and redacted, the eventual sources from which the human author drew or the models which he followed or imitated, the other works or writings of the same author. It is always very important to establish the literary genre of the text being considered, because every literary genre must take account of parallel texts of the same author or of other authors in order to establish the analogy of meaning.

4. Hermeneutics Based on the Historical-Critical Methods. The systematic use of these criteria creates a hermeneutic “method.” Given that the criteria set forth are based upon the historical sciences, these methods can all be included under the name of “historical-critical method.” As the PBC’s document of 1993 cited above explains: “Holy Scripture, inasmuch as it is the “Word of God in human language”, has been composed by human authors in all its various parts and in all the sources that lie behind them. Because of this, its proper understanding not only admits the use of this method but actually requires it” (EV 13, 2862). The use of this method in every case must be united to a careful discernment in order to eliminate the philosophical apriorisms which can condition it, given that it originally developed in a rationalistic and idealistic context.

The historical-critical method is an essentially “historical” method, because it seeks to reconstruct the history of the formation of a text by means of its sources, documents, and literary peculiarities. In this sense, one is speaking of a “diachronic method” (i.e. developed through time). This method is distinguished from the “synchronic” methods, which seek to establish the meaning based upon the text as it has come down to us, shedding light on the connections, the structures, and the rules of redaction. Besides the diachronic methods, as they are called, there are also the synchronic methods, which do not consider the preparation or the formation of a text, but only consider its relationship to the context or to its internal coherence. The document of 1993 cites three examples: rhetorical analysis, narrative theories, and semiotic analysis. The first consists in detecting and describing the meaning and the function of various parts of a text in light of the author’s general intention; the second method focuses on the nature and process of narration, discerning the real author, the fictitious author, the real reader, the fictitious reader, and the narrative thread; and, finally, the third seeks to identify the personages and the ideas that

animate the development of the narration. From the methodological point of view, the synchronic methods approach the text with a smaller possible number of presuppositions and inquire into its structure both on the surface (literary context, grammatical and syntactical aspects, stylistic resources, phraseology, etc.) and in depth (logico-demonstrative elements, content, literary genres, etc.).

These methods can be a useful complement to the diachronic methods and allow one to avoid subjectivist excesses. It needs to be made clear, however, that even the synchronic methods were developed departing from gnoseologies or sciences of language of an immanentist type (phenomenology, [positivism](#) [14], existentialism, structuralism). The synchronic methods require a detailed analysis of a text, including its most minute elements, yet they do not always arrive at establishing its meaning in a clear way. If they are not based upon a gnoseological [realism](#) [15], they can lead only to a sterile dissection of the text.

In the end, we notice that the PBC's document of 1993 makes a distinction between "method," which is a global system of explanation, and "approach," which is a partial vision, or an analysis performed under a determinate point of view. Among the approaches are cited, in the first place, the canonical approach, the recourse to the Judaic interpretative traditions, and the history of the effects of the text (Ger.

Wirkungsgeschichte). Other approaches, derived from the contribution of human sciences, are the sociological approach, the anthropological cultural, the psychoanalytical, and the psychological. Then there exist contextual approaches, which keep in mind the necessities and context of the readers, such as the perspective used by liberation theology and feminist theology. At the end of these "approaches," the document discusses in a separate section what constitutes the "fundamentalist reading" and biblical fundamentalism (see below, V.4).

None of these methods or approaches is denied to the Catholic commentator, but he must examine and evaluate them critically in light of their compatibility with the faith and with a right conception of God, the world, and man. For this reason, the document manifests clear reservations regarding the approaches of liberation and feminist theologies, and, above all, that used by the fundamentalist reading, while its judgement of the other methods and approaches depends substantially on the particular philosophy they take as their base and the point of departure of their argumentations.

IV. The Employment of Sciences as Auxiliary Disciplines for the Study of Sacred Scripture.

The use of the sciences, whether philosophical or positive, do not entail any danger for the interpretation of Sacred Scripture if one keeps their respective foundations and limits clear. The sciences also come to the assistance of biblical exegesis as "auxiliary disciplines," in as much as they allow one to know the geographical, historical, and literary context of the sacred books better. One then asks the question: what are the qualifications that a science must have in order not to oppose Sacred Scripture? Also, what qualifications must an auxiliary science have?

From what has been said before, one may easily deduce that the first prerequisite asked of a science, whether it be of a philosophical or empirical-mathematical type, is the compatibility of its presuppositions with the content of divine Revelation, considered in its entirety, as an interpretation of the truth of the human being and of the world in light of their condition as creatures. This leads also to the affirmation of the possibility, on the part of human thought, to know the [truth](#) [7] and to transmit such knowledge. In other words, it is necessary to have overcome the dilemma Descartes posed himself about methodical doubt. To embrace methodical doubt would be equivalent to situating oneself in that line of thought which inevitably leads to gnoseological immanentism. Science runs the risk of being at odds with

Revelation when, ignoring its limits and its foundations, it claims to set itself up as the sole form of knowledge or when it fixes the point of departure of all knowledge in the subject. It is necessary to have clear that the truth, understood as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, is above all adjustment of the intellect to the *res*, rather than vice versa.

In this sense, the affirmation that science can only know the “how” of things, but not their “why” —an affirmation that has continued to have a following, also in the neo-positivistic context— and that therefore human knowledge would always and only be knowledge of a model, implies a denial of the possibility of Revelation. If human knowledge is only self-knowledge, one inevitably falls victim to subjectivism, without any guarantee of certainty. What has been historically verified for Cartesian rationalism, the Enlightenment, idealistic rationalism, and positivism, can also be verified today in relation to certain uses of logic and of the sciences of language (semiotics, semantics, lexicology, and grammar) in exegesis; also in this case we would be in front of an exacerbated rationalism which, based upon methodological doubt, limits itself to affirming the “as if” of things, while fleeing from any affirmation about real being.

As a matter of principle, the exegete can have recourse to all the sciences that “help him to understand the meaning of the facts.” We are referred first to history, archaeology, philology, sociology, and psychology; in a word, all that permits us to understand better an author’s thought, from his historical circumstances all the way to the psychology of his subconscious, can offer help, at times very useful, to understand a text better. To be compatible with Revelation, its historical possibility, and its content mean for the sciences to be open to transcendence and not to remain confined in an alleged intellectual self-sufficiency. In other words, it requires that the exercise of the sciences not be nourished by a rationalistic or fideistic substrata, which can be avoided when the sciences are kept within their proper formal object and remain open towards other fields of knowledge. As a particular example, it is necessary for these sciences to recognize the problem of their own foundations from within their method, both on a gnoseological and an ontological level, and to admit in the end, at least as a possibility, a supernatural element (in our specific case, an inspired and inerrant divine Revelation). Finally, it is necessary that the auxiliary sciences be based upon an ontological knowledge (*ens et verum convertuntur*) and that they be guided by a metaphysical gnoseology, i.e., that they be directed towards being in itself and in all its fullness, and not be limited solely to the knowing subject.

In this fruitful and dynamic interaction with Scripture, not only can the human, historical, or literary sciences participate, but also the [natural sciences](#) [16]. Provided that the criteria previously pointed out are respected, the more precise knowledge they give us of the created world in all its dimensions, from its historical development to the richness of its components, can help us better to understand the Word of God written and transmitted. The role of the natural sciences is without doubt quite important, given the great quantity of contextual knowledge that they, maybe more than the human sciences, are capable of offering today. At the same time, it cannot be forgotten that the sacred text has as its most basic motive the revelation of basic truths about the relationships between human beings and God; only secondarily does it deal with truths concerning material reality in itself, the object of the natural sciences. These latter truths are presented by Scripture from within the anthropological dimension almost essentially, a dimension that finds its fullness in the Christological dimension, itself normative for the relationships between God and the created world.

The idea that all knowledge, even that derived from the study of nature, can be used by the theologian for correct exegesis was already part of the patristic tradition and can be also found in medieval theology. In the historical context of Thomas Aquinas, such a source of knowledge was principally that derived from the works of Aristotle, which Thomas assumed as a point of reference more frequently for “natural philosophy” than for his reflections on God (for which Thomas more willingly turned to neo-platonism).

The use made of such knowledge in theology and, in a lesser though still significant measure, also in the study of Scripture, can be summarized well in the noted affirmation that “those who make use of philosophical teachings in sacred doctrine, guiding them in obedience to the faith, do not mix the water with the wine, but, more frequently, transform the water into wine.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Super librum Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 5um). Before Thomas, Augustine had said it this way: “All the more one can progress in science, all the more are the Sacred Scriptures admired, because their profundity makes them unfathomable” (*Ad Orosium contra Priscillianistas*, n. 9).

V. Some Aspects of Contemporary Debate about the Authority of Sacred Scripture and Scientific Thought.

1. *The Metaphor of the “Two Books.”* In the Christian theological tradition, the metaphor of the “Book of Nature” has found a place, although with varied ups and downs, beside the “Book of Scripture.” Originating in the patristic period and present in [St. Augustine](#) [17], it also resounds in modernity with Bacon, Galileo, and Kepler until it reaches our own day, not without some ambiguity, through the natural theology of the 1700’s and 1800’s. The metaphor has reacquired interest today in the philosophical reflections of certain scientists and also was recently taken up again by *Fides et ratio* (cf. n. 19). In considering the relationships between Sacred Scripture and scientific thought it could be useful to refer to it. The idea is of two books, certainly diverse, yet not independent because they have the same Author. Their language is varied—that of nature is written with the characters of mathematics and geometry, as Galileo recalled in *The Assayer*—but the knowledge of one becomes important better to understand the other. The human person is by constitution capable of understanding both languages and of recognizing the necessity that they converge in a harmonic and united knowledge. Medieval theology placed next to these two books a third one, the “Book of the Cross,” to recall that human beings, on account of the darkening caused by sin, are not always able to read the book of Nature correctly: the understanding of Revelation, whose central hermeneutic principle remains the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, must always take account of the paradox and the scandal of the cross.

In some moments of history, separating the “finality” of the two diverse books may have seemed the easier way to avoid conflicts between science and Scripture: the first book—as Cardinal Baronio said at the time of the Galileo affair—should tell us “how the heavens go,” and the second, “how one goes to heaven.” Although at first glance this strategy could have served to give things a bit of order, in the long run it would have dangerously opened itself up to an increase of ambiguity and of dangerous misunderstandings. The book of Nature speaks of the same God that the Scripture says created heaven and earth and, for those still not reached by either the message of the Bible or the knowledge of the Gospel, it is a book that certainly possesses a salvific dimension (cf. *Acts* 17:26-28; *Rom* 1:20-22 and 2:14-15; *Lumen gentium*, n. 16). The book of Nature prepares us to receive the content of the book of Scripture (cf. [Fides et Ratio](#) [2], n. 36). The book of Scripture illuminates, with the grace of divine Revelation, the sense and ultimate meaning of all that belongs to Nature, revealing the most profound truth of creation. Therefore, because the reference to the “Book of Nature” has a certain role today within the dialogue between Sacred Scripture and the natural sciences, it is necessary that, even in respecting the methodological autonomy and the diversity of languages, the metaphor be capable also of embracing the connections between the two books and their reciprocal implications.

2. *Some Appropriate Exegetical Clarifications.* A second aspect of the relationships between science and Scripture today regards the insufficient exegetical rigor with which certain biblical questions are approached due to a presumed incompatibility with the results of science. With a certain frequency, some authors underline the “mythical” value of a relevant part of the biblical accounts. In such a context, this

adjective is not used to refer to the idea of an archaic knowledge transmitted and mediated through important narrative and cultural categories, but rather to that of fanciful and ingenuous accounts of a popular character, from which one does not need bother extracting a truthful, stable, and coherent content. In the end, one is dealing with another example of how to find an easy way out from a presupposed incompatibility: scientific knowledge does not “provoke” nor “is it provoked” by the biblical message, because the biblical message would then have a subjective and totally allegorical value. In other words, it would lead us to affirm that the narratives of the creation of the cosmos, the first human couple, their condition of intimacy with God and the sad experience of sin, the episode of the flood, the calling of the patriarchs and the most ancient events of the history of salvation, would be images without any correspondence to the real history of peoples and cultures.

A good exegesis cannot a-critically assume a similar conception of [myth](#) [18]. The allegorical sense, where present, does not cancel the presence of truth that the sacred author wished to transmit by means of those narratives: humanity can know the truths therein contained without being imprisoned in a closed hermeneutic circle, where the continual symbolic reference finishes without saying anything, because it is incapable of pointing to something outside of itself. On the other hand, to assume the “historical” value of biblical accounts, as far as it is explicitly called for by the [Magisterium of the Catholic Church](#) [12], does not imply that all the single narrative facts took place precisely in the way indicated by the sacred text, but rather that the accounts have their ultimate foundation in history, in facts, deeds, and words that God really made use of and which the author of the sacred text described with the language most appropriate in that moment or available to him, leaving the exegete the task of making explicit the meaning for all times.

At times, conflicts arise when experts in the natural sciences see Sacred Scripture as an ensemble of “authoritative formulations,” to embrace which would mean to interrupt the progress of the sciences or to falsify their results. The mediation of exegesis, of theology, and of philosophy is scarcely taken into consideration, nor is the idea of a “dogmatic development or progress”: the whole debate between faith and science seems to exhaust itself rather reductively in a comparison between biblical verses and scientific discoveries. Such a danger is most present in those religious traditions that, although identifying themselves as agreeing with the “Book of Scripture,” use it in an immediate and at times instinctive way, excluding or reducing to a minimum the necessary mediation mentioned above. What is needed is a “scientific” mediation in the proper sense of the word, both because it is necessary to have recourse to the criteria of scientific exegesis, and because it is good to make use when necessary also of the results of the positive and experimental sciences, which can help clarify the content of a truth of faith or promote a homogenous development of dogmas. The fragmentary and isolated use of biblical phrases is never the best way to formulate a confrontation with the scientific vision of the world, because Scripture possesses its own unity and coherence, and is to be considered in the light of the analogy of faith, the connection existing between various divine mysteries and, not least of all, in the light of good sense.

3. Some Contemporary Problems. The epistemological criteria recommended above are particularly relevant to some contemporary themes of the debate about Christian Revelation and the scientific vision of the world. Regarding the “problem of origins,” also raised within the sciences today, it must be kept in mind that the biblical revelation of the original and essential relationships between God and humanity, as well as between God and nature, is not to be limited to the first chapters of Genesis. Even in their solemnity and importance, these verses certainly do not exhaust the sense of those relationships, nor do they contain the whole biblical teaching on creation. The biblical doctrine on creation is also to be sought in the sapiential and prophetic books, and in the biblical commentaries of the Fathers of the Church. Moreover, a true knowledge of what creation is cannot be achieved leaving aside the message of the New Testament, and in particular not from the eschatological annunciation of a new creation, whose first fruits

are already seen in the [resurrection of Jesus Christ](#) [19]. It is only in this perspective that theology can discuss a possible comparison with the final scenarios of the physical universe and its future transfiguration.

From the perspective of the biblical doctrine of creation, the results are clearly sterile and exegetically incorrect when one focuses the discussion about Scripture and scientific thought on the fallacious dialectic between “creationism” and “evolutionism,” the first understood as the affirmation of the “immediate” appearance of all the species of living beings and the denial of any biological or even geological transformations, the second understood as a philosophical paradigm that interprets the morphogenesis of all reality in terms of a necessary and immanent development, or as the outcome of blind chance. Biblical exegesis can confront and dialogue with the facts, and therefore with [evolution](#) [20], physical or biological, explained in a scientific way and freed from presuppositions of an aprioristic philosophical character. The presence of analogous presuppositions also cannot be excluded in what concerns the theme of “monogenism,” i.e., the origin of the whole human race from one sole couple of proto-parents. Supported by various biblical passages and by the teaching of the Catholic Magisterium, this belief is presented at times as something certainly denied by scientific results, without reflecting on the fact that, for obvious reasons, the scientific reconstruction, however accurate it may be, could never attain irrefutable proofs for or against it. To this must be added the consideration that scientific analysis can only deduce *a posteriori* if and when it finds itself in front of remains that are certainly human, but it cannot conclude anything about the appearance of a first couple of proto-parents in as much as the “final cause” of such an appearance —the spiritual animation of a body, a new creative intervention of God, etc.— does not belong to the empirical order, whereas only the consequences traceable back to it are.

The Catholic Magisterium seems to have confronted the theme with clarity together with prudence: monogenism is taught to be linked to the “normative” consequences of the proto-parents for all of humanity, particularly to the doctrine of original sin, but also to the recapitulation in Christ of all that was signified in Adam, to the point that the abandonment of monogenism would require a serious re-interpretation by theology of much of the content of Revelation. The most important declaration in this regard remains that of [Pius XII’s encyclical *Humani generis* \(1950\)](#) [21]: “For the faithful cannot embrace that opinion which maintains that either after Adam there existed on this earth true men who did not take their origin through natural generation from him as from the first parent of all, or that Adam represents a certain number of first parents. Now it is no way apparent how such an opinion can be reconciled with that which the sources of revealed truth and the documents of the teaching authority of the Church propose with regard to original sin, which proceeds from a sin actually committed by an individual Adam and which, through generation, is passed on to all and is in everyone as his own” (DH 3897). Presently, there are no scientific results which motivate the abandonment of this theological understanding, nor could there be in the future, according to what it was said above.

4. The Risk of “Biblical Fundamentalism”: Sacred Scripture Does Not Espouse any Specific Physical or Biological Worldview. A good part of the debates or conflicts already highlighted can easily be resolved by avoiding what is called a “fundamentalist reading” of the Bible. The PBC’s document of 1993 speaks of it in these words: “Fundamentalist interpretation starts from the principle that the Bible, being the Word of God, inspired and free from error, should be read and interpreted literally in all its details. But by “literal interpretation” it understands a naively literalist interpretation, one, that is to say, which excludes every effort at understanding the Bible that takes account of its historical origins and development. It is opposed, therefore, to the use of the historical-critical method, as indeed to the use of any other scientific method for the interpretation of Scripture. [...] The basic problem with fundamentalist interpretation of this kind is that, refusing to take into account the historical character of biblical revelation, it makes itself incapable of accepting the full truth of the Incarnation itself. As regards relationships with God,

fundamentalism seeks to escape any closeness of the divine and the human. It refuses to admit that the inspired Word of God has been expressed in human language and that this Word has been expressed, under divine inspiration, by human authors possessed of limited capacities and resources. For this reason, it tends to treat the biblical text as if it had been dictated word for word by the Spirit. It fails to recognize that the Word of God has been formulated in language and expression conditioned by various periods. It pays no attention to the literary norms and to the human ways of thinking to be found in the biblical texts, many of which are the result of a process extending over long periods of time and bearing the mark of very diverse historical situations” (EV 13, 2971 and 2974).

In accord with these principles, one understands why, although in the Bible are reflected one or more visions of the cosmos contemporaneous to the epoch in which the sacred author wrote, one cannot affirm that Christianity (nor first Judaism) had “espoused” a particular cosmology. “Fundamentalism likewise tends to adopt very narrow points of view. It accepts the literal reality of an ancient, out-of-date cosmology, simply because it is found expressed in the Bible; this blocks any dialogue with a broader way of seeing the relationship between culture and faith” (EV 13, 2978). Instead, the fundamental relationships between God and creation, between God and the human person, between human persons—created in the image and likeness of God—and the rest of nature constitute the essential nucleus of the biblical message. And this is a history of love and liberty, of sin and salvation, of the gift received and the task to be carried out, of human responsibility in history and the awaiting of the definitive revelation of the sons of God (cf. *Rom* 8:19).

Read also: [Creation](#) [8]

[Geology](#) [22]

[Gospels](#) [3]

[Jesus Christ, Incarnation and doctrine of Logos](#) [11]

[Natural Sciences, in the Work of Theologians](#) [16]

[Book of Nature, Origin and Development of the Metaphor](#) [23]

Documents of the Catholic Church related to the subject:

[Abbreviations and complete titles of the documents](#) [24]

[Leo XIII, Providentissimus Deus, 18.11.1893](#) [25]; [Benedict XV, Spiritus Paraclitus, 15.9.1920](#) [26]; [Pius XII, Divino afflante Spiritu, 30.9.1943](#) [27]; [Dei Verbum, 11-17](#) [28]; [John Paul II: Discourse to International Symposium of Scientists on the occasion of the 350° Anniversary of the Publication of Galileo’s “Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems”, 9.5.1983](#) [29], ORWE 30.5.1983, p. 7; Discourse to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Refoundation, 28.10.1986, Papal Addresses pp. 280-288; [Discourse to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 31.10.1992](#) [30], Papal Addresses pp. 336-343, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, 23.4.1993, EV 13, 2846-3150; [Fides et ratio, 7-12, 16-23, 45-48](#) [2]; [Verbum Domini](#) [31], 6-21

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