

In the following series of six essays on revealed theology, we will examine the compatibility of the theory of evolution with the biblical accounts of creation. In this article, we will establish the authority of the Bible, its mediated character, and its authentic interpreter.

The Bible is called the “word of God” in that God is the primary author of the Bible. The human authors of sacred Scripture, such as Isaiah or Matthew, are also true authors of the text, but they are secondary, not primary, authors. How so? They are true authors in that they wrote what *they* understood, and they wrote it using their own intellectual and physical powers. They are secondary authors, and God is the primary author, because God used these human authors as His instruments in producing this written text—as one uses a pen as an instrument in writing a note.

Now, in the case of Scripture, the human authors were capable of recording a text in a human language that they knew, but only God is able to make this an authoritative and inspired text that brings sinners to repentance and to eternal life. God’s power is so great that He is able to use sinful human beings—despite their cultural biases, personal fears, and other limitations—as instruments in writing out His saving word (see essay no. 5 on causality).

Thus, sacred Scripture is mediated: the Bible has true secondary authors. It is not a simple dictation by God, as if the human author had fallen into a trance and written what he himself might not have understood or agreed with. Even so, sacred Scripture is *inspired*, because God is the primary author. It is insufficient to say that the human authors were inspired by a religious experience and then wrote it down. Surely they were, but

what makes the Bible unique among all written works ever produced or yet to be produced, is that God is the primary author of this book, and of this book alone.

This mediation of the Scriptures through the community of believers is inescapable and should not be viewed as replacing God’s action as primary author. For example, Jesus spoke in Aramaic, but the New Testament is recorded in Greek—which already leaves us one step removed from Christ, if it is not the Holy Spirit

The Authority, Character, and Interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures

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Himself who worked through this mediation. Similarly, the decision as to what books belong in the Bible, which manuscripts are legitimate, and when no more books may be added, was the decision of the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, valid translations of the Bible—on which the great majority of Christians rely since they cannot read ancient Greek and Hebrew—have to be approved by a legitimate ecclesiastical authority.

An inevitable question concerning a right understanding of the Bible is: who has the authority to interpret Scripture? A significant difficulty that attends written revelation is the possibility of divergent interpretations of the text. When there are disagreements about what God is saying in the Bible—and the stakes could not be higher—who has the authority to determine the correct view? If there is no authority on earth that can adjudicate, then the disputants remain in disagreement. History has repeatedly shown that when no such authority is recognized, the Christian community can fracture into separate churches.

The Catholic Church accepts that Christ instituted the apostles and their successors as this authority, to teach and preach in His name (see *Dei Verbum*, Chapter 2, No. 10). We can hear this from Jesus in the gospel of Matthew:

“Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’” (Mt 28:18-20, see also Jn 20:21-23).

Some Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of the Church’s mediation here because it seems to cut off the believer’s direct contact with God—and who could possibly serve as an adequate substitute for God? These Christians would maintain that when they read the Bible faithfully, the Holy Spirit will reveal to them what the Scriptures mean, and so there is no need for any authority other than the Holy Spirit.

Now, it is true that no one needs anything in addition to God the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit Himself has willed to give the community of believers a charism that He gives to no single individual, and He has willed to work through the Church’s ministers as His own instruments. Since the Bible itself is a mediated but inspired message of God, it is not unreasonable that its interpretation would also be mediated but in some way inspired.

Here it is important to note that it is not the Church *instead of* God who interprets Scripture. It is God who guides, speaks, and interprets through the Church. Analogies for this abound. For instance, could we not just go straight to God instead of to the Bible, which was produced by humans (at least as instruments)? Of course we could, but we have to go to the Bible because God willed to reveal Himself through this humanly written word. Could God not create and nurture new human life without human parents? Of course He could, but God has willed to use

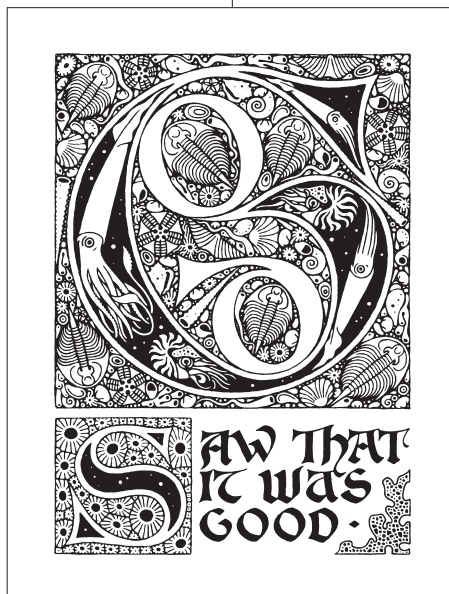
human parents as instruments to accomplish this task. Could God not speak directly to everyone at all times without apostles, prophets, teachers, patriarchs, or miracle workers? Of course He

could, but God has willed to use human instruments throughout salvation history, such as Moses, who spoke to Pharaoh in God’s name and led the chosen people out of Egypt by God’s power. God has willed that one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church interpret the sacred Scriptures in His name, according to what has been believed and handed on from the beginning.

But where does this sacred tradition come from? The New Testament comes out of and is predated by the community of believers, who have a living tra-

dition which Acts 9:2 refers to as the “Way.” The new Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Let us recall that the Church flourished with a living tradition after the Lord’s Resurrection for about twenty years before the earliest text of the New Testament was written and for likely seventy years before the latest book of the Bible was completed. Also, for forty days after His resurrection, *i.e.* until He ascended into heaven, Jesus taught the apostles, “speaking of the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). So, this tradition comes from the Lord Jesus and is developed and strengthened by the Holy Spirit. St. Paul instructs the Thessalonians to “hold to the traditions” that he has taught them (2 Thess 2:15) and commends the Corinthians for doing just that (1 Cor 11:2).

Catholics’ confidence in the Church’s mediatory role is based on the fact that the Holy Spirit did not only work through the Church when the Bible was being written and compiled, but He works in the Church no less right now! **TOBE**



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