

2002

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## eCommons Citation

Jason Paul Bourgeois (2002). Balthasar's Theodramatic Hermeneutics: Trinitarian and Ecclesial Dimensions of Scriptural Interpretation. *Theology and Sacred Scripture*. , 125-134  
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# Balthasar's Theodramatic Hermeneutics: Trinitarian and Ecclesial Dimensions of Scriptural Interpretation

*Jason Bourgeois*

Hans Urs von Balthasar developed a unique style of biblical interpretation. This paper will discuss four elements of his scriptural hermeneutics, a topic that offers glimpses of his fundamental theology and his ecclesiology as well. The first element of Balthasar's hermeneutics is *aesthetics*. Balthasar's aesthetic approach to scriptural interpretation stands in contrast with the commonly employed historical-critical method, which he found to be potentially limiting. The second element is *theodrama*. In Balthasar's notion of theodramatic hermeneutics, the interpreter is already participating in the very salvation history that is being interpreted. The third and fourth elements of Balthasar's hermeneutics involve the Trinitarian and ecclesial dimensions of interpretation; that is, he focuses especially on the role of the Holy Spirit and the church in the life of the interpreter.<sup>1</sup>

## **Contrast between Aesthetic and Historical-Critical Approaches to Interpreting Scripture**

Both Balthasar and Hans-Georg Gadamer share the conviction that if one distances oneself from the object of interpretation, one will not be able to perceive the truth of that object. This is so because there is no such thing as a neutral standpoint for interpretation, and also because the goal of interpretation is the *appropriation* of the truth of a text into one's concrete situation. On this premise, both authors emphasize aesthetics as a proper mode of describing the task of interpre-

tation, for we cannot remain neutral or distanced in the face of beauty. Rather, we are receptive to it and are transformed by it. Balthasar, in particular, will contrast an aesthetic approach to interpreting scripture with the more methodical and distanced approach of historical-critical methods.

He addresses this contrast in the very first pages of *The Glory of the Lord*. For Balthasar,

... since the exact sciences no longer have any time to spare for [beauty] (nor does theology, in so far as it increasingly strives to follow the method of the exact sciences and to envelop itself in their atmosphere), precisely for this reason is it perhaps time to break through *this* kind of exactness, which can only pertain to one particular sector of reality, in order to bring the truth of the whole again into view—truth as a transcendental property of Being, truth which is no abstraction, rather the living bond between God and the world.<sup>2</sup>

Here he expresses a concern that the scientific method does not comprehend the whole of the subject matter that is explored by theology (or indeed by most other disciplines). He also finds that its theory of truth is entirely ineffective in dealing with the subject matter of Being, God, and God's relationship to the world (expressed in revelation). Rather, Truth is discovered through a response to the beautiful that involves the whole person and not merely a detached intellect. For Balthasar, this entails an active receptivity toward the truth of revelation, that is, an attitude of faith.

Balthasar continues by contrasting two ways of understanding and interpreting revelation, namely "seeing the form" and the historical-critical method. For Balthasar, an awareness of the whole is necessary for the interpretation of any beautiful form, including that of Christian revelation. This awareness of the whole is often impaired by the analysis of parts that occurs in a historical approach to scriptural texts. Balthasar expresses this succinctly when he says that "if form is broken down into subdivisions and auxiliary parts for the sake of explanation, this is unfortunately a sign that the true form has not been perceived as such at all." For Balthasar, this is often the case in analyses of scripture based on the historical development of texts.<sup>3</sup>

Balthasar expresses his conviction that the fullness of the Christian

faith cannot be explained by a layer-based approach to scriptures, given that the earliest layer is the most authentic while each subsequent layer deviates further and further from the historical truth about Jesus. Rather, for him "the fact that research demonstrates that a given redaction belongs to an older layer of composition does not mean that preference should automatically be given [to] that redaction."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it is not through historical reconstruction but through *faith* that the full truth of the gospels can be discerned. For Balthasar, the historical-critical method leaves one "with the problem of explaining how so slight a kernel could become such a full-powered and seamless form as is the Christ of the Gospels."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it takes the "eyes of faith" to discern the full form of Christ, and this is the perspective from which the New Testament writers composed their texts. The historical development of the text is less important because the inspiration of the Spirit continually influenced the text until it reached its final form:

[O]nly the final result of the historical developments which lie behind a text—a history never to be adequately reconstructed—may be said to be inspired, not the bits and scraps which philological analysis thinks it can tear loose from the finished totality in order, as it were, to steal up to the form from behind in the hope of enticing it to betray its mystery by exposing its development.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, for Balthasar, the form of this revelation of Christ and his relationship to salvation history is more central even than the texts themselves that mediate that revelation. For Balthasar, "Scripture is not the Word itself, but rather the Spirit's testimony concerning the Word."<sup>7</sup> What is most important for him are the actual events themselves and their significance for human salvation. Scripture itself belongs to the larger totality of the revelation of God to the world expressed through creation, incarnation, and redemption. This larger totality is, in fact, the form of revelation, which is not wholly text-based. As Balthasar says, "[e]ven Scripture is not an isolated book, but rather is embedded in the context of everything created, established and effected by Christ. . . . Only in this context is the form of Scripture perceivable."<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, the interpretation of scripture cannot be carried out in

isolation from the full context of the Christian faith, a context that is not merely an idea or set of ideas but involves a lived understanding of God's relationship to human beings and to the world. For Balthasar, this relationship is a totality that can ultimately be understood only by an awareness of the whole, namely, seeing the form, and not by a reduction of the whole to its various parts that represent the layers of historical development that have been combined over time to form the completed texts of scripture.

### Theodramatic Hermeneutics:

#### The Participation of the Interpreter in Salvation History

The aesthetic style of hermeneutics involves receptive engagement with the truth being revealed through the text. For Balthasar, hermeneutics has a theodramatic dimension as well; that is, his hermeneutics involves an awareness of the *situatedness of the interpreter of divine revelation* within salvation history. Again, like Gadamer, he rejects the idea that an interpreter can take a viewpoint "over and above history." In Balthasar's theodramatic approach to hermeneutics, the interpreter of divine revelation is participating in the drama of divine revelation itself, through her place in its history. The interpretation of revelation is thus a dialogue between the human being and God across time, whose subject matter is that selfsame relationship between human beings and God.

For Balthasar,

All theology is an interpretation of divine revelation. Thus, in its totality, it can only be hermeneutics. But, *in revealing himself in Jesus Christ, God interprets himself—and this must involve his giving an interpretation, in broad outline and in detail, of his plan for the world—and this too is hermeneutics.* [This] hermeneutics, however, cannot seal itself off and ignore man's freedom and his free understanding . . . God does not play the world drama all on his own; he makes room for man to join in the acting.<sup>9</sup>

This passage makes it clear that for Balthasar the task of theology is eminently hermeneutical. First, it is the task of understanding revelation. Second, revelation itself is God's *self-interpretative* communication to us in such a way that we can understand it. In other words,

God's revelation to us is already "translated" by God, as it were, into a humanly understandable mode. The incarnation is the culmination of this communication, complemented in our present situation by the mediation of the Spirit within the context of the church.

It is also clear that the hermeneutics of theology is a complex dialogue between the free, self-revealing God and the free human interpreter. God has, in a sense, the greater role in this dialogue, being both the initiating partner and also the subject matter of the dialogue. Yet this dialogue is engaged in for the benefit of the human being, who becomes more aware of the necessary role of God in the process of human history, both collectively and for individual human beings. For Balthasar, the encounter with the infinite freedom of God the revealer does not stifle the finite freedom of the human interpreter but rather brings it to its fulfillment.<sup>10</sup>

It should be apparent that for Balthasar hermeneutics is a discipline that involves an awareness of being situated within a grand historical plan in the relationship between God and the human being. As present-day interpreters of revelation, we are situated in a particular stage of salvation history, what others have termed the "already but not yet" stage. This stage is one in which Christ has already come and reconciled the world to himself. It remains for us to appropriate this salvation within the context of grace and the church. This is the great "theodrama" that reaches its culmination in the "not yet" stage of eschatological fulfillment.

Hence, theodramatic hermeneutics involves discerning, with the help of the Holy Spirit and in the context of the church, who Christ is and what this means for us in terms of salvation. The interpreter of scripture is not distanced but existentially involved in what is being interpreted. For this reason, the interpreter cannot bracket faith or the content of faith. In fact, the very act of interpreting will be described in terms of this faith. Hermeneutics for Balthasar is explicitly Trinitarian and ecclesial; in other words, Balthasar understands the act of interpretation to take place within the context of an interpersonal relationship with the Trinity and within the social setting of the church.

#### The Trinitarian Dimensions of Interpretation

Balthasar's hermeneutics acquire a Trinitarian dimension through his understanding of the Word and the Spirit in the process of inter-

preting revelation. The Word (Christ) is interpreted in light of the Holy Spirit by both the scriptural authors and subsequent scriptural interpreters.

The main goal of the interpretation of the New Testament is the discernment of who Christ is and what he has done for humanity. As discussed above, it is Balthasar's view that a merely historical-critical analysis of the identity of Christ cannot do justice to the full aesthetic and religious dimensions that came to light through the reflections of the apostles and evangelists (and which have not yet been exhausted, even after several christological councils and centuries of theological debate). An analysis of the New Testament will not truly have "perceived the form" for Balthasar without an awareness of the Trinitarian dimensions of Christ's own life. In particular, Christ's role as the Word of God and his link with the role of the Holy Spirit are crucial to Balthasar's interpretation of the New Testament. The action of the Spirit is necessary in order to aid the interpreter herself to see the form. This is based on the idea, as mentioned above, that God already "interprets himself" for us in his self-revelation.

Thus, for Balthasar the Word is contained in history and reveals itself progressively through history. The entire Old Testament is a prophetic, historical movement toward the incarnation. For this reason, Balthasar is sympathetic to a typological, neo-patristic style of interpreting the Old Testament. Furthermore, the Word incarnate in Christ is not revealed in the New Testament as a static entity, such that one need only consult the fixed meaning of the text in order to discern who Christ is. For Balthasar,

According to this view of things, hermeneutics would limit itself to establishing as securely as possible the meaning found in the document; it would then go on to confront the meaning, thus attained, with the contemporary understanding of existence and critically assess the former by the latter or vice versa.<sup>11</sup>

Rather than this fixed view of the meaning of the New Testament, Balthasar views the Word as *always acting* in history, such that there is a continual unfolding of the interpretation of who Christ is. In this sense revelation was not "closed" with the completion of the New Testament, but rather "the meaning of Scripture (where it is in process of development) journeys *along with history*."<sup>12</sup> Scripture is not sim-

ply an objective and dispassionate account of what happened but is rather "part of the drama itself, moving along with it."<sup>13</sup>

In addition, the continual, developing presence of the Word is, as it were, mediated throughout history through the Holy Spirit.<sup>14</sup> This assertion requires an awareness that Jesus (the Word of God) and the Holy Spirit have always been intimately linked. For Balthasar, the Holy Spirit enabled the disciples to perceive the full form of Christ and continues to enable Christians to "see the form" today. Thus, based on the Trinitarian link between Word (Jesus) and Spirit, the presence of the Holy Spirit enables one to perceive the full identity of Jesus in the New Testament. In a short article titled "God Is His Own Exegete," Balthasar explicates the link between the Holy Spirit and the interpreter of scripture, saying that human beings cannot "understand [God's] self-interpretation [in Christ] . . . before the Holy Spirit has been sent to them and has settled in their hearts."<sup>15</sup> The Spirit is the necessary link between God and human beings in understanding his self-revelation, for

Were God not his own interpreter, man, who certainly knows that he is a creature and that there is a Lord who is his origin and end . . . would never ascertain what "the inner life of God" is. Only the Spirit of God is able to fathom that. But precisely this Spirit is given to us "to teach us to understand the gifts that he has given us."<sup>16</sup>

For Balthasar, the Holy Spirit is necessary to perceive this self-revelation rightly. Thus, any correct interpretation of the New Testament will require the actual grace of the Holy Spirit in the life of the interpreter. In this way, scriptural hermeneutics and theodramatic participation are interdependent.

### The Ecclesial Dimension of the Interpretation of Revelation

Finally, the fourth dimension of Balthasar's hermeneutics is the ecclesial dimension: interpretation is conducted within the life of the church. This touches upon the question of temporal development in the interpretation of revelation. How do we discern what is permanent and what is time-bound (and changeable) within divine revelation? When dealing with this question, Balthasar places the emphasis on

faith. The faith that comes from the Holy Spirit is seen as necessary in order to discern which elements of revelation are permanent and which are time-bound in such a way as to be dispensable. When there is a lack of faith-based perception, "there will be a tendency to concentrate on the secondary, time-bound elements within a particular horizon of understanding and to elevate them into primary ones; thus they will seem to be *untranslatable* and will have to be abandoned."<sup>17</sup>

Balthasar's primary example of this tendency is the project of demythologization, which finds such doctrines as the Virgin Birth as "untranslatable" into a contemporary mindset and so abandons such doctrines in favor of a more palatable explanation. As can be expected from his aesthetic emphasis on the uniqueness of the Christian form (the concrete universal), Balthasar rejects the idea that these particulars of Christian revelation are secondary and thus able to be discarded. Rather "God was able to express a uniquely divine element of this unique drama [through such doctrines], something that cannot be replaced by the categories of the universally human and the existential."<sup>18</sup>

Balthasar sees two possible solutions to the problem of demythologization, which results from the conflict between a contemporary mindset and some of the traditional doctrines of faith. The first solution is to regard the doctrine in question as not "outdated" but rather an integral aspect of the faith, without which the faith would not hold the same meaning in its totality. Such is the case with Balthasar's own evaluation of the Virgin Birth, which he regards as essential to the incarnation. The second solution is to regard the doctrine in question as having been "expressed in an obsolete terminology or conceptual world," with the understanding that the doctrine was "intending to express *greater and different things* than can be contained in the limited concepts of the period."<sup>19</sup> Balthasar's example of this is the imminent expectation of the end of the world expressed in the synoptic gospels or the Pauline epistles.

Balthasar counsels extreme caution when placing doctrines in the second category and attempting to explain what the doctrine "really meant." In attempting such an explanation, one must be careful to make judgments in light of the whole Christian form of revelation, perceived with the help of the Holy Spirit. In Balthasar's words: "this spiritual judgment has regard to a *totality* or *fullness* which the believer can discern through the Holy Spirit, at least to the extent that, while he can never attain an overview of it; he can detect every *sub-*

*stantial omission* from it as a violation of the law as the whole."<sup>20</sup>

For Balthasar, the principle remains that if a "re-interpretation" results in the omission of an integral doctrine of the faith (such as, for example, the resurrection of Christ), then it has not been done in light of the form. One final question remains: namely, how to mediate the decision of what is and is not an integral doctrine within a faith community. This is where, for Balthasar, the teaching office of the church enters the hermeneutical debate.

Balthasar believes that the teaching office of the church is an essential element in theological hermeneutics. He claims that although "the individual endowed with faith is . . . given a faculty enabling him to discern this totality [of the form of revelation],"<sup>21</sup> there is the possibility of a great divergence of opinion among individuals on various issues (some of which are essential to the faith and some of which are not). In light of this possibility, it is "necessary for the entire community of the Church to be equipped with a special organ to serve as a regulatory principle for maintaining the integrity of revelation; its function is to indicate any serious interference with the *balance* of the Church's organism, any loss of substance or weight."<sup>22</sup>

The role of the teaching office is to weigh the individual judgments of those engaged in the task of re-interpreting revelation from a contemporary standpoint and to make decisions about whether or not such judgments damage the integrity of revelation as a whole. The tension that this role can create between theologians and the magisterium is well known, but for Balthasar this is a necessary component of any attempt to mediate between contemporary and traditional understandings of the faith. The magisterium has the function of deciding which doctrines themselves are essential to the faith (such as Balthasar's example of the Virgin Birth) and also of deciding whether a theological "translation" from one cultural language to another has left out something significant.

### Conclusion

Balthasar's style of interpreting scripture is much broader than that of the historical-critical methods. It presupposes aesthetic engagement and existential participation in the truths being interpreted. The interpreter is in dialogue with God about God's self-revelation, and such a dialogue requires receptivity in faith. Balthasar's style has Trinitarian

and ecclesial dimensions: it presupposes that the grace of the Holy Spirit is necessary for correct interpretation, and it requires a relationship with the church, whose teaching office judges what elements of revelation are essential to the faith, such that the faith is altered if they are omitted or interpreted in another way. Balthasar's style of scriptural interpretation rests on a phenomenology of the interpreter as a person of faith and a participant in salvation history, in communion with the Trinity and the church.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>This paper derives from a chapter of my dissertation, "The Aesthetic Hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Comparative Analysis."

<sup>2</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. J. Fessio and J. Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982). Hereafter cited as *GLI*.

<sup>3</sup>*GLI*, 26. Balthasar was never opposed to limited use of historical-critical method to help understand the text at hand and, in fact, he used it himself at times. But he opposed the reduction of meaning in scripture to historical-critical interpretations alone, because they did not take into account the role of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>4</sup>*GLI*, 542.

<sup>5</sup>*GLI*, 486-487.

<sup>6</sup>*GLI*, 31.

<sup>7</sup>*GLI*, 31.

<sup>8</sup>*GLI*, 32.

<sup>9</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 2, *The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 91 (emphasis mine). Hereafter cited as *TD 2*.

<sup>10</sup>This is the theme of a long reflection in *TD 2*, 189-334.

<sup>11</sup>*TD 2*, 103.

<sup>12</sup>*TD 2*, 105.

<sup>13</sup>*TD 2*, 112.

<sup>14</sup>To use Gadamer's language, one could say that the Holy Spirit in a sense effects a "fusion of horizons" between Christ and the interpreter.

<sup>15</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, "God Is His Own Exegete," trans. Stephen Wentworth Arndt, *Communio* 4 (Winter 1986): 280-287, at 284.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>17</sup>*TD 2*, 96. Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup>*TD 2*, 97.

<sup>19</sup>*TD 2*, 98.

<sup>20</sup>*TD 2*, 99-100. Emphasis mine.

<sup>21</sup>*TD 2*, 100.

<sup>22</sup>*TD 2*, 100.