INTRODUCTION

1 The Fathers on the Bible's language

I

When God had created Adam and placed him in the Garden of Eden, he talked to him, telling him that he was free to eat the fruit of every tree in the Garden except one (Gen. 2:16–17). Adam understood him perfectly. Even immediately after the act of disobedience in which first Eve and then Adam ate the forbidden fruit both were able to hear 'the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day' and to hear the sentence he passed upon them (Gen. 3:8–19). The changes which then took place as a result of Adam's sin are described in some detail in Genesis, but they amount to this: the harmony of Adam and Eve's relationship with the rest of the created world and with God himself was broken (Gen. 3:14–19).

The most important effect, in the eyes of a number of early Christian writers, was the breakdown of communication between man and God. As Gregory the Great put it in the sixth century, after man was expelled from the joys of paradise and began his exile in this present life in the world, he became blind in his spiritual understanding. When God spoke to him directly, telling him plainly to follow him or to love him, man was unable to take in what he had heard, because he was 'frozen in a stupor of faithlessness'.[1] It is upon this supposition, that man, through his own fault, is no longer able to understand what God says to him except dimly and imperfectly, that the whole of mediaeval exegesis is founded.

Augustine, writing three or four generations earlier, explains that God in his mercy continued to speak to man, but adapting his Word to man's damaged understanding. He met man on man's terms, speaking to him, no longer directly, but obliquely, in three ways: through the 'visual aids' of created things; by himself becoming man, so that man could hear what he said directly; and by inspiring the human authors of the books of the Bible to write down his Word in

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a form intelligible to fallen man.[2] In these three ways, 'in his manner of speaking taking upon himself our ignorance', God ensures that man is able to arrive at a shadowy notion of that divine love which he cannot grasp when he is told about it plainly. In the words of Scripture, Gregory the Great notes, he even goes so far as sometimes to speak 'as if he shared our doubts', as in Luke 18:8: 'Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, shall he find faith on the earth?'[3] But this device, like everything in Scripture, is there to help us and instruct us.

The divine use of circumlocution and allegory, the divine way of putting himself in our place, is God's lifting mechanism, says Gregory; it raises the soul from its place at a great distance below God and brings it towards him.[4] It picks man up at the point his understanding can reach, so that as he recognises the 'outward words' he has something to hold on to while he is brought to know the meaning of their inward sense.[5] When the Book of Job has 'on a certain day' in the text, nothing is actually being said to have been done before God 'on a certain day'; God 'coming down to our level (*condescendendo*) uses our words, so that when he speaks in temporal terms about eternity, we who are accustomed to living in time' may be raised to the point where we can grasp eternal things.[6] Thus, if we laugh at certain passages in the Bible for their apparent banality, we are failing to see the great mercy of God in speaking to us in a way we can understand.[7] 'Humbling himself in speaking he exalts us in understanding.'[8]

These are ideas which would have been familiar to every Western reader of the Bible from the early Christian centuries to the Reformation and beyond. They are no longer a common heritage, and they require explanation if we are to understand the force they had for educated people for more than a thousand years. Their great attraction lay in the key they provided to everything which is obscure and apparently contradictory in the pages of the Bible. There would in any case have been a creaturely limitation on man's capacity to understand what God said to him, but the Fall had introduced a certain twistedness into human thinking. Indeed, Augustine saw such perversions and confusions as a characteristic effect of evil, and their straightening as a necessary work of the good. It became possible in this way to hold that the Bible is directly inspired word by word and that every word is true,[9] by transferring what might be called the 'blame' for the difficulties it presents from God to man, and making those difficulties not stumbling-blocks, but God's aids to a contorted

human understanding. Each obscure passage or tortuous narrative, each ambiguity or contradiction, meets an obscurity or twist or confusion in human thinking and is thus more, not less, intelligible to man's clouded sinful mind.

Augustine placed an emphasis upon another aspect of the obscuring effect of sin upon the human mind to which he gave considerable currency in the centuries which followed. He himself had had the greatest difficulty as a young man in thinking in abstractions. He found that 'corporeal images', pictures of things which exist physically in the created world, consistently got in the way of his attempts to understand the incorporeal nature of God. 'My mind used to run on bodily forms',[10] he admits. This he put down to the dominance his body and its lusts had over his soul and the spiritual longings which were proper to it as God had originally designed it. His body controlled his mind, and so his mind could think only in 'bodily' terms.

At a stroke, this notion gave him a reason for God's use of stories about the created world and the comparisons the Bible makes between created things and the divine. It explains why God had to speak in such 'bodily' images in the allegories of Scripture if he was to make himself understood to fallen man (as Jesus deliberately did in telling his parables), and why it was necessary for him to act as a 'bodily image' himself when he became man. 'Our medicine Wisdom was by his assumption of humanity adapted to our wounds.'[1] 'Though he is everywhere present to the inner eye when it is sound and clear, he condescended to make himself manifest to the outward eye of those whose inward sight is weak and dim.'[12] 'Men, who in their eagerness to enjoy the creature instead of the Creator had grown into the likeness of this world . . . did not recognise him.'[13]

When we call the Bible the Word of God we are linking it with the act of redemption and looking at both in the same light, as God's ways of re-establishing his communication with man and bringing man back to the rationality and spirituality of vision with which he was created; restoring him, in other words, to understanding and the knowledge of God. Thus it is, emphasises Hugh of St Victor in the twelfth century, that there must be not only labour but rational effort in reading Scripture, for those who merely apply themselves with assiduousness are like men who cross a wood by a circuitous path; those who use their reason are like men who cross in a straight line and come quickly to the other side.[14] It is, then, of the essence of the interpretation of Scripture as God intends it to be read by faithful souls, that it should employ man's rational and spiritual capacities to

the full, beginning from the 'bodily images' God provides in the text, and rising to an understanding of higher and spiritual truths. This is the pattern of exegesis in the West throughout the Carolingian centuries and beyond; the reader applies his mind and, increasingly, such technical aids as the study of the arts of grammar and logic and the other *artes* can provide to help his reasoning.

II

The principle that God had resorted to 'bodily images' and oblique means of declaring himself so that man's clouded understanding could grasp as much as possible of his meaning, made it natural to see passages which appeared obscure as expressing their meaning in a figurative way. To see a created thing as a representation of divine truth is to move beyond language into a region where things themselves are signs. Such 'things' (persons, places, events, animals, objects), must be accounted for as meticulously as the words of the text themselves. These figurative meanings are not thought of as additions or later interpretations, as being in any way imposed upon the text, but as so deeply embedded in it that they are acted out in the very events which the authors describe. Remigius of Auxerre, the Carolingian commentator, asks whether Abraham recognised those who appeared to him at Mamre as angels not men (Gen. 18:1). Did he know that he was being presented with a living figure or image, angels appearing to men? If he understood them to be more than they seemed, why did he prepare for them food such as only mortals need? Perhaps he first thought that they were men, and only later recognised their real identity beneath?[15] The human authors of Scripture, too, were sometimes aware that they were describing in figures and indirectly what could not be expressed plainly in human language. Augustine asks in what manner Moses (who was held to be the author of the Pentateuch) saw God on Sinai. The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend, but Moses was not able to see him in his glory, but only his 'back parts'; that is, he was not allowed to see the divine substance directly. Surely, says Augustine, Moses knew that he saw corporeally and he sought the true sight of God spiritually. That is to say, Moses understood the difference between the literal and the figurative.[16]

This is entirely in the spirit of Augustine's teaching about the need for God to make things easy for fallen man by speaking to him in terms of things in the world he knows. The Bible describes objects, creatures and historical events, so as to teach about the things of the

spirit. It is an important part of this process that it does so in ways as various as fallen man in his needs as a sinner. 'Just as the divine Word exercises the wise with its mysteries', so it helps the simple with its superficial sense.[17]

If the Word was to speak to us in terms we could understand it was necessary for it to become many words, to multiply and diversify, to descend to the level of particular sounds for us (*descendit ad particulas sonorum nostrorum*); the one Word of God (*unus sermo Dei*) is expanded or diffused (*dilatus*).[18] There are, accordingly, several levels or different kinds of meaning, sometimes occurring all at once in a single passage, some of them literal, others conveying an image or comparison, a meaning beyond the obvious one. Under the influence of Origen, it became usual in the West to think in terms of four senses: the literal or 'historical' (the plain surface meaning of the words); and three 'figurative' senses -- the allegorical or spiritual meaning, the moral to be drawn, or tropological meaning, and the anagogical or prophetic meaning.[19]

III

Augustine had difficulty, as a young man trained in the fine writing and literary appreciation of a late Roman rhetorical education, in finding the text of the Bible worthy of respect. It seemed to him crude and clumsy in expression. The Old Latin version his mother put into his hands was indeed full of archaisms and infelicities. The Christians who quoted from it in their talk in the market-place seemed to their listeners much as the Quakers must have seemed in the days when they preserved a similarly 'biblical' language in an antiquated version. But the Vulgate translation made by Jerome in Augustine's lifetime had its limitations, too. There were still obscure and difficult passages. Augustine reflected upon this in later years and came to the conclusion that it was to be explained by the fact that, because the Bible is God's own Word, it fills human words to bursting. The rules which govern grammar as we know it are often broken or modified by Scripture under the divine pressure to enlarge the frame of reference of ordinary human language. We may speak of Scripture's distinctive usages,[20] of the *locutio scripturarum*, or the *locutio divinae paginae*.[21] The Bible has 'modes' of speaking.[22] Its usage is different from common usage (*communis locutio*) and daily usage (*quotidiana loquendi consuetudo*).[23]

This awareness of extraordinary usage is present throughout the patristic and early mediaeval centuries. Writing on the first Book of

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Kings, Gregory the Great asks, 'Why does the book begin with a reference to "one man" (*vir unus*). If this *unus* refers to the number one it seems superfluous, for what man is not "one"?' It is not to be believed that the holy Samuel, who wrote these words, began in a way contrary to the custom of other writers of Scripture. Yet he seems to have done so, if we compare the opening of the Book of Job, with its reference to Job as 'a man' of the land of Hus, and Luke 1:5, with its reference to 'a priest' of the line of Abidjah.[24] We do not have *vir unus* or *sacerdos unus* there. The reason, Gregory suggests, is that Samuel is not only a writer, but also a prophet. He knew not only of the story he tells, but of him 'whom the history spoke of; he knew whom it stood for'.[25] He therefore modifies ordinary usage for the sake of those who have a deeper understanding, and now the whole Church has adopted this new way of speaking, for 'Christ is one, God and Man'.[26] Therefore the *unitas* can fittingly be attributed to Christ.[27]

No attempt has been made in this example to explain the curious grammar of the phrase in terms of the rules of grammar itself. Yet the grammatical and rhetorical education of the late Roman world had made readers actively aware of the divergence from grammatical normality which is sometimes to be found in the Bible's usages. Cassiodorus wanted his pupils to learn not to be too quick to 'correct' the text when it differs from common usage (*ab usu communi*),[28] but to understand that the Bible's language has its own *puritas*, its own idioms which are perfectly proper to it.[29] Gregory himself, in a famous passage, exclaims that Scripture cannot be constrained by the rules of the grammarian Donatus.[30] The grammarian's approach to the Bible's grammar is of a piece with the application of reason to the understanding of the text, in its susceptibility to technical development when the study of the *artes* began to make such development possible. This was above all the achievement of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[31]

IV

Gregory the Great thought it as absurd to ask who was the author of the Book of Job as if one were to hold a man's letter dictated to his secretary in one's hand and ask who had written it. God is the author of the Book of Job and his authentic voice is audible in every word of it.[32] But as the scholars of the West read them, those words were not in the original language in which God had inspired the human authors of Scripture to write, but in Latin. What was the status of the

translation? Some interpreters held that the translators into Latin were not like the prophets. It was Jerome's opinion that God's inspiration worked upon the minds of the human authors of Scripture in such a way that he supplied the content of what they were to say, but left the choice of words and imagery to them, in their varied skills and educational conditions. This must be even more the case with the translators. If we confuse *vates*, a prophet, and *interpres*, an interpreter or translator, we shall have to say that Cicero, who translated some rhetorical works from Greek into Latin, was 'inspired by the Spirit of Rhetoric', or else we shall be inconsistent. If we insist that those who translated the Pentateuch were inspired by the Holy Spirit their errors will present us with a certain 'unfittingness' (*inconveniens*); if we concede that they spoke by a human not a divine spirit then there is no difficulty (*inconveniens nullum esse*).[33] Jerome was a Hebrew scholar and he knew Greek; he was, therefore, in a position to judge the accuracy of earlier attempts to render the Bible into Latin. He was himself the author of the Vulgate version, and was aware of the working of the translation process in his own mind, where it seems there was no conviction that he was being guided in detail by divine inspiration.

In practice, the majority of mediaeval scholars inclined to Gregory's view that the text remained the text even in translation. (He works from both old and new in the *Moralia in Job*, because he felt it his duty as Pope to give due weight to both versions.) Their attitude to the absolute literal truth of the Bible even in translation imposed upon them a set of strict rules in the reading of Scripture. Every word had to be accounted for, in its context. Specific explanations had to be found for every oddity of expression or grammatical superfluity; for each statement which, taken at its face value, presented some anomaly of Christian teaching had to be reconciled with orthodoxy. It was the interpreter's task, by prayer and thought, to penetrate to God's intention in framing the text as he had it before him in Latin, employing allegorical explanations where they seemed illuminating.

v

In this climate of interpretation, in which it is natural and proper to turn to a figurative interpretation where a difficulty presented itself in the literal sense, it was necessary to insist upon the importance of establishing the literal sense, lest it be ignored altogether. Its status was often felt to be modest. The Carolingian scholar Alcuin suggests

that it may be wise to be 'content' with that sense, where deeper meanings are hard to ascertain.[34] He defends the literal sense. 'We shall deal with the literal sense, lest we seem to leave out the simple meaning altogether and despise the poverty of the historical sense while we pursue spiritual riches.'[35]

The possibilities of the literal sense began to become apparent in a fuller and more sophisticated way only with the development of refined technical skills in grammar and dialectic and the other liberal arts in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Hugh of St Victor is able to regard the literal sense not as an inferior but as a fundamental one, a foundation not buried beneath the ground but a visible part of the beauty of the structure, upon which the others rest. He points out that those who disdain to learn the alphabet do not become masters of grammar; similarly, interpreters of the Bible must first master the 'primary signification' of each narrative.[36] The novel methods and principles which were developed in these centuries altered none of the fundamentals of the approach to exegesis of the earlier Middle Ages. Hugh of St Victor's truism that 'every Scripture, expounded according to its proper interpretation, both shines out more clearly and makes it easier for those who read it to find a way to understand it',[37] would have been acceptable in an earlier age, as would his warning that those who expound Scripture without reason and spiritual understanding succeed only in obscuring its beauty and truth,[38] but something new and important was happening to these ideas. It was partly a matter of emphasis, partly the result of the application of new skills.

2 *Lectio, Disputatio, Predicatio*

Towards the end of the twelfth century, Peter the Chanter, precentor of the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris[39] compiled a manual for preachers. This *Verbum Abbreviatum*[40] begins with a discussion of the various approaches to Bible study with which Peter the Chanter and his contemporaries were familiar. They are three: *lectio*, *disputatio* and *predicatio*.[41] *Lectio* is the reading of the text with a commentary, either written in the margin and between the lines for convenient reference, or given by a master as he expounded the text to his pupils in a lecture. *Disputatio* is the discussion of the questions which arise in the exposition of difficult passages, and which prove to require fuller treatment than can be given in the course of the lecture. *Predicatio* is the highest form of exegesis, to which the others

form a preliminary; it is a method of teaching by preaching. The preacher expounds the passage in a way which will show his listeners not only what it means, but how they are to apply its teaching to their own lives, bringing in other texts to illustrate and support what he says.

Thomas of Chobham, sub-dean of Salisbury, is the author of a *Summa de Arte Praedicatoria* written in the last years of the twelfth century or the first decades of the thirteenth, which has attracted attention because it is one of the earliest manuals to place preaching among the branches of rhetoric.[42] But it is remarkable, too, for the contribution it makes to the development of the view that preaching is the highest form of biblical exegesis.[43] It is possible that Thomas was Peter the Chanter's pupil;[44] but in any case Thomas knew of Peter's threefold division and mentions it in his *Summa*.[45]

Thomas gives a fuller account than Peter of the differences between preaching, disputation and commentary: 'Preaching is the announcing (*nunciatio*) of the divine Word for instruction in faith and behaviour (*divini verbi ad informacionem fidei et morum nunciatio*). For in preaching an announcement is made to others, which is not done in disputation. It is called an "announcement" because it involves the use of our own human arguments and explanations in which we use secular words not divine (*in quibus secularibus verbis utimur non divinis*).'

There is also a difference in subject-matter. Thomas points out that he has emphasised in his definition that preaching is 'for instruction in faith and behaviour', because it is the purpose of all preaching that it should instruct the listener in faith and in good behaviour. If it deals with anything else the order (*ordo*) of preaching is perverted, by which 'other things must be reserved for lecturing and disputing' (*qua alia locutioni et disputationi reservanda sunt*).[46] There is a clear distinction not only of modes of exegesis, but also of content and purpose.

The most important indication that Thomas was aware of the latest developments in exegesis and wanted to give preaching its proper place in relation to the other branches of Bible study lies in his account of the modes of signification which are found in Holy Scripture. Here he draws on contemporary work in grammar and dialectic as well as upon a tradition which goes back at least to Augustine in the Latin West. He has no doubt that the *artes* are to be regarded as theology's handmaids;[47] he compares them unfavourably with theology, but not with disapproval. 'The Sacred Page has its own

special topics', he notes, 'beside those of the dialecticians and rhetoricians, for the praise of God and the destruction of the vices.'[48]

That is not to say that he takes these technical principles very far. Intelligibility ought to be the essence of preaching, he insists, citing Cicero on the use of *cotidiana locutio*, everyday speech.[49] In this fundamental requirement of the preacher's art lies perhaps the reason why the detailed studies of the grammarians and dialecticians on the theory of signification and on the theory of fallacy do not appear to have carried over very far into the study of the Bible as it was carried on in preaching to ordinary people. They form a substratum of technical exactitude on which the preacher may erect a structure in which the scaffolding of theoretical analysis is not apparent to the eye.

Peter's and Thomas's threefold division would not have come so readily to mind in the earlier twelfth century. *Disputatio*, envisaged as a distinct procedure and in connection with biblical study, was something of a novelty; questions had proliferated in the schools of the twelfth century to a point where it became necessary to set aside a separate time to deal with them,[50] but commentary and preaching, *lectio* and *predicatio*, had been established, and not always entirely distinct, methods of Bible study since patristic times. When Augustine and Gregory the Great expounded the text of Holy Scripture to their listeners, they included reflections on the Bible's language and upon problems of a philosophical and doctrinal kind. This study is concerned for the most part with *lectio*, as it is found in the twelfth century because it was here that the most significant new developments of the century took place in contemporary understanding of the nature of the Bible's language and its ways of conveying meaning. Technically speaking, *lectio* provided growing-points for sophisticated work of lasting value. Some of this work spilled over into *disputatio*, and we shall look briefly at the ways in which it did so. *Predicatio*, in its twelfth and thirteenth century developments, is another subject and requires another volume.

Before we look at the direction of these new developments and their technical implications (for some of them were of lasting philosophical importance), we must first try to get a picture of the work of the scholars of the day in studying the Bible with their pupils.