

CHAPTER EIGHT

SCRIPTURE AS INCARNATION



Christian Belief and the Historicity of Scripture

The historicity of scripture is important to most Christians and, especially, to Latter-day Saints. Christians disagree among themselves about how to understand scriptural history, but few deny that, in some important sense, Christian scripture is historical. However, given the challenges to scriptural history, challenges that are especially strong for Latter-day Saints who take the Book of Mormon to be historical, what are we to make of the claim that scriptures are history? Given those challenges, is it *possible* to understand scripture as literal history? The answer to that question—positive, I will argue—lies in answering the question of what we mean by *history*, a question that becomes more difficult the more we think about it.

The way that academic historians have thought of history since the beginning of modernism (about 1500) is not the only way to think about it.¹ However, since the eighteenth century, but especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, those approaching the Bible and, therefore, also Latter-day Saint scripture, have used some variation of the academic understanding of history as their entrée into the

1. Philosophically, modernism is a way of thinking about the world that is dominant from roughly 1500 to about 1800, though it continues as an important force into the present. (In that regard, it is important to note that for philosophy *modern* and *contemporary* are not synonyms.) However, though modernism is the dominant way of thinking during that period and though that period has given its name to modernism, what we call modernist thought is not confined to that historical period. There were modernist thinkers and elements prior to modernism and, obviously, there continue to be modernist thinkers. See Stephen Daniels, “Paramodern Strategies of Philosophical Historiography,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 1/1 (1993): 41–63.

question of scriptural historicity. We understand scriptural interpretation to be a subset of scholarly historical understanding, but the science of history has raised and continues to raise a variety of questions about the historicity of scriptural accounts. For the Bible, some of those questions have been resolved to the satisfaction of believers and others remain questions. Given the unique character of the Book of Mormon, work on defending its historicity has been much less decisive. As a result, believers, especially Latter-day Saints, find ourselves having to answer the question of to what degree our scriptural accounts are historical.

In general, scholars, even believing ones, have been more or less skeptical of the historical character of scripture. However, believers (scholars and otherwise) have felt it necessary to defend the historicity of scripture with the historian's scholarly tools. Most Christians believe that the religious claims of Christianity cannot be completely separated from its historical claims, and we think that we have no way of understanding those claims except via the tools of historical scholarship. For example, few have been willing completely to give up the historicity of Jesus's life and, particularly, the historicity of his death. Even those who deny the physical character of the resurrection usually tie the idea of resurrection to an historical event, such as an experience of the first apostles.² We seem faced with two options for understanding scripture: On the one hand, we can accept some variety of the academic historians' approach to scripture. We may opt for the more "liberal" approach of people such as Raymond Brown or we may prefer the more "conservative" approach of Christian literalists, but we agree that scripture is historical. Believers have generally sought to show that the scriptures are accurate histories, to some degree, and they have accepted some version of the canons of historical scholarship as the canons for understanding the historicity of scripture.³

2. For example, see Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming: How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity* (New York: Random House, 1986).

3. During the last several years there has been a sometimes rancorous discussion among Latter-day Saint scholars about how to understand history. I think the rancor of

A common alternative is to escape the problems created by accepting those canons by arguing that the scriptures are not essentially historical. On this view, rather than being accurate descriptions of historical events, the scriptures are writings that may often look like history and, in fact, may have historical elements, but they are really about something other than the events portrayed in them. These believers often argue that scriptures are not about history, but about another reality, such as a reality of archetypal meanings. Given the problems of establishing the historicity of scripture, such believers want to reject the necessity of that historicity but retain the truth of scripture: Scriptures may or may not be historical, but they are not about historical truth, they are about religious truth, these people argue. Thus, according to them, though scripture takes the guise of history, it is actually about something else, such as an ahistorical transcendent or archetypal reality.⁴

that discussion has died down—thank goodness—so I hope that I can take up this related question without becoming embroiled in that earlier debate. What follows is not a criticism of academic history nor historians nor their methods. To offer another understanding of what the word *history* can mean is not to suggest that there is something wrong with other meanings of the word. We make a mistake when we use a notion of history inappropriate to the context at hand, not when we use a different notion of history. That mistake, a kind of equivocation, is what I believe often happens in the debates between those who defend scriptural historicity and those who attack it, as well as between those who deal with that historicity by means of differing understandings of history. (For an important though, I believe, generally misunderstood discussion of several possibilities for history, see the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*.)

4. One problem with this view, a problem that I cannot explore here, is that on such a view there can be nothing new in the world. What-is is always and only what has already been; everything was given “in the beginning,” and nothing else can be. Though, under the influence of Greek philosophy, this understanding has been a feature of much traditional Christianity—perhaps most explicitly in Calvinism—it is a view that is out of character with Christianity, in which the hope for what is to come, what Bloch calls “the Not-Yet,” plays a crucial role. See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1986). The not-yet is a notion without which it is difficult to understand how such things as repentance and exaltation can have meaning, but if everything already has been given, then there is nothing that we can describe as genuinely not-yet. Some versions of this position are likely to seem very unorthodox to ordinary Mormons. However, the Platonic view, common among many orthodox Latter-day Saints, in which religious truth is the expression of a Platonic realm of truth—laws, principles, for example—may be subject to the same criticism.

Most Christian believers find this ahistorical resolution of the problem of scriptural historicity unacceptable, and this is doubly true for Latter-day Saint believers. For example, most Latter-day Saints find it difficult to explain and accept the Book of Mormon's account of itself and Joseph Smith's account of its origin if it is not substantially a historical document rather than an embodiment of a- or trans-historical truth. Most Latter-day Saints feel that if the Book of Mormon is not substantially historical, then much of its text—the narrative, major portion—is irrelevant to its meaning for us, and it is difficult to see how to avoid accusing Joseph Smith of fraud.

Perhaps one way to avoid that charge would be to understand the production of the Book of Mormon as the creation of myth, in the positive sense of that word which academics often use, namely a discourse that purports to give the structure of reality. As will be apparent, I am sympathetic to that understanding. Nevertheless, I think it is flawed because, as the view is usually argued, it gives up too much. Such an explanation gives up the claim of peculiar and unique truth—a truth inseparable from historical truth—that most Christians and (even more) most Latter-day Saints take to be essential to their religion and their religious experience. The historicity of origins has been an essential element of biblical religion from the beginning. To understand any of those religions *only* in terms of myth changes them and the religious experience within them to such a degree that it is not clear how those who take the mythic view can claim that they are Christians or Latter-day Saints or Jews or Muslims rather than merely religious people with no particular religious identity.

For Latter-day Saints the problem of the mythic understanding of scripture is even more severe. For it is difficult to understand such things as the hefting of the gold plates and the testimony of the various witnesses and the visits of the Angel Moroni if they are only part of the construction of a myth.⁵ Mythmakers account for their

5. Though I am not using the word *myth* in its everyday sense—a false or fanciful story—in contrast to the way it is used in chapter 4, I do use it here to denote an account

myths as things they have received.⁶ To that degree Joseph Smith's account could be construed as mythic. However, mythmakers do not consciously create the kinds of detailed, first-person accounts of that reception that Joseph Smith gives. Mythmakers give accounts in which they have received the story of someone who received the sacred objects. They have not themselves received the objects. Thus, if we explain Latter-day Saint scripture by saying that Joseph Smith was making myth rather than reporting historical experiences, it is still difficult to avoid coming to the conclusion that not only was he making myth, he was also committing fraud. The phenomenon of myth-making and the phenomenon of the origins of the LDS Church are not consonant with each other.

However, I believe that there is a more difficult problem. Beside the existential and phenomenological problems of the myth-making understanding of scripture, there is a theoretical problem: Those who argue that the authors of scripture are mythmakers assume, with the apologists and the academics, that the canons of academic history are *the* canons of history. They do not consider the possibility that there are other ways of understanding history and that, on one of those understandings, scripture is historical, literally so.

As a result of such problems, believers find it necessary to insist on the historical character of scripture, though doing so is sometimes rationally difficult; historical scholarship seldom lines up with our understanding of scripture as well as most believers would like it to. We can take various positions on the historicity of scripture, but if we are to think about that historicity, we must ask ourselves what the word *history* can mean and which of its possible meanings we can

that is not historically true. As I noted in the earlier discussion, the common scholarly meaning of the word *myth* does not include that it is not historically true, but I am not using the word in that sense. However, if one were to use the word in that scholarly sense, then one could take my argument to say, among other things, that scripture is myth, but the myth of scripture and its factual history are not mutually exclusive.

6. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, ed. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas, trans. Don Berry and others (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 31-32.

most accurately apply to scripture. I argue that our discomfort with the various alternative attempts to deal with the historicity of scripture results from using a concept of history that is inappropriate to scripture. As a result, though I believe that the historical part of scripture is genuinely historical, I do not think the canons of contemporary historical scholarship will be much help to us in understanding scripture as history. We must reconsider what history is.

The discussion of history and its meaning, and—especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—the discussion of the historicity of scripture, have been an important part of modern intellectual history. Much of the contemporary discussion of these issues owes its form and content to those earlier debates.⁷ However, though the terms *premodern* and *modern* are not unproblematic,⁸ I believe that the understanding of history held by premoderns is quite different from our own, that it is a plausible alternative understanding of history, and that a contemporary rethinking of it gives us a better way to understand scripture than does a modern understanding—not just a way of understanding how premoderns understood history and scripture,

7. Literary criticism also owes much to those debates. Most of the varieties of positions taken in literary criticism are very much descendants of the various positions taken in the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century debates about the Bible, and even the positions that are not directly descended from the debates two hundred years ago often rely on parts of those arguments and positions. One need only read Frei's overview of the debates about biblical meaning to see that. See Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative; A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), especially chaps. 2–7. Much of the contemporary row over texts and meaning amounts to little more than a rehash of those earlier discussions.

8. Among other reasons, the terms are problematic because the periodization of history is a questionable and peculiarly modern practice, because the definitions of the periods take modernism as their point of reference, and because the names of the periods do not name specific periods of history so much as ways of thinking that may be more obvious in one time than another, but are rarely exclusive to any period. As I will use the terms here, *premodern* and *modern* are general terms. There were a variety of ways of understanding history prior to modernism and there are a variety of ways of understanding it in modernism. However, there is, nevertheless, a divide between the two. Thus, in spite of the difficulties of doing so, I will use the word *premodern* to refer to an understanding of history perhaps best exemplified in medieval thinking and I will use the word *modern* to refer to the “scientific” ways of understanding history that come to dominate with modernism.

but the basis for understanding our own relation to history and scripture differently than we do. Consequently, a brief comparison of modern and premodern history can serve as a starting point for thinking about alternative conceptions of history.⁹

The Modern Concept of History: Representation/Reference

Perhaps the first thing to be said about the difference between modern and premodern history is that modern history takes narratives and the events they describe to be separable from each other, but premodern history does not. The distinction is not an obvious one. In fact, even if we understand that distinction conceptually, we do not find it easy to think about scripture except by using the modern distinction. Though, in its origins, the separation of event and narrative is an academic distinction, it has become so “obvious,” so “natural,” that we have difficulty understanding the distinction or reading scripture in any other way. It seems inescapably true to us that there are two things, the event itself and what one can truthfully say about that event. But premodern thinking does not make that distinction, at least not in the way that modern history does.

To give an account of an event is to speak meaningfully of that event. For example, “The cat sat on the mat” is meaningful, but it does not mean much. Though we can understand it lexically and syntactically, unless that sentence is correlated to an event in some way (whether negatively or positively), it lacks fullness of meaning. If I say “The cat sat on the mat” as a description of a particular event, then I find that event meaningful, and the meaning of the sentence is a presentation of a meaning of the event. However, counterintuitively, without such presentations of meaning, whether or not explicitly put into language, there are no events. Events without meaning are strictly inconceivable; *as events, events are meaningful*. Without meaning, the

9. Though I do not agree with some of his conclusions, Frei’s seminal work on biblical meaning and the influence of the modern understanding of history on our understanding of biblical meaning serves as my starting point.

flux of time and space is not filled with events. Without meaning, the flux is random motion of “stuff,” at best.

Modernism’s mistake was to think that the meaning of sentences and the events they describe is explained merely referentially. Modernism assumes that the truth of the sentence is a function of its reference to a particular event, but reference is not enough to explain the meaning of events. If there is to be some meaningful notion of truth, then the constituting and interpreting subject must be in relation to a world that is more than and, in some sense, prior to his or her perceptions and interpretations. The question is how to refer to that which is prior to perception and interpretation when it seems that we can only do so through perception and interpretation.

I am not saying that reference is impossible. After all, we do speak of things in the world, and attempts to do away with referential talk about things in the world are self-refuting (if there are such attempts).¹⁰ The modernist mistake is not in thinking that meaning requires reference, but in thinking that reference is sufficient to explain meaning as truth. There is meaning, but it always goes beyond what one can account for merely referentially.¹¹

10. However, whether we talk about real things in the real world in a referential way (i.e., as explained by a referential theory) remains a question. Strictly speaking, reference *per se* may be impossible, as thinkers such as Frege and Davidson argue. It does not follow that we cannot speak of the world, only that we do not do so in the way that referential theories of meaning assume that we do, namely, by correlating our meaningful sentences with states of affairs in something like a one-to-one manner. One response to the problem, a response I find interesting and perhaps compelling, is in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. See, for example, his essay, “The Event, the Phenomenon, and the Revealed,” in *Transcendence in Philosophy and Religion*, ed. James E. Faulconer (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), 87–105. Marion argues, not that reference is possible, but that we have meaningful contact with the things themselves in the world.

11. I will take up the issue of signs from a Derridean standpoint: Every system of signs depends on something outside the system, so no system of signs can completely capture that to which it refers; thus, there is always more to reality than any interpretation of it can capture, though we can give only interpretations. Nevertheless, I do not think the Derridean character of my argument is essential to it, as I will argue later. The points I take from Derrida could also be made using other contemporary philosophers, including Anglo-American ones. See Kevin Hart’s *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) for a readable, more

The connection between a word and the thing it refers to—in other words, meaningful reference—exists only in an act of reference, but no theory of reference can give an account of that act. Among other things, a theory of reference cannot account for the particular thing to which the meaning-act points or for the fact that it does so point in this case. Language theories can tell us how words relate to each other (in an “endless chain of signification,” to use a phrase from the twentieth-century French philosopher Jacques Derrida), but given the infinite variety of possible references in any particular act of meaning, language theories cannot fully account for the success of acts in which we talk about things in the world.

Many theories mark this inability by mentioning the importance of context, but such a remark makes the Derridean point, for context does not name something to which we can refer, though at first glance it may seem to. Each reference to a context is made possible by another context which is, itself, not referred to, making any attempt to refer to context itself endless. One cannot refer to context as such; context is beyond reference, though essential to it. This means that the invocation of context in a theory of reference shows that, beside whatever the theory proposes to explain meaning, something more is needed. What I mean in a putative referential act, such as the description of an historical event, is not completely decided by the sign system (such as a natural language) that I use to make that reference or by any theory of such sign systems. It is always also decided by “something more.”

We may try to specify what that something more is by mentioning the speaker’s intent, the particular audience she addresses, the history of the language, the social relations in force at the time of the event, and all of the other “things” to which rhetoric attends, including the relation

detailed overview of Derrida’s discussion of signs and for a treatment of the relevance of that discussion to religious understanding. For an excellent criticism of Derrida, see Françoise Dastur, “Heidegger and Derrida: On Play and Difference,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 3/1–2 (1995): 1–23. However, her criticism does not undo this point about signs and referentiality. Eco has made an argument similar to Derrida’s. See Umberto Eco, *Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

of the referential object to the person making the reference (which begs the question of reference). However, though we can talk about context, about what else reference requires, there seems to be no possible science or theory of context. Beside that, the act of reference (which must, as an act, include both the object of reference and the particular, existent thing that corresponds to that object) exists within the system of signs in which the reference occurs. Thus, the referential act is not a simple connection of two autonomous things, the thing to which I refer and the reference.¹² We cannot leave language behind, even in our putative reference to what is outside language.

We must use language to speak of what is beyond language. Nevertheless, we necessarily say what is, strictly speaking, impossible to say—namely, that talk about the world and the things in the world always involves something more than language. Something more than/other than language, something that cannot be said directly, accounts for any successful talk about things. Contrary to a common American (mis)interpretation of Derrida, *the point is not that there are only texts, but that, though we can deal with only texts and text analogs,*

12. Thus, also, reference is inherently unstable, not only in its inability to be explained by any theory of reference, but over time. As the context of an event changes (and the event has temporal as well as momentary context), so too does the event, as anyone who genuinely believes in repentance must believe. The present can change the past or there is no difference between repentance and mere regret. This idea of backward causation sounds nonsensical to most people (though how, without it, to explain repentance as anything other than a change of mind rather than a purification remains a mystery). However, consider rhythm as an analog. The moments of a rhythm cannot be discreet like the moments in a time line. If they were, they would not be moments of a rhythm. Rhythmic moments require (already “contain”) their before and their after. One hit on the head of a drum is not part of any rhythm; each beat in a rhythm is what it is only in its relation to each of the other, preceding and following beats, only as it fits into the rhythm as a whole. Consequently, as one varies a rhythm at any particular beat, the meaning of each *previous* beat changes. Since beats are defined in their relation to each other, a change in the relation between the various beats changes any beat in the past into something “new,” something other than what it was. The past beat no longer exists in the same way that it did. At the time the drumhead was struck initially, the beat was one thing. However, with subsequent strikes, that past event is now something other than what it was. If events are what they are in relation to each other, then the analogy suggests that their meaning could change over time, that they, therefore, could change over time.

there is necessarily something more than any text.¹³ Ironically, modernism rather than Derrida insists that there is nothing other than the text: By assuming that, in principle, it is possible, or at least desirable, for human beings to give a final, complete description of the world, modernism makes an identity of its ultimate, though ideal, text and the world described by that text. In contrast, Derrida denies the possibility of that identification. Something always remains beyond the text—beyond explanation—something that explains the text in question but is not explained by that text.

The empiricism of modernism (not the only kind of empiricism) imitates the Sophists of classical Greece, for it pins its hopes for understanding on a supposed ability to fix the connections between ideas and words, on the one hand, and things on the other. However, as Catherine Pickstock notes, it is not only impossible to achieve fixity in that connection, it is dishonest to seek for it: “Human life is always in the midst of things; the clarity of empiricist conclusions is an illusion fostered by the falsely isolated and inert nature of its artificial

13. Explaining Derrida’s position, John Caputo says: “Derrida does not deny but delimits reference; what he denies is reference-without-difference. Without *différance* [Derrida’s technical term for what happens in acts of reference: the sign differs from its object and defers complete identification, never completely corresponding to its object]. *Différance* does not lock us up inside anything. On the contrary, *différance* is a doorway, a threshold (*limen*), a door through which everything outgoing (reference, messages sent, etc.) and incoming (messages received, perceptions, etc.) must pass. **A threshold supposes both an inside and an outside.** . . . On this accounting, proper names refer *in actu exercitu*, in the exercised act, in actual use, in the concrete happening or the factual event. . . . It is a wonder, a little difficult to account for, but it happens. . . . [It is] something that philosophy is forced to swallow while being unable to digest” (John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993], 76–77; boldface added.) The misunderstanding that attributes to Derrida the claim that there is nothing external to language is common, so common that it has become the “common sense” of those who criticize Derrida, as well as many of those who praise him. Nevertheless, it is mistaken, as a careful reading of Derrida, in the context of his background in Husserl and Heidegger, will show. Out of ignorance, some continue to make and repeat this mistake because it has become so common. Others, such as Huston Smith, seem to do so more willfully. See Huston Smith, “The Religious Significance of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder,” *Faith and Philosophy* 12/3 (1995): 409–22.

findings.”¹⁴ In contrast, “the genuine ‘fixity’ parodied by the Sophists can be attained only in the unshakeable conviction of a certain way of life.” In other words, as Aristotle argues in *Nicomachean Ethics*, the alternative to the fixity of ideas is fixity of character, the fixity of a lived life, a fixity that cannot be reduced to a fixed connection between ideas and things. By ignoring that alternative, when modernism discovers that it cannot nail things down as it wishes, that crucifixion is no more appropriate for ideas and values than it is for human beings, it concludes that nihilism is the only alternative.¹⁵

For history, as for any other discipline, the question that a non-modern understanding of signs and reference raises is, “What else is involved in producing the ‘text’ of our understanding of history?” According to what we choose, we will get different ways of understanding history. And, though we can and must adjudicate between the various ways of understanding history, there is no way to do so “purely”—in other words, without referring to such things as various authorities; our goals and traditions; social, scholastic, and other conventions; social relations; and so on. As Friedrich Nietzsche saw clearly (in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*), we must take into account the lives and ways of life into which such histories enter. We cannot name, once and for all, what the “what else” of language or even of an individual language act is. Contrary to the expectations of the Enlightenment, we have no Archimedean point from which we can leverage our decision for or against a particular understanding of the world, much less of history.

It is important to note, however, that the consequence of the absence of such a risk-free leverage or standpoint does not result in absolute relativity and, therefore, in the meaninglessness of our decisions.

14. Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 19.

15. This explains why so many who read the work of thinkers such as Derrida, Lyotard, Levinas, and others cannot see anything in them but nihilism: since such thinkers reject modernism’s understanding of fixity, those readers assume that the thinkers in question must argue for no fixity at all.

That relativist consequence would follow only if, contrary to fact, we have only two options: mathematical certainty or absolute relativity.¹⁶ Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle, among the ancients, and Hannah Arendt, in this century, have offered other options. However, we need not know the work of these philosophers to see that we can break the horns of the dilemma with other options. The necessity of faith (though not necessarily religious faith) shows that there are more than those two options.¹⁷

Since the eighteenth century, both those who criticize scripture as history and those who defend it have assumed the modernist understanding of the connection between history and meaning, though usually only implicitly. I argue that, in spite of themselves, eighteenth-century biblical critics give up the Bible as a sacred text—even, implicitly, those who wished to defend it as sacred. They assume that there is a universal, language-free view available to them (at least in principle) and that the scriptures refer to or depict that universal view more or less accurately.¹⁸ They assume that events exist prior to and independent of the meanings of those events, and that the better a historical

16. Those who assume that the absence of a risk-free, universal viewpoint results in thoroughgoing relativism share with the Enlightenment the assumption that meaning is either constituted as the Enlightenment says it is or there is no meaning. With most contemporary philosophers, I deny that assumption. As a consequence, vicious relativism does not necessarily follow from denying an Archimedean leverage point for understanding and interpretation.

17. For example, echoing what other contemporary philosophers have also said, Derrida says: “There is no morality without faith, faith in the other. There is no social experience without bearing witness, without attestation, the recognition of a dimension of trust and faith. This is not a religious point; it is the general structure of experience” (Derrida, private discussion, Paris, 1 March 1996). The first of the *Lectures on Faith* made a similar point more than one hundred years ago, and it presumably echoes what the Prophet Joseph Smith believed. Joseph Smith might reply to Derrida: “True, it is the general structure of experience, but that is a religious point, for religion gives the general structure to experience.”

18. Such a view may be consequent on the traditional Christian understanding of God: As an unembodied being, God is omnipresent. For such an omnipresent being, knowledge is aperspectival, i.e., universal. Thus, as the Renaissance and Enlightenment argument goes, since we are made in God’s image, to the degree possible our knowledge also should be aperspectival and universal. However, one can believe in God’s knowledge, understanding, and omniscience without assuming that they are to be understood

text is, the more accurately it describes the independent event. By agreeing to the modernist assumption about how meaning is fixed, even defenders of the Bible conflate historical understanding with an accurate, referential description of events. They assume that meaning, biblical or otherwise, is essentially referential/representative and that only a rational method can give us understanding of historical texts, such as the Bible. By making the question of scriptural truth—scriptural literalness—a merely referential question (in other words, by understanding meaning via a referential theory and by applying that understanding to scripture), both the religious and the critics of religion turn religion into a set of beliefs to which one assents because one takes them to be referentially valid. But to paraphrase James, the devils also refer, and tremble (see James 2:19).

A Premodern Concept of History: Incarnation

In contrast, premodern thinkers take the Bible not as an accurate reference to either history or another reality (though they do not deny that we can speak of the world), but as the incarnation (or enactment) of a symbolic ordering.¹⁹ Work in the anthropology of religion,

in these universal, aperspectival terms. Much of David Paulsen's work is dedicated to showing the alternative.

19. The concept of a symbolic ordering is not a rigorous concept, but I do not think it a difficult concept to understand. I think its meaning will become clear as I use the term in context. However, let me try to say something for those who would like more of an explanation. For background in understanding my discussion of symbolic ordering, one should read sections 31 and 32 of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (and perhaps the material leading up to those sections). See *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper, 1962). There he discusses understanding and the necessity of preunderstanding to understanding and interpretation. (By *understanding* Heidegger means something like "implicit understanding," and by *interpretation* he means the explication of understanding.) The correlate discussion of prejudice in Hans-Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Wein, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1993), 265–300, and the discussion of prefiguration (also called *mimesis*₁) in Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative, Volume 1*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 1–64, might be helpful. (Both Gadamer and Ricoeur rely heavily on Heidegger's work.) Charles Guignon's book may also be helpful: *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983). Briefly put, what we think of as understanding requires preunderstanding; preunderstanding gives us our possibilities for understanding. As we have understood since Plato, our understanding of the world

such as that of Mircea Eliade, suggests that we misunderstand religion when we understand it as essentially a set of beliefs.²⁰ In contrast, when we see what such anthropological work shows us, we discover that religion is an ordering of the world in and through symbols. Beliefs are consequent on that ordering, not constitutive of it. Thus, a Catholic, a Southern Baptist, and a Latter-day Saint differ from one another, not so much because they hold different beliefs (though they do), but because they are involved in different ways of ordering the world symbolically (though, given that they are all Christians, there is considerable overlap in the orderings manifest in their lives). The most obvious place to find symbolic ordering is in the rituals of religions and in their sacred objects, though symbolic ordering also

cannot begin from zero, *ex nihilo*. Something, some way in which the world gives itself to us prior to reflection, makes reflective understanding possible. But the world does not give itself as the bare presence of mere things. It always—always already—gives itself to us in shape and relations, in a figure. The world gives itself to us, prereflectively, as configured in various ways. One fundamental preunderstanding is the configuration of the world (anciently, the *kosmos*), within which one finds oneself oriented in the world: an ordering gives the possibilities for understanding by configuring the possible relations of the world. Various things can serve to order the *kosmos*, language and mathematics, for example. A symbolic ordering is a preunderstanding in which symbols and symbols systems (as opposed to sign systems) are fundamental, though not exclusive, to the configuration in which one finds oneself oriented.

20. This reduction of religion to sets of beliefs is also consequent on the traditional understanding of God and the way that understanding led to the Enlightenment: On a voluntaristic Christian view, God's will is coextensive with his knowledge, which is ideal and at least a representation of the world. Thus, since humans image God, human knowledge (i.e., representation of the ideal), like God's knowledge, is prior to or fundamental to human action and life. (This explains why Western thought consistently values theory over praxis.) On a voluntarist view, religious beliefs are representations to ourselves of the religious aspect of the ideal world. As such, they make it possible for us to act in religious ways. Therefore, beliefs are fundamental to religion. We generally take recognition of and adherence to a particular set of beliefs to be identical with being an adherent of that religion. (Note that it is possible to understand a good deal of modernism as an outgrowth of voluntarism in theology. For an argument to this effect, see Klaus Held, "Civic Prudence in Machiavelli: Toward the Paradigm Transformation in Philosophy in the Transition to Modernity," in *The Ancients and the Moderns*, ed. Reginald Lilly [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996], 115–29.) To take religion to be a matter of symbolic ordering is to reject this understanding of the connection between religion and belief. (Of course, I do not necessarily reject everything about voluntarism, only those features that make belief and representation fundamental to action in the way that voluntarism does.)

encompasses more ordinary aspects of life, including such things as peculiar idioms and patterns of deference—and assertions of belief. Especially in religion, systems and sets of beliefs are part of the orders in question, but they are not foundational to those orders. To be religious, therefore, is not to assent to particular propositions or assertions, though that assent follows from the fact that one is religious. Instead, to be religious is to recognize—to reverence—the holy and to live in a world of which the contents, including beliefs, are ordered by the holy.²¹ For the religious, the holy is the ordering principle, the “form” of the world, to use a term important to Plato, Aristotle, and all of medieval philosophy.²² For premodern thought, both religious and

21. I am hesitant to define what I mean by *holy*. I fear a kind of definitional blasphemy, but I can say that it has to do with what is excessive—in other words, abundant, and determinative: the holy “transcends” the world of our experience and our ability to explain (though it transcends without having to be, itself, in or of another quasi-Platonic metaphysical realm) and it “explains” the world (by grounding that world, though—again—it is not a ground outside or beyond the world). Those curious about how to think such transcendence and ground might find Heidegger’s *Principle of Reason*, trans. Reginald Lilly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), interesting. Though that book is not about the holy, it does deal with transcendence without making transcendence otherworldly. The question of transcendence has become central to much contemporary European philosophy, so much so that some philosophers have complained of a “theological turn” in French thought. See Dominique Janicaud, *The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology*, in Dominique Janicaud and others, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate*, trans. Bernard G. Prusak and Jeffrey L. Klosky (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16–103.

22. I use the language of form and content here for heuristic reasons. As we usually understand that language, it requires another world to which this world refers; that is, something like a metatheory of representation. However, one need not be a Platonist or a representationalist to find the language of form meaningful and helpful. For the ancients, form is that in which the real shows itself, presents itself. That is the point, and the point need not be understood in representational terms, as Aristotle well shows. Put otherwise: the language of form and content can be helpful, though the danger is that we will understand that language via a theory of representation or something like it. The work of Heidegger, for example, is amenable to this way of thinking. I believe that Wittgenstein’s work is similarly amenable to form and content language, though of course neither Heidegger nor Wittgenstein would use the word *form* in its Platonic sense because of the metaphysical, representational, baggage that the word carries with it. Heidegger speaks of horizons, Wittgenstein of forms of life. In what follows, I will discuss how form can be that in which the real shows itself without assuming that the form must have some existence independent of that which it informs.

nonreligious, the real is primarily “formal.” There not only can be, but must be, a variety of manifestations of what I here call form, but each is an instance of the “same thing.” The form of something is the real manifesting itself in the world. For religious premoderns, the holy is the real manifest in the symbolic order of things—it is the form not just of individual things but of things as a whole—and religion gives us that form/order.

It is important to note that rational ordering and symbolic ordering are not necessarily at odds with one another. Within a symbolic order, rational discourse is one of the forms in which the real is manifest. Therefore, it is not opposed to symbolic ordering, but a possible part of any symbolic order. In contrast, in a rational ordering, symbolic discourse cannot be made an instance of reason, except as a parasitic form of reference; in other words, as ambiguous or “poetic” speech.²³ As a result, though within a symbolic ordering there is no necessary opposition between the rational and the symbolic, that opposition may be necessary to a rational order.²⁴ There is an asymmetry between symbolic order and rational order, an asymmetry that is to the advantage of symbolic order.

Living as we do in an age when modernism is the common sense for perhaps most human beings (at least those under the sway of progress and its Euro-American manifestation), the holy is no longer what orders the world as a whole. When we are asked to talk or think about religion, we usually do so as if religion were one of several regions of life. On this view, there are many regions of my life: the world of work, the political world, the family, the world of morality, the academic and scholarly world, the economic region, the world of leisure, and so on.

23. John Searle’s work is an interesting and relevant example of the attempt to take the language of symbolic ordering as parasitic. See, for example, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

24. Ironically, however, the exclusion of symbolic ordering from the rational is self-defeating since rational language cannot avoid the intrusion of the symbolic via such features of language as metaphor: we no longer understand words such as *inference* and phrases such as *follows from* out of the metaphors that inform them, but if all metaphorical language were removed, even the language of logic, like all language, would cease to function.

Religion is one of these regions of our lives, and some people's lives may have no such region. Though we engage in activities that involve the various regions of our lives, we assume that each is, strictly speaking, separate from the others, though possibly overlapping; in themselves, each region is on an equal footing with the others, and each region is differentiated in value from any other only by my valuing of it, in other words by my interests, desires, or needs.²⁵

In contrast, for the premodern, religion is not one of several possible regions of my life. Instead, it is the field within which any other regions or aspects are marked out and related to each other. Religion is that which makes regions possible and which enacts the world as a whole, giving it unity, order, and meaning in and through symbols. To use Platonic language, religion manifests the "form" of the world. On this view, we can still speak of regions of human endeavor and interest, but ultimately those regions, such as economics or morality or politics, get their meaning in themselves and in their relations to each other, as well as their relative weight and importance from religion, rather than from our valuing.

If we understand religion this way, then I think we must conclude that the religious and the critics of religion implicitly agreed to give up the Bible as a sacred text when they agreed to take it as a referential text like any other referential text rather than as a symbolically ordering one. For to understand the Bible by means of a referential theory is to take it as a manifestation of one region of human experience among others. It is to take it as something on a conceptual and ontological par with other of its regions, rather than as something incomparable because it is a revelation of what gives meaning to any possible region of life as life's enactment. The eighteenth- and nineteenth-century interest in reading the Bible with the methods that one would use to read any other book was, implicitly, a recognition that the Bible was

25. Some may expand on this, not placing the value in the individual, but in the group. However, the basic structure remains the same: the distinction between regions and the value of each is determined subjectively or intersubjectively.

no longer *the* text about human existence, but one of many texts, each referring to or describing more or less accurately a different dimension or region of human reality.

The disagreement between Catholicism and the Reformation over the nature of symbols is one locus of this difference between symbolic ordering and reference. The doctrine of transubstantiation is the most obvious instance of this difference in the understanding of symbols. Because those outside the Roman Catholic tradition do not accept that doctrine, they also often reject the idea that symbols are incarnations rather than mere references. However, one need not accept transubstantiation—at least not as it is usually understood—to accept that symbols in general are incarnations.

As the roots of the word *transubstantiation* imply, the problem with the doctrine for those who are not Roman Catholics is that it requires one to believe that the substance of the Eucharist has become, essentially and substantially, the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ. Such an understanding of the Eucharist is the consequence, on the one hand, of believing that symbols are incarnations, and, on the other, of having an Aristotelian/Thomistic metaphysics of substance and, therefore, a commensurate explanation of what it means for a symbol to be an incarnation.²⁶

26. This is not to say that the dogma of transubstantiation begins with Aquinas. Rather, he formulates philosophically the justification for a teaching that has been generally argued for (though not always required to be believed) since at least the tenth century and that was made dogmatic only with the Fourth Lateran Council (1215). The Thomist interpretation of Aristotle's doctrine of substance takes substance to be that which exists in itself or that which remains what it is, though it might have differing qualities at different moments. (For more on substance, see Aristotle's *Categories*.) The second of these characterizations of substance makes possible the doctrine of transubstantiation as usually understood in the dogma of the Catholic Church: the bread takes on the metaphysical substance of Christ's body, though in doing so it has different qualities than it does in the person of Jesus Christ. However, one caveat: Pickstock takes a position very much like that of Marion (*God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991]), arguing cogently and more fully than he that the Thomist interpretation of transubstantiation is not what makes that doctrine implausible. Rather, the implausibility results from the metaphysics of Duns Scotus and the consequent spatialization of ontology: Before Scotus, the sacrament of the Eucharist was understood as the embodied, temporal link of the past to the present and to the future. As such, it

However, one could believe that symbols are incarnations without accepting an Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics of substance and the explanations of incarnation that follow from it. The tight connection between the two ideas is only an historical one. Those who accepted the first of these ideas, incarnation, but not the second, Aristotelian metaphysics, would not hold to the doctrine of transubstantiation in the dogmatic sense. Even Catholics have other alternatives for understanding the doctrine of transubstantiation, non-Thomistic, Augustinian ones.²⁷ Thus, Marion argues that the bread and wine (or water for Latter-day Saints) are incarnations of Christ without arguing that they become, in metaphysical substance, his body and blood; he

connected the meaning of the past event of the atonement to the coming event of the Apocalypse, through the present. Therefore, the Eucharist was the embodied *presenting* of the atonement, an act. See Pickstock, *After Writing*, 160–65. In contrast, under Scotus’s influence, the Eucharist later “instantiated a transposition from a *temporal* distribution (which linked sacramentally the past and present to the eschatological future), to a *spatial* one, according to which the sacramental ‘action’ became less a non-identical repetition continuous with the ‘original’ event and more a simple, positive, authoritative ‘miracle’ in the present” (Pickstock, *After Writing*, 160), the presence of a thing. On the pre-Scotus reading, “that which exists in itself” is dynamic rather than static, more like an event than a thing. See Heidegger’s *Aristotle’s Metaphysics θ 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), for a discussion of this way of understanding Aristotle and, thus, also Aquinas. Thus, Pickstock reads Aquinas’s pre-Scotus explanation of the Eucharist and transubstantiation as escaping my criticism, above, though her understanding of Aquinas’s explanation fits well with my understanding of how ordinances, symbols, and texts work in the premodern world. Whatever one might think is the most coherent explanation of the doctrine of transubstantiation, my point is that medieval Christians rejected the modernist assumption that the most important symbol in Christianity, the eucharistic wafer and wine, are material things that *merely* direct our attention to something immaterial and invisible. Their understanding of the Eucharist implicitly rejects any simple version of reference, and that rejection can be generalized to their understanding of symbols and to the meaning of texts, as I argue we must do to understand the literal character of scripture.

27. We have seen Pickstock’s explanation. Marion explains the Eucharist, neither as a mere “perceptible medium for a wholly intellectual or representational process” nor as “an imposture of idolatry” by which “the community would seek to place ‘God’ at its disposition like a thing,” but as an incarnation of the eucharistic gift, as a temporalizing memorial, a physical memorial that orders the present and, in doing so, grants the future: “The Eucharist anticipates what we will be, will see, will love: *figura nostra*, the figure of what we will be, but above all ourselves, facing the gift that we cannot yet welcome, so, in the strict sense, that we cannot yet figure it” (Marion, *God Without Being*, 166–67).

argues for transubstantiation without arguing for that which most of us associate with transubstantiation and which non-Catholics find religiously and philosophically objectionable. Marion does so with an understanding similar to that we see in Eliade and others like Pickstock: symbols are incarnate orderings of our world.

One way to understand Marion's point better is to consider that early Christians also did not take the Eucharist as a mere reminder, but as a corporate (in other words, an embodied, incarnate) act, an enactment of a way of life. For early Christians, the Eucharist is something the church does and becomes rather than merely something by which the individual signifies and recalls. To remember the sacrifice of Jesus is to take part in a community and the life of that community. It is to incarnate the divine community—the body of Christ (see 1 Corinthians 12:27 and Ephesians 4:12)—and to become incarnate in it, not merely to recall a past event. (If the sacrament were merely a matter of recall, one could effectively perform the sacramental ritual by passing out slips of paper on which was written, “Remember Christ and your relation to him”—or even with an e-mail message to that effect or a note in one's tackle box.) For early Christians and, presumably, for contemporary ones, to partake in the elements of the Eucharist was to be and become something—to be made something (“incarnated” in the divine community, Zion) in and through ritual—not merely to recall a past event.²⁸ Of course, one cannot become what one must without recalling that past event at some times, but the point stands that the ritual's function cannot be understood only in terms of recollection. Marion's point about how the Eucharist temporalizes—incarnates, putting us into the world in a particular way—is similar.

In contrast, the Reformation understanding of symbols breaks the *incarnans* of the symbol (the material of the symbol) from the *incarnatum* (that which is manifest in the symbol). In doing so, it makes

28. Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1945), 29ff., 78ff.

the relation of symbol and what it manifests a matter merely of reference.²⁹ Rejecting the Reformation, Catholicism continues to insist that the *incarnans* and the *incarnatum* cannot be separated: the *incarnans* is more than something that helps us think about the *incarnatum*. Certainly one need not be a Catholic or believe that the bread of the sacrament becomes the actual body of Christ to think that this insistence has something valuable to say. The issue is not one of Catholics versus Protestants, especially for those like ourselves who are neither. The point is that, contrary to the modernist understanding, religions do not take symbols merely to be referential; they understand them as something more (even when their theologies deny that they do, as in much Protestantism). Contemporary philosophical arguments about meaning and reference point in the direction of a need for something more. The anthropology of religions suggests that we must understand that religion requires more than referentially valid beliefs. The Catholic tradition has called this something more *incarnation*, a term that I adopt as informative, though I will supplement that term with another, *enactment*. To be incarnate is to *be*, materially, a manifestation of, an instance of, what is, supposedly, only referred to. On this way of thinking, the symbol is what it incarnates (or what “in-forms” it, if we use Platonic language) rather than merely a representation of or reference to it. To use the language of Aristotle, to be incarnate is to en-act that to which we might think the thing refers.³⁰ My claim is that we can understand scripture as an incarnation or enactment of history rather than a representation of it.

Catholicism has given the most thought to how to understand sacred things, including rituals and symbols, in terms of enactment. However, that tradition fails to attend fully to scripture. The Reformation reverses this problem, giving attention to scripture but rejecting

29. Thus, one takes a Reformation view when one understands scripture as a more or less successful attempt to describe events accurately *and* when one takes it to be essentially ahistorical and referential to something transcendent.

30. Note that the literal meaning of *actual* is “enacted.” To be something is to enact something.

the understanding of ritual and sacrament as incarnation. And this is true even though the Reformation and Christian humanism also speak of the Bible as an incarnation of Christ, as Erasmus does in speaking of the text as the body of Christ.³¹ In spite of what might appear to be incarnational language in Reformation works, we can see the shift from enacted incarnation to representation in the seventeenth-century debates over theater (a debate between written text—representation—and enactment). As Richard Helgerson says:

Where print fixes the author and frees the reader, performance [in my terms, enactment] does the reverse. It frees the performer and fixes—transfixes—the audience. Performance allows the self a Protean adaptability, but skillfully managed, it overwhelms its audience, rendering it captive to impressions that defy interpretation. For over a millennium the Western community of Christian believers was held in at least a semblance of unity, despite theological difference and hierarchical schism, by the power of ritual performance, only to disintegrate into countless mutually hostile churches when the printed word replaced performed ritual as the primary source of authority.³²

One could make many points from this observation, from points about the importance of the temple to an explanation of why priesthood authority, something enacted rather than spoken or written down, loses its importance in Reformation belief. However, for our purposes, the point is that the rise of Protestantism involved a shift from scripture as incarnation (enacted presentation) to scripture as written re-presentation.

Having rejected the enactment of incarnation, the Reformation finds itself in trouble when it tries to preserve the sacred character of

31. Cited in Richard Helgerson, "Milton Reads the King's Book: Print, Performance, and the Making of a Bourgeois Idol," *Criticism* 29/1 (1987): 1–25, at p. 4.

32. Cited in Helgerson, "Milton Reads the King's Book," 6.

scripture, even though it insists on that. By the eighteenth century, the Reformation relies on referential theories of meaning, with the consequence that scripture, too, loses its sacred character. By itself, writing cannot do the work that the Reformation places on its back; it always falls short of re-presenting its object.³³ Though individual Protestants and Protestant churches may think of scripture otherwise, in principle it ceases to be sacred.³⁴ For the Reformation, scripture refers to what is sacred, but it is not itself an incarnation of what is sacred. This is because the Reformation gives up the possibility of understanding symbols as incarnations and replaces the incarnational understanding of symbols with the modern theory of reference that comes to the fore.

Thus, the key to the alternative understanding of history that I think saves us from the dilemma of academic history, on the one hand, and ahistory, on the other, is to understand the scriptures as incarnational: *the scriptures are literal history, but their history is incarnational rather than representational*. One can still reasonably ask, however, what it means to speak of incarnation.

To better understand what it means to say that a symbol (and, therefore, also a religious text) is an incarnation, consider an example from the contemporary Belgian philosopher, Paul Moyaert:³⁵ When Moyaert's father died, he inherited his father's cup. The cup, which he uses for his coffee every morning, has a surplus value. It cannot be reduced to instrumental values. For example, it cannot be reduced to an instrument for helping Moyaert recall his father. If it were, such a

33. Writing falls short when it assumes that the relation between the written word is simple reference rather than enactment, for it will always fail to reach that which it supposedly represents because, as only reference, it removes itself from the *act* in which genuine reference occurs. Reference is an act, not a relation. Writing must be read and interpreted for it to be enacted.

34. Ironically, I take it that the nineteenth- and twentieth-century conservative Christian interpretations of *sola scriptura* are the consequence of the fact that scripture has lost its sacred character—an insistence on its sacred character when the rational underpinnings for thinking it sacred have disappeared.

35. The example comes from a lecture by Moyaert, Catholic University of Leuven, 8 January 1996. I have used a variation of the same example in chapter 1 in this volume.

perspective would make the cup, as symbol, only a means for having a particular mental attitude, such as contemplative recollection or psychological reverence for his father. That kind of understanding of the cup will not do. Among other things, it robs the cup of its symbolic value by making it possible that anything, even something that Moyaert chose arbitrarily, could serve the same purpose. If a symbol were only something for creating a mental attitude, then Moyaert could choose a pebble from the street in front of his house to remind him of his father, but it is no coincidence that symbols do not come into being in such an arbitrary fashion. They are not mere keepsakes (and even the keepsake is rarely, if ever, arbitrary or merely subjective).

The cup is not just a tool for recollecting; the surplus value of the cup comes from the fact that Moyaert's father touched it. Thus, its character as a symbol is a matter of contiguity rather than representation or instrumentality. However, when Moyaert uses the cup, it is not that, by doing so, he touches his father *in absentia*. The cup is not a substitute for his father—another reason that it is not essentially a reminder. Though the cup can remind him, often Moyaert uses it without explicitly recalling his father. Instead, the cup is a symbol of Moyaert's father because it does something for Moyaert in spite of himself: even when he is not thinking of his father, the cup demands Moyaert's reverence; it connects Moyaert to his father even when Moyaert is not conscious of his father. In a small way, the cup gives a symbolic order to Moyaert's world, an order that relates him to his father and to the rest of the world, an order that cannot be reduced to his intentions to recall his father. It is as if the cup remembers Moyaert's father for Moyaert.³⁶

Thus, not only does the cup not refer to or even represent Moyaert's father, it does not take his place. In a very real sense, it takes

36. It is not central to the thesis of this paper, but I should note that, as I say in chapter 1, I distinguish memory from recall. Recall is a psychological event. Memory is what we share and participate in. As such, it gives us direction (intention) beyond our subjective intentions, often intentions we do not know. It also creates expectations of us that are beyond our will. Though the cup remembers for Moyaert, it may not always or ever recall for him.

Moyaert's place rather than his father's. In that sense, Moyaert is willing to grant something like but not identical to consciousness—within the symbolic order—to his father's cup. This approaches what we see described in anthropological encounters with so-called "primitive" religions: symbols are objects that do something in spite of my intentions; they do something that we otherwise could attribute only to human beings. In this sense, religion is magical—though we must avoid equating magic with naive or bad science.³⁷ The cup is an incarnation rather than a reference; it gives a symbolic order to Moyaert's world rather than a rational one, and the cup gives order by embodying that order in the lived world that it orders.

It is important to emphasize that this result—that symbols operate in a "magical" way—is because the reverence that characterizes life in a symbolic ordering is not a matter of consciousness. Of course conscious reverence for the sacred is possible. However, one could not have the mental attitude of reverence without already being in a symbolic ordering, an ordering that gives one the possibility of conscious reverence, at least partly by manifesting objects that demand reverence. The symbolic order gives objects as objects of reverence, so to be within the symbolic order is to *be* reverent, to attend to the sacred, whether or not one is explicitly conscious of and attentive to that order. For to be within a symbolic ordering is to be ordered by, to have the world ordered by, that symbolic ordering. The objects and possibilities of the world, especially but not only ritual objects and possibilities, are related to each other in and through the fact that they manifest the ordering of the symbolic; the symbolic ordering gives them their place and their relations in the world, and it makes possible our understanding. And in ritual acts, one's own body, as well as the objects to which one attends, are loci for such incarnations of the sym-

37. For an interesting discussion of symbolic ordering and its power—in the context of witchcraft rather than magic—see Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words*, trans. Catherine Cullen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980). The introduction to that book also shows why symbolic ordering cannot be reduced to primitive science.

bolic. Symbolic relations do not come from mental acts and attitudes; they make acts and attitudes, such as conscious reverence, possible.

One way to state my thesis is to say that scripture is incarnation and religion is sacred ordering. Thus, difficulties occur when, with the onset of modernism, scripture becomes, like any other book, something that is understood merely referentially, and religion ceases to be thought of as *the* ordering power of the world and becomes one sphere of interest among many, a sphere that must be ordered by something else. For modernism, that “something else” is reason, though for Christian premoderns, the ordering power is the incarnate Divine—and this difference in the ordering “principle” produces the chasm (and the common antipathy) between the two.

We see a symptom of this loss of symbolic ordering in Descartes’ *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason* (published in 1637). In the *Discourse*, Descartes tells us that he needs something by which to adjudicate between the various plausible opinions he learned in the schools. Finding nothing, he takes up the method of geometry, namely formal reason. In addition, Descartes confines religion to the region of morals. He not only speaks of the moral truths of his country and Catholicism (truths that he accepts as provisional),³⁸ he also mentions the truths of faith.³⁹ Nevertheless, Descartes does no more than mention the truths of faith. Rather than being that which orders the regions of our lives, for Descartes, religion is one region of human life among other possible regions, a region that can be ignored or set to the side as one goes about laying a foundation for understanding the world and its various regions.⁴⁰ Descartes finds himself in a chaos in which it seems that nothing can be known or trusted.⁴¹ Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church had given the world

38. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason*, part III ¶1.

39. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, part III ¶6.

40. Interestingly, Descartes reduces the religious region of human experience to the moral, a reduction that begins at about his time and grows more prevalent until, today, the identity of religion and morality is common sense—in spite of Nietzsche’s pointed and accurate attacks on such religion. Such common sense robs religion of its vitality.

41. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, part I.

its order, but that order has failed for Descartes. Thus, if there is to be something other than chaos—in Descartes' terms, if knowledge is possible—then something other than religion must order life as a whole, including religion. For Descartes, religion has ceased to give order to the world and has become one of its regions. His project in *Discourse* and in *Meditations on First Philosophy* is to allow reason to order life by giving us the method for conducting/ordering reason; in other words, by showing us that reason can order itself.⁴²

That Descartes believes we need a method for ordering reason is evidence that the symbolic ordering no longer has force: Descartes confuses our tool for dealing with the various regions of existence, namely reason, for the ordering authority of the world. He makes it clear that he has settled on a method for conducting reason and finding truth because he has no way of choosing between the various opinions of his predecessors: finding nothing that orders reason, Descartes must give a rational method for ordering it. Yet the necessity of grounding reason on itself (method) would never have occurred to an ancient Greek or a medieval Christian, Jew, or Muslim because, whatever the many differences between them, for each, the exercise of reason occurs within an ordering that is prior to and fundamental to reason. For them, whether it is *physis* or Divine creation, reason has a ground that is, on a modern view, nonrational.⁴³ Even those thinkers, such as the Averroists, for whom the truths of reason and the truths of faith are ultimately commensurable, do not assume that something is true because it is rational. Instead, something is rational because it is true. That reversal of the relation between truth and reason is signifi-

42. As Emmanuel Levinas shows in *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 48ff., Descartes' attempt relies on the necessity of something beyond the rational (see *Meditations* III). Nevertheless, Descartes seems not to have understood the degree to which the necessity of recourse to the extrarational Infinite undercuts his methodological claims. Even if he did understand that, it is certainly the case that those following him did not.

43. Of course, if one does not have the narrower definition of reason that modernism adopts, then it becomes possible to identify the ground of reason (in that word's modern sense) with reason itself, as ancients and medievals usually do.

cant. It marks the huge difference between the way that the ancients and the medievals see the world, on the one hand, and the way that we see the world once modernism arrives.

For premodern thinkers, reason's being is granted by the truth of the symbolic ordering, even if the rational order and the symbolic order are ultimately identical. Thus, for those in the centuries before modernism, there had been means for adjudicating between various plausible opinions. For Christians, the Catholic Church—its authority, its doctrines and practices, its institutional structure—provided those means and order came to the world through them. Descartes' inability to adjudicate between differing opinions and his subsequent search for a method shows us that by Descartes' time a radical shift had already taken place, a shift away from an understanding that finds the use of reason within what is given by a symbolic ordering. Prior to modernism, the world had been given order by the Divine and reason was a tool for dealing with and in that order, though not itself the source of order. However, the loss of the Divine as a ground left reason and the world without moorings and, so, required something like the four-part rational method that Descartes prescribes.⁴⁴ Reason filled the vacuum created when religion ceased to order life.

This loss of the Divine as a ground shows up in the difference between modern and premodern understandings of certainty. Prior to modernism, Christian certainty was the certainty of salvation, a certainty *given* by the life of faith, a certainty available to all who lived that life. Thus, though Christians had certainty, that certainty did not include a complete apprehension of the rational (in other words, of the mind of God). With modernism the ground shifts: since certainty is no longer given, it must be achieved; one must have a method for gaining certainty, rules for what to do to get it.

Since, as we see in Descartes, the method for achieving certainty is rational, the rational is thought of as self-revealing. Based on the biblical teaching that humans are made in God's image (Genesis 1:26

44. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, part II ¶¶7–10.

and Moses 2:27), human reason is rethought and at least implicitly modeled on the mind of God, a mind that has come to be understood as, strictly speaking, capable of only purely theoretic understanding. As a result, modernism assumes that the use of the proper method, a self-grounding method, will (in principle) lead one to the complete capture, the complete apprehension, of the rational (which, though no longer identical to the mind of God, continues to be thought in the same terms: for example, as self-revealing and atemporal). This shift changes the meaning of everything—the rational, certainty, method, knowledge—in such a way that the premodern understanding becomes inaccessible to thought, incomprehensible, at best naive and primitive.⁴⁵

One way to see the difference between a modern and a premodern understanding of religion is to focus on the question of signs. In latter-day scripture, the Lord says to Adam:

Behold, all things have their likeness, and all things are created and made to bear record of me, both things which are temporal, and things which are spiritual; things which are in the heavens above, and things which are on the earth, and things which are in the earth, and things which are under the earth, both above and beneath: all things bear record of me.
(Moses 6:63)

45. In spite of the way that, for heuristic reasons, I have described the change from premodernism to modernism and in spite of the way that modern thinkers often portrayed and understood themselves, modernism was no sudden and absolute rupture with its past. Such things as Greek *epistēmē* combined with the Christian idea of an external nature over which humans rule, the certainty of salvation, ascetic “methods” for achieving salvation, and voluntarism are important antecedents of modernism. Nevertheless, with modernism’s explicit rejection of its roots and its move to the subject (individual consciousness) as fundamental, a very new understanding of things and the world entered into European history. For more on the antecedents of modernism, see Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), and Pickstock, *After Writing*.

We often read this passage and similar ones as if it speaks of signs referentially. However, there are problems with that view.⁴⁶ The understanding that this citation exemplifies was a common one among ancient thinkers, including Augustine, so consider his reflection on signs and on the claim in question. In one obvious reading, Augustine is said to argue that signs are essentially referential. The referential character of signs seems difficult to avoid in *Christian Doctrine* 1.2 and 2, where Augustine seems to give a standard, modern theory of signs, a referential theory: words are signs of other things; we use words to refer to things. However, it is important to notice that in Augustine's discussion God is not a creature, so (in Augustine's understanding) he is not a thing. We cannot refer to God.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, all things, particularly corporeal things, point to God.⁴⁸ It follows that all things point to God, though none refer to him. Either God is an exception, or some ways of signifying point at that which they intend, but they do not refer.

In addition, Augustine explicitly compares the Incarnation with speech,⁴⁹ but the Incarnation cannot be understood as a merely referential event. Thus, though every thing (every creature; every created thing) is a sign, the final object of signs, which makes all other signs possible as signs, is no thing (because it is no creature), and cannot be referred to. The consequence is that, for Augustine (and I think also for the scriptural passage in question), we cannot understand signs merely referentially; referential theories of signs are only partial theories. Something more is needed, namely God (for Augustine) and I would add "also other intelligences."

Notice also that, according to traditional Christian doctrine, after the fall of Adam, human beings are unable to see God directly, a thought often expressed for Latter-day Saints in the idea that we

46. One problem is that, as I argue in chapter 7 in this volume, *likeness* in scripture seems to suggest likeness of being rather than likeness merely of appearance or qualities.

47. Augustine, *Christian Doctrine* 1.5.

48. Augustine, *Christian Doctrine* 1.6.

49. Augustine, *Christian Doctrine* 1.13.

cannot see God “with natural eyes.”⁵⁰ From this comes the traditional Christian view that language—veiling and obscuring as it may be in some sense—is not only a consequence of the fall, it is a blessing. Language gives human beings our only access to the Divine, which otherwise would blind us. If, as modernism suggests, the words that refer to God and divine things were mere signs, tools for thinking about something else, just tools for referring to something else, then for them to function as signs we would also have to have direct access to the referent, to God, which is impossible. Merely referential signs require that what they refer to must be available to the person who understands them.

Consider a simple sign: my driver’s license. My license has a name, a number, and a picture. They each refer to me and together they represent me. To understand this reference and representation—for any one of them or all of them as a group to function as a sign—a person taking my license as a sign must have access not only to these signs, but also to that which they refer. In principle, a person must be able to encounter me independent of those signs. He or she must be able to see, hear, or touch me independent of my license. Without that, the license cannot refer to me because the merely referential sign is a substitute for the thing signified, the license is a substitute for my person. Imagine a case in which someone says, “This license has a referent, but the picture is not the picture of the person it refers to, the number is not that person’s number, and the name on it is not the referent’s name.” No one would take the person’s claim seriously. As merely references, signs function only if that to which they refer is also independently accessible to those who read them.

If we understand symbols as a kind of referential sign, then we understand signs of God as substitutes for him and, therefore, we assume implicitly that we have direct access to him. However, signs of God do not work that way, for if they refer, they do so across a chasm with

50. In latter-day scripture, see Moses 1:11 and Doctrine and Covenants 58:3, as well as 2 Corinthians 12:1–4.

“nothing available” on the other side. Of course, religious people will deny that nothing is available on the other side, but that makes my point rather than contradicts it. The religious can see and listen to and be commanded by the Being to whom the religious symbol refers, not because it refers in the same way that an ordinary sign does (in other words to something public, something that anyone can see or hear independent of the sign), but because, being enlightened fundamentally by the Divine rather than by reason,⁵¹ they see the “other side” in and through the symbol.⁵²

Though there are a variety of positions among premodern thinkers regarding signs, I think we can characterize them as generally taking the words of scripture not to be merely referential signs of a divine reality (though they may have what we could call a referential component). Instead of referring to the Divine as do ordinary signs, the words of scripture are an embodiment of the Divine, an incarnation; they embody the divine order of that to which, on a modern view, they seem only to refer.⁵³ Thus, according to Carol Harrison, in spite of the homonymy, instead of translating Augustine’s word *signum* as “sign,” we should understand it to mean *sacramentum*, itself a translation of *mystērion*: what is secret or hidden.⁵⁴ And we must remember that the *mystērion* is not just temporarily hidden. It is hidden in principle; in

51. Which, of course, is not to say that they are not, secondarily, also enlightened by reason.

52. The difference between what Augustine and Aquinas mean by *enlightenment* and what the moderns mean is another way to mark the difference between the medieval and the modern. The former has to do with the gift of seeing the sacred in the temporal, seeing the sacred order of the temporal; the latter has to do with using reason critically. For the former, see Augustine’s *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*; for the latter, see Kant, “What Is Enlightenment?” in *Kant Selections*, ed. Lewis W. Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 462–67.

53. The incarnationist view of scripture is not confined to Christianity. Speaking of the medieval Jewish mystical understanding of Torah, Fishbane says, “On this view, the Bible . . . is ontologically unique principally because it is nothing less than a dimension of divinity itself.” Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 35.

54. Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 85, 203.

other words, it is invisible to human or “natural” eyes. We see it only by revelation.

On such thinking, the visible—the elements and objects of the created world, the history of the world, our lives together—bears (incarnates, enacts) rather than refers to spiritual reality. It bears and enacts it as depth and richness—as mystery in the strict, positive sense of that word, “a secret”—just as the human body bears and enacts the depth and richness and mystery of the person. For a Muslim, a Jew, or a Christian, the full history of the world is necessarily a history understood under the order of divine creation. Thus, strictly speaking, the actual, literal history of the world is invisible *except* as the symbolic ordering of creation embodies and reveals it. Any other history is an abstraction from that literal history. For the religions of the Bible and Qur’an, scripture is an important incarnation of the divine ordering (as are also ordinance, priesthood authority, tradition, and so on). Because it is symbolic, scripture embodies what reference cannot yield, what is in itself unrepresentable because it is excessive of reference. Scripture embodies and bodies forth the divine ordering of the world and its events. For premoderns, that embodiment is history, literal history, not the accurate reference to and description of events that have no order or meaning other than the chronology of time and the relations of reason.⁵⁵

For Christians, the Incarnation of Christ is the perfect instance of the conjunction of *factum* and *sacramentum*: Christ is neither a rep-

55. Suppose, however, that one cannot accept the argument that symbols are best understood incarnationally, that one still feels that symbols must be understood as references, as a kind of sign. Even then, it is impossible for us to refer adequately and accurately to the history of the world. Human understanding may hold some few points of that history together, but it cannot hold them together as a whole, especially not an ordered whole. For human understanding, the *kosmos* becomes, at best, a blur of amorphous shapes in an ancient mirror. (See 1 Corinthians 13:12.) If the *kosmos* can be comprehended, only God can do so. Therefore, even if scripture were referential rather than incarnational, for a believer only the divine revelation of history—in other words, scripture—could be an accurate reference to and representation of that history as a whole, something that scientific history neither attempts nor wishes to give. The events of history can be understood only as they fit into the whole of which they are a part. Thus, even the particular events of a divine history could

resentation of divine reality nor a reference to it. He is not something given to help us recall God.⁵⁶ He *is* that divine reality perceptible to human beings. As such, he is also the perfect analogy for scripture: “In the case of Scripture, the visible, created, temporal order cannot simply be shunned as an ambiguous, misleading imitation of a spiritual truth which is better grasped by the mind. Rather, . . . Scripture is the ‘incarnate’ form of the Christian revelation.”⁵⁷ Similarly, New Testament statements about the church being the body of Christ suggest that one encounters Christ *in* the church. The church is an incarnation of Christ, not a simple signifier of or reference to him—an incarnation in the sense I have discussed earlier, namely something that materially manifests or enacts a symbolic ordering, here, that of Christ.

Though this language of incarnation, as when we speak of the church as the incarnation of Christ, is scriptural,⁵⁸ it strikes Latter-day Saints as odd. It is sufficiently odd for a Mormon audience that we assume it to be, perhaps, metaphorical or a matter of simile: we want to say, “the church is like the body of Christ,” though that is not a particularly informative clause. The problem is that, given Standard English usage, we think of incarnation as an event in which something that is without a body becomes manifest in something embodied. Therefore, we speak of that event as “the incarnation of *x*, *y*, or *z*,” where the variables stand for the unembodied thing in question. Since Christ is embodied, it is not clear how he could become incarnate in the church. In fact, according to our standard usage, to say that he does suggests that he is not already incarnate himself.⁵⁹ No surprise

not be understood except from within the perspective of a divine revelation, the perspective purportedly offered by scripture and a perspective purposefully and necessarily unavailable within the parameters of modern historiography.

56. For Latter-day Saints, the comparison is even closer: the Son is an incarnation of the Father without being the same person as the Father.

57. Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation*, 81.

58. For example, 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:12.

59. Alternatively, it suggests something that we find too mysterious, something like the traditional interpretation of the doctrine of transubstantiation.

that we are confused by talk of the church being the body of Christ, or by this discussion of scripture as incarnation.

However, consider that Joseph Smith says, “There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter.”⁶⁰ According to his teachings, my body is not the incarnation of something non-bodily, for the spirit is also incarnate. In fact, there are no non-incarnate entities.⁶¹ This suggests that we cannot understand incarnation as something unembodied becoming embodied. What, then, can we mean by *incarnation*?

Our common usage and the history of thought about incarnation make it difficult for us to think of incarnation in terms consonant with the Prophet’s teaching. His teaching flies in the face of that usage and history. Nevertheless I do not think we are faced with an insurmountable difficulty. We must think carefully about embodiment. We must ask what it means to say that we “have” a body, given that we cannot mean that something unembodied possesses or inhabits something embodied and we do not explain that usage when we speak of one kind of body (a spirit body) possessing another (a physical body).⁶² Though this is not as simple as it first might seem (thinking otherwise than our usual prejudgments and understandings is often difficult, even when we know they are wrong), there are philosophers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who may help us begin to do this thinking. Put broadly, Merleau-Ponty argues that to be embodied is to inhabit (to “enact,” if you will) a world in a particular way.⁶³ “We must . . .

60. *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 301.

61. This is how I read the Prophet’s seemingly tautologous statement that there is no immaterial matter.

62. Talk of spirit bodies possessing physical bodies does not explain what it means to have a body since, according to LDS doctrine, spirits, too, have material bodies. They too are incarnate.

63. One reason that I find Merleau-Ponty’s discussion helpful is that it echoes Paul’s way of talking about what it means to be a Christian. See, for example, Romans 7 and 8, where it is clear that the change that occurs in a Christian is not a change of characteristics, but a change of being. (Compare 7:22–23 with 8:8–9.) For Paul, the division is not between inner and outer, or mind/spirit and body, but between living by the Spirit and living according to one’s will—that is, living according to the world. For Paul, to be a Christian is to inhabit the world in a particular way, not to subscribe to a particular set

avoid saying that our body is *in* space, or *in* time. It *inhabits* space and time”;⁶⁴ “To be a body is to be tied to a certain world.”⁶⁵ Taking off from Merleau-Ponty’s insight, perhaps we can say that the body is one’s attitude (in the literal sense—“fittedness; disposition; posture”—rather than in mentalistic terms) and attitudinizing in the world. The body is the position one takes in the world, where *position* refers not only to a spatio-temporal position that we can fix by specifying a series of coordinates, but also to one’s temporal relations to other things, persons, and so on—one’s orientation. We have a body like we have an idea or a fear, not as a possession, but as the way in which things appear to me and the way in which I project myself in living and in relating to other persons and other things.⁶⁶ Consciousness is part of my bodily attitude, but not the sum of it.

Given this thinking about incarnation, we can expand it to think about incarnation in general: to speak of something as an incarnation is not to say that something else, something nonmaterial, has come to be material in it. It is to say that a particular attitude, a particular way of being situated in and among the things there are, comes to be manifest, or enacted, in it. Of course, to be situated in the world in a particular way is always, necessarily, also to be situated with regard to what there is. There is no “pure, unembodied” enactment or presentation. In a strictly scientific attitude (an attitude that scientists need not take except when they are explicitly doing science, an attitude that is not the same as their mental attitude or personal beliefs) there is no relation to God. The scientific region, the region in which one investigates bodies using the assumptions, methods, and background of

of beliefs (though beliefs will follow from the fact that one inhabits the world as a Christian—see note 20). See also 1 Corinthians 1:26–29, especially v. 28, where Paul speaks of the Saints as “non-being” (*mē on*), suggesting that the difference between Christians and non-Christians is a matter of their *being* rather than the propositions to which each adheres.

64. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 139.

65. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 148.

66. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 174 n. 1.

science is necessarily godless.⁶⁷ Scientific objects, themselves impoverished, in other words abstracted objects, incarnate the work and understanding of that region. Other objects incarnate other regions and orderings.⁶⁸ Thus, to say that the church is an incarnation of Christ is to say that in the church one finds oneself situated and oriented in the world in a way given by Christ toward things revealed by Christ as they are revealed by him: one finds oneself in a world that Christ has enacted, and that enacts its relation to him as Creator. Similarly, to say that scripture or an ordinance is an incarnation is to say that, in the material existence of these things—as scripture and ordinance rather than as abstracted to merely so-called objective qualities—we are given an orientation in the world: relations to things, meanings and values of things, the existence and nonexistence of things.

As incarnations in a symbolic ordering, symbols are opaque beings rather than signs with multiple reference. The use of the word *incarnation* to describe the being of entities that give symbolic order is not accidental, for signs are like the living, enacting body, as Augustine explicitly says: “How did He come except that ‘the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us?’ It is as when we speak.”⁶⁹ The opacity of the living human body, the density and richness that, in principle, cannot be made transparent, means that no one, final description of a human being is possible. This opacity need not be something arcane

67. This is not to criticize scientists for that attitude or to suggest that God ought to be part of science. A great many other important things also do not exist in a world inhabited scientifically, things such as morality and value or, of less consequence, good taste in food or clothing. That absence is the consequence of the specialized incarnation required of science and is only a problem if scientists (or more often those who idolize science because they know too little of it) forget that such a specialized incarnation is not the only one, the best one, or the final one. God is equally—and unproblematically—absent from other regions, such as mathematics and military strategy. See also pages 167–68 of this chapter, pages 72–74 of chapter 4 in this volume, and Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977), 115–54 and “Science and Reflection” in *Question Concerning Technology*, 155–82.

68. Moyaert’s discussion of symbols—see pages 174–76—is a discussion of symbols as incarnations.

69. Augustine, *Christian Doctrine* 1.13.

or complex. Seeing it and understanding it does not require great erudition on the one hand or mumbo jumbo on the other. For example, the opacity of living persons, an opacity consequent on their embodiment, both physical and spiritual, is an ordinary, everyday experience: a person cannot be reduced to one “meaning” or perspective, though a person has meaning and one has perspectives on any person.⁷⁰ One could argue that nonhuman objects, both animate and inanimate, are similarly dense. The incarnational character of scripture makes it also dense and opaque—embodied—but the opacity of scripture is different from the unclarity of a poorly formed assertion.

Assertions that can have more than one meaning are unclear because they are faulty as assertions. They are ambiguous at best. However, it follows that all language ought to be clear in the same way that assertions are clear only if all language is best understood as assertional and referential. If scripture is not to be understood, fundamentally, by means of a referential theory of meaning, then one cannot criticize it as if it were a set of referential assertions. Scriptural opacity and depth are different from ambiguity. One cannot reduce the density of scripture to multiplicity of reference, as do most of the critics of the Bible and most of its defenders.

Both poetry and scripture attend to what is excessive of language and attention; both are matters of reverence for what exceeds and explains us. There is not enough space here to decide how they are related. It is enough to notice that they at least overlap, and that overlap helps us see how religious language differs from merely referential language. In the languages of both poetry and religion, I intend what is beyond my understanding, though often by means of something that does not, especially at first glance, itself transcend my gaze. I intend

70. I have in mind here Edmund Husserl's concept of *Abschattungen*, “profiles.” *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: Collier Macmillan, 1962), 117–20. We know an object only in its profiles, but it is always excessive of those profiles as well as of any imaginative combination of profiles (and it is important to recall that a combination of profiles is always the result of an act of imagination; the scientific objectivity of a thing is the work of imagination rather than perception).

what transcends my intention. Thus, in both poetry and religion one speaks, but not to make everything transparent and easily accessible. In fact, among other things, in both one denies, by one's way of speaking, by the language itself and its "content" (as if the two could be separated), the transparency of what one intends and one's ability to master it or fully intend it. Religious and poetic languages show us that meaning is not reducible to reference, for they mean without being able fully to refer, without trying to refer. They mean by incarnating that which they mean rather than merely referring to it.

The languages of poetry and religion incarnate things that one is mastered by rather than master of. In those languages, what I mean—what my words and thoughts supposedly intend—outstrips what I understand, outstrips what *I* mean. The object of my intention is excessive of my intention, of any possible intention.⁷¹ However, what exceeds my meaning is not another meaning, not something to be said "in other words." The abundance of meaning does not suggest that, given sufficient time, I will be able to say everything, that the abundance will disappear.⁷² Thus, what I intend in poetry or religion is never an object in the strict sense of that term ("something placed or thrown before me, clear to my sight and examination"), making the word *intention* itself problematic, though it will do for now.⁷³ Because of this abundance or excess, the languages of prophecy and poetry do not dissimulate an adequacy and clarity of understanding that belie the truth of what they say. They are not the clear and distinct languages that Descartes proposes for modernism *because* they remain true to that of which they speak. For prophecy and poetry, as

71. See note 40.

72. The Enlightenment had this overcoming of all abundance and excess as its goal. In Derridean terms, it aimed at the identity of text and world. However, the excess of meaning is a function of the embodiment of the world and ourselves, and it makes continued speaking and relation possible. Thus, the implicit goal of the Enlightenment was the destruction of the body by the reduction of everything to certainty—absolute irrelation and silence; absolute death.

73. Both Levinas's and Marion's discussions of intention are instructive (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 23, 27–29, 49, 122–30, 204–9, 257–61, 294–95; Marion, *God Without Being*, 18–23).

the twentieth-century German thinker Walter Benjamin says, “Truth is not ‘an unveiling that destroys the secret,’ but the revelation that does it justice.”⁷⁴

It may seem that this discussion of the abundance of scriptural language implies that scripture is necessarily obscure, but that does not follow. The alternative to understanding the opacity of scripture as multiple references is not to understand it as obscure; scriptural language is neither essentially obscure nor essentially meaningless. Just as opacity and the abundance that opacity makes possible are not the same as unclarity, they are not the same as obscurity. Isaiah is not more of a prophet than Mark or Nephi because he is more difficult to read; the abundance, depth, and richness of incarnation should not be confused with obscurity.⁷⁵ Any

74. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1977), 31; translation revised. See also the text that Benjamin may have in mind, namely Nietzsche’s preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*, section four, where Nietzsche compares the will to see everything to Egyptian boys who desecrate temples: “We no longer believe that truth remains truth when one pulls off the veils: we have lived too much to believe this. Today it seems to us a matter of propriety that one would not wish to see everything naked, to be present at everything, or to understand and ‘know’ everything.” Perhaps this is a way of explaining the Savior’s remark in Matthew 13:13: “I speak to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.” That idea is an important part of the Christian tradition, though it is often a scandal to believers as well as nonbelievers. The traditional explanation for parables and parabolic language is: “The motives for symbolism are secrecy and revelation, as accommodated to the abilities of the interpreters. God uses symbols so that ‘the most sacred things are not easily handled by the profane but are revealed instead to the real lovers of holiness’ (1105C, 283).” Pseudo-Dionysius, quoted in Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 25. For more on Pseudo-Dionysius, see chapter 6, note 40. My argument suggests that perhaps, instead, parables are to be explained as the only possible response to those who demand that the language of religion be “clear and distinct.” Parables demand that their hearers deal with them as something containing a secret, but a secret that, it turns out, cannot simply be removed. (Of course, the two explanations are not mutually exclusive.) Note also that the view I propose contests Kermode’s explanation of the secrecy of parables and, therefore, of what it means to understand a narrative. See Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

75. Of course, these remarks do not imply that we ought to avoid clear and distinct language. Our preference for such language is not merely contingent. Taking the identity of intention and expression to be an ultimate good for writing is an outgrowth of our Cartesian goal of mastery over everything with no remainder, the transparency of the

religious person has had the experience of discovering new meaning in texts that she has read before, often many times. That is a phenomenon of abundance, of the excess of meaning—of the incarnation of scripture—not a phenomenon of ambiguity or obscurity. Religious ordinances are a perfect example of the kind of abundance that we find in religion and scripture. In religious rituals, in other words in symbolic ordering enacted in ritual objects and on my body, my words and actions intend more than I, as an individual human being, can possibly intend, though they can and often are themselves quite simple and straightforward.⁷⁶

To take scripture as incarnational is neither to conflate historical understanding and accurate description nor to take scripture to be essentially referential. Neither is it to take scripture to be merely metaphorical or poetic (in the impoverished, everyday sense of that word). To see scripture as incarnational, as opaque and revelatory, is to see it as telling the *literal* truth, as giving the literal history of the world. As Frank Kermode says, speaking accurately of incarnational interpretations (though he does not recognize them as incarnational): “The spiritual sense so authorized [in other words, within the structure of the medieval Catholic Church, official as well as unofficial] was the true literal sense.”⁷⁷

This identification of “spiritual sense” and “literal sense” is surprising to contemporary ears. After all, we take the literal truth to be

world. However, the identity of intention and expression is sometimes a good: when that identity *is* possible, then our language ought to embody it. If our language does not, it fails. It is inadequate. Nevertheless, languages other than the language of clarity are also possible, even necessary. (For one thing, if they are not possible, then it is not clear how to avoid making the desire for knowledge a desire, ultimately, for annihilation.)

76. The Latter-day Saint and Catholic recognition of the need for ordinances and for authority in ordinances is a recognition of the inadequacy of individual intentions when it comes to understanding or invoking the Divine. In general, Protestantism disagrees on this point, but its disagreement runs the risk of reducing religion to the thoughts and feelings of the individual, to only a psychological attitude. See my “A New Way of Looking at Scripture,” *Sunstone*, August 1995, 78–84. Though the title is unfortunate—not of my choosing—that piece contains a sketch of an argument for the necessity of authority. See also Marion, *God Without Being*, 153ff., from which I have adapted that argument.

77. However, Kermode misunderstands the relation of the Roman Catholic Church to medieval scripture interpretation, accepting without question the modernist view of

the truth that most accurately describes or refers to what happened, independent of any symbolic ordering, and we take the “spiritual sense” to be something beyond the literal. We take the spiritual sense to be “merely” symbolic. Premoderns, however, do not disjoin the literal and the spiritual. For them, the word *literal* means something quite different. For them, it means, “what the letters, in other words, the words, say,” rather than, “what an objective report would say.” The sentences, “What *x* says” and “what *x* describes accurately,” do not mean the same, even if the first is a description. Even a careless reading of medieval discussions of scriptural exegesis will show that the medievals’ interest was not in deciding what the scriptures portray, but in what they say. They do not take the scriptures to be picturing something for us, but to be telling us the truth of the world, of its things, its events, and its people, a truth that cannot be told apart from its situation in a divine, symbolic ordering made manifest in human history.

Of course, that is not to deny that the scriptures tell about events that actually happened. They are about real people and real events. What I propose is not a way to reduce the premodern understanding of history to a modern view, to one that denies the historicity of scripture by taking scripture to refer to a transcendent, nonhistorical reality. I am not arguing that the scriptures only *seem* to be historical. Premodern interpreters of the Bible understand the scriptures to be about actual events. For them, what the scriptures say includes portrayal of and talk about real things. However, premodern interpreters do not think it sufficient (or possible) to portray the real events of real history without letting us see them in the light of that which gives them their significance—their reality, the enactment of which they

the matter: he applies the distinction between what the texts are about and what they mean, and he criticizes biblical texts for their failure to describe events accurately. As a result, he does not seem to understand the incarnational character of premodern interpretation or its communal character. He also misunderstands Heidegger’s discussion of interpretation.

are part—as history, namely the symbolic order that they incarnate. Without that light, portrayals cannot be accurate.

A bare description of the physical movements of certain persons at a certain time is not history. “Person A raised his left hand, turning it clockwise so that .03 milliliters of a liquid poured from a vial in that hand into a receptacle situated midway between A and B” does not mean the same as “Henry poured poison into Richard’s cup.” Only the latter could be a historical claim (and even the former is no bare description).

History is not possible without meaning and significance, perhaps not even mere chronicle is. The question is where that meaning and significance derive from. For premodern Bible interpreters, the divine order that events incarnate give them their meaning. A literal history, therefore, necessarily incorporates and reveals that order. Any history that does not incorporate it is incomplete and, therefore, inaccurate.⁷⁸ It is inaccurate because it does not embody the divine order that makes it what it is. That means that premodern literal histories—the accurate portrayals of what happened, if one continues to insist on referential language—will differ significantly from literal histories told under the aspect of a different order, such as that of the rationalism of modernism.

As already noted, modernism, too, requires that meaning be “added” to otherwise bare events so that we can understand them. In modernism, too, something besides our accounts orders those accounts and stabilizes meaning. However, with the Enlightenment, modernism does not recognize a divine order as the source of order and stability. Modernist history intentionally and necessarily ignores any divine ordering of history, taking up, instead, the order of causation as understood scientifically. This is not a matter of perversity or

78. However, we must remember that we decide accuracy relative to the region or order within which a description occurs and to the purposes for which it is given. A scientific description would be inaccurate in a scriptural text; a scriptural description would be inaccurate in a scientific text. In neither case could one rectify the inaccuracy of the description by saying more, by giving more detail, by looking more closely, by correcting one’s “mistakes,” for the inaccuracy is a function of the relation between the description, the place in and purpose for which it is given, and the order which gives it meaning rather than only a function of the descriptive skill of the person offering the description.

antitheism on the part of modern historians. There are sound, methodological reasons for such an assumption in academic history, as there are in the “hard” sciences.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, it follows that modernist historians cannot mean by the word *history* what premoderns mean, and modernist criticisms of premodern histories, such as the histories we find in scripture, beg the question. In modernist history, reason rather than the Divine gives the ultimate order of things, so reason becomes the arbiter of any claims about divine order, rather than the reverse. From the modernist point of view, history and scriptural accounts are incompatible. From the scriptural point of view, they may be incompatible, but the latter may instead encompass the former.

In conclusion and summary: If we understand scripture by means of a referential theory of history, then we assume that there is an original event that we represent (re-present) in language; on that view, a historian repeats the original event by constructing a description that represents the event as fully and accurately as possible. However, such a theory of history is problematic, for to the degree that a historian can be successful, there is, ironically, no real history, only the repetition of something that is always the same. One explanation for the unending necessity of writing histories that represent an original event might be that, though there is an original event that we describe in our histories and for which there is, in principle, one complete description, our language, methods, and so on are finite. Thus, we do not come to an end of giving the one, complete description. However, in addition to the problem already mentioned (namely that such a theory seems to deny history even as it describes it), we can ask this question: How can one justify the claim that there is such an event and that there is one ideal description of that event without encountering the very difficulty one is trying to avoid? With what language does one understand and discuss the event that is in continual need of redescription? How

79. For a discussion of some of these reasons, see Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture,” and chapter 4 in this volume.

is it available to the historian apart from the finite language that he or she uses to describe it? The only possible answer seems to be that historians are engaged not only in the accurate description of events, but that they are so engaged based on some kind of intuition (in the strict, philosophical sense) of something that is, in principle, not ultimately capturable in human expression.

Because of this difficulty, some conclude that, even if we begin with the view that there is only one, ultimate description of an event, we are driven to conclude that there is nothing to history except what we say about it. Recognizing the problematic character of claims to intuitions of something ultimately ungraspable, they take what they think is the only remaining position: history is only a socially determined, infinitely redescribable matter, a matter of what we have to say about it and no more. Though that position and variations of it have become fashionable, it is a position fraught with problems, among them, that to say something is a human construction, even that it is necessarily a human construction, is not to say that it is *only* a human construction. I think that the position also entails that the person coming to this conclusion is self-contradictory, arguing for radical historicism and invoking a principle that is not to be understood from a radical historicist position. In short, in spite of the current popularity of this response to the problem, I think it is less sound than the flawed, referential position against which it responds.

I too conclude that writing history involves an intuition of something more than what we can say. However, it is difficult to know what it means to say that. For example, I do not think the usual referential theories, which gloss over the problem, are adequate. I have attempted to give one answer, though not the only one, to that question:⁸⁰ Scriptural history is a matter of divine incarnation. And, I am supposing that academic history is another kind of history, a kind that answers very differently the question of what more there is to history than what

80. It should be clear that I do not think there is only one way to do history properly.

we can say, a way that is, therefore, strictly speaking, not comparable to scriptural history because it incarnates something very different.

On the view for which I argue, one can understand scriptural history using as a starting point a premodern understanding of what makes history. For premoderns, genuine, literal history is essentially symbolic, in other words, incarnational. For moderns, it is essentially referential. With the rise of modernism, symbols came to be understood as references (even if complex ones), and, therefore, so did the Bible: scripture is a more or less accurate depiction of events that exist independent of other considerations. (And whether one takes them to be more or less accurate depends on one's religious disposition.) Premoderns, however, understand the Bible figurally or typologically: as incarnating a symbolic order and as giving an order to life through its symbolic work.⁸¹ To say that premoderns understand scripture typologically is not to say that premoderns understand the Bible to refer to another reality or to be merely fictions. In fact, exactly the opposite is true: for premoderns, history understood apart from revelation is a fiction, a necessary and convenient one for some purposes, perhaps, but nevertheless a fiction. It does not give us the fullness of the events of history. Like moderns, those reading as premoderns understand that scripture orders human history by giving it a shape—a figure. However, they disagree with the moderns about what gives that shape. For premoderns, the revelation of scripture gives history meaning, without which there would be no real history, only chronology, if that.

For example, for medieval Christians the life of Christ as revealed in scripture is a figure or type that we can use to understand the scriptures as a whole and, therefore, history and our place in it. It is not

81. As the "Concluding More Scientific Postscript" to this essay notes, prior to Christianity, pagans had a merely cyclical view of history. It might have no meaning beyond the cycle itself, or it might, as in Platonism, only have meaning to the degree that one could leave it behind, or it might, as in Stoicism, have only the meaning possible in detachment. But even though paganism did not have a figural understanding of history, as did Christianity, it also did not have any notion of history as we understand it. See David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 200–201.

that Christ did not live or that the story of his life is “merely symbolic” of some other reality. Instead, truly to understand the life of Christ is to understand it as a life that literally (in other words, in the way that the texts say it) is a figure of our lives and history. Thus, to read the story of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, forty years in the wilderness, and entry into the promised land as a figure of the granting of salvation, our continuing sinfulness, and the promise of possible blessedness—in other words, as it shows us our relation to Christ—is not to impose an additional meaning onto the story of Israel. Contra some Jewish thinkers, neither is it to reduce the children of Israel to mere shadows, references to another reality. Instead, it is to see the biblical story of Israel as an incarnation of the symbolic order of which we, being religious, find ourselves to be part.

Those who read the Bible as an incarnation do not reduce its texts to what is described as only symbolic, for the literal/symbolic disjunction is not a disjunction for them. For premoderns, reading the story of Moses and Israel typologically, figurally, anagogically, allegorically is not what one does *instead of* or *in addition to* reading literally. Such readings are part and parcel of a literal reading. Premodern understanding does not reduce the scriptural story to a reference to or representation of something else, though it also does not deny that there may be an important representative element in scripture. Instead, premoderns believe that understanding the story of Israel is essential to understanding history—actual history, the real events of the world—as incarnation, a continuing incarnation, as types and shadows, to use the language of the Book of Mormon (for example, Mosiah 3:15). It is to understand history as having an order and the events of history as related to each other within that ordering (an ordering that does not exist independent of events, but that cannot be reduced to those events as “bare” events). It is to understand history as part of a symbolic ordering; an ordering that is given not only in scripture, but also (perhaps most importantly) in ritual—ritual objects and ritual language—as well as in the moments of history themselves. Thus, for

premoderns, the biblical narrative is literal history; the literal truth, the truth “by the letter,” is that told in the letters and words of the text as revealing and embodying the order given by God. The literal truth is the truth constituted in and through the text as incarnation, not the supposed truth supposedly only referred to by those letters and words.

In spite of appearances or what we might say when we are asked to talk about scriptural history without having reflected sufficiently on our experience with it, I think that most Latter-day Saints read scripture as an incarnation of a symbolic ordering.⁸² We may often do so confusedly and inconsistently, but we do. That is why we feel compelled to defend the historicity of the scriptures, whether we do so naively or with a full range of scholarly, theoretical, and interpretational tools at our disposal. This is especially true for adherents, such as us, of religions in which symbols and symbolic acts figure prominently. The informality of Latter-day Saint sacrament meetings may make us think otherwise, but the church’s all-encompassing social structure and the importance of temple liturgy show that Latter-day Saints’ lives, like the lives of other religious people and perhaps more than many, continue to be ordered symbolically.

For the most part, we have lost, forgotten, or never had the vocabulary and concepts for talking about our participation in a symbolic order and our reading of scripture as part of that participation. As a result, when called on to talk about scripture or to teach lessons from it or to speak reflectively about it, we resort to language and methods that ignore the symbolically ordered character of our lives and that deny the incarnate character of scripture by making it merely referential. The fact that we mix implicit attention to scripture as symbolic ordering with an insistence on simple reference often confuses our reading. Nevertheless, it remains possible not only to continue to read

82. Many non-Mormon Christians probably also continue to read symbolically, especially those often thought of as literalists or conservative.

scripture as incarnational rather than merely referential, but to do so more explicitly than we have done.

Concluding More Scientific Postscript

Several years after this essay was originally published, for the most part I continue to understand scripture along the lines it sketches, but I have come to realize that I did not sufficiently differentiate two ways of making sense of the premodern understanding of the world: I collapsed the Greek and pagan Near Eastern way of understanding the world with the Jewish and Christian way. Were I to explain my failure in terms of those on whom I have depended intellectually, I would say that I leaned too heavily on the work of Mircea Eliade.⁸³ As a result, I did not notice important differences between those two ways of understanding.⁸⁴

There are important similarities between the two ways. Because of those similarities I could make the argument I did, and because of them I believe it still works. But there are also important differences between them (differences which, for my purposes here, I will grossly oversimplify). Perhaps the first thing to notice is that the archaic understanding of the world takes it as a cosmos, an ordered and beautiful whole. (The Greek word *kosmos*, from which we get our word *cosmos*, first referred to jewelry.)⁸⁵ For the Greeks the cosmos may have come

83. I still think that Eliade's work on premodern thought can be quite helpful to us as we try to make sense of texts that have come to us from long ago. Reading his work, such as *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, 1959) and *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), has helped me think profitably about scripture and my experience in the temple. Nevertheless, it is essential to notice that Eliade's description of the ways that scripture works is not only incomplete because it does not (and could not, of course) include an understanding of the restored gospel, it is also incomplete as a scholarly treatment of comparative religion, as I will describe in what follows.

84. I first noticed those differences when I read Paul Ricoeur, "Manifestation and Proclamation," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 48–67.

85. Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 19–20. Brague's book is excellent for understanding the complexity of the question of how the ancients of various Western cultures understood that which surrounded them. Indeed, had I been paying better attention, I would have noticed when I first read Brague's book in 2001 what I have only now come to see.

into being or it may have always existed, but it was rarely the product of a creator.⁸⁶ Perhaps more importantly, the cosmos was understood cyclically: it has passed through cycles comparable to spring, summer, winter, and fall, and it will continue to pass through them. Myth gives us an understanding of the cycles, and religious ritual reenacts them and may even insure them, but there is no historical vector in myth nor its ritual. In this way of understanding, time amounts merely to the repetition of what has already occurred.

Jewish and, later, Christian understanding is similar, but it differs significantly on at least the two respects I have mentioned: it takes the world to be the creation of God (rather than a cosmos), and it insists that there is a historical aspect to its stories (rather than that they are merely cycles in an eternal round). Instead of the ordered and beautiful, perhaps eternal, cosmos, we have the ordered and beautiful creation of God. Instead of the endless repetition of the cycles of nature, we have ongoing history (with a beginning, a middle—the incarnation—and an end) within which we can see the imprint of God's patterns.⁸⁷

For the understanding of the incarnational nature of scripture, the second of these is most important. On the Jewish view, time moves. Even if the types that God has prefigured show themselves in moments of history, showing us the way that some events are “the same” as others—for example, the fall and expulsion from the Garden, with its attendant promise of blessed life to come; Abraham leaving Ur to wander in the wilderness before he enters the promised land; Israel's exodus from Egypt, wandering in the wilderness, and crossing into the promised land; Lehi's family's flight from Jerusalem, wandering in the wilderness and ocean, and arrival in the new promised land; the Saints' flight from Illinois to Utah; the experience of every repentant sinner—these moments, all shadows of what Christ's life, and indeed the plan of salvation, prefigure are not merely a repetition of the same

86. The demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* is a notable exception.

87. See chapter 6 in this volume for a discussion of types and shadows, with their antitypes or prefigures (what I have here called “patterns”).

thing each time. The incarnation of a divine pattern in history rather than the reoccurrence of the same event is the difference between the Judeo-Christian understanding of itself and the archaic self-understanding. In contrast with both, modern history preserves and amplifies the notion of history, but rarely if ever has a serious notion of the cyclical (as in pagan cosmology) or the symbolically ordered (as in Judeo-Christian cosmology). Understanding scripture requires that we set aside our modern prejudices about how to understand history in order to read the histories of ancient writers, as Nephi suggests, with the understanding of the Jews (2 Nephi 25:5)—and, I would add, the early Christians.