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How to Read Teresa after Modernity

The good Jesus is too good company for us to forsake Him ...¹

YEARS AGO, AS A college student, I had the opportunity to visit the birthplace of Teresa in Ávila, Spain. The town was charming, with a medieval castle that must have resembled the ones that Teresa also saw, and that no doubt shaped her imagination when she penned her classic, *Interior Castle*. A friar from Teresa's same Carmelite order served as our patient guide. As a Discalced Carmelite, he was wearing sandals, a sign of the reforms that Teresa herself had initiated four hundred years earlier. My most vivid memory of the place, however, was Teresa's mummified heart encased in an ornate glass container. A faint line could be traced across the heart, where, I was told, the Holy Spirit had pierced her. Teresa writes about this divine "arrow" in *Interior Castle*, as well as in her autobiography, *The Book of Her Life*. Such a mark on Teresa's heart could well be understood as a sign of Teresa's own reception of the Holy Spirit as ultimately a gift to the church.

The modern person, however, might have difficulty not only with this "heart-arrow," but also with the descriptions that Teresa gives of various unusual visions and locutions. Is she a kind of female Don Quixote, chasing giants that are really windmills and generally imagining things that are not there? Like most well-known saints, Teresa has been the subject of various interpretations: not only that of a benighted nun, but also

1. Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 175.

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an advocate of a modern "spirituality," and, more recently, one who speaks the postmodern absence of God.

My own conviction is that these various readings miss the wisdom that Teresa has to offer. Teresa rather ought to be read as an interpreter and performer of Scripture. Further, I argue that her interpretation can offer healing for wounds of division in the body of Christ. Such a reading might sound odd. Teresa's various writings can seem highly autobiographical, not particularly focused on Scripture, the liturgy, the church, or any other theological topic. Furthermore, Teresa was a reforming nun who advocated for a cloistered way of life, hardly conducive it would seem to overcoming division in the church. Teresa herself even appears to have little knowledge of the ways the church in the sixteenth century was beginning to tear apart.

Even so, it is my conviction that modern assumptions about religion and spirituality have domesticated Teresa. To see Teresa as writing simply about the "soul" or "spiritual experience" rather than Scripture, theology, or the church says more about the modern reader than it does about Teresa. In order to understand why this is so, I examine these domesticated readings of Teresa more clearly before turning to Teresa as a performer of God's Word.

MODERN READINGS

Teresa and Modern *Eros*

Those who know little else about Teresa of Ávila have often seen Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini's famous sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (ca. 1647–1652), located in the Santa Maria de la Vittoria Church in Rome. The sculpture, at least to most modern viewers, appears to be deeply erotic; an assumption confirmed when they read the words from Teresa's autobiography on which the sculpture is based:

I saw in his hands a large golden dart and at the end of the iron tip there appeared to be a little fire. It seemed to me this angel plunged the dart several times into my heart and that it reached deep within me. When he drew it out, I thought he was carrying off with him the deepest part of me; and he left me all on fire with great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan, and the sweetness this greatest pain caused me was so

superabundant that there is no desire capable of taking it away;
nor is the soul content with less than God.²

Modern viewers understandably question this so-called ecstasy. Is this really about God? Is this not obviously about Teresa's own unfulfilled sexuality, as one might expect from a celibate nun? Indeed, this is how some popular works, such as Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*, describe it.³

This reading, however, while understandable from a purely modern view, casts Teresa into a kind of Freudian narrative in which "religion" serves as a mask for something else (psychological-erotic projection, for example). Christianity is explained on some other more factual or "scientific" grounds. From this perspective, the disciples' joy in the resurrection easily becomes a projected desire not to be abandoned by a father figure, similar in explanatory power to Teresa's joy representing her repressed need for a lover/spouse.

While this understanding of Teresa reads her through a modern psychological lens to the exclusion of a theological one, it nonetheless raises an important question about the place of desire and *eros* not only in Teresa's work but in the Christian life more generally: How does Teresa understand *eros* vis-à-vis other loves, such as *philia* and *agape*? I return to this question in chapter 3, while examining the figure of divine marriage in Teresa's life and work.

Teresa and Modern Interiority

In contrast to this first reading of Teresa as unenlightened and premodern, other interpreters embrace Teresa as a "mystic for *our* time." From their perspective, *Interior Castle* narrates the inward journey of a soul making its way to God, free from religious dogma. Teresa's interior castle, according to one interpreter, shows people how "to find life's answers deep within their own souls."⁴ Author Barbara Mujica states that Teresa's "spirituality is an interior spirituality that does not hang on ritual but rather teaches people to find God within." In this "time of sectarianism," Mujica adds, "Teresa is a person who reaches across cultures and religions. She speaks

2. Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 200.

3. Brown, *Angels and Demons*. In the novel, Papal authorities banish the Bernini statue to an "obscure chapel" because it is apparently "too risqué and sexual" (337).

4. Shlumpf, "Mystic for Our Times." For a similar understanding of Teresa, see Mirabai Starr in her recent translation of *Interior Castle*, as well as Caroline Myss in *Entering the Castle: An Inner Path to God and Your Soul*.

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to everyone.”⁵ The reason that Teresa speaks to everyone is because she is not confined by the church, which, for these authors, is either invisible in Teresa's work or appears over against Teresa (as an inquisitorial force, for example).⁶ In contrast to the previous understanding of a naïve Teresa, this view portrays her instead as an *enlightened* mystic. In the famous words of Immanuel Kant, she is not bound “by self-incurred tutelage.”⁷

Such an interpretation of Teresa reflects a pervasive understanding of the religious journey of the soul as a journey within. Since it is primarily interior, religious dogma and creeds easily obstruct the immediate experience between the individual soul and God. The church too can appear as an intrusion between the soul and God. This way of interpreting Teresa as mystic can easily turn her crystal castle into a “hall of mirrors, a peculiar sort of labyrinth where it is possible to become so entrapped in the corridors of our own interiority that, though we believe we are seeking God, we are actually reflecting only on ourselves.”⁸

While this reading of Teresa is also misguided, it does raise important questions about how Christians ought to think about “interiority” vis-à-vis doctrine and the church. What if these are in conflict? Such a question is irresolvable if one accepts the modern dichotomy between the “interior” self and the “exterior” community, or between personal experience and public, ecclesial ritual. Yet, as I intend to show, Teresa's performance of Scripture disallows this kind of stark dualism. For Teresa, rather, church is the condition of the possibility for spirituality because all Christian experiences of God are structured by ecclesial practices, which are themselves grounded in God's Word.⁹

5. Cited in Shlumpf, “Mystic for Our Times”; my emphasis. Mujica is author of the novel *Sister Teresa* and of *Teresa de Avila, Lettered Woman*.

6. This is not to deny that the Inquisition directly impacted Teresa. The ecclesiastical tribunal, under direct control of the Spanish monarchy at the time, examined three of Teresa's books. In 1485 the Inquisition accused Teresa's paternal grandfather, Juan Sanchez, of being a *judaizante*, a Christian convert who secretly practiced Jewish customs. He was found guilty and sentenced to walk with his children in penitential processions to Toledo's churches on seven consecutive Fridays. Soon after this humiliation, he moved his family to Ávila, and by 1493 he was successfully running a “rich shop of woolens and silks.” For an account of this, see especially Bilinkoff, *Avila of Teresa*.

7 This well-known phrase is from Kant's classic definition of “enlightenment”: “Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage” (*Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 85).

8. Grief, “Teresa of Ávila,” 231.

9. My thanks to Jacob Goodson for assistance in making this point. This is another

Teresa and Modern/Postmodern Absence

A third misreading of Teresa is one shaped by the modern epistemological claim that one can only know “God-images,” but not God. Immanuel Kant most famously represents this epistemological position. Kant found it necessary “to deny *knowledge of God, freedom and immortality* in order to find a place for *faith*.”¹⁰ Kant could make such a statement because he believed that beyond the confines of reason existed a realm of the unfathomable and mysterious. One could have no direct knowledge of objects in this supersensible realm. While this realm was without meaning from the standpoint of knowledge, it nonetheless had existential and moral significance. For my purposes, the Kantian dichotomy between knowledge and faith is significant. Such a quintessential modern move underwrites the subjectivity of faith (a conviction that shaped the previous misreading of Teresa) and the objectivity of knowledge/reason.

This kind of dichotomy, theologian Michel de Certeau states, has made possible a modern world that is “no longer perceived as spoken by God.”¹¹ It is rather a world in which “discourses which script social bodies have ceased to be religious and theological.”¹² Thus, the world of modernity “is characterized precisely by the fact of having been inaugurated, not without them [i.e. Christians] nor even essentially against them, but in terms of revolutions of which religion was no longer the principle.”¹³ In such a world, Christian institutions and discourses have moved from the center to the periphery.

In *The Mystic Fable*, de Certeau turns his analytical skills to mystic discourse, arguing that such speech has suffered a loss. According to de Certeau, early modern mysticism—where he locates Teresa—exemplifies this loss, following the breakup of the medieval Christian society. In this opaque world, the mystic takes up the following orientation: “since the Speaking Word must exist even though it may become inaudible, he (the mystic) temporarily substitutes his speaking *I* for the inaccessible divine *I*.”¹⁴

way of saying that “spirituality” and “religious experiences” are not generic phenomena, but formed by larger stories and practices. One can no more have a purely private spiritual experience than one can have a private language. For a philosophical argument against the possibility of a private language, see Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*.

10. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 6; my emphasis. See also Jaspers, *Kant*, 85–87.

11. Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 188.

12. Bauerschmidt, “Abrahamic Voyage,” 14.

13. Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 188.

14. *Ibid.*

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De Certeau is thus claiming that as the space of a speaking God disappears in early modernity (which he locates in the sixteenth century), the mystic reimagines the voice of God as the voice of the self.

In Teresa's case, de Certeau refers to her writings as a "*fiction* [a 'mystic fable'] *of the soul*." The "*I* who speaks in the place of (and instead of) the Other also requires a *space* of expression corresponding to what the world was in relation to the speech of God."¹⁵ This space of expression for Teresa becomes the castle. De Certeau compares the seven mansions of Teresa's interior castle to the production of songs: different melodies and musical strings through which Teresa conducts a concert. The concert, however, ends on a solitary note. Filled with "outbursts" (dreams and madness) and returns (through men of letters or *letrados* and through order), "the amorous will go off alone singing its 'dreams' (chapter 41)."¹⁶ De Certeau thus concludes that the "mystic" represents both ambiguity and loss. Teresa "can equally affirm that the castle is the book or the soul, that she is the author or that God is [*no es mío*], and that she is speaking of the writing, the soul, or prayer."¹⁷

In de Certeau's interpretation, the *absence* of God so defines modernity that God can no longer be heard. The modern landscape is barren. Mystics like Teresa are left to their own devices to *invent* the soul and its journey. De Certeau thus describes the "increasingly alien landscape of modernity, in which we all dwell, and in which the believer can find no home."¹⁸

It is hard not to see some truth in de Certeau's analysis, especially in his description of a deep homelessness and emptiness that characterizes much of modernity, a homelessness that propels one toward a yearning beyond a purely this-worldly orientation. Whereas the previous reading of Teresa celebrates the modern invention of a timeless spirituality, de Certeau sees this as symptomatic of a deep loss that leaves an individual to

15. *Ibid.*; italics in original.

16. *Ibid.*, 192.

17. *Ibid.*, 200.

18. Bauerschmidt, "Abrahamic Voyage," 2. De Certeau desires to make "space" for ruptures and absences that could not be fully accounted for in the institutional church. While this position allows for fluidity and dynamism, it also fails to account theologically for the church as institution, a position that can make Jesus seem oddly disconnected from time and place. De Certeau portrays Jesus Christ, the "Other," "as present but also absent; his coming and death founded Christianity, but the signifying event is not the crucifixion but the empty tomb; 'the 'follow me' [of Jesus] comes from a voice which has been effaced, forever irrecoverable'" ("The Question of Michel de Certeau").

his or her own devices. The inability to hear the Divine Word as *a people* is, for de Certeau, a fact to be mourned. Thus, one of his key convictions is that the individual, the mystic, can only inhabit the ruins of a “tattered Christendom.”¹⁹ His analysis rightly indicates that an adequate response to modern fragmentation must be more than purely “spiritual” in the modern sense.

De Certeau’s conviction that modernity has made it difficult to perceive the world as spoken by God is confirmed, more recently, by Charles Taylor. In an oft-quoted passage from *A Secular Age*, Taylor writes, “Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”²⁰ While de Certeau’s rich description of modernity as suffering a growing deafness to God’s Word is profound, his narration of Teresa as a modern figure is more problematic. This is not to deny that loss and absence figure in her writings. For example, there are times, Teresa writes, when “the soul thinks God has abandoned it because of what it is; it almost doubts His mercy.”²¹ Even so, Teresa continues, the person should continue receiving Communion and practicing private prayer. Teresa’s turn to the practices of the church is not only typical but signals how her way is one of hearing the Word in the context of receiving this Word with the church. Thus, Teresa’s way, while at times lonely and dark, is enfolded not into a story of postmodern absence but into God’s story of communion through Christ. It is from this perspective that one can see how “the story of Teresa’s life evolve[s] into a story of God’s mercy,”²² a mercy made known with and in the body called church. Teresa, then, does not offer a “mystic fable,” but rather a scriptural and ecclesial journey that itself is a social reconfiguration. I return to this point in more depth in the following chapters as I show how Teresa’s “dwellings” reconfigure politics, how her “divine marriage” imagines an alternative economy, and how her “pilgrimage” moves toward visible unity as Christ’s body.

19. Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 25. “Within the tattered Christendom they experienced a fundamental defection, that of the institutions of meaning. They lived the decomposition of a cosmos and were exiled from it. . . . They sought a firm footing, but in the end the Scripture appeared as ‘corrupt’ as the Churches” (ibid.).

20. Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25.

21. Teresa, *Collected Works*, 2:189.

22. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez in Teresa, *Collected Works*, 3:3.

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TERESA AND THE WORD

For now, however, let us look more closely at Teresa and the Word. What do I mean by calling Teresa an interpreter and “performer” of Scripture?²³ At the outset, we can note that Teresa does not interpret Scripture according to contemporary expectations. She does not systematically offer a verse-by-verse commentary on particular books.²⁴ In fact, it is more typical for Teresa to quote Scripture sporadically and sometimes with a poor memory of where exactly a particular verse can be found. Like the majority of Christians in her day (as well as generations of Christians before her), Teresa would not have had personal access to the whole Bible. Further, she was not literate, meaning in this context that she did not read or speak Latin. Sections of the Bible translated into Spanish, however, would have been available to her in anthologies.

How, then, can we account for Teresa's interpretation and performance of Scripture? In a way that we might find difficult to imagine, Teresa inhabited a *liturgical* world. This world was marked by such practices as praying the daily office, making confession and having a confessor, frequent celebration of feast and fast days, and celebrating the sacrament of Mass as the culmination of all time. As Eamon Duffy describes this world, “Within the liturgy, birth, copulation, and death, journeying and homecoming, guilt and forgiveness, the blessing of homely things and the call to pass beyond them were all located, tested and sanctioned. In the liturgy and in the sacramental celebrations which were its central moments, medieval people found the key to the meaning and purpose of their lives.”²⁵ To describe the breadth of liturgy in this way is to register that participants were inevitably hearers of Scripture in community. The Word would have been integral to all liturgical gatherings. Teresa would not have had the capacity, therefore, to imagine what some today refer to as “*Scriptura nuda*,” the individual interpreting the text alone. She would have rather been formed to understand that “not only is Scripture within

23. The phrase “performing the Scripture” comes from Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaeus*. Lash states, “the fundamental form of the *Christian* interpretation of scripture is the life, activity and organisation of the Christian community, construed as performance of the biblical text.” He continues that “if, in the liturgy of the Word, the story is told, it is told not so that it may merely be relished or remembered, but that it may be performed, in the following of Christ” (45–46).

24. Teresa does write, though, *Meditations on the Song of Songs*.

25. Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 11.

the church, but we, the church, are within Scripture—that is, our common life is located *inside* the story Scripture tells.²⁶

In our modern context, some might find this dependence upon ecclesial reading and hearing problematic. What about the need to have a place to stand over against the church? Is this performance of Scripture simply one of strict conformity? These are important questions and ones to which, as I show more fully, Teresa's own life provides a response. Teresa herself was far from regarding the church as without blemish or hardship. Her own writings were at various points examined by the ecclesiastical tribunal.²⁷ Oddly, though, Teresa was not perturbed by the idea that she might have to appear before the Inquisition. "I knew quite well," she once wrote, "that in matters of faith no one would ever find me transgressing even the smallest ceremony of the church, and that for the church or for any truth of Holy Scripture I would undertake to die a thousand deaths."²⁸ Such strong confidence in the church, during either her time or ours, might well seem alien to modern readers. For Teresa, however, this confidence did not conflict with her conviction that the church, and thus the liturgical/scriptural world in which she lived, needed to be reformed. She noted repeatedly how she had to suffer from the ignorance and stupidity of many of her male superiors and confessors. She recounted trials of living in community with her sisters. Teresa herself, of course, led a reformation of her monastic order, establishing seventeen foundations of Discalced Carmelites. She was thus well aware of the sins and weaknesses of the church. Even so, eyewitnesses report that on her deathbed Teresa said many times over, "Finally, Lord, I am a daughter of the church." For Teresa, the ecclesial Word, even if received in distorted or incomplete ways, was what enabled one to live faithfully before God. Teresa was able to reform and renew the church not in spite of but because of her liturgical and scriptural formation.

Significantly, when Teresa's spiritual confessor, Fr. Jerome Gracián, told her to write *Interior Castle*, he requested that she "put down the *doctrine* in a general way without naming the one to whom the things you

26. Jenson, "Scripture's Authority in the Church," 30. Timothy George makes the following helpful distinction between *sola* and *nuda scriptura*: "*Sola Scriptura* does not mean *nuda scriptura* nor *scriptura solitaria*! It means instead that the Word of God, as it is communicated to us in the Scriptures, remains the final judge (norma normans) of all the teaching in the church" ("Evangelical Reflection," 206).

27. See note 5 above.

28. Cited by Boulay, *Teresa of Avila*, 80, as well as Egan, "Teresa of Jesus," 87.

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mentioned happened.”²⁹ Her confessor's statement indicates that he intended *Interior Castle* to be something other than simply Teresa's personal experience or reflections. Yet, just as *Interior Castle* seems to fall far short of being anything like a biblical commentary by modern standards, so also does it appear not to measure up to modern standards of “doctrine.” For example, there are no divisions into various doctrinal topics, no organized system of analysis, and little reference to other works. What this indicates, however, is not that Teresa is not offering commentary or doctrine, but rather that she is offering it in a way that goes against modern expectations that divide biblical exegesis, theology, and spirituality into separate disciplines—divisions that have often wreaked havoc in contemporary Christian life.³⁰

Words as Deeds

To see Teresa as a “performer of Scripture” is to see that she shares an understanding of words as deeds.³¹ Words do things. Today, more often than not, many associate words-as-deeds with magic and superstition, as in the stories of Harry Potter. Teresa's late medieval culture would not have found this kind of magic alien. Teresa's capacity to see words as deeds, however, derives from Scripture. For example, the story of Jacob stealing Esau's birthright and blessing (the older son's due) shows how words, once spoken, are deeds that cannot be undone. Even though Esau weeps and cries out to his father, “have you only one blessing?” (Gen 27:38), Isaac cannot undo his words. A spoken blessing, “like an arrow shot toward its goal, was believed to release a power which could not be retracted.”³² The Hebrew word *dabhar*, as is well known, can mean either “word” or “deed.” Most fully, God's *dabhar* “makes a world appear.”³³ As the psalmist

29. Cited by Kavanaugh and Rodriguez in Teresa, *Collected Works*, 2:263; my emphasis.

30. That Teresa's work itself is often located under “spirituality” underwrites these kinds of modern divisions. Once one imagines spirituality as separate from Scripture or theology, then it easily becomes an experiential phenomena separate from the church. The notorious cliché, “I'm spiritual, but not religious . . .” (discussed in the second misreading above) reflects this split.

31. This comes in part because Teresa lived closer to an oral culture than we do today. The contrast between orality and literacy, and how it forms our ways of being, is a fascinating one. See especially Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

32. NRSV note 35 on Gen 27:34.

33. For a theological and philosophical analysis of *dabhar*, see especially Potest, *Polanyian Meditations*, 104–32.

writes, “By the word (deed) of the Lord were the heavens made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth” (Ps 33:6, RSV). In John’s Gospel, “In the beginning was the Word” can also mean, “In the beginning was the deed” (John 1:1).

In *Interior Castle*, Teresa relies upon this understanding of words as deeds. At one point, she quotes Jesus’ words to his disciples, “Peace be with you” (John 20:19), and his words to the “glorious Magdalen,” “Go in peace” (Luke 7:50). She notes that these are more than “mere words.” Rather, she says, “the words of the Lord are like *acts* wrought in us . . .”³⁴ They are deeds that produce an effect. Thus, Teresa can write,

When Jesus Christ was praying for His Apostles (I do not know where this occurs), He asked that they might become one with the Father and with Him, even as Jesus Christ our Lord is in the Father and the Father is in Him. I do not know what greater love there can be than this. And we shall *none of us* fail to be included here, for His Majesty went on to say: “Not for them alone do I pray, but also for all who believe in Me” . . .³⁵

Teresa’s point here is that by virtue of Jesus’ words/deeds she and her sisters are like the Apostles. More fully, even, she and her sisters are with the apostles through communion with Christ. This is not imaginary, esoteric, or wishful thinking. It is rather a reality made possible by Jesus’ words, “that they may be one.”

The distance between Christ’s words of unity and the reality of the church—both in Teresa’s time and in our own—might well leave one with the impression that these words are *mere* words. Christ’s prayer for unity seems not to have made a world appear since division runs rampant. How exactly are the words of Scripture deeds? Teresa, in my view, understands God’s words/deeds as gifts of love. Inasmuch as God’s words are gifts, they call for our reception in order to be more fully manifest in the world. Such reception involves our identification and participation. Thus, Teresa is describing *how* her sisters and readers can more fully receive God’s ever-faithful words/deeds. The words of Jesus cannot fail, Teresa writes, though “we ourselves fail by not preparing ourselves and departing from all that can shut out this light, we do not see ourselves in this mirror [Christ] into

34. Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 218; my emphasis. In a similar vein, Teresa writes, “And if the soul suffers dryness, agitation and worry, these are taken away as though by a stroke of the hand since it seems the Lord wants it to understand that He is powerful and that His words are works” (*Book of Her Life*, 162).

35. Teresa, *Interior Castle*, 133; my emphasis.

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which we are gazing and in which our image is engraved.”³⁶ For Teresa, *receptivity* is key to performing Scripture. Teresa's use of the metaphor of a mirror through which we *receive* our vision echoes 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” It is not human deeds and speech that are efficacious, but rather the Word of God and human participation in it.

This deep-seated conviction that the Word of God cannot fail makes it possible for Teresa to use certain scriptural images, structures, or figures to order reality; they are the outworking of God's word/deed. To respond and participate in God's words/deeds is to allow our lives to become patterned in particular visible and unifying ways. The question remains, however, as to *how* to receive Christ and Scripture most fully.

For now, though, it is important to see that those who interpret Teresa as charting a journey of the soul *within* fail fully to grasp the nature of God's words as deeds as this plays itself out in Teresa's life and work. For interpreters of Teresa such as Heidi Shlumpf or Caroline Myss, mentioned earlier, the divine word is already within the soul and the challenge is to discover this internal phenomena. Wholeness lies in journeying toward this interior “light.” On their view, Teresa is describing the soul at the center of which resides an inner spark (Christ). Is she not after all describing an *interior* journey?

In partial response to this question, it is significant that the original title of Teresa's classic, *Las Moradas*, does not mean “interior castle,” as the standard English translation suggests, but “the dwellings” or “the abodes.” This difference is significant especially in our context, where “interior” typically means private and highly subjective, whereas “dwellings” still maintains the connotation of exterior space. As I discuss more fully in chapter 2, the journey through Teresa's *moradas* or dwellings is not a matter of going inside oneself there to discover an interior light or self, but of becoming a visible part of God's saving deeds in history.

To illumine this difference, Bernd Wannewetsch's description of two contrasting understandings of “word” is helpful. The Greek *logos*, he states, refers to the uncovering of already existing things. The Hebrew *dabhar*, on the other hand, is “an act of power that does what it says in the very power of its being spoken . . .”³⁷ The existence of an interior word means that the

36. *Ibid.*, 219.

37. Wannewetsch, “Inwardness and Commodification,” 36. Wannewetsch describes the inwardness of the word (typically expressed today through meaning or

spiritual journey is one in which an already existent meaning or essence needs to be discovered. This is the view that Myss and others mentioned earlier attribute to Teresa. Wannenwetsch describes this understanding of “inwardness” (a return from one’s fallen state in the corruptible world back to a divine source) as more Platonic than Christian. By contrast, an understanding of word as deed, and of God’s words as deeds that shape the course of history and our very lives, indicates that our journey is dependent upon God’s mighty acts in time.

Teresa, the Word, and Augustine

It is against this background of the Word-as-deed that we can see a key way in which the work of Augustine influenced Teresa. In her autobiography, Teresa discusses how reading Augustine transformed her: “As I began to read the *Confessions*, it seemed to me I saw myself in them. When I came to the passage where he speaks about his conversion and read how he heard that voice in the garden, it only seemed to me, according to what I felt in my heart, that it was I the Lord called.”³⁸ In this famous scene to which Teresa refers, Augustine hears a child singing, “Pick it up and read, pick it up and read,” and hears in these words God’s own word telling him to open the Scriptures. He then picks up his “book of the Apostle’s letters” and reads Romans 13:13–14, part of which states, “put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires” (RSV). Realizing that the grace of Christ will transform his disordered life, Augustine writes, “the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away.”³⁹

When Teresa reads Augustine’s account, she too undergoes a transformation. She writes, “I remained for a long time totally dissolved in tears and feeling within myself utter distress and weariness.”⁴⁰ While reading God’s Word as mediated through Augustine, Teresa like Augustine is “pierced” by the Word of God. As Augustine has stated, “You pierced my

sincerity) as a deformation of the Word of God. It deforms the Word by locating it already within us; it expresses “itself in concrete ‘spiritual needs’ which can be attended to by the [church] . . .” Wannenwetsch observes that the main assumption here, “borrowed from Greek philosophies of language, was that of a sort of common ‘logos’ . . . in which all share and which makes divinizing possible in the first place” (35).

38. Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 51.

39. Augustine, *Confessions*, 207.

40. Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 51.

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heart with *your word*, and I fell in love with you.”⁴¹ Like Augustine, too, Teresa's senses are more fully opened to God's gifts and desires, so that she can later exclaim not only about the Word but also about the Eucharist, “Your delight is to be with the children of the earth.”⁴² It is against the backdrop of God's Word “piercing” Teresa that we ought to interpret her description of the Holy Spirit “wounding” her (in contrast to the Freudian *eros* misreading discussed above).

The Word that both Augustine and Teresa *hear* is not an existential inner word (always already present). But how do we know, one might ask? How is this word not simply their own projected inner voice, as some of the readings of Teresa that I discussed earlier imply? It is significant that the Word that Teresa reads comes to her mediated through particular people and communities: for example, Saint Paul, Antony (who inspired Augustine and who, Augustine recalls, had been instructed by a Gospel text), Augustine, and the Augustinian nuns of Our Lady of Grace (the convent where Teresa had stayed as a layperson). The passing on of the Word, so understood, occurs in the context of the church universal as it comes to be embodied in the lives of people in concrete ways. This Word is not already inside Augustine or Teresa. Augustine does say that he was without, trying to find order in his life, while God was *within*: “Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you . . .”⁴³ And Teresa, as I will discuss more fully, develops a key image of “His Majesty,” Christ, as already *inside* the soul. These passages, however, need to be read in light of God's dwelling with humanity through Christ—not as an inner light that circumvents God's new creation, the church, and ourselves as members of it.

Teresa and the Four Senses of Scripture

I now turn more directly to how Teresa interprets Scripture. As practitioners of “scriptural reasoning” have recently emphasized, to use Scripture wisely is, ironically, to avoid simply *using* Scripture but rather to be nurtured and healed by Scripture.⁴⁴ Such an understanding of Scripture as

41. Augustine, *Confessions*, 241; my emphasis.

42. Teresa is citing Prov 8:31. The context that Teresa is focusing on at this point is particularly the sacrament of the Mass: “How You desire, Lord, thus to be with us and to be present in the Sacrament” (*Book of Her Life*, 86). This emphasis is significant because it displays how *both* the Word and the Sacrament form and transform Teresa.

43. Augustine, *Confessions*, 262.

44. In describing the practice of scriptural reasoning, Goodson writes, “The goal is

nourishment and medicine is commensurate with a wide-ranging tradition of reading Scripture in “four senses.”⁴⁵ It is this way of reading that would have formed Teresa.

The “four senses” of Scripture goes back to John Cassian in the fifth century and developed out of Scripture’s own way of reading Scripture. Briefly described, the four senses are as follows. The first sense, which is primary, is the “literal.” Today this word often refers to “inerrantist” readings of Scripture, such that, for example, Genesis 1–2 is read through the lens of modern science. In the usage referred to here, however, the literal sense can be said to refer to the “Scriptures [bearing] witness to the mighty acts of God.”⁴⁶ Others describe this use of literal sense as “the meanings that Christians conventionally ascribe to a passage in their ongoing struggles to live and worship faithfully before the Triune God.”⁴⁷ While the literal sense remains primary, it gives rise to three other senses: the moral, the figurative, and the eschatological. The moral sense teaches persons what to do, and so aims to nurture the virtue of love. The figurative sense refers to the church and seeks to nurture the virtue of faith by teaching hearers what to believe. The eschatological sense, by reading in light of how the future impinges on the present, nurtures the virtue of hope. Seeing or hearing multiple senses does not mean that “a text can mean anything a later audience wants it to mean.” According to David Steinmetz, “the language of the Bible opens up a field of possible meanings,” not any and

not to use Scripture but to be healed by Scripture” (“Baptist Theology of Mary?” 13). Scriptural reasoning is the practice whereby Christians, Jews, and Muslims read scriptures together not in spite of but out of their unique commitments. Along similar lines, Henri de Lubac writes about Origen that he was “less intent on explaining Scripture than on illuminating everything by it” (*Scripture in the Tradition*, 46).

45. A well-known distich in the Latin Middle Ages (cited by Nicholas around 1330) sums up the four senses as follows: “The letter teaches what happened. Allegory teaches what you shall believe. The moral sense, what you shall do. Anagogy, where you shall aim.” Cited by de Lubac, who gives the most systematic account of these four senses in *Medieval Exegesis* (quote in 1:4). For another account of “pre-critical” exegesis, see especially Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis.” As I will discuss, this way of reading Scripture does not deny the usefulness of historical-critical methods. Its self-understanding, however, is to read Scripture with and for the church, rather than for some other purpose.

46. Wainwright, *Embracing Purpose*, 93.

47. Fowl, “Theological and Ideological Strategies,” 171. Fowl notes that in the Christian theological tradition the “literal sense” does not correspond exactly with modern notions of “literal.”

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all meanings.⁴⁸ At the same time, the senses are inseparable; “they interpenetrate each other.”⁴⁹

For our purposes, it is important to note that this fourfold pattern became a way of training the church and her members to see themselves and their own time and place in biblical terms. Within this tradition of reading, Scripture is more than a report of past events. Rather, as Balthasar summarizes, this fourfold pattern reflects how “God’s word becomes incarnate in Christ and prepares for this incarnation in Israel through the living word addressed to Abraham and to the people in the Mosaic instructions and in the prophets.” For this reason, Balthasar continues, “the theory of the senses of Scripture is not a curiosity of the history of theology but an instrument for seeking out the most profound articulations of salvation history.”⁵⁰ An understanding of God’s Word as living and speaking in time, culminating in the Word that is Christ, provides the basis for multiple senses of reading Scripture. Teresa, for her part, does not so much specifically identify these senses as rely upon them implicitly in her life and work.

This understanding of different senses of Scripture, along with the conviction that words are deeds, makes possible an expectation of scriptural abundance easily obscured by modern readings. In *Medieval Exegesis*, de Lubac describes this approach to Scripture as “undecipherable in its fullness and in the multiplicity of its meanings.”⁵¹ The fecundity of Scripture, he adds, is “a table arranged by Wisdom, laden with food, where the unfathomable divinity of the Savior is itself offered as nourishment to all.”⁵² The ancient fathers, in fact, compared Scripture received in this way “to a robe that was worn by the royal bride, woven of gold with a thousand colors.”⁵³ God’s Word is fruitful in spectacular ways. More recently, de Lubac observes, John Henry Newman describes this scriptural excess as follows:

48. Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 31. Steinmetz also notes how the four senses have been related to Christian virtues. The four senses can go by different names: the “tropological” (moral), the “allegorical” or “typological” (figurative), and the “anagogical” (eschatological).

49. Balthasar, *Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 80.

50. *Ibid.*, 75 and 76.

51. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 77.

52. *Ibid.*, 77.

53. *Ibid.*, 79.

[Scripture] cannot, as it were, be mapped, or its contents catalogued; but after all our diligence, to the end of our lives and to the end of the Church, it must be an unexplored and unsubdued land, with heights and valleys, forests and streams, on the right and left of our path and close about us, full of concealed wonders and choice treasures.⁵⁴

This superabundance is ultimately made possible by the Holy Spirit who animates Scripture: “Scripture is ‘fertilized by a miracle of the Holy Spirit.’”⁵⁵

At this point, I want to direct the reader’s attention to how Teresa’s “spirituality” is of a piece with her scriptural performance. That is, she imagines “spirituality” (though this term is not one that Teresa herself would have used) within the context of Scripture’s abundance. While I display this conviction more fully in the following chapters, it is important to register at this point how Teresa both writes and embodies this scriptural excess. “Let us not cease to believe,” she states, “that even in this life God gives the hundredfold.”⁵⁶ Such a statement, typical of Teresa’s counsel, shows how she writes and thinks out of a superabundance made possible through God’s Word.

In contrast to these multiple senses, modern strategies for reading Scripture have tended to read it monolithically. David Steinmetz observes about the historical-critical method that “the primitive meaning of the text is its only valid meaning, and the historical-critical method is the only key which can unlock it.”⁵⁷ Certainly, viewing Scripture “purely as historians” can provide helpful resources or tools for understanding aspects of Scripture. It is interesting to consider, however, that neither the historical-critical method nor, for that matter, the modern literal method of reading Scripture aim to produce lives of abundance that manifest the fruits of Christian virtue. The historical-critical method, in its claim to be scientific and more objective, lacks the necessary *telos* since, for it, reading Scripture is not about producing certain kinds of lives but about achieving particular sorts of knowledge. There is no necessary identification on the

54. As quoted in *ibid.*, 80.

55. *Ibid.*, 82.

56. Teresa, *Book of Her Life*, 147. Teresa is echoing Mark 10:29–30: “Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.’”

57. Steinmetz, “Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” 6.

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part of the reader with the stories or events.⁵⁸ Similarly, a modern literal reading of the text, which involves the individual before the written word, ignores how the church makes possible the lives of Christians. By contrast, the *telos* of reading Scripture according to multiple senses is something radically different. As Augustine famously states, “whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them.”⁵⁹

Like Augustine, Teresa understands Scripture within the context of liturgical transformation. Teresa, too, emphasizes the virtue of love as a key sign of faithfulness to God's Word. The language of “interior” or “interiority” that Teresa occasionally uses does not refer to a private sphere but to the necessity of *conversion*.⁶⁰ To interiorize God's Word is to become transformed. Teresa's “use” of Scripture can be compared to depictions of Saint John eating the book and being commanded to prophesy (Rev 10:9–11) as well as Ezekiel eating the scroll (Ezek 3:1–3). When eaten, the Word can be bitter or sweet as honey. Teresa's journey through the many dwellings ought to be read as a treatise for learning how to digest and thus internalize God's Word. Teresa herself, as indicated earlier, has feasted upon God's Word through the “exterior” habits of liturgy, prayer, the ordering of time, reading, and many other practices that sustain life together in Christ. When Teresa or her sisters hear the Spirit speaking, Teresa's counsel is always to discern the Spirit in the context of God's Word to a people.⁶¹ It is this kind of interior reception of God's Word in the context of God's people that enables Teresa to use Scripture to attend to the wounds on the body of Christ, a point to which I return in subsequent chapters.

58. This is not to deny that the method is beneficial, or that the one using the method may well become a saint, but the method or practice itself does not call for the virtues that constitute a life of holiness. For a discussion of how the historical-critical and modern literal approaches to the Bible share similar assumptions, see Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture*.

59. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 533.

60. To cite de Lubac, “The spiritual meaning of a mystery is the meaning we discover—or, rather, into which we penetrate—by living that mystery. Still more fundamentally, the entire process of spiritual understanding is, in its principle, identical to the process of conversion” (*Medieval Exegesis*, 13).

61. Thus Teresa writes, “. . . a locution bears the credentials of being from God if it is in conformity with Sacred Scripture” (*Book of Her Life*, 166–67).