INTRODUCTION

One of the least challenged assumptions in the history of Christianity is the presence of the Bible in all its manifestations. Admittedly, many explanations may be given such as the longevity of the book going back to archaic times, its status in Jesus’ self-perception as having come to fulfil the Scriptures, its incorporation into the life and rites of the church, its subsequent self-deliverance from ecclesiastical bonds in the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation culminating in the utterly unconstrained reading- and preaching-practice of the modern day evangelical preacher. Yet in more than one respect Scripture’s presence throughout history can be called as enigmatic as it is self-evident. Of all possible enigmas, one stands out for being inherent to Scripture itself, and that is its potential for becoming superfluous. Its being intrinsically time-bound, far from suggesting that it be devoured by time, is to be seen as the very source of temporality proper. It is time, and as such performs time, not by encircling the course of history from the outside, but, rather, by acting out time and history. Thus Scripture functions as an explosive, a bomb that may go off any time. Jesus’s claim to have come to fulfil Scripture, Paul’s view that in Jesus the fullness of time has come as well as the message of the Apocalypse concerning the end of history may seem to make a point about time and history. However, in fact, the medium being the message, the end and fulfilment of history squarely depend on the right reading and handling of the explosive material at hand. In other words, there is nothing reassuring in introducing the reader at this point as the keeper of a precious museum piece.

At no time – at least, at no time until the rise of the devotional subject – have Scripture and the reading of Scripture functioned in terms of a relationship between subject and object. For that the status of the object, the book, has been too powerful, including and absorbing (as, for instance, in allegory) the act of reading as part and parcel of the object proper. This being so, another dimension of the same enigma comes to the fore. Given the potential superfluity of Scripture, one is faced with the problem of its undeletable presence. Right from Scripture’s arrival in the Hellenistic world, its very bookishness has been in the way of its potential superfluity, or, to put it differently, has raised questions both with regard to its substance and form and to its self-proclaimed temporal status. Thus Augustine’s famous handling, in his *De doctrina Christiana*, of the entire complex of Scripture’s status inside the world of the liberal arts, in par-
ticular les arts du langage, has not only produced respectability from a rhetorical point of view. At the same time it has, over and against the claims of timelessness on the part of the Hellenistic culture of rhetoric, relentlessly put the spotlight on the temporality of language, including the language of Scripture, to the point of the latter becoming superfluous:

Therefore a person strengthened by faith, hope, and love, and who steadfastly holds on to them, has no need of the scriptures except to instruct others. That is why many people, relying on these three things, actually live in solitude without any texts of the scriptures. They are, I think, a fulfilment of the saying: “If there are prophecies, they will lose their meaning; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge that too will lose its meaning”.¹

Reading Scripture, then, rather than becoming absorbed by mystical silence detached from any articulation and focus, or, for that matter, the end of history, pinpoints the explosive effect of time in the guise of full possession as the moment at which language and knowledge have run their course and are being abridged and condensed to the holding on to (tenere) a word that is no longer spoken and taught but lived to the full, transformed into a “love” that, having done away with past and future, faith and hope, will prevail; “for when one reaches eternity the other two will pass away and love will remain in an enhanced and a more certain form”.² For Augustine, the accomplished reader who has appropriated and fulfilled the scriptural sayings to the point of the latter losing their meaning, has indeed turned into Scripture himself.³ That being so, one big question remains: what is the visibility of this particular manifestation of Scripture, this Lied ohne Worte, this song without words? Since simplicity is in the air, no duplication can be intended here. If then Scripture has “lost its meaning”, what is left of its undeletable nature as linguistic corpus the possibility of whose absence should be put, in Christian terms, into the category of the unthinkable?

**CALVIN**

Making a little jump in time, I now turn to Calvin whose sola scriptura seems to be the most comprehensive expression of Scripture’s undivided presence. In Calvin too the issue is not so much the relationship between a reading subject and the object to be read as, rather, the “objectivity” of Scripture itself, that is, its self-revelatory and self-referential nature, the epitome of which is its perspicuitas: the epiphany of Scripture. As far as objectivity is concerned, Scripture is as carved in stone as the words dictated by God to Moses on the mountain. Dis-

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² De doctrina Christiana 1.39.43 (94) (as in n. 1), pp. 52-53.
³ As I will discuss below, Anselm’s sola ratione might be said to perform a similar action by merging Scripture’s superfluous nature and fulfilment.