

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 13, No. 3, September 2019
Pages: 263-280

THE WORD: VEDIC VĀK AND JOHANNINE LOGOS

Antony Edanad, CMI♦
S.H. Monastery, Chethipuzha, Kerala

Abstract

The presentations of the Word in Vedic literature and in Johannine writings have evidently their specific social, cultural, and religious milieus, and their differing perspectives and doctrinal backgrounds. Nevertheless, we find striking similarities between them. The similarities cannot be explained by postulating the dependence, either direct or indirect, of one on the other. Since it is not likely that either of these two traditions is dependent on the other in its view of the Word, the similarities between the two can best be understood as the result of common elements in the humans' encounter with the divine. When humans belonging to different cultures and social conditions experience the same divine reality, it is only to be expected that there will be similarity in the expressions of that

♦**Prof. Emeritus Antony Edanad, CMI** holds a Licentiate from Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome and a Doctorate in Biblical Theology from Gregorian University, Rome. He was Professor of Sacred Scripture and Theology at Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, where he was also dean of the Faculty of Theology and Vice-President. He is author of the books *Christian Existence and the New Covenant God-World-Man: Towards an Integral View of Divine Revelation*; *Balivediyile Thiruvachanam (Malayalam, Exposition of liturgical bible readings)*; *Jeevante Suvisesham -Commentary on the Gospel of John (Malayalam)*; *Yohannante Velipad -Commentary on the Book of Revelation (Malayalam)*; and joint translator of the New Testament from Greek into Malayalam. He has authored many articles in English and Malayalam on Bible and theology. Email: edanad@gmail.com

This article was originally published in Augustine Thottakara, CMI, ed., *Indian Interpretation of the Bible. Festschrift in Honour of Prof. Joseph Pathrapankal*, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2000, 161-180. Reprinted with permission.

experience. The particular expressions of that experience are determined by the variables of human existence, thinking and articulation, and thus there will be differences too between them. In the Indian context, the Vedic concept of *Vāk* and the Biblical idea of the Word serve as a bridge between the Hindus and the Christians involved in religious dialogue. And the Vedic concept of *Vāk* may help the Christians to appreciate better certain aspects of God's word.

Keywords: Aum (Om), Brahman, Gospel of John, Greek Philosophy, Holy Spirit, Indian Philosophy, Jesus Christ, Logos, Prophets, *Śabda*, *Vāk*, Vedas, Word, Word of God

1. Introduction

Word being the basic unit of human communication is the most apt expression to signify the divine communication that revelation is. Hence, it is not at all surprising that two major religious scriptures, the Vedas and the Bible, employ the term to describe humankind's encounter and experience of the divine. This article is an attempt to present how the Vedas and one of the theologically most significant sections of the Bible in this regard, the Johannine writings, describe the Word, paying attention to the similarities and not overlooking the differences between the two.

2. The Vedic *Vāk*

The Sanskrit term *vāk/vāc*, which is grammatically feminine, is used to signify the word that is sacred, primeval, creative, and also sound, speech, language, the organ of speech and voice. The term is employed also with reference to the whole *Veda* and, especially, the *Ṛg Veda*. There are a number of other terms, including *brahman*, which are at least partially synonymous to *vāk*.¹ The significance of this wide range of meaning of the term *vāk* and its close synonyms is that it is indicative of the complexity and richness of the concept and, therefore, of the reality behind it. "*Vāc* is really the total living Word, that is to say, the Word in her entirety, including her material aspects, her cosmic reverberations, her visible form, her sound, her meaning, her message... She does not contain revelation; she is revelation."²

¹See K. Luke, "Some Aspects of the Rgvedic Conception of 'Vak'," *Jeevadhara* 1 (1971) 176-189.

²Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience. Mantramāñjarī*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1977, 89. The translation of Vedic text cited here is usually taken, if available, from this anthology of the Vedas.

2.1. The Nature of *Vāk*: Its Origin and Divine Character

In *Ṛg Veda* two hymns are devoted to the description of personified *Vāk* (RV X.71 and X.125). Although nowhere in RV X.125 the term *vāk* is used, this hymn is acknowledged as the self-description of the personified feminine principle that *Vāk* is.³ *Vāk* presents herself as a queen and goddess who is in the company of Vedic gods and who even supports and sustains them (RV X.125.1-2). *Vāk* “was before all creation, preexisting before and being came to be. It was she who initiated the creative process... the Word is not only the First of the whole Vedic pantheon, but... she has a unique place, for her nature is not to be compared with that of any other being, whether created or uncreated.”⁴ She is “full of wisdom, first of those worthy of worship.” The Word is omnipresent and expresses herself in various forms and in many languages, which are, therefore, different expressions of the one and only Word (RV X.125.3). She is the life-giving, dynamic and immanent principle in all human beings, even when they are not aware of it (RV X.125.4). She communicates the message that is exhilarating both for the gods and the humans, and she enriches, enlightens, energizes and empowers the human beings whom she loves enabling them to be “a priest, a sage or a learned seer” (RV X.125.5). On the other hand, she destroys “the hater of the Holy Word.” From the Waters⁵ she extends her presence to the whole universe permeating it and encompassing it. She gives her gifts freely and generously. She, existing from eternity, reveals the cosmic and divine Father and thus for the sake of the creatures “begets” him, who otherwise would remain completely unrelated and non-existent (RV X.125.6-8).⁶ In *Ṛg Veda*, however, we find an ambiguity regarding the nature of *Vāk* and her origin. For example, in RV VIII.100.10-11 *Vāk* is presented first as Queen of gods and the speaker of mysterious words, and then it is said that gods generated her and she is the object of speech of all kinds of animals.

Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa (II.8.8.5) says about the *Vāk*: “The Word, imperishable, is the Firstborn of Truth, mother of the Veda and hub of immortality.” The qualification of the Word as Firstborn of Truth is already found in RV I.164.37. Since the search for truth finds its fulfilment in Brahman, truth is identified with Brahman and Brahman with truth.⁷ Furthermore, *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (I.3.21;

³See Ralph T.H. Griffith, *The Hymns of the Ṛgveda*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1973, 631-632.

⁴Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 96.

⁵According to *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* VI.1.1.9 the Waters were produced out of *Vāk*.

⁶See Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 96-97.

⁷BU V.4.1; TU II.1.

IV.1.2) states: “Brahman, verily, is *Vāk*.” Hence, the Word is co-infinite and co-extensive with Brahman (RV X.114.8). Commenting on these and other similar passages Raimundo Panikkar remarks:

The Vedic Word... is ultimately as important as Brahman and, in a way that has to be properly understood, it is Brahman itself, not as every being ‘is’ ultimately Brahman, but in a special manner: the Word is the first offspring of the Absolute and sprang from it in a peculiar way. In the last analysis God *has* no name because He himself is Word.⁸

Significantly, the very term *Brahman* is used in the Vedas to signify the Word, precisely, the sacred Word.⁹

Brahman, as both word and concept, contains a profound ambiguity... Brahman is... everything and nothing... it is also the highest and lowest and that which lies in between, prayer, the effusion of the Spirit and the Spirit itself, the sacred formula, its meaning, and its ultimate intention... [There is] the unity that nevertheless underlines Brahman. This unity constitutes the mystery of *vāc*, the sacred Word.¹⁰

In *Atharva Veda* IV.1.1-5 we find a description of the nature of Brahman, the sacred Word, and its relation to *Vāk*. Brahman, the sacred Word, which has an inseparable link with sacrifice and which makes and sustains the world, is said to have been born in the East, because it is in the direction of the East as symbol of the origins that sacrifice is performed. It is the seer who has experienced and revealed this Word and its aspects as the womb of both Being and Nonbeing. The same Word is seen in its feminine character as *Vāk* and identified as the Queen who already existed at the primordial creation and who, therefore, reigns dwelling among and within beings. The Word is the connecting and vitalizing principle of all beings. Regarding the origin of *Vāk* it is stated that the Supreme Principle brought forth *Vāk* from the bosom of Brahman, the sacred Word. “The Word is not other than her Source: the Father and the Daughter are one and yet He has begotten Her.”¹¹ The sacred Word, which had its birth “at the abysmal depths” and “has passed up to the summit,” has its divine character from *Ṛhaspati*, the Lord of the sacred Word, the cosmic ruler.¹²

2.2. Creative Power of *Vāk*

As we have seen above, Brahman, the sacred Word, is presented as the womb of both Being and Nonbeing (AV IV.1.1). Similarly, *Vāk* is

⁸Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 89.

⁹See Luke, “Some Aspects of the Rgvedic Conception of ‘Vak’,” esp. 180-189.

¹⁰Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 103.

¹¹Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 104.

¹² According to CU III.18.3, “The Word is one quarter of Brahman.”

“the womb of the universe” (AB II.38), because by the Word everything is created (SB X.6.5.5). *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (I.1.5) puts it, “with that Word, with that Self, he brought forth this whole world, whatsoever exists here.” V. Madhusudan Reddy comments:

In the Vedic context the Word is the creatrix; it is by the Word that Brahman creates the universe of forms... Just as speech expresses a mental image of an object, Brahman by the Word expresses forms of himself in the objects; objects are the many expressions, forms or self-presentations of the Supreme.¹³

Regarding the presentation of *Vāk* in the *Brāhmaṇas* Raimundo Panikkar observes:

Throughout the *Brāhmaṇas* we find a certain ambivalence as the texts oscillate between two extremes, sometimes identifying *vāc* with Prajāpati and sometimes considering the Word as a mere instrument, subordinate not only to *manas* but also to certain other fundamental concepts... The ambiguity is not resolved. There are, however, various texts that introduce us in striking fashion to the power of the Word and its unique character.¹⁴

One such text is found in *Tāṇḍya Mahā Brāhmaṇa* (XX.14.2): “This, [in the beginning], was only the Lord of the universe. His Word was with him. This Word was his second. He contemplated. He said, ‘I will deliver this Word so that she will produce and bring into being all this world.’” According to *Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa* (II.8.8.4) the Word is infinite; all the gods, celestial beings, humans and animals live in the Word; and all the worlds find their support in the Word. On the other hand, a divergent view of the origin, nature and creative function of *Vāk* is found in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* (X.5.3.1-5):

In the beginning this universe was neither Being nor Nonbeing. In the beginning... only Mind was there... This Mind was... neither existent nor nonexistent. This Mind, once created, desired to become manifest... That Mind then created the Word. This Word, when created, desired to become manifest... It acquired a substance. It was the thirty-six thousand fires of its own self, made of Word... Whatever rite is performed at the sacrifice... is performed by the Word alone... That Word created the Life of Breath.

2.3. Revelatory Function of *Vāk*

In *Ṛg Veda* X.71 we find a description of how *Vāk* became available to human beings as means of revelation and communication. The hymn is addressed to Bṛhaspati, the Lord of the Holy Word, the inspirer of hymns. The beginning of the revelation of the Word was

¹³V. Madhusudan Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, vol. 1, Hyderabad: Institute of Human Study, 1990, 21.

¹⁴Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 106-107.

when the seers began to express their profound inner experience and identify each object by naming them. In union of love and collaboration with others they fashioned the Word by means of their mind. The Word found her special expression in sacrifice, and thus she was shared by many. However, not all receive the Word and respond to her in the same way. It is the Word who reveals herself to the well-disposed person and that revelation takes place in different degrees of intensity, depth and effects.

Ṛg Veda I.164, after acknowledging the fact that left to themselves the humans do not know who they are, expresses the confidence that they will receive a share in the Word if and when that Word who is the Firstborn of Truth comes to them enabling them to know their real identity (RV I.164.37). The whole of Vedas is concentrated and contained in an eternal Syllable and the knowledge of that Syllable is necessary for spiritual fulfilment (RV I.164.39). This eternal Syllable containing and expressing the whole of Vedas is understood as the *praṇava*, the mystical syllable AUM (OM), although it is not identified as such in the text. In the Upaniṣads this syllable is the object of profound religious meditation and it is seen as having the highest spiritual efficacy.

RV I.164.45 acknowledges that although at least the wise among them are aware of the totality of the Word, the humans have only a partial conscious grasp of the Word: “The Word is measured in four quarters. The wise who possess insight know these four divisions. Three quarters, concealed in secret, cause no movement. The fourth is the quarter that is spoken by men.” This theme has become the subject of later speculations and development. *Vāk* is seen as having different dimensions and varying forms. The first and highest of it is *Parā Vāk*, namely, the Word in its transcendent and, therefore, inaccessible form. The second is *paśyantī vāk*, the illuminated inner word that is still at a transcendental level. The third is *madhyamā vāk*, the middle word, which is purely mental articulation. And the fourth and lowest is *vaikharī vāk*, the intoned outer word, namely, the external expression of *Vāk*, the human word that is spoken and heard.¹⁵ According to another interpretation *Parā Vāk* is seen as the Word existing within the unmanifested supreme Brahman and in a way identical with the supreme Brahman; *paśyantī vāk* as the Word uttered by Brahman and manifested in cosmic form, and, therefore, identified as *Śabdabrahman* or *Saguṇabrahman*; *madhyamā vāk* as the Word manifested to the mind of sages and experienced by them

¹⁵See Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, vol. 1, 14-15; Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, 102.

through meditation; and *vaikhari vāk* as the human form of the Word, the word spoken and understood by humans, by which revelation is communicated.

In later speculations on the Word, the term *śabda* is used as synonymous to *vāk*, and a philosophical-theological theory of knowledge and language has been evolved.¹⁶ Experience is the soul of *śabda* and that experience is rooted in the reality that is divine.

It is the divinity of experience which forms the basis of the word that makes it universal and fundamental for thought... The concept of the divine nature of language and its being the supreme Brahman himself, *Shabda-brahman*, as well as the thesis of its creative and illuminative power – rather, its omnipotence and omniscience are all connected with the Veda.¹⁷

According to the *sphoṭa* theory, the word exists in the mind of the speaker as *sphoṭa* and it comes out in the form of sound, *śabda*, recreating the word in the mind of the hearer. *Sphoṭa* is the immutable essence of the word existing within the speaker and immanent in the consciousness of all hearers. *Śabda* is the effect of *sphoṭa*. *Dhvani* (the word-sound) and *artha* (the word-meaning) are the two aspects constituting *sphoṭa*, the transcendent sound, in which they are, therefore, integrated.¹⁸ *Sphoṭa* is the internal phase of *praṇava*, the primordial *Vāk*, AUM, from which all forms of *Vāk* are evolved and which has assumed the form of the phenomenal world.¹⁹

In the period after the formation of the Brahmanas, the Vedas as a whole has been designated as *Vāk*. The Veda has been understood as the primordial Word whose author is not any human being. The seers have discovered the Word imbedded in their hearts and have brought it out and revealed it (RV X.71). They are not authors of the Vedas, they are “the seers” of the Word, the eternal Truth. They, being charged with the Supreme, and being filled with the Truth, have poured out their luminous experiences in the form of mantras.²⁰ *Chandogya Upaniṣad* (VII.2.1) acknowledges that it is the Word which

¹⁶See Bhartrhari, *Vākyapadīya*; also K.A. Subramania Iyer, *Bhartrhari. A Study of the Vākyapadīya in the Light of the Ancient Commentaries*, Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute, 1969, 147-180; Tandra Patnaik, *Śabda. A Study of Bhartrhari's Philosophy of Language*, New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1994, 41-61.

¹⁷Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, vol. 1, 12.

¹⁸V. Madhusudan Reddy remarks: “The term *sphoṭa* is derived from the root *sphut* which signifies ‘to burst forth’; it is something that breaks forth on the hearer and discloses a meaning and an experience, a vision and a revelation – *pratibha*” (Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, vol. 1, 13).

¹⁹See Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, vol. 1, 12-16.

²⁰Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, vol. 1, 16.

makes known the Vedas and imparts all knowledge and that “if there were no Word, there would be no knowledge.” However, the Word cannot express Brahman adequately, as *Kena Upaniṣad* (I.5) aptly reminds: “That which cannot be expressed by words but that by which the word is expressed – this is Brahman, understand well, and not what is worshipped here as such.”

3. The Johannine *Logos*

The Greek term that is predominantly used for “word” in the New Testament in general and in the Johannine writings in particular is *logos*, which means speaking, word, account, reason, matter or subject. The term *rhēma* is also used, though less frequently, as synonymous to *logos*. The Johannine concept of the word is to be understood primarily against the background of the Old Testament.

3.1. Some Aspects of the Old Testament Concept of Word

In the Old Testament the Hebrew term *dābār* is used to signify the word that is divine or human. The Hebrew *dābār* means not only the spoken word, but also “thing,” “event,” “action,” implying that the word is not only a medium to communicate the idea, but that the (spoken) word is a concrete reality, it is an event and a dynamic entity. In Biblical view the word (*dābār*) of God contains and conveys not only the divine message/idea, but also the divine dynamism, the Spirit (*rûah* in Hebrew), which is the divine life-principle,²¹ and hence it is both revelatory and efficacious.²² That the word contains the spirit of the speaker appears to be based on the observable fact that when a person speaks, the breath of that person necessarily accompanies the word that is uttered. In Hebrew, one of the terms for breath is *rûah*, which also means spirit. Hence, according to the Bible, the divine idea and the divine life-principle, which is the Spirit, together constitute the word of God, and, therefore, the word is the extension of God himself and it is his self-expression and the medium of his self-communication.

3.2. The Creative Power and Revelatory Role of the Word

In the creation account of the Book of Genesis, which is, of course, not to be understood literally but theologically, God’s creative action is described as taking place through the words uttered by him: God utters the word and the thing intended by him comes into existence (Gen 1:3-25). Apparently reflecting on this tradition the Psalmist

²¹Ps 33:6, where the word and the breath/spirit (*rûah*) stand in parallel equation, illustrates this idea.

²²See Isa 55:10-11; Ps 147:15, 18; Wis 18:15-16.

acknowledges, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath (*rûah*) of his mouth” (Ps 33:6). The author of the Book of Wisdom is more explicit in this regard when he addresses God as “O God of my ancestors and Lord of mercy, who have made all things by your word...” (Wis 9:1). Ps 33:6, where the word and the breath/spirit (*rûah*) stand in parallel equation, shows that the dynamism of God’s word in creation is the dynamism of his Spirit. Creation is, therefore, the concrete expression and realization of the word of God accomplished through the power of the Spirit.

Since, according to the Bible, the divine idea and the divine life-principle, which is the Spirit, together constitute the word of God, the word is the extension of God himself and it is his self-expression and the medium of his self-communication. The Biblical idea of creation through God’s word, therefore, means that the created world shares in the reality of God and it is thus the manifestation of God. God’s creative action is revelatory and the whole creation is a revelation of God, not simply in a passive sense, but in an active form, because the transcendent God has become dynamically immanent in his creation.²³

In this connection, the accounts of the creation of humankind given in the Book of Genesis are significant. In the Yahwist narrative of Gen 2:4b-7 God creates man through a process that is much more complicated than simply uttering the word. God forms man out of the dust of the ground and he breathes into him the breath (*nešāmâ*) of life. What we find here is an equivalent of the word that is acted out. God gives concrete shape to his idea by forming man and then communicates his breath/spirit into that form. In Job 33:4 we find a theological reflection on this idea: “The Spirit (*rûah*) of God has made me, and the breath (*nešāmâ*) of the Almighty gives me life.” The life that is communicated to man is a share in the life of God, the principle of which is God’s own Spirit. Thus human beings are a special expression and concretization of the word of God and they are, therefore, revelation of God in a special manner. This is a view that is also found in a different form in the Priestly account of Gen 1:26-27 where it is stated that God created humankind in his image (*šelem*) and according to his likeness (*demût*).²⁴ The primary meaning

²³Before affirming, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Rom 1:20), Paul in Rom 1:19 states that “what can be known about God is plain” to humans, “because *God* has manifested it to them.” It means that God is actively involved in revealing himself through his creation.

²⁴ See also Gen 5:1; 9:6.

of this statement in this particular context is that as “the image” of God the humans are the representatives of God in this world and endowed with the divine authority to govern the other creatures. However, the description of humans as made in the image and according to the likeness of God also indicates that they in a special way share in the dignity of God and are his concrete manifestation. The Psalmist expresses these ideas stating that God has made the human beings “a little lower than God/gods and crowned them with glory and honour” (Ps 8:5).

3.3. The Word, the Commandment and History

In Biblical view history is the result of an interaction between God and human beings in which the word of God has a central role. History is guided and determined by God through his word and as such it is a manifestation of God and his plan in which co-operation of humans is required. The humans are to be guided by the word of God in their conduct. They are invited to co-operate with God in his plan by following his instructions as communicated to them in the form of commandments, which are described as his words.²⁵ As words of God the commandments contain the divine dynamism empowering the humans who receive them to live according to the message communicated to them. This idea comes to clear expression in Dt 30:11-14, “For this *commandment* which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off... But *the word* is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that *you can do it.*”

The word of God freely accepted and put into practice by humans positively determines the course of history according to the divine plan that is often expressed in the form of promises. If, on the other hand, humans refuse to co-operate with God the course of events will be decided by God’s word having the form of threats of punishment. However, God being sovereign can decide also on his own what turn history should take. The dynamic role of the Word of God in history comes to vivid expression in Is 55:10-11, where God says,

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.²⁶

²⁵Ex 20:1; 34:28; Dt 4:13; 5:5, 22; 10:4.

²⁶The dynamic presence and active role of God’s word in the world and in history are described also in Ps 147:12-20; Wis 18:14-16.

Since the word of God contains the divine life-principle and is, therefore, efficacious, the word is described as having the power to impart life; by accepting the word and translating it to conduct a person receives long life (Dt 32:46-47). It has the power to heal the people (Ps 107:20) and it preserves those who believe in God (Wis 16:12).

3.4. The Word and the Prophets

God's word plays its crucial role in history through the prophets by whom God communicates with the people and who interpret the meaning of the events and the course of history as a whole. In the prophetic writings the word of God is described as coming to the prophets imparting to them the divine message and enabling and impelling them to communicate it to the people.²⁷ As a result the prophets interpret and explain the meaning of the past reminding the people how God has revealed himself and his plan for them through what he has done for them. They explain the significance of the present and exhort them to co-operate with the divine plan being obedient to God. They show the people what their future is going to be according to God's design.

Georg Fohrer²⁸ has explained the prophetic discourse as the result of a process having four stages. The first stage was the call experience of the prophet, which was a moment of deep personal contact with God, in which the "spirit" or "word" of Yahweh came upon the prophet. The second stage was the prophet's interpretation of his experience, which was dominated by faith and intensified and reshaped by new experiences of the divine. The third stage consisted of the rational processing of the experience resulting in its translation into comprehensible words. And the fourth and final stage was the reduction of the message to a discourse, which was usually poetic in form and was orally communicated.

The words uttered by the prophets on behalf of God are regarded as God's own words. This is underlined by the introductory formula, "Thus says the Lord," that is frequently used in their proclamations. Since the words of the prophets are the words of God, they are dynamic and effective, and the past, the present and the future are the realizations and expressions of God's word. The dynamism of the word mediated by the prophets, which determines the course of history, is due to the fact that the divine Spirit accompanies the

²⁷See, for example, Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1.

²⁸Georg Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion*, trans. David E. Green, London: S.P.C.K., 1972, 238-240.

prophetic word as the word of God. There are instances in the Old Testament where it is indicated, implicitly or explicitly, that the prophets convey God's word because they have received the divine Spirit. At least in the post-exilic period of Biblical tradition prophecy is seen directly and explicitly as the result of the Spirit that the prophet has received.²⁹

3.5. The Johannine Hymn about the Word Become Flesh

The Prologue of the Gospel according to John (Jn 1:1-18) consists primarily of a hymn about the Word (Jn 1:1-5, 10-12, 14, 16) with its climax in Jn 1:14 and 16, setting the tone of the rest of the Gospel. What the hymn says about the Word (*logos*) has as its primary background the theological views of the Old Testament about the divine word and divine wisdom.

3.5.1. *The Divine Logos*

The hymn begins introducing the Word (Jn 1:1-2) with an allusion to Gen 1:1, and stating, "In the beginning was the Word," meaning, as it can be deduced from what follows, that the Word was eternally existing together with God. It specifies further that this Word was God or, rather, divine. The hymn is about the Divine Word who has personal nature and functions, as it is made clear in the subsequent verses. The fact that the Greek term for "word," *logos*, is grammatically masculine has facilitated and even necessitated the use of masculine personal pronoun for the Word in the hymn anticipating the later statement about the personal human form the Word has taken (Jn 1:14).

3.5.2. *The Logos and Creation*

The role of the Word in creation is celebrated in the next section of the hymn (Jn 1:3-5). The hymn emphatically states that it is through the Word that everything, without any exception, came into being.³⁰ Here we find a reference to the Old Testament view of creation as having taken place through God's word. It is stressed that what has come into being through the agency of the Word in a special way is the life, apparently meaning the gift of life at the creation of human being.

3.5.3. *The Logos in History*

The hymn proceeds to recall the dynamic, guiding and saving presence of the Word in human history (Jn 1:10-12). The Word was

²⁹See 2 Sam 23:2; Num 24:2-4; 2 Chr 15:1; 20:14; Neh 9:30; Is 59:21; 61:1; Ezek 11:5, 24; 37:1; Mic 3:8; Zech 7:12.

³⁰Compare Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:2.

present in the world, which was made through him. However, the world, the humankind, in general rejected the Word (Jn 1:10). That is an apparent reference to the general irreverence shown by humankind towards God and his revelation as narrated in Genesis. In particular, the Word came to his own, namely, to the people of God, Israel, in a special way, and they also by and large rejected him (Jn 1:11), as attested by the books of the Old Testament from Exodus onwards. The hymn, however, acknowledges that there had been some who positively responded to the Word and received him, and that to them he gave the power to become the children of God (Jn 1:12). In the Old Testament the people of Israel who accepted the words of Yahweh, which constituted the basis of God's covenant with them, were considered the children of God.³¹ The hymn seems to refer to this.

3.5.4. The Logos Become Human

The climactic section of the hymn (Jn 1:14, 16) solemnly proclaims that the personal divine Word has become human and has made his dwelling among the human beings thereby enabling the humans to see and experience his divine character and reality and to have a share in it. When the Word became flesh, he could be recognized as God's unique Son. The Word "becoming flesh" is a theme without any proper parallel in the Old Testament or, as far as we know, in the Jewish and Hellenistic milieu, although in non-Jewish religious mythologies there were stories of divine beings assuming human forms. Although the hymn itself does not clearly identify the Word-become-flesh as Jesus Christ, in the context of the Prologue (Jn 1:17-18) and of the whole Gospel that is evident.

3.5.5. The Pre-Incarnational and Post-Incarnational Role of the Logos

The first three sections of the hymn seem to have not only a pre-incarnational perspective but also a post-incarnational one. What the Word was and did before he became incarnate is paralleled and completed by what he is and does after becoming incarnate. In the new era of salvation, in the new beginning, the incarnate Word exists as its defining principle. He, who was with God, after completing his mission here below has returned to the Father and is with him now (Jn 20:17). The accomplishment of his ministry has revealed his divine character, that he is God (Jn 20:28). In this new era nothing salutary whatsoever happens without the incarnate Word (Jn 15:5). And what has become available in the new creation through him in a special way is the divine life (Jn 20:22, 31). After becoming incarnate, he was

³¹Ex 4:22-23; Deut 14:1-2; 32:5-6; Isa 1:2.

in the world that had come into being through him; however, the world – humans – in general and even his own people by and large rejected him. But to those who believed in his name Jesus, the incarnate Word, gave the power to become really the children of God (Jn 3:3-8; 20:17; 1 Jn 3:1-2).

3.6. Further Johannine Presentation of the Word

The direct and explicit presentation of Jesus Christ as the Word of God is not found outside the Prologue anywhere else in the Johannine Gospel. However, in 1 Jn 1:1 and Rev 19:13, in different contexts, he is referred to as the Word. Moreover, in the Gospel itself there are passages where this message is equivalently presented. In Jn 6:35-51a where the Johannine Jesus presents himself as the bread of life (vv. 35, 48) or living bread (v. 51a) or bread from heaven (vv. 41, 50), what is meant is that he is the life giving Word of God come down to the human realm from heaven. In the Old Testament bread in general and manna in particular stand as the symbol of God's word.³²

3.6.1. Jesus the Logos as the Source of the Word and the Spirit

Jesus Christ, being the Word, is the source of the divine word and Spirit for the humans. This is expressed in the Gospel using the imagery of water. Water is a symbol of both the word of God³³ and Spirit of God³⁴ in the Old Testament. The theme of "living water," meaning life giving word and Spirit, which is to become available through Jesus, is one that is developed step by step in the Gospel. If according to Jn 4:11, 13-14 Jesus is the one who can give the living water, in Jn 7:37-38 he is to be the source of this water; and in Jn 19:34 Jesus actually, though symbolically, becomes the source of the living water for those who accept him.

The words of Jesus, the Son sent by God, are the words of God, because the Father has given him the Spirit fully, and he and the Father are dynamically united by their mutual immanence (Jn 3:34; 10:30; 14:10, 24). His words are, therefore, the medium by which the Spirit and life become available to those who believe in him (Jn 6:63, 68). Those who believe in him and accept his word receive the divine, eternal life here and now (Jn 5:24), and they will be raised from death.³⁵ His words and commandments are identical;³⁶ they impart

³²See, for bread as symbol of word/wisdom, Amos 8:11-12; Prov 9:5; Sir 15:3; and for manna as symbol of word, Deut 8:3; Wis 16:20, 26.

³³See Isa 55:1-3; Sir 24:21, 30-34; Prov 13:14; 18:4.

³⁴See Isa 32:15; 44:3; Ezek 36:25-26; Joel 2:28-29.

³⁵Jn 5:21, 24-25, 28; 6:40; 11:25-26.

not only knowledge of the divine truth, they are also norm for conduct. Moreover, there is equivalence between Jesus and his word; he is present and available in and through his word.³⁷

3.6.2. *The Dynamic Character of Jesus' Word*

The true disciples of Jesus are those who “remain” in his word, namely, who accept the word in faith, interiorize it, keep it within permanently, and respond to it adequately. If they do so they will know the truth – they will have an existential experience of and relation to the truth that Jesus is as the embodiment of God’s revelation (Jn 14:6). Moreover, they will be liberated from the enslaving power of sin (Jn 8:31-32, 34-36). The divine word being dynamic spiritually strengthens and empowers those in whom it abides (1 Jn 2:14). The word also “cleanses” the disciples enabling them to produce more and more the fruits of discipleship in the form of a life that is according to the commandments of Jesus, especially the commandment of love (Jn 15:1-3, 10, 12). A theme related to this is found in the same context of the farewell discourse of Jesus. The Johannine Jesus affirms that he has given the word of the Father to his disciples (Jn 17:14). He prays the Father that he may sanctify, or rather, consecrate his disciples in the truth that his word is and that he himself is. This is in preparation for their sending to continue the revelatory ministry of Jesus, for which to equip them he consecrates himself by fulfilling his Father’s will and undergoing saving death (Jn 17:17-18).

The divine word as source of divine life for those who accept it is involved, together with the Spirit, in transforming them and “begetting” them as children of God (Jn 3:2-8). As the principle of divine begetting the word is described as “the seed” of God; it remains in those begotten by God and it empowers them not to commit sin and thus to lead a life that is befitting the children of God (1 Jn 3:9).³⁸ The expression “begotten by God” as designation of the believers indicates that they have been really transformed and elevated to the divine realm through the communication of divine

³⁶ “To keep the words” and “to keep the commandments” are used as interchangeable expressions; see Jn 8:51, 52, 55; 14:21, 23, 24; 15:10; 17:6; in 1 Jn 2:7 the commandment is directly identified as the word.

³⁷To believe in Jesus (Jn 4:21; 5: 38, 46; 8:45-47; 10:37-38) is the same as to believe in his word (Jn 2:22; 4:50; 5:47); to abide in him (Jn 15:4, 7) is the same as to abide in his word (Jn 8:31) and it is through his word that Jesus abides in the disciples (Jn 15:7; comp 15:4, 5).

³⁸A comparison of 1 Jn 3:9 with 1 Pet 1:23 clearly shows that what is meant by “the seed” of God in the former is in fact the word of God.

life, which is the result of the dynamic agency of the word of God they have accepted and by the power of the Spirit it contains. "Children of God" is not merely a title given to the believers, they are in real sense the children of God (1 Jn 3:1-2).

3.6.3. *Jesus the Word and the Proclaimed Word*

Jesus Christ who is the Word of God and who has revealed God's word and has communicated it becomes accessible and available through the proclamation of his authentic witnesses. The proclaimed word becomes the word of life for those who accept it in faith (Jn 17:20; 20:31; 1 Jn 1:1). The identification of the proclaimed word as the word of the Lord/God is, in fact, frequently found in the Acts of the Apostles and also elsewhere in the New Testament.³⁹ There is vital link and dynamic continuity between Jesus who is the Word of God, his word by which he communicates the word of God to the disciples, and their word by which they impart the same word of God to others.

4. Concluding Observations

4.1. Vedic *Vāk* and Johannine *Logos*: Similarities and Differences

In the previous two sections we have examined, separately and in their own contexts, how the Vedic literature describes the *Vāk* and how the Johannine writings present the *Logos*. The presentations of the Word in Vedic literature and in Johannine writings have evidently their specific social, cultural, and religious milieus, differing perspectives and doctrinal backgrounds. Nevertheless we find striking similarities between them. Both the Vedic *Vāk* and Johannine *Logos* have personal characteristics. If the Word in the Vedas is personified, the *Logos* in the Johannine Gospel is one who has appeared as a concrete person. The divine character of the Word is stressed by both, although in the Vedas we find differing views regarding the origin of *Vāk*. Whereas *Vāk* is born from Brahman, the *Logos*-become-flesh is the unique Son of the Father. As Brahman is *Vāk*, *Logos* is God according to John. The Word is co-existent with God and omnipresent according to both the Vedas and the Johannine writings. The pre-existence of the Word and the involvement of the Word in creation are also ideas common to both. While the Vedas present the Word as life giving immanent principle in all human beings, according to John the Word is immanent and the source of life especially to those who accept him in faith. The revelatory function of the Word is another aspect that is stressed by both the Vedas and

³⁹Acts 4:31; 6:7; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5, 7, 44, 46, 48-49; 15:35-36; 16:22; 18:11; 19:20.

John. The relation of the Word to the truth is also a common idea. The explanation of the four forms of *Vāk* and the four stages of prophetic discourse as described by Georg Fohrer are strikingly similar.

These similarities cannot be explained by postulating the dependence, either direct or indirect, of one on the other. In fact, some have argued that Greek philosophy is derived from Indian philosophy and, more to the point, that the Greek idea of *logos* has been influenced by the Indian concept of *vāk*.⁴⁰ However, the arguments adduced in favour of such a theory are at best conjectural. Moreover, the primary influence on the Johannine conception of *logos* was not Greek philosophy but the Old Testament and Jewish views.

Evidently, there are also differences between the Vedic *Vāk* and the Johannine presentation of *Logos*. In the Vedas *Vāk* is presented as a feminine principle, a Queen among gods, and the explanations of her origin and relation to Brahman are ambiguous, if not inconsistent. John, in contrast, is clear about the nature of *Logos* and his relation to God. Basing on the Old Testament and Jewish views, but going further, John describes the *Logos* who is coexistent with God as the unique Son of God who is equal to the Father, though totally dependent on him. Whereas in the Vedic literature *Vāk* is described as becoming available to the human beings and shared by them in various forms and degrees, John emphatically states that the Word has become flesh – that he has become a concrete historical human being – and that is the most significant difference. Consequently, according to John, faith in him is the only means for the humans to share deeply in his reality as the Word and Son of God. In the Vedic writings there is emphasis on the unity of the Word within the multiplicity of its forms and degrees of participation, and, therefore, all words and languages as different expressions of the one *Vāk*. This is a view that is not found in the Johannine writings, or even in the Bible as a whole, though there is continuity and dynamic relation between God's word and that word as proclaimed by humans authenticated to do so. These are some of the major differences between the Vedic and the Johannine/Biblical concepts of the Word. There are also differences in nuances as regards other aspects of the Word.

Since it is not likely that either of these two traditions is dependent on the other in its view of the Word, the similarities between the two

⁴⁰See A.D. Pusalker, "Cultural Interrelation between India and the Outside World before Asoka," in Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, ed., *The Cultural Heritage of India*, vol. 1, Calcutta: The Radhakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1958, 144-159, esp., 153-154.

can best be understood as the result of common elements in the humans' encounter with the divine. When humans belonging to different cultures and social conditions experience the same divine reality, it is only to be expected that there will be similarity in the expressions of that experience. The particular expressions of that experience are determined by the variables of human existence, thinking and articulation, and thus there will be differences too between them. In the Indian context, the Vedic concept of *Vāk* and the Biblical idea of the Word serve as a bridge between Hindus and Christians involved in religious dialogue. And the Vedic concept of *Vāk* may help the Christians to appreciate better certain aspects of God's word.

4.2. Jesus the *Vāk*

Jesus Christ as the Word incarnate, the Alpha and the Omega (Rev 22:12), is the Supreme Word, AUM, in concrete human form. He is the *vāk* whom the Supreme Principle brought forth from his bosom (AV IV.1.3; Jn 1:18), who existed with God before all creation, through whom God "brought forth this whole world, whatsoever exists here," and whose expression the world is (BU I.1.5; Jn 1:1-5). He is the *Vāk* who is the firstborn of the Truth (RV I.164.37), who himself is, therefore, the truth and who as the source of life is "the hub of immortality" (TB II.8.8.5; Jn 14:6; 5:24; 11:25-26). He is the Eternal Syllable containing and expressing the whole Scripture – the Law and the Prophets (RV I.164.39; Jn 1:45). He is the *Vāk*, full of wisdom, worthy of the same worship as the Father (RV X.125.3; Jn 5:22-23). He is the *Vāk* who is one with the Father (BU I.3.21; Jn 10:30), the *Śabdabrahman* who reveals the Father (RV X.125.5, 7), who is the basis of human words about God and who makes them meaningful (RV X.125.3; Jn 14:7, 9; 15:15; 17:6; 15:27). He is the *Vāk* who after coming down to the realm of humans to fulfil his mission has "passed up to the Summit" returning to the Father (AV IV.1.5; Jn 13:1; 14:28). He is the *Vāk* who can be known and accepted only by those who have the word within them (RV X.71.4-6; Jn 5:37-38). He is the *Vāk* who is the life-giving, dynamic, immanent principle in those who have received him (RV X.125.4; Jn 15:4) and who brings about the unity of all who accept him (RV X.125.7-8; Jn 17:21-24).