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The Bible as “The Word of God in the Words of Men”

The Bible, considered from the point of literature, may appear to be just a collection of literary compositions of different authors of various times. But if we take a second look, with a critical mind, we realize that they represent the faith-experience of many individuals and communities of believers. For the Christians, however, these writings represent God’s Word to them through the medium of human language. Just as they believe that God became man, they believe also that God’s word assumed the outward appearance of human words. The infinitely sublime Word of God lowers itself to the ordinary status of human word and thereby subjects itself to all the limitations of human language. But a Christian has an eye of faith to penetrate these layers of human language and see clearly the Word of God enshrined therein, which comes to him anew as a normative force of his life here and now through the Bible. For him, therefore, the Bible is not like any other literary work by a human author, but it is the inspired Word of God.¹ In other words, it is not an ordinary book, but a sacred book, the author of which is God and not man.² This aspect of the Sacred Scriptures of the Christians is discussed at some length in this article.

Scripture as Revelation

The Christian Scripture, as it is the Word of God, is God’s revelation to men. A word is always revelatory. It is a means of communication. It reveals the mind of the one who speaks. This is true also of the Word of God contained in the Scripture. Through the Scripture God’s design about man and creation is revealed. It is

1. Cf. 2 Tim 3:15-16; 2 Pe 1:21

2. Cf. *Institutiones Biblicae Scholis Accommodatae*, Vol. 1: “De S. Scriptura in Universum”, 6th ed., (Roma : Pont. Inst. Biblicum, 1951), pp. 17 ff.

essentially a self-disclosure of God to man. As Alonso Schökel says: "God opens Himself out and reveals Himself to us as one person to another, using the personal, or interpersonal means of communicating."³

The Scripture is like a personal letter God sent to us through the hands of so many intermediary human beings, who, in divine providence, were specially chosen by Him. These individuals and communities who acted as medium to bring me here and now the letter of God, have, in one way or other, contributed to my understanding of the mind of God. In this respect they are different from the ordinary postmen who do not open the letters, but only carry them in sealed covers. When I read the Gospel of John for example, I may find the Word of God coming to me as it was understood and proposed by the theological mind of John and of the Johannine community. Through this letter, however, God reveals to me that he has still concern for me as he has concern for the whole mankind. He writes to me that he is the beginning and end of everything, and that he is the Almighty who controls the whole of nature and human history, and that he is my Saviour. He makes me realize that the value of my existence depends on how far I remain related to him. Thus this letter itself is a sign of his love. It is, therefore, with reverence and love that the Scripture should be approached.

God's Word in Human Language

This Word of God, however, is expressed through human language. In order that two persons may communicate with each other, there should be a common medium available to them. God with His infinite knowledge can understand everything and express Himself in infinite ways. But man with his limited intellect can easily grasp and communicate only that which comes within the purview of his language. He breaks down what is within himself and arranges it and places it outside himself. This is his language which expresses his interior. God in his condescension has adopted this human way for His formal communication with man, and that is the Scripture. As Alonso Schökel says: "Language embodies the apex of human revelation, and therefore God has chosen this means of communicating and revealing Himself to men overcoming the anonymity of

3. Luis Alonso Schökel, *The Inspired Word* (New York: 1965), p. 41.

nature and history. This is, in the strict sense, formal revelation."⁴ The Scripture, therefore, is the formal and personal way of God's speaking to man.

God Speaks through Human Words

The Scripture is a sign of God's self-abasement. Here we find the transcendent God coming down to use the poor human language to communicate Himself to His creatures. Here is the mystery of love. Whoever truly loves another person will often abase himself to express his love. We know how a loving father, even if he is a magistrate, or governor, or chief minister, lowers himself to the level of his child and communicates with it speaking in the way it speaks. This is exactly what is happening when God speaks to man. He abases Himself and uses the human language with all its limitations in order to communicate with man. This He does out of His true love for man, His creature. The very fact that He speaks to us is a sign that He loves us. Thus, the Scripture symbolizes God's self-abasing love for man. Hence, we need not be surprised when we come across certain passages in the Bible which speak of God anthropomorphically, or which speak of very silly and scandalous things. For, here the transcendent God is lowering himself and making use of man's way of thinking, feeling and expressing, in order to communicate to him the salvific truths.

Word through words

The importance of the Christian Scriptures consists in this that they communicate to us the Word of God for our salvation through human words. Here we have to distinguish between the external form of a word and its internal rational content. Thus beyond the connected series of sounds in a spoken word, there is a meaning enshrined in them. Even though this sound differs when an Indian or a Russian or a German or an American speaks, the rational content, the "logos" remains the same.⁵ For example, when an Indian calls his father "Pithaji", a German may call him "Vater", an Englishman "Dad", and a Hebrew "Abba". But the content of all these is the same. Hence

4. L.A. Schökel, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

5. Cf. C.H. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge : 1968), p. 266.

the Scripture, which, in its external appearance, consists of human words, in fact contains and conveys the *logos*, the rational content, the Word of God. This Word of God is unchangeable and eternal. It corresponds to the eternal truth, the ultimate reality of the universe. That is why Jesus emphatically says: "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Mt 5:18). St Peter in his letter, quoting Is 40:6-8, speaks of the incorruptible nature of the Word of God: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God; for 'All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord abides for ever'. That Word is the good news which was preached to you" (I Pe 1:23-25).

Word and Wisdom

The Word of God expressed through the Scripture is the wisdom of God. It is His mind, His thought manifested to man. It is "the hypostatized thought of God projected in creation, and remaining as an immanent power within the world and in man."⁶ Now, the Scripture as the record of man's experience with God, is a store house of wisdom. There we find the vibrations of the human mind as the reflections of the true wisdom of God. In this respect, the Scripture is a witness of God's wisdom as well as of man.

The Scripture Oriented to a Person

The Scripture is the expression of the eternal Word which was existing with God from all eternity.⁷ Now, the whole Scripture is oriented towards the full revelation of the Word of God in the person of Jesus Christ. The entire Old Testament is God's way of expressing His Word to man. But it was only a preparation for His most perfect expression of His Word in the New Testament. So the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* says: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his

6. C.H. Dodd, *op. cit.*, p. 275

7. Cf. Jn 1:1

word of power".⁸ Hence, the whole Scripture, which is a way of God's speaking, is oriented to a person, who is God's Son, through whom God speaks in the most perfect way so much so that man can very well understand Him.

This person, according to the New Testament, is Jesus of Nazareth, the Word become flesh.⁹ He is the sum-total and embodiment of all that God has spoken and wants to speak to man. The Scriptures are only the expressions of this eternal Word who became incarnated in time and space. Hence, the Scriptures lead us not merely to some truths, but to a person. For, everything true has been summarized in this Person, who is the eternal absolute Truth, the true image of God, the eternal Mind of God. This eternal Word, according to Philo, is the *raison d'être* of the sensible universe.¹⁰ According to the New Testament too, this eternal Word is the meaning, plan and purpose of the created universe.¹¹ He is the light and life for men.¹² As light, he is the revelation of God to men, which, when man accepts wholeheartedly, becomes His eternal life.

The Old Testament is actually so oriented towards him that the New Testament writers have understood the events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth as the fulfilment of what has been foretold by the OT.¹³ In his confrontation with the Jews, Jesus brought out this point very clearly: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness to me."¹⁴ The New Testament writings are also oriented towards the Person of Jesus Christ. They try to reveal his life and teaching which is the expression of the eternal Word, who is the perfect image of God. They tell us that Jesus the Incarnate Word is the *alpha* and *omega*, the beginning and end of everything created.¹⁵ He is the efficient cause, the exemplary cause, the instrumental cause and the final cause of the

8. Heb 1:1-3

9. Cf. Jn 1:14

10. Cf. Philo, De Opif. 17:24 *Quod Deus*, 31

11. Cf. Jn 1:3; Col 1:16; Rom 11:36

12. Cf. Jn 1:4

13. Cf. Mk 15:28; Lk 4:21; Jn 13:18; 17:12; 19:24, 28, 37

14. Jn 5:39

15. Cf. Rev 21:6

whole creation.¹⁶ He is the way, the truth and the life.¹⁷ He is the bread of life.¹⁸ He himself is the resurrection and life.¹⁹ Thus the entire New Testament as well as the Old Testament Scriptures as word of God are oriented to God's total Word who is a Person, the incarnate Son of God.

The Power of the Sacred Scripture

The Scripture as the expression of God's Word and Wisdom, has tremendous power in the created world. According to the Wisdom Literature, wisdom is the eternal thought of God projected in creation and remains as an immanent power within the world and more especially in man. Now Scripture as God's wisdom has the power to control and activate man's mind in such a way as to transform his life and the life of the whole human society.

Creative Power: The Scripture as Word of God has creative power. It was with the power of this Word that God created the heavens and the earth and everything therein.²⁰ Sometimes in the life of every individual there may be moments of emptiness, chaos, confusion and frustration as in the case of the earth before its creation.²¹ But on such occasions, if one reads the Scripture and submits himself to be acted upon by the Word of God, a new heart and spirit will be created in him.²²

Life-giving Power: Scripture as Word of God is a life-giving source in the life of man. After Moses had conveyed to Israel all the commandments of Yahweh as God's Word, he added: "Lay to heart all the words which I enjoin upon you this day, that you may command them to your children, that they may be careful to do all the words of this law. For it is no trifle for you, but it is your life, and thereby you shall live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess."²³ Hence to know the Scripture and to live

16. Cf. Jn 1:3; Col 1:16; Rom 11:36

17. Cf. Jn 14:6

18. Cf. Jn 6:51-58

19. Cf. Jn 11:25

20. Cf. Gen ch. 1; Ps 33:6

21. Cf. Gen 1:2

22. Cf. Ps 51:10; Is 65:17

23. Dt 32:46-47

according to the demands of the Word of God contained therein is as important as one's life itself.

Healing Power : Scripture as the Word of God has healing power. The human mind is vulnerable. Many a time man may feel wounded at heart and sick in mind. This may be connected also with his bodily suffering and other adverse circumstances of his life. But then, if he turns to the power of the Word of God contained in the Scripture, he will be cured from within and be able to face problems in his life with joy and peace. About such healing power of the Word the Psalmist says : "Some were sick . . . they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress; he sent forth his Word and healed them, and delivered them from destruction."²⁴ Hence, one has to approach the Scripture with the attitude of a sick man approaching a doctor for medicine to cure him of his ailment.

Preservatory Power : The Word of God has preservatory power. The author of the Book of Wisdom says: ". . . so that thy sons, whom thou didst love, O Lord, might learn that it is not the production of crops that feeds man, but that thy word preserves those who trust in thee."²⁵ Food is needed to sustain man's physical life, but more than that man needs the Word of God for preserving his spiritual life. Hence, to the tempter Jesus replied by quoting from Dt 8:3: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God."²⁶ Man is placed in this world in an atmosphere of constant temptations. From all sides he is induced to lead a sinful life. But, if he, as Jesus did, lives by the Word of God of the Scripture, his life will be preserved from corruption.

Dynamic and Effective Word : The Word of God in the Scripture is very dynamic and effective. Hence, through Isaiah God says: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water 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 forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but

24. Ps 107:17-19

25. Wis 16:26

26. Mt 4:4

it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."²⁷

Power to make one God's son: God's Word makes one God's son. It is to those who receive the Word of God by believing in him that he grants the boon to become God's children.²⁸ It is the Word who gives this boon and makes men God's children. Only if men are united with the Word Incarnate as branches in the Vine, they will live; otherwise they will have no life of the children of God in them.²⁹ One can, however, remain united with Him only as far as he responds positively to the demands of the Word of God that comes through Him.³⁰ St Peter speaks of this power of the Word of God to make men children of God: "You have been born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God."³¹ Hence, if one abides with the living Word of God, he will attain the status of God's beloved son.

Power of impeccability: God's Word makes one impeccable. John says that he who has become God's son cannot commit sin, since God's seed remains in him.³² Here God's "seed", according to ancient commentators like Clement of Alexandria, Photius, Augustine, Beda as well as modern commentators like B. Weiss, Büchsel, Dodd and Boismard, signifies the Word of God. This implies that if the Word of God enshrined in the Scripture becomes the normative force of one's life, he cannot lead a sinful life. The Word of God will help him to overcome the influences of the evil one.³³ Hence, if the Word of God remains in man either as "Law of God" (Ps 36:31) or as "wisdom" (Eccl 24:22; Henoch 6:8), or as "truth" (Qumran, I QS 4:20), he will not knowingly commit sin.

Power to purify: The Word of God has power to purify man. That is why Jesus said to his disciples: "You are already made clean by the Word which I have spoken to you."³⁴ This internal cleansing

27. Is 55:10-11

28. Cf. Jn 1:12

29. Cf. Jn 15:6

30. Cf. Jn 15:10

31. I Pe 1:23

32. Cf. I Jn 3:9

33. Cf. I Jn 2:14

34. Jn 15:3

takes place because of the judging character of the Word. The Word of God is like a sharp double edged sword.³⁵ It serves as a light, it makes man see clearly what is right and what is wrong, and thereby accuses him in his conscience if he is following a wrong path in his life.³⁶ This, in fact, is an interior cleansing.

Power to liberate and sanctify: The Word of God as truth has the power to liberate and sanctify man. So Jesus prayed at the Last Supper: "Sanctify them in the truth; thy Word is truth".³⁷ It is this Word as truth that gives true and perfect freedom to man. Jesus, therefore, said to his believers: "If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free."³⁸ Hence, if one desires to have perfect freedom, he should first of all approach the Word of God, which can cleanse him, liberate him from his bondage and sanctify him. It is with this tremendously powerful Word of God that the Scripture brings us into contact.

Man's Disposition for the Word of God

Even though the Word of God is powerful and dynamic in itself, it can remain ineffective in a man if he is not rightly disposed towards it. Thus Jesus said in the form of a parable: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell upon thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."³⁹

The explanation of this parable is given in Mt 13:18-23. According to the general opinion of the scholars, this passage is most probably the interpretation of Jesus' parable by the early Church.⁴⁰ There are

35. Cf. Rev 1:16; 19:15; Is 49:2

36. Cf. Jn 3:18-21

37. Jn 17:17

38. Jn 8:31-32

39. Mt 13:3-8

40. Cf. Joachim Jeremias, *Rediscovering the Parables* (London: 1965), p. 64; J.L. McKenzie, "The Gospel According to Matthew", in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, pp. 62-114, p. 87.

also authors who think that such an interpretation of the parable which was prevalent in the thinking of the early Church could have also come from Jesus himself.⁴¹ In any case, the meaning of the parable as given in the Gospel is important. Here the seed stands for the Word of God, and the land for men to whom the word came. As regards the response of men to the Word of God that came to them, there are various categories of people. There are those who do not actually accept God's Word by pondering over it and interiorizing it. They are like the open path which does not offer favourable circumstances for the seed to grow, but allows the seed to be picked up by the birds: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in his heart; this is what is sown along the path."⁴²

The second category of people resemble the rocky ground. They readily accept the Word of God in as much as it does not demand self-sacrifice. Whenever its demands touch directly upon their self-love, they reject the Word of God altogether. So it is explained: "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is he who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the Word, immediately he falls away."⁴³

The third category of people resemble the thorny ground. As the thorns are a hindrance for the free growth of the seed, so their minds are taken up with so many things of this world which are opposed to the message of the Word of God. Hence it is explained: "As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the Word, but the cares of the world and delight in riches choke the Word, and it proves unfruitful."⁴⁴

The fourth category of people, however, receive the word with a good disposition. They interiorize the Word and respond positively to its demands and produce the desired fruit. So the parable says: "As for what was sown on good soil, this is he who hears the word

41. Cf. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 2, (Bangalore, T.P.I., 1981), p. 59

42. Mt 13:19

43. Mt 13:20-21

44. Mt 13:22

and understands it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.'⁴⁵

Hence, in order that the Word of God may become effective, man should have the right disposition and inclination. He should be free from prejudices and self-centredness. He should be open to the Spirit of God who helps him to interiorize the Word. Hence, it is with an open heart, with the readiness to do whatever the Word of God would demand of him, that a person has to approach the Scripture. One should not approach the Bible with an over-scientific attitude. Because the methodology of science is far too analytical. If a beautiful piece of sculpture is presented to a scientist's observation and appreciation, he will subject it to minute analysis with the help of a microscope, part by part. In this part-by-part analysis, the scientist may not be able to see the real beauty of that piece of sculpture as a whole. But if it is put before the eyes of an artist, it will be viewed as a whole and its real beauty will be appreciated. In the same way, if we isolate each part of the Bible and subject it to too much scientific analysis, we may miss the real beauty and power of the Word of God enshrined therein. Hence, a religious methodology with its emphasis on faith has to be followed in approaching the Bible. Here what is important is not merely an intellectual understanding of the Scripture, but a knowledge divined by the heart, an experiential knowledge involving faith and obedience: For, the Scripture is the Word of God which reveals to man not the scientific truth as such, but the religious truth for his eternal salvation.

45. Mt 13:23