

“AND THE LORD SAID”? BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON SCRIPTURE AS THE WORD OF GOD

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IT HAS BEEN my contention¹ that history will divide this century roughly into thirds as regards significant movement in the Catholic study of the Bible. The first period (1900–1940) was dominated by the rejection of modern biblical criticism. The second period (1940–1970) saw the introduction of biblical criticism by the order of Pope Pius XII and the gradual but reluctant acceptance of that criticism in and through Vatican Council II. The third period (1970–2000), in which we now live, involves the painful assimilation of the implications of biblical criticism for Catholic doctrine, theology, and practice. That assimilation is necessarily slow, even in academic areas. Biblical scholars themselves are continually developing insights in areas that affect theology;² and only now are we encountering a generation of Catholic theologians who were nurtured in their first studies on a critical approach to the Bible, rather than appropriating it late in life and having to unlearn some of their early formation.³ One feature of this gradual assimilation is that, while we may develop a sophisticated theology, we continue to use basic terms shaped in a precritical era without stopping to examine the meaning of those terms when rethought in a critical context. (Or even when those terms are rethought, often we do not reflect sufficiently on how they are understood by a noncritical audience for whom they may have a much simpler connotation.) Two lectures in a theological context this month (October 1980), the present *Theological Studies* Lecture and the Twenty-Fifth Annual Bellarmine Lecture in St. Louis (for *Theology Digest*), offer me

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¹ See *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist, 1973) 3–11.

² There are areas that are only now being opened up (the different communities or churches of the first century, and their different outlooks on Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, etc.) and there are areas that, in my judgment, have never really been studied (the different pneumatologies of the NT).

³ A biblical scholar must admire the industry of Schillebeeckx, who would take three years in middle age to do the exegetical reading that went into *Jesus* (New York: Seabury, 1979; see p. 36). But it is a commentary on Roman Catholic history in this century that such an endeavor had to be done in middle age and was not done in Schillebeeckx' theological training for the priesthood or even for the doctorate, as it would have been done in the case of a Protestant theologian like Pannenberg and Moltmann.

the opportunity to rethink critically two basic tenets of the Catholic approach to the Bible, both of which were strongly affirmed at Vatican II, and both of which have serious implications for theology. The present lecture will concentrate on the implications of affirming that the Bible is the word of God, and the Bellarmine lecture will discuss how one attains to the meaning of biblical passages and especially how the Church functions in "authentically interpreting the word of God."⁴

The terminology "the word of God," while a firm part of all Judeo-Christian thought, has in these last years been brought to the fore in Roman Catholicism in both liturgy and theology. In the vernacular Mass, as the passages of the lectionary are terminated, the lector proclaims, "This is the word of the Lord," to which all assent by the response, "Thanks be to God." And the Vatican II document on revelation, which was the subject of the battle that determined the direction of the Council and of Catholic theology in this century, was entitled *Dei verbum*, "The Word of God." Yet what does "word of God" mean when applied to the Bible? Are the Scriptures themselves the word of God or do they contain the word of God? In either case do we literally mean *word* of God? Does God speak? And if one smilingly replies, "Not in the physical sense of emitting sound waves," there is still the question of whether God internally supplies words to the recipient of revelation and/or inspiration. I more than suspect that there are theologians who as good scholastics would not blanch at saying that technically God does not think, has never had an idea, and makes no judgments, but would hesitate at saying that God does not speak. Similarly, there are biblical interpreters who recognize anthropomorphism in biblical statements about God's smelling, walking, and begetting, but would hesitate about God's speaking.

Let me be precise about the limits of this discussion of the Bible as the word of God, lest I arouse misunderstanding or false expectation. First, I fully accept the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Bible as the word of God, and the whole discussion assumes that fact. This may disappoint those who think proof is needed that the Bible is the word of *God*—no such proof is possible beyond biblical self-claim and Church doctrine; it is a matter of faith. Catholics who are going through the struggle of faith may ask themselves why the biblical record written so long ago continues to have such a privileged position as a norm for Christian life, but in honesty I must say that the theoretical denial of the Bible as of truly divine origin is not a major problem in Catholic thought. On the North American scene there are a few left-wing Catholic theologians who regard the newspaper to be just as much a revelation of God's dealings with

⁴ Vatican II, *Dei verbum* 10: "The task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church. . . . This teaching office is not above the word of God but serves it."

human beings as the Bible, but in my judgment that is more a problem in areas of Protestantism where liberalism has a long history. Catholic theologians of the left are a minority speaking to a minority; they have no following among the masses of Catholic faithful and will never influence the hierarchy nor change the Church.

The real struggle, which is between the Catholic center and the Catholic far-right, does not imperil the Catholic doctrine of the Bible as the word of God, which both accept. In this instance, as in most others, the struggle concerns the *meaning* of the doctrine. It gets nasty only when the far-right claims that its understanding of the doctrine is doctrinal.⁵ But if in this lecture I struggle with the difference between a centrist and a rightist understanding of the Bible as the word of God, it is not because I regard militant Catholic fundamentalism as a real threat. Rightist militancy is confined to a few Catholic newspapers and periodicals, more vocal than their numerical following justifies.⁶ In smaller part, my debate has in mind the vast number of unconscious fundamentalists among Catholics who have little knowledge of the Bible and therefore make simple assumptions; it also has in mind the increasing number of conscious (but not militant) Catholic fundamentalists who have taken over Protestant fundamentalism from contacts in the charismatic or moral-issues movements.⁷ In larger part, in a *theological* presentation I struggle over the Bible as word of God because I do not find that theologians have been specific or clear on this subject. I suspect that most modern Catholic theologians will agree with what follows and that some will even regard it as "old hat." Yet it is very difficult to find a theologian who writes specifically on whether God communicated directly in words (even internal words) in either biblical revelation or biblical inspiration. (The general affirmation that revelation is not propositional is not enough to settle the meaning of "the *word* of God.") This is no minor issue, because if God did not actually speak words (external or internal), one must admit clearly and firmly that every word pertaining to God in the history of the human race, including the biblical period, is a time-conditioned word, affected by limitations of human insight and problems. The attribution of a word to God, to Jesus, or to the Church

⁵ In his speech at the Catholic University in Washington on Oct. 6, 1979, Pope John Paul II quoted his predecessor: "Among the rights of the faithful, one of the greatest is the right to receive God's word in all its entirety and purity." It is typical that many extreme rightists have quoted this as proof that the Pope wants *their* interpretations of Catholic doctrine presented.

⁶ For details see R. E. Brown, *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York: Paulist, 1975) 13; also my NCEA speech "Debunking Some Fictions: The Dilemma of the Magisterium vs. the Theologians," *Catholic Mind* 76, no. 1325 (Sept. 1978) 18-20.

⁷ I pass no judgment on such movements, but certainly biblical fundamentalism marks their Protestant components.

would not enable that word to escape limitation.⁸ The Roman Catholic Church has admitted that its past magisterial statements may have been enunciated in “the changeable conceptions of a given epoch.”⁹ Existentially that is a greater concession than saying that the Bible is phrased in the changeable conceptions of a given epoch,¹⁰ but theologians who praise the Church affirmation may well ask themselves whether they have made explicitly and clearly a similar statement about the Bible.

If this paper presses for theological frankness and clarity that will drive home inescapably the necessary point in the debate between the Catholic center and right, my contribution will be entirely from the vantage point of biblical criticism. I do not plan to consider the word of God philosophically (e.g., what human activities are possible to the Supreme Being) or in the context of historical theology (e.g., what various past Church writers have thought about the word of God) or of systematic theology (e.g., whether there is a Church position or a unanimous Catholic theological position on what “the word of God” means).¹¹ Confining myself to an outlook gained from biblical criticism, however, may not be so modest an enterprise as it might first seem, for biblical critics are not of one mind on the question.¹² Let me illustrate this by quoting James Barr and Bernhard Anderson, two outstanding Christian OT scholars. Barr states: “My account of the formation of the biblical tradition is the account of a *human* work. . . . If one wants to use Word-of-God type language, the proper terms for the Bible would be Word of Israel, Word of some leading

⁸ This affirmation is sometimes translated hostilely as a denial of absolute truth. There is a God, and God is truth; and so there is absolute truth. The affirmation made above would mean only that every human perception of that truth is *partial*. The opposite affirmation would be that a human statement about God can be exhaustive.

⁹ *Mysterium ecclesiae*, a declaration of the Roman Doctrinal Congregation (1973); see the pertinent text in my *Biblical Reflections* (n. 6 above) 116–18.

¹⁰ Theologically the Bible outranks Church statements (since no one claims they are the word of God); but existentially a Catholic moral theologian who disagreed with Qoheleth (*Ecclesiastes*) would be less likely to get in trouble than one who disagreed with *Humanae vitae*.

¹¹ In any case, it would be almost impossible to show that past writers or Church statements were dealing with the problem to be discussed here, for its particular nuance stems from modern biblical insights. Very interesting is the *sic et non* approach to dogmatic affirmations taken by Avery Dulles, “The Bible in the Church: Some Debated Questions,” in *Scripture and the Charismatic Renewal*, ed. G. Martin (Milwaukee Symposiums; Ann Arbor: Servant, 1979) 5–27.

¹² What is described above is a discussion among centrists. Among Protestant Evangelicals one may cite Harold Lindsell’s works *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) and *The Bible in the Balance* (1979)—works contradicted on a historical basis by J. Rogers and D. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979). Yet the latter work is too narrow in its own way, as shown at the 1980 AAR (Dallas) Meeting by Gerald T. Sheppard in the “Consultation on Evangelical Theology.”

Christians.”¹³ Anderson responds: “The Word of God is not a voice carried on the sound waves, nor is it reducible to written form as a letter is dictated and transcribed. . . . Metaphor is an imaginative form of poetic speech in which one thing is spoken of as if it were the other. . . . Metaphorically, the Bible *is* the Word of God.”¹⁴

If Anderson seems to be diametrically opposed to Barr, the “as if” in Anderson’s statement needs to be probed. He continues:

God chooses to use human literature, initially composed in the oral words of tradition and finally written down as Scripture, to establish relationship with people. . . . This Godly “use” of Scripture is an act of divine election. . . . The Bible, then, is a human medium, which God nevertheless uses authoritatively to speak to the believing and worshipping community. In this sense, the divine and the human are inseparably related in the Bible, making it impossible to separate Word of God and human words at any point. Of the canonical Scriptures it has been said in Chalcedonian language: *Qmnia ex Deo, omnia ex hominibus*.

It is rather curious to find Anderson using Chalcedonian language to describe an adoptionistic approach to Scripture. Vatican II also used a Christological model in attempting to understand Scripture, but one based on incarnation, not on adoption: “For the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as of old the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to himself the weak flesh of humanity, became like other men.”¹⁵

The difference is significant, for many would judge that the word-of-God dimension is not properly represented by speaking of the godly *use* of a human medium. Nevertheless, the simile of the pre-existent Word of God becoming flesh also creates problems about how the Bible is the word of God. In a way, is this difference not related to the traditional Catholic distinction between revelation and inspiration in relation to the Bible? I say “Catholic distinction” because in some forms of Protestant thought that distinction seems to disappear, e.g., Carl Henry’s statement, “The Bible is a propositional revelation of the unchanging Truth of God.”¹⁶ I say “traditional distinction” because some Catholics are moving away from it by collapsing inspiration into revelation. The traditional position has been that the whole Bible is inspired but only some parts of the Bible transmit revelation. But for Karl Rahner, God becomes the inspiring originator of the Scriptures by forming the apostolic Church and her constitutive elements, and the Bible is the literary objectification of a faith that is a response to revelation.¹⁷ Avery Dulles moves in the

¹³ *The Bible in the Modern World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) 120.

¹⁴ “The Bible in the Church Today,” *Theology Today* 37 (1980) 4–5.

¹⁵ *Dei verbum* 13.

¹⁶ *God, Revelation and Authority* 3 (Waco: Word, 1979) 457.

¹⁷ *Inspiration in the Bible* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1961; rev. 1964) esp. 50.

same direction: "The Bible is a reliable, approved, canonical expression of the word of God; it not only transmits, but in some sense is, the word of God."¹⁸ While I can understand such an approach by theologians, I do not think the theory adequately covers all parts of Scripture. To the jaundiced eye of a biblical scholar it often seems as if theologians phrase their theories of inspiration by reflecting on books like Genesis, the Gospels, and Romans; they might do better by trying their theories out on the first nine chapters of 1 Chronicles! In any case, to discuss the Bible as word of God, one must face the problem that certain biblical authors were very conscious of having received a divine communication (the prophets, Paul) while other authors were not. Indeed, an author like Qoheleth would surely deny that he had received the word of God; he was writing out of collected human experience. Nevertheless, whether the lectionary reading be from Jeremiah, from Paul, or from Qoheleth, the Church would have it stated that this is the word of God. In attempting to deal with such problems, I shall treat under the heading of "revelation" biblical claims to receive or transmit the word of God,¹⁹ and under the heading of "inspiration" the Church's understanding that the whole Bible is the word of God. In a way, then, I shall be dealing with realities reflected in the incarnational and adoptionistic approaches to the Bible described above.

BIBLICAL REVELATION AS WORD OF GOD

If we begin with the OT, the "Wisdom Books" make no claim to be the word of God,²⁰ nor do the songs we call Psalms. The two areas that need attention are the Prophets and the Law given to Moses; for in the biblical descriptions of the inaugural visions of the prophets and of Moses' vision on Sinai a divine word comes to man.²¹

¹⁸ "The Bible in the Church" 18; also "Scripture: Recent Protestant and Catholic Views," *Theology Today* 37 (1980) 7-26.

¹⁹ I make no attempt here at a definition of revelation. The self-disclosure of the God of mercy and love, delivering human beings from what enslaves them (oppression, sin, sickness, death) and making them His own in a special way (His people, His children), has found expression in various ways outside the Bible and in the Bible. If in dealing only with the latter, I concentrate here on the *word* of God, I acknowledge that the *actions* of God are equally and even primarily important in the Bible. *Dei verbum* made a great contribution to official Catholic thought by setting "deeds" alongside "words" in the description of revelation. The teaching of the Church is what gives me certitude that God has revealed Himself in the biblical actions and words; granted that presupposition, biblical criticism can clarify that nonetheless the actions and words are fully human and subject to limitations.

²⁰ One exception is that in the self-description of divine Wisdom, she must be considered a type of divine word: "From the mouth of the Most High I came forth" (Sir 24:3). But that is chiefly through an identification of Wisdom and Law, and I plan to discuss the Law as a divine revelation.

²¹ Although Moses can be described as prophet (Deut 18:15), in rabbinic tradition he is superior as the first of the prophets or the father of the prophets. While God spoke to both Moses and the prophets, the prophets saw Him through nine panes of glass or unclear

The question of how to understand that divine word is already present in the oldest of the writing prophets. Amos 1:1 begins with "The words of Amos" (*Dibré 'Amôs*); it ends in 9:15 with "Thus says the Lord your God" (*'āmar YHWH 'Elōhēkū*). If one may paraphrase the Esau/Jacob story, it sounds as if the voice is the voice of God, but the words, the words of Amos. And all of this is more complicated for the biblical critic who thinks that 9:8–15 is an addendum to Amos by a redactor who was not happy with the pessimistic tone of many of the other "Thus says the Lord your God" passages in Amos—one saying of the Lord God correcting another in the same book. And, of course, that is even more deliberate when one compares two different books. Because of political overuse, a word of the Lord to Isaiah (2:1) is well known: "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks" (Isa 2:4). Less familiar is the contradictory word that the Lord speaks to Joel: "Beat your ploughshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears" (Joel 4:10; RSV 3:10). One may argue whether God changes His message according to circumstances, but it is hard to deny the likelihood that in conveying a divinely received insight to a new generation one prophet has deliberately taken the words of another prophet and used them in a contrary way. The prophets leave no doubt that they thought that God had communicated with them, but they may have been more subtle than is often suspected about the extent to which the words they uttered came from God.

Jeremiah offers the best opportunity to study this issue, precisely because his work is so self-reflective. On the one hand, we are told that God put words into Jeremiah's mouth (1:9), and even that He dictated to Jeremiah for writing purposes (36:1–4). Yet there is a prose and poetic form of the same oracle (chaps. 7 and 26) which betrays a certain freedom of expression. More important, there is a series of complaints by Jeremiah that "the word of the Lord" that he (Jeremiah) has spoken does not come to pass (17:15–16) and that he has been deceived (15:18; 20:7, 9). There is revelation from God, for Jeremiah's message is not of his own creation. But the phrasing of the revelation seems to suffer from limitations. Once again I am tempted by my paraphrase: the message is the message of God, but the words are words of Jeremiah.

The question of whether a revealing God ever communicates in words comes to a head in an OT perspective in the encounter between Moses and God on Sinai. In Jewish thought this was the supreme experience of God,²² and its exalted status is reflected in the Johannine debate about

glass, while Moses saw Him through only one pane of glass or clearer glass. See L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* 5 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1925) 404, n. 68; *Leviticus Rabba* 1.14.

²² Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* 2.33, wrote of the Sinai event, "There never has been before nor will there ever be again anything like it."

whether Moses or Jesus has seen God (Jn 3:13). Christians were led to argue that Jesus had a contact with God that even went beyond that of Moses. And in modern Christian thought it continues to be poetically stated that if there was ever a time when the transcendent reached into the course of human history (from the outside rather than from within), it was on the two Mounts, Sinai and Calvary. Of course, the claims about what God said to Moses on Sinai can be presented in an inflated way that is easily discounted. (There is a rabbinic tendency to make even the later oral Law of the Mishnah part of the words of God to Moses.) In the second century of the common era, against those who took a literal view that every word or letter of the Law had a purpose,²³ Rabbi Ishmael defended the principle that "The Torah speaks the language of human beings."²⁴

But let us move from the many casuistic parts of the Torah, which are clearly the product of collected jurisprudence, to the apodictic imperatives,²⁵ "Thou shalt or thou shalt not," dealing with religious matters where the speaker is portrayed as God. And indeed, let us concentrate on the Ten Commandments, which in Hebrew are referred to (unlike other commandments) as the "Ten Words" of God.²⁶ In theological tradition these have had a special place as reflecting the essence of what God demands of His people, and in modern biblical study they have been spoken of as the basic stipulations of the covenant between God and Israel. Are they really the words of God spoken (externally or internally) to Moses, or are they human formulations of a less specified revelation of divine moral demand? The modern biblical critic would be inclined to the latter answer simply from a comparison of the two different forms of the Decalogue (Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21), especially since the *later*, Deuteronomic form of one commandment, separating the wife from the chattel and slaves, may represent a development of moral sensitivity.

But sometimes it is good to realize that modern biblical criticism is only rephrasing a problem recognized long before. In rabbinic discussions, how much was actually spoken by God and how much was phrased by Moses was very much an issue. In *Exodus Rabbah* 28.3 on Exod 19:8, God is portrayed as thinking, "When I say to them, 'I am the Lord your God,' they will ask, 'Who is speaking? God or Moses?'" Some rabbis thought that the people on the plain below heard the words of all ten of the commandments; others asked which commandments were "given in

²³ A similar view is found later in *Sanhedrin* 9a of the Babylonian Talmud: the whole Torah is from heaven, and not a single verse or letter can be attributed to Moses as if it were not uttered by God.

²⁴ See H. L. Strack, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Meridian, 1959; German 5th ed. 1920) 93-95.

²⁵ See *JBC*, art. 77, no. 87.

²⁶ This designation is preserved in the literal meaning of "Decalogue."

the words of the Holy One" and which "by the hand of Moses." Maimonides, *Guide to the Perplexed* 2.33, argued that the people heard a sound but not the distinct words.²⁷ A common theory was that the people heard only the first two, understood as those in the first person: "I am the Lord your God" and "You shall not have other gods before me."²⁸ But at a later period Rabbi Mendel of Rymanów suggested that all that was heard of the commandments was the first letter of the first word of the first commandment—the aleph of 'anōkī, a soundless glottal stop! G. Scholem comments:

With his daring statement that the actual revelation to Israel consisted only of the *aleph*, Rabbi Mendel transformed the revelation on Mount Sinai into a mystical revelation, pregnant with final meaning, but without specific meaning. . . . It has to be translated into human language, and that is what Moses did. In this light every statement on which authority is grounded would become a human interpretation, however valid and exalted, of something that transcends it.²⁹

I could phrase no better the issue I am raising of whether even in the most sacred moments of revelation God communicates in words.

Inevitably many Christians will look for a higher *form* of revelation in the NT.³⁰ Heb 1:1–2 comments: "On many occasions and in many ways God spoke to the fathers by [in] the prophets; in these last days He spoke to us by [in] the Son." This Jesus is the one who dared to correct even the words God spoke to Moses: "You have heard it said. . . but I say to you" (Mt 5:21 ff.). Yet in the words of Jesus it is dubious that one encounters an unconditioned, timeless word spoken by God. The Son of God who speaks in the first three Gospels is a Jew of the first third of the first century who thinks in the images of his time, speaks in the idiom of his time, and shares much of the world view of his time. The Jesus of the fourth Gospel, who is pre-existent, does claim to have heard words in the presence of his Father and to have brought them to earth (Jn 3:31–32; 5:

²⁷ Maimonides thinks there was a divine "voice created for the purpose of speaking" the Commandments.

²⁸ These "two" commandments cover the identity and unicity of God; in a subsequent commandment God refers to Himself in the third person: "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." See J. Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1933) 228.

²⁹ *On the Kabbala and Its Symbolism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965) 29–31. I am indebted to Rabbi Burton Visotzky of the Jewish Theological Seminary (N.Y.C.) for help on some of these points.

³⁰ While the Christian view of revelation ascends from the prophets to Jesus, in the Jewish view there is a descent from Moses to the prophets; and then after the prophets ceased (1 Macc 9:27; Ps 74:9) there was divine communication by the *bath qōl* and by the holy spirit, with the latter being responsible for Scripture. See S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1950) 194–99; also Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 7a.

30; 8:26, 40; 14:24; 15:15); but when one examines the words of the Johannine Jesus critically, they are often a variant form of the tradition known in the Synoptics.³¹ The very existence of diverse traditions of the words of Jesus reflected in the four Gospels testifies to the fact that his followers understood his words to be so time-conditioned and so locale-conditioned as to require adaptation as they were transmitted to new times and places.³² This is patent in Paul: although he cites the antidi-
 vorce statement of Jesus as coming from the Lord ("Not I, but the Lord": 1 Cor 7:10), he goes on to allow separation and perhaps even divorce in a situation that Jesus did not envisage ("I, not the Lord": 7:12).³³

A special plea has sometimes been made for the unconditioned character of the words of the risen Jesus since he is one who has passed beyond space and time. Lack of limitation here would be quite important, for the sayings of the risen Jesus are often Church-foundational, involving apostleship, forgiveness of sins, baptism, conversion of the Gentiles, etc. Nevertheless, elsewhere³⁴ I have discussed the point that while these sayings are similar to each other in intent, they differ markedly from each other in actual wording, having much less similar vocabulary than parallel Synoptic sayings from the ministry.³⁵ Moreover, although theoretically these words were spoken in the early 30's, often there is little evidence that they influenced Church life in the next few decades. For instance, in Acts 1:8 the risen Jesus tells his disciples that they will be his witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. Yet when those developments occur in Acts, his disciples act as if they had never heard of such a directive (e.g., 8:14). The whole history of the Church in Acts reflects ignorance of the command of the risen Jesus in Mt 28:19 to make disciples *of all nations* (Acts 11:1-3; 15), baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:16). What we seem to have is a communication by the risen Jesus that was only later vocalized in words as the various communities and writers came *post factum* to understand the import of the revelation.

³¹ See the evidence amassed by C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963).

³² This is now formally acknowledged in Church doctrine through the Instruction of the Roman Pontifical Biblical Commission on "The Historical Truth of the Gospels," which traces a process of adaptation during the formation of the Gospels. For the pertinent passages, see my *Biblical Reflections* (n. 6 above) 111-15.

³³ The antidi-
 vorce statement of Jesus is also modified when reported in Mk 10:11-12 (application to the wife) and in Mt 19:9 (the *porneia* exception)—modifications determined by the life situations of the communities which were diverse from that of Jesus.

³⁴ *Virginal Conception* (n. 1 above) 107-8.

³⁵ Some of them may be variants of ministry sayings; e.g., the postresurrectional "If you forgive men's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you hold them, they are held fast" (Jn 20:23) may be a variant of Mt 18:18, "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The category of "speaking" may be an inadequate way to describe the unique, eschatological encounter with the risen Jesus—an approximation of this revelation to ordinary experience. If so, the study of the "words" of the risen Jesus (who has passed *beyond* the limitations of human circumstances) may confirm the thesis that only human beings speak words and that revelation by the word of God really means divine revelation to which human beings have given expression in words.

THE INSPIRED BIBLE AS WORD OF GOD

Although inspiration is sometimes thought to be a lower or less extraordinary charism than revelation (n. 30 above), the belief that only the Bible has been inspired by God has led that whole collection of books, composed over a period of a thousand years, to be called *simpliciter* "the word of God"—a designation covering even those books in which it is difficult to find any revelation at all. As Vatican Council I stated (DBS 3006), the books of Scripture "are held to be sacred and canonical. . . because they were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit." There have been many theories of inspiration: inspiration of the biblical authors (*Providentissimus Deus* of Pope Leo XIII); inspiration of the words; inspiration of the readers as they came to recognize God's work in the Scriptures; inspiration of the Church that gave birth to the NT (Karl Rahner). Such theories all touch on an aspect of the truth; however, they are scarcely adequate to answer all the problems detected by critical scholarship, e.g., the long history of composition that marked many works. These theories might explain how the final Gospels were inspired but do not cover Jesus the subject of the Gospels and the originator of the sayings preserved therein. Nor do they account sufficiently for the diversity that exists among biblical works, even among NT works, diversities so sharp that the biblical authors might not have agreed with one another on certain points.

Be all that as it may, my chief concern here is the extent to which the inspired Bible is a time-conditioned word, marked by the limitations of human utterance. Inevitably this brings up the sensitive question of inerrancy, for the tendency simply to equate inspiration and inerrancy implicitly denies human limitation to the biblical word of God. Without rehearsing the obvious, let me point out what can be learned from the increasing sophistication of official Catholic statements on this problem. Already in 1893 Pope Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus* (DBS 3288) excluded natural or scientific matters from biblical inerrancy, even if he did this through the expedient of insisting that statements made about nature according to ordinary appearances were not errors. (An example might involve the sun going around the earth.) While this understanding of error echoes an ancient equation of inerrancy with freedom from

deception, it sounds strange to modern ears, for inculpable mistakes cease to be errors.³⁶ In any case, Pope Leo's approach undermined the very purpose for which most people want to stress inerrancy, namely, so that they can give unlimited confidence to biblical statements. The theory that these statements were made according to surface appearances and so are not necessarily correct from a scientific viewpoint is a backdoor way of admitting human conditioning on the part of the biblical authors.

Leo XIII stated (DBS 3290) that the same principles "will apply to cognate sciences, and especially to history," a concession that many thought opened the way to admitting that the biblical books were not necessarily historically accurate. Thirty years later Pope Benedict XV attempted to close this door in *Spiritus Paraclitus* (1920) when he stated that one could not apply universally to the historical portions of the Scriptures the principles that Leo XIII had laid down for scientific matters, namely, that the authors were writing only according to appearances (DBS 3653). Despite the respect that bound Catholic scholars to papal statements, this effort to save historical inerrancy failed, for the twentieth century produced indisputable evidence of historical inaccuracies in the Bible.³⁷ It was no surprise, then, that when inerrancy was discussed at Vatican II, no less a figure than Cardinal Koenig could dare to read off a list of historical errors in the Bible and to affirm that "the Biblical Books are deficient in accuracy as regards both historical and scientific matters."³⁸ In questioning the historical inerrancy of the Bible, Catholic scholars had worked upon a good philosophical principle, *Ab esse ad posse valet illatio*: if historical errors exist, they must be possible.

But all this development left untouched an area that even some Protestant discussions of inerrancy had avoided. It is one thing to admit that the biblical writers were limited in their knowledge of science and history. It is another thing to admit that the biblical writers had religious limitations. The Bible, most would recognize, was not written as a scientific or historical textbook, but many would think of it as almost a religious textbook. Nevertheless, critical investigation points to religious

³⁶ Of course, in saying that the biblical author spoke according to the ordinary natural appearances, one might be supposing that the author knew better but was simply adapting himself to the ignorance of the time. However, no serious scholar today could assume that the biblical authors had scientific or natural knowledge beyond that of their times.

³⁷ For instance, the discovery of the Neo-Babylonian chronicles made it lucidly clear that the dates assigned to various Babylonian interventions in Daniel were wrong; no longer could exegetes say that those dates might be true because of our ignorance of Babylonian chronology. One may very well answer that the author of Daniel was not writing history, but surely he used those dates because he thought they were correct.

³⁸ A. Grillmeier, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chapter III," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. H. Vorgrimler, 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969) 205.

limitations and even errors. For instance, Job 14:13–22 and Sir 14:16–17, 17:22–23, 38:21 deny an afterlife. It is not that the respective authors were ignorant of the possibility of an afterlife; they brought it up as a solution and rejected it at the same time that other biblical authors were accepting it. If one accepts the afterlife teaching of Jesus (which was harmonious with Pharisaic Judaism), how does one reconcile a word of God in Job that is contradictory to a word of God spoken by Jesus? Leaving aside the possibility of excising the Job passage from the Bible,³⁹ believers are faced with two possibilities.

1) If one has an a priori view of inerrancy that forbids a religious error in the Bible, one will have to argue insistently that Job did not mean what he seems to say. A great deal of time and effort has been spent by interpreters in such efforts, whether applied to religious errors or to the above-mentioned historical and scientific errors. This approach, in my judgment, is an unmitigated disaster, draining off energy into the creation of ingenious implausibilities and turning exegesis into apologetics. A recent book by Paul Achtemeier⁴⁰ documents the bankruptcy of this method in Protestantism. It is sad that simultaneously the Catholic *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* was in its November 1979 issue publishing an article by a convert, Edith Black, entitled “Inerrancy in the Bible,” which seeks (by a literalist interpretation of Church documents) to introduce into Catholicism a fundamentalist view of inerrancy similar to that which has vitiated the sincere efforts of Protestant evangelicals. It has been said that after Vatican II Catholics seem intent to duplicate in a decade the mistakes that Protestants took centuries to make. That holds not only for liberal excesses but also for ultraconservative ones.

2) One can be more modest in making a priori claims about what the God who inspired the Scriptures will tolerate by way of error. (It remains a paradox that we worship a God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, and yet we tend to be so sure about what He would think fitting. Every clearly discernible action of His has been a surprise; how can we be so sure what He must do?) This means that we shift to an a posteriori approach to inerrancy. Using the best biblical methods available, scholars seek to determine what the human author meant with all his limitations. Combining this with a belief in inspiration, they recognize that there is a *kenōsis* involved in God’s committing His message to human words. It was not only in the career of Jesus that the divine has taken on the form of a servant (Phil 2:7). If one discovers religious errors, one does not seek to explain them away; one recognizes that God is willing to work with

³⁹ Excision may seem a fantastic solution, but the canon-within-the-canon approach virtually excises passages deemed theologically unworthy by marginalizing them.

⁴⁰ *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

human beings in all their limitations. In one of his Lincolnesque asides, Avery Dulles has said about Eucharistic practice that sometimes we spend too much effort in protecting Jesus from things Jesus might not wish to be protected from. We have spent too much time protecting the God who inspired the Scriptures from limitations that He seems not to have been concerned about. The impassioned debate about inerrancy tells us less about divine omnipotence (which presumably allows God to be relaxed) than about our own insecurity in looking for absolute answers.

Many of us think that at Vatican II the Catholic Church "turned the corner" in the inerrancy question by moving from the a priori to the a posteriori in the statement of *Dei verbum* 11: "The Books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation." Within its context, the statement is not without an ambiguity that stems from the compromise nature of *Dei verbum*. The Council in 1962 rejected the ultraconservative schema "On the Sources of Revelation" that originally had been submitted, and so it became a matter of face-saving that in the revisions and in the final form of the Constitution the ultraconservatives should have their say. The result is often a juxtaposition of conservative older formulations with more open recent formulations. Those who wish to read *Dei verbum* in a minimalist way can point out that the sentence immediately preceding the one I just quoted says that everything in Scripture is asserted by the Holy Spirit and can argue that therefore "what God wanted put into the Scripture for the sake of our salvation" (which is without error) means everything in Scripture. However, there is noncritical exegesis of Church documents as well as noncritical exegesis of Scripture.⁴¹ To determine the real meaning of *Dei verbum*, one must study the discussions in the Council that produced it.⁴² A clear change of direction is noted in the basic fact that the term "inerrancy" was dropped from the Constitution, and that

⁴¹ Essential to a critical interpretation of Church documents is the realization that the Roman Catholic Church does not change her official stance in a blunt way. Past statements are not rejected but are requoted with praise and then reinterpreted at the same time. It is pathetic to find ultraconservatives claiming that there has been no change towards the Bible in official Church thought because Pius XII and Vatican II paid homage to documents issued by Leo XIII, Pius X, and Benedict XV and therefore clearly meant to reinforce the teaching of their predecessors. What really was going on was an attempt gracefully to retain what was salvageable from the past and to move in a new direction with as little friction as possible. To those for whom it is a doctrinal issue that the Church never changes, one must repeat Galileo's *sotto voce* response when told that it was a doctrinal issue that the earth does not move: "E pur si muove" ("Nevertheless, it moves"). And the best proof of movement is the kind of biblical scholarship practiced by ninety-five percent of Catholics writing today, a kind of scholarship that would not have been tolerated for a moment by Church authorities in the first forty years of this century.

⁴² These are documented in the Grillmeier article cited in n. 38 above.

the final statement about error came after Cardinal Koenig and others had pointed out the kinds of errors that do exist in Scripture. As Grillmeier has observed, without confining the inerrancy of Scripture to matters of faith and morals (a formulation condemned in earlier Roman statements), "the Theological Commission—as well as clearly emphasizing the universal extent of inspiration—keeps the way open for a new interpretation of inerrancy."⁴³ It does this by relating the truth of the Scriptures to the salvific purpose for which God intended the Scriptures.

Thus in the inerrancy question Vatican II assumes *a priori* only that God wants the salvation of His people. Which truth in Scripture conforms to that purpose is an *a posteriori* issue. And in determining that, I would contend that one cannot be satisfied with the literal meaning of Scripture, i.e., with what the human authors intended,⁴⁴ as deciphered by historical criticism. A great mistake in dealing with inerrancy has been to take an ancient principle that the Bible contains God's truth and to apply that principle in terms of the exclusively dominant literal sense—a modern approach to the Bible. The Book of Job contains error because its author denied an afterlife. But the meaning of Job as a biblical book goes beyond what its author intended, for Job became a *biblical* book not when it was written but when it was joined to other books as part of the Bible. First it became part of the sacred collection of Israel and was joined in Babylonian and Palestinian Judaism to the apocalyptic material in Isaiah (26:19) and Daniel (12:2), which maintained a doctrine of resurrection, and in Egyptian Judaism was joined to 2 Maccabees and Wisdom, which offered other views of the afterlife. Finally, Job was joined in Christianity to a New Testament which was unanimous in its affirmation of an afterlife. This joining relativized the position of Job, so that as part of the canonical collection its rejection of an afterlife could be seen as a step in the gradual perception of a larger truth. (As I insist in the Bellarmine Lecture in St. Louis, however, that larger view should not silence Job's protest against resorting to an afterlife as a solution for all the problems of justice—inadequate in one way, it remains a voice of conscience in another.)

But even the placing of a book in the Bible does not tell us fully about its meaning. For this Bible to be normative for Christian life, it has had to be accepted by the Church and proclaimed as part of a living tradition in the community of believers.⁴⁵ "Biblical meaning" is not simply what a passage meant to the author who wrote it (literal meaning), or what it meant to those who first accepted it into a normative collection (canonical

⁴³ *Ibid.* 214.

⁴⁴ As I point out in the Bellarmine Lecture for *Theology Digest*, the literal sense is larger than the author's intent, covering sources and redaction.

⁴⁵ I write as a Christian; a Jew might choose to phrase this in terms of rabbinic tradition.

meaning); biblical meaning is also what the passage means today in the context of the Christian Church. And when one speaks of the Bible "teaching without error that truth which God put into the Scripture for the sake of our salvation," one is speaking of biblical meaning as a whole and not of an isolated stage of that meaning. It is for that reason that I have conceived this lecture on the word of God as intimately related to the Bellarmine Lecture in St. Louis on the relation of the literal sense of Scripture (discovered by historical criticism) to other senses of Scripture and on the role of the Church in interpreting Scripture.

But in the limited context of this paper I have argued that inerrancy cannot be applied a priori to the literal sense of Scripture in a way that would free it from human limitation. Thus, whether the words of the Bible reflect revelation received from God or constitute an account inspired by God, they remain very much human words, reflecting partial insight and time-conditioned vision. A perceptive book written some twenty years ago by Jean Levie dealt with some of the problems I have considered under the title *The Bible: Word of God in Words of Men*.⁴⁶ While at the time one needed the emphasis in that title for pedagogical purposes, to speak of "word of God in words of men" is tautological. Only human beings use words; and so, when one has entitled divine communication "word of God," one has already indicated that the divine communication is in human words,⁴⁷ and therefore that the communication is in a time-conditioned and limited form.

As indicated at the start, I have spelled this out because, while I think that most centrist Catholic theologians agree with me, they have not been sufficiently clear at a time when "word of God" is still likely to be understood simplistically by most Catholics. Nevertheless, I am conscious that my emphasis on the "word" section of "word of God" has not allowed equal time for the "of God" part which, as I said, I have assumed throughout. The fact that the "word" of the Bible is human and time-conditioned makes it no less "of God." In the Bible God communicates Himself to the extraordinary extent that one can say that there is something "of God" in the words. All other works, patristic, Thomistic, and ecclesiastic, are words *about* God; only the Bible is the word *of* God.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ (New York: Kenedy, 1961). The French title was more perceptive: *Parole humaine et message de Dieu* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1959).

⁴⁷ If it is objected that "word of God" is also a title for the Second Person of the Trinity, I would reply that it is a title given to that Person alone who took to Himself the human, the time-conditioned, and the limited.

⁴⁸ J. Ratzinger, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* 3 (n. 38 above) 194: "It is important to note that [in *Dei verbum* 9] only Scripture is defined in terms of what it is: it is stated that Scripture *is* the word of God consigned to writing. Tradition, however, is described only functionally, in terms of what it *does*: it hands on the word of God, but *is* not the word of God." This unique status of Scripture explains the last sentence in n. 4 above.

If I may return to the Christological comparison with which I began, Jesus as “fully divine and fully human” has been rejected not only consciously by nonbelievers but also unconsciously by believers. The nonbeliever regards the fully divine as incompatible with the human; the believer often regards the fully human as incompatible with the divine. To the biblical exception to the full humanity of Jesus (“without sinning” in Heb 4:15), are sometimes added “without ignorance,” “without temptation,” and “without limitation of world view.” Consequently, if another Christian, who believes in the divinity of Jesus, insists that Jesus did not know all things, did not foresee the distant future, and was tempted, having to learn obedience, Christological fundamentalists will accuse that person of denying that Jesus is the Son of God. Small wonder that if a believer in revelation and inspiration insists that the biblical word is human, time-conditioned, and subject to limitation and error, biblical fundamentalists will accuse that person of denying that the Bible is the word of God. My paper has been dedicated to the thesis that only a believer who insists on such limitations holds that the Bible is the *word* of God.