

# The Value of Biblical Categories

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An interesting problem has arisen in modern Biblical exegesis and theology, the problem namely of the value of Biblical categories and ways of expression. It is mainly the problem concerning the mythic elements in the Bible, i.e. the pictorial representation of the relation between God and men. I propose to outline this question under four headings: the Biblical categories (1) as a pastoral problem, (2) as a philosophical-metaphysical problem, (3) as a mythic problem, and (4) as a theological problem.

## (1) THE PASTORAL PROBLEM

Preachers who are somewhat sensitive to the age in which they live will readily agree with R. Bultmann, and recently with Dr. John A. T. Robinson (*Honest to God*), that Biblical ways of speaking create difficulties for the understanding of modern audiences. Are not the Biblical ways of expression pre-scientific and pre-reflexive, belonging to a mythic sacral age that has gone by? A great number of men and women of today, chiefly in towns and industrial areas, live in an atmosphere of science and technique. Sciences have taught us to speak about many fields of life with measured precision and verified exactness. What is not verifiable, in the sense that it cannot be measured or observed exactly, cannot easily claim to be scientific in modern times. All our machines and gadgets are based on the principle that they work with precision and exactness. Thus, modern scientists venture to shoot on to the moon with calculated precision. Sciences have proved beyond any possible doubt that they are successful in their fields. Men are consequently relying more and more on the sciences and are also becoming more and more this-worldly.

When the preacher of today faces, Bible in hand, modern audiences, he is aware of an uneasiness, a gap which arises between the Biblical way of speaking and the understanding of the modern men. When the preacher in the pulpit points to 'heaven above' or to 'hell below', what is the reaction in audiences who have read about satellites and space rockets? Where is heaven and where is hell for them? Where is God and where is the devil? Similar questions may arise in their minds when we preach about God as Our Father, about the Glory of God appearing on earth, about the Son of God descending from heaven, or about the

Power of God working miracles in this world. Again, it is asked, what is the meaning of Christ 'rising' from the dead and 'ascending' into heaven? Does not all this belong to another world which we cannot calculate and observe exactly, and about which we cannot be precise? Must not modern men rather make a compromise and give up talking about heaven in order to be able to affirm this earth about which they know more and more? Why not leave this vague heaven alone and immerse themselves into this world which they think to be a self-sufficient unit closed upon itself? Can we preserve the Bible and sciences? Can the preacher and the scientist stand side by side? Does this earth point to heaven? Can our daily life, which we call secular, be soaked with genuine religion and worship? The preacher definitely feels the need of throwing a bridge between what the text of his Bible says and what his audience is thinking according to their modern secularized mentality.

## (2) THE PHILOSOPHICAL-METAPHYSICAL PROBLEM

Our questions must first of all get an answer from philosophy and metaphysics. In particular we must look for a solution in a metaphysically well-grounded theory of knowledge. The all-comprehensive laws of being tell us that the reality of a being is not exhausted by studying what is merely observable, measurable, precise and exact. All this 'measuring' remains dangerously close to the mere quantitative aspects of beings. We must of course in no way try to deny that there are observable and measurable aspects to our world, but we must deny that these are the only aspects. What is needed is an integrated look on the world and being, on all that is. There are aspects to reality which the senses cannot observe; there are depths to men and things which scientists cannot measure and weigh or calculate. Let us just ask how 'Personality Cult' is measured! In their total reality beings are more than measurable quantities or observable reactions. The total reality of all beings flows over beyond what men can observe about them. Together with matter, the senses and the finite (not without or apart from them) arises the question of spirit, the intellect and the Infinite: matter, senses and the finite are not closed in upon themselves but remain 'open' towards spirit, intellect and the Infinite; matter, senses and the finite carry within themselves an 'intention' towards spirit, intellect and the Infinite. The good old proven way of expressing this is to say that all beings are analogical to each other; they remain open towards each other, their aspects can overlap, they can interpenetrate. Thus it is possible for God and the world to exist together, God being immanent and transcendent to the world; transcendent, not in a spatial meaning but through intensity of being. To claim that matter, senses and the finite explain everything is the greatest impoverishment the world's civilization has suffered in these latter decades.

Happily there is in our days an important group of scientists who have humbly learned that they cannot explain everything. An increasing number of philosophers and scientists are becoming convinced that philosophy and science have each their own legitimate fields and methods. At the same time the realization is growing that sciences and metaphysics must start a dialogue, not of contradiction but of mutual fulfilment. On this principle it can gradually become clear to both scientists and philosophers that the pure Gospel and genuine human existence can be combined.

### (3) THE MYTHIC PROBLEM

Yet, in the meantime we can clarify to our audiences the way of speaking of the Bible. Some, like R. Bultmann, seem to have gone too far in making concessions to the secularized world. They would propose that we interpret the categories of the Bible and of our faith into merely secular categories of modern men. It is claimed that we should preach nothing but what can be understood through the categories of the modern world. The modern world is said to be seeking an understanding of itself from its intramundane existence only. Does Bultmann want us to preach to a secularized world just what it expects us to preach, and nothing more? I know that much can be said for and against Bultmann; this cannot be discussed here in detail.

There are however many exegetes and theologians who are ready to go a long way with Bultmann. I think we must be grateful to Bultmann and Dr. Robinson for having stated the preachers' problem in all its urgency: how far are we bound to the Biblical way of speaking?

(a) It would seem to be evident that a fundamentalist sticking to the very expressions of the Bible cannot be defended for any serious reasons. Biblical representations and forms do not by themselves contain any sort of magical power *ex opere operato*. Biblical ways of speaking must not be absolutized.

(b) There are indeed many representations in the Bible and in our Faith which can be expressed in ways which are equivalent to the Biblical ones. Truth is not formally in expressions and images, but in 'judgements'. The problem about Biblical expressions is not solved by looking at them as they stand, but by finding out what is really said, what is really affirmed in and through the expressions. In many instances there is no need to keep the expressions of the Bible provided we keep their meaning. When e.g. the Bible says that God showed his strong arm in Israel, is it wrong to preach to modern audiences that God showed his power in Israel? When it is said that God walked with Adam in paradise, it is evident that we must preach to modern men that Adam enjoyed the friendship of God! We see in fact that the Bible itself uses its pictures, notions and concepts rather elastically; exegetes know how many nuances may be hidden in words like spirit, banquet, vineyard, shepherd, and many other similar forms of expression.

(c) But even this legitimate adapting of the Bible must remain moderate. Modern men themselves show how they can still understand and enjoy many aspects of life which are not merely scientific. In fact modern men are to a certain extent bored stiff with science. The machines of their factories, the gadgets of their offices and the tools of their jobs are starving the imagination and the emotions of modern workers. Hence people feel the need, chiefly in towns, to go back to Nature. How otherwise to explain the popularity of sports, hiking through forests and mountains, sunbathing in the sand and wind of the beach, and the exodus of picnickers on paid holidays! Whence come the modern trends in painting, song, jazz, and dress; whence that crazy popularity of the Beatles? Are not all these safety-valves for the pent-up emotions of our present-day civilization? Modern men want occasionally to run away from the one-sided atmosphere of science and technique! Science itself has invented 'machines to make us dream' as cinemas have been called.

Some people have exaggerated, perhaps unknowingly, the so-called modern liking for science or the aversion for the mythic elements of life. It is not true to say that modern people do not understand most of the categories of our Bible and of our Faith! Who is the person who does not understand such categories as birth, marriage, death, life, light, darkness? What is pre-scientific about love, father and mother, son and brother, bread, water and wine, thirst, heat and hunger, or anger, fear and joy? These are precisely the pictures and notions which you can find on every page of the Bible. Is it perhaps providential that God speaks to mankind in the Bible through those common human pictures and experiences which can be understood by all men in all times, climes and cultures? The strength of the Bible lies in this that it is not a system of philosophy but that it appeals to the deepest human experiences and attitudes in life as all men know them.

#### (4) THE THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

We must however go further; the Biblical representations hold also a theological, supernatural content. If the Bible would say nothing else but what we naturally accept in a secular world, then, what would there be special in the Bible? There are a number of instances in the Bible where we may not adapt the Biblical ways of speaking to the ways of the modern world to such an extent that both would merely coincide; for then our preaching would be merely in perfect agreement with the world to whom we preach. Then the Bible or the Gospel would have no real message to the world that is worth while! There are a number of statements and expressions in the Bible and in our Faith which are meant to say something special about God and Christ; such expressions want to tell us something about God and Christ that is definitive and has an absolute meaning, beyond what the secular world says or can say. We may not peel off our Biblical pictures

and expressions so as to peel off at the same time all what is divine and supernatural in them. Here of course we come before very delicate distinctions which will have to be made for each individual expression as it occurs. Suffice it to say here in general that in a number of cases we cannot change the expressions of the Bible without losing the meaning of the Bible! When e.g. we hear the Bible speak of God as Father, we may of course take away (demythologize ?) his beard and white hair (are they in the Bible ?), his old age and his throne in heaven, but may we also throw overboard the idea of fatherhood in God altogether ? Does not fatherhood correspond to something genuine in God as He is ? It is here that adaptation of the Biblical language to the language of a secularized scientific world has to stop. Most theologians will agree that when Biblical revelation represents God as Father it really wants to say something meaningful about God Himself: God is Father not only towards us and for us, but also in Himself. In this and similar cases it is not the modern and secular mentality which must constitute the norm for Biblical ways of speaking, but the Biblical ways become the norm for human ways of speaking. At a certain stage of understanding about the Bible it is not men who interpret the Bible but it is the Bible that starts interpreting the meaning of the existence of men. We interpret the Bible but the Bible also interprets us—as God sees us. In the same line of argument, when the Bible calls Jesus Christ the Son of the Father, it is meant to be true not only for us but also for Christ in Himself. Again, when it is said in the Gospels that Jesus rose from among the dead, it is not for us to purify and adapt and demythologize the words to such an extent that the Resurrection of Jesus might have a meaning for our existence but not for Jesus Christ Himself. In the Resurrection of Jesus Christ there is something more than what a secularized person is prepared to accept. The Bible definitely expresses a few realities which the modern world would not readily agree to as long as it relies only on its own way of thinking. Through and in our human ways of speaking the Bible expresses not only what is horizontal with our human existence, but also what is vertical to it, from God.

Concluding, I would say that the value we are going to give to Biblical categories will depend on what we hold concerning the relation between matter and spirit, between senses and intellect, and between Finite and Infinite. These again hide further implications about the relation between nature and supernature, between reason and faith or grace. Many modern people live in an atmosphere where they are told that these fields of experience are contradictory and that therefore one of them, the supernatural, has to be cut out! The real and traditional solution must be found in examining anew how matter and spirit, senses and intellect, finite and Infinite, nature and grace or reason and faith, can work together ; we must explain again to the world how all aspects can and do interpenetrate, as God and man interpenetrate each other in Jesus Christ. It is about this Christ that the Bible

speaks as His way was prepared in the Old Testament and as He has been definitively revealed in the Gospel.

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# An Administrative Body of Priests and a Consecrated People

—Exod. 19 : 6

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#### INTRODUCTION

To give an objective and accurate explanation of a particular Scripture text is always extremely difficult. The human mind is no virgin ground, but a living storehouse of varied reminiscences. It reacts according to reflexes that result from one's background, education and experience. It projects on to the newly-received object a whole gamut of associations that are the unavoidable consequence of one's social, philosophical and religious outlook. If it is already so difficult to share the inner thoughts of someone who is near and dear to us and physically present, what must it be when we try to fathom the thoughts of sacred writers who belong to another race, another millennium, another level of divine revelation and another phase in the economy of Salvation? A mastery of Semitic languages, a thorough knowledge of the historical and social background of the author and a long familiarity with the original texts of the Bible can, to some extent, reduce the difficulties. The exegete is living in a Biblical world and, when confronted with a particular passage, the words and phrases evoke associations and provoke reflections which are akin to those of the hagiographer or his contemporaries.

This Biblical background is especially useful for the interpretation of a text such as Exod. 19:5-6, which is not strictly connected nor explained by its context, and contains some words and