

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

Scripture

THE QUARTERLY OF THE CATHOLIC BIBLICAL ASSOCIATION

VOLUME XVII

APRIL 1965

No 38

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

In the reform of the liturgy a place of great importance is to be given to the reading and expounding of holy Scripture. It is essential, says the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, to promote 'a warm and living love for holy Scripture' (§ 24). There is to be 'more varied and more suitable reading from holy Scripture'; the sermon, 'which is part of the liturgical action', is to be based on 'scriptural and liturgical sources'; encouragement is to be given to the 'celebration of the word of God' on certain days (§ 35:1, 2, 4). The followers of Christ 'should be instructed by God's word and nourished at the table of the Lord's body' (§ 48). The treasures of the Bible 'are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare of the word of God may be provided' (§ 51). The faithful are to take their part in the entire Mass, since the 'two parts which, in a certain sense, go to make up the Mass, the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one act of worship' (§ 56).

The following considerations on the 'liturgy of the word' arose from a debate with a view to the forthcoming liturgical congress at Glenstal Abbey. The point for debate was as follows: 'Why does the new constitution lay such stress on Scripture? What theological principles lie behind this insistence? Does this insistence derive ultimately from Protestant theology? If so, what safeguards has one to take, so as to maintain the primacy of the sacraments and not to oust the sacraments by a *mystique de la parole*?'

Not all of these interesting questions can be investigated here, but at least the Scriptures provide a good starting point. The aim, briefly, is to determine the meaning and theology of the 'word' or 'word of God' as we meet these terms in the Scriptures and to see in what respect scriptural usage can be related to what is today called the 'liturgy of the word'. Such theological discussion is encouraged by the Constitution itself: 'that sound tradition may be retained . . . a careful investigation—theological, historical and pastoral—is to be made into each part of the liturgy which is to be revised' (§ 23).

The basic problem is a rather subtle one. A 'word' is a spoken thing, a fleeting, transient reality, 'writ on wind and swift-flowing water'. A word can have great power, it can have a considerable impact and a lasting effect, but as a 'word' it belongs to the moment when it was spoken. Thus, when King Ahaz refused to ask a sign at the bidding of Isaiah, the prophet crushingly replied: 'Hear then, O house of David . . . the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son . . .' The word had an inherent dynamic power in it which would eventually come into effect. But what of the word itself? As a spoken word it belongs to the past. It can, indeed, survive as a *written* word, as a record of the past. But how can a written record of a word spoken in the past be made to speak to me here and now in my concrete existence? Here we are confronted with the realities of time, change and movement.

A word, however, especially if it be a word of God, can acquire a nuance of lastingness from its *content*. Thus, because of what he says, our Lord can proclaim 'my words shall not pass away'. Or a word of the law, just because it is a law for all time ('Thou shalt not . . .'), has a lasting and absolute character, whereas the word of the prophet can, and very often does, envisage a concrete historical situation, which will not last. Similarly, a word of God which contains a revelation can have an absolute character, because the revelation is an absolute. It would follow, then, that there are two possible connotations of the 'word of God': as a word directed to somebody here and now in a concrete historical situation (existential), or as a word or word-content which is valid for all time (absolute). As we shall see, both of these connotations are attested in the Bible.

The Word of God in the Old Testament

The 'word of God' in its oldest form is that of the prophet or *nabi*'. The *nabi*' was a man called by God to be his spokesman: 'Go and say to this people . . .' (Is. 6:9). As a spokesman of God, the prophet presented God's message ('Thus speaks the Lord'). The message of necessity had a conceptual content, but the bearing of this content is not usually on truth as such, but rather on some action or event that God is about to bring about: an action either of judgement or of salvation that God by His intervention will consummate 'on this people'. Because of this bearing on what God is going to do, the prophetic word has a peculiar dynamic power inherent in it. Thus Elijah warns Ahab: 'As the Lord . . . lives, there shall be neither rain nor dew these years except by my word' (1 Kgs. 17:1). The same dynamism is often illustrated by an accompanying symbolical or

prophetic action, as when Jeremiah smashed a newly bought jar in the presence of witnesses and at the same moment proclaimed: 'So will I break this people and this city' (Jer. 19:11).

When one studies the prophets, one necessarily learns a lot about their concept of God and of man's relationship to God. But such truth (in the static sense) as is revealed in the prophets is, so to speak, incidental. It accompanies the message but is not an object of the message. The object of the message is to proclaim a coming judgement and to demand a reaction or a response. Therefore each word is a separate communication. One could not add them all up and arrive at the equation 'revelation'. Each word was a separate reality, for which the prophet sometimes had to wait (e.g. Jer. 28 or 42), but which, once it did come, had an irresistible force (Jer. 20:9, 23:28 f.).

In later books one finds further development. The author of 2nd Isaiah, who had lived through the exile and experienced the grim realities of catastrophe and death, cries out that 'the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand for ever' (40:8). The one abiding reality is God's word. Not now the word mediated through the prophet, but God's own summoning call: 'who brings out their (heavenly) host by number, calling them all by name' (40:26); a word which rules over history: '(calling) the name of my counsel (Cyrus) from a far country. I have spoken and I will bring it to pass' (46:11); a word which, when it 'goes forth' from God's mouth, will not 'return empty' (55:11).

This idea of God's ruling history is pursued by the school of Deuteronomy in their editing of the historical books (e.g. Kings). But along with it, and especially in Deuteronomy itself, one finds another (not unrelated) concept of the word, that of the *revelation of God's will*. God's commandment, or even the whole revelation of the *torah*, can be called a 'word'.¹

Lastly, there is the concept of God's *creative* word. The priestly author of Gen. 1, although he does not use the phrase 'word of God', gives graphic expression to the creative power of God's word in the repeated clause: 'And God *said*, let there be . . .' It is this creative word of God which becomes an object of cultic praise in Pss. 29 and 147.

Ultimately, the 'word of God' becomes a summary expression for God's revelation of Himself in history and in law.² Thus in Ps. 119

¹ Already in Exod. 34:28 the ten commandments are called 'words'. In Deuteronomy, one precept can be called *dabar* (15:5), or all of them *debarim* (28:14). In Deut. 30:14 the whole revelation of the *torah* is called a *dabar* (cf. 4:2).

² Of the three forms of the word: prophetic, creative and revelatory, the first two might be classified as having an 'existential' aspect; the third comes closer to the Greek philosophy of the absolute. cf. Jn. 1:17: 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'.

one finds three concepts of the word running through the psalm : the word of the law ; the word of promise ; the word that rules history (cf. v. 161). But the Psalmist does not think of 'revelation' in our objective and absolute sense, but rather of God's historical revealing of Himself. The 'word of God' is not presented as the source of truth but as the embodiment of God's condescending address or call to His people in the course of their history. It is God's *call*, which brought Israel into being and sustains it, to which the response is faith (e.g. Gen. 15:6), or it is God's *command* (the law) to which the response is obedience. The notion of God's call to man is always implicit in the 'word', even in the latest texts, it remains a *spoken* word, not an abstract record.

Word of God in the early Christian kerygma

The Old Testament is given a new development, homogeneous and yet extraordinary and unique, when one turns to the pages of the New Testament.¹ Throughout the New Testament, with the exception of the Johannine writings, the vastly prevailing meaning of the 'word' or the 'word of God' is the *kerygmatic preaching of the Christ-event* by the Apostolic Church. God has spoken in Christ Jesus, in his redemptive work as well as in his words. Man accepts this word of God by faith. It is a spoken word, a preached word, not an abstract idea nor (*per se*) a written scripture. One hears it and believes it, rather than reads it or studies it.

The evidence is particularly striking in the Pauline *corpus* and in Acts. In the latter Luke speaks of 'eye-witnesses and ministers of the word' (1:2) ; of the 'ministry (*diakonia*) of the word', i.e. witnessing to and proclaiming Jesus (6:2, 4). Paul was 'occupied with the word, testifying that Jesus was the Christ' (18:5). The Jews of Thessalonica 'received the word', proving the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) to see 'if these things were so' (17:11). Even the gentiles 'received the word of God'—not the Old Testament scriptures but the Christian kerygma (11:1). Always the 'word of God' is the Christ-event. As such it is *spoken, announced, taught, evangelised, listened to, received glorified, or makes increase*—all words used in the course of Acts 4-19.

The same situation is to be found throughout St Paul. The Thessalonians 'received the word in affliction and joy' (1 Th. 1:6) ; from them the 'word' has echoed into Macedonia and Greece (1:8), and

¹ The most thorough study is that of TWNT IV, pp. 69-145, especially articles by Proksch and G. Kittel. There is also an extensive article in the DBS, V, 425-97 : 'logos in the O.T.' by A. Robert ; 'logos in the N.T.' by J. Starcky, the latter following Kittel but also adding some important criticisms. Cf. also RGG³ vol. VI : articles by W. Zimmerli (on O.T., col. 1809-11), O. A. Piper (on N.T., col. 1811) and C. Andresen (on later history, col. 1811-17) ; Leonard Johnston, 'The Making of the Fourth Gospel', *Scripture*, 1960, pp. 1-12

Paul hopes that, as it did among the Thessalonians, so 'the word may speed on and triumph' (2 Th. 3:1). The 'word of God' came to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14:36); it is 'catechized' among the Galatians (Gal. 6:6); it is 'spoken boldly' by Paul's prison acquaintances (Phil. 1:14). He himself is not a 'peddler of God's word', he does not 'tamper with God's word', but has been commissioned by God and speaks 'in Christ' (2 Cor. 2:17, 4:2). He asks the Colossians to pray that God 'may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ', as it is incumbent on him. For an *oeconomia* has been given him by God: according to 2 Cor. 5:18 a *diakonia*, 'to fulfil the word of God', the 'mystery' hidden from the acons and now revealed by God, the mystery which is 'Christ-among-you' (the gentiles. Col. 1:25-7). He himself may be fettered, but not 'the word of God' (2 Tim. 2:9). Timothy is to herald 'the word of God', in season and out of season. It is a 'word of the Cross' (1 Cor. 1:18), and therefore a 'word of grace' (Acts 14:3, 20:32), 'of life' (Phil. 2:16), 'of salvation' (Acts 13:26). It is a word that has to be preached; for without a *speaking* of the word (*rhēma*), there can be no *hearing* or faith (Rom. 10:17). At the proper time God 'revealed His word in the kerygma with which I have been entrusted' (Tit. 1:3). It is a word which, if it be received in faith, has the power of 'consecrating' even material creation (1 Tim. 4:5); if it be rejected it is 'blasphemed' (Tit. 2:5).

Apart from the Pauline writings, one finds in 1 Pet. 1:23 that Christians are 'born again' through the 'living and abiding word of God', defined in 1:25 as 'the gospel that was preached to you'. James calls it an 'implanted word, which is able to save your souls' (1:21), a 'word of truth' whereby God 'of His own free will has brought us forth' (1:18).

Turning to the synoptic tradition, it is significant that never is there question of Jesus 'receiving' the word of God, as if he were a prophet.¹ The reason can only be that such a communication would be considered repugnant to the Father-Son relationship expressed in Mt. 11:27: 'No one knows the Son except the Father, nor does any one know the Father except the Son'. Again, in the synoptic narrative, it is only very rarely that we are told that Jesus himself 'spoke the word'.²

¹ The 'voice from heaven' (or 'the cloud') in the scenes of the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus (Mk. 1:11, 9:7 par.) is not an exception. It is not a 'prophetic word' but a revealing voice, corresponding to the *bath qōl* of the Rabbis.

² cf. Mk. 2:2, 4:33, (8:32), Lk. 5:1; Acts 10:36. In the sayings part of the gospel one finds the phrase 'word of God' on the lips of Jesus only in the interpretation of the sower-parable (Mk. 4:13-20 par.), where there is good reason to think it secondary (cf. Kittel, p. 123; Starcky, col. 481, in disagreement). Also in Lk. 8:21 and 11:28—'hearing the word of God and doing it'—which is certainly Luke's variation of an original 'doing the *will* of God'.

And, at least on one occasion, the word was not something spoken but something *done* by Jesus: 'Go back and tell John what you hear and see' (Mt. 11:4f.). What they saw was a fulfilment of prophecy (cf. Is. 35:5f., 61:1). Thus, for those who had eyes to see as well as ears to hear, the very works of Jesus were 'words of God'.¹ It is also striking how little echo there is outside the gospel tradition of the sayings of Christ. There is no clear allusion to any one of them in St Paul,² who was clearly less interested in handing down the oral teaching of Christ as such, than he was in the whole Christ-event as God's word of fulfilment, a fulfilment which he expresses with great force in 2 Cor. 1:9: 'For the Son of God whom we preached among you . . . was not "Yes and No"; rather "Yes" was fulfilled in him.' Christ himself, the 'faithful and true witness' was the 'Amen' spoken by God, the beginning of God's creation (Apoc. 3:14).

To sum up: the whole Christ-event, his words and his deeds, above all his redemptive work by death and resurrection, are a 'word' spoken by God, proclaimed by the Apostolic church in its preaching and received by the faith of all who believe.

The Johannine Word

The situation in the fourth gospel is rather different.³ At the very outset we find 'The Word' used in a totally independent, absolute, pregnant manner (Jn. 1:1 ff.): a Word pre-existent and eternal, a divine person, by whom all things were created, the source of light and life, who 'became flesh and dwelt amongst us, and we saw his glory'. But outside of the prologue, the word is no longer used absolutely. This is strange, especially in view of the fact that John makes very frequent use of *logos*-combinations: the word of God; the word of

¹ This was not unnoticed by the Fathers. Thus St Gregory: *Ipsa etenim facta eius praecepta sunt*: 3rd noct., Common of Evangelists)

² In St Paul the only clear allusion would be 1 Cor. 13:2. Outside of the gospels the richest stock of sayings of Jesus, or better, *allusions* to sayings, is to be found in the epistle of James. For a list see Franz Müssner, *Der Jakobusbrief*, 1964, pp. 48-50. The paucity of sayings outside of the gospels makes Kittel (p. 109) doubt whether there was ever a sayings-source used in the composition of the first and third gospels! Starcky (col. 481) does not go so far, but does note there there was no 'superstitious reverence for the *ipsissima verba* of Jesus', a conclusion which would also follow from the considerably greater variation within the sayings of Jesus than within the synoptic narrative about Jesus.

³ 1 Jn. 1:1 and Apoc. 19:3 (cf. also 1:5, 3:7, 3:14) present problems which cannot be discussed here. Both texts have a usage of the *logos* which points towards that of the gospel prologue, without, however, having the absoluteness of the latter. cf. Starcky's discussion (cols 487-90). Starcky is certainly right in rejecting Kittel's constrained alignment of the prologue usage with that of the apostolic church and his practical rejection of all 'speculative influence' in Jn. 1:1 ff. (Kittel, pp. 134-40; Starcky, cols 490-5)

the torah ; the word (or words) of *Jesus himself*.¹ For John, unlike the synoptic gospels, has no hesitation in speaking of the word(s) of Jesus. And yet, much more than the synoptic gospels, John links words and works : the miracles provide the theme of the discourses ; the discourses expound the significance of the miracles. So then, whereas the prologue presents the pre-existent *logos* (creator, source of light and life), the remainder of the gospel shows the incarnate *logos* as the *revealer* of God within the human scene, in time. Not as a mere prophet or rabbi, but as the pre-existent Son 'who is in the bosom of the Father'. As the one 'sent by God' : one meets the phrase some twenty-five times altogether, he reveals God to man. He alone is the revealer of the 'truth' (cf. 18:37, 8:32f.) ; he alone is the gate (10:9) ; no one comes to the Father except by him (14:6). Not merely, then, is Jesus God's 'word' in history, as a concrete revelation, he is the revealer, the *sole* revealer, of God.²

For John therefore, the accent shifts from the event to the person, from time to eternity, from the historical and the relative to the absolute. The *logos*, as used in the prologue, can no longer be equated with the Hebrew *debar Jahweh*, a concrete word-event spoken by God in time, but rather with the Greek concept of 'ordered reason'—in so far as it is possible to translate the most characteristic and basic of all

¹ cf. Jn. 2:22, 4:41 and 50, 5:24, 7:36, 8:31, 37, 43 and 52, etc.

² On Jesus as the Revealer of God, cf. Wikenhauser, RNT. Vol. 4, 1948, pp. 138-140. The problem, so far as this enquiry is concerned, is to determine what difference of concept there is between the Hebrew *dabar* and the *logos* of John's prologue. There is no agreement as to what speculative influences lie behind the selection of the title *logos*. Among the most likely are : (a) God's creative and dynamic *word* (as in Gen. 1) ; (b) God's creative *logos*. Already in Ps. 119:89ff. a certain absolute quality is given to God's word 'firmly fixed in the heavens'—almost as a fixed law of creation, model and prototype of all God's actions *ad extra*. Allied to this is the role attributed to wisdom in Prov. 8:22-31 : Wisdom was the beginning (or 'principle') of his work, set up before the beginning of the earth, already with him like a 'master-workman' when the world was created. Here Greek influence is already at work ! (c) The *logos* of the Stoa (or *prophorikos*). (d) The *logos* of Philo, a demiurge or mediator between God and the created world. (e) The *logos* as revealer of God.

As Kittel remarks (p. 134), John starts from the historical Christ and proceeds backwards ('We have seen his glory . . .') rather than starts from the *logos* and proceeds forwards. He also uses the title to designate the *pre-existent* Christ, for he does not use it in the course of the gospel ; but this does not preclude his taking the meaning of *logos* (or a great part of it) from the gospel. Against Kittel, however, it is clear that, merely by using the title *logos* absolutely, the fourth gospel makes a decisive advance on the early Christian understanding of the *logos*. No longer can it mean a word in history, but an eternal word (or 'thinking' or 'thought' or 'speaking' or 'revealing') of God. So pregnant is the term *logos* that any or all of the above five notions may be included in it. But the one which carries most weight must be that of the *logos* as God's 'revealer'. The One who 'made God known' (1:18) is the *logos*, who was from eternity. But *logos* as revealer is an absolute ; whereas the Hebrew *debar Jahweh* is a concrete, historical, spoken word.

Greek philosophical concepts, that of *logos*. No longer a spoken 'logos of God' but THE *logos*, which speaks, reveals, creates; which is the source of life and light, and the absolute eternal Son of God.

What it amounts to is that there are two concepts of the 'word of God' in the New Testament, behind which there are distinct conceptual backgrounds. The one that prevails is that of God's word 'spoken of old in many various ways to our fathers in the prophets, but in these last days spoken to us in a Son' (Hebr. 1:1), the fulfilment within history of an eschatological hope which includes both salvation and judgment, a word which, since it was spoken in time, confronts man in his concrete existence, which, therefore, must be preached to man, heralded to him by the Church as a good news or gospel, for as a written 'scripture' it is only a historical record of the proclamation by the early Church. As a gospel of God, preached and believed in by the individual in his concrete situation, it has the power to give him a new life, a new existence, a new spirit of sonship, once it is responded to by faith.¹ Even in St John's gospel the same remains true. For the message of the fourth gospel is that salvation depends on one's attitude to Christ by faith, in the course of one's existence; he who believes is already saved; he who will not believe is already condemned.²

The word of God is therefore the kerygmatic preaching of the Church, not the Scriptures as such. The New Testament kerygma is, for obvious reasons, primarily a missionary one directed to non-believers. But the 'word of God' must also be taken to connote the preaching *within* the Church to her own faithful. As a 'word' it would be not only the proclamation of the Christ-event (*kerygma*), but also the Church's teaching about the fulfilment of the Scriptures in the Christ-event (*didache*) and the Church's exhortation to the faithful to show their faith in action and in love (*paraenesis*). But the most important aspect of the word is its urgency here and now. As a word or action of God it demands the immediate response of the individual in his concrete existence. It is this dynamic aspect of the Church's preaching, as a word here and now, that appears to be envisaged in the forthcoming liturgical reform.

On the other hand, St John's use of *logos* as a title to connote the pre-existent Christ, which also expresses the absoluteness of his revelation as the source of light and life, cannot be understood in the same way as the kerygmatic *logos*. Whether or not John was influenced by Greek speculations, the absoluteness of the *logos*-title introduces a pattern of

¹ cf. Rom. 1:17, 3:5 and 21-6; 2 Cor. 3:9; Phil. 3:9; Gal. 3:11, etc.

² cf. Jn. 3:14-19 and 36, 5:24; also Mk. 8:38, 16:16

thought which does not truly belong to the Jewish world, but is absolutely at home in the Greek world. The next step, therefore, in our argument will be a study of the influence of the Greek *logos* idea on the Church's later understanding, not of the person of the *logos*, but of the Scriptures and of the liturgical use of the Scriptures down through the ages. From the standpoint of Hebrew thought the Scriptural *logos* would be understood as God's spoken word, addressed to each concrete individual; From the standpoint of Greek philosophy the Scriptural *logos* is no longer a *verbum* but a divine *ratio*, no longer concrete words or revelations spoken in an historical context, but *revelation* in an absolute sense.¹

KEVIN CONDON, C.M.

All Hallows College,
Dublin

(to be continued)

PAULINISM AND JOHANNISM : RAPPROCHEMENT

The case to be proposed is that there has in past years been too strong a tendency to find a cleavage between the two most coherent theologians among the New Testament writers, St Paul and St John, and that the time has come to look for common ground. It will not be sufficient

¹ This observation is not without bearing on the question of the nature of inspiration. If the Hebrew notion of the 'word of God' is that of a dynamic kerygma which calls for action, and the Greek idea of *logos* is more akin to our idea of revelation in an absolute sense, our understanding of the truth of inspiration will differ accordingly. In the Hebrew notion the prophet himself, as a spokesman of God, actively intervenes as mediator of a 'word' which calls for *response*. In the Greek notion, the prophet is a *passive* instrument in the hands of the deity, who through him reveals a 'truth'. In the former, inspiration bears a pragmatic aspect, in the latter a speculative one. Both of these aspects can be seen reflected in texts of the N.T.: the Hebrew one in 2 Tim. 3:16: 'Every inspired scripture is *profitable* for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in justice'; the Greek one in 2 Pet. 1:19-21: the 'prophetic word' shines 'like a lamp in a darksome place'; 'no prophecy ever came by the impulse of men, but men *moved* (*feromenoi*) by the Holy Spirit spoke from God'. The Greek hermeneutic is also apparent in the manner in which texts are cited for their truth-content in Hebr. 1-2. (The bearing of this distinction on problems of inspiration and inerrancy is well brought out by Pierre Benoit in his chapter on inspiration in *Guide to the Bible* (Robert Tricot), 2nd ed., 1960, pp. 9-52).

From this distinction there also arise two different ways of viewing revelation. If the Hebrew *verbum* is a concrete word (or event) spoken in history, then the emphasis will be on the history of God's saving interventions, or his plan of fulfilment: whence 'salvation-history' (= *Heilsgeschichte*). But if one understands the Greek word *logos* according to the dominant Greek philosophy of *logos*, then the accent will be not on the history of revelation but on the absolute reality disclosed by the revelation.