

# 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](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php)

the concern to promote the cohesion of the faithful, the development of Israel, and much more so, its salvation. The new Israel is in continuity with the old. In Is. 7:8 we even find the image of giving birth to describe the relations of Sion to the new people that is coming into the world. For the Apostles, there was also continuity between the Israel of the Second Temple and the Christian Church, for the true temple had been rebuilt in three days (Jn. 2:21). Christianity was a doctrine, but a doctrine which dealt with a divine presence in a people which had always to be gathered together in unity, even when Jerusalem had not wished that her children scattered abroad should be gathered under his wing (Mt. 23:37). Right from the order given to humanity, made in the image of God, to spread out over the earth (Gen. 1:28) to the coming down of the heavenly Jerusalem upon the earth (Apoc. 21), this gathering together of the people around its Creator is the theme which gives the whole of the Bible its unity.

HENRI CAZELLES, S.S.

*Institut Catholique,  
Paris*

## THE MYSTERY OF THE WORD

### *Thoughts on Biblical Language*

The Swiss philosopher, Max Picard, in his book, *The World of Silence*, goes to some pains to make clear how positive is his concept of this great and much neglected state of being. Part of his care is expended on demonstrating the organic movement from silence to the word: it is the word which is the greater value because it incarnates thought and makes possible the communication of thought between man and man and between man and God. The vivid and growing consciousness which we have today of the Bible as the word of God accentuates the problem of the whole complex of human words, of language in which the word of revelation and salvation comes to us. It is not enough that a word be spoken; it has also to be understood and there are certain difficulties that prevent us from understanding the Bible. These difficulties are summed up in the question of biblical language, not this or that language, Hebrew or Greek, original or translation, but language itself, that human and contingent clothing in which God's word comes to us. For God has given us not just a set of ideas which could be later expressed in any human form whatever; the language

itself is the gift of God, and we can understand the message only in so far as we are scrupulously faithful in translating and interpreting the language.

It is here that we meet the paradox that runs so directly counter to our immediate reactions. The language of the Bible is so strange, so limited and particular, in a word, so specifically Jewish. Do the experiences of the Israel of three and four millenia ago have something to say to us today? Above all, can the language in which these experiences were expressed at that time, in that culture, have a really vital influence on our religious outlook? These are two parallel realities which can be neither explained nor translated away. They simply must be accepted for the facts which they are. The fact is that in revealing Himself to man God chose this people, in this precise geographical, social and cultural world; He sent His Son to be made flesh of this people, the heir to their particular form of life; and He expressed His revelation in their language, so that through it He fixed His word in a written form which was to provide the world with a direct line of reference to Him. In other words, God's communication with man as we know it, and apart from any 'private' experiences which we have no way of gauging, is inserted into a cultural framework very different, if not completely foreign to our own. It is a culture in which, for example, symbolism plays a preponderant role in the explanation of reality. This is very unlike our civilisation which uses symbols as an escape from reality: see the billboards along any modern highway. Symbolism in ancient eastern cultures was naturally marked by the mentality, the experiences, the way of life which predominated in those times among those people; they can scarcely touch us in the same way today. Ezekiel could speak of God as the shepherd of His people; our image of a modern industrialist leader is quite a different thing. We would not find the same pleasure as the psalmist in the thought of oil poured over us from head to foot. The kingship of God is basic to much of Old Testament thinking and piety; but outside of fairy tales, royalty now lost all its charm in many countries of the world. Again, all these difficulties are brought to a head in the language in which they are expressed. Words like spirit, covenant, wisdom, glory, justice, even such basic terms as light and life carry a richness of meaning in the Bible which is beyond our immediate grasp because their cultural connotations have changed so radically.

And yet this language remains the providentially chosen vehicle through which we receive the message of salvation. It bears all the marks of its time and of its insertion into a definite and limited human history, but this history constitutes the substance of God's ways with

men, the basic formulation of the pattern of salvation that extends from the call of Abraham to the call of each one of us to incorporation in the body of Christ. Our problem therefore is that of adapting ourselves and our way of thinking to the culture of a people separated from us by many centuries but with whom we nevertheless have something very important in common : we share in the one experience of salvation. And that common experience can only be shared if we speak the same language. Why? Once again because the experience and the message it contains cannot be separated from the language in which they have been handed down to us. Without indulging in the fantasies of a theory of purely verbal inspiration, in which God would have whispered every word into the human author's ear, it remains completely true to say that the language of the Bible is the language of God, and this extends to the specific terminology and vocabulary. The events of salvation were providentially directed by God in such a way that their expression in language would become the vehicle for our faith, so that this language constitutes the normal means for us to adhere to the revelation of the God who saves us. Hence the whole complex of historical reality, of the way of thinking and acting that were specific and proper to the people of Israel, and then to Jesus and his disciples, belongs to us as Christians, and the language in which this reality was definitively fixed, the particular and special ways of speaking are intimately and ineluctably connected with our participation in the mystery of salvation. We are therefore very much committed to understanding the *past*, not for any purely aesthetic or archaeological reasons, but because that past is such a vital part of our present existence as the people of God. We are not interested in the past as is the scholar, for scientific reasons, but as believers, for the sake of our life of faith. This means in practice that we have to derive from the language of the Bible a meaning which is very closely related to the one it had for the people who used it so long ago. We have somehow to bridge the enormous gap that separates us, psychologically and culturally, from the men of those days. This is required not by any attachment to a pseudo 'traditionalism', but to a vivid awareness of tradition in the proper sense : that of a living reality which reaches out of the past to engage our lives at this moment and fill them with the richness of its own meaning. In this case, the richness is that which has been instilled into the language of revelation by God himself. This attitude is well characterised by the 1955 statement of the Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland, which declares that we must 'let the Scriptures speak to us in terms of themselves, so that the word of God *controls us* and we do not allow our preconceived ideas to dictate what we get out of the Scriptures'.

But how will this language be able to reach us and 'control us', separated as we are from the concrete historical experience which it expresses and seeks to hand on to us? In her mission of bringing all men to the knowledge and love of Christ the Church has a twofold task: she has to bring them the message of salvation with the utmost fidelity and she has to do it in a way that they can understand and that corresponds to their needs. In terms of the biblical problem this means that she must be absolutely faithful to the inspired text and yet retain the greatest possible connection with the language that the ordinary faithful use and understand. An immediate solution is often sought in translating the language of Scripture into the most ordinary and commonplace everyday speech. This takes a number of practical forms which can be essentially reduced to one of the following: either there is a 'pastoral' preoccupation—the Bible must be made accessible to the man in the street—or a scholarly one—we cannot cater to either emotions or ignorance: the cold, hard philological fact is that such and such a word has such and such an original meaning. In the first case the contention is made that the language of the New Testament for instance, is not the cultivated language of the classical writers, but a slightly elevated form of the current everyday speech of the Mediterranean world; hence to capture the authentic flavour of the New Testament one must put its language into the current forms of our everyday speech. Or again, in translating the terms of the Bible we must find modern equivalents for their most ancient and basic meanings, and not retain a nomenclature pejoratively referred to as 'Bible English'.

The first of these attitudes fails to recognise the cultural gap that exists between the people of New Testament times and ourselves; the second overlooks the development and successive stages of enrichment that took place within the Bible itself.

(a) In announcing the good news of the Kingdom, our Lord and his disciples doubtless used simple language which could be understood by all their hearers. Nevertheless the background of this language was quite special, unique even, and without this background of specifically biblical culture, the language itself would have been incomprehensible. It was a background impregnated with the history, institutions and way of life of the people of Israel. If Christ compared the Kingdom of heaven to a wedding feast and referred to himself as the bridegroom, he was not merely using images from everyday life that all his hearers were familiar with from their own experience; he was appealing to a tradition that had been deeply inculcated into the Israelite mind by the prophets and which had been amply extended by rabbinic teaching. In the Bible, the relations between Yahweh and his people are

conceived of as those between bridegroom and bride, between the lover and his beloved. This is a basic aspect of scriptural thinking which reaches a summit of poetic-theological expression in, for example, the *Song of Songs*. The whole of biblical tradition was surrounded by the atmosphere of the holy, couched in terms which were themselves sacred. Indeed, some words had been imbued with such reverence that they were no longer even pronounced; hence in the gospel of St Matthew, written for Christians of Jewish extraction, the Lord does not speak of the Kingdom of God, but of the Kingdom of the heavens, a typical late-Jewish circumlocution. If we are to be faithful in handing on the message of the gospel we must retain not merely the message in skeletal form; we must also translate some of this atmosphere of the sacred. Our everyday language is simply insufficient for this. More often than not it reflects our most common experiences reduced to their most 'worldly' aspects. It is incapable of handling the richness of the mystery of Christ and his salvation. To bridge the gap that exists between us and the world through which revelation was given to us we must make use of the specific language based on the human experience that was the history of Israel, fulfilled and transfigured in Christ, relived now by his followers in his Church. Notice that it is a question of the biblical world, biblical culture, not of a later one which grew out of this or was grafted on to it. In other words, no appeal is being made here for values of a lesser order, aesthetic ones, for instance. If certain key words and terms have persisted in our English tradition of Bible translations, they have value only in so far as they are faithful to the biblical ground out of which they have sprung. It would be quite useless to cling to the Authorised Version out of preference for Elizabethan turns of phrase. But while converting from outmoded forms of grammar and style one must by all means retain the basic vocabulary and terminology which have nothing to do with later periods of history but which stem directly and literally from the biblical tradition itself. Without this basic and inspired vocabulary of biblical language, we really have no language at all for delivering the message of salvation.

(b) The urge to change certain traditional biblical expressions in favour of ones with more 'grass roots' meanings can lead to unfortunate misunderstandings which obscure the course of gradual and harmonic development that impregnates many parts of revelation. For within the Bible itself there is a process of organic change that takes place in certain key expressions, in which an original meaning is slowly transformed and sublimated until it reaches a degree of purity, scarcely dreamed of by those who first used it, and which becomes clear only in the light of later revelation, ultimately in the light of Christ. Father

Gelin, the great French exegete, understood this very well and spoke of the phenomenon of 're-readings': certain important words went through a series of interpretations which gradually transformed their meaning, and it is the *last* of these interpretations which is the definitive one and which must decide our understanding of the word.

To take an example: the concept of wisdom runs all through the Old Testament, but an examination of the texts, especially in their chronological order, shows a gradual yet definite change in its meaning. Israel, like all ancient peoples, especially in the Orient, always had its 'wisdom', the expression usually in a popular, easily remembered form—the proverb—of something common to human experience. It deals with practical solutions to the problems of life and the prudence, skill and energy to 'make a go of things', to use 'common sense' as we would say today. Hence, in the earliest collections of sayings in the Book of Proverbs we find advice on subjects such as proper parental discipline, moderation in food and drink, honest dealings in business, marital fidelity. Examples of wisdom in other parts of the Bible deal with craftsmanship, administration, political foresight. The connection that has been established between Israel's wisdom and that of her neighbours in the world of the time bears out the basic earthiness of the whole concept. Nevertheless despite its profoundly human, universal and moral character Israelite wisdom is always centred on Yahweh, the transcendent, supreme, unique and just God. And this is apparent already in the earliest stage of the tradition: see for instance the constant reference to Yahweh in the sixteenth chapter of Proverbs. It was this characteristically religious outlook which, while going hand in hand with the purely human and practical one gradually transformed it, so that there is a constant progression towards the idea that God alone possesses wisdom which He communicates to men, especially in the form of piety, fidelity to religious practice, and in particular to the observance of the Law of God. In this way there is a twofold development of the religious concept of wisdom: first, it becomes a synonym for personal goodness of life and virtue, while sin is seen as the greatest foolishness, and secondly it is gradually identified, almost personally, with Yahweh Himself or His spirit, as the active principle of the creation and providential ruling of the world. In this second sense it provided the passage to the New Testament concept of the Word incarnating the wisdom of God's plan of salvation: Logos in St John, mystery in St Paul.

Now when our Lord and his apostles begin to use the concept of wisdom in their preaching of the Kingdom they do not refer to its

most primitive, earthy and practical significance, but to the meaning it had acquired through the centuries of experience and contemplation on the part of the people of God and its wise men. This is especially evident in a passage, for example, like Jesus' parable of the ten virgins with its strong eschatological and messianic import. Christ is certainly not commending the virgins for being 'sensible', any more than he means to say that the unjust steward who falsifies his master's accounts is 'enterprising'. Such language does not do justice to these passages whose whole meaning is that in him, in his own person the wisdom of God has appeared and is communicated to men so that they are able to choose, with fully enlightened minds and hearts the way that leads to salvation, are able in other words to respond to the eschatological meaning of his message. In this sense even the greatest heights of Old Testament wisdom are surpassed; Christ takes them up in himself and raises them to a perfection which the men of Israel could not have imagined. Nevertheless, the wisdom of Christ is in profound continuity with that of Israel and is its proper perfection, not its destruction. In him the wisdom that had traversed the long dusty roads of time and human experience achieves the end towards which God had providentially directed it from its obscure beginnings; it is no less wisdom for that, and must be called by its own name. If we fail to use the proper and traditional biblical term we run the risk of confusing a basically religious concept with something of a much lower, or at any rate quite different order and also, most important of all, failing to transmit a vital and profound element of revelation. Absence of the specific language of the Bible inevitably leads to a loss of the message itself, with all that it includes of the providential ordering of things towards our understanding of the mystery of salvation.

The objection may now be raised that one can hardly expect the faithful of today to insert themselves into a cultural and religious context so far removed from them, for which they have little if any sympathy and almost no background and training. The problem is real but not new. There has always been the necessity, once the Church moved out of the strictly Jewish and Palestinian limits which marked its origins, of establishing a relation between the thought and language structures of the Old Testament and those of the rest of the world which was called to share in the one redemption of Christ. But the solution begins to be sketched for us in the New Testament in the preaching of the apostles to non-Jews: they present the word of God in its proper and literal form, and they add to this an explanation more or less developed according to the needs of the hearers. The



same thing happens all through the patristic age, when even the most highly technical theological treatises normally take the form of commentaries on Holy Scripture. Our task today is not to purge or water down the specific language of the Bible in modern speech translations, but rather to initiate the people by catechesis and preaching into a progressive understanding of the language of revelation itself. We must not change the language, but learn to find within it the experience of life which it contains, to recognise the similarities it bears to our own experience, in short to realise that the word of God is a living thing, addressed to us as living beings. This is the function of the homily at Mass, of basic and advanced courses on the parochial level in the history and meaning of the Bible and the language with which it speaks to us. There must be a positive attempt at education in the proper sense of the term, that is, at drawing out of the Christian people the latent capacities for understanding the word of God given them at baptism in the first place, but also present in certain facets of their human sensitivity as such : all cultural differences taken into account, there remains between the man of today and the man of Christ's time and of Abraham's a certain basic relation founded on qualities of the human mind and heart which simply do not change. It is to these large and universal aspects of man's human and religious need that the Bible speaks, and in a language that everyone can understand given a certain clear and well-defined explanation and formation.

To sum up : we are dealing with a single problem that has two basic aspects. There is no point in trying to avoid the fact that our Christian vocabulary is quite proper and specific and is conditioned by the course of revelation itself. It contains words, concepts, expressions which do not belong to any other segment of reality as we know it. Our task is to adapt ourselves to this language, to become steeped in the culture that inspired it under God's direction, and not to change it to suit ourselves. On the other hand the language of revelation must not be obscured by grammatical archaisms or subjected to the mannerisms of an age other than our own ; it must really speak to us as men of the twentieth century. May we be spared from translations so literal or outmoded that they do violence to the sense of speech as we understand it today. The Douay and Authorised versions have a certain value as literary monuments ; their practical pastoral value is rather slim. To translate the message of salvation and its specific formulation in words into clear and vital language that speaks to the heart of modern men, avoiding the pitfalls of excessive literalism and off-hand paraphrasing ; it combines rigorous fidelity to the inspired text with sensitivity for the language of today : these

are the tasks of those who must present the word of God to His people.

BASIL DE PINTO, O.S.B.

*Mount Saviour,  
New York*

## THE PROBLEM OF THE SERVANT SONGS

In the second part of the book of Isaiah there appear four poems which by reason of their theme are commonly called the 'Songs of the Suffering Servant'. In these poems we meet a mysterious figure designated as 'the Suffering Servant' or the 'Servant of Yahweh'. The study of these four sections gives rise to some difficulties. First of all some critics do not agree as to the number and length of the passages. Others consider these poems of the Servant so different from the rest of the book, even if the latter part of it, i.e. chapters 40-66, that they regard them as being of independent origin. Secondly, and no doubt connected with this, there is the question of who this Servant is. What does the prophet mean by this term? What does the figure represent and what are the attributes and function associated with it?

Three of the Servant Songs are almost universally recognised as being 42:1-4; 49:1-6, and 52:13-53, 12. There are only a few critics who exclude the passage: 50:4-9. The reasons they give for this are that the word Servant does not occur in the poem, that the rhythm of the passage is different from that of the other three and that it is the only song that seems to have influenced the surrounding prophecies. But although the word Servant is not expressly mentioned, the resemblance of this passage to the other poems is so great as to make it practically certain that the speaker is the same personality described in the other songs. This third passage is almost a necessary link between the second and the fourth poems, thus connecting the Servant's mission in its further stage of persecution and suffering. A few scholars on the other hand would include a fifth Song, 61:1-3. It is true that the speaker of the fragment presents great similarities with the Servant: 'the spirit of the Lord is upon him' . . . He is 'anointed' . . . He is 'sent to preach to the meek'. But there are clear differences as well. Here there is a prophet who, as if in a soliloquy, gives a prophecy of salvation, but without appearing himself as the instrument of its realisation, as in the Songs of the Servant. Besides we cannot find here the universal mission of the Servant. The prophet is to proclaim