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The Word is a Seed

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THE WORD IS A SEED

Of even the richest languages it is true that for every million ideas there are only a thousand words. The color range may serve as an example: no one will ever fit words to every shade of the spectrum—not a tongue is called for but a paint brush.

Now if this were the whole of it, we might well despair of expressing all but our most simple thoughts. But in truth there is no such thing as a pure note in the scale of human tongues; or, rather, each note summons its family of overtones, born to it in its years of history. The word the mother teaches her child was already venerable when she herself received it. It had grown old in the service of her ancestors; it had been sent on this errand and on that; at one time it had toiled in the cellars of literature, at another it had shone in its courts, adroitly adapting itself to all changes of fortune. After the experience of a hundred lifetimes this word, old but very vigorous, remained still itself but became so much more. And now it wears on its face the pain and the joy of its long story. We ourselves give it something, too; because having served with us it outlives us who seemed to be its masters. We pass. The word remains.

I

Now what if God should choose to take the word into His service? Supposing God were to use the tongue of man—what then? Plainly, no word will outlive Him; nor did it exist before Him. God foreknows the fortunes of His word. No part of its story (what we call past and present and future) is hidden from Him. He sees it, therefore, with eternal eyes and knows it wholly—seed and flower and fruit. Should He send it to do His bidding, He already knows what will become of it. Man learns the varying power of the word only as
generation succeeds generation; but God is aware of it from eternity. Or, if we may change the image yet again, the word that first appeared naked will reappear—since it is for man that God intends it—in the fashion of the generation to which it is revealed.

If, therefore, through the medium of written sentences God elects to reveal Himself to man in one favored millennium of history; and if—since God is a wise God—that revelation is tuned to the reception of its hearers; and if—because God is a God of truth—that revelation can never contradict itself as it increases in volume but must now cry aloud the selfsame thing that once it whispered, then the thousand years of revelation is a period to be considered in its entirety, to be savored only when it is complete. Then and then only can its first beginnings be seen as beginnings and the innate but latent power of the Word acknowledged. I do not know the acorn until I have seen the oak.

II

The Bible, then, is not a granite block of equal density throughout, immovable, undeveloping, dead. It is not like a coral reef growing in bulk through the years by the mere juxtaposition of homogeneous matter. It is the living word of the living God. It is a thing that grows from within, vitally. At no stage of its growth, therefore, can it be justly appreciated. We must wait until it has achieved full stature. After all, we can no more make an exploratory incision into living things without destroying the tissue than we can give ourselves time to admire the water's flow by freezing it. I say this with regard to the theme of the present essay but dare add, in passing, that it has wider application in a wider context. So much distortion of God's Word is born of the monstrous parentage we may call the static outlook. So often it is the Bible's misfortune to be taken for a series of adjacent oracles, each independent of the other and all independent of their setting, snatched out to vindicate the perpetuation of some passing stage of man's relationship with God. There is no more fundamental error in the whole range—and it is an alarmingly wide range—of exegetical absurdities. In this way a man could even justify the desert law of vendetta in our modern cities, could build another Ark of the Commandments according to the pattern shown to Moses on the
Mount, could make the thousandth year of revelation look no different from the first.

For if the Word was not spoken idly to the fathers, neither was it spoken only to the fathers. It was spoken also for our instruction "upon whom the final age of the world has come" (1 Cor 10:11). That the Word still lived was the basic conviction of the Church's earliest days. It has been very justly said, indeed, that "the application of prophecy was probably the earliest form of Christian theological thought."¹ This theology, which precedes and underlies our New Testament writings, is therefore a biblical theology in the fullest sense of the phrase. The first duty of the disciples was, no doubt, to inform the world of the facts—of the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, "a prophet mighty in work and word" (Lk 24:19). But they had also to show their Jewish brethren that this new Thing was no foundling in Israel's cradle but the heir of all the prophets. To the Gentile they had to show that the wisdom of Providence had not been silent before and had spoken freely now. Old and New Testaments had to be brought together; the Word must be shown to be consistent with itself—the Word at no time destroyed and now at last fulfilled.

III

Whatever the New Testament writers meant by the term "fulfillment," they did not mean some mathematical equation of past promise and present performance. Far from it. For them the reality transcended the promise: Israel had expected a king; it had received a king of kings. With this in mind we may well hesitate before some popular forms of what is called "the prophetic argument"—forms that would persuade us that the prophets wrote the gospel before the gospel. No, the vision of the prophets was obscure; they could hope only for a vague outline, peering out, as through a fog, to catch some sight of the period and pattern of messianic days.² This is why Christ

¹ C. H. Dodd, History and the Gospel (London: Nisbet, 1938), p. 60. Dr. Dodd's statement is adequate as long as we remember that the theological argument does not consist of an alignment of texts selected from Old and New Testaments. The argument implicit in this present essay is of a very different kind.

² Such is the clear impression left by St. Peter when he speaks of the prophets' "earnest inquiry and search" into the grace that was to come (1 Pet 1:10).
could bless the eyes of His disciples, which looked upon the things "many prophets and just men had longed to see" (Mt 13:16-17).

Even the formal assurance of prophecy, therefore, had its shortcomings. But we have more than this, much more. For it is the whole record of Israel's story that is God's word to man—an acted word, as truly conveying His meaning as does the visible universe. The pattern of this history not only recurs within itself but reappears in the fullness of time. And when it thus reappears it is not, as it were, larger; rather is it resumed on a higher plane, becoming more refined, assuming a spiritual nature.\(^8\) It was thus that the Hebrew always looked upon his history. Unlike the Greek he never saw time as a series of wheels, each period powerless to grow beyond its own circumference, impotent to do aught but imitate its predecessor in rise, decline, return. For the Hebrew, as for the Christian, a driving Providence bears history along toward a goal. The movement is real and forward, not frustrated and cyclic.\(^4\) Nevertheless, as we have said, it is repetitive: the ascent goes on and the same obstacles recur to be conquered, though on a higher level. The summit is above the clouds.

About the Old Testament there hangs an air of something unfinished, and one feels that the Hebrew mind should be the first to sense it. In his heart's heart the Jew, son of patriarchs and prophets, cannot believe that God should halt where the Old Testament ends, and so he lives on deferred hope. Neither can the Christian believe it, but for him the New Testament provides insuperable climax. For the Christian the Old Testament and the New are movements of one great symphony, the one movement calling for the other. Without the New Testament the Old is a chain of melodies of great beauty—of melodious hints leaving us with a sense of loss, of lovely sounds cut off in their childhood. But without the Old Testament the New bursts upon the ear almost brutally, the ear being not yet attuned to the key or to the mode; the music is heard, but its great motifs are not fully recognized; its several parts are wondered at, but are not under-

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4. C. N. Cochrane has reminded us again of St. Augustine's repugnance for the theory of cycles, for history's moving like a wheel, which so utterly contradicts the Judaic-Christian conviction that time and also space are not causes but opportunities, "not gods but gifts." See Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), pp. 483-484; De Civ. Dei, XII, 14-21 (PL 41:560-372).
stood as the parts of one majestic whole. For the Christian the thin and separate melodies of the Old are in the New brought together, given richer tone, contrapuntally interwoven, discovered to have belonged all the time to one musical composition. And as foolish as it would be to deliver judgment on the sole witness of preparatory bars, so foolish does he hold it to pronounce upon either New Testament or Old without its fellow.

This sensation (for it is more than an impression) has a cause which is capable of literary proof. All the great themes of the Old Testament—and they are all "words" of God: we might name at random the themes of the Presence, the Sacrifice, the Temple—work toward a sublime maturity they do not find except in the New. Of such themes we shall examine one: the theme of the Word of God itself. It is the very term we apply to the Scriptures. If we pursue this theme to its end, it should be clear how, not in fantasy but quite exactly, we can say: "The Bible is Christ."

Scripture grows, ripens into Christ, is Christ, for the Word of God is a seed. This agricultural image is common to both the Testaments; though the actual phrase belongs only to the New, its spirit is that of both. What in one is life-giving water is the very germ of life in the other:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return no more thither,
but soak the earth and water it,
and make it to spring
and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater:
So shall my word be,
which shall go forth from my mouth:
It shall not return to me void,
but it shall do whatsoever I please
and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it.

(Is 55:10–11) 6


6. In the Word of God infallibly executing His will, man is blessed. Hence Isaiah likens the Word to rain, so needed by the dry land, so obviously not under
The sower went out to sow his seed... Now the parable is this:
The seed is the word of God.

(Lk 8:5, 11)

IV

When we speak of the "history of religion," what do we mean? By "religion" we mean the acknowledgment of a relationship between the human and the Divine, between the finite and the Infinite. Now, to establish such a relationship, infinite power is necessary. But have there not been many attempts by man to bridge the infinite abyss between the finite and the Infinite? Indeed; yet even these human gropings, the pagan religions, would not have been possible had not the infinite Hand moved first. Strictly speaking, then, the history of religion is not so much, nor essentially, the story of man's quest for God but of God's for man.

The story begins with man's creation—the making of the bond between man and God. It proceeds with man's growing recognition of this basic fact and of its consequences for himself. Whence comes this recognition? From reason, we say. True, but not the whole truth. It is reason indeed but reason working on something intelligible. That intelligible thing is man himself and the creation around him—contingent things through which human reason attains to the existence of the Necessary. In other words, by the fact of creation God has communicated with man; creation is a Word of God to man—the first Word of God to man.

The act of creation is therefore an act of speech, of speech in a tongue understood by all who would hear, a standing witness against all who would not:

human control, so clearly a gift—a blessing, then, for field, beast, and man. The thought of rain as a gift is stressed in the Jewish prayer book. In the second of the Eighteen Benedictions, the devout Jew prays: "Thou, O Lord, art mighty forever, thou revivest the dead, thou art mighty to save." From fall till spring, from the day after the feast of the Rejoicing of the Law till the eve of Passover, he adds: "Thou causest the wind to blow and the rain to fall." See The Authorised Daily Prayer Book, trans. and ed. J. H. Hertz (New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1952), p. 133. In connection with this Benediction, the Talmud speaks of three keys that are God's: the key of rain, the key of birth, and the key of the rising of the dead—a beautiful thought even though the Talmud adds that these keys are not entrusted to the hand of any messenger (Ta'an. 2a; cf. The Babylonian Talmud, ed. I. Epstein, London: Soncino, 1938, Ta'anith, p. 3).
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For from the greatness and the beauty of created things
their original author, by analogy, is seen.

(Wis 13:5)

And again:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the firmament proclaims His handiwork.
Day pours out the word to day,
and night to night imparts knowledge.

(Ps 18:2–3)

The created universe, then, is a revelatory Word to man; it is a thing
that speaks to him, and in this the two meanings of the Hebrew
term dabar ("word" and "thing") come together.

So much for man. But as it proceeds from God, the Word not only
speaks; it is also creative. When God "utters," an effect is necessarily
produced. The Greek logos and the Hebrew dabar may agree in their
dictionary meaning; in reality, since the two terms are children of
opposed mentalities, they are poles apart. For the Greek, the "word,"
logos, is an instrument and expression of thought even if the thought

7. Thorleif Boman, in Das hebräische Denken im Vergleich mit dem griechi-
schen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1952), sums up this difference
well. The noun dabar comes from the verbs dabar and diber, "to speak." But
the root-meaning is "to thrust forward" and in consequence—picturing, as it
were, the act of speaking—"to let words follow one another." Because of the basic
meaning of the verb, dabar means "deed" as well as "word." Eliezer's telling, for
instance, "all he had done" (Gen 24:66) is in Hebrew his telling all the "deeds"
or "words" he had done. But to say that the Hebrews made no sharp distinc-
tion between word and deed is not to say that they did not know words that
promised much but were never acted on. In such a case, the fault, as they saw it,
was not that the speaker brought forth only a word, and no deed. What he had
brought forth was an evil, empty, lying word, a word that lacked the inner power
and truth for realization. Never could a Hebrew have burst out contemptuously, as
Hamlet did: "Words, words, words." Never could he, with Goethe's Faust, have
called words Schall und Rauch; they were reality. To the Hebrew, then, the "word-
deed" is that which is highest and noblest in man. The Greek logos, on the other
hand, derives from legein, "to speak," the basic meaning of whose root, leg, is
"to collect, to order." Hence legein comes to have such diverse meanings as "to
count, to think, to say." Logos, having nothing to do with the function of speech,
the dynamics of being-spoken, or the articulateness of speech, has to do with
meaning, the ordered, rational content. And in this sense it represents to the
Greek the highest human function. Compared, the two "words" show what each
people held most important in the life of the spirit: for the Hebrew it was the
dynamic, lordly, majestic, powerfully creative; for the Greek it was the ordered,
measured, carefully planned, and meaningful (pp. 52–54).
remain unuttered. But when the Hebrew speaks of the "word," *dabar*, he always thinks of something strangely operative; when he speaks of the Word of God, *debar Yahuwah*, he is thinking of the expression of God's sovereign will and also of the vehicle of His irresistible power. This creative aspect of God's Word is never far from the Hebrew mind. Hence the book of Wisdom:

*God of my fathers, Lord of mercy*

*you have made all things by your word.*

(Wis 9:1)

And the Psalmist:

*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made;*
*by the breath of His mouth all their host.*

(Ps 32:6)

Those two facets of God's Word, the revelatory and the creative, will never be separated in Israel's literature—an ancient and momentous concept which the Christian revelation takes to itself, giving it climax and sublimity.

The act of creation, then, is the first stage of God's revelation to men, the initial epiphany of His "Word." But it is only a beginning.

When God chose to shape a single people as the organ of His message to the world, the Word became more articulate. The voice of God sharpened, as it were, into a series of specific commands addressed to a nation: into the Sinaitic code which, in the most ancient legislative texts of the Bible, is called "the words." It is said, for instance, that the Lord would write upon the Tables "the words"; and again, that He wrote upon them "the words of the covenant, the ten words," *dibrei ha-berit 'aseret ha-debarim* (Ex 34:1, 28). The Word written in the created heavens now comes to earth. And though it commands, yet it is a kind, beneficent word, for obedience removes all obstacles to the Word's creative power, which will carry Israel to its destiny. This is why Israel is bidden to follow the voice of the angel of the Exodus—God's own mouthpiece—if it would reach the Land.
Israel’s fortune will always lie in following the Word, whatever form it may assume.

The Word of the Law is more articulate than the Word of creation; nevertheless it bears the same message of God’s nature and demands. If the creative Word already implied a divine law for man—a law founded upon man’s intrinsic dependence—it is no less true that the legislative word is likewise creative. It brings forth a light as real as, more real than, the light that came when “God said: ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” (Gen 1:3). Hence the Law is a light to the mind:

A lamp to my feet is your word,  
a light to my path.  

(Ps 118:105)

It does not surprise us, therefore, when the Psalmist passes without apology from praise of the sun to praise of the Law. Sun and Law are each a Word of God:

He has pitched a tent there for the sun  
which comes forth like the groom from his bridal chamber  
and, like a giant, joyfully runs its course. . . .
The law of the Lord is perfect,  
refreshing the soul . . .  
rejoicing the heart . . .  
enlightening the eye.  

(Ps 18:5, 6, 8, 9)

Here creation and legislation are side by side, products of the Word which is light to the outer and to the inner eye. Again, the same Word that rules the universe rules God’s people:

He sends His word and melts [the frozen waters];  
He lets His breezes blow and the waters run.  
He has proclaimed His word to Jacob,  
His statutes and His ordinances to Israel.  

(Ps 147:18–19)

But the Word is not exhausted in the ten words of the Decalogue nor confined to the restrictive “Thou shalt not!” On the contrary,
Long before the Exile, "the Word" had come to stand for God's great favor to His people—His self-manifestation by which each might live. There is nothing cold, narrow, or legalistic about it; rather is it an abundant source of life:

It is something very near to you,
    already in your mouths and in your hearts;
you have only to carry it out. . . .
It means your very life.

(Deut 30:14; 32:47)

So much is the Word the life of the people that the silence of Yahweh is, for the earliest of the prophets, the most dreadful of all the punishments that could befall it:

I will send forth a famine into the land:
    not a famine of bread,
    nor a thirst of water,
    but of hearing the word of the Lord.

(Am 8:11)

How could the absence of His Word not have been the dread punishment it was, since Israel's God is the "God who speaks"? And as sacred history goes on, the Hebrew idea of the Word grows warmer and richer so that one begins to wonder what divinely intended goal can satisfy this almost unconscious thrust. The 118th Psalm, which has so often been most unjustly taxed for "its legalistic spirit," is in reality radiant with love: it is perhaps the glorification of the Word in the Old Testament, its highest praise. "I hope in your word" is its keynote. For "your word, O Lord, endures forever; it is firm as the heavens"—a phrase that recalls Jesus' own: "The heavens and the earth pass; my word shall not pass." And the Word which is promise and precept is "sweet to the palate; sweeter than honey." "How deeply do I love your word!" is like a refrain which, in many variations, runs through the whole psalm. 8 It is important to note the entrance of this element of affection, of profound love, because if

8. Ps 118:74, 89, 103; and many other verses of the same psalm. An excellent vindication of the truly devotional spirit of Ps 118 (in the Hebrew Ps 119) will be found in A. Robert, P.S.S., "Le Psaume CXIX et les Sapientiaux," Revue Biblique, XLVIII (1939), pp. 5–20.
ever the Word is to be “fulfilled,” Israel will surely expect it to be supremely lovable.

VI

As the “Word,” this medium of God’s contact with Israel, runs its course, it gradually becomes an object of worshipful reverence—not indeed for its own sake but because it is God’s. The very fact that it has assumed two forms, creation and the Law, demonstrates that it is independent of either and is free to assume a third. Certainly we are far from Stoic philosophy, in which the logos was no more than the inner pattern, the intrinsic order and intelligibility, of the self-revealing cosmos. The Hebrew debor Yabweh is quite clearly detached from any created thing; is it in any sense whatever distinct from God? There is no doubt at all that such an unexpected distinction confronts us in the inspired poetic literature. And, in truth, this process of personification is far from alien to the concrete mode of Hebrew thought. Though it does occur notably in the hellenistic period and reveals a certain Greek influence, the process is authentically Hebrew, for already in the Psalms the attributes of God are poetically endowed with personality. God’s attributes of mercy and justice, of kindness and truth, are pictured as two soldiers of the royal guard stiffly marching:

Kindness and truth go before you.
(Ps 88:15)

Justice and peace are said to kiss, truth to spring out of the earth, and justice to look down from heaven (Ps 84:11–12). The Word is similarly endowed, and since it can scarcely be described as an “attribute,” its personification becomes all the more striking. Thus it goes forth as a messenger, not an idle one, but one that fulfills the errand that sped it on its way:

So shall my word be,
which shall go forth from my mouth;
It shall not return to me void,
but shall do whatsoever I please.
(Is 55:11)
Even more significantly, it reappears in the book of Wisdom as a warrior of God destroying the firstborn of the persecutor:

Your all-powerful word from heaven's royal throne
bounded, a fierce warrior, into the doomed land,
bearing the sharp sword of your inexorable decree.
(Wis 18:15–16)

The process goes on when Israel begins to identify debar Yabweb, in which are all the treasures of wisdom, with the wisdom so eagerly sought in the Greek world. Indeed, long before, in the book of Proverbs (about the fifth century B.C.), Israel had identified the Word—which is the Torah—with the Wisdom the sage so perseveringly commends. In the much later book of Wisdom (middle of the first century B.C.), this identification is explicit:

You . . . have made all things by your word
and in your wisdom have established man
to rule the creatures produced by you,
to govern the world in holiness and justice.
(Wis 9:1–2)

But it should be noticed that this Word-Wisdom of the Hebrew is not, as it was for the Greek, the achievement of man but the gift of God. True Wisdom dwells in heaven; if it is to come to earth God must send it. What man has gone up to heaven to bring it down from the clouds? asks Baruch (3:29).

Because of the identification of the Word with Wisdom, the frequent personifications of Wisdom in the books of the inspired scribes of Israel are pertinent here, for they are personifications—however poetic—of the Word itself. This Wisdom-Word appears in public like a prophet preaching in Jerusalem's streets:

On top of the heights along the road,
at the crossroads [Wisdom] takes her stand;
by the gates at the approaches of the city,
in the entryways she cries aloud.
(Prov 8:2–3)
Wisdom claims eternal companionship with God before the world was, claims fellowship with Him in the work of creation, claims to hold within itself the very sources of life:

_from of old I was poured forth,  
at the first, before the earth. . . .  
When He made firm the skies above,  
when He fixed fast the foundations of the earth. . . .  
then was I beside Him as His craftsman,  
and I was His delight day by day. . . .  
He who finds me finds life._

(Prov 8:23, 28, 30, 35)

This life it offers to men; the Wisdom-Word offers its own self as the ever-sustaining food:

_Come, eat of my food  
and drink of the wine I have mixed._

(Prov 9:5)

The fathers of Israel were ever being reminded that "not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8:3). Their children too were ever being assured that this Word would never cloy but would give increase of appetite:

_He who eats of me will hunger still,  
be who drinks of me will thirst for more._

(Ecclus 24:20)

Are not these words somehow heard again on the lips of Him who sorrowed: "You are not willing to come to me that you may have life" (Jn 5:40); who stood and cried out:

_If anyone thirst,  
let him come to me and drink._

(Jn 7:37)
On His lips there is also the claim, couched in the very terms of Ecclesiasticus and yet infinitely bolder:

*He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.*

(Jn 6:35)

When a man comes who says: "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35), it is evident to the Hebrew mind what he is claiming to be.

VII

We have witnessed a tendency in Israel’s sacred literature to contemplate the Word of God as in a way distinct from God; to consider it, with poetic—no, more than poetic—imagination, as a person. The post-biblical Jewish tradition went further still on the way toward the personification of the Word. The author of the book of Sirach had written that the Word which came "from the mouth of the Most High" was created "before all ages, in the beginning" (Ecclus 24:3, 9). He was speaking of the everlasting Wisdom. Rabbinical tradition took up the theme. The Torah, it said, was made before the world was made, the working tool of the Holy One for its creation; God’s perfect daughter, it was light, life, and truth.⁹

A no less honored place was given to the Word by the Targumim, the Aramaic renderings of the Old Testament, whose oral tradition dates back to long before Christ, though their final redaction was not made till centuries after Him. Now the Word is called *memra.*¹⁰ At first glance, Memra would seem to be but a respectful synonym for God. It is, as we shall see, much more than this; yet it is indeed a literary device to safeguard the divine transcendence, a "buffer word."

⁹. References in Gerhard Kittel, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1933), IV, 139, lines 14–27.

¹⁰. To be more specific, the Targumim use two terms for "word": *pitgama* where the Hebrew Scriptures have *debar Yawheh,* "the word of the Lord," be it revealing, prophesying, or commanding; and *memra,* which the Aramaic translators introduced into the text to take the place of Yahweh, of God Himself. See R. D. Middleton, "Logos and Shekinah in the Fourth Gospel," *Jewish Quarterly Review,* XXIX, 2 (Oct. 1938), pp. 107–107.
as George Foot Moore has called it. Thus it is no longer God who feels and tastes and handles, who is angered and takes offense; it is His Memra that does and suffers all these things. So the Targum to Gen 3:8 does not read: "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden"; rather, "They heard the sound of the Memra walking in the garden." In the Targum to Deut 9:3, it is not the Lord God, it is His Memra, that is called "a consuming fire." Again, it is not Yahweh, the Lord God, it is His Memra, that regrets having created man, that smites all the firstborn of Egypt, that is offended by Israel's grumblings in the desert.

In these and other instances, Memra may well be a literary device to avoid speaking of God in too human terms. Yet there is a startling rabbinic insistence on the Memra's mediatiorship between God and man. "The Memra brings Israel near to God and sits on His throne receiving Israel's prayers," reads the Jerusalem Targum to Deut 4:7. Other targumic passages speak of the Memra as God's agent in the creating of the earth, in the administering of justice, in the ruling of man's destiny. Still others see the Memra as the shield of Noah and of Abraham, as the guardian of Jacob and of all the house of Jacob. Again, the Memra works the wonders of Egypt, goes before Israel in the desert, blesses the people and battles for it. It is called "comforter" and "witness" and "like a father to Israel." In the Memra "redemption will be found." "My Memra," says the Lord God, "shall be unto you like a good plowman who takes off the yoke from the shoulder of the oxen." These beautiful passages leave no doubt that the targumic literature regarded the Word as a mediator between heaven and earth. Here, clearly, is an attempt to build a bridge between the finite and the Infinite, and we receive the impression that something new has been seen. Or better, the vision of God seems somehow fuller and richer; He is the God utterly transcendent and yet utterly

immanent, very far and very near. Moreover, the work of mediation between God and man is a divine work, given to the divine Word, the Memra, which issues forth from God.

Certainly the way is paved here for St. John’s presentation of Christ as the Word and for St. Paul’s presentation of Him as the Wisdom of God (see 1 Cor 1:24, 30; Col 2:3). A Christian would suspect that here Jewish tradition was under a wondrous pressure from revelation. At least the targumic use of Memra was a psychological preparation for the shock of Christ’s newness; in this sense too Memra may be called a “buffer,” but a “buffer idea” rather than a “buffer word.” Quite evidently, and understandably, Jewish faith in the one living God—a faith so often imperiled by the polytheistic world around it and by the people’s temptation to compromise with that world—would have been affronted by a brusque “I am God” from Jesus’ lips. But the Memra might well say: “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30), or: “Philip, he who sees me sees also the Father” (Jn 14:9).

Yet an anxiety to combine God’s remoteness above the universe with His proximity to His people Israel does not account for all the uses of Memra. This anxiety may well have led to the adoption of the term but scarcely explains its subsequent expansion—I mean its use in cases where no anthropomorphism is to be feared. The Targum to

14. Well worth recording is J. Abelson’s view that the chief reason behind the use of Memra is the desire to express God’s immanence. “The view commonly taken that the Memra is an expedient for avoiding the ascription of anthropomorphism to the Deity is only half the truth,” he writes, for “the Memra has a deep theological or mystical significance,” entering “into the relations between the human and the Divine, between God, man and the world, to an even greater extent than the Shechinah.” The Memra, Abelson states, “is the expounding of the ‘Word’ from the Jewish point of view. All things exist by virtue of the word (i.e. Memra) of God. It permeates everything, brings everything into the realm of being, conditions everything. It is the immanent manifestation of God in the world of matter and spirit. Divine wisdom, Divine power, Divine love, Divine justice, all these do not abide in the highest heavens, isolated, unapproachable, unknowable. They are imbedded in the scheme of things that we can see and feel and touch and know. They are a part of the constitution of man and the world. Man and the world are a fragment of them. The Memra comprises and expresses these teachings” (The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature, London: Macmillan, 1912, pp. 150-153).

Deut 33:7, for example, reads not: "Hear, O God," but "Hear, O Memra of God, the voice of Judah's prayer." Or again, the Jerusalem Targum to Num 10:35–36 which had Moses plead: "Arise, O Memra of the Lord. . . . Return, O Memra of the Lord." Memra, then, is more than a literary device, more than a "buffer."

To say, as Moore does, that Memra "is purely a phenomenon of translation, not a figment of speculation," is perhaps to offer too sharp an alternative—an alternative which takes little account of the psychology behind a growing tradition. It would surely be rash to contend that the rabbinic tradition was setting up, side by side with the one God, a distinct creative and law-giving Person, itself divine in nature, even though the Targum to Gen 28:20–21 has Jacob vow, on the morning following his vision at Bethel: "If the Memra of the Lord be my help . . . the Memra of the Lord shall be my God." On the other hand, the insistence and persistence and extension of the extraordinary use of Memra seem to betray a need in Israel's soul comparable to the yearnings of the prophet that God would rend the heavens and come down (Is 64:1). Hence, for instance, the repeated angelic interventions in the Jewish apocalypses of the same period. After all, it was that epoch of Greek speculation which sought intermediaries between finite and Infinite; the Jewish mind must have felt the influence. Further, it seems highly probable that the loving use of Memra in the targumic literature was later thought to come too close to Christian teaching—this would explain its suppression by the rabbinic commentators on Scripture, the Midrashim, which followed the Targumim. If this suggestion is valid, then the Memra must have stood on the threshold of personification. I do not contend that Jewish tradition really knew whither it was tending but rather that there may have been a half-conscious thrust toward an unseen goal.


17. Such is the view of Kaufmann Kohler, who ends his article on "Memra" in the Jewish Encyclopedia by saying: "Possibly on account of the Christian dogma, rabbinic theology, outside of the Targum literature, made little use of the term 'Memra'" (VIII, 465).

18. This position is midway between the two extremes: Memra a mere synonym for God, a device of translation devoid of all theological content; or Memra a person intermediary between God and man. In support of "mere synonym," see Moore, op. cit., I, 417–419; and "Intermediaries in Jewish Theology," Harvard Theological Review, XV (1922), pp. 53–54; Strack-Billerbeck, Kommentar zum Neuen Testament (München: C. H. Beck, 1922), II, 303–304; W. F. Albright, From the Stone Age to Christianity (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1940), pp. 286 ff;
To sum up: The Word of God in biblical thought reveals. It reveals whether by creation or by more direct instruction, which breaks in upon man from without. For the Greek, the Word, *logos*, was the inner order and reason determining the self-revealing cosmos, whether a personal God was to be thought of or no. It was not so, it could not be so for the Israel of old with its deep sense of the otherness of God, a sense we Christians inherit. Pantheistic thinking was as alien to the ancient people of God as it is to us. The Word, we have seen, became more and more articulate: the voice of creation was reinforced by the voice of the Law, the voice of the Law by the tongues of the prophets and of the inspired scribes. Finally, the notion of the Word reached a stage beyond which it could not go unless in truth it appeared in person upon earth. At this stage Israel stops, the Church goes on.

VIII

In the first chapter of the fourth Gospel, the final step in the long march is taken: "And the Word was made flesh." The Word that had spoken to man from rock and river; the Word that had alighted on Zion and spoken to Israel through the Law; the Word that had been spoken by the lips of the prophets; the Word that Israel’s scribes and rabbis had reverenced as its guide and protector; this same Word—said the Evangelist—had this time, this end of time, taken to itself a human body.

In a certain sense this Word had taken to itself many human bodies when it spoke through the prophets, but now by a unique, permanent, and personal union it had assumed a human nature as its instru-


19. I use "human body" here the same way the Evangelist uses "flesh," for the whole of human nature, soul and body, with the emphasis on what is its infinite distance and difference from God: its mortal frailty.

20. In the books of the prophets we read: "The word of the Lord came to Isaiah, saying . . . ." (38:4), or "to Ezekiel" (1:3), or "to Hosea" (1:1). But nowhere in the New Testament do we read that "the Word of the Lord came to Jesus, saying . . . .," because it is in Him.
ment, as the new vehicle of revelation, speaking as neither creation nor Law nor prophet could ever speak.

It is needless to say that we men are incapable of understanding God's Word as it is in Him. It must be mediated through the words of a human intelligence. Hence the humanity assumed by the Dabar, the Logos, is a true human nature, not an appearance only, and its intelligence functions in truly human fashion—otherwise the Incarnation is not the link between God and ourselves. Nevertheless "the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). The Word was no second God any more than the "Word" of Jewish tradition had been, but the Godhead was now seen to bear within itself a mystery of plurality in unity—plurality of relation, unity of essence—or, in the formula of a Christian theology no less tenacious of monotheism than the Jewish: one in nature, more than one in person.21

IX

It was, if I may call it so, the paroxysm, the climax, of divine effort that brought the Word in the flesh. The creative Word in the cosmos had been ignored by the Gentile, "who from the good things seen," the author of the book of Wisdom mourns, "did not succeed in knowing Him who is" (13:1). The revealing Word in the Law had so often gone unheeded; that Israel had not heard had so often been the lament of the prophets (Is 1:3; 30:12; Jer 6:10; Ez 3:7; Os 9:17; Soph 3:2). And so the Word that spoke through the prophets speaks again, this time through the Son, speaking truly with human lips but most poignantly in deeds. Of old, God had repeatedly declared His love for His people, repeatedly shown it in Israel's history. Yet it was

21. Without discussing here certain of his misinterpretations of St. John's Gospel, it is interesting to note that Abelson (op. cit., pp. 161–165) finds nothing in St. John's theology to counter ancient Jewish tradition. To the Evangelist, who, according to Abelson, echoes "the Jewish apocalyptic as well as the Palestinian rabbinic teachings in the first century A.D.," the truth that God is one, that there is no "dualism of Deity," is an "unassailable stronghold." In the passage, "The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was made nothing that has been made," Abelson sees but a firm insistence on the divine unity. I fear, however, that he did not discern the full meaning of his own words when he spoke so rightly of the unity of God as "unique," "incomparable." For the oneness of God is a oneness which breaks open our everyday thoughts and terms, a unity absolutely above any unity to be met in the world of finite creatures; it is a unity on an infinite plane.
still possible for men to ask how far that love could go—perhaps even to begin to wonder what “love” meant at all in an infinite God. But now, translated into the sacrificing life and sacrificial death of the Son, God’s Word is shown to be a message of love as man understands love. Translated into the resurrection of that crucified flesh, it is shown to be a Word of triumphant hope and of the promise of life. For it is the function of the Word-in-flesh to bring life, to create.

This is why the opening phrase of John’s Gospel is a deliberate echo of the first word of the Bible: “In the beginning,” Bereshit, which is the very title of Genesis in the Hebrew canon. There “In the beginning” introduces an account of the creation of the material universe, and St. John invites us from the outset to identify the Word which is to take flesh with the creative Word of Israel’s tradition:

\[
\text{In the beginning was the Word. . . .}
\text{and without Him was made nothing. (Jn 1:1, 3)}
\]

This strikes the Psalmist’s note:

\[
\text{By the word of the Lord the heavens were made;}
\text{by the breath of His mouth all their host. . . .}
\text{For He spoke, and [the earth] was made;}
\text{He commanded, and it stood forth. (Ps 32:6, 9)}
\]

And indeed the whole marvelous pattern of John’s prologue, which begins in heaven where “the Word was with God,” then comes to earth where “the Word was made flesh,” where it does its work of grace and creates the new sons of God, urgently recalls the Isaian description of the Word as the rain coming down from above to water the earth that seeds may grow and men live (55:10–11). Again, the Word’s descent is modeled on the Old Testament hymns to the Wisdom which is the Word: Wisdom with God from the beginning, Wisdom taking part in the world’s making, Wisdom coming to earth to bestow its riches upon those who would receive them.22 Similarly, according to John, the Dabar is “in the beginning with God”; by Him all things were made; once more “He came unto His own,” to

the chosen people on earth, and gave to "those who believe in His name" "the power of becoming sons of God." 23

But the prologue of John is more than a prologue; it is in miniature his own Gospel, in which there recurs constantly the theme of the Dabar which creates. We may not agree with those who, on the model of the Genesis account of creation, would arrange the whole of John's Gospel in a seven-day framework 24 but at least it is evident that the motif of new creation underlies every chapter of it. 25 The giving of life preoccupies it: "I came that they may have life," "I am the resurrection and the life," "Unless a man be born again . . ." (10:10; 11:25; 3:5). Forty times the noun "life" occurs in John's Gospel to Mark's four. For John, Christ's is a new world, a creation of higher order than this, an order in which even the material body is glorified. It is the "regeneration" or "second genesis," the palin genesia, of which Christ Himself speaks (Mt 19:28), the "new creation in Christ" of Paul (Gal 6:15), the "new heavens and new earth" promised by Isaiah (65:17) and seen near by John (Apoc 21:1). The turning point of history is come: the Word of the Lord, the debar Yabweb, has resumed its creative activity on a wondrously higher plane. Its is a destiny worthy of the God from whom it came.

It is not that a stray sentence here or there in the prophets glows more brightly in the light of Christ, but that the total expectation of Israel, increasing in tempo, growing in volume, rising in pitch, could never be thwarted—because it was of God. If there is one datum that stands out in the preaching of the ancient prophets, it is that God would do greater things for His people than the great things already

23. It may be well to remember that John was nurtured not only on the Hebrew Scriptures but on their Aramaic versions as well. Hence the prologue of his Gospel, illumining the mystery of Jesus, has a savor also of the Targumim. For instance, as "all things were made through Him," so, according to the Targumim, the world was created, the earth shaped, and man made in God's image, by the Memra of the Lord (Targ. to Deut 33:27; Targ. Pseudo-Jon. to Is 45:12; Targ. Jer. to Gen 1:27). Again, as the Word-made-flesh "dwelt among us," so according to the Targumim, the divine Presence (shekinah, in Aramaic shekinta) was to dwell in the tabernacles of Shem and in the midst of the children of Israel (Targ. to Gen 9:27; Targ. to Ex 29:45). And as John saw "the glory as of the Only-begotten of the Father," so the Targum has Moses, Aaron, and the elders of the people see the glory (kabod, in Aramaic yechara) of the God of Israel (Targ. to Ex 24:10).


done. But since it is of God we speak, the word "great" must not be thought of in terms of size and visibility. In such a context true crescendo is of quality. However invisible its effect, the Word of God that raises creature to supernature is more powerfully active than the same Word when it first constituted creation in its natural being. In this is the Word "fulfilled," that it has established man in the noblest state he is capable of receiving. It has not disappointed Israel's highest hopes in the God whose spirit "renews the face of the earth" (Ps 103:30).

x

THIS, then, is the course the Word of Yahweh runs: from creation to creation, from making to remaking, from the fashioning of the world to the renewal of man, and even of the world in Christ. While marveling at this journey, I am reminded of an old Jewish blessing. Though far from seeing this journey as I have traced it, the prayer speaks most beautifully of the two termini. It is a greeting of the new moon, which the ancient rabbis considered a symbol of the messianic redemption and renewal of Israel. So highly is this blessing valued that, to one of them, the pronouncing of the words which conclude it: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, who renewest the months," was like welcoming the divine Indwelling, the Shekinah.

Blessed art thou,
O Lord our God, King of the universe,
whose word made the heavens
and the breath of whose mouth all their host.
Law and appointed times He gave them
that they should not falter in their parts.
Joyful and glad they are to do the will of their Master,
the true Worker, whose work is truth.
The moon He bade to renew herself,
a crown of beauty for those He upheld from the womb.
In the time to come they will be renewed like her,
and will glorify their Maker for the honor of His kingdom.26