

The Bible as the *Dabar* of God

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When the Blessed Virgin purportedly appeared several times in Agoo, La Union, to a youthful visionary, thousands of people —some even said more than a million—, flocked to that place hoping to be one of the privileged souls to get a glimpse of the Mother of God. In fact some were greatly thrilled and immeasurably awed when, according to them, they witnessed the “dancing sun.” Of course the sun objectively never really “danced” in the sky. If it had been so, all the people in the world where the sun was shining on that day would have experienced it. But *subjectively*, as observed by some beholders, the sun really danced or changed colors. With greater emotional experience would they have undergone if they had heard the Blessed Virgin herself speak, or greater still, if they had seen her!

But actually, contrary to what others think, the Blessed Virgin cannot really appear here on earth as she is now in heaven. Not only because the glorious body does not wear clothes but she cannot appear anymore in her real heavenly existence as crying or much less shedding tears of blood since she is already in her glorious state. Hence even authentic apparitions of the Blessed Virgin on earth can only be considered as *manifestations*. Just like the appearance of an image, for instance, on a television screen. We are easily lead think that the image is real, that is, we do not anymore make distinction between the person we see on TV through images formed by the movements of electrons on a phosphorous screen and the real person. Even the phenomenon of speaking is imitated on TV by means of radio waves translated into sound waves by the vibrations in the diaphragm of a loud-speaker.

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Hence apparitions of heavenly entities like the Blessed Mother or our Lord to privileged people do not exactly mean that these individuals see the real person of these heavenly beings just as, for instance, seeing the person of the Pope, but simply manifestations using the different media in nature —like condensation of air or production of sound waves—, influencing the imagination or the external senses of the visionary or visionaries. If these effects were produced by the Blessed Virgin herself then the communication would be an authentic one from her. But other agents or factors may also be responsible for such phenomena, even evil preternatural forces like the devil. Or perhaps only natural agents, in which case the communication cannot be considered as something supernatural. Only communications coming directly from God can be regarded as strictly supernatural.

From the great number of people who flock to apparition sites of the Blessed Virgin all over the world we can conclude that many indeed are hungering for divine communication. But it also shows the ignorance of many people concerning the nature and the fact of divine communication. God has already spoken to us; actually, He became one of us: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." But even before the Incarnation of the Word, God was already the *Immanuel* ("God with us"): "At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son..." (Hebrews, 1:1-2, *Jerusalem Bible*¹). In the Acts of the Apostles 13:17-26, as given by St. Luke, St. Paul concludes his summary of the, important events in the history of the chosen people with these words: "Brethren children of Abraham's race, this message of salvation is meant for you."

It is interesting to observe that the "message of salvation" mentioned by St. Paul refers to events or actual historical happenings in the life of a people who descended from Abraham. This is in fact one of the meanings of the term *dabar* in Hebrew —"event," although the usual translation is "word." Another important observation is that these events have God as their principal agent: "He chose our ancestors," "He made them stay in Egypt," "He led them out," "He prepared the way for the coming of Jesus-Savior in the line of David whom He selected after rejecting Saul." Hence, in the mind of St. Paul, God has immersed himself in history (*Immanuel*), a history which can be truly called divine.

¹ Biblical quotations in this article, unless otherwise noted, will be taken from this version.

It has been the constant belief of the Church that the things contained in the Bible are the "words of God." But what does this really imply? Does it really mean that when the book of Genesis, for instance, says that "God said," there was a time when He actually uttered these words to create the universe and the elements in the universe? In the other books of the Pentateuch we read that God spoke to Abraham and especially to Moses (so many times in the books of Genesis to Numbers, but scarcely in Deuteronomy.) In the short book of Ruth we do not read any episode of God talking to man, neither in the book of Proverbs and Qoheleth or Ecclesiastes.

In the so-called text of the "Davidic Succession," from chapters 9-20 of 2 Samuel and 1-2 of 1 Kings, which is considered one of the ancient texts of the Bible dating from about the tenth century B.C., there is hardly an episode of God talking directly to man. The origin of this text, the homogeneity of which is very striking, has been seriously studied by many scholars and its historical import is fairly well established. The author was very likely contemporary with the events he wrote, during the time of David and Solomon.

It is a fact of experience that the greater the gap between the writer and the events being reported the more inaccuracies are likely to appear. Biblical historians have still to fill up so many *lacunae* in the history of the chosen people, some of which are already probably impossible to recover. The historical gap between the last chapter of Genesis and the first chapter of Exodus can easily extend to about four hundred years or even more. The Bible is silent about these four hundred years. Some documents discovered in Egypt, like the letters found in Tell-el-Amarna of the 15th-14th cent. B.C., and other archaeological findings have bridged somewhat this gap. Yet the author or authors of the Exodus' texts lived many centuries later. The Persian period from the fall of Babylon to the conquest of Alexander the Great, —about two hundred years (539-333 B.C.)—, is also a hazy period in biblical history. It is mentioned in the book of Esther but because much data in this book do not correspond with established historical data, it is assumed that this book was only written during the subsequent Greek period.

The writer or writers of the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were centuries separated from the events they wrote. How then were they able to know the historical accuracies of these events? The most plausible answer to this query is that they received these stories through oral tradition, a practice which, because of the scarcity of

writing during those times, preserved the memory of their origins, however scanty and most often colored by transmission. It is through the final phase of these traditions consigned into writing where we should look for God's message in the Bible.

The final text is definitely the text which has God for its author. This affirmation has more than just what meets the eye. It clearly implies that there was a stage when the text was not yet final and, hence, has a history itself of editorial re-workings. This is what biblical scholars call a *history of redaction*. As there is a "history of tradition" which traces how the different events or ideas now contained in Scripture had originated and developed, there is also a "history of redaction" which traces the progress in the writing of the text until its final completion. The Bible itself is a witness to this history of redaction.

In Jeremiah 36:1 ff. we read that the prophet was addressed by Yahweh to "take a scroll and write on it all the words He has spoken to him about Jerusalem and Judah..." This was about the year 604/5 B.C. Jeremiah then employed Baruch as secretary "who at his dictation wrote down on the scroll all the words Yahweh had spoken to him" (36:4). But this first scroll was later on burnt by King Jehoiakim since it contained oracles inimical to the royalty and to Jerusalem (vv. 22-25). Yahweh again ordered Jeremiah to "take another scroll and write down all the words that were written on the first scroll burnt by Jehoiakim, king of Judah" (v. 28). "Jeremiah then took another scroll and gave it to the scribe Baruch, son of Neriah, and at the dictation of Jeremiah he wrote down all the words of the book that Jehoiakim had burnt, *with many similar words in addition*" (v. 32).

The second scroll, then, although substantially the same as the first scroll that was burnt, contained other things which were not in the first. The narration of this story in our present book of Jeremiah could not have come from the prophet himself. Some biblical scholars surmised that it could have come from Baruch the secretary.

As a matter of fact the ordering of the chapters of Jeremiah is different in the Septuagint (LXX) —the oldest version of the Old Testament in Greek— and in the so-called Masoretic Text (MT), the oldest extant manuscript of which, although in Hebrew, dates only from the ninth century A.D. (It was discovered in the synagogue of the Jewish Karaites of Cairo in 895 A.D.). The discoveries of biblical manuscripts in the Judaean desert, especially at the Qumran area near the Dead Sea, seem to prove that the underlying Hebrew text of the

Septuagint has significant variants compared with the Masoretic Text. In the Septuagint, the so-called "Oracles Against the Nations" of Jeremiah are found in chapters 26 to 28:64, while in the Masoretic version they are placed in chapters 46 to 51. However, chapter 25:15-38, which immediately precede in the Septuagint text, is definitely an introduction to these oracles. Evidently they are out of place in the Masoretic Text. Unfortunately many English versions of the Bible still follow the Masoretic ordering of this text of Jeremiah.

A rough sketch of the composition and editorial reworkings of the text of Jeremiah may thus be plotted:

1. His prophetic ministry, starting from the year 626 B.C. during the time of Josiah. His oracles were delivered orally until he was ordered by Yahweh to write them down with the help of Baruch in 605 B.C., during the reign of King Jehoiakim.

2. This first scroll was burnt by King Jehoiakim but it was reconstructed again with the help of Baruch, even with some additions. This text may be found in our present Bible from chapters 1 to 24, after removing some biographical elements, probably written by Baruch, like 19:1-20:6; consoling oracles in 3:12-18 and 23:4-6, which seem to be editorial additions; passages which were written after the death of Jehoiakim as chapters 21-24; "Oracles Against the Nations" (LXX: 26 - 28:64; MT: 46-51), and separating chapters 50-51, which seem to be originally exilic or post-exilic passages.

3. Baruch probably added later on the biographical passages in chapters 26 to 44 with the short conclusion of chapter 45, known as the *Passions of Jeremiah*.

4. During and after the exile, the second part of the 6th century B.C., other texts were appended and the whole work was edited by the disciples of Jeremiah with the addition of an appendix taken from 2 Kings 24:18 - 25:30.

We also read in Jer 51:59-64 that "Jeremiah had written down in a special book the entire disaster that was to befall on Babylon." However, this scroll was thrown into the middle of the Euphrates river as a prophetic symbol of the sinking or ruin of Babylon. The contents of this scroll seems to have been substantially the same as the prophecies against Babylon included in the "Oracles Against the Nations."

This process of composition and redaction of the Book of Jeremiah is similar in general terms to the other prophetic books. There was first a stage of oral preaching, then the writing of the substantial contents of the prophecies, followed by the final editing of the whole book, usually by disciples of the prophet with their own additions. In the book of Jeremiah, we find that Baruch was one of those mainly responsible for the writing of the text and other substantial additions. Other additions were made during and after the exile. By the end of the 6th century B.C. the final text of Jeremiah could already have been finished.

What we have just traced roughly with regards to the stages in the composition and redaction of the book of Jeremiah raises questions on our understanding of the Bible as the "word of God." This stages are not only verified in the book of Jeremiah but in other biblical books as well. In fact the history of the composition of the Pentateuch has been shown to be much more complicated, the total process of which may not be anymore traceable. A similar complex process has also been found in the composition of the Gospels.

In the first place, does this phrase "word of God" refer only to those prophecies dictated by Jeremiah to Baruch which, as Yahweh says in the text, are "all the words spoken by Him?" And what about the passages written personally by Baruch himself without any direct intervention neither from Jeremiah nor from God? What of the editorial reworkings and additions of later scribes? When the text in Jeremiah says that the prophet "summoned Baruch, who at his dictation wrote down on the scroll all the words Yahweh had spoken to him," it is commonly understood that the authors of the finished scroll, although it was written by Baruch, were both Yahweh and Jeremiah. The same understanding is held with regards to the letter to the Romans, the real author of this letter being St. Paul, although in 16:22, the actual writer of the letter —definitely with a secretarial function— was Tertius.

But if we apply the phrase "word of God" merely to those passages which were spoken by Yahweh to a prophet or to an individual, then there would be only very few of such passages in the whole Scripture. Yet it has been the constant teaching of the Church that all the passages in the Bible —down to the word-level, which includes all the punctuation marks in the original language and script of the writers, whether Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek—, *have God for their author*. At the same time, according to their own merits and contributions, the human writers are also regarded as true authors. This is the Church's doctrine on the two-fold authorship of Scripture: divine and human. The Church,

however, has rejected the explanation of this divine authorship as mere mechanical dictation, the human author simply acting as a secretary. In the case for instance of those passages dictated by Jeremiah to Baruch, or by Paul to Tertius (Romans 16:22), or by Peter to Silvanus (1 Peter 5:12), the authentic authors are, of course, the ones who dictated the passages. But we know later on that Baruch also wrote passages on his own and not anymore as secretary, thus being himself the authentic author of those passages.

There is a term in biblical scholarship for these human authors. They are called *hagiographers*, meaning "sacred writers." However, if these hagiographers were not mere secretaries of God but true authors on their own rights, how can we reconcile the fact that God is also the true author of these passages without dictating the actual words to the human author? The key explanation is given to us by St. Paul in 2 Tim 3:16: "All scripture is *inspired* by God." Of course, in this Pauline passage the word "scripture" does not yet include the books of the New Testament. This could only refer to the books of the Old Testament. It was only later on, through the teachings of the apostles themselves guided by the Holy Spirit—who by appropriation is regarded as the true divine author of Sacred Scripture—that all the books of the New Testament were accepted as "scripture," hence also *inspired by God*.

It took many centuries for the Bible to be completed with so many human authors who collaborated in its writing. It is more of a library than a single work. In the canon declared by the Council of Trent there were seventy three books all in all. Some religious groups accept less. Traditionally it is claimed that Moses was one of the ancient authors of the Bible which could push the first stages of the writing of biblical texts to the thirteenth century B.C., the most probable period when Moses lived. However, modern biblical scholarship tends to minimize the scribal role of Moses and explains the traditional view of his authorship of the first five books of the Bible, called the "Pentateuch," to be more of an influence and authority rather than of actual authorship. (This is explained to be somewhat analogical to the name of "Webster" appended to all the Webster's dictionaries after him, not because he actually wrote these dictionaries in their present form but because of his great influence in lexicography.)

If Moses wrote anything we do not exactly know which passages in Scripture he wrote. Some biblical scholars contend—and I share this view—that the primitive text of the Decalogue came from his hands, of course, without prejudice to the view that the ultimate author of this

Decalogue, through the charism of inspiration, was God himself. However, we find two formulations of the Decalogue in the Bible itself, one in Exodus 20:1-17 and the other in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. From the differences in the wordings of the Decalogue, it can easily be concluded that it had passed through a process of redaction.

Whether there were some texts in our actual Bible written before the time of Moses is something difficult to determine. But the traditions behind the texts go back with certainty to the time of Abraham, about the 19th century B.C. Yet we cannot say that there were already written passages about the Patriarchs during this nineteenth century period. Most likely they were oral traditions handed down from one generation to another until these traditions were put into writing at a later date. Certainly the stories about the creation of the world, about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Deluge, and the Tower of Babel were unwritten traditions, the origins of which are difficult but not impossible to determine.

We may venture on the origin of the Tower-of-Babel tradition, which later on became part of the composition of a scribe, probably during the time of David and Solomon. The story speaks of Shin'ar, which can only mean the Mesopotamian region. The mention of "bricks baked in the fire" confirms this setting, since these are the native building materials in the region. In fact, in this area, archaeologists have discovered tower-like structures, actually sanctuaries for the gods and goddesses of the people. Such structures are called *ziggurats*. A particular ziggurat was discovered in Babylon itself being described by the Greek historian Herodotus as having a base of about 100 square meters, an area of about one hectare, and a height of about 100 meters. Indeed an imposing structure by the standards of the time! The construction of this ziggurat was already started during the reign of Sharkalisharri in 2225 B.C. and was possibly in use during the First Babylonian Dynasty (1830-1530 B.C.). However ancient Babylon was destroyed by the Hittites coming from the Anatolian region under Mursilis I in 1530 B.C. and this ziggurat was ruined, giving the impression of being unfinished. The splendor of Babylon together with this ziggurat was restored by Nebuchadnezzar in the 7th century B.C. Since the writing of the Tower-of-Babel tradition was most probably during the 10th century B.C., as part of the Yahwist (J) document, the tradition of an 'unfinished' tower—which became the object of a theological reflection of man's pride causing the diversity of languages—could only have originated in between the years after the

destruction of this ziggurat by the Hittites in the 16th century B.C. and the actual writing of this tradition in the 10th century B.C.

It is the actual writing of this tradition now enshrined in the Bible that is inspired or directly influenced by the Holy Spirit which makes God the author of this text and not the origin and the process of handling down of this tradition. Similar processes may be discerned in other traditions behind the biblical texts. But it is always the act of writing of chosen individuals whom we call the hagiographers which had been influenced by the divine charism of inspiration.

Since the Bible contains so many books, each book or group of books has its own history of composition, sometimes written not only by one author but by several authors, all of whom must have enjoyed the charism of inspiration. The final text, called the autograph, which is the text which directly came from the hands of the hagiographer and is now part of the biblical whole, is the "word of God."

Hence God has communicated to us through the written medium by using human individuals as instruments. Not inert or passive instruments, like a stylus or a pen, but living and intelligent instruments, each one endowed with different personality and cultural background. The prophet Isaiah, for example, who lived during the 8th century B.C. was distinct as a person from St. John, who wrote during the later part of the first century A.D. But all the while the Holy Spirit had been there during the centuries that the Bible was being composed giving the hagiographers the charism of inspiration.

The charism of inspiration did not destroy the personality of the hagiographer by making him into a robot. He remained a free and intelligent individual, although all his faculties were in a way elevated through this supernatural force from the Holy Spirit so that the effect, which is the written text, would also be truly a divine effect. But here is the rub: Since Sacred Scripture is a written medium, what is exactly the divine message? In other words what did God really reveal to us?

Some difficulties with the Bible as a written medium have something to do in the first place with the time span of its composition, which took more than a thousand years. Also with the texts, being written in three ancient languages which are not anymore spoken, namely, Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, although Hebrew and Greek are now modernly transformed. And finally with the many human authors who collaborated in its composition, some of them contributing only with a phrase, as happened with glosses which later on became part of the text,

some others with more substantial texts and who have remained anonymous, like the Deutero-Isaiah and the author of the Davidic Succession in 2 Sam 9-20 and 1 Kgs 1-2. Historical, cultural and ideological contexts of the authors were also diverse in place and time.

But these difficulties are somewhat attenuated by the realization that the principal author of these books is still present with us. The Holy Spirit, who was the divine architect using different workers throughout the centuries to build the biblical edifice, is the same Spirit who is the soul of the Church, the Spirit of truth promised by Christ himself during the last supper and whose sending became a reality on that Pentecost immediately after the ascension of our Lord. The Church's understanding then of Scripture is very crucial as the only authentic interpretation of the word of God since this interpretation comes from the principal author himself of Scripture, the Holy Spirit.

Dei Verbum —the Constitution of the Second Vatican Council On Divine Revelation— expressed this by saying that the interpretation of Scripture should always be made according to the intention of the author or the sacred writers. We may distinguish, however, two levels of this intention, namely, the intention of the human author or authors and the intention of the divine author. We are assured, nevertheless, that the intention of the human author(s) because of the charism of inspiration never contradicted the intention of the divine author.

Yet, how are we going to determine the intention of the sacred writers or hagiographers? In other words, how are we going to distinguish the message from the medium? The literary medium itself can take on so many forms and we find a diversity of these literary media in the Bible. Poetry as a literary medium is definitely different from prose. Even among the prosaic literary media there are various kinds. A folklore is different from a novel; a prophetic oracle, from a sermon; a parable, from a historical writing; a fable, from a fiction, etc. A method of biblical interpretation has in fact developed by analyzing the various literary forms and even determining their history. This is called the form criticism method or, in German, the *formgeschichtliche methode*. It also aims to discover the various settings in life where these literary forms developed called by the exponents of this method in its German phrase as the *sitz-im-leben* ("situation in life").

There is no question about the validity of this method, which has helped very much in the understanding of Scripture since the beginning of this century when this was pioneered by Herman Gunkel for the book

of Psalms and Genesis. However, some prejudices and biases tend to color the conclusions of the users of this method, especially when it is used exclusively neglecting other valid methods.

Other authors start from the most basic in understanding the biblical text by using the so-called *philologico-grammatical method*. This requires a thorough mastery of the biblical languages, including its historical development. Even the mastery of the biblical languages would not be enough, since related languages could also shed light on the text. That is why serious biblical scholars study not only Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek but also other Semitic languages like Akkadian, "Amorite," Arabic, Syriac, Ugaritic and even other non-Semitic languages, like Sumerian and old Egyptian, written in hieroglyphics. The meaning of words has also suffered a historical transformation; that is why some authors attempt first to make a historical stratification of the meaning of words resulting also in a historical stratification of the biblical texts.

For example, the root word *qara'* in Hebrew can have the meaning of "he called," "he summoned," "he cried out," "he read," etc. The imperfect tense of this verb is *wayyiqra*. In Ex. 19:3 this was translated by the *Jerusalem Bible* as "he called," while others "he summoned." This has, however, caused a difficulty in the understanding of the text since Moses, according to the beginning of the sentence in v.3 was already on his way up to God. There is no more sense for God to summon him. In fact this difficulty was seen by some commentators of the book of Exodus but interpreted it to mean that Moses was just half-way on his journey up the mountain when God summoned him. This is rather a forced interpretation. Some, to avoid the discrepancy, have resorted to the division of the sentence between two traditions, the Elohist and the Yahwist, since the first phrase used "Elohim" while the second used "Yahweh." In fact this apparent disharmony can probably be solved by a simple philological and grammatical analysis. After making a thorough investigation of this word in all the verses where it is found in the Old Testament, this writer opted for the sense of "he proclaimed." Hence the sentence in our thinking should be translated: "And Yahweh *proclaimed* to him from the mountain saying..."

This technique requires patience but it is rewarding. A concordance reference is a most helpful tool in this regard. With the aid of concordances one can determine all the texts in the Bible where a particular word appears and more or less get its sense or its specific meaning as intended by the sacred writer.

It is often very easy to fall into the trap of interpreting the meaning of a word or text according to our contemporary meaning. This leads to what biblical scientists call *eisegeisis* or putting our own meaning to the text, and not *exegesis* or drawing the sense which the hagiographer intended. In fact it is useful in this regard to distinguish between the *meaning* of a word and its *sense*. The “meaning” of a word actually refers to its functional aspect of being used as a symbol or a sign of a reality. This depends on pure social convention. There is no natural law which says that a word (oral when it is formed by sounds from the vocal chords, the tongue and the lips; written when it is formed by letters) should mean the way it is. That is why the same thing or reality has different words in different languages. Man is *tao* in Filipino, *homo* in Latin, *anthropos* in Greek, ‘*adam* or ‘*ish* in Hebrew. Or the same word may have different meanings in different languages. *Pating* in Hiligaynon in the Province of Iloilo is a dove, while in Tagalog it is a shark.

A word, then, can have many meanings, as we usually see in dictionaries. Out of these different meanings a writer chooses a specific one. This is the *sense*. It is, therefore, very important to understand the sense of a writer in order to interpret accurately his text. Philology and the study of grammar is a very important tool in this area.

A cursory comparison of different translations of the Bible in English can show how important these linguistic tools are. The first sentence alone of Genesis is translated differently by different Bibles. In the *Jerusalem Bible* this verse runs: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep...” In the *New American Bible* and others the first sentence is not taken as absolute but as a clause. In fact, until now, there is no absolute certainty which translation is correct. The difficulty is traced in the precise reading of the root *BR’*, all consonants (beth, resh, alef), since the primitive text did not have vowels.

The autographs of the Hebrew biblical texts were certainly written only with consonants using the old Phoenician alphabet and later the Aramaic square script, while the vowels were later invention, only during the 6th to the 10th centuries A.D. This is not to be wondered at. Even today newspapers and most books in Israel are written with consonants only. A native speaker of Hebrew can easily understand them. Hence the exact reading of the texts had been the result of tradition. When vowels were invented by a group called the “Masoretes,”—and for this reason their text is called the *Masoretic Text*—, the word *BR’* was given the vowels *BaRa’* which grammatically in Hebrew is the

third person, singular, masculine of the perfect tense and, therefore, the translation of the *Jerusalem Bible*, confirmed by the Vulgate (Latin) and the Septuagint (Greek), is correct: "God created." But because of the phrase "in the beginning" (*berishith* in Hebrew) some Hebrew grammarians think that the word should not be in the perfect tense but in the infinitive mode, which therefore should be read as *BeRo'*, and hence becomes a complex sentence as found in the *New American Bible* (NAB). As a confirmation of this translation some biblical scholars refer to a parallel narration of creation in Sumerian known by its first words, the *Enuma Elish*, which is translated as a complex sentence and not as absolute. The nearest parallel is in Genesis 2:4b itself, where the sentence starts with the phrase *b'eyom 'asoth*, translated by JB in this fashion: "At the time when Yahweh God made earth and heaven there was as yet..."

Since we are so far distant in time from the autograph of the text we have to rely most often from the traditional understanding of the passage unless there is strong evidence whether from philology, grammar and other contexts either historical or literary to warrant a new interpretation.

A case in point is the translation of John 20:17. The translation in the Vulgate is *noli me tangere* (literally "do not touch me")—incidentally, words perpetuated by Jose Rizal by taking them as the title of his novel. But going back to the original Greek, the sense is rather the reverse. Greek has different ways of expressing a prohibition. When it is a prohibition of an action not yet done then the aorist tense is used, which in this case should be *me mou hapse*. But when it wishes to express a prohibition of an action already done, then, the present imperative is used. In this verse it is clear that it has the present imperative: *me mou haptou*, hence, it should be translated as a prohibition of an action already done. So that instead of "do not touch me," the translation should be literally "cease touching me" or, as translated by the Jerusalem Bible, "do not cling to me"—with a footnote which says, *Mary had fallen at the feet of Jesus to embrace them. Cf. Mt 28:9*. Our Lord seemed to be telling Mary Magdalene: "That will do. You can cease embracing my feet since you will still see me, as I have not yet gone to my Father."

The above examples clearly show the importance of philology and grammar in the understanding of the text. But this is not enough. If we are really to penetrate the intention or message of the writer we have to situate ourselves, as it were, in his ownself and this entails a lot of

difficulties for the solution of which historical science and even sociological and psychological sciences are invoked.

It can readily be seen that the Bible is literature of the past and written by men who lived in the past and who told us about past things, persons and events. But when a certain biblical writer narrates to us some past events it does not necessarily mean that those events are "historical," as we have already shown in the case of the Tower-of-Babel. To be sure, looking at this story in our present perspective, we may distinguish different levels of "historicality" (in our sense, real persons or events of the past, just like in the Filipino setting Marcos was real, Ninoy Aquino was real and the 1986 EDSA event was real).

The author who wrote the story of the "Tower of Babel" is a historical person; and even if this story was edited later on still we can posit this writer's historical existence. Another historical dimension would only be added, that is, the history of edition or redaction of this story. But this has to be proven by a literary analysis of the text. Yet we have also seen that the writer could have taken his story from a tradition that had been handed down originated in turn from another historical monument, the ziggurat of Babylon. As the story unfolded, especially as it is now presented to us in the Bible, it has already acquired a theological dimension and a theological message. This message is true and has a great salvific significance.

Everytime, then, we read a biblical passage we have to ask ourselves what the salvific message of the author of the text, given to us by his literary medium, really is. But first we have to isolate the literary unit written by the author and not only in the final reductional stage. Some examples in this regard can make our point clear.

Let us take as an example the book of Genesis. We have already said that, according to some biblical critics, this book was not written by only one author but by several authors, and that later on it was edited to form part of a collection which we call the *Pentateuch* (*Torah* by the Jews), the first five books of Scripture, traditionally attributed to Moses: *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, *Deuteronomy*. In the book of *Genesis* itself some critics have successfully isolated different literary units which are attributed to different traditions. Three principal traditions have been distinguished: the Yahwist (J), the Elohist (E) and the Priestly (P). These traditions were supposedly written down later on, that is why the first proponents of the distinction of these traditions spoke of J, E and P documents. Another document was identified afterwards, the D (*Deuteronomic*) document but new

studies tend to prove that this tradition or document cannot be found in the book of Genesis.

It was a physician in the court of King Louis XIV of France who first made the successful distinction of sources in Genesis and who, in 1753, wrote his findings in a book. His name was Jean Astruc. He observed, for instance, that in the first two chapters of Genesis the text used two names for God: *Elohim* and *Yahweh Elohim*. He devised two columns, which he tentatively named A and B. In the A column he copied all the texts in Genesis using only *Elohim* and in the B column all the passages with *Yahweh-Elohim* or just *Yahweh*. According to his observation, the text of Genesis 1-2:4a, which he placed in column A, came from a writer different from the one who wrote Genesis 2:4b - chap. 4:26. This work of Astruc was continued by other biblical critics, especially in Germany, not only using the name of God as criterion to distinguish the sources or traditions but other linguistic peculiarities and stylistic characteristics as well, and extending their work to the whole of the Pentateuch. In our times biblical hermeneutics or the science of biblical interpretation has developed so much that its findings using valid methods of interpretation are well accepted by biblical scholars.

It is now unquestioned, for example, that the author of Gen 1 - 2:4a is distinct from the author of 2:4b - 4:26. Further analysis has also shown that the first text came from the priestly tradition, that is why it is now called the P text, while the second literary unit has been attributed to the J tradition (from the German spelling of *Yahweh*: *Jahwe*).

These principal traditions have been studied and their time of composition has been generally determined. Between these two traditions, J and P, the more ancient of the two is the J tradition, which is placed during the time of David and Solomon. The date of its writing was most likely during the 10th century B.C., perhaps before the political and religious schism during the time of Rehoboam, the successor of Solomon as king of Judah, in about 931 B.C. In fact there are indications that the writing of the story of Joseph in its main lines was written during the time of Solomon.

In our present biblical text, however, these traditions are already combined. The first and second chapter of Genesis, telling us about creation, are read as a continuous text. But even in the translations the literary style of the two passages is discernibly different and their contents do not accurately match. For example in Gen 1:11 God created the plants on the third day before the creation of man (male and female)

on the sixth day, but in Gen 2:5 it is said that "there was as yet no wild bush on the earth nor had any wild plant yet sprung up, for Yahweh God had not sent rain on the earth, nor was there any man to till the soil." In the first account of creation the birds and animals were created before man. But in Gen 2:19 the beasts and birds were created after the male human being while the female human being was created after them in v. 21. This was not so in the first story of creation when God created man, "male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). These divergencies in the details of creation can easily be explained by referring them to two different traditions of the story of creation, the first one coming from the Priestly tradition (P) while the second from the Yahwist tradition (J).

Nevertheless their messages do not conflict. They are only given in different literary expressions. For instance the message that man was created in a special fashion, different from other living things like the plants and the beasts, is expressed in the first story by saying that man was created in the image of God. In the second story it is given with an anthropomorphic (human form) expression as God breathing into the nostrils of man the breath of life. There is another literary form of the message of creation in the Bible expressed in hymnic-poetic form found in Psalm 104. All these literary media express the same message but in different forms.

There is no truth or falsity in the literary medium. Truth or falsity is found in the message. Although the biblical authors employed different literary media, their message "for the sake of salvation" has God as its ultimate author and, therefore, it is always true. The goal of the literary analysts of the Bible is, then, to find out the sacred writers' message, which is in fact their intention in writing the text. These messages are the ones that are revealed in Sacred Scripture.

To discover the message of every biblical writer, aside from the literary context of their writings, other contexts have also to be taken into account, foremost of which are the historical context and the theological context.

As we have already pointed above, even the writings of a biblical author have a historical context. In fact the life itself of the writer is part of history and the things he wrote may also have a historical dimension. We have seen this, for instance, in the narration of the "tower of Babel." Whoever wrote this story, we call him an author of the Yahwist tradition or the "J," written after 1530 B.C. but before the 6th century B.C. when the ziggurat of Babylon, which was most probably the

inspiration of this story, was not yet repaired by Nebuchadnezzar. Yet the idea of the author that the building of this tower was the cause of the dispersion of languages cannot be historical. In fact in Genesis chapter 10 verses 5, 20, and 31 people were already speaking different languages. Rather this idea came from a theological reflection of this seemingly unfinished tower. In short it is a theological concept rather than a historical one.

The theological idea that pride is sinful and the cause of division among men is true. The ruined, historical ziggurat of Babylon was just an inspiration to convey this idea. As in the story of the deluge, the theological idea that nature has been rebelling against man because man has rebelled against God is also true. The literary medium of this idea was influenced by a devastating flood in the Mesopotamian region. The story of Cain and Abel is also explained not as a historical story between two brothers but between two classes of people: the farmers and shepherds. It could not be historical if it were to refer to the direct descendants of the first couple whom the Bible calls Adam and Eve since, according to anthropology, shepherding and farming came much later in the evolution of human history. But a theological aspect also comes to the fore in this story, which is the reality of conflict even among brothers. This motif is seen, for instance, in the story of Esau and Jacob and in the story of Joseph and his brothers.

We have, therefore, to be careful in distinguishing the historical context and the theological context, besides the literary context, in any biblical passage. It is easy to fall prey to "historicism" in our readings of the Bible, an aspect which may be far from the intention of the sacred writer. This kind of attitude would not be able to explain some passages in St. Matthew or even some sayings of our Lord which are manifestly in contradiction with some Old Testament data.

When Matthew (ch. 1) lists the genealogy of Jesus, he writes in v.8: "Jehoshaphat, the father of Joram; Joram, the father of Azariah; Azariah was the father of Jotham." But in 2 Kings this passage is contradicted by some texts. In 2 Kings 8:16, it is said: "In the fifth year of Joram, son of Ahab king of Israel, Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat became king of Judah." This is concluded in v. 23: "the rest of the history of Jehoram, his entire career, is not all this recorded in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah? Then Jehoram slept with his ancestors and was buried with them in the Citadel of David; his son Ahaziah succeeded him." This Ahaziah was assassinated by Jehu, who was succeeded by his mother Athaliah, who massacred all the descendants

of Jehoram except one, Jehoash (Joash), who was saved by his step-sister, Jehosheba (vv. 27-29; ch. 11:1-3). With the help of the priests of the Temple led by Jehoiada, Jehoash was proclaimed king upon reaching his seventh year of age and Athalia was executed (11:4-16). King Jehoash or Joash was succeeded by his son Amaziah. "He was twenty-five years old when he came to the throne, and he reigned for twenty-nine years in Jerusalem" (2 Kings 14:2). "The rest of the history of Amaziah, is not all this recorded in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah? A plot having been hatched against him in Jerusalem, he fled to Lachish; but he was followed to Lachish where he was put to death. He was brought back by horse and buried in Jerusalem with his ancestors in the Citadel of David. All the people of Judah chose Uzziah (Azariah), then sixteen years old, and made him king in succession to his father Amaziah" (2Kings 14:18-21).

From the data of 2 Kings it is clear that Azariah or Uzziah was not strictly speaking the son of Jehoram or Joram but rather his great-grandson. Three kings, therefore, are missing in the list of St. Matthew from Joram to Azariah/Uzziah: *Ahaziah, Jehoash and Amaziah*. Although Ahaziah and Jehoash were strictly half-brothers yet there are still three generations spanning Joram and Azariah. Still St. Matthew does proclaim that from David to the Babylonian deportation there were only fourteen generations (Mt. 1:17)!

We cannot, however, accuse St. Matthew of falsifying history by omitting some kings in his genealogy. For the Jews of his time it was legitimate to speak of the Messiah as the "son of David." Hence, there is no difficulty in speaking of Azariah or Uzziah as the son of Joram or Jehoram when in fact the former was the great-grandson of the latter. Some biblical critics also claim that St. Matthew intended to maintain the number fourteen in the generations from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the Babylonian captivity and fourteen from the Babylonian captivity to the birth of Christ since this hides in numerical figure the name of DAVID for by taking all the consonants (D, W or V, and D) in his name and substituting them by their numerical equivalents we get the total of 14. Thus, D = 4, V or W = 6, D = 4; $4+6+4 = 14$.

Every biblical text, therefore, has a historical context since it came from a writer who is by now a figure of history. But the text itself could have also undergone historical process, which we call a history of redaction. Some biblical analysts, for instance, contend that the J document, originated from the south about the 10th century B.C., and the E document, coming from the north, written about the first half of

the 8th century B.C. —although some authors do not accept a written E document but only an oral tradition— were later on merged by a redactor or redactors in the south after the fall of Samaria in 721 B.C. and many inhabitants of the north who were not exiled to Assyria took refuge in the south (cf. 2 Kings 17). This is called the JE texts and the redactor is called the JE redactor. Some biblical texts could also have come from this JE redactor, hence also injecting his own message in the Bible and even modifying the previous senses and theological perspectives already given by the J or E.

Nevertheless, in spite of this historical processes which the biblical texts underwent until their final writing, the ones which we consider “authored” by the Holy Spirit are the final texts. Our interpretation, then, should begin from these final texts.

Conclusion

When we say, therefore, that Sacred Scripture is “the word of God” we do not only mean that it is God’s communication to man by “talking” to privileged individuals which could have happened in many ways, either through sensible means by actually making those individuals hear His words. This type of communication is given profusely in the first books of the Bible as well as in the prophetic books. Yahweh seems to have been talking directly to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. But it is difficult to verify historically this kind of communication, which could only be in many cases a literary device on the part of the writer to say that God had communicated with these individuals. If we understand the term *dabar* not only as “word” but also as “event,” then the actuations themselves of the community as God’s people where God himself acted is the real “dabar” or “word-event” of God. God chose our ancestors, made them a great nation in Egypt, led them out of Egypt by his divine power, took care of them in wilderness, gave them the Promised Land, chose charismatic leaders for them, selected David as king rejecting Saul, made a covenant with David that his dynasty will last forever, fulfilled with the coming of Jesus “who will rule over the house of David forever whose kingdom will have no end.”

With the coming of Jesus, the Word made flesh, God’s revelation to mankind entered a new phase. The communication is not anymore through intermediaries but directly through the Son of God. Even with his ascension to heaven the Holy Spirit sent by the Lord, forever alive

in the Church, would, as the Lord himself has promised to his apostles in his sermon during the Last Supper, teach us and make us remember all the things that he has told us (Jn 14:26).