GOD SPOKE

By BRUCE VAWTER

SEVERAL YEARS AGO in this review when discussing 'the ways of God', the present writer instanced the biblical concept of word as 'the most inclusive and the most filled with meaning' in respect to the divine self-revelation in history.[1] As was then brought out, word in the biblical sense combines in itself dimensions of power and of vital activity that we more normally associate with other categories of being than that of verbal utterance. A striking exemplification of this phenomenon might be found in what appears to be two parellel recensions of the johannine thought making up the last supper discourse of the fourth gospel.[2] In the second of these, in the allegory of the true vine and its branches, Jesus says to the disciples: 'Already you are made clean through the word *(logos)* which I have spoken to you'.[3] 'Clean' here is a term of multiple meaning, with its ethical, moral and spiritual senses all being suggested by the 'cleaning' or pruning of the vine-church by the divine vine-dresser. In the parallel version, however, Jesus says that the disciples are 'clean' because of a symbolic act, the act of the footwashing which introduces the last supper discourse in its final redaction.[4] The footwashing is one of the non-miraculous johannine 'signs' of the glory of God, that is to say of the divine saving presence, of events in the life of the historical Jesus which point to the continuation of the Christ-event in the saving life and ministry of the church; here baptism is doubtless meant.

Thus in a greek document of the first christian century, the Gospel of John, we are made conscious of a dimension ascribed to *logos* which it did not normally possess in its 'native' greek. A saving word, quite obviously, can also be a saving act, or word and act can be one and the same thing.

To explain this phenomenon of language, recourse is generally had to the semitic thought-patterns underlying the word-theology

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[1] Cf 'The Ways of God', *The Way* 4 (1964), 167–175.

[2] That is, Jn 13–14 (note the conclusion in 14, 31), many of whose key-concepts are reiterated with formulaic variation in 15–16 (17).

[3] Jn 15, 3. [4] Cf Jn 13, 11.

of the bible, as was done in the article just mentioned. Though written in greek, the New Testament is rarely a greek work in any 'ideological' sense of greek literature. Despite well-taken *caveats* that have been issued against naive etymologizing and the alleged proclivity of biblical theologians to read their theology out of an 'inner lexicography' they have read into the bible,[1] the procedure remains basically sound. Language is, in some way, an index to the mind of the people that use it, their 'petrified philosophy', to employ Max Mueller's phrase;[2] a study of the one necessarily entails a study of the other. Certainly it is difficult to see how we should successfully treat of the biblical word of God without taking serious account of the word of semitic man in which the bible, both New Testament and Old, first made its utterance.

At the same time, it is possible that sometimes, by this very necessary advertence, we can give the impression that the biblical word is something less than relevant to the here-and-now for its having been formulated in a conceptuology that is largely alien even to most modern-day 'semites'. This would obviously be a grave error, and it is not, in fact, the reason for insisting on some casual acquaintance with semitic thought-forms as the route to a better understanding of the bible. If we do so insist, it is not to imply that twentieth-century christians must somehow be made over into pre-christian semites before they can properly enter into the spirit of the book of their origins – though it must be admitted that some well-meant efforts in 'biblical theology' and 'salvation history' appear to have been aimed at creating precisely this impression. Rather, what we suggest, or what we should suggest, is that the better we grasp the thought-processes of the men who wrote the bible, the better we shall follow it with our own as we read it. What has made the bible perennial is not, after all, the extent to which it is an esoteric oriental literature, but the much greater extent to which men of every age have heard it speaking to them in their own language.

That is to say, in the case at hand, once the biblical – or semitic – dimensions of 'word' have been pointed out, it speedily becomes evident how in one way the bible has testified to a reality to which, perhaps in somewhat different ways but no less consistently, our

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[1] Cf especially Barr, James, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961) and 'Hebraic and Greek Thought-forms in the New Testament' in *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (New York, 1962), pp 1-22.

[2] Cited by Boman, Thorleif, *Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek* (Philadelphia, 1960), p 24.

own experience also testifies. As an example of this we might take one of the most pregnant of the biblical usages of word, the concept of 'name'.

When we say that for the bible 'name' is no mere vocable but power, identity, personality itself, do we bespeak notions that are really so alien to our own philosophy? True, it would probably not occur to us normally to formulate under 'name' the theology of christian identity that we find in the fourth gospel's 'keep them in your name'.[1] But on the other hand we have no difficulty in understanding what the bible is about when it speaks of blasphemy of the Name. We can even enter into the spirit in which God is declared the One not-to-be-named,[2] since a similar instinct keeps us from speaking the name of those with whom it is not permitted us to deal familiarly and as equals. The name is, therefore, for us as for the bible, the exercise of some power. It does, for us as for the bible, identify with the person. One of the ultimate humiliations we can inflict on a man is to strip him of his name, reducing him to a cipher, a non-person. The substitution of numbers for names in the modern super-state typifies a polity that is embarrassed by individuation. The bigot and the primitive racist respond instinctively to the power of the name, withholding the titles that a kindly human convention has used to surround personal dignity, and employing instead the language of contempt. The nickname is the name that mars, scars, and hurts. Only in a most superficial and insignificant sense do we really believe that it is sticks and stones, rather than words, that harm.

Probably more than we initially recognize, then, do we share the bible's idea of the word as a power and a reality. We are prepared for the discovery that it is under the concept of 'word' that the bible categorizes the saving and judging activity of God, for whom to think and will is to act. And, since it is eminently through prophecy that God speaks, it is by preference that 'word' in the bible describes the prophetic function.

We learn this from a classical text, in which the enemies of Jeremiah are quoted as conspiring against him to trip him up in

[1] Jn 17, 11. So also Jn 15, 7: 'If you remain in *me*, and *my words* remain in you', paralleling Jn 15, 4, 'Remain in me and I in you'. This is to pray 'in Jesus's name' (Jn 14, 13f; 15, 16, etc.).

[2] Exod 3, 14, *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*, 'I am who I am', is God's answer to Moses' request for his name. Though this episode has obviously served as a popular etymology of the divine name Yahweh, the primary sense is that God cannot be named in the same way as the gods of the gentiles.

his words. 'What are the odds?' they ask: for in their mind Jeremiah is quite dispensable. 'It won't mean the end of *torah* from the priest, nor *'etsah* from the sage, nor *dabar* from the prophet'.[1]

Torah is instruction: literally, what is handed down. Though it can and does begin as word – the decalogue, for example, is known also as 'the ten words'[2] – and though for a similar reason as well as for its etymological sense the term can be used for the instruction given by either prophet[3] or wise man,[4] as such *torah* is tradition, the province of the priest. We see it as a living form of communication in Psalm 78, to take one instance, a liturgical *torah* of the kind delivered by priest or levite on the occasion of one of Israel's pilgrimage feasts, celebrating Yahweh's great deeds in salvation history and inculcating what Israel's response had and should have been. Psalm 78 is in miniature the type of priestly instruction that eventually developed into such work as Deuteronomy and Chronicles. For evident reasons, *torah* comes to mean 'law' and is applied specifically to the pentateuch.

Though *'etsah*, too, which is 'counsel', can be conceived of as sometimes the gift of the prophetical spirit,[5] it is eminently regarded as the fruit of reflection and of human resourcefulness, thus proper to the wise man, the sage, who by definition derived his wisdom not from divine revelation but from his own ingenuity and observation.[6] Beginning as part of an international tradition and community with no specific religious commitment, wisdom and its pragmatic laws of life and of good sense did finally become identified with Israel's religious *torah* that ultimately depended on the prophetic word; but such had not been the original intention. As the work of man's own thought and devising, *'etsah* more or less properly corresponds with the sense that *logos* had first had in its 'native' greek – that is, as derived from *legein*, cognate with words like col-lect, se-lect, and so forth, implying a process of sorting out, of putting in order, an analytical idea that is quite lacking in the semitic concept of *dabar*. Not only is it lacking, it can even be in violent contrast. 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says Yahweh. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts

[1] Jer 18, 18. [2] Deut 4, 13. [3] Isai, 1, 10.
[4] Prov 6, 23, etc. [5] Isai 11, 2.
[6] Cf Ezek 7, 26; Prov 20, 18, etc. In Isai 5, 19 *'etsah* is ascribed to God by anthropomorphism: he is seen here as a 'wise man' who has devised a 'plan'.

above your thoughts'.[1] 'Yahweh knows the thoughts of man, that they are vain'.[2]

For when we come at last to see the meaning of *dabar*, word, having distinguished it from these other ways in which the bible conceives of man as formed and in-formed by the means of communication, we discover that it is eminently reserved to the idea of revelation: that is, to God's inbreaking upon man's life and consciousness. Word is what comes to man from without, independently of his own devising and therefore often enough at odds with it. We speak here, of course, of the word of God, which is the word of prophecy. It is by this word that God shows who he is in relation to man. Man himself, of course, also has his own word which, like *'et sah*, can and should be the normal and proper expression of his own being as one autonomous within his own order: this it is to be created in the image and likeness of God.[3] Only when the word of man threatens to intrude upon the domain of God or to substitute itself for God's word does it become the 'wisdom' that is habitually denounced by the prophets.[4] For it is then that we see repeated man's primal sin, which is to make himself like God.[5]

God's word is his utterance, his communication of himself to man. But the God who communicates himself does not do so simply to enlarge man's mind: he is, first and foremost, a saving God, and it is as such that he reveals himself. Thus we understand some of the dimensions that the bible ascribes to his word. It is creative: 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made; by the breath of his mouth [his 'spirit'] all their host'.[6] In turn, this is only to say tha it is salvific, for in the bible creation is viewed as the first of God's saving acts in a history of salvation. (In the same tradition, the New Testament so often represents the salvation achieved in Christ as a 'new creation', with Christ himself as the 'second Adam' or 'the firstborn of every creature'.[7]) When we see God's creative word at work in the priestly creation story of Genesis,[8] we are tempted to take as the sacred writer's purpose the portrayal of an omnipotent transcendent Being at whose will alone, effortlessly and without emanation, that which was not comes to be: the

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1 Isai 55, 8 f. 2 Ps 94, 11. 3 Gen 1, 26.
4 Cf Isai 29, 13–16; 1 Cor 1, 17–25; 2, 6–16, etc.
5 Gen 3, 5. 6 Ps 33, 6.
7 Cf 1 Cor 15, 45; Rom 5, 12–19; Col 1, 15; Eph 1, 10, etc.
8 Gen 1, 1–2, 4a.

creatio ex nihilo sui et subiecti of the philosophers. But while such an idea is not necessarily to be excluded from a passage whose author was obviously a theoretical as well as a practical monotheist, still it was evidently not primary to it. The concept of creation in this narrative is neither philosophical nor merely theological, but soteriological, derived from the great exilic prophet for whom 'creator' is synonymous with 'redeemer', 'king' (that is, 'saviour'), 'the holy one of Israel'.[1] Creation for this author of Genesis consists in God's having brought order out of chaos, in his merciful act of bestowing meaningful existence on man and his world, the act of salvation which is the positive giving of life. Such is the creative word of God.

God's word, then, presupposes a saving action of which it is sign and assertion. The word can, in fact, be this action itself: thus the biblical idea of a saving history. We are accustomed to think of revelation as taking place in and through history. This concept is, of course, true enough, but it is even more accurate to regard revelation *as* history – history which is no mere succession of happenings, but rather saving events which, by their inter- and inner-connexion, make up and reveal the *heilsplan* of God. It is its character as God's uttered word that makes revelation out of historical event; verbal communication is only one kind of event within such a history.

Best of all in the prophets, perhaps, can it be seen how the word of God is sign and sacrament of saving reality. It has become traditional in our theology to treat of the prophet as the instrument used by God in the communication of his word, and of prophecy as the charismatic grace by which the human faculties of a given individual are transiently elevated to permit him to utter a word which transcends the natural capabilities of those faculties. There is considerable utility in these analogies, which is not diminished by their having sometimes been applied too mechanically and unimaginatively. They do not, however, do full justice to the biblical representation of the prophet, who is not so much one who possesses a charism – the transient entity of the scholastics' conception of

[1] Cf Isai 43, 1, 14 f; 44, 2. 24; 45, 6 f. 18, etc. It is also the Second Isaiah who has made a technical term of the verb *bara* to refer to a wonderful (saving) deed of Yahweh (cf Isai 41, 20; 45, 8). Rather than say, as we have, that *bara* in Gen 1, 1 does not strictly mean 'create' in the technical (philosophical) sense – it is doubtful, in any case, whether any language possesses a word that has invariably this meaning – we ought to recognize that in the *biblical* sense the *bara* of Gen does mean precisely 'create'.

prophecy – as he is one who is possessed by God, 'filled with power – with the spirit of Yahweh – with judgment and might',[1] so that like him he becomes wholly other, incarnationally his sign in what he does and what he is, as well as in what he says.

'When Yahweh began to speak through Hosea'[2] is the introduction to a life-drama in the course of which some of the inter-communication between God and the prophet is expressed as verbal utterance. That the verbalization is, however, rather incidental, a literary device more or less necessary to the story, ought to be evident to anyone who considers carefully the verses that follow. The essential word which God was speaking through Hosea was, first of all, the experience of the prophet's tragic marriage in which he could see mirrored Israel's apostasy from Yahweh and, to some degree, her consequent destiny. By this word Hosea was introduced into the *sod* of Yahweh, that is, into his fellowship, into familiarity with his mind and soul,[3] by means of which he could share the divine pathos and anguish along with the divine wrath and judgment over a faithless people. It was the peculiarity of this word, this experience, that constituted Hosea the prophet that he was, a prophet of the divine passion,[4] distinct from a no less authentic prophetic figure like, say, Amos.

In this sense we understand the incarnational nature of the prophetic word. From this viewpoint we are afforded a better appreciation of the role in prophecy of the 'symbolic action'. The symbolic action, as we have always recognized, is one of the forms – we could hardly say 'literal form' in this connexion – proper to the utterance of the prophetic word. Here the word is uttered not in speech but in act, or if in speech accompanying the act, principally in the act itself. We speak, then, of the dramatization of the word and of the appropriateness of such a form of communication among a semitic people which delights in signs and parables of meaning. But when we recognize how much prophecy and the prophet consist in being as well as saying, or in being more than in saying, we are not tempted to relegate the symbolic action to a merely adventitious role in the communication of the prophetic word. God spoke through Hosea's marriage, and through Jeremiah's celibacy.[5]

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[1] Mic 3, 8. [2] Hos 1, 2. [3] Cf Amos 3, 7; Jer 23, 18.

[4] E.g., Hos 11, 8f. The identity of word uttered *by* the prophet and word formative of the prophet is, I believe, not fully recognized by James M. Ward in his discussion of 'Hosea's Marriage' in *Hosea: A Theological Commentary* (New York, 1966), 67–71.

[5] Cf Jer 16, 1 ff.

Ezekiel became a sign to Israel when God set him forth to a yet unrepentant people to figure in him, and in his mourning over his dead wife, the devastation to come upon daughter Jerusalem;[1] indeed, through Ezekiel's dumbness the Lord spoke most eloquently.[2]

With this biblical tradition in mind, it should not be difficult for us to see why it was that John the evangelist could find no higher or more expressive designation of the supreme incarnation of the saving – and the judging – presence of God among men than the Word: the Word which became flesh and which has revealed to us God's glory and God himself, alike in what he said and what he did. Or indeed, since the evangelist's christology is nothing if not an ecclesiology as well, we say better with John that the Word does now continue to reveal God's presence in what the Church does and says, the Church in which the Word is continually incarnate through the vital activity of God's prophetic Spirit. This is the theological background to the johannine concept of the 'signs' of Jesus: Christ's wonder-works with water, bread, wine, which endure in the Church's sacraments; his washing of the disciples' feet, which is the *diakonia*, the ministry of the church to itself and to the world; his preaching of the word of truth, which is the church's proclamation and preaching of his words which are the spirit and life, which make the demand calling for the response of faith by which men become the children of God. The Word is at work in the church not virtually but actually, not merely institutionally but personally, and we may say again, incarnationally, since the Spirit of God has come into it and breathed life into its members, making them instinct with the power and presence of God, constituting the church a prophetic community, as the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council went to some pains to spell out in detail in their constitution on the church, *Lumen Gentium*.[3]

Thus we are brought back to the point with which we began, the word-theology of the fourth gospel. The more we examine such fundamental assertions of the New Testament as is this one, the more we are made aware of the vital thread of organic continuity that connects the New Testament with the Old. Nor is this continuity one in which some vague foreshadowing is replaced by a substantive reality that has appeared only at the end. 'At various times in the past and in various different ways God spoke to our

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[1] Ezek 24, 15–24. [2] Ezek 3, 22–27; 24, 25–27.
[3] Cf especially sections 12 and 35.

ancestors through the prophets. Now in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through a Son . . . the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect stamp of his nature'.[1] The Christ-event is unique, it is true. But the Word in Christ fulfils the word of prophecy as itself standing within the prophetic line. Christ himself is the last and greatest of the prophets as incarnating in himself a word which, admittedly in less degrees and ways, had already been incarnated in the prophets of Israel. In Christ has appeared the God of love who possessed Hosea, the God of justice known to Amos, the all-holy of Isaiah's vision, the God of redemptive suffering who spoke to Jeremiah and Second Isaiah. Here were no types and figures, but the common witness to a common reality. The Father revealed by Jesus was first made known through Israel's prophets, and without their word he could never have been recognized as the Father of Jesus.

[1] Heb 1, 1–3.