

WORD AND WISDOM IN ST JOHN

“No one can understand this gospel unless he has rested against the breast of Jesus and taken Mary for his Mother”.

These words of Origen at the beginning of his commentary on St. John (P.G. 14, 32) provide one of the indispensable keys to understanding the fourth gospel. But it must be joined to and understood in the light of a complementary remark made by the great Alexandrian master a few lines earlier: “None other (of the evangelists) has so clearly thrown into relief the divinity of Christ” (ibid., col. 29). Certainly St. John deserves the titles that have been heaped upon him by tradition: *the theologian* (or “the divine”); *the eagle* who soars to heights untouched by the other sacred writers. From a literary point of view his gospel is a masterful combination of poetry and logic, of loving reminiscence and strong doctrinal assertion. At the same time, to understand St. John one must be capable of responding to a depth of humanity which, again, has scarcely any parallel in the Bible. One would have to go back as far as the prophet Osee perhaps to find the same degree of sensitivity, the same finesse in tracing a psychological portrait. If St. John is categorical in his proclamation of Jesus as the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father (1, 18), he is no less transparent in his description of the man Jesus, the one who in fury drove the money changers from the temple; who wept over Lazarus; who weary from his journey, rested by the well in Samaria. It was this last picture that drew from St. Augustine the moving reflection, “For your sake Jesus was wearied by his journey . . . the strength of Christ was your creation, his weariness your redemption; he made us by his power, he saved us in the weakness of his flesh” (On St. John, 15, 6; PL 35, 1512). With his usual insight, St. Augustine has caught here the whole delicate balance of the beloved disciple’s thought: Jesus is God and man, the Word made flesh, creator and redeemer. The fourth gospel presents us with a total view of what was for its author the supreme reality: Jesus, the master, the Lord, the beloved.

If one asks, how did St. John arrive at this understanding of the Lord, the answer must surely lie first of all in that constant, intimate contact with Jesus, which once established, was never lost, not even in the darkest hour of the Master’s life. It was not merely the fact of living in close proximity to him and receiving his own personal instruction: all the disciples had that. But there would seem to have been from the first an inner harmony between Christ and the younger son of Zebedee, an exchange of confidence which meant on John’s side an act of complete self donation, and on Jesus’ a bestowal of affection

which found no parallel among the other apostles and which caused John to refer to himself always, with neither hesitation nor arrogance, as, "the disciple whom Jesus loved".

But beyond this immediate and extremely powerful aid to understanding Christ, St. John was able to profit from a lifetime of contemplation of his Lord, in which he gradually and with constantly increasing clarity saw that the appearance of the Son of God on earth and the love of the Father that had sent him to redeem the world was part of a pattern that had been established by God "in the beginning". He saw that the Scriptures of Moses and the prophets spoke everywhere of him, the one he had known, on whose breast he had laid his head. Ultimately, the many pathways of the Old Testament all led to Christ. And so he began to trace these pathways, so that the many who had not seen the Lord as he had, might believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and that believing they might have life in his name (20, 31).

The opening lines of St. John's gospel (1, 1-18) are not only a solemn introduction, they are also a summary, an epitome of the whole history of salvation, the entire plan of God for man whom He has created and destined to share in the glory of His inner life. The very first words, take us into that realm of inaccessible light where God has decreed that all things shall be, and in a few deft strokes the evangelist sets before us all that follows from this decree: the creation of all things, united in the harmony of the divine plan; filled with the light of life; the struggle of the powers of darkness to overcome this light, but their failure to restrain or overcome it; the triumph of the light in the hearts of those who willingly and lovingly accept it.

The idea of light is one of the key threads of the Prologue; strictly connected with it is the idea of life: there is even an identification between the two—"the life was the light of men".

But the most characteristic expression of the Prologue, the one which has always been indissolubly associated with it, and even sometimes unduly stressed, is the Word. It is here that St. John shows his dependence upon the Old Testament and this leaves the reader with no doubt that he is in strict continuity with the thought of the children of Israel and the sacred writings which had nourished their hopes throughout all the trials and vicissitudes of their existence. The first word of the fourth gospel is the same as the first word of Genesis: "In the beginning." One cannot stress too much the significance of this association. The first words of Holy Scripture have always had for the people of God a quality of sacredness, a sacramental value which raises them above all the other words in the Bible. The beginning (*rosh*, head in Hebrew) in some ways recapitulates and contains the whole thing. The rabbis conceived of the Torah as being itself eternal; the

Torah was the word which was always in God, the wisdom by means of which in the beginning he made all things. All of this is present in the first lines of St. John's gospel. He is making a conscious reference to the beginning of Genesis where the word of God is seen as the power by which God brought all things into being: "And God said, Be light made. And light was made." By his word alone, God creates the entire order of living things in the universe. But for St. John, the word of God is not as impersonal attribute, nor even a poetic personification of one. The Word for St. John is the Son, the one who was in the beginning with God. Our English preposition *with* does little to communicate the sense of the Greek *pros*. As used in the first verse of St. John's gospel this term indicates a dynamic relationship between God and the Word; it even implies the idea of movement. Later theology would speak of this as the personal distinction between the Father and the Son. Such language is completely foreign to St. John, but the essential idea is there all the same. From all eternity God and the Word live in a dynamic exchange of love, and this living communication of being from one Person to the Other (for God *is* love, as St. John says in the epistle he wrote to accompany and explain the gospel) is the source out of which all other being springs.

There was a current of thought in modern biblical study (it is already outmoded) which maintained that the doctrine found in St. John's writings and especially in the gospel was taken from the movement of religious and philosophical thought known as Gnosticism, that had been circulating for some time in the Mediterranean world. There can be no doubt that the gospel, in the final literary form in which it has come down to us, intentionally uses a mode of expression which will make it accessible to the minds of those for whom it was written. Hence it would be foolish to deny all Gnostic influence whatsoever. But it would be equally exaggerated to suppose that the fourth gospel is simply an attempt to reconcile the faith of the early Church with the ideas of salvation current in the Graeco-Roman world of the time. The truth is much simpler: the terminology in which St. John clothes his ideas are indeed borrowed from the Gnostic vocabulary, but the ideas themselves represent the Christian transformation and fulfilment of the Hebrew Old Testament. St. John's supreme source book was the Bible itself.¹

The clearest evidence of this is in the use of the term *Word* in the prologue. Whatever may be the Hellenistic and other non-biblical

¹ This has been admirably demonstrated over and over again. The most recent synthesis of the whole matter is that of P. Braun. *Jean le théologien, l'accord des écritures d'après le quatrième évangile*, Paris 1964. For an excellent short account in English see W. Grossouw, *Revelation and Redemption*, Westminster, Md. 1955 pp. 69-73.

references to the Logos of St. John, they are strictly secondary and subordinate to the important Old Testament idea of the Word of the Lord. This Word has a variety of forms in the Bible. It is first of all, as we have seen, the creative Word. This notion appears not only in the book of Genesis, but also in the sapiential literature of the Old Testament where the creative Word is poetically personified; it is the Wisdom of God, the one who was with him in his creative work, present beside him and aiding him "in the beginning" when he laid the foundations of the earth and stretched out the heavens above it and enclosed the oceans within their limits (Prov. 8, 22f). In the book of Ecclesiasticus the identification of the Wisdom of God with his creative Word is explicit: "Wisdom speaks in her own behalf. I came forth from the mouth of the Most High" (24, 1-3). In this discourse of Wisdom about herself, she is seen living and acting among the people of God in some of the most important events of sacred history: present in all the acts of creation (v. 5-6), manifesting the Lord's presence in the cloud that followed the Israelites through the desert (v. 7) dwelling in the Holy Place of the Temple in Jerusalem (v. 12-15).

In the gospel of St. John this Word of God who is also His wisdom, without whom was made nothing that has been made, appears among men and "pitches his tent" among them: the word in v. 14 of the Prologue usually translated "dwelt among us" has in Greek the same root letters as the word used in the Old Testament to indicate the presence of God dwelling among His people in the tent in the desert. Here St. John is very close to one of the important wisdom passages of the Bible, Baruch 3, 29 f: "Who has gone up to heaven to capture her (wisdom), and brought her down from the clouds? Who has crossed the sea to find her, and buy her at the price of purest gold? There is none who knows her ways, nor that can search out her paths. But he who knows all things knows her . . . and has bestowed her on Jacob his servant, and upon Israel his well-beloved. *And thus wisdom appeared upon earth, and conversed with men.*" Throughout his gospel St. John presents Jesus as the wisdom of God incarnate, living among his own and doing the works of God among them: "My Father works even until now, and I work . . . For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself does" (Jn. 5, 17-20). Like the wisdom of the Book of Proverbs (8, 32-33; cf. Eccli. 4, 11) Jesus goes about teaching the way of truth which he has heard from God and comes to reveal to men: "My teaching is not my own, but his who sent me . . . I have not come of myself, but he is true who has sent me . . . I know him because I am from him, and he has sent me" (Jn. 7, 16 and 28-29). Jesus is the one who has come down from heaven (3, 13), who belongs to the world beyond man's reach; because he comes from above, he is over

all, (3, 31), and when he has been exalted again to his heavenly glory, he will draw men after him that they too may live in that heavenly world with him (12, 23 and 32). This was the reason he came into the world, to bear witness to the truth of God's glory and his will to save the world (18, 37); he comes to bring to the world the Father's word of salvation; as wisdom incarnate he reveals what he alone has seen and heard in the bosom of the Father: "No one has ever seen God, (but) the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him." (1, 18).

The Old Testament had spoken of the word of God in another way, the way of the prophets. They too had known the word of the Lord, but it was not always the glowing illumination of wisdom for them. The prophetic word was more often the word of the cross, the word of scandal that came to announce the judgment of God. The formula "Thus says the Lord" or "the word of the Lord that came to the prophet" or "the word of the Lord came to me" occurs repeatedly in the prophets; see the abundance of these expressions in the first lines of many of the chapters of Jeremiah, for example. The word comes to the prophet with great power and cannot be resisted: "The lion roars, and who is not afraid? The Lord God has spoken, and who shall not prophesy?" (Amos 3, 8).

Jesus is filled with this great prophetic word, the word that has been present among the people from the time of Moses: "You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them is life everlasting. And it is they that bear witness of me . . . if you believed Moses you would believe me also, for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (5, 39 and 46-47). The message that Jesus brings is the word that has been given him by God: "Amen, amen, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes him who sent me, has life everlasting" (5, 24). But like all the great prophets, Jesus is faced with the unbelief of men, their failure to accept the word of the Lord: "Now though he had worked so many signs in their presence, they did not believe in him; that the word which the prophet Isaiah spoke might be fulfilled, 'Lord, who has believed our report, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?' This is why they could not believe, because Isaiah said again, 'He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they see with their eyes and understand with their mind, and be converted and I heal them.' Isaiah said these things when he saw his glory and spoke of him" (12, 37-41).

But the prophets also knew of the word of God which is the same as His power and His wisdom, and so is stronger than all the unbelief of men. The plan of God to save man is contained in this word, and

when God sends his word on its mission of salvation, it is filled with His own strength, and so cannot in the end fail to do its work: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and return there no more, but soak the earth and water it and make it to spring, and give seed to the sower and bread to the hungry, so shall my Word be, that goes forth from my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall do my will and prosper in the things for which I sent it" (Is. 55, 10-11). Jesus himself is this prophetic word, fulfilled on the day of his resurrection: "Go to my brethern and say to them, I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." The Word that had dwelt with the Father, whom the Father had sent forth, had then indeed done his will, and prospered in the work of salvation for which he had been sent. Now he could return to the Father as the firstborn from the dead, the firstborn of many brethren.

But of all the manifestations of the word of God which the Old Testament had known, none was so sacred as the word of the Law, and this word too St. John predicates of Jesus. The idea flows naturally out of the identification of the Word and the wisdom of God, for nowhere is God's wisdom so plainly manifest as in the Torah. We have seen how the author of the book of Ecclesiasticus shows the wisdom of God at work with him throughout creation and in his blessings bestowed on the chosen people. Immediately following this passage (Eccli. 24, 1-31), in which wisdom personified speaks for herself, the author declares, "All this is nothing other than the book of the covenant of the Most High God, the Law promulgated by Moses" (Eccli. 24, 32). The very same mode of expression appears in Baruch: after the announcement that the wisdom of God has appeared on earth and conversed with men (3, 38), it is solemnly proclaimed that what has appeared is "the book of God's commandments, the Law that abides forever. All those who keep it shall live, those who abandon it shall die. Return, O Jacob, walk in the way of its brightness, in the presence of its light." (4, 1).

The relation of all this to the Word of St. John's gospel is transparent. Not that it is a question of his having written his gospel with the Bible open before him so as to make a direct and explicit reference in every case. St. John had simply assimilated the Old Testament and the rabbinic teaching associated with it to the point at which it is no exaggeration to speak of his work as a mass of tacit allusions to the great traditions of Israel through which he aims at persuading his readers that the whole of Scripture has been fulfilled in Jesus. (cf. Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 226). Where the Law is concerned, it is clear that in the prologue St. John has simply transferred its attributes to the Word: he was in the beginning with God; he is life and the life is the light of

men. Because he is the wisdom of God, he is also the Torah. The repeated references in the discourse after the last supper (chapters 13-17) to keeping the Lord's commandments is one of the elements that gives structural unity to this scene; Jesus embodies in himself, in his own person, all that had previously made the Torah the object of supreme veneration for the pious Israelite.

This is the point at which St. John goes beyond the mere identification of the Word and the Law; for to say that Jesus "embodies" the Law or Wisdom or the Word is to put oneself in the precise context which is the essential and all embracing one in the fourth gospel. The climax of the Prologue indicates this: verses 14 and 16 through 18 (verse 15, the testimony of John the Baptist, can be regarded here as a parenthesis). "The Word was made flesh": In Christ the world of the divine is manifested in visible, palpable form. This had also taken place in some way when God revealed his eternal Torah to Moses. The Law given by God is the revelation of his inner being; and so in the thirty-fourth chapter of the Book of Exodus, the actual words of the Covenant of God with his people, given through Moses, the ten Words or Commandments, are preceded by the divine apparition in which God himself declares who he is, "the Lord, the Lord, God of tenderness and mercy, slow to anger, rich in grace and truth" (Ex. 34, 6). These attributes of grace and truth: the descending and compassionate love of God coupled with His unswerving fidelity, recur throughout the Bible, especially in the prophets and the Psalms, but they always refer back, in one way or another, to this revelation and self-definition which God makes known to Moses, the prophet who never had an equal in Israel: "And there arose no more a prophet in Israel like into Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face" (Dt. 34, 10).

Yet the fulness of grace and truth had not been revealed to Moses. Wonderful as had been the revelation of Sinai, unique as had been the privilege of Moses, it had only been the preparation for the coming of him who was *full* of grace and truth, the one in whom the divine glory of the Father dwelt in its plenitude. Moses had caught a glimpse of God, he was chosen by God from among men to be the mediator through whom the Torah was given. But the grace and truth of which the Law was a revelation and embodiment merely passed by him in a fleeting mystical experience (cf. Ex. 33, 18-23). "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Here (Jn. I, 17) again the usual translation fails to convey the profound meaning contained in the original text, which says, not "came" but "was made": it is the same term as that used in v. 14 to describe the incarnation of the Logos: the Word was made flesh, and grace and truth, taken together as embodied in the Word, was made flesh.

Grace and truth are taken together because they refer to the one person of the Word in whom they are united; they evoke the divine reality of Jesus Christ and his bringing that reality into the world of men in his own human flesh. Grace and truth were seen in the Old Testament as the chief distinguishing characteristics of God, especially as he revealed himself in the Word of the Law; now they appear in the Word made flesh, the one who brings that grace and truth in all their fulness, the one who is not, like Moses, only the mediator through whom the gifts of God are given, but who is himself the fulness of the Father, and of whose fulness we have all received.

Ultimately then, the Word of God is not an abstraction, not a dead commandment, but a living Word, the person of Christ. It is not surprising that St. John should make this personal identification between the Word of God and Jesus, since already behind him lay the primitive Christian tradition in which the Word is synonymous with the Gospel, conceived of not as a lifeless doctrinal system, but "the power of God to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1, 16). Christ himself, "the power and wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1, 24) is the content of this Word. What we find therefore at the end of St. John's Prologue and throughout his gospel, is the person of Christ, the eternal, divine Logos, the wisdom of God, giving light and life to the world, but at the same time the man Jesus, the Word made flesh: After this passage the term "Word" is no longer applied to the Lord: now he has a name, and it is by believing in this name, Jesus Christ, that the life-giving light of divinity can shine in men's hearts and make them what he is—sons of God. This was what Jesus had promised to his disciples on the night before he died: "I live and you shall live" (14, 19), what he had promised to all those who would come to him: "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall not hunger" (6, 35). It is because he is the Son of God that Jesus is the living one, and it is because he makes those who believe in him become sons of God that they live. But notice the condition: "to as many as received him he gave the power of becoming sons of God, to those who believed in his name." (1, 12). It is by faith that we adhere to Christ, become one with him in the fulness of his Sonship. By faith we cling to him and are transformed in him in that act of total self-donation which we noted was the prime characteristic of it. It is as though the author of the fourth gospel wanted to infuse into his readers some of the reality of that all absorbing contemplation into which his love of Christ had drawn him and in which he had found life. Indeed he explicitly states that this is his purpose in writing: "you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name." (20, 31).

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This more than anything else is what we should take away from our every reading of St. John: a total dedication to the simple and humble reality of faith. The beloved disciple was privileged to soar to great heights in his penetration of the mystery of the Word made flesh. This is such a great mystery that to tell of it in its entirety is beyond human power; to do this, "not even the world itself . . . could hold the books that would have to be written." (2I, 25). But St. John shows us that to reach the Word, to share in the life he came to give to the world, we need only reach out to Christ in faith, that faith whose obscurity diminishes none of its reality. In the faith of the risen Saviour, the darkness of this world is already illumined with the dawn of eternal light, and in that light, shining in our hearts with an imperishable confidence, we, like the disciple whom Jesus loved can recognize him and say, "It is the Lord." (2I, 7)

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