

The Bible as “Letter Sent by God to Humankind”: Outlining the Theological and Pastoral Merits and Demerits of the Analogy

Ernest M. Ezeogu

Introduction

The word “letter” occurs 126 times in the RSV text in both the singular and plural forms.¹ In the Old Testament, letters were written not only by kings and statesmen but also by prophets, such as Elijah and Jeremiah (2 Chron 21:12, Jer 29:1). In the New Testament, twenty out of the twenty-seven component books are explicitly identified as letters. These include the thirteen letters attributed to Paul and the seven Catholic letters addressed to no one person or community in particular.² There is no doubt that letters and letter writing feature prominently in the Bible. Nevertheless, the Bible nowhere identifies itself as a letter from God to humankind. Even the book of Revelation, with its well-known seven “letters” to the seven churches of Asia Minor, does not use the word “letter” to describe its contents. On the contrary, the only Bible passage that uses the phrase “letter of Christ” (evpistolh. Cristou/) applies it not to a written text but to a living community, the Christian community to which Paul addressed his letter.

You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. (2 Cor 3:2-3 NRSV)

This notwithstanding, the image of Scripture as a “letter sent by God to humankind” has perdured throughout the history of Christianity, at least from medieval times. In our days, the *Lineamenta* for the Synod of Bishops XII Ordinary General Assembly on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”³ has revived this ancient analogy. Given the potential popularity of this handy image of Scripture with the people of God, this paper intends to investigate the inherent strengths and weaknesses, merits and demerits of this metaphor in the reception of Scripture as the Word of God, especially in the African context.

My submission is that the metaphor of the Bible as God’s letter to humankind has many theological and pastoral benefits. At the same time, it is a metaphor that must be presented with much biblical catechesis and caveats in order to maximize its positive potentials while minimizing its negative ones.

Images of Scripture in the *Lineamenta*

The images of Scripture used in the *Lineamenta* include the following:

- as a symphony (n. 9)
- as “the Letter sent by God to humankind” (n. 17)
- as “the Book of Life” (n. 17)
- as “food for the soul and the source of the spiritual life” (n. 17)
- as “a lamp for my step, a light on my path” (n. 24)

¹The RSV text used for this computation is that of the Septuagint, which includes the proto-canonical, the deutero-canonical and the apocryphal books. The word “letter/s” occurs more in some of the deutero-canonical and apocryphal books than in the proto-canonical books, for example, 25 times in 1-3 Maccabees, and 15 times in deuterocanonical Esther.

²Though traditionally regarded as a letter, the New Testament book of Hebrews does not identify itself as a letter, nor does it have the format of a letter.

³*Lineamenta for the Synod of Bishops XII Ordinary General Assembly on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,”* General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops and the Libreria Editrice Vaticana (2007).

as a “compass pointing out the road to follow” (n. 24)
as “the leaven in modern culture” (n. 31)
as “a ‘Great Code,’ which contains a richness for all” (Questions 3, n. 6)

Many of these designations are traditional formulations taken from the Church Fathers. Such is the formulation in which this study is interested: “The Scriptures are then in the heart and hands of the Church as the “Letter sent by God to humankind.”⁴ This characterization of the Scriptures is taken from the writings of St Gregory the Great.⁵

To better analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the analogy, we shall break the statement into its three major composite terms, namely, (a) letter, (b) sent by God, (c) to humankind.

The Bible as a “Letter”

The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines a letter as “a written, typed, or printed communication addressed to a person, organization, etc., and usually sent by post or messenger.”⁶ To this we may include more modern extensions of letter-writing, such as electronic mail (e-mail), text messaging (sms and mms), and instant messaging (chat). Altogether, one can say without fear of contradiction that the letter is the literary form or genre that is most familiar to the generality of literate people today. One may need the services of experts to interpret laws, songs, and drama, but few people need any help in interpreting the letters they receive.

In a weblog dedicated to collecting peoples beliefs and comments on the Bible, we find these views of the Bible: (a) as “Love Letters from God” and (b) as “God’s letter of love to His creation who (sic) He loves beyond our imagination.”⁷ For most people, the image of the Bible as “letter” from God easily translates into “love letter” from God. This is theologically defensible, since love is the one motivation for God in His dealings with humankind.

The view of the Bible as God’s letter or love letter to humankind has much to recommend it. First and foremost, it fosters a better foregrounding and reception of the biblical text. People will be more inclined to pick up the Bible and read if they feel that they are about to read a love letter rather than a book of legal and moralising precepts of dos and don’ts.

Moreover, regarding the Bible as a love letter from God could give one a better pre-understanding of the Bible. The Bible is, after all, a book of love. If one understands the central event of biblical history to be the incarnation, then, “God so *loved* the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). If one takes the highpoint of salvation history to be the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, then, “No one has greater *love* than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (John 15:13). Either way, love is the central point. Jesus himself summarised the entire biblical law or torah in the twin commandment of love:

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ 31 The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:28-31)

The central theme of the Bible is love. The view of the Bible as a love letter from God has this to recommend it, therefore, that it will encourage readers to focus on the main theme of the Bible, which is

⁴*Lineamenta*, n. 17.

⁵S. Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum Epistolarum* V, 46, 35: CCL CXL, 339.

⁶“*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-ROM; Version 1.0.03, 1997.

⁷“Bible Comments,” <http://www.bible-history.com/feedback/weblog2.cfm> (accessed March 22, 2009).

love. This would be a bonus, theologically as well as pastorally.

One of the biggest problems in the biblical apostolate in Africa is ignorance of the Bible. By this I do not mean the obvious difficulties in giving correct interpretations of the Bible, I mean primarily the lack of familiarity with the Bible itself. People find it difficult to pick up the Bible and read in any systematic way. A recent survey in a major seminary revealed that less than 10% of the seminarians have read the Bible from cover to cover. Most members of so-called Bible churches, bible colleges and biblical associations content themselves with reading only passages and quotations to which they have been referred. A view of the Bible as a love letter from God could be the panacea needed to overcome this scandalous inertia. Who needs to be reminded to read a love letter? A love letter is something people read with relish. It is, therefore, a likely supposition that when people see the Bible as a love letter from God they will bring some of the appetite with which they ordinarily read love letter to bear on Bible reading.

Getting people to open the Bible and read is one thing. Getting them to read it systematically, all of it, without neglecting any of its parts is another. Most African Bible devotees, including those few of them who read it regularly on a daily basis, read it haphazardly rather than systematically, from cover to cover. Some of them follow a lectionary-type Bible reading guide that picks and chooses passages of the Bible that it deems more relevant. This system is a big improvement over the practice of opening the Bible at random every now and then and reading whatever shows up. Nonetheless, taking the Bible as a letter from God, one may ask, is any part of a letter from a loving Father worth skipping?

Take the Catholic or the Revised Common Lectionary, for example. All the lectionary readings in the three-year cycle, Sundays and weekdays included, amount to about 71.5% of the New Testament and 13.5% of the Old Testament.⁸ This means that 18.5% of the New Testament and 86.5% of the Old Testament are left out of the lectionary. If we really saw the Bible as God's love letter to us, would we be content with leaving such large portions of the Bible unread? If what the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation says about the Bible is true, that "In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes *lovingly* to meet his children, and talks with them,"⁹ then this truth must apply to all pages of the Bible and not only to some of them.

Perhaps the greatest factor that deters the generality of the people of God from Bible reading is the widespread belief that the Bible is a difficult book that can only be safely read by trained experts. There is some truth in this statement, but this truth has been exaggerated, with the unfortunate consequences that the laity generally regard the Bible as a book for the clergy and consecrated religious. Experience in the biblical apostolate, however, has shown that with a little introductory biblical catechesis, average lay people can be helped to read the Bible devotionally with much profit to their spiritual life and lay ministry. As a result, the Church continues to teach with insistence the benefits to the faithful of the practice of spiritual reading of the Bible, also known as *lectio divina*.

Direct contact with Sacred Scripture plays an important role in the work of evangelization. Indeed, the primary aim of evangelization is Sacred Scripture: "In concrete terms, catechesis should be 'an authentic introduction to *lectio divina*, that is, to a reading of the Sacred Scriptures, done according to the Spirit who dwells in the Church.'"¹⁰

To underline the importance of prayerful Bible reading in the lives of the faithful, the Church has even granted an indulgence to the faithful who do it. This is one of the most effective ways that the Church uses to endorse a spiritual exercise and encourage the faithful to its use.

A partial indulgence is granted to the faithful, who with the veneration due the divine word make a spiritual reading from Sacred Scripture. A plenary indulgence is granted, if this

⁸Felix Just, "Lectionary Statistics," The Roman Catholic Lectionary Website, <http://www.catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm> (accessed April 23, 2009).

⁹*Dei Verbum*, n. 21. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰ *Lineamenta*, n. 22.

reading is continued for at least one half an hour.¹¹

If the belief that the Bible is a book for experts works against the Church's intention to restore the Bible as a book for the people of God, the belief that the Bible is a love letter from God to humanity would work in its favour. It would help to inculcate in the people of God the confidence to take up the Bible and read, as well as the mind-set to appreciate the Bible's central Scriptural perspicuity, it would be unfortunate to recommend to the people of God a model of Scripture reading that takes them in the exact opposite direction. This is a potential demerit of the analogy of Scripture as a letter from God.

Another demerit of the analogy of Scripture as God's letter to humankind is that the metaphor conceals the nature of the Bible as a collection of diverse literary works with a diversity of literary genres. It gives the false impression that all of sacred Scripture is in the literary form of letter writing. But this is not so. A mistake in identifying a literary form could lead to a mistake in interpreting a text.

For the ancient peoples of the East, in order to express their ideas, did not always employ those forms or kinds of speech which we use today; but rather those used by the men of their times and countries. What those exactly were the commentator cannot determine as it were in advance, but only after a careful examination of the ancient literature of the East.

...

Hence the Catholic commentator, in order to comply with the present needs of biblical studies, in explaining the Sacred Scripture and in demonstrating and proving its immunity from all error, should also make a prudent use of this means, determine, that is, to what extent the manner of expression or the literary mode adopted by the sacred writer may lead to a correct and genuine interpretation; and let him be convinced that this part of his office cannot be neglected without serious detriment to Catholic exegesis.¹²

Regarding the Bible as God's letter to humankind seems to go contrary to the above injunctions by "determining in advance" the literary genre of all Scripture before a careful examination of the biblical literature itself. It seems to force the other literary genres that are clearly evidenced in Scripture, such as, myth, poetry, law and history to bend to the literary and interpretive rules of the epistolary genre. An attempt to reduce every biblical literary genre to that of letter would lead to a "serious detriment to Catholic exegesis."

The Bible as Written by God

In this section our focus turns to God as the sender of the letter. Clearly God is here portrayed as the author of the Bible. This portrayal carries with it many spiritual and theological benefits as well potential pitfalls.

First and foremost, the belief that it is God who sent the letter underlines the uniqueness of the Bible. It means that the Bible is a book like no other. I remember the impression I had as a twelve-year old primary school pupil when I wanted to borrow a Bible from the mobile library and when it came to the name of the author, the librarian wrote "God." I knew immediately that the book in my hand was different from any other book. If God cared enough to write a book, he must have something pretty important to say. This proved to be for me an important foregrounding for devotional Bible reading.

That God wrote the Bible as a letter also underscores the unity of the Bible, as well as its inerrancy. If God wrote the Bible, it follows that every part of the Bible must be a revelation of God's mind. As such, there would be no contradictions or inconsistencies. Similarly, since God is all-knowing, there would be no errors in the Bible. These are important traditional beliefs about the Bible, and the analogy of the Bible as a letter written by God upholds these beliefs.

¹¹The Sacred Apostolic Penitentiary, *The Enchiridion Of Indulgences* (1968) n. 50.

¹²Pius XII, Encyclical Letter *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (September 30, 1943) nos. 36, 38.

Nevertheless, the view of the Bible as a letter from God raises serious problems for a Catholic understanding of the Scriptures. Firstly, it short-changes the mystery of the Bible, taking it simplistically to be just the word of God, when, more accurately speaking, it is the word of God in the words of men. The Vatican Council II tells us that the human writers of the Bible were true authors and not just transcribers of God's words.

In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, *as true authors*, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted.¹³

Paul's letters to various communities, for example, can, therefore, not simply be read as God's letter to humanity but also, and this is very important for their proper interpretation, as Paul's letters to these specific communities. The more we know about these communities and Paul's relationships with them, the better we position ourselves to understand these writings.

In other words, the view of the Bible as a letter from God lends itself readily to a synchronic reading of the Bible that collapses the time frame between the writing of the Bible and the person actually reading the text more than 2000 years after it had been written. It tends to ignore the socio-cultural differences between the context of the original addressees and the context of the present reader, making believe that the Bible was written today and that God is addressing the words of Scripture directly to the reader here and now. *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* reminds us of the importance of some diachronic reading that takes account of the differences in historical and socio-cultural contexts between the original addressees and the present reader. Ignoring diachronic or historically situated reading altogether, in the guise that the Bible is a letter from God, would be a gross disservice to the task of biblical interpretation.

But diachronic study remains indispensable for making known the historical dynamism which animates sacred Scripture and for shedding light upon its rich complexity: For example, the covenant code (Ex. 21-23) reflects a political, social and religious situation of Israelite society different from that reflected in the other law codes preserved in Deuteronomy (Chapters 12-26) and in Leviticus (the holiness code, Chapters 17-26). We must take care not to replace the historicizing tendency, for which the older historical-critical exegesis is open to criticism, with the opposite excess, that of neglecting history in favor of an exegesis which would be exclusively synchronic.¹⁴

Reading the Bible as a letter from God could lead to a model of biblical interpretation that would be "exclusively synchronic." This would be one of the demerits of the analogy.

In addition, the analogy of the Bible as the letter sent by God is silent of *how* the Bible is the letter sent by God. It suggests that the human intermediaries through whom God gave us the letter functioned only as secretaries taking notes at God's dictation. This is a model of inspiration that the Church once accepted, but only with the understanding that the human authors functioned "in full freedom," not as mechanical recorders of God's words.

You will not find a page in his (St. Jerome's) writings which does not show clearly that he, in common with the whole Catholic Church, firmly and consistently held that the Sacred Books – written as they were under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – have God for their Author, and as such were delivered to the Church. Thus he asserts that the Books of the Bible were composed at the inspiration, or suggestion, or even at the dictation of the Holy

¹³Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965) n. 11. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins* (January 6, 1994): c.1, §1.

Spirit; even that they were written and edited by Him. Yet he never questions but that the individual authors of these Books worked in full freedom under the Divine afflatus, each of them in accordance with his individual nature and character. ... In each case Jerome shows us how, in composition, in language, in style and mode of expression, each of them uses his own gifts and powers.¹⁵

Muslims believe that the prophet Mohammed wrote down the words of the Koran at the dictation of the angel Gabriel. For them, the Koran could be described as the “words” of God. The Christian view of biblical inspiration is quite different. It is such that Christians do not describe the Bible as the “words” of God, only as the “word” of God. The words are human. Hence we say that the Bible is the *word* of God in human *words*. If the analogy of the Bible as the letter from God could lead Christians to misconstrue the Bible as the *words* of God, then the analogy has gone too far and needs to be restrained.

What we are saying, in brief, is that the analogy of the Bible as God’s letter to humankind could lead to a non-Catholic view of Scripture that sees Scripture as the words rather than the word of God. This view, more consonant with the Reformation view of Scripture, leads to biblical literalism or fundamentalism

If the Bible is God’s letter to humankind, then it makes sense to conclude that God has included in the letter everything necessary for human salvation. Again, this is true in some sense, but it would be an exaggeration to try to derive from this the Reformation principle of the all-sufficiency of scripture, *sola scriptura*, in such a way that the sacraments and the teaching office of the Church are reduced to non-essentials.

The view of the Bible as God’s letter to humanity could lead Christians to start regarding the Christian faith as a “religion of the book.” Yet, Christianity is not a “religion of the book” but a “religion of the Word of God,” as the *Lineamenta* for the Synod of Bishops XII Ordinary General Assembly on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” insists:

First and foremost, we should remember that Christianity is not a religion of the book, but a religion of the Word of God, Incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ. When considering the Bible in relation to the sacred texts of other religions, due care is required so as not to fall prey to syncretism, superficial approaches or a distortion of the truth.¹⁶

Popularising the model of Scripture as God’s letter to humankind without an accompanying and sufficient biblical catechesis could easily lead to these excesses against which the *Lineamenta* cautions the faithful.

The Bible as Addressed to Humankind

The image of the Bible as God’s letter addressed to all of humankind carries with it a lot of positive theological and pastoral implications. First and foremost, the analogy portrays the Bible as a community document. The community in question here is the entire human family. A close analogy in our time would be the charter of the United Nations Organisation, addressed to all humankind. This analogy immediately removes the Bible from the realm of private interpretation. A true interpretation of a universal document must have universal relevance, universal applicability and universal acceptance. This understanding underscores the importance of biblical proscription of private interpretation as found in 2 Peter:

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, 21 because no prophecy ever came by human will, but people moved by the

¹⁵Benedict XV, *Encyclical Letter Inspired by the Divine Spirit: Spiritus Paraclitus* (September 15, 1920) n. 8.

¹⁶*Lineamenta*, n.30.

Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Peter 1:20-21)

This understanding will checkmate the growing tendency in some Bible reading circles to read the Bible as God's letter addressed to them personally in which only they will determine what it means to them. In such circles, the phrase, "My Bible says to me ..." is very common. When challenged with an alternative interpretation, their stock response is, "That is the way you see it, but for me, this is how I see it," implying that whatever your Bible says to you is authoritatively and right for you. This can only mean biblical relativism and a subjectivity of interpretation that is contra-indicated by the analogy of the Bible as God's letter addressed to all humankind.

On a positive note, seeing the Bible as God's letter to all humankind tends to ground the Bible as a book that is best read in community. The universal community of believers to which the Bible is addressed is the Church. Therefore, it belongs to the Church to determine what interpretations of the Bible are to be considered authoritatively right or wrong. The teaching office of the Church, the magisterium, exercises this function on behalf of believing humanity, just as the Supreme Court determines the final interpretation of the laws of a country. In this way the image of the Bible as letter addressed to humankind encourages reading the Bible with the Church, the community of stakeholders, and not in individualistic isolation.

The image of the Bible as God's letter to all humanity could have immense benefits in the area of biblical ministry. If a letter is sent to all humankind, shouldn't everyone get a copy? This line of thought leads to the need for a biblical apostolate that aims to reach out to all humanity with the message and copies of the Bible. For this reason, Pope Paul VI in 1968 established the World Catholic Biblical Federation, whose "goal is to distribute Bibles in various languages and provide everyday people with assistance in knowing the Bible and living its teaching through accurate translations, done under the pastoral care of Bishops."¹⁷ In modern Christian experience, however, the organisation most popularly associated with translating and distributing Bibles worldwide is the United Bible Societies.

The Church recognises the importance and the urgency of making copies of the Bible available and affordable to the people. It admits that "many regions stand materially in need of biblical texts, Bible translations and copies for distribution"¹⁸ and that "The Church community's task must also be to make the Bible available at a cost accessible to people."¹⁹ A widespread conviction in the Church that the Bible is indeed a letter that God addresses to all humankind will foster the ministry of providing copies of the Bible to the people of God everywhere, overcoming the present cold feet in the Church to commit more of the Church's resources to this important ministry.

Does the view, that the Bible is a letter addressed to all humanity, have a downside to it? Yes, unfortunately. The medieval church belief that only trained and authorised persons could safely read the Bible is a case in point. Just as the average person on the street shies away from reading the constitutions of the country, regarding it as a document that only trained lawyers could read and understand, so the average Christian who sees the Bible as a letter addressed to all humankind may feel intimidated to take up the Bible and read. There are certainly aspects of the Bible that only trained scholars are best suited to handle, such as reading the Bible as a source of systematic theology or reading the Bible for the sake of reconstructing history. But reading the Bible as a spiritual book, mainly for the sake of spiritual nourishment, is something that every believer should be able to do with only a minimum of instruction and guidance. The key is to avoid the two extremes of regarding the Bible, on the one hand, as a plain book that anyone could read and understand perfectly without any guidance whatsoever, and on the other hand, as a complicated book of coded language that only an elite group of believers, who have been rigorously initiated into the guild, could decode.

Conclusion

¹⁷*Lineamenta*, n. 26.

¹⁸*Lineamenta*, n. 25.

¹⁹*Lineamenta*, n. 25

The image of the Bible as God's letter to humanity is an attractive image which is bound to be well received by the people of God, given the familiarity and popularity of letters. At a time when the Church's concern is to get her members to overcome whatever keeps them away from the Bible and cultivate the habit of regular Bible reading, this image could serve as a much needed catalyst to awaken this interest in the faithful. Before this could happen, the Church who, following the analogy, is the mailman through whose hands God delivers this letter to the people, must rise up to her responsibility to make sure that everyone who wants to read the letter would have a copy to read. This places the onus on the Church to commit more of her personal and material resources to the task of translating the Bible into the languages of the people and making copies of the Bible available to the people at prices that they can afford. Among illiterate peoples, this might include the responsibility of teaching the people to read, since they would be unable to read God's letter addressed to them if they are unable to read.

Nevertheless, the Bible is not a letter, literally speaking. To say that the Bible is a letter from God is figurative language. It is a figure of speech in which an image is used to refer to something that it does not literally denote in order to suggest similarities. There are many points of similarity between the Bible and God's letter. We have seen many of such useful points in this study. Nevertheless, the statement that the Bible is God's letter addressed to humanity is an analogy and, as the scholastic adage goes, "analogy limps," *analogia claudicat*. This means that an analogy can only go so far and no farther. To stretch an analogy beyond the intended points of similarity is to misunderstand it.

How then does the Church ensure that the people limit their use and understanding of this analogy to the useful and intended points of similarity and not stretch the analogy too far? This is where we see the need for initial and ongoing biblical catechesis to accompany the ministry of providing Bibles and encouraging people to read them.

One of the goals of catechesis should be to initiate a person in correct understanding and fruitful reading of the Bible. This will bring about the discovery of the divine truth it contains and evoke as generous a response as is possible to the message God addresses through his word to the whole human race.²⁰

The *Lineamenta* for the Synod of Bishops XII Ordinary General Assembly on "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church" has revived the ancient and appealing image of the Bible as the letter sent by God to humankind. This is a handy model of Scripture which promises much theological and pastoral benefit for the people of God. Nevertheless, the same document recognises, and we cannot agree more, that the benefits of this analogy will be maximised and its potential demerits minimised only when it is accompanied by adequate biblical catechesis.

²⁰Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," *Origins* (January 6, 1994): c.IV, §6.