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**IMAGES OF THE WORD OF GOD IN THE BIBLE**

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**ALIVE AND ACTIVE  
IMAGES OF THE WORD OF GOD IN THE BIBLE**

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The Mother of Jesus (John 2:1), the first in the New Testament to hear God's word and keep it and so conceive in her womb and give birth to God-Word become flesh (John 1:14). And to St Joseph, her husband, who in his own way also heard and kept God's word and thus became the legal father of Jesus. With a prayer they may take CABAN into their able care as they did the child Jesus till the Association accomplishes God's will for it.

# **Alive and Active God's Word in the Nigerian Context<sup>1</sup>**

Teresa Okure, SHCJ

## **Preamble**

Pope Benedict XVI declared October 2007 - October 2008 as the Year of the Word. This Year climaxed in the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October this year,<sup>2</sup> with the theme, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*. All Christ's Faithful in parishes and dioceses expectedly studied the *Lineamenta* and gave input for the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod. The impact of this synodal process was not greatly felt in Nigeria, though the Catholic Secretariat (CSN) produced a simplified version of the *Lineamenta* for easy comprehension by the faithful.<sup>3</sup> As its contribution to this synodal process, the Missionary Society of St. Paul (MSP) organized its 2008 "Annual St. Paul Lecture" on the synod theme. The Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) similarly chose for its Nineteenth Theology Week (March 10-14, 2008) the theme: "The Word of God and Meeting the Millennium Goals in Africa". CIWA

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<sup>1</sup>This paper was originally presented as the "Annual St. Paul Lecture" Gwagwadala, Abuja, FCT, 26 January 2008, ten months before the Synod took place. It was slightly revised for the Inaugural Convention of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), 30 April – 3 May, 2008 and is here in this published version very slightly revised to reflect that the Synod has actually taken place.

<sup>2</sup> The *Lineamenta* published by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007), was reproduced by the Biblical Apostolate Unit of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Abuja and Lagos.

<sup>3</sup> The Simplified Version was produced by lecturers of the Catholic Institute of West Africa.

felt that God's word needed to be brought to bear on the UN efforts to meet its eight-point millennium goals by 2015 and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

The inspired theme of my presentation at the Annual St Paul Lecture, "Alive and Active", became the inspiration for the theme of this our inaugural convention of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria. The invitation to give that lecture gave me a singular opportunity to reflect in-depth on God's word and to share with the audience and now at this our CABAN conference the insights I received from the Holy Spirit on the active nature of God's word in Nigeria, Africa, and the world at large. I have no doubt that the birth of our Association itself is God's gift to us to mark this Year of the Word. To God be the glory.

I emphasize that this presentation is essentially a personal reflection, not a "scientific" study. During the Great Jubilee of our Lord, the late John Paul II reflecting on the life and mission of the Church in the past two thousand years asked us his "Brothers and Sisters" (Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful) to reflect on what the Jubilee signified for us with reference to this mission and to share the same with others.<sup>5</sup> In his unique reflection, the Pope observed that for the past 2000 years we have, as it were, been fishing all night, catching nothing. At the dawn of this New Millennium, we are to see and hear Jesus standing on the shore (as he did in Luke 5:1-11), inviting us (as he invited Peter and his companions) to pair out our nets into the deep (*Duc in altum*) for the catch of the century.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere perhaps in our Nigerian/African context is the need to launch into the deep more pressing than in this issue of God's word (the Bible). Following the Pope's injunction, I too ask each of you, "my Brothers and

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<sup>4</sup> The eight millennium goals are: to eradicate extreme hunger and poverty; achieve universal primary education; promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality; improve maternal health; combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability; and develop a global partnership for development.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter Novo Millennio Ineunte. At the Dawn of the New Millennium. To the Bishops, Clergy and Lay Faithful at the Close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), esp. nos. 1.

<sup>6</sup> See in particular, nos. 1, 15, and 58 of the Letter.

Sisters”,<sup>7</sup> to reflect along with me as I share my insights on God’s word in our own contexts, and in turn to share yours with me and all of us during the discussion period.

The reflection has three main parts: word as being alive and active by nature, the word seen from God’s and Jesus’ perspectives (God-Word Incarnate; John 1:14) and God’s word in our contemporary Nigerian and African contexts. This last aspect is the most challenging, though it is the least noticed in today’s popular preoccupation with what “the word of God” or “the Bible says” or does not say.

## 1. Word by Nature Is Alive and Active

The phrase “alive and active” in the title of this presentation is from the Letter (or Epistle, as one may prefer) to the Hebrews:<sup>8</sup>

The word of God is something alive and active: it cuts more incisively than any two-edged sword; it can seek out the place where the soul is divided from the spirit, or the joints from the marrow; it can pass judgment on secret emotions and thoughts. No created thing is hidden from him; everything is uncovered and stretched fully open to the eyes of the one to whom we must give account of ourselves (Heb 4:12-13; NJB).

This much quoted passage arguably sums up the nature of word in general. Not only God’s word, but word by its very nature is something

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<sup>7</sup> It is heartwarming that the Pope in this Letter constantly refers to all Christ’s Faithful: Bishops, clergy, religious and lay faithful as his brothers and sisters; see nos. 3, 26, 42, 57, 59; in contrast to the usual practice of addressing mainly or only “my brother Bishops”.

<sup>8</sup> For a succinct distinction between Letter and Epistle, see John C. Hurd, “Letters in the New Testament”, in *International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*; William R. Farmer et alii, eds. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 1546-1552, esp. 1546-1547.

alive and active. It is alive because the one who speaks seeks an active response from the addressee. Can we think of any action which was not occasioned by word, spoken or written? Take our gathering, for instance; the word of the organizers of this convention and our response to it brought us all together here. The word of an institution on the opening or closing date of its sessions makes students and parents act appropriately. The word of a company, that there would be interview on a given date and time, sends the interviewees speeding with zeal to the exercise. Examples are endless, as I noted in my commentary on “John”.<sup>9</sup> It is impossible to think of an action that was not occasioned by word, spoken or written. Word may not receive the expected response; that does not make it ineffective by itself. As in the case of the word of the sower in the parable (Matt 13:10-15) even a negative response is itself a response, a personal choice to ignore it. Thus God kept sending prophets to his people, even when they staunchly refused to listen;<sup>10</sup> because whether heard/received or not, word does what it signifies. Word by its nature is active, welcome or not.

From the Genesis creation narratives we learn that first was the word, not the life.<sup>11</sup> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Before that there was nothing; or when God first created the earth, the earth was “a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep”. Then God’s Spirit hovered over the primeval waters to bring about life: “God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Gen 1:1-3). Life came to be as a result of the word. This applies not only in the first creation account (Gen 1:1-2:4a), but also in the second (Gen 2:4b-24) which climaxes in the creation of the woman; in her creation God also

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<sup>9</sup>Teresa Okure, “John”, in *International Bible Commentary*, 1438-1505; Farmer et alii, eds., especially the section on John 1:1-14, 1459-1460.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Isa 9-13; incidentally this same passage is quoted by Matthew 13:14-15 in the context of why Jesus speaks to the people in parables.

<sup>11</sup> This observation may sound like a contradiction of my earlier article “First was the life not the book” in Teresa Okure, ed., *To Cast Fire Upon the Earth: Bible and Mission Collaborating in Today’s Multi-National Global Context*.

Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000), but in effect it does not since the issue in this other work is not word as word, but the relation between life and the events narrated in the Bible.

deliberated and spoke (Gen 2:18), as God did in the first. John's Gospel rightly proclaims: "In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was with God; and the Word was God . . . In him there was life . . . and all that came to be had life through him" (John 1:1-4). When God uttered the divine word, God put the entire divine self into it since God does not exist or grow in bits as human beings do. What God spoke was God-Word: "the Word was God"; the first Christians and Fathers of the Church recognized this long ago.

Word has the power to destroy, blame, generate quarrels and fights; or to build, celebrate, affirm, console, instruct and praise. What it does depends largely on the motive of the speaker and the reception by the one to whom it is spoken. When God sent Jeremiah "to knock down and to destroy, to build and to plant", Jeremiah had only one instrument for this mission: the prophetic word which he learned to speak, child though he was (Jer 1:2-3, 6-10), and continued to speak well into old age.<sup>12</sup> Before him Moses (Exod 4:10-17; 6:10-13) and the OT prophets, had similar experiences. Isaiah was missioned to use the prophetic word to "blind" the eyes, "deafen" the ears and "make dull" the hearts of the people (Isa 6:10-13).<sup>13</sup> No human word is ever neutral to the recipient, much less God's word. Whether one receives it positively or negatively, one cannot but be affected by it; ignoring it is still a response; and in such cases word becomes judgment. This is particularly true of God's word (John 12:48). The fate of the rich man in the parable of Dives and Lazarus and the fear that the same might befall his brothers (Luke 16:19-31) demonstrates the judgment nature of the rejected word: "They have Moses and the prophets . . . If they do not listen to them, they will not listen even if one should rise from the dead".

This intrinsic nature of word as alive and active has challenges for us as speakers and hearers in our daily interactions. Scripture tells us that

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah outlived a number of Israel's kings: from the reign of Josiah to the deportation into Babylon, 608-587BC.

<sup>13</sup> In the Hebrew these verbs are *hiphil* or *causative*. Because word is active by nature, the negative response it receives from the people has a hardening effect on them. Thus Jesus says of the Jewish leaders, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been at fault, but now they have no excuse for their sin" (John 15:22). See further John 9:41.



we were created in God's "image and likeness" (Gen 1:26-27). We image God most by our ability to speak or voice out what is within us. We therefore have great responsibility for how we use words, for as Jesus says, our words are evidence of who we are, and on judgment day each of us will be held accountable for every word we utter (cf. Matt 12:33-37).

## **2. Word in God's Perspective: The Bible and God-Word Incarnate**

The Bible, God's inspired word, taken summatively is the proclamation of God's good news to humanity; it guides, warns and teaches us what to do or not do, if we are to enter into God's rest. The author of 2 Timothy reminds us that "All Scripture is inspired [*theopneustos*, "inbreathed"] by God and is useful for teaching, refuting error, for correcting and training in Christian life" (3:16). Seen thus the Bible is like the "*Owner's Manual*" of any product (a car or computer, for instance). It is the Owner's Manual God gives to humanity to provide it with sure instruction on who we are (our true identity as God's creatures and children); what God intends us and our world to be; and how we are to conduct ourselves in this world if we are to be true to our God-given identity and destiny: people created in God's own image and likeness and recreated even more wonderfully in the Son through our new birth as God's children, whereby we become "heirs of God and coheirs with Christ" (Rom 8:14-17).<sup>14</sup>

The Letter to the Hebrews (on the living, active and all exposing nature of God's word; 4:12-13) recalls how the same God, who in former times spoke to us through the prophets, now, speaks to us through the Son, whom God has appointed heir of all things (Heb 1.1). Preceding this passage (4:12-13) is the author's discourse on God's sabbatical rest after the six-day work of creation (Gen 2:1-3) and his exhortation to his audience to make concerted effort to enter into God's rest; not to be like those Jews in the wilderness who by refusing to submit to God (hear and keep God's word) forfeited their entry into the Promised Land (Heb 3:7-4:11). Following the passage is another exhortation to approach God's

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<sup>14</sup> On our sonship and daughtership of God see further: Gal 4:23-28; John 1:12-13; 1 John 1:1-4; 3:1-4; Heb 12:22).

throne of grace with confidence because Jesus, our High Priest, God-Word who became like us in all things except sin (4:15), is ever living in God's very presence to intercede ceaselessly for us, and dispense God's graces (absolutely unmerited free gifts) to us. The path to God's throne of mercy is one of suffering, in the footsteps of Jesus himself. But this suffering, ability to endure everything to the end rather than give up on God or quit halfway, constitutes the only sure passage or entry into God's own rest (4:14-5:10).

Though God rested after the work of creation, the entry of sin into the world made God decide not to rest till, for our sake, God would destroy the power and domination of sin in human lives and society. This "restlessness" of God for our sake is the work of salvation, the history of which is recorded in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. God embarked on this restlessness at the very moment that humanity sinned, missed the mark, turned away from God by choosing to listen to (obey and keep the word of) the serpent tempter rather than God's (Genesis 3). At that very moment God vetoed the devil's action by announcing programmatically the good news of our salvation: God promised to put enmity between the woman and her seed which God himself would effect (Gen 3:15). As a result of this promise, the man named his wife Eve "because she was the mother of all who live" (3:20).<sup>15</sup> The promise embraced the whole of humanity. The progressive fulfillment of the promises God made to subsequent characters, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob/Israel and the people of the Old Covenant is evidence of the living and active nature God's word throughout biblical history.

God's word is most uniquely alive and active in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, God-Word become flesh (John 1:14), "Son of Mary" (Mark

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<sup>15</sup> As I have indicated in "Biblical Perspectives on Women: 'Eve, Mother of All the Living' (Gen 3:20)", (*Voices from the Third World*, Philippine Edition [1985] 17- 25) the man's naming of the woman as "mother of all who live" is his response to God's promise of life through the woman and her seed, at the very point when he himself is told that he would die and return to dust (Gen 3:19). It is therefore ironic that the name "Eve" (*havvāh*) which means essentially life, from the same verb root word as God's own preferred name in the OT, "YHWH", should have gone down in history (through a legacy of the Fathers of the Church) as the name which brought death into the world.

6:3), our brother and Saviour of the World (John 4:42; Acts 4:12). His life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit and commissioning of his disciples to proclaim this good news of salvation to the whole world (cf. Matt 28:19-20) and be his “witnesses” from Jerusalem, to “Judea, Samaria and indeed to earth’s remotest end” (Acts 1:8; used as the leitmotif of the 1994 African Synod) evince his dynamic action as God-Word incarnate. God’s work in and through him aims at the universal entry of all human beings greatly loved by God (John 3:16) into God’s rest.

Word bares a person’s mind or thought. John’s Gospel (1:18) proclaims summatively that Jesus, God word-Incarnate, “the only begotten God” (*monogēnēs theos*), alone has uniquely revealed God. Jesus himself tells Philip that whoever has seen him has seen the Father also (John 14:9). As God-Word incarnate, he revealed God’s goodness to humanity in action, by loving us unto death and resurrection (John 13:1-2). As Peter would say, he revealed the good God by going about “doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38). His life-long agenda as one anointed (*echrisen*) by the Lord’s Spirit as the Messiah (*Christos*) was:

to bring the good news [of liberation] to the poor, .  
 proclaim liberty/release to captives and  
 recovery of sight to the blind,  
 to let the oppressed go free,  
 to proclaim a year of favour [general amnesty] from the Lord  
 (Luke 4:18-19).

In his life from the crib to the cross and resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples; in his mission of teaching, speaking in parables, curing diseases, consoling the bereaved, reaching out to the marginalized and outcasts, challenging the unjust system and hypocritical religious practices of his people, God’s word was and still is alive and active in the fullest sense. Jesus’ actions as God-Word did not end with the ascension, the sending of the Holy Spirit and the commissioning of the disciples. He promised to be with us till end of time (Matt 28:20). In heaven where God has entrusted everything into his hands,

he continues his ministry of intercession and dispensing God's graces to humanity. In the Eucharist, Bread of Life, he serves as our daily food and drink unto eternal life, the real or true life. As God-Word, he himself is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). As our intercessor and unique mediator with the Father, he is the "throne of grace" (Heb 4:16), not of fear, judgment and punishment.

In sum, both in Scripture and in Jesus the alive and active nature of God's word continues and endures eternally; all actions of God's word are intrinsically good and for the good of all. It cannot be overemphasized that from God's perspective and the actual evidence of Scripture, all God's deeds in Jesus are solely for the good of humanity; or, as the creed says, "For us and for our salvation". God works ceaselessly for our liberation from sin, our alienation from God. One of Jesus' last words on the cross was "Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 32:34). All this also has great challenges for us children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus who are configured to him by baptism (Can 849), as we will see later.

Jesus himself speaks of the active and enduring nature of his word. His word is "a rock" for one who accepts, hears and keeps or builds his house on it (Matt 7:24-25). "Heaven and earth may pass away, but my word will not pass away" (Matt 24:35). As in Isaiah's mission, Jesus' word has a hardening effect on those who hear and yet resist or reject it: "If I had not come they would not have been at fault", but now they have seen/heard and "hated both me and my Father" (John 16:22-23). His word has a cleansing effect on his disciples and on all believers (John 15:3). In the ministry of the Church, the cleansing, creative and life-sustaining nature of his word is best manifested in the sacraments all of which depend on effective word and symbolic action: "I baptize you, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit", "This is my body given for you. . . do this in memory of me"; "I forgive you your sins . . ."; "I, Mary, take you, John, as my lawful husband . . ." and so forth. In all actions (liturgical or administrative) of the Church, Body of Christ, word plays a living and active role. The innate power of the word cannot be overemphasized.

## God's Word in Images

The Bible has a multiplicity of ways of conveying the active and dynamic character of God's word. In Hebrew, "word" *dābār* (Greek *logos*) also translates "thing", "substance".<sup>16</sup> Apart from the word of creation and the Word-Incarnate viewed briefly above, the Bible projects God's word as something essentially alive and active, that is, as having a life of its own. God's word is reported as coming to prophets (as in the call narratives); Amos "saw" (in vision) God's word (Amos 1:1). Similarly, 1 John speaks of having seen, heard, felt and touched "the word who is life" made physically manifest in Jesus (1 John 1:1-3). In his call and inaugural prophetic vision Ezekiel "ate" the entire scroll of the word by God's orders; though sweet in his mouth, it made his stomach sour (Ezek 3:1-3). He was to digest and assimilate the message he was to proclaim to others in its bitter/sweet character. This *personal* character of God's word is true even when it is expressed figuratively as "a hammer" that breaks and shatters rocks and "a fire" that consumes and transforms (Jer 23:29), in contrast to the empty words or dreams of the false prophets who run without God sending them, to tell lies to God's people (Jer 23:25-28). It is "a lamp for my feet and light for my path" for one devoted to studying and meditating daily on God's law (Ps 119:105). The word is "a two-edged sword that cuts finely" (Heb 4:12). The Book of Wisdom attributes the massacre of Egypt's firstborns to God's "all-powerful Word"; it leapt from God's royal throne, like a mighty warrior with a "sharp sword", to deal death to doomed nation (Wisd 18:14-16).

In all these instances word is presented as acting on its own, on its own authority. In Isaiah 55:10, the divine word is a *messenger* that does not return empty to God but carries out all that it was sent to do. The Psalmist recalls that God "spoke and it was made; God commanded and it [creation] sprang into being". All these images point to the fact that God's word is not mere empty sound but action packed programme that conveys God's will and ways to us and all humanity and requires our active response for our own good. The innate power, incisiveness and

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<sup>16</sup> The same applies in Ibibio where it can be said *Iko aba* (Word has occurred), *Anie Iko* (One has a word, meaning "a case").

effectiveness of God's word derive from the authority of the speaker, because word is an extension of the speaker. "The word that goes forth from my mouth", God's mouth, cannot return empty without doing what it was sent to do (Isa 55:11).

As we respond to the human word because of the dignity or status of the speaker, so are we required to give an uncompromising attention and response to God's word. We obey human word with alacrity, if we view the speaker as an *oga* (chief, boss), even if it does not favour us. Unfortunately we very often do not think twice about ignoring God's word though this word is solely for our good. "I think thoughts of peace and not of affliction" (Jer 29:11). God's thoughts of peace flow into words of peace.

NT authors and Christians conceived of the word as something mobile, spreading from place to place, something which "grew", "increased" and "waxed strong" (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). This is interesting. Was it the word that grew or was it the preachers who grew, increased and waxed strong? The preachers no doubt added their own distinctive understanding of the word as they preached it to their diverse audiences in the diverse contexts. Their participation both helped to spread the word; and any genuine effort to inculturate the word, to preach it in a way that concrete persons in their concrete socio-cultural locations can understand (as *Gaudium et spes*, no. 22 counsels), necessarily enlarges the word itself, even as the Incarnation has added something new to the Trinity.<sup>17</sup> The more the number of people who received the gospel grew, the more the word increased by being alive in them. How today do we help the word to authentically grow, spread and wax strong in our own contexts?

### 3. Word in Nigerian/African Context

To say that God's word is alive and active in Nigeria would be an understatement. The country is besieged by the explosive emphasis on

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<sup>17</sup> I have elaborated on this dimension of the incarnation in "Inculturation: Biblical/Theological Bases", in T. Okure, Paul van Thiel et alii, *32 Articles Evaluating the Inculturation of Christianity in Africa*; Spearhead 112-114 (Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1990), 55-88, esp., 58.

God's word today. This explosion promoted by TV evangelists and apostles with their plethora of programmes at prime time; through CDs and DVDs, advertisement on websites, revival programmes, posters and banners in streets and captions on motor vehicles such as "Jesus is Lord"; "Psalm 23"; "The just shall live by faith". Even the celebrated series, "Africa Magic", has a stint or two on biblical themes parodying the many revival crusades and prayer sessions in public arenas. Most of the mushroom churches that spring up almost on a daily basis claim the Bible as their authority. Inspired by the relatively older ones such as the Full Gospel Men's Fellowship, Deeper Life and the Redeemed Church of Christ, these newer ones base themselves on a word or phrase of the Bible, regardless of whether or not the word chosen has the same meaning in the Bible as they give it. The phrase "born again Christian" seems to underlie all of these churches and movements.<sup>18</sup>

On the part of many Catholics the US-based series, "Thirty Days with Jesus", has become a "Vade mecum". The love of the Bible is such that even while at Mass, some prefer to read their Bible. Others may prefer to attend a charismatic fellowship session rather than attend Mass on Sunday. Prayers of the Faithful are often punctuated with such phrases as "Father Lord . . . for as your word says" or "as you say in your word".

Interest in Bible is not restricted to prayer sessions. People often punctuate their conversations and speeches with "as the Bible says" or "as it says in the Bible" or as "the word of God says" in such and such a book. Even politicians quote the Bible, especially the Old Testament, to support their actions, rightly or wrongly. Some Pentecostals use the Bible to critique certain Catholic practices like the Rosary, the sacrament of reconciliation and infant baptism. The questions, "Is it in the Bible?" or "Where is it in the Bible?" can be quite disconcerting to Catholics who know neither the traditions of the Church nor the Bible itself. They lead at

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<sup>18</sup> Within a space of few kilometers from CIWA to the Port Harcourt International airport, one can see the advertisements of the following churches: Christ Victory Sabbath Church, Holy Ghost Power Fire Ministry, The Lord's Chosen Charismatic Fulfillment, Christ Crucifixion Gospel Ministries, God of Elijah Ministries, Christ Fulfillment and Reconciliation Gospel Church, Mount Zion Church, The Redeemed Church of Christ to list but a few, each urging the public to come and worship with them.

times to some leaving the Church on the false grounds that the Church is acting contrary to Bible.

The lay faithful are not alone caught up in this problematic and obsession with what “the Bible says”. Some priests feel compelled to imitate the style of TV preachers and to join in the chorus, “as the Bible says”. At times they cite the Bible, with wrong chapter and verse, or verses which do not exist; for instance, “John chapter 22 verse 7”. Passages from the Old Testament may be attributed to Paul or John and vice versa. The reason for all this is that the Catholic Priest in a determination not to be left out or behind or made to feel irrelevant to his audience, or be seen to be ignorant of the Bible, simulates a acknowledge of Scripture which he does not have.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus commissioned his disciples to go out to the entire world and proclaim the good news. As a result, the Catholic Church is very keen in encouraging the preaching of the word. Since the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of which was celebrated in 2005) and subsequent papal documents on the Bible, never tire of emphasizing the importance of proclaiming the Good News as Jesus commissioned.<sup>20</sup> The Catholic Biblical Federation (CBF) founded in 1968 by Paul VI seeks to promote a conciliar approach to the study of Scripture and the Catholic biblical apostolate; it has branches in almost every diocese worldwide.

This biblical apostolate is concerned primarily with how to proclaim the word effectively to people in their various languages and cultures so that they can hear and understand it as did “all the nations under heaven” at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). The Church in Nigeria is a member of this Federation. The effectiveness and existence of this apostolate vary

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<sup>19</sup> A student Brother reports how he noted down about sixty-six references to the Bible in a homily. When, after Mass, he looked up those references, three quarters of them were wrong. This may be an exceptional case, but it proves the point.

<sup>20</sup> Notable among them are *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI; and severally in the works of John Paul II. The proclamation of the Year of the Word by Benedict XVI is itself evidence of the Pope’s great interest in the Bible as word of God. For a compendium of the Church’s documents on the Bible see Dennis J. Murphy MSC, ed., *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001).



from diocese to diocese. The Catholic Biblical Apostolate (CBAN) a unit of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN) took up the challenge of making the *Lineamenta* of the Synod on the Word of God available and easily understood by the people. Outside the charismatic circles, perhaps, the biblical apostolate appears to make little impact on life generally; though members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria (CCRN) appear not to be part of the Catholic Biblical Instructors Union (CBIU), the grassroots body through which CBAN works.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has laid great emphasis on making Scripture available and accessible not only to Christ's faithful, but also to non-Christians.<sup>21</sup> The apostolate of the CBF as already said is an outstanding response to this. The *Lineamenta* of the Synod on "The Word of God in the Mission of the Church", following in the footsteps of *Dei Verbum*, stressed the need to organize reading sessions, promote *lectio divina* and train people on ways of reading the Bible.

The Church further emphasizes the importance of the Bible in the mission of the Church. Chapter III of the *Lineamenta* was devoted to this. Aspects of this mission include proclamation of the word (no. 25); making it accessible to all in every age (no. 26); using it as a grace of communion among Christians (no. 27); as a light for inter-religious dialogue with Jewish people and other religions (nos. 28-30); and as a leaven in modern culture (no. 31). In this venture, the Bible with knowledge of it tends to receive the centre stage, though the need to be its living witness is by no means lacking. The conclusion of the *Lineamenta* highlights the importance of "listening to the Word of God in the life of the believer" (no. 33).

In sum, one can hardly turn in any direction in Nigeria without meeting, in one way or another, a keen interest in the word of God and for diverse reasons. On this level of interest and awareness of what the Bible says there is no problem. The observation in the *Lineamenta* (no. 26), that "despite much insistence by the Church, . . . most Christians, in effect, do not have personal contact with the Scriptures", does not apply in the Nigerian and African contexts. The question is whether this preoccupation with God's word actually responds to how God wants us to understand and

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<sup>21</sup> See DV 24; and cf. *Lineamenta*, no. 26.

live this word. Archbishop John Onaiyekan once aptly warned against what appears to be “bibliolatry” (worship of the Bible) rather than living by the Bible.

## **Evaluation**

An in-depth study of the aims and objectives of the overwhelming interest in the Bible is yet to be systematically conducted. For our immediate purposes, it suffices to say that most people read and cite the Bible in order to call God to task on his promises. God promised to do such and such for his people, therefore when the individual asks God, God is bound to perform. The use of the Bible in such cases amounts to fetishism. Some believers and unbelievers actually use the Bible as a sort of talisman. What this implies is their awareness of the power of the Bible. Claiming the authority of the Bible, people have reduced God to a problem solver. We are all familiar with the phrase, “God will solve all your problems” often heard from the pulpit; whether or not the people addressed do actually have problems is immaterial. God is asked to provide good jobs, give the fruit of the womb, a life partner, break ancestral curses, liberate from ancestral spirits, and deal summarily with one’s enemies, all because the word of God says “ask and you will receive”.

While they see God as a problem solver and a “Father Christmas” and seek God’s blessings, the same people may cheat their clients; embezzle public funds; pay unjust or no wages or delayed wages to their workers (sometimes for months or years). Yet they may offer huge sums for the support of the Church; buy cars and jeeps for priests and pastors; build churches and donate or pledge fat sums in thanksgiving harvest and bazaars (even if it takes them years to redeem the pledges made). People pay tithes faithfully and attend all kinds of prayer and healing sessions, vigils, tarry nights, allegedly on the authority of God’s word. The resultant impression is a tit for tat bargain approach to God, allegedly on the authority of the Bible.

The overall emphasis in studying the Bible, both within and outside the Church, seems to be on what we human beings can do or need to do to get to know the Bible. All this is praiseworthy; but how does it square with scriptural emphasis itself on a correct attitude to God's word? Does this concern with promoting the knowledge of the Bible/Scriptures unintentionally shift the focus from Christ to whom the Scriptures point (John 5:39) to the Bible as a be all and end all? How does the Church ensure that the promotion of the biblical apostolate does not become a thing in itself, a false security that neutralizes the fundamental challenge and call of the Christian to be another Christ, a God-word in the world?

God's word is not a bargain or business venture (though many today seem to make the preaching of the word the fastest growing business as a solution to the prevailing joblessness in the country and continent). Paul called such people "peddlers of the word". It is rather "something alive and active", alive in the lives of individuals and their communities, challenging them to be God-like in all their ways. While in general people challenge God to keep the divine promises, Scripture itself lays unrelenting emphasis on the need for the hearer to accept, believe, keep, do and live by the word. Jesus has a number of injunctions on this matter. To his disciples at the Last Supper, his parting words were, "Now that you know these things [his life among them as 'one who serves', graphically illustrated by his washing their feet], you will be blessed, if you do them" (John 13:17). At the end of his Sermon on the Mount, tagged the *Magna Charta* of the kingdom, he said that anyone who listens to, hears, keeps his words and acts on them is "like a sensible person who built his or her house on rock" and which nothing could destroy. But one who hears and does not act accordingly is like a foolish person who built his or her house on sand such that the least wind demolished it completely (Matt 7:24-27). It is also pointless calling him "Lord, Lord" without doing what he says (Luke 7:46-49). People, like Mary his mother (Luke 1:26-38; 42-45; 2:19), are blessed if they hear God's word and keep it (Luke 11:27-28). A good portion of the letter to the Hebrews (chs. 3-4; 10-11) is devoted to the indispensability of *listening* to God's living and active word and *acting* accordingly.

We may recall Jesus' verdict on the scripture searching activities of the Scribes and Pharisees, the biblical scholars of his time: "You search [*eraunate* or pore over] the scriptures [day and night] because you think that in them you have eternal life. And indeed the scriptures speak of me. But you will not come to me to find life" (John 5:39). Jesus, not the Bible, is the ultimate Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:7). People, especially Catholics, today who get hooked on the Bible and have little or no interest in the Eucharist need to become aware of this statement of Jesus as it applies to them. He alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life. As "other Christ" (in the words of St Augustine) Christians are also called to be the way, the truth and the life; to become Eucharist by breaking the bread of their lives as food for all humanity in their daily living. They are meant to be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (Matt 5:13, 14), as Jesus designates them.

In a year dedicated to the Word of God and against the backdrop whereby even Jesus seems to become an appendix to what the word of God says, it is imperative to awaken in people the consciousness that all said and done, Jesus is God's word who alone reveals God absolutely and uniquely in the totality of his life from which his words and teaching flowed. John testifies that "No one has ever seen God, the only begotten God [*monogenēs theos*] who is close to the Father's bosom has made him known" (John 1:18). The Johannine Jesus declares "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). If as much emphasis as is laid on knowledge of the Bible were laid on imitating Jesus, if those who know, quote and teach the Bible on television committed themselves with the same zeal to imitating Jesus, God-Word incarnate, our country and world today would be a very different place, a heaven on earth rather than a "valley of tears". The word of God in the Bible cannot truly be as alive, active and fruitful for the receiver as God intends it to be (Isa 55:10) if it does not lead the one who receives, proclaims or studies it to commit self wholeheartedly to following Jesus, thus becoming the visible presence of God, God incarnate in/by his or her entire life; a witness to Christ in deed and in truth in the whole of one's life.

Jesus himself did not simply read the Scriptures as a kind of hobby. He did so in order to discover from the Scriptures his own identity as the Messiah (what Scripture required of him) and to summon from them

the inner courage and energy to live out his mission regardless of the people's messianic expectations and the temptation to betray his identity.

You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings,  
but an open ear. [Literally: "ears you have dug for  
me"].

You do not ask for holocausts and victim [or sin  
offering].

Instead, "Here I am.

In the scroll of the book it is written of me  
that I should do your will.

My God, I delight to do your will  
in the depths of my heart".<sup>22</sup>

Again he says, "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (John 4:34). In other words, doing God's will was what sustained him, kept him alive and gave meaning to his entire life and ministry. At the end of his ministry he concludes, "I have completed the work which you gave me to do" (John 17:4). Concretely this will was the salvation and liberation of humanity by the offering of himself once and for all on the cross (Heb 10:10, 12, 14).

The point is clear. True knowledge of God's word leads one in turn to seek to do God's will in the entirety of one's life. The purpose of this undertaking is not primarily to please God but because one's identity as God's child and God-word (one spoken into being by God), requires this. Even so did Jesus' identity as God-Word incarnate and Messiah make it imperative for him to know and do to the end (*eis telos*, John 13:1-2); to accept the eschatological imperative (*dei*) that he must be "lifted up" (John 3:14) to accomplish absolutely and most perfectly what God's word of supreme and utmost love required of him for the good and rebirth of humanity (cf. John 10:10-11, 14-18).

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<sup>22</sup> Ps 40:6-8. Hebrews 10:5-7 cites this psalm to encourage the audience to align their lives with that of Christ. The Psalm is also cited in many of Our Lord's feasts, the latest this year (2008) being the Responsorial Psalm for Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A.

## Ways Forward

The above reflection on the dynamics of the living and active nature of God's word challenges us to chart ways forward so that the explosive interest in God's word witnessed on all fronts in our times may bear fruit that will endure. Such fruit can only be based on what God, whose inspired word the Bible is, tells us in this Bible and requires of us. In what follows we highlight a few steps we can take to redirect the interest in the Bible towards God so that God's word in our lives and communities can be rooted in the truth which alone can set us free from any slavish or inordinate attachment to "the word of God" (cf. John 8:31-36).

### Emphasis on the human being as God's word

The first evidence of Scripture, as we saw at the beginning, is that the human being himself or herself is an expression of God's word. God said, "Let us make humanity in our own image and likeness" (Gen 1:26-27). The Pauline tradition underscores that human beings are "God's work of art" (Eph 2:10); "God's garden, building and tilling" (1 Cor 3:9). This word of God, the human being, is also alive and active as long as life lasts. Each living and active believer, therefore, to be true to own identity needs to commit self to living and acting in everyway as God's image and likeness and child, so that through such action, the person, like Jesus, God-Word incarnate, may give glory to God and in turn be glorified by God (John 17:1-3). This observation recalls the emphasis of the Second Vatican Council reiterated by John Paul II in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* and severally afterwards, that the "the human being is the route which the Church needs to travel" in the work of evangelization and mission. The first challenge therefore is to help people to realize that God lives, acts and speaks in them as God did in Jesus (cf. John 14:9-12) and that they have a personal responsibility not to divorce God from their lives.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> One can conclude that when Jesus here says that the believer "will do even greater things" than himself, he is generously sharing with believers, whom after

In practice, this awareness challenges us to watch how we use words. For as said at the beginning, our words are not neutral; we image God by the ability to speak. Quite often our words about others, our country and even ourselves are negative. This is shown in such phrases as “This is Nigeria; this is Africa; what more can you expect?” The same applies in our attitude to one another, to things Nigerian and African and to our rulers. Children learn or are socialized into this negative and abusive language from home, even before they have any sense of right and wrong. Can we move from this death-dealing type of language into God language that is creative and life-giving? God’s words are spirit and life; our words to one another and about one another and the whole of life should also be spirit and life.

### **Christians are anointed and sent like/with Jesus to be Good News**

One way of helping our people into Christian maturity is to make them aware that as God’s children in deed and in truth, they too have been anointed like and with Jesus to proclaim and to be God’s good news to the whole of humanity, beginning from their homes and places of work as springboard for preaching to others. Jesus asked the disciples to begin the proclamation in Jerusalem and Judea, where they were located before moving to the ends of the earth (Acts 2:8). Facing this challenge will move our people from the current over dependency syndrome on pastors and TV preachers to becoming active participants in the proclamation of the gospel.

We cannot proclaim the gospel effectively unless we have first experienced its transforming power in our lives. Since the object of such proclamation will be to invite people to come and experience our fellowship or communion with the Trinity. The author of 1 John declares that what they proclaim to the people is what they have seen with their eyes, heard with their ears and touched, felt with their hands. They proclaim this so that the hearers may in turn share in their communion

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the resurrection he calls his siblings (brothers and sisters, John 20:17; Matt 28:10), the grace and privilege of experiencing God living and acting in them (John 14:23-24).

fellowship with the Trinity (1 John 1:1-4). Often the ultimate end of proclaiming the gospel, namely, the intimate communion of all believers among themselves because they are members of Christ's body (1 Cor 12:12-13, 27) and one person in Christ (Gal 4:23-28), is not emphasized. Yet this is the ultimate goal of Jesus' mission.<sup>24</sup> This poses a challenge to both evangelizers and evangelized, for as Paul VI rightly says, the faith is not fully planted in any country, church or among a people unless they themselves become evangelizers as a result of having received the gospel.<sup>25</sup> Mary did this in her visit to Elizabeth after the annunciation (Luke 1:39-56).

### **Genuine life is knowing God and Jesus**

Jesus declared that eternal life lies not in knowing the Bible, but in knowing God and Jesus Christ whom God has sent (John 17:3). Knowledge here, as in Semitic thought, is not intellectual knowledge but experience and intimate communion with what or who one knows. Scripture, especially the gospels, constitutes a unique way of knowing God and Jesus; but knowledge of Scripture, however active, is not and cannot replace true and full knowledge of God as revealed by Jesus in the totality of his life. John declares that what Jesus did far surpasses what can be encapsulated in the book, yet the book has enough information to inspire life-giving faith in him (John 20:30-31). Scripture, in the words of Paul, acts like a tutor (or disciplinarian) or guardian leading us to Christ (referring to knowledge and discipleship of the Torah as opposed to knowledge and discipleship of Jesus). Jesus himself is "the substance" (Gal 3:23-4:1).

Christians and especially Catholics need to be helped and enlightened to know that true knowledge of the Bible must lead them to Jesus. To this end, emphasis needs to be laid on the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Mass as unparalleled gift which Jesus gives us, if we want

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<sup>24</sup>See, for instance, John 11:52; 12:32; 2 Cor 5:16-21; Col 1:15-20; to cite but a few passages.

<sup>25</sup>Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, *Evangelisation in the Modern World* (8 December 1975), especially nos. 6-16.



to have eternal life, and which also invites us to become Eucharist for others in our daily living. John Paul II reiterated this in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. The core meaning of the Eucharist is utmost love. Benedict XVI, accordingly, underscores this in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. This love is based on hope, hence his most recent encyclical *Spe Salvi*.<sup>26</sup> The traditional three theological virtues remain faith, hope and love, and the greatest of them is love (1 Cor 13:13), because love makes us like God and is the one virtue that can do no wrong to the neighbour (Rom 13:8-10).

Concerted effort needs to be made to instruct the people about the value and worth of the Eucharist and of the sacrifice of the Mass. Here, unlike in natural human sacrifices, it is God himself offering, sacrificing the divine self for us in the person of Jesus, in order to draw us closer to Goself.<sup>27</sup> No human made prayer, however scripturally based, can compare with or replace the sacrifice of the Mass. Our people still have great value for sacrifice. God has given us the perfect sacrifice free of charge, or better still, at God's own expense. If we want to offer a sacrifice truly pleasing to God, we cannot think of another that surpasses the one which God himself has given to us. Let us accept it with gratitude and joy and enter into it with our entire lives all day long, making them "a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God".

## A Conclusion

The reflection has highlighted the dynamic character of God's word from God's perspective and from the human perspective, since human beings, made in God's image and likeness share with God the power of word to communicate and require a response. Word is primarily a medium of communication. What counts is what it communicates and the

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<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005); Benedict XVI, "Deus Caritas Est" AAS (December 2006) 217-252; idem, *Spe Salvi* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007).

<sup>27</sup> I have developed this point in an earlier work in relation to sacrifice in Hebrews, "Hebrews: Sacrifice in an African Perspective", in *Global Bible Commentary*, edited by Daniel Patte, Teresa Okure et alii (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004) 535-538.

response it requires. Word is therefore not an end in itself. The same should apply in our understanding of the Bible as God's inspired word. Jesus, God-Word Incarnate, holds for us the fullest and truest (in the sense of real) key for understanding the Bible. Therefore no study of the Bible should treat him and his teachings as an appendix.

More could be said and needs to be said on the topic of this presentation. The last section in particular on the word of God in our Nigerian/African context requires a more serious, systematic and coordinated reflection and action than could be undertaken within the constraints of this presentation. My humble view based on my keen observation of the situation for some time now and attentive listening to the Scriptures with fresh eyes, is that all of us need primary evangelization. By this I do not mean that we have not yet heard about God's word. By "we" also, I do not mean only Nigerians and Africans. I mean all Christians worldwide.

We need, in the words of John Paul II in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*,<sup>28</sup> to launch into the deep at Jesus' command, and discover, perhaps for the first time, the abundant wealth which God's word holds for us, but which in the past two thousand years we did not really or fully grasp because of the paradigms we used in reading the Bible and the theological frameworks employed. The Lineamenta of the Synod on the Word (no. 26) mentions the "many theological and methodological uncertainties" which some Christians (scholars, understood) have "in communicating their content".<sup>29</sup> Primary evangelization is, therefore, necessary for all. It requires that we have the humility to allow God's Spirit to lead us to "the complete truth" concerning the great deeds of God narrated in the Bible and taught and embodied in Jesus (John 15:12-13; 14:25-26).

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<sup>28</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>29</sup> The document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993) gives a comprehensive evaluative review of contemporary methodologies. I have also done an extensive evaluation of such methods and their negative, at times devastating effects on both the meaning of God's inspired word and on the faith of the non expert readers and scholars themselves in T. Okure, "'I will open my mouth in parables' (Matt 13:35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics", *NTS* 46 (2000)445-463.

The harvest is indeed great, especially given the very keen interest in the Bible in our country and continent. The labourers may be few, but the Lord of the harvest knows how to send labourers into the harvest. May we be ready and willing labourers, even if, as an Association, we feel hired at the eleventh hour (compared to other older biblical associations) to work in the Lord's vineyard or be his witnesses to our people. Let us individually and together strive to become more authentic living witnesses to and bearers of God's word, as our Blessed Mother was. Let us be accountable for the scripture formation we have received and which enables us to discern not only "what" the word of God says but also most importantly "how" it means. Let us do what it requires of us all so that it may truly be alive and active in our times and nation.

# **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>2</sup>Though 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.

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”<sup>3</sup> 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)
- as a “compass pointing out the road to follow” (n. 24)
- as “the heaven in modern culture” (n. 31)

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<sup>3</sup>*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 ‘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.”<sup>4</sup> This characterization of the Scriptures is taken from the writings of St Gregory the Great.<sup>5</sup>

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.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>4</sup>*Lineamenta*, n. 17.

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

<sup>6</sup>*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* on CD-ROM; Version 1.0.03, 1997.

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

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 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.<sup>8</sup> 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,"<sup>9</sup> 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

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

<sup>9</sup>*Dei Verbum*, n. 21. Emphasis mine.



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.’”<sup>10</sup>

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 reading is continued for at least one half an hour.<sup>11</sup>

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

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<sup>10</sup> *Lineamenta*, n. 22.

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

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.

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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.<sup>12</sup>

Regarding the Bible as God's letter to humankind seems to go contrary to the above injunctions by "determining in advance" the literary

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

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.

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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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

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.<sup>14</sup>

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 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

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<sup>14</sup>Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Origins* (January 6, 1994): c.1, §1.

expression, each of them uses his own gifts and powers.<sup>15</sup>

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,

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

due care is required so as not to fall prey to syncretism, superficial approaches or a distortion of the truth.<sup>16</sup>

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 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

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<sup>16</sup>*Lineamenta*, n.30.

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."<sup>17</sup> 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"<sup>18</sup> and that "The Church community's task must also be to make the Bible available at a cost accessible to people."<sup>19</sup> A widespread conviction in the Church that the Bible is indeed a letter that

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<sup>17</sup>*Lineamenta*, n. 26.

<sup>18</sup>*Lineamenta*, n. 25.

<sup>19</sup>*Lineamenta*, n. 25



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**

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 reach, 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.<sup>20</sup>

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

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

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.

# **The Word of God as Food: Implications for Eucharistic Theology**

Luke Emehiele Ijezie

## **1. Introduction**

This paper examines the biblical portrayal of the word of God as something that can be eaten. This imagery provokes some thoughts on the relationship between the word of God and the Eucharist. The paper responds to the question posed in the *Lineamenta* of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2008) on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”. According to the *Lineamenta*, it was the felt close relationship between the Eucharist and the Word of God that motivated the choice of the theme “Word of God” for the Synod as the previous Synod was on the Eucharist. The question then is: In what ways can one better explain the close relationship between the Eucharist and the Word of God? This question becomes pertinent when one considers many aberrations in the understanding of the Eucharist as reflected in both theology and practice. Sometimes both are treated as two parallel or independent contexts of God’s presence such that some people tend to deemphasize the word of God and lay a rather exaggerated emphasis on the Eucharistic Host and the devotions connected with it.

An attentive study of the biblical understanding of the word of God as food provokes a number of problematic posers for the prevailing Eucharistic theology and practice. This is the very task that the present paper has set itself.

The portrayal of the word of God as food appears in a number of biblical texts. These texts have, no doubt, influenced faith and life in various ways, but their different interpretations have not gone far enough to expose their deeper implications. Three significant texts for this discussion are Ezek 2:8-3:10; Jer 15:16 and Prov 9:1-18. The text of Jeremiah is most

probably older than that of Ezekiel, but for the purposes of the present discussion, the text of Ezekiel is better examined first. The chosen texts are not exhaustive, but they provide the relevant ingredients for the discussion.

## 2. The Eating of the Scroll in Ezek 2:8-3:3

In this strange text, Ezekiel is commanded by the vision to open his mouth and eat the scroll placed before him and then to go and prophesy to the house of Israel (Ezek 2:8-3:1). The text is within the narrative of the visions that frame the prophetic call of Ezekiel in 1:1-3:15. The central event of this call narrative is the eating of the scroll. The event is initially introduced in the very opening words of the book, in 1:2-3: “On the fifth day of the month, the fifth year, that is, of King Jehoiachin’s exile, the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar. There the hand of the Lord came upon me.” After this introduction, what follows is the account of the vision while the mentioned word of the Lord is actually spoken out in 2:1-8 ending with the command to eat the scroll. In 2:9 the prophetic narrator continues from the element introduced in 2:3 regarding the hand of the Lord that came upon him. This hand is now reported as giving the scroll to the prophet to eat. Dale Launderville summarizes the whole section thus: “Ezekiel’s call (1:1-3:15) was like a rite of passage. He was overcome by the vision of YHWH enthroned above the four living creatures (1:28) and was revived by ‘spirit’ (*rûah*, 2:2) so that he might listen to Yhwh’s commission. The scroll that he consumed gave him a message from Yhwh that he was to speak (2:8-3:3).”<sup>1</sup>

Ezekiel opens his mouth and eats the scroll and it tastes as sweet as honey in his mouth (3:2-3). What interests us most in the present paper is the significance of eating the scroll. Why must the prophet eat the scroll? Is it not enough to read and understand the text of the scroll? Any implication for the Christian Eucharist?

2:8: The text begins in v. 8 with two significant commands: hear (*šema*) and eat (*’ekôl*). Both words (hearing and eating) are in parallel, but

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<sup>1</sup> Dale Launderville, “Ezekiel’s Throne-Chariot Vision: Spiritualizing the Model of Divine Royal Rule”, *CBQ* 66 (2004) 368.

what the prophet is commanded to hear is not the same as what he is commanded to eat. The words of the scroll are not spoken out to the prophet. The hearing has only to do with the order to eat the scroll. So, the emphasis is on eating the scroll. “Open your mouth and eat that which I am giving to you!” The word used for eating here is the normal Hebrew form *’akl*, and it is not used metaphorically, even though the whole episode belongs to the genre of metaphor. The scroll is actually meant to be eaten as one would eat normal food.

2:9-10: The scroll that the prophet is commanded to eat has inscriptions on both sides, and on the scroll are written these words of doom: lamentation, mourning and woe. A scroll is an ancient writing material made of papyrus or animal skins. Writings on scrolls are usually on one side, but the fact that the present scroll has writings on both sides is an indication of the grievous nature of the impending disaster.<sup>2</sup> The real content of the scroll is not mentioned, and the three significant words on the scroll (lamentation, mourning and woe) are better understood as references to the effect of the message rather than its content.<sup>3</sup>

3:1-2: An interesting feature of this text is the relationship between the eating of the scroll and the mission to prophesy. The aim of eating the scroll is to proclaim its message. According to Luis Alonso Schökel, the prophet’s task is not to burden the people with the reading of the scroll but to digest and assimilate it himself and proclaim its message to them.<sup>4</sup> The eating should not be seen as having a magical effect but an act with expressed orientation. Without the proclamation, the eating becomes irrelevant. As Alonso Schökel puts it, “There is nothing mechanistic about the prophetic activity; it is vital, dynamic and interior.”<sup>5</sup> A significant point to glean from this text is that the eating of the word of God is oriented towards the prophetic proclamation of its message.

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<sup>2</sup> Herbert G. May – E. L. Allen, “The Book of Ezekiel”, *The Interpreters Bible*, 6 (ed. George Arthur Buttrick: New York, Abingdon, 1956) 78-79.

<sup>3</sup> See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezekiel* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990) 24; Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel. Chapters 1-24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) 125.

<sup>4</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *The Inspired Word. Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 93.

<sup>5</sup> Schökel, *The Inspired Word*, 93.

3:3: The prophet actually eats the scroll and finds it very sweet, sweeter than honey. The gift of this scroll recalls the gift of the manna in the desert. In Exod 16:31, it is reported that the manna from heaven tasted like wafers made with honey. In a similar way, the present scroll is said to taste sweeter than honey in the mouth. The sweet taste of YHWH's word is also alluded to in other texts (such texts as Jer 15:16; Ps 19:10; 119:103). From these other texts, one gathers that the sweetness of the scroll is derived from the fact of its divine provenance.<sup>6</sup> According to Leslie Allen, the words signify that the prophetic mission will bring hostility and rejection to the prophet but the privilege outweighs the hardship.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the burden though hard will be sweet to carry.

This text provokes a number of ideas that can pose serious challenges to the prevailing Eucharistic theology. The passage deals with the commissioning of Ezekiel as a prophet. The eating of the scroll serves as the initiation ritual for the prophet. This initiation equips him with the main ingredient for his mission, and this ingredient is the word of God. By eating the word, he symbolically undergoes a direct encounter with the word, and this empowers him to proclaim the word.

### **3. The Eating of the Word in Jer 15:16**

In Jeremiah, one finds the same idea of eating the word and getting endowed with the power to proclaim the word. It is well represented in Jer 15:16: "When your words came I devoured them: your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your Name, Lord God of Sabaoth."

This text is based on the account of Jeremiah's call in Jer 1:9 where YHWH is said to have stretched out his hand and touched the prophet's mouth and then said: "There, I have put my words into your mouth." The text recalls Deut 18:18 where YHWH says to Moses: "I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command." William L. Holladay argues that these words

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<sup>6</sup> May – Allen, "The Book of Ezekiel," 79.

<sup>7</sup> Leslie Allen, "Ezekiel 1-19" (WBC 28; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1994).

of Deut 18:18 gave inspiration to the text of Jer 1:9,<sup>8</sup> even though it is presented there as Jeremiah's own experience.

Jeremiah recalls this experience later on and links his eating of the word of God with his prophetic call, as he says in Jer 15:16: "When your words came I devoured them: your word was my delight and the joy of my heart; for I was called by your Name, Lord God of Sabaoth." This text so resembles that of Ezekiel that some interpreters try to see some literary dependence between the two texts<sup>9</sup> or even a type of historical and relationship between the two prophets.<sup>10</sup> Following Holladay, one traces a process of literary relationship from Deut 18:18 to Jer 1:9 and from Jer 1:9 to Jer 15:16, which in turn influenced Ezek 2:8-3:3.<sup>11</sup>

Eating the word is, thus, a rite of prophetic initiation. It is an experience that symbolically ties together the mission of the prophet.

#### **4. The Banquet of Lady Wisdom in Prov 9:1-6**

<sup>1</sup>Wisdom has built herself a house. She has hewn her seven pillars; <sup>2</sup>she has slaughtered her beasts, drawn her wine; she has laid her table. <sup>3</sup>She has despatched her maidservants and proclaimed from the heights above the city, <sup>4</sup>'Who is simple? Let him come this way.' To the fool she says, <sup>5</sup>'Come and eat my bread, drink the wine which I have drawn! <sup>6</sup>Leave foolishness behind and you will live, go forwards in the way of perception'."

This text presents Wisdom as having built herself a house with seven pillars, prepared a banquet, and dispatched her maidservants to call the simple to the banquet. The text belongs to the larger context of

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<sup>8</sup> William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* (2 vols; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986, 1989) 1, 36; Idem, "Had Ezekiel Known Jeremiah Personally?" *CBQ* 63 (2001) 32.

<sup>9</sup> So Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel I* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 136.

<sup>10</sup> So Holladay, "Had Ezekiel Known Jeremiah Personally?", 32.

<sup>11</sup> See Holladay, "Had Ezekiel Known Jeremiah Personally?," 32-34.



Proverbs 8-9, which introduces the figure called Wisdom who is presented as a female figure. Thus, we may refer to her as “Lady Wisdom”.

The figure of Lady Wisdom in this section of Proverbs has been interpreted from multiple perspectives, and sometimes some of these interpretations are based on presupposed ideas and do not pay enough attention to the actual text. Some see her as the representation of a deity, a goddess, and the argument is often based on the fact that one finds a similar phenomenon in the surrounding cultures. For instance, in Ancient Egypt, the word *Maat* stands for truth and is represented as the goddess of truth and order. In Babylonia, the goddess, Ishtar, is regarded as the creatress of wisdom. While such is the fact in many ANE writings, one does not have enough evidence to argue that the writer of Proverbs was thinking along that line. Some scholars even argue that Wisdom is presented here as a personification of YHWH himself. Other interpretations identify it as the Messiah (the Christ) while others see it as a direct reference to a real female personality, the person of the mother of the messiah, the Virgin Mary. None of these interpretations does enough justice to the complex use of the term in Proverbs. Such interpretations are often very influential, and consequently they continue to bias the understanding of the use of the term itself.

Since Lady Wisdom is not the representation of a divine figure, it becomes imperative to pay good attention to the text so as to understand what the author means in the use of this imagery. In 8:1, Lady Wisdom is also identified as Understanding. This implies that the use of the term “understanding” in the book is also with reference to her. Ordinarily, one would understand “wisdom” and “understanding” as abstract ideas. How does one explain this personification of abstract ideas? Who is this personified Wisdom? Is she really a person?

We adopt the opinion of the scholars who interpret the banquet of Lady Wisdom in 9:1-6 as actually a reference to the body of instructions acquired from the school of wisdom.<sup>12</sup> The banquet motif has been

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<sup>12</sup> See G. Baumann, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverbien 1–9. Traditionsgeschichtliche und theologische Studien* (FAT 16; Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck), 1966) 207-209; Roland E. Murphy, “Proverbs” (WBC 22; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1998).

recognized as common in both the biblical literature and in the literature of the ancient Near East, a typical example being the famous epic of Keret, where the invitation to a banquet is presented in a form similar to that in the present text of Proverbs.<sup>13</sup> These parallels notwithstanding, there is always the responsibility of interpreting each text with its own context. In the present context of Proverbs, the teaching of wisdom is to be understood as the banquet of wisdom. The maidservants are implicitly the wisdom teachers. Along the same line of interpretation, the house with seven pillars is seen as representing the seven main collections that constitute the book of Proverbs. There are really seven collections if one subtracts Chs 1-9 and 31:10-31 both of which were composed later on to frame the book.

Those invited to the banquet of Lady Wisdom are referred to as the simple. The Hebrew word here is *pethaim*, plural of the form *pethi* meaning “simple, open-minded”, being derived from the verb *patah* (“be open, spacious”). The simple here is understood as the one who is not yet endowed with wisdom, one who is open to learning, and thus can be taught. The invitation is aimed at helping the simple to abandon the simple-minded approach to life and come to learn the practical ways to a successful living. That is why the simple/fool is called upon: “Leave foolishness behind and you will live, go forwards in the ways of understanding” (9:6).

The implication of this text is that the banquet functions as a continuous process of initiation to becoming wise. Eating the banquet is a metaphor for getting instructed in the ways of wisdom. Thus, the point is not actually on eating but on learning and living according to the principles learnt. Here, one finds a thread that links the text to the Eucharistic theology. Eating is used as a metaphor for learning. The school of wisdom is a banquet of knowledge.

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<sup>13</sup> In the epic, the king, Keret, summons his wife, Hurriya, with these words: “Hearken O lady Hurriya! Prepare the fattest of thy stall-fed ones; open a jar of wine. Summon my seventy peers, my eighty barons, the peers of Khubur the Great, Khubur the Grand. She prepares the fattest of her stall-fed ones. She opens the jar of wine. Into her presence she causes his peers to come, Into her presence his barons she causes to come: the peers of Khubur the Great, Khubur the Grand” (*ANET*, 146). See discussion in M. Lichtenstein, “The Banquet Motif in Keret and in Prov 9”, *JANESCU* 1 (1968/69) 19–31.

## **5. Implications for Eucharistic Theology**

This paper has been trying to articulate the nature of the relationship between the word of God and the Eucharist. It confronts the implications of the fact that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is encountered as food in the Eucharist. In the Christian setting, the Eucharistic bread and wine function as the sacramental symbols of the continued presence of Christ in the community. The argument becomes very simple: Jesus is the Word of God, and he is present also as the Eucharistic Bread; thus, the Eucharistic Bread re-presents the Word of God. In other words, it is the Word of God that is sacramentally eaten in the Eucharist. This statement may appear simple, but its theological implications are immense. The question then is: What is the essence of this eating?

i. OT Perspective: In the texts of the Old Testament, examined above, the word of God is presented as food, and the eating of this food functions as a symbol for a more spiritual assimilation of the word as well as an initiation to the mission of being a dispenser of the word. The real challenge here is to see the Eucharist not merely as a rite having a magical effect but as an initiation rite for prophetic mission. It is a ritual experience that ties together the main elements of the Christian mission. It is a memorial meal that reminds the partakers that they are commissioned to proclaim that which they have eaten.

ii. Johannine Perspective: In John's Gospel, Jesus is presented as the Incarnate Word of God. It is this Word that is identified as the Bread of Life in the great discourse of John 6:22-71. According to this text, people are looking for Jesus because they expect to eat material bread from him. Jesus points to another bread: the Bread of Life, which he identifies with himself (6:35). He shifts the emphasis from material eating to believing in himself (6:35, 40). In the two verses (vv 35,40), Jesus makes it clear that the sole condition for eternal life is belief in him, but in vv. 50-51, the same eternal life is anchored on eating the bread of life. It is the opinion of most scholars that here in verses 50-51, eating the Bread of life is used as a

metaphor for believing in the person of Jesus, who is the Word of God.<sup>14</sup> This Johannine position agrees in principle with this response of Jesus to the tempter in the Synoptic accounts: “Human beings do not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4:4; cf. Luke 4:4). The synthesis of every word that comes from the mouth of God is Jesus himself. He is the Word which gives true nourishment to all. So the real spiritual food is the Word of God.

iii. Institution of the Eucharist: The relationship between the Eucharist and the word of God is clearly expressed in the words of its institution. Most scholars agree that the oldest account of the institution of the Eucharist is that found in the Pauline text of 1 Cor 11:24-26:

And after he had given thanks, he broke it, and he said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in memory of me.' And in the same way, with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me.' Whenever you eat this bread, then, and drink this cup, you are proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes.

The most significant idea in this text is “proclaiming (*katangellete*) the Lord's death until he comes”, and this incorporates the whole paschal mystery together with the hope of the parousia.<sup>15</sup> The verb here is *katangellein* which is consistently used in the New Testament to express the act of preaching or proclaiming the “goodnews”. The point of the text

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<sup>14</sup> See more recent discussion in J. Painter, “Tradition and Interpretation in John 6,” *NTS* 35 (1989) 421-450; D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids 1990) 276-280, 295-299; Maarten J. J. Menken, “John 51c-58: Eucharist or Christology,” *Biblica* 74 (1993) 1-26.

<sup>15</sup> On this point, the Catechism of the Catholic Church explains, “The command of Jesus to repeat his actions and words ‘until he comes’ does not only ask us to remember Jesus and what he did. It is directed at the liturgical celebration, by the apostles and their successors, of the *memorial* of Christ, of his life, of his death, of his Resurrection, and of his intercession in the presence of the Father” (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church. Pocket Edition* [ed. Geoffrey Chapman; Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994/1995] 1341).

is that the Eucharist is a memorial meal proclaiming the goodnews. This “goodnews” is the main content of the Word of God in the New Testament. The main Christian mission is to preach this Word which is concretised in the person of Jesus Christ. All these buttress the point that the Eucharist is in essence the ritual proclamation of the Word of God.

iv. Patristic Perspectives: The intrinsic relationship between the Word of God and the Bread is very much present in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, but because of the many controversial issues involved in the history of the development of Eucharistic theology, the deeper implications of the relationship have not really received much theological refinement.

John Chrysostom speaks elaborately on the relationship between the Johannine bread of life and the Word (*Logos*), as in this discourse: “He called Himself ‘living bread’ because He welds together for us this life and the life to come. Therefore, He added: ‘If anyone eats of this bread he shall live forever.’ Surely, ‘bread’ here means the teachings of salvation, and faith in Him, or else His Body, for both strengthen the soul.”<sup>16</sup>

The issue is presented from another but equally significant perspective in the theology of St Augustine: “That Bread which you see on the altar, consecrated by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what the chalice holds, consecrated by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ.”<sup>17</sup> What is implied in Augustine’s teaching here is that without the word of God there is no consecrated bread. In other places, Augustine identifies the Word of God as Bread. Quoting the opening verse of John’s Gospel, Augustine says, “‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.’ O food and Bread of angels! The angels are filled by Thee; they are sated, yet they do not draw away from Thee. They live by Thee; they are wise in Thee; they are happy because of Thee.”<sup>18</sup> In this sermon, Augustine addresses the Word (*Logos*)

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<sup>16</sup> St John Chrysostom, *Homily 46 [John 6.41-53]* (trans. Sr. Thomas Aquinas Goggin) in *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, 33 (ed. Roy Joseph Defarrari; New York: Fathers of the Church,, 1957) 465.

<sup>17</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermons 227* (trans. Sr. Mary Sarah Muldoney) in *The Fathers of the Church. A New Translation*, 32 (ed. Roy Joseph Defarrari; New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959) 196.

<sup>18</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermon 196*, in *Fathers of the Church*, 46.

as the Food and Bread of Angels. This imagery is further amplified in another sermon: “In order to be in the Virgin’s womb, did the Word leave heaven? And how would the angels live, if the Word should leave heaven? Yet, in order that man might eat the Bread of angels, the Lord of the angels became man.”<sup>19</sup> Here, Augustine equates the Word with the Bread eaten by angels which has now become the food of human beings.

In a similar manner, St Jerome equates the Word of God with the Body of Christ: “The Lord’s flesh is real food and his blood real drink: to nourish ourselves with his flesh and to drink his blood in not only the Eucharist but also the reading of Sacred Scripture. In fact, the Word of God, drawn from the knowledge of the Scriptures, is real food and drink.”<sup>20</sup>

v. Synthesis: What can be gleaned from all these is that it is not enough to eat the sacramental bread. One must see the eating as a continuous initiation to mission and a reminder of the obligation to get nourished with the Word. Any Eucharistic theology that does not make the Word of God central does not really understand the real meaning of the Eucharist. Interestingly, the Fathers of Vatican II Council stress this relationship in these words: “The two parts which in a sense go to make up the Mass, viz. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship.”<sup>21</sup> The two parts of the Mass are so interrelated that they form only one table and not two: “The Eucharistic table set for us is the table both of the Word of God and of the Body of the Lord.”<sup>22</sup>

Sometimes the Eucharist has been treated in such a way as if it could stand alone without the Word of God which it re-presents. The problem really is that the Eucharist has not always been interpreted in its close relationship with the Word of God. The consequence is the apparent dichotomy between the cult of the Eucharist and the reading of the Word. Despite the liturgical practice of reading the Scriptures at the beginning of

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<sup>19</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermon 225*, in *Fathers of the Church*, 191.

<sup>20</sup> St. Jerome, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, 313: CCL 72, 278. Quoted in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, 35, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, No. 26, 25 June 2008, 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Vatican II Document: The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 56; see also Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, 21; Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1346.

<sup>22</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1346; *Dei Verbum*, 21.

the Mass, people still tend to see the Scriptural reading as one of those preliminary rites preceding the main rite which is the Eucharist. The fact is that both are often treated as if they were radically independent ways of encountering the presence of Christ.

## **6. Conclusion**

The *Lineamenta* of the Synod, at the end of Chapter 1, challenges all its readers with the following question: “What is the relation between the preceding Synod on the Eucharist to the present one on the Word of God?” This question is a pointer to the scarce theological emphasis on the relationship between the Word of God and the Eucharist, despite the fact that some Church Documents point to it. This paper responds to this lack by arguing on two main fronts: 1. that the Eucharistic meal needs to be better understood and celebrated as a rite intrinsically linked to the Word of God, being by its nature the sacramental expression of the spiritual nourishment which the Word gives; 2. that the Eucharist is better interpreted as a rite of initiation to prophetic mission. In other words, the Eucharist celebrates that which the Christian is called to witness in the world, and this is Jesus Christ, the Word of God, whose main teaching is the love of God and humanity.

# **The Word of the Lord and the Power of Human Agency: An Appraisal of a Theological Dynamic**

Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu

## **1. Introduction**

The topic of this convention “The Word of God, Alive and Active” relates to the general theme of God’s revelation of his will in human history. The Bible presents two basic forms of revelation: direct and indirect, which characterize periods of Israel’s history.<sup>1</sup> The period of direct communication marks the time from Creation through the Patriarchal period to the time of Tribal Confederacy. God’s direct speaking brought the world into being and held it firmly on its foundations. God also spoke directly to the patriarchs, and to the Judges he spoke through the *mal’ak Yhwh*, the heavenly messenger of God who announced salvation.

The period of indirect communication of God’s will began with the Monarchy. This period addressed the need for intermediation, which is presented prophetically in Deut 5, being fruit of the people’s request to Yahweh. Therefore, prophecy marks a period of indirect revelation when God no longer spoke directly to his people but is served by human messengers to communicate his will. The Deuteronomistic History presents Moses as the archetype of intermediation; the man with whom God spoke face-to-face as a man speaks to his friend.<sup>2</sup>

The word of God is a means of divine communication. It points to the character of God as one who speaks and who desires to be in relationship with his creatures. The Hebrew term for ‘word’ is *dabar*. After the general definitions of *dabar* as means of divine communication and

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<sup>1</sup> C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Louisville, Westminster, 1991), 99-100.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Num 12:6-8; Deut 34:10.



after explaining its relational characteristics, this paper will concentrate on the importance of human agency for the fulfillment of God's word in history. In the biblical tradition, human agency appears for the first time in the Mosaic tradition as a new theological dynamic. This dynamic belongs primarily to prophecy, where the prophet is the powerful and active agent that promotes the fulfillment of the word.

## 2. *Dabar* as Word and Event

The most important Hebrew term for the word is *dabar*. This paragraph investigates how the etymology of *dabar* contributes to the dominant biblical idea that the word of the Lord is powerful, dynamic, active or swift. In its secular meaning, 'word' is an articulate and intelligible utterance and a vehicle for intellectual expression. In the Bible, *dabar* goes beyond this secular use to denote potency derived from the authority of God. O. Procksch observes that *dabar* is to be distinguished from *omer* and *'imrah* which are used only poetically with the meaning 'saying'.<sup>3</sup> Scholars distinguish two meanings of the term in the Old Testament: "word" or "thing". In the words of O. Grether, *neben der Bedeutung wort steht die Bedeutung sache*, and he adds that its meaning as '*sache*' does not imply a 'material thing' but an event, affair or something.<sup>4</sup> The gulf of difference between these two meanings makes the question of etymology a hard one, but it shows that we are dealing with a concept that goes beyond a verbal relationship.

The Bible presents the word of God as powerful and active in history. As an agent of the revelation of God's will, the word is that which shaped the life and history of Israel.<sup>5</sup> The idea of the power of the word is a thread that runs through the entire Bible. The accounts in Gen 1 and 2 present the created world as a wonderfully organized structure that proceeds from the divine word of command.<sup>6</sup> In the Exodus tradition, the

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<sup>3</sup> O. Procksch, "The Word of God in the Old Testament" in *le,gw*, *TDNT* 4:91.

<sup>4</sup> O. Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament*, Giessen: Alfred Töplemann, 1967, p59.

<sup>5</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* 2, London: SCM, 1967, p72-73.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also, Isa 40:26; 44:24; 50:2f; Ps 33:6,9; 104:7.

word is given the name “the ten words”, and here, it is codified and presented as valid for all times. Eichrodt explains that the power of God’s word is given the highest emphasis in the prophetic tradition.<sup>7</sup> The prophetic word achieves its effect not in opposition to the legal word but on the basis of it, seeing that events are described in terms of willed performance or disregard to the divine commands. The designation of the Law as *debarim* increased significantly in post-exilic prophets.<sup>8</sup> Even the technical term for the prophetic word (*dabar Yhwh*) was applied to the Law.<sup>9</sup> The prophets show that the word of the Lord is that which moves the world towards the objectives of God’s will. It would be right to say that while the idea pervades the Bible, the expression belongs primarily to prophecy.

Some scholars think that in this biblical idea, Israel was concerned with a magical understanding of the power of words, and the relation between words and the reality, which they signify.<sup>10</sup> As a unified and creative entity, the word is thought to be an objective reality endowed with mysterious and autonomous power, which unavoidably worked to bring about what had been articulated. Therefore, once the word is brought to the historical scene, it can produce something new or an intensified form of something already in existence in every realm of existence – religion, theology, and politics.<sup>11</sup> This idea could be true of other religions. The creative word of the gods is a common theme in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Sumeria, especially, the word of a god took effect as magic.<sup>12</sup> The application of this idea to Israelite thought occasioned an article in 1974, written by A. Thiselton and entitled “The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings”.<sup>13</sup> This insight of Thiselton is influenced by the Speech-Act theory, which builds on the work of Jane Austin (1962). According to

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Eichrodt, 72-76.

<sup>8</sup> Isa 66:2,5; Ps 50:17; 2 Chron 34:21.

<sup>9</sup> Num 15:31; 1 Chron 15:15; 2 Chron 30:12.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, J. Sanders, “The Word” in *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 869-872; G. von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> von Rad, 61-65.

<sup>12</sup> A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 19-22.

<sup>13</sup> *JTS* 24 (1974) 283-299.

T.E. Fretheim, the previously magical understanding of the use of words in the OT is far from being a theological concern. Rather, it is rooted in a mistaken view of language.<sup>14</sup> He adds, “The lack of an independent power for words is shown by the fact that words may be ineffective and cannot in and of themselves compel response (Prov 2:3-4; 17:10; 29:19)”. On the basis of the Speech–Act theory, Thiselton states that words are effective not because of the power they have in themselves but when there is the authority of a god behind them or when special kinds of utterance were spoken by specially appointed speakers on the basis of conventionally accepted procedures.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the efficacy of the word is found in its performative character. It is dependent on the identity of the speaker, where and when the word is spoken, and the particular form in which it is spoken. If the wrong person speaks the word at the wrong time and in a wrong manner, the word might produce a contrary effect.<sup>16</sup>

In view of the foregoing, the function of the word in the Bible is to be explained in terms other than the magical and the mysterious. To bring the explanation home, we can understand that certain people exercise authority over our lives. There are people whom we accord great respect because we know they love us and they play vital roles in our lives. It could be a parent, guardian, benefactor / benefactress, elder sibling or anybody who could belong to this category. Any word spoken by such a person is not simply taken seriously. What they say commands our lives and actions. So also any word spoken by a political personality, who has proved that he / she has the interest of the local community at heart. The word simply assumes power from the authority of the speaker. This banal example could help us to understand why the Bible uses an objectifying language when it speaks of the powerful and creative force of the word of God. It does so only because it is the word of Yahweh and never attributes power to human words. The word of God is creative, powerful, dynamic, swift and eternal because its speaker is God himself.

In prophecy, however, there is a clear identification of Word of the Lord and word of the prophet. 1 Sam 4:1 reports, “for all Israel, the word of Samuel was as the word of the Lord...”. The word is therefore lifted out

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<sup>14</sup> E.F. Fretheim, “Word of God” in *ABD* 6:962.

<sup>15</sup> Thiselton, 293.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Prov 27:14.

of the sphere of naturalistic determinism or magical caprice, as is found among Israel's neighbours. In Israel, the divine command creates history which works out from within a divine-human relationship. The relational character of the word is the topic of the next paragraph.

### **3. Between the Word and the Event**

Another dimension to the meaning of the word concerns its relational character. Although God's word shapes the cosmic and human history, it does not do so deterministically, but in a relationship with human response. 'Word' is not an abstract concept or a bare statement. It is a verbal and relational term that generates a relationship in which one communicates and another receives or responds. When used of God, it refers to a medium of divine communication, although this can only be said metaphorically of God with all the differences and similarities in mind with respect to the human analogue.<sup>17</sup> With the use of this concept, Israel testifies that Yahweh is a God who speaks and is always in communication with humans. It is a vehicle for the will of God. Biblical texts present us with images of the word of God as a relational category,<sup>18</sup> and they express the eagerness with which God desires this communication with his people.<sup>19</sup> God can speak and can be spoken to. From the 'beginning', the entire creation is called to respond to God's creative word: vegetation, living creatures, beasts and human beings.<sup>20</sup> The word of God, therefore, is a relational category by means of which the relationship between God and people could be realized more fully.

Like every human relationship, this relational characteristic exposes the word to vulnerability. If God has considered the human being as an interlocutor, it implies that the human partner can hear and respond to the word of God, without his/her freedom being compromised. In other words, God's word is not deterministic in the relationship. The creature

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<sup>17</sup> Fretheim, 961.

<sup>18</sup> Fretheim, 964.

<sup>19</sup> Gen 18:7; Isa 65:1-2; Amos 3:7.

<sup>20</sup> Gen 1:1, 11, 22, 24, 28.

could respond positively or negatively to God,<sup>21</sup> and any response can affect the relationship. Individuals can shape or reshape their history depending on how they respond to God's word.<sup>22</sup>

The relational character of the word also implies that God has ongoing relationship with his word. Depending on the response from the human partner, God may change his mind or repent (*nihām*) of the word he had earlier spoken. A surface level reading of an Old Testament passage like Isa 55:10-11 could suggest that God's words once spoken will move to fulfillment irrespective of human response or human resistance.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

However, a more contextual reading has shown that it represents God's word of promise on which the faithful rely and which remains in force even in the face of rejection. On the other hand, Exodus 32 show how those who receive the word can misuse it, twisting it toward ends not consonant with God's purposes, and prevent it from having its intended effect. In other situations, God may reverse a word of judgment in the face of human repentance (Jer 26:3, 13) or prayer (Jonah 3:10) or intercession (Amos 7:3-6). The fundamental motivation for a divine reversal of a word of judgement is that God's desires that human beings live and not die. He

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<sup>21</sup> Ezek 2:7.

<sup>22</sup> The word of God in creation and promise constitutes an exception to this relational understanding. In the perspective of creation, God's word is powerful and effective in the beginning and in the natural and historical realms. What God says or commands comes to being (Gen 1; Ps 33:6,9; 107:20; Wisd 16:12). The tradition also shows that God's doing also has creative effect (Isa 45:12; 48:13). Whether by word or deed, the creative word is a deliberate act of the divine will, which alters chaos decisively (Fretheim, p965). Similarly, God's word of promise is reliable, irrevocable and permanent. While it will be fulfilled for the faithful, a rebellious generation may not live to see its fulfillment.

always wants that his salvific intention be fulfilled in the world.<sup>23</sup> God can also stop the effects of judgment already administered so that they do not proceed to total destruction (Jer 42:10; Joel 2:13-14). In this way, human history is shaped not only by the word of God but also by human response to that word.

#### **4. Between the Word and Human Response: The power of Human Agency**

In view of the fact that the word may or may not reach its desired effect depending on the nature of human response, God takes yet another decisive step to ensure the efficacy of the word. In-between the word of God and human response, another dimension to this discussion appears in the biblical story in the form of a theological dynamic. This dimension regards the introduction of the human agent, whom God calls to embody the word and who sees to it that the word reaches its desired goal.

This dimension concerns the power of intermediation. In the Bible, it is a dominant theological dynamic that is developed especially in the prophets. God can speak directly and on the basis of his authority as God, his word can have creative and redemptive effects on nature and in history. God spoke directly to the patriarchs (Gen 12–Exod 2). However, for the first time in Israel's history, God's relationship with Moses introduces a new pattern of relationship. This marks a new beginning in the history of Israel, distinct from what preceded in the time of the patriarchs. God begins to speak through the agency of human beings whom God calls for that purpose. How this theological dynamic became a powerful means of eliciting human positive response to God's word is the topic of this paragraph.

##### **4.1 The Background**

The background to the story of Moses as an intermediary per excellence is found in Exodus 3:1-15. In the theophany that begins this story (Exod 3:1-

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<sup>23</sup> Ezek 12:25, 28; 24:14; Jer 4:28.

6), God speaks to Moses and reveals to him his desire to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses was to become the agent for the accomplishment of this great task. Without making a detailed exegetical analysis of the story (the demanding character of God's word, human reluctance and feeling of inadequacy, and provision of divine assurance), it should be pointed out that in this foundational experience, God determines the way by which he would communicate with his people whom he was about to make into a nation. Moses is presented in the entire story as the archetypical agent of God's will, one who has a unique access to the mind of God.<sup>24</sup>

Exodus 3:13-15 has a nexus of interrelated elements. The idea of Moses as being sent is in a very close connection with the revelation of the divine name by which Moses is to communicate the word. Yahweh is the historic divine name by which Israel encountered their God. This name, revealed to Moses, carries great significance and authority. It reveals divine commitment to the people as their God who would deliver them. It is the guarantee that the reality of God stands behind the promise and will execute its fulfillment.<sup>25</sup> With the use of peculiar vocabulary of prophecy this text presents Moses as the classic Hebrew prophet who is sent to speak to Israel in Yahweh's name. The verb *šalah* (vv13-15) is commonly used in the OT to designate a prophet's commission from God.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Moses characteristically introduces his message with the prophetic formula "Thus says Yahweh". This description of a foundational encounter is given classical exposition in Deut 5:22-33; 18:9-22. These texts establish that prophecy is the sole means of communication with God, with the exclusion of other means – angels, dreams, vision, divination, and sorcery. It also ensures the continuous operation of God's word in Israel by the promise of an unbroken line of prophets, whose mediation is comparable to that of

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<sup>24</sup> For instance, J. Sanders, "The Word" in *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 869-872; G. von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> von Rad, 61-65.

<sup>24</sup> A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 15.

<sup>25</sup> B.S. Childs, *Exodus*, OTL (London: SCM, 1974) 115.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7; Ezek 2:3.

Moses.<sup>27</sup> The text of Amos 3:7 presents the prophet as the privileged human agent to whom God communicates his intentions for the world.

## 4.2 The Word – Event Formula

The Bible speaks of the word as an event in which the prophet takes part. God sends it to the prophet to fulfill a particular command. According to von Rad, this formula represents the apprehension of the divine word as event, a unique happening in history.<sup>28</sup> Hence, it is called the ‘word–event’ formula (*dabar Yhwh*). Almost half of all the appearances of *dabar Yhwh* in the OT appear in this formula.<sup>29</sup> The phrase goes with the verb ‘to be’ (*hyh*) and translated as ‘to come’ (The word of the Lord came to...), which implies that something happened or came to pass. Since it is the subject of the sentence, one can understand it as an independent history creating force.

With regard to its function, the following assertions could be made. Firstly, the formula stresses the character of the divine initiative to communicate his will as an event. It employs the biblical term, *wayehi*, by which general historical events are described. In other words, through it the prophets do not merely reveal God’s will or intention. Rather, with it they reveal God’s word in an event. The Hebrew meaning of *dabar* as both ‘word’ and ‘event’ suggests this duality. Secondly, the vocabulary of the formula removes the impression that what is at issue is a physical speaking or an ordinary exchange of words between two persons. It rather entails that the prophet receives a revelation of God in his relation with the world and with history. Finally, one can say that the formula describes an act of communication in which the message is conveyed to the prophet for a people living in a particular situation.

At this point, it will be appropriate to present this particular Mosaic prophetic function to whom God entrusts the successful outcome of the word.

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<sup>27</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 63.

<sup>28</sup> von Rad, 66.

<sup>29</sup> Grether, 67.



### 4.3 The Power of Human Agency: The Face-to-Face Knowledge

Backed by an understanding of the biblical idea about the Word of the Lord in itself and in prophecy, I shall present a text, which explains how prophetic mediation of the word works out powerfully in history. Given that Moses is the archetypical prophet that fulfills this function, it is necessary to choose a text in which Moses plays a major character. The text I have chosen to present is Deut 34:10-12.

Deut 34:10-12 closes the Pentateuch, the part of the OT in which Moses is the authority behind the traditions that are represented. It is most fitting therefore that the Torah should close with a statement that confirms the importance of this figure in the history of Israel. The issue is the statement about Moses' unequalled status in Israel:

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

This statement is “an all-inclusive retrospective evaluation of the period from the death of Moses to the time of writing”.<sup>30</sup> It affirms that since the death of Moses, there has never been any prophet like Moses. In this way, the statement places the entire history of prophecy on a level lower than the Mosaic covenant. This statement is augmented with a reference to the signs and wonders which Moses worked in Egypt and in the midst of all Israel (vv 11-12). Scholars consider these last verses as a gloss and as peripheral to the core issue of the text, which is the nature of the revelation to Moses.<sup>31</sup>

The nucleus of the text is the direct face-to-face communication to Moses, which affirms the difference between Moses and the well-known

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<sup>30</sup> J. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins*, Indiana: Notre Dame, 1977, p86.

<sup>31</sup> Blenkinsopp (1977), p 87-89.

modes of communication familiar to subsequent prophets. The face-to-face communication of Deut 34:10 is rendered analogically in another text (Num 12:6-8) as a mouth-to-mouth communication. What is this face-to-face communication? Exod 33:11 explain it as an unstinting familiarity existing between friends. Exod 34:10 has a peculiar purpose:

- a. To contrast the revelation proper to Moses with that of the prophets (through visions, dreams and riddles). Since the sight of the deity's face was deemed fatal, this role was granted to him probably on the grounds that he was a covenant mediator. Tradition contemplated such nearness to God only within the covenant relationship (cf. Exod 24:11)
- b. Among the prophets, something close to the revelation proper to Moses is found in the claim of some prophets that they were members of the divine council, the *sod Yahweh*. By making this claim, Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:16-17), Amos (3:7), and Jeremiah (23:16-19) purport that they were present at the divine council when God was taking decision in matters that concern the world.
- c. Because of this model form of revelation, Moses was able to record more successes than any other prophet in history. Hence the appendix of Deut 34:11-12. The word from his mouth was the word of the Lord. Above all, he was the only prophet who changed God's mind in favour of the Israelites. His power of intercession is unequalled in the history of prophecy (cf. Exod 32; v 4 especially).
- d. Most fundamentally, the life of Moses was included in his message. His prophetic task did not begin and end with words. In fact the word of the Lord becomes an event in the person of the prophet. This is seen symbolically in the lives of Jeremiah and Ezekiel who after eating the word of God it became a part of their lives. Even without denying their freedom, the compelling character of the word, the fact that they could no longer resist it shows that it has become a part of them.

This speaks of a deep and personal knowledge of God's nature and character. God has revealed himself as a God whose will makes history for redemption. In the face of human negative response, he maintains an

ongoing relationship to his word whereby he sees that it produces the desired salvific effect. Armed with this knowledge, the prophet takes advantage of this divine attitude and work for the redemption of humanity deserving of God's wrath.

## **5. Conclusion: Moses as Model of the Prophet for Africa**

The last point raised in the last paragraph inspires a reflection on the meaning of the Jesus as the Word of the Father, made flesh and dwelling among us. Jesus' intimacy with the Father was so tight that his words and works are identical with that of the Father. On the basis of this relationship, the Father did whatever the Son asked him on behalf of the people for whom he worked. This closeness to God is found in the lives of such prophets like Hosea, Jeremiah and Amos. The prophet about whose life the most important information is provided is Hosea. It was indeed through the experience of his life that he got to understand God's endless love for his people. Hosea's life was a vehicle for conveying the message of judgment and hope to Israel. The prophet, therefore, is: not one who has ecstatic frenzy, not one who raises his voice loud to condemn the excesses of politicians, not a social reformer, but a prophet like Moses.

## **“Planted in the House of the Lord” (Ps 92:14): Arboreal Images in Psalm 92**

Mary Jerome Obiorah

### **Introduction**

The divinely inspired human authors of the Bible utilized tools available to them in their effort to convey the Word of God to their contemporaries. One of the means by which they communicated God’s Word is the use of vivid images very familiar to the first addressees of their message. The author of Ps 92 employs the image of two representational trees in his geographical ambient, date-palm and cedar of Lebanon, and contrasts them with grass, in order to persuasively pass on his message. As an inspired writer, he and many others communicate God’s Word in their literary art, and significantly in the metaphors, which eloquently impart the Word of God. In both the OT and the NT, the Word of God assumes significant modes of existence, and often these are not aliens to their first addressees. Hence, the sacred authors artfully brought the Word of God to their contemporaries by using images with which their first addressees were very much at home.

Readers and interpreters of the Bible can arrive at its message by penetrating into the world of these ancient writers. In our society, in which current religious enthusiasts ostentate the Bible, the faithful need correct interpretation of this Christian Sacred Text. Biblical scholars play an important role in this aspect. Enhanced understanding of these metaphors with which the ancient writers communicated the Word of God is of great importance to us who today read and make use of their texts. “In an increasing number of ways, people today are eagerly seeking the Word of God as the source of life and as a means of encountering the Lord in a

personal manner”.<sup>1</sup> They need to know what the ancient writers intended to relay to the people of their time, and how they have done this.

In Psalm 92, the poet uses the image of trees, which is found in other parts of the OT, to communicate the Word of God. The present contribution, employing a simplified literary method, seeks to highlight how the psalmist has achieved this and its relevance to those who today read the ancient text. Ours, therefore, is an attempt to interpret a text from the book of the Psalms with the intention to arrive at the message of the composer, the meaning of the arboreal images he employed in conveying the Word of God to his contemporaries, and the import of these images in the text.

## 1. Literary Genre and the Text of Psalm 92

The multifaceted literary genre of Psalm 92 engenders the varied interpretations that scholars have accorded to its text. Psalm 92 begins in its first stich with a *tôdāh*, thanksgiving or praise tendency easily discernible in the verbal root *ydh* which is recurrent in many Psalms of Thanksgiving (cf. Ps 18; 30; 32; 34; 40,2-12; 41; 66; 92; 116; 118 and 138).<sup>2</sup> Again, the rich repertoire of words in Ps 92 for the wicked (*ba'ar*, *k'sîl*, *rāšā'*, etc.) and its antipode, the righteous (*saddîq*), as well as subtle discuss on theodicy (vindication of divine justice), makes the song appear didactic and sapiential, comparable to Psalms 37 and 49. Psalm 92 also alludes to the life regenerating features of the sacred precinct, God's House (cf. vv.13-15), which are often found in the Songs of Zion. This Psalm is not extraordinary, because many Psalms exhibit more than one literary genre, and this is an evidence of the freedom of the composers who did not restrict their thoughts to a set rule.<sup>3</sup> Characteristic features of Songs of Thanksgiving are

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<sup>1</sup> Synod of Bishops, XII Ordinary General Assembly, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church: Lineamenta* (2007) §2.

<sup>2</sup> The versification of the Psalms in this work is according to the Masoretic Text, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld – Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51-100* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 436, who similarly perceived three levels of statement in Psalm 92.

outstanding in Ps 92.<sup>4</sup> The text begins with introductory phrases (vv.2-4) expressing hymn of thanksgiving to God. First in the psalmist's series of verbs indicative of thanksgiving is from the verbal root *ydḥ* used in the text as *hiphil* infinitive. This introduction is immediately followed by the body of the text (vv 5-12) governed by the causal demonstrative particle *kî* which ushers in the reason for this Song of Thanksgiving. The concluding part is in vv. 13-16. Furthermore, in a song of thanksgiving the psalmists thank God for specific favours received. The author of our text does this in verses 11-12; perhaps, it is an allusion to deliverance from certain enemies.<sup>5</sup> The thanksgiving song has developed into a hymn because the rescue alluded to in verses 11-12 has stirred the psalmist deeply.<sup>6</sup>

Our study of Ps 92 takes cognizance of all these literary types of the text as we attempt to understand the function of the arboreal images that the poet cleverly appropriates in his persuasive song. Apart from the second stich of v.11, the original text of Ps 92 is well preserved.<sup>7</sup> This stich, which has posed considerable difficulty to many translators, is stated in this way in the Masoretic Text (MT): *ballōtî b'ešemen ra'ānān*. It is a difficult stich to translate because of the obscure meaning of the first word which is often analyzed as a verb. As it stands, the first word is *qal* perfect, first person common singular, from the germinate root *bll*. The sudden change from the

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<sup>4</sup> Hermann Gunkel – Joachim Begrich, *Introduction to Psalms: The Genre of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998) 199.

<sup>5</sup> James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster Bible Companion; Westminster John Knox Press, 2000) 315.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003) 106; similarly in Klaus Koenen, *Jahwe wird kommen, zu herrschen über die Erde: Ps 90-110 als Komposition* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 101; Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995) 56.

<sup>7</sup> M. Dahood, reviewing *The Psalms for Modern Man* [New York: American Bible Society, 1970] in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34 (1972) 240-242, explains the *lamed* in *lāyhwh* of v.2 as a vocative. Part of his explanation is worth citing: "The fact that throughout the Psalm Yahweh is addressed in the second person should have made it obvious that the *lamedt* of *layhwh* in the opening colon was the vocative particle, especially since *'elyōn*, the second half of the composite title *yhwh 'elyōn*, stands in the vocative case in the second colon. Once this is recognized, it will be seen that the implicit direct object of *l'hōdōt* "to praise", which normally governs a direct object, is second-colon *šim 'kā*, "your name".

direct address in the first stich of this verse to a near soliloquy in the second stich apparently disrupts the rhythm of the text, which so far has been direct address to God. The *NRSV* solves this difficulty by using the Syriac Peshitta version at this point. The Peshitta reads: *wsb'tny bmsm'*: “you have moistened me with fragrant oil”. The same sense is expressed by Targum: *rbyt'yty bms'h rbwt' rtyb' dzyt' bwp*: “you have anointed me with fresh anointing-oil from a leafy olive-tree”. From these translations, of which many scholars share,<sup>8</sup> the verb is read as second person masculine singular with first person common object suffix. Some, however, changed the verb to *bālagtî* on the basis of the Arabic verb *balaja* “to shine, to dawn”, thus producing this rendition: “I shine with fresh oil”.<sup>9</sup> Reading this verb with the Targum and Peshitta as *qal* perfect, second person masculine, one could perceive some scribal oversight in copying *ballōtî* instead of *ballōtanî*; the only difference in the consonantal version of the text is the consonant *nun* which the copier most probably omitted.

Still on the same stich of v. 11, and conceivably on the basis of other floral images in the text, Loewenstamm sees another type of tree<sup>10</sup> in the Hebrew term *šemen* which in the OT is almost always translated as “oil”. He identifies *šemen* as wild oiltree. His translation of the verse is “my old age is like a fresh oiltree”. An arboreal image in his rendition makes his suggestion inviting; however, objective translation should not cede to subjective explanation of the text. “My old age” in this rendition is probably derived from the LXX *to gēras* “old age”, which corresponds to none of the words in the MT version of this Psalm.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. C. A. Briggs – E. M. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986) 283; H.-J., *Psalms 60-150* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 226; A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962) 613; similarly in some modern translations such as *The New Jerusalem Bible*, 1985; *English Standard Version* 2001; *New Living Translation* second edition, 2004, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Thijs Booij, “The Hebrew Text of Psalm 92,11”, *VT* 38 (1988) 210-213.

<sup>10</sup> S. E. Loewenstamm, “An Additional Remark upon Psalm 92,11”, *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palästinas* 13 (1981) 302. See also Loewenstamm’s previous article on this, “*Balloti b'ešāmān ra'anān*”, *Ugarit-Forschungen* 10 (1978) 111-113.

## 2. So much in a Literary Art

To understand Psalm 92, one ought to have in view the “land of many contrasts” in which the psalmist lived and composed his poem, and which gave the poet the matrix for the images he used. The arid regions in most parts of the south with the oasis of Jericho and En-gedi, the thick forest of the north, especially around Mount Hermon and its environs, must have supplied the psalmist with the picture depicted in the poem. In its structure, the entire Ps 92 is chiasitic:

In fact the ABCDCBA shape of a chiasitic poem is as natural as going for a walk and returning by the same route. We set out from A and pass B and C on our way to D, then come back via C and B, home to A again. In the case of Psalm 92, D represents verse 9, which is very clearly the poem’s midpoint: the middle Yahweh of seven, the middle verse of fifteen, the middle line of thirty-one.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 73-150: Songs for the People of God* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001) 82-83; similarly in James M. Boice, *Psalms II: Psalms 42-106* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996) 755. Expressing similar idea in their work, J.-N. Aletti – J. Trublet, *Approche poétique et théologique des psaumes: Analyses et Méthodes* (Initiations; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1983) 87, use the term concentric; according to their structural analysis, the text concentrates on v. 9. See also Jonathan Magonet, “Some Concentric Structures in Psalms”, *The Heythrop Journal* 23 (1982) 365-376; his study of structural analysis of some Psalms with concentric structures includes Psalm 92. Similar tripartite structure of Psalm 92 is seen in the interpretation of this Psalm by Frank-Lothar Hossfeld – Erich Zenger, *Psalms* 2, 436; the same structure is adopted by Eric Zenger, “Kanonische Psalmenexegese und christlich-jüdischer Dialog: Beobachtungen zum Sabbatpsalm 92”, *Mincha: Festgabe für Rolf Rendtorff zum 75. Geburtstag* (Neukirchener-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000) 243-260. A more detailed structural study of this Psalm is found in Pierre Auffret, *Voyez de vos yeux: étude structurelle de vingt psaumes dont le psaume 119* (Leiden-New York-Köln: E.J. Brill, 1993) 301-317.



The first letter A represents the introductory part of the text, that is, vv.2-4. Verse 1 is the superscription in the Hebrew version of this Psalm. Second letter A refers to the rear section, vv.13-16, which corresponds to vv. 2-4 in some words and expressions. The verb *ngd* “to report, announce, tell” forms an inclusion with the use of the same verbal root in the introductory part of the poem (v.3). The two letters of B in the citation above stand for vv.5-6 and vv.11-12 respectively. Letter C is for vv.7-8 and v.10. Verse 9 is represented by the letter D, and it is the middle of the poem.<sup>12</sup> Points of correspondence in the parallel sections are mentioned in the following paragraphs.

Besides this artistic presentation of the poem is the use of word pair in v.3 “morning and night”.<sup>13</sup> Further examples are found in Isa 21:12 and Hos 7:6. This word pair is also an example of chronological *merismus* in Psalm 92; it accentuates the unceasing praise of God from one pole of the day to the other extreme. To praise God “morning and night” means praising him all the day long. It is impressive to observe the use of the plural form for night in the Hebrew version of this text; the LXX and the Vulgate have singular. The plural *allot* could be an example of intensive plural of using plural form of a noun with singular meaning as in Ps 134:1 and Canticles 3,1.8. It is also possible that the author had in mind the divisions of the four segments of keeping watch at night in the Temple (cf. Ps 16, 7).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Convincing as it is, J. P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible at the Interface of Prosody and Structural Analysis III: The Remaining 65 Psalms* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 43; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003) 177-181, proposes a tripartite structure different from the opinion of most scholars: 2-6; 7-12; 13-16. From a close observation, the first two parts in his structural study cut across the logical flow of the text.

<sup>13</sup> These are included in the lists of frequent word pairs by Yitzhak Avishur, *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs in Biblical and Ancient Semitic Literature* (Alter Orient und Altes Testament 210; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1984) 121.

<sup>14</sup> The four divisions are from sunset to 9 p.m.; from 9 p.m. to midnight; from midnight to 3 a.m.; and from 3 a.m. to sunrise. These four corresponds to four divisions of keeping watch during the day: from sunrise to 9 a.m.; from 9 a.m. to noon; from noon to 3 p. m.; and from 3 p. m. to sunset.

In this song of thanksgiving and praise to God, the psalmist structures his poem in such a way that the two categories of individual he portrays in the text correspond to the two spectra of vegetal-arboreal imagery found therein. One group is symbolized by 'ēšēb (v 8), a collective term for weeds, grass, vegetables, cereals, that grow during rainy season; these are not perennial. In the context of the text, 'ēšēb is a symbol of transitoriness. The second group to which the psalmist belongs is represented by the direct opposite of 'ēšēb; the singer uses two symbolic names of trees to accentuate the contrast: these are *tāmār* "palm", botanically known as *Phoenix dactylifera*; this picture is complemented by another ever-green plant 'erez "cedar".

At the centre of his song of praise and thanksgiving is God, addressed with the covenantal name, the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, which occurs seven times in the text (vv. 2.5.6.9.10.14.16). The number seven is symbolic; it signifies completeness and perfection. The text is so arranged such that the fourth occurrence of this divine name is at the centre of the Psalm and in a phrase that has so much to convey about the theological thrust of the poem. Verse 9 articulates it in these words: *w<sup>e</sup>'attāh mārôm l<sup>e</sup>'ōlām* YHWH: "But you O Lord are on high forever". God's greatness guarantees his marvelous works of which the psalmist sings and the vindication which only the One who is on high can achieve. Some perceive an antithetical parallelism between this verse and the sense of verse 8 that immediately precedes.<sup>15</sup> The lowly nature of grass cannot be compared to One who stands on high. In sum, verse 9 "acts as a caesura, a pause between the first and last three stanzas".<sup>16</sup>

Verse 9 is in the centre of the main body of the poem, viz., verses 5-12. The four verses that precede verse 9 are divided into two.<sup>17</sup> The first set is verses 5-6 which are positive in its content; the psalmist rejoices in God's marvelous deeds. The second is verses 7-8 and the content is negative;

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Klaus Koenen, *Jahwe wird kommen, zu herrschen über die Erde: Ps 90-110 als Komposition* (Bonner Biblische Beiträge 101; Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995) 56.

<sup>16</sup> Dan Vogel, "A Psalm for Sabbath? A Literary View of Psalm 92", *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 28/4 p. 218.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Gianfranco Ravasi, *Il Libro dei Salmi: Commento e Attualizzazione II [51-100]* (Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane, 1996) 928.

God's deeds elude the godless. There are four terms, two in each verse, which portray the nature of the godless; each heightens their depravity. In verse 7, they are first presented as *'iš-ba'ar* "dullard", having animal instinct. The verb, *lō' yāda'*, that comes immediately after renders the nuance of *'iš-ba'ar* more explicit. In the same verse 7, the second stich is synonymous to the first; it contains a synonym of *'iš-ba'ar* on one hand and *lō' yāda'* on the other. These are respectively *k'sîl* "foolish" in practical affairs, and the negative verbal form *lō'-yābîn*. In verse 8 there are two other terms that depict the godless; these are *rāšā'* "guilty, transgressor", and *pō'ālê 'āwen* "workers of iniquity"; the latter has the nuance of idolatry. At this point in the Psalm, the psalmist likens the godless and their action to *'ēšeb* "grass" which sprouts (*prh*) and blossoms (*sîs*) but only to be destroyed. They disappear with the same spontaneity with which they sprout up.

The three verses (vv 10-12) after verse 9 are also divided into two according to their contents. First is verse 10 which is negative: God's enemies perish:

*kî hinnēh 'ōy<sup>e</sup>bēkā YHWH*  
*kî hinnēh 'ōy<sup>e</sup>bēkā yō'bēdû*  
*yitpār<sup>e</sup>d û kol-pō'ālê 'āwen*

"For your enemies, O Lord, / for your enemies shall perish; / all evildoers shall be scattered".

The content of this tristich strophe has been compared to an Ugaritic Poem about Baal and Anath:

*ht ibk b'lm*  
*ht ibk tmhs*  
*ht tsmt srtk*  
 Now thine enemy, O Baal  
 Now thine enemy wilt thou smite,  
 Now wilt thou cut off thine adversary<sup>18</sup>

In his text the author of Psalm 92 probably appropriates the words and the rhythm of this Ugaritic poem. In the Ugaritic, Baal is opposed to his cosmic

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<sup>18</sup> J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts relating to the Old Testament with Supplement (ANET)*; Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University, <sup>3</sup>1969) 131a.

enemy *Yam*; and his victory is significant for existence. Its demythologized sense in Psalm 92 refers to YHWH and his enemies in human history.<sup>19</sup> Avishur sees further parallel texts of this in the Hebrew Bible in Pss 73:27 and 83:3.<sup>20</sup>

Verses 11-12 are positive; the psalmist praises God's work in his life; especially the Divine vindication over enemies.

In the concluding part of the Psalm (vv 13-16), the singer, employing the arboreal images of *tāmār* and *'erez*, elucidates the blissful life situation of the righteous, *saddîq*. The divine name YHWH occurs for the seventh and final time in verse 16.

Furthermore, in verse 13 *tāmār* and *'erez* are a word pair common to both Hebrew and Aramaic. For the Aramaic it is found in *Genesis Apocryphon* XIX 14-15: "and I saw in my dream that there was a cedar and a date-palm"; and in another phrase, "to cut down and uproot the cedar, but leave the date-palm to itself".<sup>21</sup>

Similarly in verse 14, house and courts form a word pair and are parallel to each other in the two stichs of this verse. Further examples of this word pair seen often in synonymous parallelism are found in Exod 8:9; Ezek 9:7; Zech 3:7; Pss 65:5; 84:11; 1 Chron 28:6.<sup>22</sup> In this rich literary art the psalmist employs the images of significant trees common in his ambient.

## 2. An Insight into the Arboreal Images in Psalm 92

The author of Psalm 92 chooses three terms from the ancient Near Eastern botanic world, *'ēšeb*, *tāmār* and *'erez*, in order to convey his message, which is the Word of God in human language.

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<sup>19</sup> A more detailed study of Psalm 92 and its parallel texts in Ugaritic are the focus of Oswald Loretz, "Psalm 92: Ugaritische Texte und Gattungsforschung", *Ugarit-Forschungen* 25 (1993) 275-288.

<sup>20</sup> Yitzhak Avishur, *Studies in Hebrew and Ugaritic Psalms* (Jerusalem: The Magnes, 1994) 243.

<sup>21</sup> Avishur, *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs*, 482-483.

<sup>22</sup> Avishur, *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs*, 540-541; he points out more word pairs in our Psalm, about fourteen pairs.

*ʿēšeb* (“grass”) is a collective deverbative singular noun<sup>23</sup> for low vegetation which stands in contrast to *ʿēs* (“tree”), “woody plant”. Their growth depends on precipitation, for they sprout in the rainy season and wither when the weather grows hot and dry. In the second account of creation, traditionally attributed to the Yahwistic source, *ʿēšeb haššādeh* “grass of the field” first sprouted on earth after the Lord had caused the rain to fall on the ground. “The luxuriant growth of plants during the rainy season symbolizes fertility and vitality”.<sup>24</sup> According to Ps 72:16, good governance makes the king’s subject blossom like grass in the field. In Job 5:25, the children of the upright are like the grass of the earth. Psalm 92:8 bears similar connotation of *ʿēšeb* as a symbol of fertility; the psalmist combines this positive image with the ephemeral and transient feature of grass, which endure only when there is rain. “The greenery that sprouts so luxuriantly in the spring withers and perishes in the heat and drought of summer, symbolizes the mortality of transient human beings”.<sup>25</sup> The OT employs synonyms of *ʿēšeb* such as *hāsîr* and *sîs* in conveying the same idea of transience of human life (cf. Pss 37:2; 90:5-6; 103:15-16; Job 14:2; Isa 40:6, 8; 51:12).

While *ʿēšeb* stands for ephemeralness of human life, *tāmār* and *ʿerez* among many other meanings, underscore the longevity of human life. In the OT, the term *tāmār* is first the name for “date-palm” *Phoenix dactylifera*; it occurs in the OT with this meaning for about twelve times.<sup>26</sup> The second use of *tāmār* in the OT is derived from its physical features as a very tall, statuesque, straight, evergreen and full of sap; thus it is a personal feminine name. It is the name of Judah’s daughter-in-law (Gen 38:6-30), the daughter of David and Maacah and sister of Absalom (2 Sam 13:1-22), and Absalom’s only daughter, perhaps named after her sister (2 Sam 14:27). The author of the Canticles 7:7 must have thought of the familiar graceful shape of a palm tree when he likens it to the figure of a woman standing: “You are

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<sup>23</sup> The only exception is in the Book of Proverb 27,25 where it occurs in feminine plural form, *ʿiššebôt*.

<sup>24</sup> P. Maiberger, *ʿēšeb, Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament XI* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001) 384.

<sup>25</sup> Maiberger, *ʿēšeb*, 386.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Exod 15:27; Lev 23:40; Num 33:9; Deut 34:3; Judg 1:16; 3:13; Neh 8:15; Joel 1:12; Ps 92:13; Cant 7:8, 9; 2 Chron 28:15.

stately as a palm tree, and your breasts are like its clusters". Third, *tāmār* is also a place name (cf. Ezek 47:18-19; 48:28). In the Mishnaic Hebrew, *tāmār* is called *deqel*. *Tāmār* grows abundantly in Jericho, whence the name *'ir haṭmārîm* "City of Palms" predicated of Jericho (Deut 34:3; Judg 11:6; 3:13; 2 Chron 28:15). It needs hot climate for its fruit to ripen and it grows mainly in the valley of Jericho, the lowland of the southern coast and the plains of the wilderness. If it happens to grow in the mountains, its fruits are not edible. The term *tāmār* literally means "erect" like a column or post, *tômēr*; its symbolism for a righteous person in Ps 92 is further elucidated by this meaning. "The imposing date-palm can usually be seen from a great distance as it often reaches a height of some sixty feet."<sup>27</sup>

According to rabbinic traditions "honey" among the seven species of the Promised Land (cf. Deut 8:8) is the honey of *Tamar*. The softer and juicer variety of the date has a high sugar content and is generally found in inhabited areas where irrigation and cultivation are practiced, whereas, the fruit of the drier variety known as "bread of the desert", is more typical of semi-arid regions and has a high starch content.<sup>28</sup>

Palm fronds were used in public jubilation especially on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacle (Lev 23:40; Neh 8:15), and as emblem of victory (1 Macc 13:51; 2 Macc 10:7). The roots of *tāmār* are strong and fibrous and this keeps its leaves ever green and full of sap.<sup>29</sup> A date palm begins to bear fruit when it reaches about thirty-five years old and can produce about one hundred and five pounds of fruit annually; thus it is a symbol of peace and plenty.

Every part of *tāmār* date palm is useful:

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. David Lavie, *Plants of the Bible in their Natural Surroundings* (Haifa: Department of Education and Culture, 1969) 28; also Hepper F. Nigel, *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Bible Plants: Flowers and Trees, Fruits and Vegetables, Ecology* (Leicester: Inter Varsity, 1992) 116-118; Jean et Solange Maillat, *Les Plantes dans la Bible* (Méolans-Revel: Éditions DésIris, 1999) 117-118; M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible: A Complete Handbook to all the Plants with 200 Full-Color Plates taken in the Natural Habitat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982) 60-61.

<sup>28</sup> Lavie, *Plants of the Bible in their Natural Surroundings*, 28.

<sup>29</sup> Yoshitaka Kobayashi, "City of Palm Trees", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* I (London: Doubleday, 1992) 1052-1053.

The trunk was used for construction, fences, rafts, and fuel. The leaf provided a motif for ornaments of King Solomon's temple (1 Kgs 6:32), and later became an emblem of victory on coins. The leaflets were woven into mats, baskets, utensils, sails, and roof thatch. The fiber was fabricated into rope. Fibers from the base of the leaves were used by the Egyptians for wigs, ropes, matting, baskets, bags, brushes, and brooms. When the fiber was mixed with camel hair it was woven into cloth for caravan tents. The leafless midrib sticks were manufactured into cages, chairs, doors, and palm-stick torches. The fruit was a basic food consumed both fresh or dried, made into honey (over 60 percent sugar content). The fermented fruit produces alcohol and vinegar. The unripe green date produces a dye, and is a good substance for tanning. The sap of the crown contains syrup used for wine and as a sweetener. The kernel has long provided animal fodder (especially for toothless camels). Oil may be pressed from it, but the kernel has also been used ornamentally in necklaces.<sup>30</sup>

A Midrash reflecting on the usefulness of date palm comments: "As no part of the palm has any waste ... so are there none worthless in Israel".<sup>31</sup> Palm leaf served as decorative element on pottery dated to about one thousand eight hundred B.C.; it is part of the decoration in Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs 6:29, 32, 35; 7:36), and on Jewish coin, especially the *Judea Capta* "Captive Judea" coins of Vespasian, which depicts Judea sitting mourning beneath the palm.

A Sumerian text on the creation and function of the date palm tree has this description:

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<sup>30</sup> Irene Jacob – Walter Jacob, "Flora", *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* II (London: Doubleday, 1992) 809; cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica* XIII (Jerusalem: Ketter, 1996) 44.

<sup>31</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* XIII, 44.

A tree, which grows forever – where have I seen such?  
 Its scales truly surround its palm heart  
 Its dried palm fronds truly serve as wicker  
 Its sapling/suckers are the surveying line  
 On the fields of the king it finds its significance  
 Its palm branches one uses in the palace of the king for  
 purification  
 Its dates which are heaped up next to pure grain  
 Find in the temples of the great gods their meaning.<sup>32</sup>

To this impressively rich significance of *tāmār* the author of Psalm 92 adds another equally symbolic term, *'erez*, and with essential specification, *'erez ball<sup>e</sup>bānôn*, which literally means, “Cedar in Lebanon”. This term occurs in the OT about seventy times almost in this syntagm. *Cedrus libani*, according to its botanic name, is *kedros* in Greek; this is etymologically related to the English word ‘cedar’. Almost all the biblical mentions of *'erez* refer to *cedrus libani*, even when this is not explicitly stated. It is a huge, flat-topped, ever-green tree which grows on mountains at a height of more than one thousand meters and can reach the circumference of about forty to fifty meters.<sup>33</sup> From its massive trunk and scaly bark which thrusts upwards, the cedar sends out horizontal, wide-spreading branches in layers. The branches are covered with dark, evergreen, needle-shaped leaves. The roots of this handsome, sturdy forest monarch firmly grip the mountain slopes and withstand the driving winds and the lashing rains at high altitudes.<sup>34</sup> Cedar is a conifer;<sup>35</sup> it develops slowly and it is longeval. It can reach ripe age of more than one thousand years; and those at Baalbek in Lebanon are known to be about three thousand years old.<sup>36</sup> As it advances in age, its pyramidal form changes to

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<sup>32</sup> J. G. Westenholz (ed.), *Sacred Bounty Sacred Land: The Seven Species of the Land of Israel* (Jerusalem: Bible Lands Museum, 1998) 45.

<sup>33</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* V, 268

<sup>34</sup> Lavie, *Plants of the Bible in their Natural Surroundings*, 54.

<sup>35</sup> A conifer is gymnospermous tree or shrub of the order *Coniferales*, members of which typically bear cones and evergreen needle-like leaves.

<sup>36</sup> Lavie, *Plants of the Bible in their Natural Surroundings*, 54.



widespread branches.<sup>37</sup> Its wood is slow-growing with bluish-green short needles, durable, highly valuable, fungi and rot resistant, knot free, hard with close grain, full of fragrant resin, and it yields oil. The resin and oil from cedar are utilized for embalming and for perfume.

All these rich qualities of cedar, its beauty, hardiness, longevity, and usefulness make the Biblical writers present it in the superlative. The OT uses a Semitic form of superlative whereby the divine name *'ēl* and *'ēlōhîm* are in construct chain with *'erez*. Hence, constructions such as *'ar<sup>e</sup>zê-'ēl* in Ps 80:11. Literally this can be rendered “cedars of God”; however, our knowledge of this Semitic way of expressing superlative calls for appropriate superlative phrases such as “mighty cedars”, “very tall cedars”, and other similar expressions.<sup>38</sup> Further examples of this construct chain with *'erez* and a divine name can be found in 1 Sam 14:15; Pss 26:12; 36:7; Cant 8:6. In Psalm 104:16 the inherent parallelism in its two stichs shows that *cedrus libani* as an exceptional tree is called God’s own tree in a superlative sense: “The trees of the Lord are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted”. Some texts in the OT call it “the glory of Lebanon” *k<sup>e</sup>bôd hall<sup>e</sup>bānôn* (cf. Isa 35:2; 60:13); Canticles 5:15 describes it as excellent and desirable: “His legs are alabaster columns, set upon bases of gold. His appearance is like Lebanon, choice as the cedars”. The cedars of Lebanon are noble trees, the noblest, tallest and the massive, feeling all who see them now with awe and reverence.<sup>39</sup>

Among its many and various uses, the timber from cedar is used in the construction of palaces and other major building (Isa 9:9); Solomon imported cedars for the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 5:13). Apart from these symbolic features of cedar, it is also the symbol of the tallest tree in contrast to hyssop, which represents the lowest. When cedar and hyssop occur in a text (cf. 1 Kgs 5:13), both represent a literary figure called merismus: the two extremes in a spectrum.

In composing his poem, the author of Psalm 92 was undoubtedly familiar with the rich qualities of *tāmār* and *'erez*, and their loftiness in

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<sup>37</sup> *Encyclopedia Judaica* V, 268.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Paul Joüon – T. Muraoka: *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Subsidia Biblica 27; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2006) § 141n.

<sup>39</sup> Harold H. Moldenke – L. Alma, *Plants of the Bible* (Waltham: Chronica Botanica, 1952) 68.

contrast to *‘ēšeb* “grass”. What functions do these have in the text, and how does the knowledge of these enrich our understanding of the message of this Psalm, and as an image of the Word of God?

### 3. The Function of the Arboreal Images 4. in Psalm 92

In a metaphor a name or descriptive word or phrase is transferred to an object or action different from, but analogous to, that to which it is literally applicable. Hence, plant images used for human beings in the Bible predicate of human beings the qualities of these plants. They usually refer to human vitality or lack of it,<sup>40</sup> depending on the inherent qualities of the tree employed. The image of the tree in the OT texts is probably derived from Egypt for in Egyptian wisdom literature, it characterizes the “silent ones”.<sup>41</sup> Its function in the Psalms and in the rest of the OT texts in which they occur depends so much on the theological thrust of the text.

In Psalm 1, the plant image helps structure the text. This Psalm underscores the fate of two types of human beings that exist, the righteous and the godless.<sup>42</sup> Those in the first group are like trees planted by the streams of water; while the second is compared to chaff which is blown away by the wind. The author of this Psalm uses a collective term for trees; any tree by the riverside thrives because it is near the source of life. In the same way, those who meditate day and night on the Law of the Lord are near the Lord and they thrive with life. Plant by streams of water is the image of the righteous. It also represents the fate of those who trust in the Lord: “Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jer

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<sup>40</sup> Luis Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988) 126.

<sup>41</sup> Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 353-355.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Oswald Loretz, “Psalm 92”, 285-286.

17:7-8). That the courts of the Lord are tantamount to streams of water can be explained from the vision of Ezekiel 47:1-12, particularly these concluding words of that vision: “On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing” (Ezek 47:12).

In the OT Wisdom literature, the metaphor of flourishing tree depicts the righteous: “The righteous will flourish like green leaves” (Prov 11:28); “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life” (Prov 11:30); “A gentle tongue is a tree of life” (Prov 15:4). In all these texts from the Book of Proverbs, the adjoining poetic stich states the contrast the sage makes between the lives of the righteous symbolized by luxuriant trees and the fate of the wicked.

In other texts of the OT, the writers are more explicit and specific. While they continue with floral images, they specify species of tree. In Psalm 52:10, the psalmist exults: “But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God. I trust in the steadfast love of God”. The olive tree is a metaphor of beauty, of fertility and of endurance.<sup>43</sup> It is one of the seven species of the fruits of the Promised Land (Deut 8:7-8 cf. Hos 2:8; Joel 2:19; cf. Rom 11:17-18). Its tree can live for more than a thousand years and it is difficult to terminate its existence because new sprouts continue to emerge from the roots even when the old trunk looks dry. Punishments due to disobedience and infringement on the stipulations of the covenant are depicted as unfruitful or withered olive tree (Deut 28:40; Job 15:33; Amos 4:9; Mic 6:15).

Image of a tree can function differently in other texts. In Psalms 37 and 35, specific plant image assumes a special function: “I have seen the wicked oppressing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon”. Again in Ezekiel 31, the image of a tree, specifically cedar, unifies the theme developed in this text. The seven kinds of trees in Isa 41:19 symbolize the landscape of paradise: “I will put in the wilderness the cedar, the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive; I will set in the desert the cypress, the plane and the pine together”. Similar accumulation of tree images is found in Hosea 14:6-9.

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<sup>43</sup> J. G. Westenholz (ed.), *Sacred Bounty Sacred Land*, 42.

In all the texts cited above, plant image predicated of human beings are reduced to only comparisons. In Psalm 92:13-15, however, the writer develops this image further than ordinary comparisons, and its function is understood when read with other components of the text. The psalmist first compares the righteous to the two trees (v 13); they flourish and grow great. Both actions refer to the qualities of date-palm and cedar of Lebanon. The next verse (v 14) tells us why they flourish; it is because they are in God's house. They are near the source of water, of life. They are not like the wicked, who are not planted in God; who wither and varnish from life. The contrast between the two is impressive. The next development of the image is in verse 15; these trees that are known for their long life span are perpetually fruitful, bearing fruit. Cedar, however, does not have fruit like the palm, but it is useful. The older it becomes, the stronger its timbers are for construction. Its aroma and oil are part of the fruit that the psalmist most likely had in mind. The early Christians, praying this text, considered it as a reference to Christ's resurrection and the Christian resurrection in general.<sup>44</sup>

The Psalm's features of praise and thanksgiving correspond to the cosmic and historical work of God mentioned in the Psalm. God's work of creation is articulated in verses 5-6; his deed in human history is equally behind man's life experience (vv 11-12). Verses 5-6 are reminiscent of similar joyful exuberance in Psalm 8:4: "When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established". According to the superscription of Psalm 92, the ancient commentators interpreted it as "A Song for the Sabbath Day",<sup>45</sup> probably because of this allusion to God's work of creation. N. Sarna asserts that the underlying mythic-cosmogonic concept of creation is the main reason for this superscription of Psalm 92.<sup>46</sup> The sevenfold repetition of the divine name

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. Louis Painchaud, "Deux citations Vétéro-Testamentaires dans l'écrit sans titre (NH II,5): Ps 22,7 – 92,13 et Is 41,25", *Le Muséon: Revue d'études orientales* 98 (1985) 98.

<sup>45</sup> Anne Avril, "Psaume 92,1 selon l'interprétation du Midrash Tehillim", *Cahiers Ratisbonne* 1 (1996) 14-30, studies the interpretation of this Sabbath motif of Psalm 92 in Midrash of the Psalms.

<sup>46</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Studies in Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2000) 398.

and an interference of creation may also be the motive for this connection.<sup>47</sup> In the version of the Decalogue in Exodus 20, the reason for the observance of the Sabbath Day is traced back to the accounts of creation in Genesis 1-2.

In Ps 92, worthless human beings described in the text with appropriate terms, understand little about God's work. The psalmist highlights this attitude of the godless by using image of grass, which appears to live but disappears instantly. Just like grass is ephemeral, the godless are not deep-rooted, for they are not of God. Evil doers are also compared to grass in Psalm 90:5-6. Again in Psalm 92, their description in the text is placed very closely to the psalmist's well-articulated presentation of God in verse 6. God's works are great and his thought very deep like the valley. Similar description of divinity has been perceived in a Sumero-Akkadian hymns and prayers to the moon god: "O lord, thy divinity fills the wide sea with awe, as well as the distant heavens... O mighty prince whose deep heart no one of the gods comprehends..."<sup>48</sup> Isaiah 55:9 and Psalm 40:6 are other texts where the wondrous deeds and thoughts of God occur together. In the NT, Paul alludes to this concept in Rom 11:33: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"

The godless, whose deeds are incomparable to God's works, are enemies of both the righteous represented by the psalmist and of God (cf. v 10 and vv 12-13). They are as always, not persons who are stupid but those who ignore God.<sup>49</sup> Because they are not rooted in God, they are like grass. The repeated use of the verbal root *p'l* "to make, do, work" heightens the contrast between God's great *works* and the transitory evil workers (vv 5, 8, 10). The contrast is further intensified by the images of flourishing grass and God's greatness.<sup>50</sup>

The righteous instead are planted in God's house. Ancient temples had sacred orchards that symbolized the fertility found in the divine

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<sup>47</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*. Berith Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001) 230.

<sup>48</sup> ANET, 385d; the text is dated to the reign of Ashurbanipal, King of Assyria, 668-633 BC; it was discovered at the site of Ancient Nineveh.

<sup>49</sup> Wilcock, *The Message of Psalms 73-150*, 84.

<sup>50</sup> Schaefer, *Psalms*, 231.

dwelling,<sup>51</sup> and this, among others, must have suggested to the psalmist the image reproduced in verses 13-15. The palm-date and the cedar of Lebanon are as beautiful as they are distinct from each other. Both trees evoke the idea of fresh growth, fertile throughout the years.<sup>52</sup> They are symbolic of strength, longevity, and desirability (cf. Isa 2:13; 65:22; Hos 14:5-6; Zech 11:2).<sup>53</sup> Again both trees are used in the OT as images of stateliness, solidarity, and strength.<sup>54</sup> They testify to the greatness and goodness of God.<sup>55</sup>

The person who truly prospers is planted in God's courts and house. He worships God and sees his works (v 5). His life is fruitful even to old age (v 15). "When the prosperity (lit. the blossoming) of the ungodly comes to an end, the springing up and the growth of the righteous only then rightly has its beginning".<sup>56</sup> Thus prosperity is not to be found in this fleeting world; it is to be found in knowing the living God and being "*planted in the house of the Lord*" (v 14).<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

"The fact that many of the Church's members, individually and in groups, are intensely studying the Word of God in the Bible affords a rare opportunity to instruct the faithful in understanding it properly and apply it

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<sup>51</sup> Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2003)107.

<sup>52</sup> Schaefer, *Psalms*, 231.

<sup>53</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms* (The Expositor's Bible Commentary with the New International Version of the Holy Bible 5; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan 1991) 606.

<sup>54</sup> John I. Durham, "Psalms", *The Broadman Bible Commentary 4: Esther to Psalms* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1971) 153-464. 361; similarly in Maillat, *Les Plantes dans la Bible*, 104-105.

<sup>55</sup> James. M. Boice, *Psalms II: Psalms 42-106* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1996) 759.

<sup>56</sup> F. J. Delitzsch, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980) 70-71.

<sup>57</sup> Donald M. Williams, *Psalms 73-150* (The Communicator's Commentary Series, OT 14; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989) 00178.

to everyday life”.<sup>58</sup> The Word of God is conveyed in varied images in both the OT and the NT, and sacred writers picked those images that vividly spoke to their first readers. Those of us who today read their texts can understand their message, which is God’s Word in human language, if we enter their world and the world of their metaphors. When we understand the text, we can apply it to present life situations.

The arboreal images in Psalm 92 spoke persuasively to the contemporaries of the psalmist, to those who down through the ages have made use of the text, and in particular, these images speak to our present society. Life is meaningful only when it is rooted in God. In the text of Psalm 92, grass and the two symbolic plants, palm-date and cedar, all flourish. The author of the Psalm aptly uses the same verb, *prh*, for this action of flourishing (cf. vv 8, 13). However, genuine prosperous life is proved by time. “Grass, a well known symbol of the swift transition from prosperity to annihilation”,<sup>59</sup> stands for life without God. On the other hand, longeval fruitful existence characterizes human life based on God. “The Bible dynamically proclaims the Word and is the source of life for the believer”.<sup>60</sup>

“God manifests Himself to man in part through language, and necessarily His deeds are made known by any one man to others, and perhaps also by any one man to himself, chiefly through the mediation of language”.<sup>61</sup> In Psalm 92, the Word of God in human language is mediated through images of classic symbolic plants in the Biblical world.

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<sup>58</sup> Synod of Bishops, XII Ordinary General Assembly, *Lineamenta*, 15.

<sup>59</sup> Loewenstamm, “*Balloti b’ešāmān ra ‘nān*”, 113.

<sup>60</sup> Synod of Bishops, XII Ordinary General Assembly, *Lineamenta*, 15.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 200) 136.

## 6

# **The Motif of the Word of God in the Prologue (Isa 40:1-11) and Epilogue (Isa 55:6-11) of Deutero-Isaiah**

Agnes Acha

### **Introduction**

Almost every passage of the Holy Scriptures attest to the efficacy, durability and the infallibility of the Word of God which is often manifested in God's fidelity. The importance of the Word of God to Deutero-Isaiah (DI) cannot be overemphasized. It is not surprising that it is found in the prologue (Isa 40:1-11) and the epilogue (Isa 55:6-11). This motif forms an *inclusio* to Deutero-Isaiah. The epilogue has a strict connection with the prologue especially Isa 40,6ff. Thus the prophecy of DI is solely anchored on the Word of God. The prophet received his call or vocation through the Word of God and served as its mouth piece. This prophet prophesied in Babylon during the exile and among the exiles. His main aim was to give hope and reassurance to the fallen house of Israel, encouraging them not to despair. This hope is based entirely on the infallibility of the word of God. The backdrop of the hopelessness among the people was the trauma of the loss of the Land, the Temple and their liberty through the deportation of the elites of Judah to Babylon. The people thought either that God has forsaken them or that he was not powerful enough<sup>1</sup> to deliver them. By implication, they

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<sup>1</sup> They thought the gods of the Babylonians are more powerful than Yahweh. That was the general idea among the people of the Ancient Near East (ANE), the gods of those who defeat in any battle are considered stronger than those of the defeated people.



thought that the covenant and all the promises that God made to their forefathers no longer hold.

The prophet then came with the message of comfort and hope in the prologue that “the grass withers, the flower fades but the word of God will stand forever” (40:8). This promise and assurance of salvation reaches its climax in the epilogue of DI. Isa 55:10-11 portrays an image of the vitality, dynamics, purposefulness and supremacy of the word of God. In this way, the Word of God serves as the *terminus ad quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of the whole prophecy of DI.

Contrary to the majority of the prophetic books, DI is without any superscription or literary introduction (Compare with the beginnings of other prophetic books). The lack of superscription concurs with the prophet’s way of withdrawing entirely into the background of his message. Again, most of the prophetic books begin with an account of the call of the prophet. Most scholars regard Isa 40:6-8 as the equivalent of this. In that light, the two passages which precede and follow verses 6ff. (3ff. and 9ff.) are two cries which form a framework for the prophet’s call: the one an order given to unspecified listeners to prepare a way in the wilderness, the other a call on Zion to get up onto a high mountain and proclaim to the cities of Judah, behold your God! All three sections are in turn introduced by the cry, Comfort my people (v 1ff). The call in verse 1 determines and sets the pattern for all that follows. For God’s people to be comforted, a way has to be prepared in the wilderness. A voice is heard announcing to the people that although the nation is ruined as it is, the WORD of GOD STILL remains IMMUTABLE. Therefore, jubilant proclamation should be made to the cities of Judah that the coming of Yahweh is around the corner. There is an indication that the new event, the New Exodus is already on the way. It should be noted that the real order to “depart, move out of Babylon” does not occur at the prologue but at the end of the last Servant song (Isa 52:11). The cry “comfort my people” leads eventually to the cry “go out”. The proclamation of DI lies between the two. The prophet’s duty was to lead the people from the first cry to the second. Right from the prologue, the message of DI is shown as seriously linked with the Exodus tradition which forms the heart of the historical *credo*. Just as the first Exodus – there is a voice crying to depart from bondage; a decisive move of this was the making of the way in the wilderness.

## Background Introduction to Deutero-Isaiah

The works of J.C. Doederlein (1775) and J.G. Eichhorn (1778-1783) gave the theory of dual authorship of the book of Isaiah. Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah were assigned to a sixth century author for the following reasons:<sup>2</sup> Firstly, the historical setting of chaps. 40ff seem to reflect an exilic period after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. and the deportation of the Jews to exile. Secondly, there are striking differences in language, style, and concepts between the first and second parts of the book which can be understood by positing two different authors. Lastly, if Isa 40ff were spoken by an eighth century prophet to the needs of an exiled people in anticipation (about 150 years later) it will be a totally isolated case in the entire OT. In his commentary of 1892 Duhm made a major contribution to this discussion. He distinguishes Isaiah 40-55 from chaps. 56-66. Modern scholarship of in DI is inclined towards emphasizing intertextual references within the Isaianic *corpus* as a key to its interpretations. Beuken made a very significant contribution in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

Duhm, in his commentary of 1892, distinguishes passages designated as the Servant Songs (Isa 42:1-2; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) from the rest in DI. He thus provided the basis for subsequent relational analysis which sought to interpret a portion of the book independently of the entire *corpus*. The question regarding the servant songs is still debated and there is no consensus among scholars yet. Some have also questioned the authorial unity of Isa 40-55. Materials like the polemics against the making of idols (44:9ff) and the Cyrus oracles (44:24; 45:1) have been interpreted redactionally as belonging to once independent layers, which at times are extended well beyond the scope of DI.<sup>4</sup>

## Problems of the Text

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<sup>2</sup> B. Childs, *Isaiah*, OTL; (London 2001), 289-290.

<sup>3</sup> W. A. M. Beuken, *Jesaja*, II (POT, Nijkerk 1979), 1983.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Childs, *Isaiah*, 291.

In Isa 40:6 there is problem of translation of the phrase, *w<sup>e</sup>kol-hasdo* which is the reading of the Massoretic Text (MT). The different translations of the word *hasdo* include "beauty", splendour, fidelity, glory grace, constancy etc. It is a word derived from the noun *hesed*. Among the most important meanings of this word in the OT are: grace, loving kindness, truth etc. The word implies mutual obligations and relationships which unite kinships or social groups. Based on this we are tended towards translating it as constancy. Again in the same verse there is the problem of person: The Septuagint (LXX); Vulgate (Vg) and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> read "And I said" while the MT has *w<sup>e</sup>'amar* meaning "and he said". The LXX reading is in harmony with the context. If it is accepted that this section depicts the call of the prophet, then it is the prophet who asks the question "and I said, what shall I cry?"

In Verse 9 there is a problem of syntax in the words and *m<sup>e</sup>basseret Siyyion* and *m<sup>e</sup>basseret Y<sup>e</sup>rusalaim*. While the MT reads O Zion herald of good tidings, the LXX, Targum and Vg translate it as accusative object: good tidings to Zion (cf. Isa 41:27; 52:7). The reading of the MT and some others who take it in apposition (cf. Isa 41:14) seem more plausible. This denotes the use of a noun phrase immediately after another noun phrase which refers to the same person or thing. For instance "Abuja, the capital of Nigeria", "the capital of Nigeria" is in apposition to "Abuja". In verse 10, the MT reads *b<sup>e</sup>hazak* meaning, "as a strong one". But the LXX and 1QIsa<sup>a</sup> read *b<sup>e</sup>hozek* meaning "in or with strength". The latter is more acceptable in the context.

## The Question of Structure and Context

The prologue (Isa 40:1-11) has the following subdivisions: verses 1-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-11. While scholars agree that the first eight verses of the prologue of DI constitute a unit, there is a debate whether verses 9-11 are also part of the prologue. We think that the controversial verses are not only a part of the prologue but constitute its climax. The lack of superscription which usually introduces a new prophetic collection in DI has created the problem of establishing the context for the interpretation of the prologue. This could not have been lost in transmission. The LXX and the Targums recognized this problem and supplied an alleged addressee (priests, prophets). The prologue is usually considered a call narrative once it is

accepted that Isa 40ff is the work of an anonymous prophet of the sixth century. However, it is important to note that some of the features that mark a traditional call are lacking in the passage. For Cross, Isa 40:1-8 is a “divine directives to angelic heralds” having its setting in the divine council.<sup>5</sup> He finds parallels of this genre in 1 Kgs 22:19ff; Isa 6:1ff; Job 1:6ff and also in some extra-biblical literature. Nevertheless, he spoke of a mixed genre containing elements from a call narrative and a divine council which goes back to the prior hypothesis of the call of the prophet in verses 6-8.

Based on the analysis of Cross, Seitz changed his trend.<sup>6</sup> He discarded the widely assumed call narrative context with all its accompanying biographical and psychological features. On the contrary, he sees the exegetical key to lie in an intertextual relation between Isaiah 40 and Isaiah 6. In his opinion, both share the language of the heavenly court. For him, Isaiah 40 does not provide a new call narrative but is a reapplication of Isaiah’s call in Isaiah 6. It signifies then that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 587 fulfils the commission (prophecy) of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isa 40:6b-7 summarizes the prophetic message of judgment by an intertextual reference to Isa 28:2b-4: “the fading flower of his glorious beauty”. On the other hand, the prologue announces a divine decision that now reverses the commission of judgment which was given to Isaiah: “speak tenderly to Jerusalem and declare to her that her term of service is over” (40:2). There is an indication from the prologue that the old era of historic Isaiah is passing away and a new day is dawning. This is possible only because the word of God extends into the future since it endures forever.

The interpretation of the various voices that are involved in the prologue brings out his (Seitz’s) point of view more clearly. God speaks to the divine court in verses 1-2. A divine attendant delivers his command in verses 3-5. In 6a heavenly voices address someone individually with the imperative to “cry”. This author considers verses 6b-7 as an objection “what shall I cry? All flesh is grass; it withers when the breath of Yahweh blows on it”. He sees an intertextual reference to Isa 28:1-4 in the objection. This passage summarizes Isaiah’s judgment on Israel which comprises the

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<sup>5</sup> F. M. Cross, “The Council of Yahweh in Second Isaiah”, *JNES* 12, 1952, 274-277.

<sup>6</sup> C.R. Seitz, “The Divine Council: Temporal Transition and New Prophecy in the Book of Isaiah”, *JBL* 109 (1990) 229-247.

“former things” of Isaiah 1-39. Isa 40:8 however, supersedes the objection and a charge of “new things” is delivered in verses 9-11.

The conventional interpretation of the different voices in the prologue, particularly in verses 6-8 sees the answer to the question of verse 6a starting immediately with verses 6b. In this view, it is rather a clarification of content rather than an objection. In the face of the ephemeral nature of every other thing expressed in verses 6b-7, the Word of God persists forever (verse 8). Asserting that this traditional interpretation does not adequately respond to the tension between verses 7 and 8 in the passage Beuken<sup>7</sup> has a similar division of the voices as Seitz.

We agree with other scholars (Childs, Seitz), that the key to the prologue lies in its intertextual reinterpretation of Isaiah 6 and thus serves as a crucial bridge between the first and second Isaiah. It indicates the change from the “old things” of chapters 1-39 to the “new things” of chapters 40ff. While the former is a reference to the judgment associated with Assyria, the latter refers to the redemption from Babylon. According to Childs, Isaiah of Jerusalem is the one who proclaims both the “old things of judgment” and the “new things” of salvation. Thus the message of the prologue is that although the prophetic judgment has been fulfilled, Isaiah’s word of future salvation is now about to be accomplished in the new things. The continuity between Isaiah 1-39 and 40ff does not lie in the historical *persona* of Isaiah.<sup>8</sup>

## Exegetical Analysis of Isa 40:1-11

### Isa 40:1-2

In verse 1, God confirms his relationship with his people with the words, “...my people...says your God”. This sounds like an echo from the ancient covenant tradition.<sup>9</sup> Three announcements of change in divine purpose follow the amplification of the message of comfort each introduced with a *ki*. That Israel has received a “double for her sins” does not mean that Israel received more punishment than deserved, but rather the author makes use of the legal

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<sup>7</sup> Beuken, *Jesaja*, IIA, 23.

<sup>8</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 296-297.

<sup>9</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 297.

image already found in Exod 22:3(4), which entails that a guilty person restores double for an offence. The cry to comfort in these verses forms the fundament of the prologue. The verb *naham* occurs frequently in DI and also in *Trito* Isaiah (cf. 49:13; 51:3; 12:19; 52:9; 61:2; 66:13). This verb hints at the divine restoration which is the nucleus of the second part of DI. Westermann<sup>10</sup> suggests the possibility that DI invented the verb *naham* used in this passage on the basis of the lament common in Lamentations, “there is no helper”. The cry turns away from the question “who helps you and comforts you?” (Lam 2:13; Isa 51:19), to the exultant cry, the anticipated answer of those delivered “for Yahweh has comforted his people” (Isa 49:13). The comfort therefore, lies on the fact that God has forgiven and resolved upon the deliverance of his people. It is a word spoken with authority, because the cry “comfort” advances to the cry “prepare”. Duplication is an important stylistic feature in DI’s preaching which indicates urgency.<sup>11</sup> It occurs also with imperatives (in Isa 51:9 awake, awake; 51:17 rouse yourself, rouse yourself; 52:1). And differently in 48:15 I even I, have spoken; cf. 43:11; 48:11. The need for this urgency is the fact that at that time the people were gradually turning away from God, gradually closing their minds to him, and gradually letting their faith grow cold. Therefore Israel must be motivated for action. Any waste of time would spoil and worsen things. The opening words of the book, attributes the urgency to God himself, who in his cry is bent on bringing comfort to his people. The echo of the glad tidings that Israel’s physical hardships in enforced exile are now at an end is to recur on almost every page of the chapters of DI. This is better understood by considering the parallel clause: “her iniquity is pardoned”. The basis of the change in Israel’s fortune is the divine forgiveness. This implies that for DI the fundamental and determining factor in that period of Israel’s history which led to the service was iniquity and involvement in guilt.

Childs made a strong intertextual connection between Isa 40:1 and 12:1: *You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.* According to him, Isaiah 12 looks forward in anticipation to the day when

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<sup>10</sup> C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, OTL (Philadelphia 1969), 34.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 34.

God's anger has abated, and he comforts her. And Isaiah 40 announces the beginning of God's comfort to his people, who have already experienced judgment. Again, Isaiah 12 is understood as a song of deliverance from Assyria, but chap 40 following 39,7 *Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon* suggests that the assurance of comfort is for those being freed from Babylonian oppression. Childs argues that "by the technique of intertextual exegesis the radically new word of deliverance announced by second Isaiah has been already adumbrated in chapter 12".<sup>12</sup> Thus the word of comfort in 40:1 was already a part of the prophetic word of first Isaiah. Rather than being a voice of the past, this word of promise is "the word of our God [that] stands forever". Childs finds another important link between first Isaiah and Isa 40 in the reference to Israel's *'won* (iniquity) being forgiven (v.2).

### **Isa 40:3-5**

There is a new dynamics in verse 3: a voice that cries. Probably it was intentionally left unsaid whose voice it is. Some scholars believe that the one who called and those that are called are invisible powers or an allusion to the heavenly court. The important thing however is that the subject of verses 3ff is the carrying out of the order given by Yahweh in verse 1ff. Therefore, God's orders *to comfort*, *to speak*, and *to cry* have been heard. The voice that cries the words of vv. 3ff introduces the fulfillment of the divine order by giving a new one, an operation order "prepare the way". The act of comfort begins with the preparation of a way. The mode in which verses 3ff follow upon verses 1f gives credibility to the truth expressed in the epilogue namely: *"my words shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish...."* (Isa 55:6ff). His words are effective and efficacious. This means that once Yahweh says, "comfort my people", something must happen. His words are creative and thus cannot return to him empty. Comfort is to start with the preparation of the way! The word *naham* in this context therefore implies the *turning away of sufferings, which in certain circumstances mean helping, and so, an active intervention to turn the suffering away. The comforting of*

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<sup>12</sup> Childs, *Isaiah*, 297-298.

this people starts with the preparation of the way, conducting them home via the desert.

The phrase, “in the wilderness” is to be taken along with the verb “to prepare” and not with the preceding clause, “a voice cries...” – in spite of the traditions represented by the LXX and the citations of this passage in the Synoptics (Matt 3:3; //s.) and John 1:23. Accentuation, parallelism and rhythm all testify to the proper connection.

The attention is not on the ringing out of the voice in the wilderness, but that in the wilderness – which separates the people of Israel from their homeland – the way should be prepared. There is nothing at all in the whole DI which answers to or picks up a “voice in the wilderness”, while the book is full of the proclamation of the way through the wilderness. Thus this passage as applied to John the Baptist in the NT does not correspond exactly to the Isaian text which it cites. It is a very common trend in most of the OT citations in the NT. The NT writers often reformulated the OT writings in order to adapt them to the new situation (The Christ Event). The Idea of preparing a way is a special feature in DI. Certainly, there is a sort of influence of the Babylonian culture and religion here.<sup>13</sup> The highway for Yahweh is indicated by the fact that “the glory of Yahweh shall be revealed”. In the Babylonian culture, the primary function of the processional highways was to allow the great processions to display the power and majesty of the gods in visible form. While the impression of majesty is created in the Babylonian processions by the images of the gods, the glory (*kabod*) of Yahweh is revealed in his action in history. Therefore, the highway which is to be made through the desert is the way on which Yahweh now gives proof of himself, in a new and quite serendipitous historical act. It is the way leading his people home. Divine intervention is required: it presumes release

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 38-39. The “high way” has a peculiar place in the Babylonian hymns. The layout of the city of Babylon is itself a proof of the importance of the great processional highways. The highways of the gods and of the kings meet. This forms the background of this passage and many others in DI. For the Israelites in exile, these imposing highways were symbols of Babylonian might that had brought about Israel’s downfall. This is the circumstances in which they heard the cry to “make straight in the desert a highway, a highway for Yahweh.... Our God” – a highway which will enable Israel to make her way homeward via the desert. It is to contrast the highway for the Babylonian gods.



from Babylon. Making straight the way in the desert is figurative rather than literal. This motif is expanded in those sections or complexes of DI's proclamation which portray divine intervention in history, particularly in the commission of Cyrus to carry out the work which liberates Israel. The jussives in verse 4 continue the imperatives of verse 3. They give a hint that there are obstacles in the preparation of the way and these should be removed. Moreover, they suggest the historical reality of the proclamation.

In verse 5b the phrase, "And all flesh see it together" implies that when Yahweh's glory is revealed, it is for the whole world to see. At the revelation of the glory of God, the world and all its peoples cannot but realize that the Yahweh the God of Israel who apparently seemed defeated fulfills his word and restores his chosen people to live in the land of their ancestors. This motif too is often taken up again in the rest of the book. The message is given a divine authenticity with the phrase, "for the Mouth of Yahweh has spoken" (v 5c). Yahweh's involvement is thus rooted in his words and this sets the stage for the next section.

### **Isaiah 40:6-8**

The similarity between these verses and v.3ff seems to prove that the sections of the prologue are skillfully merged parts of a single unit. The implementation of the command in verse 1 goes a step further. The voices in verses 3ff and verses 6ff seem to have the same function. They aim at comforting Israel. Most scholars particularly those who take this section as a call narrative, interpret the phrase "what shall I cry?" as an opposition to the command. This is a common phenomenon in the OT in most call narratives. In a way it summarizes perfectly the people's complaint and frustration. The prophet in solidarity with his people spoke like a member of an outdone nation that no longer believes that a new beginning was possible. The objection of the prophet is expounded in verse 7. The statement in the first part of verse 8 *the grass withers, flowers fade* confirms and agrees with the objection of the prophet and his people. This is just to carry their negative state of mind to its climax in order to counter it with the positivity of the word of God in the second part of the verse. It gives a positive and optimistic response to their pessimism and objection.

Verse 8 constitutes the climax of the whole prologue. It can rightly be considered as the answer given to the prophet when he objected. While verse 8a agrees to the truth from the human perspective that there is nothing more to be done: crying or preaching to the dying remnant was pointless, verse 8b confronts the apparent hopelessness of the situation with the reality, durability, stability and permanence of the WORD of God - It is not part of decay: it stands, it persists forever.<sup>14</sup> The reference is to the promises which Israel once received. The objection of the prophet is thus counteracted. The word which he was required to cry (v 6a) does not belong to the realm of transitory things, but to that which is lasting, permanent and enduring. Nothing in existence has the power to make it invalid (cf. Matt 5:17-20) not even Israel's desperate predicament. The word of God rather brings things from non-existence to existence. The word is determinant in this discourse. It is basic to and crucial for the proclamation of DI. Isaiah 55:10ff is a proof of this and develops its thoughts. Both passages (Isa 55:10ff and 40:8) form the frame within which DI's proclamation is set and mounted. Israel has lost everything except the WORD of God committed to her keeping which at once took on a significance never thus far seen or even dreamt of. Therefore, we can rightly say that the word of God constitutes the starting point, the focus and the climax of DI's proclamation.

### **Isa 55:6-13: The Epilogue of Deutero-Isaiah**

This passage has a simple structure: present in verse 6 are the imperatives; these are the last of the many which have been addressed to Israel. There is the substantiation in two parts that rounds off and gathers up all the rest. Verses 8-9 counter the questions asked by Israel full of doubt. This verse substantiates the promise by reference to the loftiness of the thoughts and ways of God, while verses 10f. do the same by saying that there can be no doubt that the saving word which God speaks to Israel will prosper. As in Isa 40:12-31, the reason why this final substantiation of the call to partake in God's salvation is divided into two parts is that descriptive praise is similarly divided – God is praised in respect of his sovereign power and of his

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66*, 42.

condescension. That Isa 55:6-11 are in the nature of a conclusion and summary also comes out in the fact that the terms used are those of a summary. In verses 8-9, God's thoughts and ways are grouped together and contrasted with those of the human beings, and in verses 10-11, the words of God spoken to Israel, his promises and proclamations of salvation are subsumed under the term, the word of God, a synthesis found only in the prologue precisely in Isa 40:8.

## Exegetical Analysis

### *“To seek Yahweh”*

In the final section of DI, this expression has essentially the same meaning as in Amos 5:6 or Jer 29:12f. It is basically a cultic summon, a call to approach God and to seek him with sacrifice and prayer in the Temple. But even at the time of Amos it has lost its connection with the Temple, and taken on the broader meaning of turning towards God. The summons here continues the invitation in 55:1-3a (cf. Jer 29:12-13, also accompanied by the promise, "so will you live"). Since Isa 55:6ff. form a conclusion and summary of DI, the verses do not seem to intend a general invitation to seek God and invoke him. Rather, probably, they are to be taken in exactly the same way as the invitation in 55:1-3a – now, at this present moment, you, Israel, are given the offer of salvation, God's turning towards you, the return home, and the new life! There is an indication that he can be found *at the moment*, he is present *at this very instant*! It was of set purpose that DI clothed this offer in a form associated with the solemnities of Israel's worship. He wanted to make her see what was now at stake. Verse 6 itself gives a hint about the substantiation of the summons, to be developed in verses 8-11; he may be found he is near.

The rightful position of verse 7 is being contested among scholars. Most of them (for instance, Duhm) regard it as an addition made by a reader, either suggested by the words “thoughts and ways” in verse 6, or as an expansion of verse 6 which he took as a general exhortation. The “thoughts and ways” of mankind in verse 7 mean something entirely different from what they mean in verse 8. In verse 7 they are the transgressors' thoughts and ways, but in verse 8 they are those of Israel, whose doubting and lack of faith are contrasted with the thoughts and ways of God. The preposition “for” in verse 8 may substantiate verse 6, but not verse 7.

In verses 8-9 “thoughts” does not have the meaning, “reflections”, but, as often in the OT, it means plan or design. The ways are appropriate to the execution of these plans or designs. The subject is what God purposes and how he carries it out. The general terms, “thoughts and ways”, give a very suitable parallel between God and human beings, which brings out the contrast in a wonderful manner. This is typical of the way in which the Bible speaks about God and human beings. Usually, God is spoken of with terms and concepts related to humans – anthropomorphic language. Thus, God thinks his thoughts as men think theirs, and he goes his way as they go theirs. The author uses the phrase, “as the heavens are higher than the earth” to express the contrast between God and the humans. The bible rarely speaks of God without reference to the humans.

Even though the contrast between God’s thoughts and ways and those of humans may seem general, they specifically refer to the one thing which God is planning and its implementation, as against this, Israel’s indolence and acquiescence due to the situation in which she found herself. This is demonstrated by the way in which Isa 55:10-11 re-echoes Isa 40:6-7. That God’s thoughts are higher above the heavens than the thoughts of the humans, recalls Isa 40:12-31. In order to counter Israel’s resignation and weariness (40:27), DI extols God and magnifies him as creator and lord of history. DI does a similar thing in this last chapter. With reference to the boundless horizons of God’s designs and ways, greater than humans can imagine the prophet inculcates confidence to his audience. Even though their actual state of mind militates against this, all things are possible with God.

Verses 10-11 can rightly be regarded as the core of the whole epilogue with the motif of the word of God. These verses introduce another important factor: the dependability of the word of God. Strictly speaking, the general statement made about God’s words alludes to the word of salvation now being spoken to Israel. It shall certainly be accomplished. What is here said is given its force by the comparison in which it is formulated. Two processes are set side by side and compared; they are *per se* not of the same nature. The word expressly spoken to the needs of a particular situation and meeting with faith or lack of faith in it, understanding or lack of understanding is an entirely different matter from rain or snow in the world of nature. Just as with the parables of Jesus, it is precisely this difference in kind that makes the comparison possible, for it tries to say that these two

very different matters have, at least, one thing in common: with both something is effected and thus it achieves its purpose. This factor which links the two must then be something that DI regards as characteristic of the word and of its understanding – through the word something takes place between an I and a you, a speaker and a hearer. According to this line of thought therefore, the word is not necessarily something with a content, but the instrument through which something is effected. God's word is a word that does things. When God speaks, something comes about. This view of the word dominates the whole of OT prophecy – before DI it finds expression in Jeremiah. Moreover, it is the basic view in both Testaments. The special feature in the word of God as the prophets proclaimed it was that it had nothing to safeguard it. The word might be doubted, disdained, even silenced but that will not prevent it from accomplishing its purpose. The other side of the coin is the certainty that what it proclaims will be fulfilled. This motif of the word of salvation runs through the whole of DI's proclamation and forms its nucleus. However, listening and acceptance on the part of Israel is necessary for the message of salvation to be effective on them.

### **Theology and Relevance of the Prologue (Isa 40:1-11) and Epilogue (Isa 55:6-11) of DI**

In these passages of DI Yahweh is shown as the God of History. He rules over Israel and over all the nations (the whole world). He is a God who is able and willing to deliver his people from bondage. Just as in the first Exodus from Egypt, he hears his people's cry and stooped down to deliver them, thus he does once again at this second Exodus. This time around it is deliverance from oppression and slavery in Babylonian exile. God is therefore shown as a God of fidelity who is faithful to his words. The expression of the infallibility of the word of God in these passages cannot be overemphasized. His words endure forever: *Verbum Domini Maneat in Aeternum*. Everything must pass away but his word remains forever (Isa 40:8; cf. Matt 5:17-20). His word took flesh in a definitive way in the person of Jesus Christ. It was through his words that God made the world (cf. Genesis 1-2), maintains and sustains history.

It is the Word of God which made revival and restoration of the "dead" Israel possible. Thus God's words create and recreate. His word is not part of the "decay". Just as he called from non-existence into being the things that are (exist) in the first creation, he is able to recreate in this new situation of apparent chaos. Israel is called from none existence as a nation, submerged and swallowed up by the Babylonian power, to being a liberated, blessed nation. This is also an indication that "death", suffering, hardship and situations of apparent death do not have the last word on those whose God is the Lord, those who believe, trust and hope in God. Since God's thoughts and ways are different from those of the humans, it implies that even Israel's situation in exile considered as "death in its fullness" can be reversed contrary to Israel's expectation. In like manner, Nigerians should not give up hope in the present situation of things in the country. Just as death did not have the last word for Israel, in exile, there is every reason to hope that it will not have the last word for Nigeria. It was a message of hope given to Israel in exile and also good news for Nigeria in the present state of chaos in the nation.

God is shown also as a good shepherd who cares for his flock with tenderness, love and compassion. In the NT, Jesus is depicted as the good shepherd who cares for his flock with the qualities attributed to Yahweh in the OT. Just as in our passage of DI Yahweh goes out in search of his people in exile, so does Christ for all his followers especially those who have strayed (John 10:7-21). He loved his sheep to the point of laying down his life for them.

One of our tasks as Christians, and particularly as catholic theologians is to allow the Holy Scriptures to speak to us in our different life situations. The Second Vatican Council highlighted the normative character of the Holy Scriptures in *Dei Verbum*.<sup>15</sup> It is also with the same frame of mind that B. Childs asserts that "it is constitutive of Biblical theology that it be normative and not merely descriptive, and that it be responsive to the imperatives of the present and not just past".<sup>16</sup> With this frame of mind we acknowledge that these passages of DI although addressed to desperate Israel in exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. are still relevant to us today. There is no doubt

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<sup>15</sup> A. Flannery, *Vatican Council 11: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin 1981, 762.

<sup>16</sup> B. Childs, *Biblical Theology: A Proposal*, Minneapolis 2002, 68.

for instance that the task to comfort or to console is given to all Christians but in a special way to Seminarians, Deacons, Priests and Religious. They are specially called to be "bearers" or "heralds of good tidings". It implies that they have the obligation to preach the message of hope and salvation to people. There is need therefore that they be in solidarity with the people. The people should be identified with particularly in their difficulties. The good news is to be given to the people according to their different life situations. The message has to be contextualized, putting the different concrete life situations into consideration. It should not be left just "hanging in the air" worse still handling it as something that is obsolete. There is no other option for Christians than to be bearers of good tidings in today's world where injustice, violence, restlessness, hatred and sufferings of different kinds bemoan us in the face.

A very important point to note is that one is not called to be a messenger or a "herald of good tidings" because the person is a perfect being. Rather, God chooses whomsoever he wishes from wherever he wishes and in a manner that he wishes. Most often, he chooses weak instruments and shapes them in such a way that they will be fitting for his work. He chooses weak vessels and reshapes them to suit his purpose. This is evident in almost all the call narratives and choice of God in the Scriptures ranging from Moses, Aaron, the judges, David, Solomon, the prophets etc. This awareness therefore, guards against pride and "holier than thou" attitude. God chooses the weak in order to shame the proud. God's criteria of choice are completely different from human criteria (cf. the choice of David from among his brothers; also 1 Sam 16:1-23 esp. vv 6-13). So the weakness demonstrated by DI in Isa 40:6b-8a should not scandalize anybody. It is surprising to most readers that rather than living above his compatriots, he was in solidarity with them in thinking that restoration was impossible. He too was a weak instrument of God. In spite of that, God used him to convey the message of salvation across to Israel in exile.

The section of the prologue of DI regarding the preparation of the way for Yahweh in the wilderness is repeated many times during the Advent and Lenten seasons. Thus the focus shifts from the literal sense of preparation and the wilderness to a transferred sense is spiritual. This means preparing the hearts/souls to be fitting places for the Lord who comes at Christmas or the risen Lord at Easter as the case may be. It implies making

the hearts fitting places where God can dwell. It entails that the very lives of Christians should be a true manifestation of God's glory. In other words, Christians are called upon to be true Ambassadors for Christ in deeds not just in words. It is a spur that those who encounter the Christians in their ministries or apostolates may see and feel the glory of God, his presence, love and comfort.

Ministers of the word should therefore see it as one of their main duties to inculcate into God's people the fact that God is faithful. This is demonstrated by the stability and permanence of his Word as demonstrated by these two passages of DI. He keeps his promises. Thus one does not have to despair when one prays and does not get instant response to the prayers. These qualities of God are also for imitation. Christians are thus motivated to be reliable people too. The word of God is alive and active. It does not return empty without accomplishing what it was meant to do. God's word is creative not destructive. Christians should learn to speak creative words, words that build up rather than those that tear down.

The word of God is to be proclaimed without fear, with one's strength and whole being. It should be noted that the content of the message to be proclaimed is the "good tidings" and not "bad tidings". "The good tidings" as presented by this passage is the presence of God and his might - "Behold your God comes..." (vv 9-10). He comes to save. He is faithful to his promises since his word endures forever. Christians particularly the priest and religious should be people those who bring people close to God - not those who scare them away from God. Worse still, they should not through their attitudes cause others to lose faith. Even though they should not be prophets of doom, it is necessary to warn sinners to abandon their evil ways and return to God. Christians should always be ready to pardon offenses just as Yahweh pardoned Israel.

The need to be a true shepherd over God's flock entrusted to one's care cannot be overemphasized. Yahweh in this passage of Isaiah has given an indication of what it means to be a good shepherd. This implies knowing how to handle the "weak" and the "strong". It requires a differentiated treatment of the flock which entails paying attention to the individual not just handling them *en bloc*. In doing this, more attention should be given to the weak and the less privileged. It is not simply material or physical weakness. Spiritual weakness even calls for more attention. The good Shepherd knows



how to make the way easy for every single sheep. In the words of St. Paul, this implies "being all things for all people". The Christians especially those in leadership positions should guard against being counted among those false shepherds spoken about in Ezek 34:1-10 who rather than "feeding" and caring for God's flock, lazily "got very fat" by "feeding" and caring for themselves (cf. Ezekiel 34). This passage of DI is a call to imitate Yahweh (cf. Isa 40:11; Ezek 34:11-31), made manifest in Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd *par excellence*. He is the incarnate word of God. Thanks to him people are privileged to experience in a concrete way the permanent nature and the purposefulness of the word of God spoken in the prologue and Epilogue of DI.

### Conclusion

The word spoken by God is very important in the whole of Scripture and in a particular way in DI. The importance is clearly shown by the way DI carefully utilized the motif at the introduction and the conclusion of his message. The image of the word of God forms an *inclusion* to the whole message of the prophet. Two main qualities of the word of God are expressed at the beginning (Isa 40:8) and the end (Isa 55:11) of the book: *Verbum Domini Maneat in Aeternum* (durability) and alive and active (efficacy). His word endures forever and it does not go back to him without accomplishing that for which it was meant. These qualities of the word of God were employed by God through the prophet in order to assure Israel that God's promise of salvation was possible in spite of the apparent frustration and hopelessness. It was God's word that sustained Israel during the exile thus saving her from total despair. And it was through the efficacious word of God that the return of Israel from exile was possible. Thus there is no need to despair no matter how hopeless any situation may seem. There is still hope for even the distressed Nigeria nation.

## 7

# **“House Built on the Rock” (Matt 7:24-27): The Challenge of Hearing the Word for Nigerian Christians**

Joel Okechukwu

## **Introduction**

The pervasive effect of the Word of God makes it appear to be the only thing that really matters in the world. The Book of Genesis recounts that the whole array of creation was brought into being by the powerful Word of God. The Word of God creates, recreates, enlivens, and resuscitates. It revives the soul. Yet it smites the wicked. Its operations are described with various images; as seed that is sown and expected to bear fruit (Matt 13: 3-8, 18-23), sword, judge, spirit that gives life to dry bones (Ezek 37: 1-10), as rain that gives produce to the earth (Isa 55: 10-11), and so on. Above all, this word took flesh and dwelt among us (John 1: 14). The Word of God acts very powerfully wherever it is accepted, internalized, and obeyed. It generates life and all the positive qualities associated with it. Where it is neglected, the opposite effects are experienced, that is death, destruction and all the negative features associated with it; loss, regret, sorrow, and so on.

At the end of his lengthy inaugural speech on the Mount (Sermon on the Mount), Jesus gave a warning concerning the consequences of obeying or disobeying the words he had spoken; the good news he had proclaimed. This he did in the text of our study (Matt 7:24-27). One who hears his words and keeps them, utilizes them for his life, will be like a wise man, a sensible man who built his house on the rock that enabled it to withstand various adverse forces of life that are bound to affect the house: rain, flood, wind. The one who neglects his word will be like a fool who built his house on the sand that could not support it against those natural forces that are bound to

come against it. Jesus says it all in and with this powerful imagery or parable. His words are consequential; they are alive and active, heeding or not heeding them has its respective effects.

The question arises as to how Christians in Nigeria receive the Word of God and what results are perceptible in their lives from their response to the Word of God that they hear. The life of many Christians in Nigeria looks like a house built on the sand rather than on the rock as one observes gross wreckage in their Christian lives and witnessing in the society. There are quarrels, divorce and other marital problems in many families, social life is marked by godlessness, wickedness, violence, dishonesty, distrust, injustice and so on that make life insecure. Personal life is not exempt from the disastrous effect of disobedience and heedlessness to the Word of God. Of course, it is a wrecked personal life that reflects in many a disharmonious social life, family or the wider society. This parlous state of affairs in the life of some Christians in Nigeria needs a re-reading, study and internalization of the text of our study and doing the Word of God that we preach and hear. Thus the life of Christians in Nigeria will be as secure, focused and fulfilling as a house built on the rock by a wise man, rather than the wasteful labour of a foolish man who does not live by the word of God that he heard as presently obtains among many Christians in Nigeria today.

## **The Background**

This text concludes Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) with which he inaugurated his missionary activity. Jesus had spoken extensively on various moral issues that should characterize the lives of his disciples; the members of the kingdom of God he had come to inaugurate. It was his Magna Charta, a summation of his teachings that launched his ministry. He delivered the words in power as the new lawgiver like, and yet superior to Moses. He declared the type of people who are really blessed and fit for the kingdom of God: the poor (in spirit), the humble, the merciful, the peacemakers, those who thirst for righteousness, those who mourn, the pure of heart, and those who are persecuted for his sake (Matt 5:1-12). He told the disciples that they are the salt of the earth, and a house built on a hill top that

cannot be hidden. Thus they should be filled with good works such that people seeing their good deeds would give glory to their father in heaven (Matt 5:13-16).

Next he set out to perfect the Law and the Prophets, using the speech technique of thesis and antithesis (You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...) <sup>17</sup> to preach a higher order of morality that captures the spirit of the law rather than the mere letter of the law. The disciples must be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (*teleios*). For Miriam Perlewitz, “perfect, when applied to the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, advocates that all actions be fully one with God who is Good and who acts from the perspective of the end”. <sup>18</sup> God is the standard of perfection and he is the Father whom the disciples as his children should imitate and resemble. They should keep away from immorality, violence, wickedness, injustice even in thought. They should love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them. Their virtues must surpass those of the scribes and the Pharisees if they would be qualified to be his disciples and those to enter the kingdom of heaven. Hence Daniel J. Harrington says that Matthew “wanted to show that Jesus interpreted the Torah in such a way as to lead to its goal and its fullness.” <sup>19</sup>

Jesus taught them many things besides. He taught them the prayer “Our Father”, the proper way to go about pious activities: prayer, fasting, alms giving; all to be done in secret to the glory of God who would observe it and reward them accordingly. This contradicts the outward show of hypocrites who would like to be hailed for their pious deeds without seeking God’s pleasure as the goal of their actions. He taught them absolute confidence in God’s providence rather than being anxious that smacks of faithlessness. They should first seek the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and God will provide all their needs even as he takes care of lesser creatures that do not labour for their food. They do not have to be judgmental of others, but preoccupied first with self-perfection. He encouraged them to pray to God in confidence trusting in his goodness. Jesus

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<sup>17</sup>Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* in Daniel J. Harrington, ed.; Sacra Pagina, vol. 1, (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 90.

<sup>18</sup> Miriam Perlewitz, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1988, 38.

<sup>19</sup>Daniel J. Harrington, 90

then went on to warn about the dire consequences of not doing what they heard. He used some images including that of the house built on rock with which he concluded the discourse.

In the words of Wilfrid J. Harrington, “when the Sermon on the Mount is compared with the rest of the New Testament, it becomes clear that these words of Jesus – his moral teaching- were preserved primarily because they were part of the essential structure of the Gospel. Jesus did make demands; he did lay down the law of the Messiah. There is no conflict between the Gospel and the Law; the law of Christ. The Gospel is not only kerygma and didache, it is also a moral code, and this was so from the beginning.”<sup>20</sup> Some scholars do not regard the Sermon on the Mount as a moral code or a law. In the opinion of John Drane, “Jesus’ teaching was not a law, but an ethic of freedom. Consequently, Jesus did not burden his followers with rules and regulations, but gave them principles and guidelines by which to structure their lives. These principles were more concerned with what people are, than with what they do; not because actions were unimportant to Jesus, but because he realized that the way people behave depends on their inner motivation and self-understanding. Jesus provided his disciples with a compass from which they could get their bearings, rather than a map which would provide them with specific directions.”<sup>21</sup> One can say that inasmuch as Jesus did not set down new codes, he fulfilled his stated intention of fulfilling or perfecting the already existing Law given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai that has often been misinterpreted by the religious authority till his time. All the same, they were meant to be acted on, to be guides for the life of the disciples. Amos N. Wilder assesses the teaching as a prophetic injunction, and more besides. In his words, “the larger part of Jesus’ ethical teaching falls in the category of prophetic injunction. With this is combined a considerable amount of observation and of appeal to the wisdom tradition. Jesus himself spoke as a prophet and a teacher. The prophets always went deeper and asked more than the letter of the statutes. Yet Jesus deepened the requirements whether of prophets or of wise men; he

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<sup>20</sup> Wilfrid J. Harrington, *Key to the Bible*, vol. III Record of Fulfilment: The New Testament (Cranfield, Ohio: Alba Books, 1975) 43.

<sup>21</sup> John Drane, *Introducing The New Testament* (Oxford: Lion Publishing, 1999), 166.

was more conscious of God's action and its reality. He was the prophet and the bearer of the kingdom of God."<sup>22</sup>

Michael J. Crosby identifies the three images employed by Jesus to conclude the Sermon on the Mount as "triad of contrasts", all taken from Q.<sup>23</sup> With three pairs of contrary situations, Jesus paints the picture of the results and challenges of keeping his words. These are found in 7:13-14, 15-23, 24-27. In 7:13-14, he counselled the disciples to enter by the narrow gate, for wide and spacious is the road that leads to perdition, and many follow it. The road that leads to life is narrow and only but few find it. Keeping and doing the word could pose problems and difficulties that can scare many people away, but it leads to life, and only few people might be willing to take the trouble. According to Adrian Leske, "this is an exhortation to become part of the faithful and not simply to follow the crowd or give in to social pressure and thus become lost."<sup>24</sup>

In 7:15-23, Jesus warns about those who hear, and even proclaim or preach the word of God but do not act on them, and so do not bear good fruits. They are false prophets, and hypocrites. They are to be identified by their fruits, for a good tree does not bear bad fruits neither does a bad tree bear good fruits; each produces fruits according to its kind. Those who do not bear good fruits will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Similarly, people will invoke the name of Jesus, but only those who do the will of the Father in heaven will enter the kingdom of God. Commenting on this imagery George A. Buttrick explains: "The whole passage is momentous for Christian leadership. The marks of a false prophet are here given, and they convict us. False prophets are outwardly true: their manner- sheep's clothing-appears to certify them as members of the flock of Christ. But they are ravening in their influence: they leave the Church stripped of funds, chaotic in emotion rather than serene, and drained of homespun virtue and staying

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<sup>22</sup> Amos N. Wilder, "The Sermon on the Mount" in George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. vii (New York : Abingdon Press, 1951) , 163.

<sup>23</sup>Michael H. Crosby, *House of Disciples, Church, Economics & Justice in Matthew* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1988) 194.

<sup>24</sup>Adrain Leske, "Matthew" in William R. Farmer et alii, eds., *The International Bible Commentary: An Ecumenical Commentary for Twenty-First Century* (Bangalore: Theological Publication, 1998) 13.

power. They are correct in theology and ardently punctilious in their phraseology: Lord, Lord. They even win a measure of success: they drive out demons and work cures, and crowds gather to their message. The reader should notice the truth of this description when applied to a mercenary class of evangelists.”<sup>25</sup> This commentary cannot be too strange to Nigerians with the current spate of aberrations among some self-acclaimed pastors, and other preachers of the Word, and Christian leaders, some of whom are swindlers, murderers, fraudsters, ritual killers, and all manner of unchristian and inhuman criminalities that are associated with them, or brought in accusation against them, that are often found to be true, despite the massive disciples they command.

The third of the “triad of contrasts” is the house built on the rock and the one built on the sand and their ability to withstand the onslaught of natural forces that is bound to come (7:24-27). This is the last of the three warnings in imagery, and with it Jesus concluded his long ethical discourse.

### **The Text: Matthew 7:24-27**

Here Jesus compares the reception of the Word of God, his words, with building a house. The person who hears the word of God and does it, “will be likened to a sensible man (*andri phronimō*), who built his house upon the rock (*hostis okodoμ esen autou ten oikian epi ten petran*). Rain fell, floods came, wind blew and struck that house, but it did not fall, for it was founded upon the rock. Everyone who hears his words and *does not do them* (*me poion autous*), will be likened to a foolish man (*andri morō*) who built his house upon sand (*epi ten ammon*). Rain fell, floods came, and wind blew and struck that house and it fell, and it was a great fall. John L. McKenzie points out that “the words of Jesus are a call and a challenge to action; they are not mere teaching, and understanding them is an insufficient response. The challenge is serious; failure to meet it is followed by catastrophe- “great is

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<sup>25</sup> George A. Buttrick, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew” in George A. Buttrick et alii, ed., *The Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. vii (New York, Abingdon Press, 1951), 331

the fall”<sup>26</sup>. He adds that “the fall is an eschatological catastrophe.”<sup>27</sup> Sherman E. Johnson notes that this parable is not very new neither was Matthew’s Jesus the first to employ it. Already it is a rabbinical parable found, for instance in the work of Aboth R. Nathan and reads: “A man who has works and has learnt much Torah, to what may he be likened? To a man who builds below with stones and above with adobe; and when much water comes and surrounds it, the stones are not moved from their place. But a man who has no good works and learns Torah, to what may he be likened? To a man who builds first with adobe and then with stones, and when even small streams come, they are immediately toppled over.”<sup>28</sup> However, the genius of Jesus in using familiar stories and parables to drum home his message in a very understandable manner cannot be overstressed. Johnson observes that “Matthew’s form of the parable is more primitive and its two characters more Palestine than Luke’s who wrote mainly for gentile community. The wise one builds on a rock, but the foolish one builds a house of mud bricks in a wadi or dry torrent bed, which is smooth and inviting, like South western arroyos. When spring and fall rains come, such water courses may quickly become raging rivers. Luke, on the other hand, thinks of the wise man as digging deep to build foundations. This is perhaps more natural in a Greco-Roman city.”<sup>29</sup>

The word of God is a material for building up one’s life. It is used to build up society also as individual members build themselves up with it. For Mckenzie, “it is action, not knowledge or profession of belief that furnishes the secure foundation for the life of the disciple.”<sup>30</sup> If one hears the word of God and acts on it; does (*poiein*) it, his life will be built as securely as a house built upon the rock that can withstand the natural forces and buffetings of life. Like those natural forces that a house encounters, human life is subject to natural and man-made adverse forces; the vicissitudes of life.

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<sup>10</sup>John L. Mckenzie, “The Gospel According to Matthew” in Raymond E. Brown et alii (ed), *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969) 75.

<sup>11</sup>Mckenzie, 75.

<sup>12</sup>Sherman E. Johnson, “The Gospel According to Matthew” in George Arthur Buttrick, ed. *The Intrpreters Bible* Vol. Vii, (New York: Abingdom Press, 1951) 334.

<sup>13</sup>Johnson, 335

<sup>14</sup>Mckenzie, 176



Challenges of life, hardships, oppositions, persecutions, quest for well-being, etc, abound and form part of human experiences. These can pull a Christian, a disciple down unless his or her life is firmly built on the Word of God. If one is able to live by the Word of God one hears, if one does the will of the heavenly Father, one's life will be securely established; able to withstand various adverse conditions of life that threaten one's faith in God. As A. Leske points out, "to build one's house on a rock would have readily been understood by the audience to mean 'to build one's life on God', since God was often referred to as 'the Rock' (Deut 32:4-31; Ps 62:6; Isa 26:4). A life built on this covenant relationship with God cannot fall, no matter how strong the forces against it."<sup>31</sup> If however one hides under the mere pretext of hearing the word of God without doing it, one can only end up being a false prophet, a hypocrite. He will prove himself by bearing bad fruit, and will be ineligible for admission into the kingdom of God. His will be 'a great fall', an eschatological disaster. In the words of Raymond E. Brown, "the praise of those who hear Jesus' words (7:24-27) as building a well-founded house almost constitutes a judgment against those who reject him."<sup>32</sup>

Leske sees the import of this text as evocative of the Deuteronomic sermon with its covenant injunction of two ways (life and prosperity, death and adversity, Deut 30:15-18).<sup>33</sup> He assessed the text this way: "the phrase 'everyone...who hears these words of mine and acts on them' is similar to the frequent exhortations to hear the words of the covenant and do them found in Deuteronomy (e.g. 5:1; 6:3). The sermon is thus identified as the new covenant, one that renews the original intent of the covenant at Sinai but is to be written in the hearts of the people (Jer 31:31-34; Isa 51:7)."<sup>34</sup> For Benedict T. Viviano, "'these words of mine' points back to the Sermon itself as a kind of Torah. For Matthew following the word of Jesus is wisdom about life. Luke lacks this sapiential emphasis."<sup>35</sup> Such is the import of this

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<sup>15</sup>Leske, 1347-1348

<sup>16</sup>Raymond E. Brown *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2000) 180.

<sup>17</sup>Leske, 1347.

<sup>18</sup>Leske, 1347.

<sup>19</sup> Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew" in Raymond E. Brown et alii, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 647.

powerful imagery on the reception of the word of God, and what it can do in a person's life. It is either one obeys it and lives according to its demands, and is wise and sensible, experiencing a well ordered life established solidly on cordial relationship with God, the everlasting, dependable rock of refuge, or one labours in vain and reaps destruction, having built one's house, one's life on the sand of hypocrisy.

### **The Nigerian Context**

The Christian scene in Nigeria looks promising as a house of disciples with many and ever multiplying Christian churches or communities. Every nook and corner of the city and the countryside is filled with churches sprouting and noisy. People troupe to churches. Pastors; the dispensers of the word, miracle workers, prophets and prophetesses, deacons, evangelists, Apostles and senior Apostles, prayer houses and ministries, all dot the Nigerian scene. Crusades and break-through gatherings, Christmas, Easter, Beginning of the Year and End year retreats and crusades are common experiences of a seemingly vibrant Christian community ever ready to witness to the word. But how much is the word obeyed? How much is the word lived? The result that Jesus laboured to point out stares the Christian communities in Nigeria in the face as the fruits reaped in Nigeria portend a bad tree rather than a good one. Some political leaders, most of whom are Christians are nothing but robbers and thieves of the public fund. Election is conducted with the highest perfection of dishonesty, violence and wickedness. The electorate, most of whom are Christians, are neck deep into all manner of unchristian conduct during elections and in other affairs of the society.

Nothing of the beatitudes, fulfilment of the law, trust in God or basic human goodness are called to mind in the pursuit and exercise of political office. The general public is not exempt from the macabre dance. Corruption is the generic name for all these unchristian mentality and acute lawlessness in Nigeria of which Christians and non Christians are both guilty. In the words of Lucius I. Ugorji, "Corruption involved moral decay, ethical rottenness and loss of integrity. In Nigeria it has many faces. It appears as bribery, embezzlement, inflation of bills, abuse of office, nepotism, looting of public property, impersonation, false declaration, cheating, deceit forgery,

quackery, OBT /419, buying and manipulation of votes, etc.”<sup>36</sup> These unethical behaviour are canonized among many Nigerians, Christians and non – Christians alike. Is this not building a house on the sand that leads to personal and societal destruction that is presently experienced in Nigeria? Hence the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria in their communiqué of February 1999 writes: “We are painfully aware that corruption has eaten deep into the very fabric of the Nigerian society. It has become so pervasive that many now accept it as the “Nigerian way of life”, or the Nigeria way of doing things. People now speak about a so called “Nigerian Factor” when they mean corruption.”<sup>37</sup>

Joseph D. Bagobiri writing a foreword to “Corruption in Nigeria” an the edited work of Catholic laity Council of Nigeria, 1999 Annual Conference at Uyo writes: “The Catholic Bishops were quick in warning that if things are allowed to continue the way they are now, corruption will eventually bring about the death both of individual Nigerians and the Nation itself”<sup>38</sup>. This prophecy has been fulfilled, Nigeria ranks among the most corrupt nations in the world and life has become very insecure. Robbery, assassination, fraud, and dishonesty abound. One takes a risk on one’s life to trust the other. Morality continues to nose-dive, and every person is sighing under the weight of corruption with lip-service to the faith in the word of God.

### **The Word, the Text, and Nigerian Christian Context**

The text under survey speaks eloquently to Nigerian Christians (disciples). The image of a building is a very familiar one all over the world. Could one be thriving in self deception by building on the sand rather than on the rock? The text makes it clear that such an endeavour amounts to foolishness rather than wisdom. One labours unto destruction rather than security and well-being. Nigerian Christians, high and low, preacher and audience must think

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<sup>20</sup>Lucius I. Ugorji *Witness in Charity and Truth* (Enugu: Snaap, 2002) 98.

<sup>21</sup>Joseph Bagobiri “Foreword: Corruption in Nigeria” in Alice Awan et alii, ed., *Corruption in Nigeria* (Abuja, Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria, 2000) iii.

<sup>22</sup>Bagobiri, iii.

twice and deeply too. The word of God throws light on all facets of life for the guidance of the hearer and bearer of the word.

Jesus spoke so marvellously and threw so much light on some life and doctrinal perplexing issues that his audiences were astonished at the authority with which he spoke, not like the scribes. He had spoken on the real attitudes for real happiness, the beatitudes; he had perfected the teachings of the law and the prophets, taught the Our Father that establishes filial attitude in prayer, as well as proper ways of practicing piety, issue of judgment, trustful prayer, and confidence in God's providence and so on. These and many others are proper attitudes expected of the disciples of the kingdom of God he was inaugurating. He concluded by giving stern warnings on poor reception of the word. Hypocrisy can never be helpful. One who hears the word must act on it in order to benefit from it. By so doing, the individual and the society will live godly lives and be better for it like a house built upon the rock. Hearing the word and not bearing good fruit with it leaves a person or a society in a great fall like house built on the sand. Commenting on the futility of hypocrisy Buttrick writes: "the temporary success of professionalism in Christianity need not deceive us. Men who used Lord, Lord as an incantation in the early Church won, in some instances, a striking success. But their harvest had no root and soon withered. Only real Christianity survives."<sup>23</sup>

If Nigerian Christians are to be true to their calling, the word of God should cease to be an article of commerce that the seller does not consume, and even the "buyer" buys it for the fun of it. People should learn to build their lives on and by the word of God they hear and preach, and not simply make boast of lengthy, verbose, noisy prayer and quotation of biblical passages. This attracts to the denunciation of the Psalmist (Ps 50:16-21):

But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes, or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free rein for evil, and your mouth frames deceit. You sit and speak against your kin; you

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<sup>23</sup> George A. Buttrick, 333-334

slander your own mother's child. These things you have done and I have been silent; you thought that I was one just like yourself. But now I rebuke you, and lay the charge before you.

There is a similar denunciation in Isaiah 29:13, "these people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me", also cited by Jesus in Matt 15:7-9. The Word of God is a bulwark, a rampart to those who believe it and keep it. Thus individual and communal lives are built up and firmly established against the forces of life; persecutions, trials, temptations and oppositions. Nigerian Christians will be true disciples of the kingdom of God when they live by the Word of God they hear and preach. When this happens corruption will be a thing of history and the society will progress. Presently the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Judiciary and other anti-corruption agencies are very busy because the preachers and hearers of the word in Nigeria are not doers of the word. Else, why is there power failure while N16bn has been sunk into it? Why is every facet of Nigerian life hugely infested with lawlessness, violence, greed, etc? Why is every thing going backward including education, economy etc? Why is there reneging on promises when Jesus has said, let your yes be yes and your no be no, any other thing comes from evil? Yet Christians and Christian activities abound everywhere, even in government houses. Few people who try to keep the word of God in private and public life make a great difference worthy of emulation, transforming the society for the better in their respective areas.

## Conclusion

The word of God looms large in human life and in the whole of creation. Various images can be employed to capture different aspects of approaching it either in its being, operation or reception. The word of God can be regarded as rain that waters the ground and brings about the fruitfulness of the land (Isa 55:10-11). It is the spirit and life (John 6:63). It is the seed that the sower sowed that yields fruit according to the disposition of the land.

In the text of our study, the effect of the reception of the word is given in the image of a building. By the word of God one's life is built up. One who lives by the word is firmly established in all he does. He is a

disciple and member of the kingdom of God. One who hears the word but ignores it can only pretend to be built up. But he is a hypocrite, a false prophet and this is manifested in the fruit the person bears. Besides, the person is like a foolish man who builds his house on the sand that cannot withstand natural forces that are bound to hit the house. In the words of M H. Crosby, “House concludes the last section of the Sermon on the Mount as it concludes the first section of the Sermon (5:15). The entire ethos contained within this first of Jesus’ teaching makes it abundantly clear that authentic discipleship is manifested by house members who do their heavenly Father’s will by good works manifested in justice.”<sup>40</sup> Christians in Nigeria and elsewhere are called upon to build upon the rock by keeping God’s word in order that the happiness and blessings of the kingdom of God may be theirs; their lives made secure and firmly established like a house built on the rock. God’s word is consequential; to possess and keep it is security, to ignore it is destruction; personal, national, and even an eternal disaster.

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<sup>24</sup>Grosby, 194

## **The Word of God as Life Giving Power in the Fourth Gospel with Particular Reference to the Raising of Lazarus from the Dead (John 11:1-44)**

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### **Introduction**

Last year the Roman Pontiff, Benedict XVI, proclaimed October 2007 – October 2008 as the year of the Word which will climax in the 12<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October this year.<sup>1</sup> The recent CIWA Theology Week with the theme “The Word of God Meeting the Millennium Development Goals in Africa” is in line with the Holy Father’s intention. In January this year the MSP Major Seminary Gwagwalada Abuja organised a lecture for the Annual Feast of St. Paul where Prof. Sr. T. Okure delivered a paper titled “Alive and Active: God’s Word in Africa”, and our present conference with the theme “Alive and Active: Images of the Word of God in the Bible” are all in view with this year’s celebration of the Word of God. The need and the value of the Word of God cannot be over-emphasised.

Hence we wish to discuss the importance of the Word in the Fourth Gospel with particular reference to the raising of Lazarus in chapter 11. The Greek term for word is *logos* and in the prologue, apart from other passages in the gospel, the evangelist affirms that Christ is this divine *logos*. He utters the *logos* which the Father has given him, and so gives it to men to be power unto life. One reason why this Gospel was symbolised in the ancient church by the eagle is the lofty heights attained by its prologue. With skill and delicacy, John handles issues of profound importance. It comes as no surprise that this

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<sup>1</sup> The theme is “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”. The Synod will take place in Rome from October 5-26.

prologue has been foundational to the classic Christian formulation of the doctrine of Christ. Here divinity and humanity, pre-existence and incarnation, revelation and sacrifice are each discussed by John with deceptive simplicity.

The prologue may well have been an ancient Christian hymn. We know of other hymns extant especially in Paul's writing, and here too there is an artful flowing of language and theology.<sup>2</sup> The prologue is also an overture to the story of the rest of the Gospel, since themes mentioned there will be picked up later and given fuller development: the pre-existence of Christ (1:1; 17:5), divine light entering the world (1:4, 9; 8:12; 9:5), the opposition of light and darkness (1:5; 3:19).

In John 1,4 without the article the evangelist stresses the quality of the *Logos*: in the *Logos* was "life", life in the fullest, highest sense, the eternal, blessed life of God.<sup>3</sup> The stress is on the phrase which heads the statement, "in him" was life. This life corresponds with his being of the *Logos*, forever inherent in his very essence. This Light of the *Logos* is still alive and active since it continues to shine on men and women of this world. Indeed it is this *logos*, the divine *logos* God, that restores life to a dead man Lazarus. We shall first of all search for the meaning of word (*logos*), then this will be followed with the usage of the word (*logos*) in the Fourth Gospel. Finally we shall treat the power of the word (*logos*) in giving Life to a dead Man (John 11).

## **The *Logos***

The term *logos* has an exceedingly extensive range of meanings.<sup>4</sup> Those which most concern us here are the two which the Stoics distinguished as *logos* in the mind and the uttered *logos* – that is, 'thought' and 'word'. For us these concepts are distinct as they were not for Greek-speaking persons. *Logos* as 'word' is never the mere word as an assemblage of sounds but the

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<sup>2</sup> Other NT hymns are found in Eph 5:19; Phil 2:5-11; Col 1:15-20; 3:15.

<sup>3</sup> The edition of New Revised Standard Version (Catholic edition) is used throughout, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. A. Debrunner – H. Kleinknecht, et al., "lego, logos etc.", *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* IV, 69-143.



word as determined by a meaning and conveying a meaning<sup>5</sup>. *Logos* as ‘thought’ is neither the faculty nor the process of thinking as such, but an articulate unit of thought, capable of intelligible utterance, whether as a single word, a phrase or sentence, or a prolonged discourse, or even a book. Whether or not it is actually uttered (or written) is a secondary matter, almost an accident; in any case it is *logos*. Behind it remains the notion of that which is rationally ordered, such as ‘proportion’ in mathematics or what we call ‘law’ in nature. These are examples of the same thing that we experience as articulate thought or meaningful speech<sup>6</sup>.

In the LXX *logos* almost always translates *dābār*, a term whose range of meaning overlaps that of *logos* but is not co-extensive with it. It is derived from the root *dbr*, which means to speak, and, *dābār* is fundamentally the spoken word as means of communication. In the Old Testament *dābār adonai* is frequently employed of God’s communication with men, His self-revelation, especially through the prophets, to whom ‘the word of the Lord came’. The totality of God’s self-revelation is denominated by Torah a term which is often parallel or virtually synonymous with *dābār adonai*<sup>7</sup>

The whole notion of revelation in the Old Testament is determined by the analogy of the word spoken and heard, as distinct from the idea of revelation as vision. It preserves the ontological distance between God and man, while affirming that God, of His personal choice, approaches men and deals with them in a way they can understand, and expects their response; as one man communicates with another by means of spoken words, inviting a response, without invading the prerogatives of individual personality. The idea that God similarly addresses a ‘word’ to what we call inanimate things, and that by means of such a ‘word’ He called the ordered universe out of primeval chaos, is a refinement upon the idea of the ‘word’ that came to men through the prophets, to bring order and justice into human affairs under the rule of Torah.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *De Inter.* 4.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. C. D. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) 263.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 263.

We have to observe that for the Hebrew the word once spoken has a kind of substantive existence of its own.<sup>8</sup> A blessing, for example, once pronounced continues to bless, and a curse once spoken works itself out. This is true even of your words or mine, still more of the Word of God.<sup>9</sup> Consider such expressions as the following:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater. So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:10-11).

“Your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior, carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death, and touched heaven while standing on the earth” (Wisd 18:15-16).

If it be said that these are mere poetical embellishment of language, it must nevertheless be accepted that the readiness to employ such language alludes to an habitual tendency of thought to attribute to the spoken word an existence and activity of its own; and in fact such an aptness is strongly impressed upon the Hebrew language.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Use of *Logos* in the Fourth Gospel**

Here we may distinguish the following ways in which *logos* is employed by the author in the Fourth Gospel and find out its many nuances. First the term *logoi* in the plural is employed in the plain and simple sense of ‘words’

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<sup>8</sup> For an informative example of the persistence of this notion among Semitic speaking people in Palestine, see A. Merx, *Die vier kanonischen Evangelien* (1920, on Matt v.47).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. T. Okure, *Alive and Active: God’s Word in African Context* (Unpublished Lecture delivered at the Annual St Paul’s Lecture (MSP) Gwagwalada, Abuja, 2008) 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> It is not, however, exclusively Hebraic. It would appear to be common in primitive thought, and has left traces in various languages. Homer’s “winged words” which “escape the barrier of the teeth”, and “fly” are an example. But in Hebrew the conception appears to be more continuously alive: the word is sent, comes, goes, endures, and so forth.

spoken by Jesus or by others.

Secondly the singular *logos* is used for a ‘saying’, ‘statement’, or ‘discourse’. Thus, in John 2:19-22, Jesus says, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”. He is misunderstood by both the crowd and the disciples; but the latter, after His resurrection, are said to have understood and believed it: “and they believed the scripture and the **word** that Jesus had spoken”. In 4:39 “many of the Samaritans believed in him because of the woman’s testimony,<sup>11</sup> “He told me everything I have ever done”. In 4:37: For here the **saying** holds true, the *logos* (in our translation saying) here is a proverbial saying. In 12:38; 15:25 it is a passage cited from the OT (12:38 “This was to fulfill the *word* spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “Lord, who has believed our message, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?”). A *logos* in this sense is composed of *logoi* in the sense of sayings. The expression in 19:8 “When Pilate heard this does not differ in sense from “When Pilate heard these words” in 19:13.

Thirdly *logos* is used collectively for the whole of what Jesus said to his disciples and to the world, his ‘message’, conceived as revelation and as a ‘command’ to be obeyed. Thus Jesus says in John 5:24 “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my **word** and believes him who sent me, has eternal life”, and to his disciples, John 15:3 “You have already been cleansed by the **word** that I have spoken to you”.

While, however, in all such cases *logos* is that which is spoken and heard, it is, in accordance with the fundamental connotation of the Greek term, to be understood as the spoken word with its meaning, or rational content. As such it is distinguished from speech (*lalia*). “Why do you not understand my *lalia* (speech or manner of speaking)? asks Jesus of the Jews (8:43), and replies, “because you cannot hear my *logos*. Thus to ‘hear the word’ is not simply to receive with the sense of hearing a connected series of sounds, but to apprehend the meaning which those sounds convey—much as a Hermetic writer says that all men of every nation have one *logos*, whether they be Greeks, Egyptians or Persians (or Africans emphasis mine), though their sound differs.<sup>12</sup> Thus the *logos* of Christ is the sum total of his spoken words, regarded as containing his thought or meaning, but his uttered words,

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<sup>11</sup> In the original Greek the term employed is *logos*. The Latin Vulgate speaks of *verbum* which is also good.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Dodd. xii. 12-13

nevertheless, as is shown by the fact that what is said of his *logos* can also be said of his sayings. Compare, for example, John 8:31 “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples” with 15:7 “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you”.

It is clear that for the evangelist the uttered words of Christ, constituting his *logos*, his total message to the world, are in a specific sense a life-giving power,<sup>13</sup> and the medium through which He gives Himself to men. We may probably trace here something of the Hebraic conception of the word as having in some sort a substantive existence and a power of its own. When Yahweh, for instance, commissioned the prophet Jeremiah “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant”, the prophet had only one instrument: the prophetic word which he learned to speak, though he was a child (Jer 1:6-10). This seems to be the experience with Moses (Exod 4:10-17; 6:10-13) who existed before Jeremiah as well as the other OT prophets. Isaiah, for instance, was sent to employ the prophetic word to ‘blind’ the eyes, ‘deafen’ the ears and ‘make dull’ the hearts of the people (Isa 6:10-13). Okure, rightly, observed that “no word is ever neutral to the recipient, much less God’s word. Whether one receives it positively or negatively, one cannot but be affected by it; ignoring it is still a response; and in such cases word becomes a judgment. This is particularly true of God’s word”.<sup>14</sup>

Finally *logos* is employed of the ‘Word of God’, that is, His self-revelation to men. In accordance with Jewish tradition, adopted by the Christian Church in general, this is conceived as embodied in the Old Testament. Thus in John 10:34-35; Jesus quotes from Ps 81(82):6 “I say, You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you”; and comments by saying he called them gods: “If those to whom the word of God came”. A similar idea is implied in 5:37-8 “And the Father who sent me has himself testified on my behalf. You have never heard his voice or seen his form, and you do not have his word abiding in you, for you do not believe him whom he has sent”. We might paraphrase thus:

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Okure, *Alive and Active*, 4, where he says that “Word has the power to destroy, blame, generate quarrels and fights or to build, celebrate, affirm, console, instruct and praise”

<sup>14</sup> Okure, *Alive and Active*, 4.

“God bears witness to me. True, God has not a voice to be heard, any more than He has a form to be seen; nevertheless there is such a thing as the Word of God. You believe that you have that word in the Scriptures, and you study them in the hope that they will give you that knowledge of God which is eternal life. But you fail to understand their true purport, which would point you to me as the real mediator of eternal life. That shows that though the *words* of Scripture are in your minds, the *logos* of God, which they embody, is not a power in you”.<sup>15</sup>

The established distinction is suggested between sound, and word. God has, unlike men, no sound, or at any rate none which can be heard by men.<sup>16</sup> But He has a *logos*, which can be recognized in the Scriptures by those who have it abiding in them. But in a more profound and ultimate sense the Word of God is to be found in the *logos* of Christ: ‘the word which you hear is not my word, but the one who sent me. So in 17:14 Jesus says, “I have given them your word”. He adds, in 17:17, “your word is truth”. Thus the *logos* of Christ is the *logos* of God, and that is truth, the ultimate reality revealed. *Logos* is clearly the content of Christ’s teaching, the thought or meaning it conveys, and not merely the utterance.

We conclude that, along with other quite ordinary uses of the term, the Fourth Evangelist employs the term *logos* in a special sense, to denote the eternal truth revealed to men by God. This truth as expressed in words, whether they be the words of Scripture or, more especially, the words of Christ. *Logos* in this sense is distinguished from speech and sound. The divine *logos* is not simply the uttered words. It *is truth*.

In the prologue (1:1-18) Christ is this divine *Logos*. Christ utters the *logos* which the Father has “given” Him, and so “gives” it to men to be a power unto life. But in view of the equation of the divine *logos* with truth, it is significant that Christ says, in John 14:6 I am the truth. He not only “gives” the word which is truth, He is the truth, just as He not only gives life,

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 266.

<sup>16</sup> The voice from heaven of 12:28 (which is understood by the hearers to be either a thunder-clap or the voice of an angel) is to be understood in the light of the rabbinic belief in the *bat qôl*. This is described as an echo of the heavenly speech; that is to say, it is not the voice of God, but represents the word of God. See S.-B. on Matt 3,17; similarly Judaism 1, 421sq.

but *is* life. This is admirably illustrated in the discourse of chapter 6. There Christ gives the bread of life, but He *is* the bread; and His comment on this is, “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63). All that Christ is, is in His words, and He is the truth and the life. It is only a step from that to say, He is the *Logos*. This step is taken in the Prologue.

The high point is reached in the affirmation: “the Word was God”. Nothing higher could be said. All that may be said about God may fitly be said about the Word. The author is affirming that he is God.<sup>17</sup> He lays it down unequivocally that nothing less than God will do for our understanding of the Word. John intends that the whole of his Gospel shall be read in the light of this verse. The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God; if this be not true the book is blasphemous.<sup>18</sup> This is the theme that will be echoed throughout the Gospel. He is the greatest of all people. He is the Messiah of Jewish expectation; but more (this is John’s unique message), Jesus is the Son of God, the divine Messenger from the Father. Any reading of the Fourth Gospel that omits this supreme and ultimate claim for Jesus misses its central affirmation.

### **The Power of the *Logos* in Giving Life to a Dead Man (John 11:1-44)**

In chapter 11, we cross an important literary divide in this Gospel. Here Eternal *Logos* makes his final move to the region of Jerusalem by coming to the village of Bethany (a short from Jerusalem) to attend to his friend Lazarus. Here we read the story of the most dramatic, provocative sign in the Fourth Gospel. Jesus is master of life and death and proves it by bringing Lazarus from the grave. The Lazarus story is a story about one man whom Jesus liberates from the grave; but it is also a parabolic story, informing us far more about Jesus, his power, and his upcoming experience in the grave.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. E. M. Sidebottom, “One cannot help feeling that the tendency to write.....” cited in Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (ICNT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1971) 77.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1970) 130.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. G. M. Burge, *John: Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000) 311.

This chapter 11 has provoked numerous scholarly criticisms over the years, but it is not within the scope of this work to address them here. Objections have been raised, for instance, against the absolute enormity of the miracle itself. This is clearly Jesus' most dramatic sign. Scholars who have difficulty with the miraculous will see themselves stumbling here. However, John's entire theology aims to state that God has indeed intervened in the history of the world. An incarnational theology at once makes room for a narration like this, in which this God who comes into history has power over the natural human processes over which he is the master through his spoken word.

Similarly, some other scholars have posited that this story is clearly a reworking of the Lazarus parable of Luke 16:19-31. True, both stories employ the same name and center on a resurrection motif. But actors in Jesus' Synoptic parables generally remain anonymous, and in this case the parallels between the two accounts are limited.<sup>20</sup> The name of Lazarus was common in the first century (as can be attested from both literary and archaeological findings). Furthermore, the two stories serve different purposes. The Lazarus parable in Luke is an exhortation to obey the words of the prophets; while the Lazarus sign<sup>21</sup> in John point to Jesus' lordship (the Incarnate Word) over the grave.

In John 11:1-41 we have a compact periscope which has the aspect of a single continuous narrative – the longest in this gospel outside the Passion narrative. The narration commences, “Now a certain man was ill”, and ends with the restoration of the sick man, who meantime has died and been buried.<sup>22</sup> The story is told with a peculiar elaboration of events. No separate discourse is annexed; after 11:44 we pass, through a short connecting link, to

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<sup>20</sup> Lazarus “from Bethany” named here is a specific as “Philip from Bethsaida”, whom we met in 1:44, or “Judas Iscariot” (meaning “Judas, man from Kerieth” 6,71)

<sup>21</sup> Often miracles in John are called “signs” since they point to Jesus as the Eternal and Incarnate Word of the Father.

<sup>22</sup> Such manner of narration is quite normal to a healing-pericope. Compare Mark 1:23; 3:1, with some additional details about the sick person (See Mark 10:46). The story ends after the restoration of the patient, with a note of the effect on spectators, and some indication of the remoter results (John 11:45; compare Mark 1:27; 2:12; 5:42; 7:37; Luke 7:16). What I am indicating is that this exceedingly long periscope, therefore, has traces of the convention.

a different scene. On examination, however, the *pericope* 11:1-44 is found to contain a large proportion of discourse, in the form of dialogue, in which the interlocutors, apart from Jesus, are Mary, Martha and Thomas, as well as the messengers from Bethany, the disciples in a body, and the ‘Jews’ who serve as chorus and comment on the action.<sup>23</sup> The lively interchange of dialogue, which is characteristic of John’s style, runs through the entire *pericope*. Hence, it is diffused through with the distinctive ideas of Johannine theology, as they appear in discourse and dialogue throughout the gospel.

The double themes, those of life and light, dominate the Book of Signs.<sup>24</sup> The present episode is wholly concerned with the theme of life. In the programmatic discourse of John 5:19-47 (where the activity of the Father in the Son is characterized as consisting of Life and Judgment), the work of Life is shown in two stages; or on two levels. First, to hear and believe the word of Christ is to possess eternal life; it is to have passed from death to life. In that sense the time is coming *and now is* when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and come to life (John 5:24-5). Secondly, the time is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and come out (John 5:28-9). With this we may compare John 6:54, which also moves in two stages or on two levels: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day”.

The discourse of chapter 11 plainly returns to this line of thought, and once again we identify the two stages, or levels, upon which it moves. “He who believes in me, even if he dies, will come to life, and everyone who is alive and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25-6). *Prima facie*, all these passages affirm, first, that eternal life may be enjoyed here and now by those who respond to the “word of Christ”, and, secondly, that the same power which assures eternal life to believers during their earthly existence will, after the death of the body, raise the dead to renewed existence in a world beyond.

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press) 228.

<sup>24</sup> Scholars have been quick to note these divisions and label them. Chapters 1-12 are called the “Book of Signs” since they record Jesus’ numerous revelatory miracles. Chapters 13-21 (uniting the Upper Room and Passion sections) are called the “Book of Glory”, since on the cross Jesus is glorified (13:31).



In John 5:24-9 this final resurrection is associated not only with eternal life but also with judgment (5:27), but in the present passage the theme of judgment is not in view.

The regulative idea is that the word of Christ, and indeed Christ Himself who is the Word of God is the Life on both levels. In John 11:23-6 this idea is set in contrast with the current belief in resurrection “on the last day”: set in contrast, for it seems that Martha is here playing the normal part ascribed to interlocutors in Johannine dialogues; she is misunderstanding a saying of Jesus to open the way to further explication. “I know he will rise again on the last day”, says Martha. “I am the resurrection and the life”, is the reply. In other words, whether the gift of eternal life is conceived as a present and continuing possession (“he who is alive and has faith in me will never die”), or as a recovery of life after death of the body at the end of this world (“even if he dies he will come to life”), the thing that matters is that life is the gift of Christ-and Christ’s gift to men, we know, is Himself (John 6:51).

If it is true that in Jesus the power of resurrection life is present in Bethany, the logical implication is that this may lead to something for Lazarus. Lazarus’ resurrection becomes a proof of Jesus’ word. At this point – however – Martha cannot draw this conclusion directly. Her declaration (11:27) demonstrates that she is following Jesus’ reasoning. She says “yes” when unquestionably the implications of this “yes” are beyond her understanding. She is trusting in Jesus’ power as a personal commitment, but she is also ready to make cognitive commitment to who Jesus must be.<sup>25</sup> If he (Jesus) has this kind of authority, by extension he must also be the “Christ (the Messiah), the Son of God, the *Logos*” whom Judaism sought on its future horizon.

The dramatic high point of the narration is attained in 11:43 when Jesus calls to Lazarus “in a loud voice” to come out. This is not a whisper or a firm request. It is a shout of raw authority. The Greek verb *kraugazo* is employed six times in John – in addition to here, once for the crowds on Palm Sunday (12:13) and four times for the cries of the crowds calling for Jesus’ crucifixion (18:40; 19:6, 12, 15). When Lazarus emerges from the tomb, he is bound in grave wrappings, which were strips of fabric wound around his limbs and filled with burial spices. Jewish burials likewise tied the jaw closed

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Burge, *John*, 317.

and covered the face with a linen cloth.<sup>26</sup>

Lazarus's coming from the grave on account of the word of the *Logos* must have been an amazing spectacle witnessed by a growing crowd of people, many of whom take news of this sign back to Jerusalem (12:9, 17). Lazarus stands before the Incarnate Word wrapped tightly. Jesus is no doubt talking to him (what does he say?), and the crowd obviously shrinks back in awe. Jewish superstitions took great interest in cemeteries (as do most cultures), and strict ritual laws of purification (clean/unclean) were attached to dead bodies. Should anyone come near the man? Martha? Mary? Jesus loved Lazarus, and it is not far to imagine him (Jesus) being the first to embrace his friend. Jesus had a reputation for touching those deemed "untouchable" (Matt 8,3; 9:20), and while the text is silent, such an embrace here would have left the crowd stunned. Jesus remains in command and issues a word (*logos*) that someone unbind him (11:44).

Are we then to conclude that the Raising of Lazarus is given as a sample fulfillment of the prediction in John 5:28? In a sense it is so. Any moment in which Christ presents an action, a sign of His divine functions of Life and Judgment is, in some sense, the destined hour of his manifestation. At Cana, when Mary intervened, his hour had not yet come (John 2:4); but when he showed his glory in turning water into wine (John 2:11), it had, in some sense, come. Likewise, when Jesus was in hiding in Galilee, his 'appointed hour' was not yet present (John 7:6), but when at the Feast of Tabernacles He declared himself the source of light and of living water it was, in some sense, present.

A certain resemblance of structure in the Lazarus' story would indicate that when Jesus delayed in Trans-Jordan, his time was not yet, but the moment when the dead heard his voice and came out was the appointed time in which His glory was manifested, and so, in some sense, a fulfillment of the prediction, 'there will be a time when all who are in the tomb will hear his voice', or at least a first part of the fulfillment. But it now becomes important to ask, in what sense the resurrection of which John 5,28-9 speaks is final? Of those who thus come out of the tombs at the voice of the Son of God to "the resurrection of life" it must plainly be understood that they die no more.

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<sup>26</sup> Often one discovers that coins had been placed on the eyes of buried first-century Jews.

But the man Lazarus, upon the level of events in time on which the story moves, will die again when his time comes. If therefore his resurrection is, in some sense, a fulfillment of the prediction in John 5:28-9, it must be in a symbolical sense. Not the raising of Lazarus, as sign, is the fulfillment, but that which the sign signifies.<sup>27</sup> Now the resurrection to which John 5:28-9 alludes to is the general resurrection “on the last day” (cf. John 6:54 “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day”); but the raising of Lazarus is put in contrast with the resurrection on the last day, to which Martha, the sister of the dead man, had pinned her faith. It appears we might argue in this way: the evangelist has taken an event associated with the “last day”, and transferred it into the historic ministry of Jesus, thus making of it a “sign” of the Life which that ministry (when consummated) brought into effect.<sup>28</sup> The implication is that the absoluteness and finality which belongs to the resurrection on the last day belong also to the Life which Christ has effected. We might go so far as to say that if it were possible for us to contemplate the resurrection on the last day as a *fait accompli*, it would still be, as is the Raising of Lazarus, no more than a sign of the truth that Christ is Himself both resurrection and life – the giver of life and the conqueror of death; and this truth was as certain, as potent, and, for those who could ‘behold his glory’, as manifest in his historical activity and its consequences as it ever will be.

If something like this is the intention of the evangelist, we may say that the sign of the Raising of Lazarus adds to the presentation of Jesus, God’s Word Incarnate as giver of life, which has already taken such varied forms of expression, this especial new element: that the gift of life is here presented expressly as victory over death. This indeed is one of the functions of the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ par excellence, God and Man. “The Son is the Eternal Word, ever-present in God, because he himself is God”.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 366.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, 366.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Instrumentum laboris* of the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the “Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”, 4. Jesus Christ Himself is the Life and Mission of the Church.

John 11 touches on the themes that are immediately relevant to the modern mind. Every age struggles with the finality of the grave and the incomprehensibility of death. Throughout history societies have surrounded death and burial sites with mystery and superstition, and this is no less true of our modern society. However, through the word uttered by the Incarnate *Logos*, the meaning of all this changes.

Indeed, from the above study we have seen this dynamic character of word (*logos*) from different perspectives: both from the side of God and from the side of human beings, since human beings created in God's image and likeness share with God the power which word has to convey and call for a response.<sup>30</sup> Word is a medium of communication. Primarily what matters most is what the word communicates and the response it demands. Therefore, word should not be an end in itself. This is the case with our understanding of the Scripture as God's inspired word par excellence.

Jesus, God-Word Incarnate holds for us the fullest and truest key for understanding the Scripture.<sup>31</sup> The power of the spoken word is seen in the dialogue between Jesus, God's Word Incarnate<sup>32</sup> and a dead man. It seems clear, therefore, that the desired effect of a spoken word cannot be underestimated, since the word has the power to destroy and build. The Word also has a power to raise. This theme is elaborated in the dialogue between Jesus, God-Word Incarnate and the sisters of the dead Lazarus, as well as in the significant narrative of the raising of the dead. The Word of God, Jesus Christ Himself, transforms the lives of those who approach him in faith. The Word never fails. This is very evident in the raising of Lazarus.

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Okure, *Alive and Active*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Okure, *Alive and Active*, 16.

<sup>32</sup> Who is the "Way, the Truth and the Life" John 14:6.

## Narrative Criticism as a Hermeneutical Key for Interpreting the Gospels in the African Context

Anthony Iffen Umoren

### Introduction

“Hermeneutic” comes from the Greek noun *hermeneia*, which corresponds to the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means “to express, to explain, to translate, to interpret”.<sup>1</sup> It is a term which is traditionally used to express a theory of interpretation and a phenomenology (description) of understanding. Hermeneutic, therefore, seeks “to establish the principles, methods, and rules needed in the interpretation of written texts”.<sup>2</sup> In line with its etymology, biblical hermeneutics (with “s”) is concerned about the principles, methods and rules which are needed for the interpretation, explanation and translation of the sacred written texts, the word of God, the Bible. There is need for biblical hermeneutics, given the fact that the texts of the Bible relate experiences and material from a world-view different from that of today’s reader in terms of language, geography, history, as well as socio-economic, religious, political and moral realities.<sup>3</sup>

A survey of the hermeneutical methods and approaches to biblical studies in Africa would reveal that on the whole, African biblical scholarship, especially in English speaking Africa, “uses various methods of the historical critical scholarship in analyzing the biblical text, and aims at showing some correspondence between the experience of Christianity in its early history and

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<sup>1</sup> Bauer, W., Gingrich F., Danker, F., eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 310.

<sup>2</sup> Soulen, R. N., *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 82.

<sup>3</sup> Soulen, R. N., *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 82.

in Africa today”.<sup>4</sup> The historical – critical method of biblical hermeneutics has as its hermeneutic principle that the meaning of a biblical text can primarily be found “in the author’s intention, which was formulated in terms of the social, political, cultural, and ideological matrix of the author”.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the interpreter of the word of God must focus on many issues that can usually be known only from extra-biblical sources. In this regard, the historical-critical method routinely researches into the world behind the text, in order to discover the historical life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the text, and investigate the historical circumstances which inspired the author, the sources used by the author, the place the author wrote from, the date of writing, the author’s purpose in writing, and the audience of the author. The interpreter has to unearth the socio-cultural and religious environments of the author in relation to the text, and the history of the development of the text.<sup>6</sup> This process is carried out with the help of a number of historical-critical theories such as Textual Criticism, Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Redaction Criticism, and History of Traditions Criticism.

The multiplicity of scholarly debates and disagreements, and the often widely divergent scholarly views on historical issues, such as the history of the transmission of a text, an author’s date of writing and purpose of writing, and the nature of the recipients of a text have sometimes made results from historical-critical studies to appear highly hypothetical. Questions have also been raised on the difficulty, if not impossibility, of assuming that a text can convey undistorted, an author’s original intention, given the natural limitations of space and time from the original author. Furthermore, historical criticism has been queried on the grounds that too much attention is usually paid on investigating the origins and historical background of a text, without a corresponding amount of time spent on analyzing the text itself. Many of the biblical texts, to be sure, were not written primarily as histories, but as theologies, and so, one would appreciate the difficulty of going out in search of or totally depending on historical reliability in them, as the experience of the *Life of Jesus* research showed. With these, the appropriateness of the historical-

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<sup>4</sup> Ukpong, J. S., “Models and Methods of Biblical Interpretation in Africa” *JIT* 4/1 (1997), 3-31; here 9. See also, 13, 15, 16.

<sup>5</sup> Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), xvi.

<sup>6</sup> Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, xvi.

critical method for arriving at meaning has, therefore, come into question.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that meaning cannot be arrived at through the historical-critical method. It is an indication rather, that meaning cannot *always* be arrived at, in *every* biblical passage, *only* through the historical critical method.

On the basis of these observations, some modern interpreters of the word of God are exploring with some measure of success, text-centered approaches to biblical hermeneutics. Narrative Criticism (Narratology) is one of such text-centered approaches. Other text-centered approaches include Structuralism (or Structural Analysis, *not Literary Structure of a text*), Rhetorical Criticism and Reader-Response Criticism. It is the thesis of this paper that for a more dynamic interpretation of the word of God, especially the gospels in the African context, the hermeneutic principles of Narrative Criticism would be quite helpful, alongside the historical-critical theories, given the fact that the gospels are basically stories or narratives about Jesus Christ, written from oral traditions; and Africans are a story telling people.<sup>8</sup>

### Narrative Criticism

Having as basis literary theory, Narrative Criticism, like other text-centered approaches, is synchronic not diachronic. It has as hermeneutic principle, “textual autonomy”. Accordingly, “the text is a literary entity which can stand on its own. Interpretation is limited to the text, meaning that the role of the author is for all practical purposes denied, or at least given no prominent role in interpretation”.<sup>9</sup> This means that in order to arrive at meaning, much attention has to be paid to the literary and linguistic elements which exist within a text. Just as in many if not all African stories, the author is more or less “dead” after having told the story. The story has a life of its own. In no African story is there an investigation into the original story-teller, his or her social background, and even the original recipients of the story. There is also no investigation into the history of the redaction of the story over the years or even centuries. Rather, the story is accepted without questions as currently told by

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<sup>7</sup> Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, xvii.

<sup>8</sup> For more details on this, see Healy J., and Sybertz D., *Towards an African Narrative Theology* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Tate, R. W., *Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Approach*, xviii.

the contemporary storyteller. Indeed, every narrator of the same story brings in his or her own narrative artistry in order to drive home the point of the story.

In the same way, Narrative Criticism allows the text to speak for itself, and does not attempt to bring the author back to life, so as to give meaning to the text. The meaning of the text must be derived by the reader from narrative hermeneutic principles. These hermeneutic principles include, after a *Delimitation of the Text* according to certain dramatic and stylistic criteria (change of locus, time, character, action; use of repetitions, inclusions, shift in vocabulary), a careful analysis of *Time* (narrative time, narration time, gaps, duration, frequency); *Plot* (unified plot, episodic plot, scene, different moments of the plot: exposition, inciting moment, complication, climax, turning point, resolution, denouement); *Point of View* (narration or focalization through whose “eyes”: from without, from within, or from behind?); *Characters* (dynamic, static, flat, round); and *Narrator and Reader* (real and implied; reader response).<sup>10</sup> In these principles, the aim is to observe how the text is dynamically constructed as a narrative, how all the narrative and literary elements are systematically and progressively employed by the narrator to drive home certain points whether at the micro (events, scenes) or macro (narrative, story, discourse) levels, and how all these affect the real reader today.

The hermeneutic pre-understanding of Narrative Criticism is, therefore, that the text is an interactive and unified whole, even where redaction-critical studies may have seen in the text different layers of redactions. Narrative Criticism does not deny the possibility and importance of these redaction layers, but it does not pay much attention to them. This it does in the same way as the reader and interpreter of a communiqué, any other modern official document, or even a paper presented at a conference today does not insist on recovering different layers of the redaction or editing of the document from its original manuscript form, in order to determine the meaning of the final text.

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<sup>10</sup> See J. L. Ska, “*Our Fathers Have Told Us*”: *Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990); Alter, R. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Sternberg, M., *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Tannehill, R. C. “Narrative Criticism” in Coggins, R. J. and J. L. Houlden, eds., *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1990), 488-489; here 488.



Neither does the reader today insist on investigating the background of the composer(s) of the document and their historical circumstances, although all these may be quite useful and important. It is taken for granted that the document must have passed through several redactions before being found in its final form; and it is the document or paper in its final form that deserves attention and analysis.

Following upon this hermeneutic pre-understanding, a text analyzed using text-centered theories invariably discovers, oftentimes to the surprise of historical-critical analysts of the same text, that a text hitherto regarded as disjointed and incoherent was actually a carefully threaded literary unit, possibly even by the same author. In this way, the holistic and integral natures of many biblical texts have been unearthed, and their dominant literary and theological concerns made to emerge. According to Tannehill,

Focusing on one or more dominant purposes is a principal way of unifying a story. The reporting of unconnected events does not make a story, for a story is more than a string of incidents. In stories of the traditional kind, events take on meaning because they reveal purposes at work and represent movement toward the fulfillment of a major purpose or obstacles which block fulfillment.<sup>11</sup>

Narrative critics also pay much attention to the use of narrative patterns and literary devices within a story. These features may be grammatical such as morphology and syntax, or stylistic such as the use of repetitions, contrasts, suspense, comparisons, summarization, generalization, pivot, hyperbole, irony, inclusion, chiasm, interchange, intercalation, interrogation and preparation. These are used to organize the narrative in a way that attention to such details would reveal meaning in the text.<sup>12</sup> Narrative patterns and literary devices are intended create certain effects in the reader, who is being subtly invited or

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<sup>11</sup> Tannehill, R. C., *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation Volume One: The Gospel According to Luke* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup> See Sternberg, M., *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Powell, M. A. *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 32-34.

persuaded by the narrator to participate in interpreting the text in a particular way.

## **Narrative Criticism of the Gospels**

A complete Narrative Analysis of any particular Gospel text would be beyond the scope of this paper, which is simply trying to draw attention to the need and importance of doing New Testament exegesis, especially Gospel hermeneutics in the African context using the principles of Narrative Criticism. As mini test of the narrative critical model, however, the paper will here present the conclusions of Powell's narrative analysis of Matthew's plot.

### **Powell on Matthew's Plot<sup>13</sup>**

Matthew's gospel is basically the story of its central character, Jesus. However, Matthew's story about Jesus is set in the broader perspective of a story about God. In this way, the narrator's temporal perspective is not limited to the events in the life of Jesus, but extends from creation to the close of age. It is, therefore, God's point of view that the narrator establishes as normative for the story. Based on this, the analysis of the narrative plot reveals that the primary concern or main plot of the narrator is to establish that Jesus is the Son of God, and as such, comes to save God's people from their sin and from Satan. The narrative, therefore, focuses on fostering the divine plan by which God's rule will be established, and God's people will be ultimately saved from sin and evil.

Matthew's gospel uses numerous episodes that may at first sight appear unrelated. However, these numerous episodes serve to develop the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders and to explain how it happens that Israel rejects Jesus and puts him to death. Within the plot, there is a sub plot which comprises of a separate set of episodes or events that develop conflict between Jesus and his disciples and serve to explain why they ultimately desert him. Other sub plots are also discernible in the plot of

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<sup>13</sup> Powell, M. A. *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible*, 48-50.

Matthew. All of these plot lines, however, find their resolution in the events surrounding the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus.

Accordingly, the divine plan is introduced in the first part of the gospel, where Jesus is presented as the Son of God, by whom God is “with us” (1:23), and will save God’s people from sin (1:21). God is pleased with Jesus (3:17). In an inciting moment, the reader is later presented with a direct threat to frustrate the divine plan, through a conflict between God’s plan and Satan’s plan. Satan challenges Jesus as the Son of God (4:1-11).

The narration then shifts its focus from a direct presentation of conflict between God and Satan to a complication, which involves the development of conflict between human characters, especially Jesus and the religious leaders. These religious leaders indirectly represent Satan and evil (9:4; 12:34, 39, 45; 16:4; cf. 13:19, 38), and are indirectly opposing God’s plan. They put Jesus to the test and challenge his divine authority. As Jesus goes about his mission of liberation through teaching, preaching, and healing, they seem determined to thwart his efforts to bring salvation to God’s people. Indeed, the narrator presents in the climax of the plot that they are apparently successful, since Israel rejects Jesus as Son of God and the salvation which he came to offer them, by putting Jesus to death. The narrator however, presents other sub plots such as one involving Jesus and his disciples. The characters in this sub plot are not agents of Satan, but representative of the human up and down efforts or struggles to belong to God’s camp.

The reader has come to fear that God’s plan has been successfully thwarted by Satan and Satan’s human agents. Yet, with Jesus’ first passion prediction (16:21-23), the narrator presents a prolepsis which begins to reveal that ironically, the religious leaders’ rejection and eventual crucifixion of Jesus is part and parcel of God’s plan. After its climax of the death of Jesus, there is a turning point with the news about the resurrection of Jesus (28:1-10). The plot thus ends with the resolution that it is actually through Jesus’ rejection and death that God’s plan of saving God’s people in all the nations from sin and Satan is fulfilled (20:28; 28:16-20). This resolution acts as denouement of the plot of Matthew, untying all the knots of the plot, and indicating that in the final outcome of the gospel narrative, God’s plan has through Jesus, been fulfilled “ever after”, with the defeat of Satan and Satan’s agents.

Powell’s conclusions presented above on the plot of Matthew’s gospel has exposed the gospel narrative in a new light, unifying the entire narrative.

### **Narrative Criticism of the Gospels in the African Context**

Africans love stories. They patiently listen to stories, are caught up by the elements of the story, and respond appropriately to the elements in any story. They do not merely have an intellectual involvement with a story, wondering whether the story is true or not, or seeking to determine how it actually happened. They rather prefer to take the story as a whole, and having gone through its moods and swings, make resolutions for their lives from the lessons of the story. When Africans listen to a story, they cry, laugh, clap, moan, jump up, become gripped by fear, shout, etc., while listening to the story. All their attention is on the plot of the story, until the resolution of the conflicts in the story. Little wonder that the Nigerian Home video market is experiencing a big boom not only in Nigeria but in all of Africa. A story is forever remembered and narrated to others in turn.

On this basis, the interpretation of the gospels using the hermeneutical key of Narrative Criticism would definitely excite Africans. It would make the gospel stories become alive, and the characters become more real. The African response to the gospel within the African's individual and social contexts would be part and parcel of the hermeneutic, since the reader or listener cannot be personally uninvolved in a story. Therefore, if the story of the good news of salvation is to have meaning in the African context, the Historical Critical method should be complemented. Little wonder that some up coming biblical students in Africa are often shocked beyond their wits and faith when they learn for the first time that certain historical assumptions that they held about the Bible have been roundly questioned. Having come to such knowledge, many of them simply respond by stating that they must never tell their people "this truth" which they have come to discover about the Bible, or the people's faith will be destroyed. Yet historical critical studies do not intend to destroy faith but build it. The only difference is that it cannot adequately serve as a tool for building the faith of Africans, who have a different contextual dynamic. The dynamic of the African context appreciates unity and wholeness, incidentally the twin hermeneutical keys of Narrative Criticism.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to establish that although the Historical Critical method of biblical interpretation is quite popularly used among African biblical scholars, it is not the only method appropriate for interpreting narrative texts, especially the gospels, in the African context. Given the nature of Africans as a story loving people, and the impact that story telling has among Africans, it is strongly suggested that African biblical scholars think about employing the principles of Narrative Criticism as one of the tools in trying to unearth meaning in the gospel narratives.

## **Interpreting Scripture with the Church Fathers: A Case for Effective Hermeneutics**

Stephen Ziga Dedua

### **Introduction**

The interpretation of scripture by the Church Fathers was motivated by their understanding of scripture and the place of scripture in the life of the Church. The proximity of the Church Fathers to the New Testament writers gave an added vigour and purpose to their exegesis of the Bible. Their overarching position in the appreciation of the Bible gave them a place of honour and respect in the history of exegesis. As ancestors (in the African understanding) of the Christian faith and with the advantage of being close to the very formation of the canon of scripture, they are not only beacons on the field of exegesis but also pivotal points in sketching a holistic understanding of the Bible. The Church Father lived, ate, preached and taught scripture with the passion of fathers who were ready to break down any barrier in the understanding of scripture. No doubt, their excessive zeal sometimes veered off the tangent and gave us not only ridiculous interpretations of some sections of the Bible but further made them suspects in the interpretation of Scripture.

Indeed, in the modern time, Textual, Historical, Grammatical, literary, Form, Tradition, Redaction and Structuralist criticisms have advanced the interpretation of Scriptures but they have also left a yawning gap in the overall understanding of scripture as a book in the Church. Apart from the Canonical Criticism that has insisted that the Bible is “the sacred scripture of the Church and synagogue.”<sup>1</sup> there has been almost the neglect of this point by other criticisms; such that the Bible has been put on the same level of interpretation with other ancient texts like Iliad and Homer.

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Hayes and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis* (London: SCM , 1983) 7.

While the Historico-grammatical interpretation of the Bible implies three elements: knowledge of the different meanings of the expression, the precise meaning of the expression in the text, and the historical description of the idea this determined, there is the need to re-read the Bible with the Church Fathers; in order to advance our knowledge of the text; rather than keep the text in the past.<sup>2</sup> The Church Fathers interpreted that spirit and message of the gospel within the tradition of their time in its social context.<sup>3</sup> They struggled to explain the scripture to the Hellenized world in which they lived even as they read the Scriptures in some instances as apology to combat the Jews.

The challenge before this paper is to discover how relevant is the insight and interpretative methodology of the Church Fathers today. How can we form a synergy between the hermeneutics of the Church Fathers and the modern day hermeneutics? These will form the gadfly for the contextual study of the fathers. Because of space, we shall study the two schools of interpretations at the time of the Church Fathers and highlight their import in the corpus of patristic exegesis.

At this juncture, we wish to state that we have had Church Mothers in the Church also. Their dedication to the life of the Church cannot go unnoticed. Paula, AD 404, Olympia AD 404. Indeed, The Apostolic Constitution, late fourth-century document on church order, allows women to function officially as deaconesses.<sup>4</sup>

## State of the Question

What has the “self-imposed amnesia” of Church Fathers on interpretation of scripture done to the modern day hermeneutics of scripture? Has the novel interpretative methodology in the modern time advanced exegesis or retarded it? What can we proffer as the reason for the constant dissatisfaction about modern day exegesis?

The need to go back to our roots has become imperative today in the appreciation of a contextual theology. This is in line with Thomas Oden’s view that the time has come “to hear voices from the past with different assumptions

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<sup>2</sup> Hayes and Holladay, 123.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, (New York: Orbis, 1994) 4.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1998) 9.

entirely about the world and time and human culture.<sup>5</sup> This is very important today because many modern day theologians find themselves rootless and are constantly drifting in “a barren secular scientific or ecclesiastical landscape, largely because they have forgotten their Christian past.”<sup>6</sup>

This divorce of modern day interpretation from the heroes of the past has led to a grand disconnection from the source of our Christian history. This has also led to modern day distrust of exegesis. This therefore calls for an interrogation of the tools of our exegesis and how we can eke out a much more satisfying mode of doing exegesis with the Church Fathers. As Catholic Biblical scholars, are we drifting in a circle and have lost our identity and the methods of interpreting scripture in the Church? <sup>7</sup> Or have we been affected by the bug of the enlightenment<sup>8</sup> that was suspicious of tradition? This rudderless way of doing exegesis according to Robert Wilken has made us unable “to accept with gratitude what has come to us and what has been done on our behalf”.<sup>9</sup> Or has the post modern hermeneutics infection that elevates gender, culture, language, social change and social problems as seed bed for interpretation caught up with us? We agree with Alasdair MacIntyre that this has led us to “subjective perspectivism” that glorifies our own myopic views as the therapeutic answer to the plaguing problems of life.<sup>10</sup> Or as William Meyer says concerning students that were trained with different set of tools of work

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Oden, *Word of life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 219.

<sup>6</sup> Robert L. Wilken, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) 18.

<sup>7</sup> The document on the Interpretation of the Bible in the church is a document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission. It was produced on Sept. 21, 1993. The document contains a well-grounded overview of the panorama of present day methods of doing exegesis. In this way, the document provides for exegetes an orientation to the possibilities and limits of these methods or approaches. This document provides us with a synthesis of the official Church document of 1943 and advances them in a fruitful way.

<sup>8</sup> This was the period in history that glorified reason and science. It left its mark on the bible as a science text to be inductively studies through renews reason alone.

<sup>9</sup> Wilken 171.

<sup>10</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1989) 353.



have we “... become painfully aware of the fact that they have been given a “metric” set of tools to work with “nonmetric” context?”<sup>11</sup>

The drive to go back to interpret scripture with Church Fathers is to underscore the fact that as catholic exegetes we need to make use of the tools that will foster a profound appreciation for understanding the text and guide us from losing the aim of every exegesis.

Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical “Providentissimus Deus” repeats that authority of the Fathers of the Church laid down by the Vatican and Tridentine councils”<sup>12</sup> in which he argues that the Fathers are our guide in interpreting the scripture in its true sense. How can catholic exegete in Nigeria therefore interpret scripture to meet the needs of Contextual Theology or African Theology? The Fathers will offer us their help.

## Church Fathers

The title of Church Fathers has a more comprehensive meaning. According to J. Quasten, it extends to “Ecclesiastical writers in so far as they were accepted as representatives of the traditions of the church.”<sup>13</sup>

The term took a more technical meaning from the fourth century on especially in the context of the theology controversies that filled the fourth and fifth centuries, “while bishops - the teachers of the church – had been called fathers from the second century forward, bishops who faithfully preserved and protected the decisions of the council of Nicaea (AD 325) Constantinople (381) and Chalcedon (451) received the designation as persons worthy of special regard for having preserved the orthodox teachings”.<sup>14</sup>

The Church Fathers demonstrate deep commitment to one of their crafts; which was interpretation of biblical text. This is the same with some of the doctors of the Church. We shall treat some of the Doctors of the Church in an extended sense to fall within the context of our study. This is because they all exemplified love for the four central degrees.

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<sup>11</sup> William H. Meyer, “The Hermeneutical Dilemma of the African American Biblical Student”, in Cain Hope.

<sup>12</sup> Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* 1983, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 4vols (Westminster, Christian Classics, 1986) 1:9.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, 50.

Boniface Ramsey identifies the four central criteria used for determining a given Church figure as a “father” as: Antiquity, holiness of life, orthodox doctrine and Ecclesiastical approval.”<sup>15</sup> These classifications also include according to Quasten, “eminent erudition” and express “ecclesiastical declaration”.<sup>16</sup> All these combine to elevate the pedigree of the Church Fathers. As a matter of fact, they do not always embody all the characteristics but have more or less all the characteristics

For example, Origen has not received Ecclesiastical approval because the consensus of the Church judged his ideas to be outside the boundaries of orthodoxy.<sup>17</sup> Neither can we admit that they were all holy because, Tertullian displays a very cruel streak, Jerome has an unforgiving temperament, Theophilus of Alexandria was an opportunist of the worst sort, Cyril of Alexandria persecuted his enemies relentlessly and some misdirected their zeal for God.<sup>18</sup>

These fathers of the Church are also persons with their weaknesses but with their strength in the way they teach and preach the word of God. Their exegesis was not exegesis for its sake or for the academia; but one that was pastorally motivated. It is for this reason that numerous exegeses of the Church Fathers are found in their sermon, catechesis or commentaries. They interpreted scripture for the sake of knowing the truth about Jesus.

To show how important the Church Fathers are to us today, Benedict XVI during his weekly general audiences from March 7, 2007, to February 27, 2008 devoted it exclusively on the father.<sup>19</sup> He says “let us now devote our attention to the Apostolic Fathers; that is to the first and second generations in the Church subsequent to the Apostles. And thus, we can see where the Church’s journey begins in history”.<sup>20</sup> Let us now briefly turn to the Patristic Exegesis.

<sup>15</sup> Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (New York: Paulist, 198) 4. He captures in this seminal work, a detailed list of the factors at the head of this designation. Quasten also agrees with him on the point of holiness of life. These criteria further reveal the fact that the designation is not arbitrary one.

<sup>16</sup> Quasten, 1:9-10.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsey, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *the Fathers* (Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2008) 7

<sup>20</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, 7.

## Patristic Exegesis

We shall treat patristic exegesis from the point of the two major schools of exegesis that the Fathers fall into; that is the Alexandrian (allegorical) and the Antiochian (literal). This is done with the purpose of stating that the Fathers used predominantly these methods in their exegesis. These methods were the ones that the patristic times required for the purpose of making lucid the word of God. Their exegesis “consists in drawing from the totality of scripture the basic orientation that shaped the doctrinal tradition of the Church, and to provide a rich theological teaching for the instruction and spiritual sustenance of the faithful”.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, for the Fathers of the Church, “the chief occasion for reading the Bible is in Church in the course of the liturgy. This made the Church Fathers to make their hermeneutics God centered. This therefore made their exegesis theologically and pastorally oriented. In all these, the Fathers had some peculiar methods they used in interpreting scripture. Though their exegesis was not exegesis in the strict sense; “they used the biblical text either to support their exhortations to lead a fruitful Christian life or to form a spiritual mosaic of spiritual texts”.<sup>22</sup>

But why were the Church Fathers of Alexandria interested in the allegorical method? How were they to present the gospel message effectively in a deeply Hellenized world? They used the allegorical method to reach the Hellenized Jews and convince them of the relevance of the Old Testament. There was also the need to combat Gnosticism. Allegorical interpretation according to James Kugel and Rowan Greer “is an interpretative approach in which biblical persons and incidents become representative of abstract virtues or doctrines”.<sup>23</sup> This does not exhaust the fact that the allegorical approach was

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<sup>21</sup> The , *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> L.F. Hartman “Biblical Exegesis” in *Catholic Encyclopaedia* 5 (Washington: Thomson Gale, 2003) 509-30.

<sup>23</sup> James and Kugel Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 80.

for some time confused with the Typological Method<sup>24</sup>. These methods were used by some early biblical writers who read or interpreted the Old Testament in a “spiritual” sense. Paul labels his spiritual reading of Old Testament texts as a “typos” (Rom 5:14; 1Cor10:6). On one occasion Paul refers to the Hagar and Sarah narrative in the book of Genesis as “allegoroumena (Gal 4:24)”.<sup>25</sup> Paul further refers to Hagar as a slave woman and Sarah as a free woman. Each of their sons according to Paul was born according to a different principle: Ishmael according to “the flesh” and Isaac is according to “the promise”. Paul clearly allegorizes each woman: Hagar represents Mount Sinai bearing children forth for slavery while Sarah corresponds to the heavenly Jerusalem bearing forth children that are free (Gal 4:24-26). These add up to show that in allegory there are two main points to look out for: the immediate meaning and the ulterior meaning.

On the opposite side of the hermeneutic field, why was the literal response of the Antiochian School different from the Alexandrian school? Was allegory too subjective a methodology to aid in proper interpretation of the text? How can we arrive at a literal interpretation of a text and apply it to the life of the people? Was the Antiochian School out to destroy the over spiritualization of a text by the Alexandrian school? Or was the Antiochian School that was versed in textual criticism, philological and historical studies out to test the veracity of the biblical text? Is the literal method contrary to the allegorical method or complementary to it? These are some of the questions that we shall attempt to answer in our bid to express the divergence of both methods of hermeneutics.

In this school we have Lucian of Antioch and Diodore of Tarsus who is seen as the fountainhead of the literal method. Theodore of Mopsustia and John Chrysostom are also illustrious members of this school. They were suspicious of the allegorical method and formulated rules of interpretation in the literal sense. In doing this, they wanted to insist on the validity of biblical history and the need to stay in the text and eke out the truth in it. Their hermeneutical

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<sup>24</sup> This is a method whereby parts of the Old Testament are read as foreshadowing and prediction of the events of the gospel. It is this method that was used mainly in Christological interpretation.

<sup>25</sup> For details on the use of Allegory by Paul confer Manlino Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) 12-20.

principles helped to reveal the plain truth in the text without any form of romanticizing on the text.

The combination of both schools of interpretation has brought forth the fact of understanding the text in context and bringing out the truth in the text. This is why the study of the Fathers will remain a watershed for future exegesis.

### **Effective Hermeneutics**

In this brief paper, we shall not go into the hair spitting difference between exegesis and hermeneutics.<sup>26</sup> We shall focus on hermeneutics “as the natural process by which a human being interprets, understands and relates meaningfully to self and the world outside self on a daily basis”.<sup>27</sup>

The case for an effective hermeneutics is borne out of the urgent need to interpret scripture to meet the need of every age. Any hermeneutics that does not speak with every age and culture is irrelevant nay ineffective.<sup>28</sup> This is truly the case because “any theology that is not up-to-date (actuelle) is a false theology; because it is not reflective of the times, culture and current concerns”.<sup>29</sup>

Unfortunately, we are at a time when the hang over of Western Enlightenment has stayed with us for too long and its method has made modern day hermeneutics of the bible lifeless. Okure captures the present situation thus: “As a result biblical criticism has been largely like the barren gig tree full of leaves season after season, but with little or no fruit to nourish God’s people hungry for the word of life”<sup>30</sup>. The result of some of these lifeless works is what we have on our library shelves gathering dust from year to year with no one interested in opening its dead letters. This explains in part why many exegetes today wing out in search of better exegetical tools to enable them

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<sup>26</sup> For a detailed study of the distinction between Exegesis and hermeneutics confer T. Okure, “‘I will open my mouth in parables’ (Matt 13:35): A Case for a Gospel-Based Biblical Hermeneutics” and Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Towards a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*.

<sup>27</sup> Okure 447.

<sup>28</sup> Bevens 3.

<sup>29</sup> Bevens 4.

<sup>30</sup> Okure 454.

explain difficult texts. This will not help the exegete much because the social context is an index in the interpretation of a text. We agree with Bernard Ukwuegbu that hermeneutics should no longer see a social context as a mere marginal factor in the corpus of interpretation but one that is the index that guides the flow of textual interpretation.<sup>31</sup> This is what patristic hermeneutics does. It takes the text in its context and exposes the germ of the text. It is polemical some of the time also. The interpretation of the text of Is 7:14 will clarify the issue further.

This text falls within the corpus of the sign of Immanuel (Is 7:10-17). Ahaz is put to the test by the prophet. The prophet invites Ahaz to test God by asking for a sign. But why should Ahaz abandon himself to his worst enemy Assyria? Faced with the threat of Syria and Northern Israel? This verse therefore deals with the sign that the sovereign will give; “Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (7:14a).

This text would not have raised any dust if not the translation of *‘almah* (young woman) by the Septuagint (LXX) with *parthenos* (virgin). In this verse the LXX translated the word *‘almah* with virgin as quoted also in Matt 1:23. The Jews objected to this Christological interpretation (translation) of the term. As an issue at the time, the Jews were against any Christological interpretation of the text; this resulted in an endless debate among the Jews and the Fathers of the Church. Indeed Origen’s enterprise of seeking to stabilize the fluidity between the Masoretic Text and the LXX stemmed ultimately from this concern that Christian exegetical debates with Jews needed to rest on a careful critical assessment of the textual relationship.<sup>32</sup>

When dealing with the virgin birth in Isa 7:14 Irenaeus pursues not only the miraculous elements but also the theological implications of Christ being truly God and truly man. In his argument against Theodotus, Aquila and the Ebionites, Irenaeus argued that it was a virgin who conceived and not a young woman. Justin the Martyr also follows the same argument against the Jews. It was Jerome who gave the over-drawn argument a conclusive approach. He began by reviewing the parallel occurrences of the word *‘almah* in the Old Testament. He notes that the Jewish commentators and the Greek versions –

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard Ukwuegbu, “Towards an Alternative Hermeneutical Impulse for Interpreting Paul and His Galatian Correspondence”, *JIT* 8/1 (2006) 3-20.

<sup>32</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*

the Septuagint is an exception – all translate the term as “young woman.” The Jews argue that in Hebrew only *betulah* means a virgin and that the term is not used in the passage. Jerome sets out to demonstrate even referring to the Punic cognate that *‘almah* does mean in Hebrew simply young woman or even merely virgin, but “hidden – away virgin” (virgin *abscondida*), of marriage age. It is interesting to note that the word has a double sense of concealed and *nubilis*. He opts for the former sense of concealed. In this way he used the text and brought the important issue of virginity at the time to the front burner. This philological treatment and the historical consideration with the context of the time helped in clarifying this thorny issue. The conclusion from this is that while the prophet did not mean to stress the virginity, he did not mean to leave it out either. “In fact he could have used this term because of its richness and diversity.”<sup>33</sup> The translators who used *parthenos* to translate may also have meant a woman who has remained inviolate up to the time of marriage. This important aspect of the text is one that we need to appreciate profoundly. The Fathers of the Church did not underestimate the treasure in the LXX. They employed its use because it is not only a “unique linguistic monument but also constitutes the first complete and pre-Christian commentary to the Old Testament”.<sup>34</sup>

It is for the above reasons that we hold with Ernest Ezeogu that there is the “crying need to give biblical scholarship a more serious attention in the whole enterprise of African Christianity”.<sup>35</sup> This is possible to the extent that we are able to enter into the world of the text and see the richness in the nuances of the lexical forms. The selective choice of instruments for this important project should no longer put the LXX on the margin. The Fathers did not play down on the importance of the LXX. This is the dearth that we suffer today. We need to expand our world view and appreciate the path that the Fathers of the Church took to make their exegesis life-giving.

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<sup>33</sup> John S. Oswalt, The book of Isaiah 1-39.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Hengel, The Septuagint as Christian Scripture: The Prehistory and the Problem of its Canon (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002) xi.

<sup>35</sup> Ernest Ezeogu, “The Crucial Role of Biblical Scholarship in the Development of African Christian Theology” *JIT* 9/2 (2007) 108-130.

## Conclusion

The Fathers of the Church conducted their work in the Church and for the Church; an idea foreign to many modern scholars who conduct their work in the academy largely for the academy. Therefore Childs says, the “challenge of reclaiming the bible for the Church is awesome, particularly at a time in which the academic guild is moving in the exact opposite direction.”<sup>36</sup> This has become necessary because once the interpretation loses its point of departure; it is bound to drift like a ship without a rudder. This is the challenging problem for the modern exegete. To know whose and what purpose the interpretation is serving at every moment of interpretation is very important in the act of interpretation.

The Fathers of the Church interpreted scripture Christologically because the bible has to be read holistically. This is because the bible is characterized by continuity and fulfillment. For the Fathers therefore, if we fail to read the bible in the light of its overarching message we have failed to read the bible correctly.<sup>37</sup> The Fathers had some questions that they wanted to answer; are all scriptures pointing to Jesus? If this is so where can we find the fulfillment in scripture? How can they preach Jesus and his work to the Jews and the Hellenists?

What are the questions the African Christians are asking today? What are the answers the exegetes are giving? How are they responding to the questions raised by fundamentalists by their faulty hermeneutics? The Fathers of the Church have addressed most of the defective ways of interpreting scripture. It is therefore left for the African Exegetes to follow the outline: The meaning of the text for its primary audience; the history of the text up till now and the meaning of the text for us Africans in our context; as given at the workshop for the Bible in African.<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of the methodology of the Fathers of the Church in the above outline will aid the project tremendously.

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<sup>36</sup> Brevard Childs, “On Reclaiming the Bible for Christian Theology”, in *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church*, Carl E. Braaten (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995) 16.

<sup>37</sup> Hall, 191.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Ezeogu, 108.



# 11

## **Epilogue: Now Is the Time, God's Time for Us: A Reflection on the Birth of CABAN<sup>39</sup>**

Teresa Okure  
Coordinating President, 2007-2008

We sincerely thank God who has convoked us to this inaugural conference and meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN) on this Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord. This year 2008 the Ascension falls on May 1<sup>st</sup>, the feast of St Joseph the Worker, God's appointed custodian of the God-Word become flesh and his mother (though this year the feast is subsumed into that of the Ascension). May 1st is nationally and internationally Labour Day. More comprehensively, today is the first day of the month of May which the Church dedicates to our Blessed Mother Mary, "the Handmaid of the Lord" (Luke 1:38). In the new dispensation, she was the first to hear God's word, believe/keep it, conceive in her "womb", her own woman substance (Luke 1:31) and eventually birth to the God-Word become flesh (John 1:14). On the ecclesial dimension, God has been pleased to give birth to our long awaited Association, described by many as "a dream come true", "something new", in this year that Pope Benedict XVI has dedicated to the Word of God (October 2007 – October 2008). The desire to form a new association based on the negative experiences of some members in the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS) had often been discussed. At the CATHAN meeting in Ekpoma in 2006, Fr Camillus Umoh had sounded persons who showed keen interest in forming such an association. The birth of our Association today happens in God's own way and at God's own time. The Association is our

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<sup>39</sup> Initially this presentation was intended to be the only one by the Coordinating President. But when a lacuna occurred because Archbishop John Onaiyekan who was to give the inaugural address was inevitably absent at the last minute, it became necessary to fill in the gap with the first article in this book.

God-given corporate response to the Year of the Word which, as we will see, goes beyond this year's papal declaration. To God be the glory for ever and ever.

We recall further that this Association had its first exploratory meetings on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> April 2007 during the annual conference of the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN) in Makurdi. The theme of that conference, "Religion and Violence", also holds a special call and challenge for us as members of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria. What follows is an attempt to reflect on the special graces, packaged and given to us by God as our heritage through these cumulative circumstances of our coming to birth as Association. I invite each of you to do your own reflection and share it as the Spirit inspires so that together we can reap the abundant fruits of God's rich endowment to our nascent Association. "Mary kept all these things in her heart" and pondered on them with wonder, love and praise (Luke 2:51). May we too continually do the same as we ponder God's great deed among us in the founding of our cherished CABAN. A brief history of the genesis of our Association is pertinent as part of our heritage from God.

### **Beginnings at Makurdi (Easter Week 2007)**

CABAN members who were present at the CATHAN conference in Makurdi in 2007 will recall the initial impromptu announcement made at my request by Fr Ignatius Obinwa, then Rector of Iwnene Tansi Major Seminary: "Professor Okure would like all people with biblical formation to meet immediately after lunch in the room adjacent to the dinning room". The purpose of the "summons" was not stated. Yet the "people with biblical formation" present responded with great enthusiasm to the call, though this meant sacrificing an hour or so of siesta. As we were proceeding to the meeting point, his Grace Archbishop John O. Onaiyekan arrived for the conference. As he got out of his car, I said to him "Your Grace, the biblical people are meeting next door to see whether they can form an Association. You will join us, won't you?" Without the slightest hesitation or asking any questions, he said "I am coming". He did, straight away. This show of solidarity from a member of the hierarchy was a source of great encouragement. The overwhelming response with which the idea of forming an association was welcomed at Makurdi and afterwards is

sure evidence that God's time has come for this Association to come to birth. I am most grateful to all who were at that CATHAN conference and responded to the initial call to get together (almost with blind obedience). The outcome of the two sessions in Makurdi went beyond all expectations and dreams. May the Holy Spirit who kindled that fire of love, enthusiasm and zeal in our hearts keep it alive and burning all the days of our Association.

The group at Makurdi showed its great excitement over the nascent association by taking swift actions in the two brief (lunch break) sessions. Different suggestions were made concerning the name of the Association. Finally the name, Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), was adopted (modeled after CATHAN). Since other Catholic associations related to Bible existed in Nigeria (such as the Catholic Biblical Apostolate of Nigeria, CBAN; and the Catholic Biblical Instructors Union, CBIU), it was decided that the minimum requirement for full membership in CABAN would be a Masters degree in biblical formation. Students who were still doing their masters could register as associate members. Other types of membership would be treated when the Association got fully off the ground.

The group entrusted the moving forward of the Association to CIWA, specifically to the three CIWA biblical lecturers who were present at the CATHAN conference. They designated me as the Coordinating President and Frs. Luke Ijezie and Camillus Umoh as Coordinating Secretary and Treasurer, respectively. This coordinating team was to plan for the effective take off of the Association. Archbishop Onaiyekan pointed out that this team would need money to operate. Fr. Francis Nni, a doctoral student of CIWA, the only student in the group, was the first to respond with a cash donation of N1, 000 (one thousand naira). It was then agreed that nobody would give anything less than N1,000 as a way of registering interest in the Association. Some paid beyond the N1,000 (Fr Nni later upgraded his donation by N4,000, making it a total of N5,000). Another CIWA student, Fr. Joseph Opuowei (a masters student and an associate member), later registered his interest with N10,000. The Archbishop gave a generous donation of N50,000. Fr. Camillus Umoh, the Treasurer, has the details of this and other donations made by enthusiastic members at and after Makurdi to register interest in the Association.

A total of seventeen people registered interest at Makurdi; some gave names of potential members, and all made a commitment to spread the good news to other "persons with biblical formation". The momentum and

enthusiasm initially generated at Makurdi has been maintained by all who have heard of the Association, those resident in Nigeria and abroad. To God be the glory. According to the Coordinating Secretary, Fr. Luke Ijezie, over thirty people have so far signed up for membership in the Association. It is not clear, however, whether all have backed up their show of interest with the minimum N1.000. Or should this free donation be made optional from now on? The issue was left open in Markurdi and new members have continued to show their interest by donating whatever the Spirit moves them to give. This conference will need to make a decision on this matter

### **Graces of the Association Given at Birth**

It is often said that a life that is not reflected upon is not worth living. The Bible itself is a record of how Israel and the NT Christians reflected over the years on their life, of God among them. We too need to reflect on “the great things” our mighty God has done for us, as our Mother Mary did, through the cumulative circumstances of our coming to birth. These include this venue CIWA, the theme of the 2007 CATHAN conference where the CABAN was conceived, the Solemnity of the Ascension (this first day of our inaugural conference), the liturgical significance of the month of May, and the Year of the Word.

### **CIWA as Venue of the Inaugural Conference**

A major hurdle the CABAN Coordinating Committee had to jump over was to find a suitable venue for the inaugural meeting. In the end they settled for the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA), where all three coordinating members were located. This was taking a leap in the dark, as the CIWA has no accommodation facilities for conferences, especially when the Institute is in session. Staff and students of the Biblical department were brought into planning this inaugural conference and worked in the different Committees. The accommodation sub-committee did its best to locate possible places close to CIWA where members could be lodged. But the many efforts yielded very little fruit, especially considering costs and transportation.

Then almost out of the blue God sent an incredible windfall. Fr Stephen Ziga Dedua who had just registered in 2008 at CIWA as a doctoral

student, took it upon himself to contact benefactors who surprised us with their generosity. Mr. Patrick Ugboma and Mr Eze Ugboma offered free accommodation to participants at their newly launched Algate Hotel at Abacha Road, Port Harcourt. This is a first class hotel, complete with Internet and other modern facilities. The generous benefactors went out of their way to ensure that we had enough room for the numbers expected. In addition, they made available a new air-conditioned bus with a driver to transport participants to and fro for the entire duration of our meeting. May God bless them for their great generosity.

The Holy Rosary Chaplaincy CIWA has also been most helpful. Prior to the conference, the Chaplain, Very Rev. Msgr Joseph T. Ogunduyilemi allowed us to address members of the Chaplaincy on the Association. This roused great interest among them; some assisted us with cash donations; others asked if they could become members of the Association. The Chaplain has also given us the free use of this hall in the Children's Mass Center as the venue of our sessions; he supplies us with electricity from the generator whenever NEPA is not forthcoming. CIWA as an Institute has given us the free use of the dinning room. All these initiatives show the concerted interest and involvement of the entire family of God in our nascent Association. To God be the glory. May we continue to sustain this interest by making our research life-oriented so that they impact the live of all God's people.

### **The Theme of 2007 CATHAN Conference: “Religion and Violence”**

An important gift to our Association at Makurdi, aside from the great enthusiasm generated and sustained there, was the theme of that annual CATHAN conference: “Religion and Violence”. That context in which CABAN was conceived calls us, among other things, to address the issue of violence that surrounds the Bible: violence in the Bible itself (e.g., “May he take your little ones and dash them against a rock”; “The firstborn of the Egyptians he smote. . . . kings in their greatness he slew, for his great love is without end”, and so forth); and violence in the use of the Bible itself. Our people tend to find great comfort in the use of such violent texts in the Bible because they synchronize with what traditionally we would do to those we regard as enemies. The same applies to the violence in the texts themselves

generated and sustained by the election theology. In the light of *Dei Verbum* (no. 12), these violent texts would count among those aspects of the Bible which are culturally conditioned and therefore not universally normative.

We have an urgent mission to rescue our people from doing violence to themselves and to one another by taking such texts literally as God's word regardless of the teachings of Jesus, God's Gospel (Rom 1:1, 16), as put forth comprehensively in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), the Magna Charta of the Kingdom. We may mention in particular the violence which surrounds the issue of sex and gender in the Bible, and its oppressive effects on both men and women, preventing them from living, working together as persons created in God's own image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27; 5:1-2). The Irish Bishops Conference long ago proposed that those texts which call for the unquestioning subordination of the wife to "the husband in all things as to the Lord" (Eph 5:22-25) or which treat women as inferior beings by nature should be removed from the Lectionary since they give rise to domestic violence. Their proposal was published years ago in *The Tablet*. In addition we need to address the diversity of socio-cultural and religious violence, often born of ignorance, not only among the children of Israel, but among all God's children, the peoples of the Bible (Jews and Christians) and of the Book (Moslems).

Along with the violence in the texts and the individual's use of such texts is the overwhelming violence and oppression in preaching the Bible. A cursory acquaintance with biblical programmes on the TV, radio, CDs and other media, reveals the level of violence to which our people are daily subjected or willingly subject themselves through wrong understanding of the Bible. Take, for instance, the violence of women being forced to cover their heads whenever they pray to God not only in the Church, but also in their homes, all on the basis of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16. This violence can produce such sadly ridiculous situations as women putting newspapers on their heads before they can pray to God or even more tragically staying outside the Church during liturgical celebrations by will or by force because they have no head covering, not even a handkerchief however dirty. Worse still they may skip the celebrations entirely or be forced to do so by church wardens (with the priest looking on) because they have no head tie handy. We have great responsibility for our people and accountability to God's word interpreted through Christological hermeneutics in these matters. Violence in religion is not only practiced by fundamentalists and suicide bombers. The most insidious ones are

those practiced by orthodox Christians who are rooted in unevangelised cultures, not in Christ. How do we proclaim the gospel to them so that it truly liberates them from these and other culture rooted bondages?

The third type of violence is that of a literal interpretation of the Bible without taking into consideration the diverse socio-cultural, geo-political, historical, religious, theological and specific life contexts of the texts of their authors and intended audiences. A good example is the issue of tithes. Biblically tithes were originally paid by the people of Israel to the Levite clan who at the time of the settlement had no portion of land assigned to them among the twelve tribes of Israel. Consequently they had no personal means of sustenance, the land being the capital of the peoples in those days. Their portion was to look after the spiritual life of the people. As a result they were to secure their sustenance by receiving tithes from the people. As time went on this developed into tithing everything the people had. In his time, Jesus accused the Pharisees for tithing mint, dill and cumin while neglecting the weightier matters of law: justice, faith, love and compassion (Matt 23:23). Today some Catholic priests have revived the idea of tithes along with AMC (Annual Missionary Collection) plus a whole series of what some have tagged “non-canonical taxing of the people”, borrowed wholesale from the Pentecostal churches, all in the name of God’s word.

Examples could be multiplied on violence within the Bible and in the use of the Bible. Our responsibility as Christ’s people who have been equipped with the grace of encountering the texts in their ancient socio-historical, cultural and gospel contexts is to liberate our people by offering them an interpretation of the Bible that sets free. Jesus declares that he alone gives ultimate meaning to the Bible (John 5:39). He is the Son who remains in the house forever (John 8:34-36) and who alone sets free by making us his siblings (John 20:17), titled members of God house and family. Our biblical research should help to promote knowledge of him as “The Way, The Truth and The Life” (John 14:6); the Prince of Peace who gives a peace, shalom, total wellbeing which the world cannot give (John 14:27). We have been entrusted with a great mystery and ministry in our own time and contexts. May we not fail to honour that trust with joy and a deep sense of accountability. May we become true servants of the gospel and learn to give without charge even as we have received from God without charge (Matt 10:7-8).

## The Solemnity of the Ascension

The Solemnity of the Ascension as the first day of our inaugural conference fills us with joy. The Ascension from our perspective as disciples is essentially about commissioning all believers to go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news (Matt 28:20). The first African Synod chose the theme: “You will be my witnesses from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). But first we need to be strengthened with power from on high (Acts 1:4-5, 8). Today the Church begins the novena to the Holy Spirit in preparation for Pentecost. We join the Church and the first disciples in committing ourselves and the mission of our nascent Association to the unfailing direction and guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Truth alone can lead us to the complete truth; the Spirit enables us to bear witness to Christ and will serve as our Senior Advocate in Nigeria (SAN) and beyond when we run into difficult forensic situations (John 15:18-26). What greater endowment could we have asked for as our inheritance from birth as CABAN? Let us tease out a little some graces of this God-given context, the dimensions of our commissioning from birth to “Go out to the whole world, proclaim the good news”.

1. **Go out.** Though Jesus was God, he did not think equality with God something to be grasped at, or used as a halter around people’s necks. Instead, “He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave becoming as human beings are”. (Phil 2:6-8). His example makes us aware that we are called and commissioned to **be evangelizers** not **colonizers**. Evangelizers go out and build up the communities and peoples to whom they are sent (heal the sick, cure the lame, raise the dead, etc). Colonisers impose their views, cultural values and practices on those to whom they are sent. Central to evangelization is inculturation: self-emptying and selective assumption, a kenotic spirituality (Phil 2:1-11); its abiding tangible, summative form is the Eucharist, giving of one’s life so that others may live and have life in its fullness<sup>9</sup> John 10:10): “Take you all of this and eat it, this is my body given for you.” “Take and drink, this is the cup of the new covenant in my blood, which shall be shed for you and for all so that sins [derailment from God] may be forgiven [dropped, cancelled]. “Do this in memory of me”. Reenact in your life (not merely ritually), individually and collectively what I have done, what you see me the



master do (John 13:1-17). We take seriously this call to go out as evangelizers, not colonizers even in our study of the Scriptures. We serve as servants of the word, not as its masters.

**2. To the whole world (cross boundaries).** Jesus told the disciples to go from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria to the ends of the earth. It is said that “the end of the earth” in the ancient world referred to Africa. So if the Gospel has now reached Africa, Africa has the responsibility to share it with those who may have brought us Christianity, a divided Christianity at that, but not the Gospel. For this to happen, we humbly own up that we too need to cross quite a number of boundaries: attitudinal, psychological, spiritual, historical, ethnographical, cultural and geographical . . . in our relationships; in the way we think of and perceive one another, Nigeria and Africa; in who we believe to be “my people” or not my people, the son/daughter of the soil syndrome; we eschew the false trinity of me, myself and I. Each of us will identify in all honesty and humility and with Christological truth the boundaries we personally need to cross as we embrace this biblical fellowship. We will need to pay particular attention to the boundary of institutionalism: where we studied and who our revered teachers/professors were, what methods we used in those institutions, etc., so that we can together move into the ONE SCHOOL of the Holy Spirit who alone leads and can lead us into the complete truth (John 16:12-13), into the depths of the meaning of God’s word that is ever old yet ever now.

**3. Proclaim the GOOD NEWS.** We are sent to proclaim JESUS, GOD’s own GOOD NEWS (Rom 1:2, 16), not woes, to our people and all nations. We do this in new and creative ways (new wine, new skins), not only in the same old cherished historical critical method we all learnt so well. Their positive aspects notwithstanding, these method may have distorted and derailed rather than disclose the message of the Gospel; they may have served like the barren fig, full of leaves – producing plenty of publications (scholars speaking to scholars) – but with little or no nourishing fruit for Jesus, hungry in his people (Mark 11:12-14). “Only the Spirit gives life” [literally “causes to live”]; “the flesh [the letter], is of no avail” (John 6:63). Third World biblical scholars and theologians have long distinguished between Christianity (the gospel incarnated in western contextual and cultures frames) and the Gospel: Jesus of Nazareth whom Ignatius of Antioch declared to be the *canon*, the yardstick, for

everything that is written or not written in the Bible. Jesus himself is the Book of God for humanity; written not in letters but in his flesh, in an impeccable life of total, visible and invincible love: self-giving as Eucharist (Thanksgiving to God) unto Passion, Death, and Resurrection (“I have risen and I am still with you”, Introit of Easter Sunday before the post-Vatican II liturgical renewal). His is a love that is stronger than death (John 15: 13; Songs 8:6). Today more than ever, our world badly and urgently needs this Good News of love because, “God is love” (1 John 4:16); because love has become self-serving and/or serves as covert way of exploiting others especially the weak and the most vulnerable (like wolf in sheep clothing). The heart of Jesus as the Good News, and the sum total of his message is that “God is Love”, *Deus Caritas Est*, as Benedict XVI has recently reminded. God/Love is patient and kind (1 Corinthians 13). We will strive to receive and mediate this love to one another as members of CABAN, so as to witness not only in words but in deed.

**4. Be my witnesses from Jerusalem . . . to the ends of the earth.** Jesus instructed his disciples as a prelude to his ascension to be his “witnesses from Jerusalem to Judea and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). This text as said earlier was the key to the First African Synod. The “end of the earth” in the ancient world, as already noted, signified “Africa” though it also stood for the entire creation. We are called to be witnesses to Jesus in our own Nigerian and African contexts. This is important. Jesus asked his disciples to start from Jerusalem, where they were located, not to ignore it. As God’s primary witness, Jesus bore witness to God’s love within his own Jewish context by doing God’s will there in his entire life (John 4:34; 17:4) and challenging the anti-God practices in that culture and religion. Jesus loves us enough in turn to invite us to share in his ministry of witnessing to God’s love, after his own example (John 13:1-17), in our own contexts. One can only bear witness to what one has personally seen, experienced or lived. As members of CABAN, launched on the Solemnity of the Ascension, privileged and specially commissioned to be witnesses to Jesus in our own Nigerian and African contexts, we pledge ourselves to reap this grace of our heritage from birth by committing ourselves to make our study of the word impact and liberate our own lives as well as the lives of our people. Jesus bore witness to God not only in word and deed directed to others (healing the sick, raising the dead) but by his own entire life unto death and resurrection. “My food is to do the will of

my Father (John 4:34). “The world must know [be convinced] that I love the Father and do only what the Father has taught me to do. Rise, let us be on our way” (John 14:31). Because he did this with impeccable integrity (John 8:46), his life has impacted us and the entire humanity and creation, for good.

**5. Wait till you are strengthened with power from on high.** Jesus knew that we could not carry out this ministry of love after his own example by ourselves, so he asked his disciples and us today to wait till they/we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit, God’s power from on high. The first disciples did this in a praying, waiting capacity. As we move forward, we remain conscious of, pay attention to, and recognize our need of the Holy Spirit’s work in our lives, in our research and in our world. We not only pay attention, but we rejoice that God’s Spirit whom Jesus has given to us already works in us and through us and will be in us and with us for ever, even as Jesus himself is with us till the end of time (Matt 28:20).

## **The Liturgical Significance of the Month of May**

**1. May 1<sup>st</sup>, Feast of St Joseph the Worker.** Today, May 1<sup>st</sup>, is the feast of St Joseph the worker. St Joseph paid attention to and responded with heroic faith to what God was doing in his life and the life of Mary his betrothed. Because he did this, he became the genealogical link by which Jesus though biologically not his child was truly the son of David. This is the point of the Matthean genealogy of Jesus. May we ask St Joseph to pray for us to also have the same faith which enabled him to transcend cultural laws and mornings and enter fully into the new deed which God was doing in the incarnation. With his intercession, we will serve the message of the Word made flesh with the same faith and commitment as he did.

**2. May, Month of Mary: “The Handmaid of the Lord”.** Last but not least, we recognize and are grateful to God that our association is launched on May 1<sup>st</sup>, a month dedicated to Mary, the Mother of Jesus and our Blessed Mother. This connection needs little explanation. Mary was the first to receive, conceive the Word Incarnate in her womb and give birth to him in our human flesh. She was God’s chosen instrument, first “priest” of the New Testament to effect the foundational transubstantiation of the Word: “I am the Handmaid of

the Lord, let what you have said happen to me". So the Word became flesh in her flesh. She raises our awareness to the necessity to receive Christ in our own lives, in our own human reality if our conception of the word and our resulting research are to bear fruit and give life to the world. Because Mary was the mother of Jesus, she could claim a mother's authority to urge him to begin his salvific mission in earnest and reveal to his disciples who he really was, though she knew what this would cost him: "They have no wine". "Do whatever he tells you". Through this the primary (alpha) of his signs (John 2:1-11), Jesus revealed his divine glory, his inner reality, to his disciples and they believed in him. As a result their believing, they disciples formed a new family with Jesus and his mother (John 2:12) and together they embarked on the saving mission which Jesus came to do and complete (John 4:34, 17:4). This event, incidentally is the second of the Mysteries of Light of the Most Holy Rosary.

The grace/heritage of birth from Mary in this month of May is that we commit ourselves to do whatever Jesus tells us; in that way we will see his glory in our research and reflections; this glory will strengthen our faith in him. As Association we will see ourselves as a family of brothers and sisters united with Jesus our brother and Mary our mother. This grace also invites us to surrender our individual and corporate selves to God to use as God wills so that the word may take flesh in our context today in our lives and the lives of our people. We have firm faith and hope that with Mary as our mother and patron, the best wine is yet to come in our biblical research.

**3. May 3<sup>rd</sup>: Feasts of SS Philip and James.** This our inaugural meeting will end with departures on the feast of SS Philip and James, apostles and martyrs [witnesses unto death]. What a coincidence! Philip and James, it would seem, had a special mission to interact with Jesus concerning the needs the people. We see especially Philip in John's gospel being challenged by Jesus to become aware of the need to give the people something to eat (John 6:6-7); with the disciples, we are to take note of the people's need for physical food as an integral component of proclaiming the word. We may not have much even to start an association, but we are full of confidence that Jesus who constitutes us today knows how to make us survive and feed the people. Philip and James, martyrs, model for us the cost, the sacrifices we will need to make for our ministry of the word to be fruitful and for our association to stand and survive. They invite us to ensure that the ministry of the word does not become self-

serving, a most lucrative venture as appears to be the case with most TV and bus evangelists. They model for us what we said earlier about going out and transcending boundaries in the service of the gospel. It is interesting that in this feast James is closely associated with Philip, not with his sibling John. Their example calls us to be ready and willing to work to establish bonds of friendship with one another beyond our ethnic circles so as to form a true family of God and work together as members of this one family irrespective of tribe, class and sex (Gal 3:28) and degrees bagged.

### **“Year of the Word”: A Reminder of God’s Eternal Year of the Word**

Finally we are grateful to God that by divine providence our Association has come to birth in this year 2008, the year Pope Benedict XVI declared the “Year of the Word”. This declaration is itself a reminder that God in Christ declared an eternal Year of the Word once and for all when God-Word became flesh to dwell eternally among us (Heb 1:1-2; John 1:14). Jesus, God’s word in our human flesh, is the *canon* for understanding the Scripture, as Ignatius of Antioch once said. Before Ignatius, the Johannine Jesus himself declared that all Scripture was about him (John 5:39; Luke 24:26-27). Paul says he is the Amen to all God’s promises. As we forge ahead in this eternal year of the word, we bear constantly in mind that in Jesus we have the unique key for conducting a true, faithful and faith-based biblical research, one that will contribute to making God’s word achieve the purposes for which it was sent (Isa 55:10-11); and which Christ came to administer to the world in his own person by his life, teaching, Eucharist, passion death and resurrection.

This context of the Year of the Word gives us hope that as long as this “Eternal Year of the Word” lasts (these last times, the long awaited eschaton), our Association will continue to thrive, wax strong and serve as God’s delightful instrument for spreading the good news not only in Nigeria but “to the ends of the earth”, in Africa and beyond. In this connection we must not lose sight of the special grace of the venue of this our inaugural conference, the Catholic Institute of West Africa as a theological institution. The Bishops of AECWA established the institution on December 8, Feast of the Immaculate Conception of our Lady, to do theology within the socio-cultural context of West Africa for a deeper rooting of the faith in the lives of the people in the

sub-region. This venue serves an added grace and a reminder that our research should address issues which are not confined to Nigeria or even to the AECAWA region, but which serve the mission of the universal church to proclaim the good news to all and sundry. The soils and concerns of our people will be unique keys to open new insights into the word of God. It is our special mission to make this word of God's mighty deeds heard addressing our own living contexts as it did that of the biblical authors and their audiences.

### **Our Prayer for CABAN**

I end this reflection on the birth heritage of our Association with a prayer: May we receive these abundant graces with joy. May we commit ourselves to be students and servants of the word, working collaboratively with each other and with God's Spirit in and among us. May no difficulties we encounter in the process of serving the word hinder us from carrying out our great mission. With and like our brother Jesus, may we always strive to give glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory be to God in each of us, in CABAN, in the Church and in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen. Long live the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria officially inaugurated today at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, the Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, Feast of St Joseph the Worker, a month dedicated to Mary Mother of Jesus and our Mother and Patron.

## **Participants at the Inaugural Convention and Foundation Members**

### **1. Member Participants at the Inaugural Convention 2008**

**Note.** Many of CIWA academinc community and chaplaincy participated at the Convention. Those here listed are potential members of CABAN. Name of State given in parenthesis (for CIWA Students only) indicates State of origin, birth or mission.

1. Sr. Prof. Teresa Okure, SHCJ, Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) Port Harcourt Rivers State, Coordinating President (2007-2008)
2. Fr. Dr Luke Ijezie, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State, Coordinating Secretary (2007-2008)
3. Fr. Dr Camillus Umoh CIWA, PH, Coordinating Treasurer (2007-2008), now Catholic Bishop of Ikot Ekpene, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State
4. Fr. Prof. Vincent Nyoyoko, Uiversity of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt, Rivers State
5. Fr. Dr Emmanuel Nwaoru, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Rivers State
6. Fr. Dr Clement Dioka, OP, Dominican Institute, Ibadan, Oyo State
7. Fr. Dr Clement Osunwokeh, Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Ebonyi State

8. Sr. Dr Mary Jerome Obiorah, IHM Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi Seminary, Onitsha, Anambra State
9. Fr. Dr Cosmas Uzowulu, OFMCap, Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, Enugu, Enugu State
10. Fr. Dr Ernest Ezeogu, CSSP, Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, Enugu, Enugu State
11. Fr. Dr Anthony Iffen Umoren, MSP, Catholic Institute of West Africa Port Harcourt Rivers State
12. Sr. Dr Sylvia Nwachukwu, DDL, Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, Enugu, Enugu State
13. Fr. Dr John Iwe, Seat of Wisdom Seminary (SWS), Owerri, Imo State
14. Fr. Linus Umaru, CIWA, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Bauchi State)
15. Sr. Dr Agnes Acha, DMMM, Gwagwalada, Federal Capital Territory (FCT) Abuja, Nigeria
16. Fr. Dr Joseph Haruna Mamman, Amadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State
17. Fr. Dr Stephen Egwim, SWS, Ariam, Oweri, Imo State
18. Fr. Francis Nni, CIWA, PH (Kaduna State)
19. Fr. Benignus Oguejiofor, CIWA Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Anambra State)
20. Fr. Joel Okechukwu, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Anambra State)



21. Fr. Anthony Ezeogamba, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Anambra State)
22. Fr. Patrick Osuide, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Edo State)
23. Sr. Benedict Isara, EHJ, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Delta State)
24. Fr. Joseph Opuowei, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (Bayelsa State)
25. Fr. John Abimbola Jimoh, Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt Rivers State (FCT, Abuja)
26. Fr. Vincent Diyong, CIWA, PH (Plateau State)
27. Fr. Bonaventure Okoye, Achina, Awka Diocese,  
Anambra State

### 3. Foundation Members at the Meeting in Makurdi, 2007

Listed here in the order in which the list was signed,  
(with the exception of nos. 1-4 for obvious reasons)

1. His Grace, Most Rev. Dr. John O. Onaiyekan
2. Rev. Sr. Prof (Dr) Teresa Okure, SHCJ (Coordinating President)
3. Rev. Fr Dr. Luke Ijezie (Coordinating Secretary)
4. Rev. Fr. Dr. Camillus Umoh (now Bishop, Coordinating Treasurer)
5. Rev. Fr. Dr. Bernard Ukwuegbu
6. Rev. Fr. Dr. Cletus Gotan
7. Rev. Fr. Dr. Joseph Mamman
8. Rev Sr. Dr. Mary-Silvia Nwachukwu, DDL
9. Rev. Fr. Dr. Ignatius Obinwa
10. Rev. Fr. Dr. Ernest M. Ezeogu (*RIP 2011*)
11. Rev Fr. Dr. Victor Owukeme, MSP
12. Rev. Sr. Dr. Mary Jerome Obiorah, IHM
13. Rev. Fr Oliver Ortese
14. Rev. Fr. Dr. Clement Osunwokeh
15. Rev. Fr. Francis Nii, later Dr (*RIP 2018*)
16. Rev. Fr. Dr. Callistus Mbanusi, later Dr (*RIP 2011*)
17. Rev. Fr. Dr. Anthony Dewale Ojo

## Appendix I

### ***Verbum Domini* The Word of the Lord Presenting the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI on the 2008 Synod**

Teresa Okure, SHCJ

CABAN drew inspiration for the theme of its inaugural convention from the Synod on the Word of God. The process of the synod, a consultative meeting of the bishops of the Catholic Church, started in 2006 and reached its climax in the issuance of the Post-synodal Exhortation of Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord) in 2010. We think it fit to enrich our publication by introducing this Apostolic Exhortation to our readers. This presentation aims to encourage the reader to make a personal encounter with this rich document (which has received great praise from the public), so as to appreciate its richness and use it to deepen (for personal and communal renewal) whatever insights are gained from this publication.<sup>40</sup> The Pope himself encourages “a rediscovery of God’s word in the life of the Church as a wellspring of constant renewal” with a “hope that the word will be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity” (VD, 1). He further encourages research on diverse aspects of the word of God as we will see later.

We give a brief background of the synod process and then highlight the structure of VD, its special features and the major topics treated. In doing this we pay attention to how these issues in VD relate to the theme of our convention and to our mission as life-long students of the word of God; scholars committed to serving the ministry of the word within the Church in our Nigerian and African contexts and in the universal Church.

#### **1. Background of the Synod on the Word of God**

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<sup>40</sup>Google search on “*Verbum Domini* of Benedict XVI” reveals a plethora of websites apart from the Vatican website where diverse readers interact richly with the document.

Pope Benedict XVI first mentioned the idea of the synod on the word of God in October 2006; in April 2007 he officially convoked this synod with the theme, “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church”. In the preliminary “Guidelines” for the *Lineamenta* the Pope gave the purpose, aim and objective of the Synod. The purpose, “primarily pastoral”, was “to spread and strengthen our encounters with God’s Word”. Its objective was “to spark an appreciation and deep love of Sacred Scripture so that ‘the faithful might have easy access’ [DV, 26] to it; to renew listening to the Word of God, in the liturgy and catechesis, specifically through *lectio divina*, duly adapted to each circumstance; and to offer a word of consolation and hope to the poor of the world”. Accordingly, the Synod would aim at fostering “a proper approach to biblical hermeneutics and to correctly direct the process of evangelisation and inculturation”. Further it would “encourage ecumenical dialogue” and “promote an encounter and dialogue of not only Christians and Jews but also those engaged in inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue”.<sup>41</sup>

The pastoral and life oriented emphases in these Guidelines were carried into the entire synod process as the contents of *VD* show. From 5 to 26 October 2008, the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops discussed at the Vatican the issues surfaced in the Guidelines; by now they had developed from the *Lineamenta* to the *Instrumentum Laboris*. The Post-synodal Exhortation is the Pope’s official communication “to the whole People of God [of] the rich fruits which emerged from the synodal sessions and the recommendations which resulted from our common endeavour”.<sup>42</sup> His introduction to *VD* gives a detailed account of the synod process which led to the issuance of *VD*.

To better appreciate the Pope’s interest in Scripture, we note that he is said to be the first Pope with expertise in biblical theology “ever to occupy the chair of St Peter” (excluding, of course, St Peter himself) and that his pontificate “to a degree not seen perhaps since the medieval papacy of Gregory the Great has borne the stamp of a distinctive biblical theology”.<sup>43</sup> Further

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<sup>41</sup> For the draft “Guidelines”, see, [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/documents/rc\\_synod\\_doc-20070427\\_lineamenta-xii-assembly\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/documents/rc_synod_doc-20070427_lineamenta-xii-assembly_en.html); cited in Olson, “A Symphony of the Word”.

<sup>42</sup> Benedict XVI, “Introduction” to *VD*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Carl E. Olson, “‘A Symphony of the Word’. A Short Guide to Pope Benedict XVI’s Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*” (Ignatius Insight, December 21, 2010);

evidence of this stamp was his declaration of the Year of St Paul which ran parallel with the Year of the Word in 2008. Throughout that Year the Pope made constant references to St Paul in his homilies, addresses and catechesis as he does in *VD* itself.<sup>44</sup> His first book as Pope was the popular and highly acclaimed *Jesus of Nazareth*.<sup>45</sup> A Vatican report states that in *Verbum Domini*, “Benedict XVI writes about the topic he’s most passionate about: Holy Scripture”.<sup>46</sup> This passion is very evident in the exhortation. The Pope’s singular interest in Scripture is largely the fruit of his many years as Prefect of the Pontifical Council for Doctrine and Faith during the long papacy of John Paul II.

## 2. Structure of *Verbum Domini*

*Verbum Domini* consists of three major parts, each with three subdivisions: i) *Verbum Dei*, the Word of God (6-49)<sup>47</sup>; ii) *Verbum in Ecclesia*, the Word in the Church (50-89); and iii) *Verbum in Mundo*, the Word in the World (90-120). It has a short introduction (1-5) and a conclusion (121-124). Part I, “*Verbum Dei*” is subdivided into: “The God who speaks” (6-21); “Our response to the God who speaks” (22-28); and “the interpretation of sacred Scripture in the Church” (29-49). Part II, *Verbum in Ecclesia* has “the word of God in the Church” (50-51); “the liturgy, privileged setting for the Word of God” (52-71); and “the Word of God in the life of the Church” (72-89). Part III, *Verbum in Mundo* is devoted to “the Church’s mission to proclaim the Word of God” (90-

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[http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2010/colson\\_verbumdomini\\_dec2010.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2010/colson_verbumdomini_dec2010.asp). (Assessed 20 August 2012). Olson cites as source for his views, Dr. Scott Hahn’s “Opening Chapter on *Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI* (Brazos, 2009)”.

<sup>44</sup> References to St Paul occur from beginning to end of the document; see nos. 4, 9, 12, 13, 38, 40, 43, 46, 77, 79, 87, 91, 103, 122,

<sup>45</sup>Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*; this was followed by volume two: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*.<sup>45</sup> A third volume on Jesus’ birth and infancy is said to be in the offing.

<sup>46</sup> Rome Reports TV News Agency, “Top 10 Vatican news stories 2010. Date: 2010-12-27 12:26:51”. <http://www.romereports.com> (accessed 20 July 2012).

<sup>47</sup> The number or numbers in parenthesis in the body of the work refer to the paragraphs in *Verbum Domini*.

98); “the Word of God and commitment in the world” (99-108); and “the Word of God and culture” (117-120).

Consciously or unconsciously the double tripartite structure underlines the work (three major parts, each with three subdivisions) reflects the trinitarian grounding of the entire exhortation. Scripture is seen as the word, activity, self-revelation and self-communication of our trinitarian God. God gives us this self-revelation through creation, in the history of salvation and climactically in the Incarnation and the entire Christ event. The exhortation recalls that the Father does nothing without the Son and the Holy Spirit whom Irenaeus considered as “the two hands of God” (VD, 15). We now highlight some key elements in each major part of the document.

## Introduction (1-5)

*Verbum Domini* is addressed to all Christ’s faithful (bishops, priests, consecrated persons and the laity) so that “our joy may be complete” (cf. 1 *Jn* 1:4) (2). The word “joy” opens and closes the exhortation. In the introduction (2) it is the joy of proclaiming and communicating the good news; in the conclusion (123) it is “the joy born of the awareness that the Lord Jesus alone has words of everlasting life (cf. *Jn* 6:68)”; that this joy has “its roots in the very heart of the trinitarian life” and “is communicated to us in the Son”<sup>48</sup>; the “joy” of Mary Mother of the Word also reflects it (124). Fundamentally it is the joy of sharing in the very life of the Trinity which is God’s gift to us.

VD highlights the close link between the Synod on the Word of God and the previous Ordinary Synod on the Eucharist: In this current synod “we were conscious of dealing in a certain sense with the very *heart* of the Christian life, **in continuity with** the previous synodal assembly on *The Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church’s Life and Mission*”; as the Church is fed and nourished by the Eucharist, so is it born from and draws life from God’s word (3). The ecclesial character of the synod is reflected throughout in the “we” language juxtaposed with the “I” language. It is also evident in the account taken of the diverse inputs for and from the synod.<sup>49</sup> The universal import of

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<sup>48</sup> VD, nos. 1 and 123, respectively

<sup>49</sup> These are the *Lineamenta*, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the *Relationes ante* and *post disceptationem*, the texts of the interventions, both those delivered on the

the Synod is heightened by the awareness that the Church is living “a new Pentecost” (4): it “speaks in many tongues”, embraces many nations and cultures and welcomes diverse ways of worshipping and listening to God.

Because the synod is essentially consultative, the Pope registers his personal stamp by making John’s Prologue his mantra for the exhortation. Because this Prologue (John 1:1-18) reveals and “offers a synthesis of the entire Christian faith” (5), it serves as a fitting basis for underscoring throughout the exhortation the need for each person to do what the Evangelist John did: have a personal encounter with Jesus (“lean on the breast of Jesus”; John 13:25)” in a manner that transforms our personal and ecclesial lives. Each of the three main parts of *VD* is introduced with quotations from the Prologue,<sup>50</sup> a further indication of “the intimate relationship between Sacred Scripture, the written word of God, and Jesus Christ, the Word of God”.<sup>51</sup>

### **Part I: The Word of God (6-49)**

The first major part of *VD*, by far the largest, gives as it were, the theological foundations or principles for the rest of the document. The central insight is that God, who is love, is in dialogue with us, starting from creation through the history of Israel to the incarnation, passion death and resurrection of Christ: “the novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us”. “At the heart of the divine life there is communion, there is absolute gift. ‘God is love’ (*1 Jn* 4:16)” (6). “Born of the Virgin Mary”, the Word of God became “consubstantial with us”; speaks to us and requires our response. Ours therefore “is not a religion of the book, but a religion of the living and active word of God” (7). God’s word, though present in every creature in virtue of the fact of creation, is uniquely present in each man and woman, created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26-27) (8-9). This truth calls each and all to openness and heart-filled receptivity of this divine gift.

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Synod floor and those presented in written form, and the reports of the smaller groups, the Final Message to the People of God and, above all, a number of proposals which the Fathers considered significant” (no. 1).

<sup>50</sup> Part I: John 1:1, 14; Part II, John 1:12, p. 65; and Part II, John 1:18.

<sup>51</sup> Olson, “A Symphony of the Word” (see note 3 above)

In response to the God who speaks to us, we are called to become in turn living dynamic and active expressions of God's word. This requires faith such as Mary had, through the working of the Holy Spirit. Mary is "the Mother of God's Word, the Mother of Faith" from the Annunciation to Pentecost; she is "the synthesis of word and faith" (124). As one whose very soul and words were aligned to God's, she images "the Church in attentive hearing of the word, which took flesh in her". "Mary also symbolizes openness to God and to others; an active listening which interiorises and assimilates, one in which the word becomes a way of life" (27). Her "Magnificat – a portrait so to speak of her soul" – celebrates her full awareness of God's action in her and her welcoming of that action in joy and complete freedom with the whole of her being (28).

Our response like hers requires developing a living relationship with God's word, paying attention to the Church, the authoritative interpreter of God's word, cultivating a hermeneutics of faith as opposed to that of secularism and philosophy, and imitating the saints whose lives were sound hermeneutics of God's word. They offer us example of "effective hermeneutic" of Scripture (48). Other issues addressed in this section – Christology, the role of biblical studies and interpretation, the unity of Scripture, false interpretations of Scripture (fundamentalism, literalism, spiritualizing the Scripture away from its life contexts), the need for dialogue between pastors, theologians and exegetes and Scripture and ecumenism – are all intended to help us develop a hermeneutic of a life of faith, a reading of Scripture that is grounded in life and aims at transforming life at all levels and for every human being.

## **Part II: Verbum in Ecclesia, The Word of God and the Church (50-89)**

Part II focuses on the Church as the recipient of God's word (50); and on "the relationship between Christ, the Word of the Father, and the Church" (51). The theological principles enunciated in part one are here applied to the life and worship of the Church. The relationship between Christ and the Church is "a living relationship which each member of the faithful is personally called to enter into" (51). Other issues treated are gathered under the subheading, "the liturgy, privileged setting for the word of God" (52-71), including "the relationship between the Word of God and the Eucharist". The worship or



faith-life of the Church centers in the liturgy, with the Eucharist as the source and summit of all Christian life and worship. Aspects of the liturgy addressed include the lectionary, the ministry of readers, the importance of homilies, the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing of the sick, the liturgy of the hours, the book of blessings, silence and liturgical music. It will be recalled that the first document of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council was *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the Decree on Sacred Liturgy, because of the importance of the liturgy in the life of the Church. Properly understood and conducted, the liturgy becomes a most effective setting for encountering, celebrating, assimilating and drawing strength for living the word of God daily and in all activities.

The subsection on “the word of God in the life of the Church” (72-89) includes the need to prepare the hearts of the faithful to encounter the word of God (72). This can be done through catechesis, bible-inspired pastoral activity, biblical formation of Christians, rooting in Scripture the vocations to the priesthood, the consecrated life, the diaconate (the permanent one included), marriage and family life and the role of the Christ’s lay faithful. In short, the import of the word of God for the different functions and states of life in the Church are highlighted, with repeated encouragement and emphasis on *lectio divina* (86). Also encouraged are Marian prayers, especially the Rosary, Angelus and the litany and other expressions of the Marian piety of the Byzantine tradition (88); not left out are pilgrimages to the Holy Land which the synod viewed as “the Fifth Gospel”, because here “the Word of God became flesh in the womb of Mary of Nazareth” (89).

### **Part III: "The Church's Mission: To Proclaim The Word of God to the World" (90-120)**

The third part of *VD* focuses on the Church's mission and commitment to proclaim God's word in and to the world. The Pope notes that the synod “forcefully reaffirmed the need within the Church for a revival of the missionary consciousness present in the People of God from the beginning” (92). What the Church proclaims is the “*Logos of Hope*” (91).<sup>52</sup> The word of God is the source of the Church's mission (92). This mission is first and foremost “to let the Holy Spirit assimilate us to Christ himself, and thus to

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<sup>52</sup> This is a reference to 1 Pet 3:15; also referring to his encyclical, *Spe Salvi*.

share in his mission” (that is, to be sent as God sent Jesus, John 20:21) (93). Aspects of this mission treated from the scriptural standpoint include the responsibility of all the baptized to proclaim God’s word; the abiding nature of *missio ad gentes* (the Church’s missionary outreach to unbelievers); the new evangelisation; Christian witness; service and commitment to justice, reconciliation and peace between peoples; practical charity; care for migrants, the suffering and the poor, and the need to protect creation. Equally important is the need to engage the youth in the Church’s mission, to reckon with the reality and value of culture (aware that the Bible itself is “The Great Code of Culture”; 110); the need for education, social communication, inculturation, ecumenical translations of the Bible; the importance of interreligious dialogue, and religious freedom, and of art in biblical interpretation. Throughout *VD* follows closely and builds on *DV* of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent church documents, especially *Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI and *Redemptoris Missio* of John Paul II.

Of particular interest for evangelisation is the emphasis on the value of **culture** in the life of “every man and woman”. Since “the phenomenon of culture is, . . . an essential datum of human experience” the indispensability of addressing it in the work of evangelisation is also an essential datum: “Every authentic culture if it is truly to be at the service of humanity, has to be open to transcendence and, in the end to God” (109). The gospel gives life to culture by promoting inter-cultural relationships and cultural transcendence (116). This awareness makes the task of inculturation imperative, what “Pope Paul VI called *the evangelisation of cultures*”,<sup>53</sup> for “the authentic paradigm of inculturation is the incarnation itself of the Word ‘when a culture, transformed and regenerated by the Gospel, brings forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought’”.<sup>54</sup> The necessity to address culture in proclaiming the gospel cannot be overemphasised, especially since the Bible itself, “the Great Code of Culture”, is a record of God’s word expressed in human language and thought in diverse cultures and successive ages. To germinate and bear fruit, the seed, God’s word, inevitably has to fall on cultural soils operative human hearts and lives.

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<sup>53</sup> *VD*, 114; citing Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, AAS 68 (1976), 18-19.

<sup>54</sup> *VD*, 115; citing John Paul II, *Address to the Bishops of Kenya* (7 May 1980), 6: AAS 72 (1980) 497.

## The Conclusion (121-123)

The conclusion recalls the fact that the exhortation is the Pope's effort "to gather up and examine more fully the rich fruits" of the Synod of Bishops on the word of God in the life and mission of the Church. The Pope once more encourages "all the People of God . . . to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures". Not to forget that "all authentic and living Christian spirituality is based on *the word of God proclaimed, accepted, celebrated and meditated upon in the church*" (121).<sup>55</sup> To this end the Pope emphasises the necessity of *a new evangelisation and a new hearing*"; where we would "rediscover the centrality of the divine word in Christian life" (122).<sup>56</sup> This rediscovery "will create a *communion*' and bring about complete and lasting joy because it originates "in the very heart of the trinitarian life" (123). All are encouraged to imitate Mary who heard God's word, believed it and thus "received God's word into her womb in order to give him to the world". *VD* concludes with a prayer that "everyday of our lives" may "be shaped by a renewed encounter with Christ, the Word made flesh" (124).

### 3. Special Features and Themes of *Verbum Domini*

The above overview of *VD* does not and was never intended do full justice to the document. To savour its richness, one needs to have a "personal encounter" with it, to use the Pope's favorite phrase in the work. For a deeper understanding and appropriation of the exhortation we now highlight select features of this document, pointing out how they relate to our Nigerian and African contexts.

#### A Word of Encouragement

*Verbum Domini* is essentially an exhortation. The English word "exhortation" is the translation of the Greek *exortatio*. In classical rhetoric and in Scripture, especially in NT letters, the hortatory section is generally the goal to which the

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<sup>55</sup> Italics are original as in all citations, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>56</sup> To concretise this need for a new evangelisation, the Pope has announced a Synod on it for 2012 and has created a Pontifical Council for it alongside the Congregation for the Evangelisation of Peoples.

works tend. *VD* displays a marked consciousness of its nature as an exhortation. The phrase “I encourage” with its equivalents (“I urge”; “I ask”; “I recommend”; “it is my hope that”) occurs many times. This encouragement is directed to all the addressees: bishops, pastors, consecrated persons, the faithful; biblical scholars and theologians. The Pope includes himself when he says, “let us encourage one another to do good and to commit ourselves to justice, reconciliation and peace” (99). By far the greatest encouragement seasoned with gratitude goes to biblical scholars and theologians (including members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission) and at their own level pastors and men and women committed to proclaiming the gospel. This hortatory character reflects the spirit of the Synod itself. *VD* cites instances where the Synod encouraged and thanked biblical scholars, theologians, the PBI, pastors and the faithful for their different contributions based on their expertise, and urged them to keep going and mine deeper into the rich treasures of the word of God.

The exhortation surfaces a variety of needs requiring attention: the production of a Directory on the homily similar to that of the Eucharistic Compendium (60); ecumenical translations of the Bible (47); preparation of priests and lay persons to instruct God’s people on the “genuine approach to Scripture” (as opposed to approaches promoted by “the proliferation of sects”); proper celebration of the liturgy of the hours and Marian prayers (88); adequate catechism and catecheses (74); “frequent personal reading and study of sacred Scripture, in imitation of Mary” (recommended to pastors and all the Pope’s brother bishops 66, 124); fostering the people’s full participation in the liturgy; celebration of the word of God in communities (65); outreach to the poor, the sick and the physically challenged (71, 107), expertise commitment on the part of the media (113); formation of artists (113); holding interfaith meetings with Christians and Muslims (118); and encouraging the promotion of right ethical values by each religion (102).

## **Inclusiveness and Interconnectedness**

Inclusiveness and interconnectedness characterise the exhortation in many ways: in the recognition and of the work done during the Synod and of all other sources used in the exhortation. The inclusiveness extends to patristic authors (especially Augustine mentioned about 12 times), works of the Second Vatican Council, past popes, and Pope Benedict's own previous works, including those he wrote as Prefect of the CDF (e.g., *Dominus Iesus*). In particular *VD* makes about 47 references to *DV*, which the Pope regards as "a milestone in the Church's history" (3). Throughout the Pope remains faithful to his introductory word that he would use all the itemised documents of the synod process to produce his reflection in the exhortation. Inclusiveness extends to the sections where all categories of church members and church personnel are addressed and in the outreach to other religions: Jewish, Muslim, oriental and traditional (117-119).

While citing these previous works, the Pope makes clear what his own interjections are, as he said in the introduction. First he uses John's Prologue as his mantra. Then he pinpoints his personal contributions throughout by such phrases as "I would suggest", "I urge" and, when he joins his voice to those of the Synod, previous Popes and patristic authors, "I would like to echo" (e.g., "the words of the Synod"). These cited sources invite biblical scholars to further study the importance of the word of God in the life and mission of the church.

In this feature, the Pope gives a good example of accountability. He is conscious that this exhortation has an ecclesial as well as a personal character that derives from his office. Scholars normally acknowledge the contributions of others in their work. It will be desirable that church personnel recognize, acknowledge and celebrate the works of their predecessors, while making their own contributions, rather than feel threatened by what others did, since one and the same Spirit operates in all and through all.

## **Excitement about the Newness of the Word of God**

In *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (At the Dawn of the Third Millennium) John Paul II said that the word of God has not lost its luster after two thousand years of existence and called for a return to this word as the divine energy which will

energise the live and mission of the Church in this new millennium. *Verbum Domini* displays a noticeable excitement about the newness of discovering God's word. The term "new" and related words such as "novelty", "newness", "renew" and "anew" permeate the exhortation. The call for "a new evangelisation" based on "a new hearing" of the word (96, 122) is rooted in and encapsulates this motif of newness. A major purpose in calling the Synod on the word was to help the Church "confront the new challenges which the present sets before Christian believers" (3); "to stress anew something we risk taking for granted in every day life: *the fact that God speaks and responds to our questions*" (4) and "to renew the Church's faith in the word of God" (27). The OT had already foretold "God's new ways" (12). Jesus, the new Adam inaugurates the new creation through the new and definitive covenant which rules out the possibility of "a new public revelation" (14). Through Jesus' passion, death and resurrection, God offers us "the merciful possibility of starting a new way of life in Christ" (26).

On his part, Benedict XVI believes that "renewed attention to the Fathers of the Church and their exegetical approach" can lead to "the recovery of an adequate scriptural hermeneutic" (33). The paschal mystery sheds new light on the Old Testament when re-read "in the light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit" (37). All new forms of Marcionism which set opposition between the OT and NT are to be rejected and the unity of Scripture sustained (39-40). A proper understanding of the Old Testament can bring out "the newness of Christological interpretation" (41).

As members of "a community that hears and proclaims the word of God . . . [and] discovers ever anew the direction for her journey;" every Christian must understand and commit himself or herself to this new approach since "only those who first place themselves in an attitude of listening to the word can go on to become its heralds" (51). Like the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), all must begin to "look at the Scriptures in a new way in the company of this traveler" (Luke: 24:27); like these two disciples we must learn to turn our apparent failures into a "new beginning" and "experience in a new way" our previous experiences with Christ (55). Benedict XVI rejoins John Paul II who in *Novo Millennio Ineunte* asks all to listen to Christ's instructions and launch into the deep as Peter and his companions did (Luke 5:1-11), in order to make the great catch of the century. With the Synod Fathers, the Pope expresses his "heartfelt hope for the flowering of 'a new

season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus”.<sup>57</sup>

This newness must urgently be brought to bear in the proclamation of the gospel: “We need, then, to discover ever anew the urgency and the beauty of the proclamation of the word for the coming of the Kingdom of God which Christ himself preached”. By preaching a word that disrupts, we help towards the emergence of “a new humanity” (93). *Missio ad gentes* even “in the most difficult situations” demands a readiness “to adapt to new situations and for setting out courageously and boldly along fresh paths in meeting new challenges for the effective proclamation of God’s word” (94). The “new communities” are “a great force for evangelization in our times and an incentive to the development of “new ways of proclaiming the Gospel”.<sup>58</sup> With *EN* of Paul VI, *VD* calls for “a new missionary season for the entire people of God” so that all “may discover anew the attraction of Christ” (96). The “complexity of today’s situation” and the “immense horizons of the Church’s mission” call for “new ways of effectively communicating the word of God” (97). The situation of migrants also offers new possibilities of proclaiming the word of God in new ways (105).

Engagement with the world, as God’s word demands, requires that we look with “new eyes at the entire created cosmos” (108). The fact that the Gospel is spreading and taking root in different cultures, new western cultures included, calls for a renewed encounter between the Bible and cultures (109). The modern means of communication, the media and the Internet can serve in “discovering new methods of transmitting the Gospel message” even to believers. And “operating within communities with a worldwide network enables us to discover and give new meaning to the word of Christ” (113). By entering into communion with others across cultures we experience a new exodus (116). “In this way the Church will always be renewed and rejuvenated, thanks to the word of the Lord which remains for ever (cf. *1 Pet* 1:25; *Is* 40:8). (124). Newness defines the work of the Spirit who delights to make all things new and whom we daily invoke to “renew the face of the earth”.

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<sup>57</sup> *VD* 72; citing Proposition 9.

<sup>58</sup> *VD* 94; Proposition 38;

The sense of newness which permeates the exhortation finds a home in Nigeria and Africa. Since the Second Vatican Council and especially in the wake of Pentecostalism, the wave of excitement over the word of God has swept through the country and continent. It is felt by all and sundry (including politicians, artists and even Muslims) in all walks of life. The question is whether this excitement translates into bearing the desired fruit: the transformation of lives, personal, communal, ecclesial and national, as Jesus intends his gospel to do. Have we become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17); people driven by passion, love and zeal to proclaim Jesus, God's Gospel, to the ends of the earth, across all boundaries as Paul did (2 Cor 5:14-6:10)?

### **The Centrality of the Bible in the Life of the Church**

During the sixteenth century Reformation, the Protestants took to the Bible (*Scriptura sola*); in reaction the Catholic Church took to Dogma. As a result the Catholic Church was not in the forefront of the newly invented methods of biblical studies. The order of ecclesiastical discipline was Dogma, followed by Scripture and other disciplines. Scripture studies served mainly to furnish proof texts to buttress the dogmatic pronouncements of the Church. In the pontificate of Leo XIII, however, the Church started a slow journey back to the embrace of Scripture: "Beginning with the pontificate of Leo XII, we can say that there has been a crescendo of interventions aimed at an increased awareness of the importance of the word of God and the study of the Bible in the life of the Church" (3).<sup>59</sup> DV of the Second Vatican Council occupies a pride of place in this task and offers a major impetus for the slow return; the Pope's words on this deserve citing in full.

Everyone is aware of the great impulse which the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum* gave to the revival of interest in the word of God in the life of the Church, to theological reflection on divine revelation and to the study of sacred Scripture. In the

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<sup>59</sup> This slow journey of the Church's "interventions" include *Providentissimus Deus* of Leo XIII, *Spiritus Paraclitus* of Benedict XV, *Divino Aflante Spiritu* of Pius XII, climaxing in *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Benedict XVI's *Verbum Domini* which is part of this has been rated the most important pronouncement on the Bible since the Second Vatican Council.



last forty years, the Church's magisterium has also issued numerous statements on these questions. By celebrating this Synod, the Church, conscious of her continuing journey under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, felt called to further reflection on the theme of God's word, in order to review the implementation of the Council's directives, and to confront the new challenges which the present time sets before Christian believers.<sup>60</sup>

Frequent references to *DV* heighten this re-appropriation and re-installation of the Bible in the life of the Church and faithfulness to the Council's directive, tagged "a directive to be appropriated" (34). Outstanding are the important reminders that "'the study of the sacred page should be as it were the very soul of theology'",<sup>61</sup> and that the magisterium "is not superior to the word of God, but is rather its servant"; it listens to, teaches, guards and reverently and faithfully expounds "only what has been handed on to it", "with the help of the Holy Spirit".<sup>62</sup> To underscore the importance of all this, the Pope adds his own hopeful voice "that, in fidelity to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, the study of sacred Scripture, read within the communion of the universal Church, will truly be the soul of theological studies".<sup>63</sup>

The newness of the word of God mentioned in the last section finds its reinforcement in this section. If Jesus, God-Word Incarnate, is the "head" of the Church, the source and summit of its life and mission, then it goes for granted that he is and must be visibly seen to be central in all that the Church does. Catholics in Nigeria and Africa may need to wake up to this reality and abide by its imperatives. Can we truly say that Scripture (the written word), and Jesus, God's Gospel form the "soul" of all that we do as Church? Are we truly "servants" of God's word, not its superiors, with a disciple's ear (Isa 50:4-5) and a heart accountable to God, not to ourselves or the people?

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<sup>60</sup>*VD*, 3; in note 8, the Pope gives a detailed list of the statements of the magisterium on the issue.

<sup>61</sup>*VD* 31, citing *DV* 24.

<sup>62</sup> *VD* 47; citing *DV*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, citing further *DV* 24.

## Personal Relationship with the Word through Dialogue and Encounter

*Verbum Domini* has a sustained focus and emphasis on the relationship between God's word and life. This comes almost in every paragraph of the document. This relationship as noted earlier defines the very purpose of God's self-communication to us. Since God-Word (the *Logos*) became flesh to give us life in ever increasing abundance (John 10:10), the Bible can only be understood if and when lived; living the word is the best school of biblical hermeneutic. This hermeneutic is variously defined as a hermeneutic of life, of love, of faith. This is because "God's Word is something alive and active, not a mute letter of the past; not a lame word of false consolation, but one that challenges, probes, converts, disturbs (or cuts like "a two-edged sword"; Heb 4:12). Ours therefore is not "a religion of the Book, but of the word of the living God" (7). Proclaiming the word is therefore "not a matter of preaching a word of consolation, but rather a word which disrupts, which calls to conversion and which opens the way to an encounter with the one through whom a new humanity flowers" (93). It rules out a selective, spiritualised or secularized hermeneutic and calls for dialogue.

Often the words "dialogue" and "encounter" remind us of interfaith, intercultural and ecumenical dialogues and so forth. True as this is (114-119), and true as is the need for dialogue between theologians and exegetes (45) in the exhortation these two words are closely related to the hermeneutic of life needed for understanding the Bible. "The novelty of biblical revelation consists in the fact that God becomes known through the dialogue which he desires to have with us" (6). Dialogue defines the interpersonal relationship within the Trinity itself. It originates from God who reaches out to us humans and invites us to enter into a personal relationship with the Trinity. It should in turn mark our response to the God who speaks to us (24).

The repeated emphasis on dialogue in *VD* has a novel character: it entails encountering the word and developing "a personal relationship with the word of God". Many of us may never have thought in terms of having a "personal relationship" with the written word of God. Yet the exhortation frequently calls us to do this: to cultivate a personal relationship with the word of God and with Jesus, God's word par excellence. *Lectio divina*, a systematic, contemplative and prayerful reading of the Bible, helps us to develop this personal, intimate relationship with God's word; so too, attentiveness to God's

Word in the liturgy. *Lectio divina*, which dates back to Origen and was re-emphasised by the Second Vatican Council,<sup>64</sup> occurs many times in the document. In case we forget, the Pope takes pains to recall the stages of this divine activity which are: *lectio* (reading the text carefully to get the meaning in its own context), *meditatio* (pondering on the meaning of the text in our current diverse situations), *oratio* (prayer, praise, thanksgiving and petition based on the word heard), and *actio* (putting into practice or living what one has heard) (87).

The call for *lectio divina* is very necessary in the Nigerian and African contexts. It provides a solid and complete process for encountering the word not only personally but also in groups; for the word by nature is something to be communicated and shared. The need for this is heightened by the way the Bible is proclaimed today by TV evangelists and consumed by almost all. *Lectio divina* challenges and serves as a solid corrective to the popular music of “the word of God says” with little or no attempt to give that word life in its own socio-historical and religious contexts. *Lectio divina* helps create awareness that God’s word wants to convict, convert and enrich us today, as it did its first hearers, in our diverse life contexts. It helps us to develop and sustain a dynamic, ongoing all-round relationship with God’s word in every situation.

### Need for Life-oriented Biblical Hermeneutics

Citing the 1993 document of the PBC, *VD* reminds Catholic exegetes never to forget “that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*”. Therefore they cannot limit “their common task” to simply determining sources, defining forms or explaining literary procedures. “They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God’s word for today”.<sup>65</sup> For this reason all types of hermeneutics must serve the “ecclesial hermeneutic” of the Second Vatican Council (34), which is essentially “a hermeneutic of faith” (31, 35c). “The lack of a hermeneutic of faith with regard to Scripture entails more than a simple absence; in its place

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<sup>64</sup>Origen, *Epistola ad Gregorium* (*Letter to Gregory*) 3; and the Second Vatican Council, *DV*, 25; both cited in *VD*, no. 86.

<sup>65</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (15 April 1993), III, C, I: Enchiridion Vaticanum 13, no. 3065; *VD*, 33.

there inevitably enters another hermeneutic, a positivistic and *secularized hermeneutic* ultimately based on the conviction that the Divine does not intervene in human history.” This secularized, philosophical hermeneutic explains away the divine element in the Scriptures and reduces “everything to the human element” (35c). Also to be avoided is the sharp dichotomy between a purely scientific, secularized and philosophical hermeneutic and a hermeneutic which spiritualises “the meaning of the Scriptures” thus failing to respect the historical character of revelation” (35).

In short an “ecclesial hermeneutic” or a “hermeneutic of faith” maintains a balance between faith and reason, recognizes that the Church is the primary setting of biblical hermeneutics; pays an ever deepening attention to the criteria set forth in *DV*, 12; is undertaken as an ecclesial enterprise and is ever conscious of the philosophical and cultural underpinnings of all philosophically inspired hermeneutics; it adopts no criteria which rules out “in advance God’s self-disclosure in human history” (36).

This feature reminds us that life is the first school of hermeneutics, as Third World theologians have long observed. Life is the seed on which God’s word falls and bears fruit in individuals and communities, welcome or unwelcome (cf. Isa 55:10-11). The challenge is for biblical scholars and pastors to groom ourselves and the people to become aware that our daily life experiences invite us to interact with God’s word and find new meanings, new life in them, even in apparently hopeless situations. The strong tendency among pastors and people to sidetrack the gospel challenge to take up our lives and live in preference for “miracles on the way” needs to be countered by a life-oriented hermeneutic such as Jesus and the first disciples had. That hermeneutic commits one to see God at work in every situation in life and to respond accordingly.

### **Attention to Mary, the Mother of Jesus**

The exhortation devotes a section to the Mother of Jesus (27-28) and mentions her dotted throughout the work. She is “‘Mother of God’s Word’ and ‘Mother of the Church’” (27-28); “Mother of God and mother of joy” (124). Her Marian Prayers get special mention (88). In terms of reception of the word, she is the perfect example of “faith-filled hearing of God’s word”; one who by her faith “remained completely open to God”. By her “‘yes’ to the word of the covenant

and her mission, she perfectly fulfills the divine vocation of humanity"; "the word of God becomes her word, and her word [especially the Magnificat] issues from God's word". She is thus "the image of the Church in attentive hearing of the word of God, which took flesh in her" and "symbolizes openness to God and others". In sum, she models that "active listening which interiorise and assimilates" God's word such that "the word becomes a way of life". Her unique closeness to God's word empowered her to become the Mother of God Word Incarnate. In view of all this, her "closeness to the Word", merits a special "study of the relationship between Mariology and the theology of the word"

Mary is mentioned especially in connection with the work of the Holy Spirit and the mystery of the incarnation: Jesus was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit; the same Spirit that effected the conception of God's word **in her womb** guided Jesus throughout his mystery (15); she was present at prayer on Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended "on the Twelve"; analogically we can say that "as the word became flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary, so sacred Scripture is born **in the womb of the Church** by the power of the same Spirit (19). As we contemplate Mary's familiarity with the word, "her life totally shaped by the word", "we too are called to enter into the mystery of faith, whereby Christ comes to dwell in our lives" (28); whereby we become other Christ in virtue of our baptism.

If there is a single most strong devotion in the Nigerian church, it is the Marian devotion. This is true even for some separated brethren. On the other hand, the baseless attacks by Pentecostals, many of whom were once Catholics, can lead to exaggerations in the devotion. True Marian devotion should not be limited to prayers, processions, polemic choruses and novenas. It should equally encourage devotees to do what Mary did: recognize and celebrate God's mighty deeds for them (sing their own Magnificat), reach out to those in need and be ready to hear and keep God's word in faith no matter the consequence. In this way true devotion to Mary leads us to truly become Jesus' "mother and sister and brother" (c

### **Essentiality of Faith for Receiving the Word of God as Mary Did**

The exhortation emphasises the essentiality of faith (“personal and ecclesial”) for receiving, studying, understanding, contemplating the word of God (25). “The intrinsic link between the word and faith makes it clear that authentic biblical hermeneutics can only be had within the faith of the Church, which has its paradigm in Mary’s *fiat*”. (29). By her fiat she becomes a model and archetype for a faith of the Church (29). Mary is pre-eminently the woman of faith as Elizabeth declares in Luke 1:45. “Mary is blessed because she has faith, because she believed, and in this faith she received the Word of God into her womb in order to give him to the world” (124). Faith is mentioned over 100 times in the exhortation, excluding the kindred words “faithfully” and “faithfulness”. Strikingly, the Pope’s preferred word for the laity is “the faithful” (over 60 times, excluding an occasional use of “the lay faithful” in the references to the Synod and the Council). Not surprisingly, the exhortation reiterates that these faithful be helped and formed to understand God’s word, develop a faith-filled relation with the word and make God’s word their way of life as Mary did.

What was said in the last section in relation to the African situation applies in this section. Our people’s faith is more directed to obtaining miracles from God than to believing in the God who works the miracles. An example is “claiming” “Abraham’s blessings” without awareness that the height of these blessings was Abraham’s trust in God to the point of accepting to sacrifice his son through whom God’s promises were to be realised. Let us inculcate faith in God through sound proclamation of the word.

### **Call for Ongoing Biblical Research**

VD calls for a holistic and balanced study of Scripture, one that integrates scientific research and faith in service to life; one where faith in the God who warmly communicates the divine self to us guides and monitors “scientific” historical and all other approaches. The balance in the exhortation is marked by the frequent use of the phrase, “one the one hand . . . and on the other”. This stands out in the section on biblical hermeneutics (29-49), where the Pope calls for a balanced research between biblical exegesis, theology and biblical spirituality. It embraces ecumenical biblical studies. In interreligious worship, care is to be taken not to betray our Catholic beliefs in the name of ecumenism (for instance, replacing Sunday Mass with ecumenical worship).

The Pope recalls that this balance was maintained even by the 1993 document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission which urged Catholic exegetes never to “forget that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*” and that their “common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures” But to remember that “they arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God’s word for today” (VD 33). Today’s academic exegetes must guard against the extremes which create a dichotomy between “mystical” and “scientific” exegesis. As they are “highly competent in the field of historical-critical methodology and its latest developments,” so must they “pay comparable attention . . . to the theological dimension of the biblical texts, so that they can be more deeply understood in accordance with the three elements indicated by the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*”.<sup>66</sup> The indispensability of learning the biblical languages must be maintained, not forgetting the spiritual dimension in biblical research.

While the historical critical method of reading the Bible is important, a type of research which can be done even by an atheist is not interpreting the Bible according to the mind of God. To be carefully examined, and when necessary rejected, are fundamentalistic, literal, a-historical and certain Pentecostalist readings; so too the hermeneutics of secularism and human philosophy and imposing on the text values of un-evangelised cultures (traditional, modern and postmodern) where God is either co-opted into human systems or regarded as irrelevant to our lives. The dark passages of scripture are not to be ignored but carefully studied to discern between the human word and God’s word for us in them. All Scripture is for our instruction either by telling us what not to do, or warning us against making God speak our human language and endorse our unredeemed cultural values instead of our aligning ourselves with God’s language and gospel culture.

Areas of ongoing research mentioned include a deeper study of the processes of inspiration and the relationship between inspiration and truth; ecumenical studies of the Bible with attention to areas of similarities and differences; how to deepen the people’s relationship with the word of God; exploration of the relationship between exegesis and theology and exegesis and the spiritual life; the relationship between *Mariology* and *the theology of the*

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<sup>66</sup>VD 34, “a directive to be appropriated”; citing Proposition 26 of the Synod.

*word* (27); interpretation of the “dark” passages of the Bible (42). In this enterprise, a certain method of scholarly research that would consider itself neutral with regard to Scripture should not be encouraged. To conduct these studies effectively, specific study centres supported by Catholic groups are to be set up to offer a distinct contribution to the promotion of culture and education. The significance for our context of this issue is woven into the concluding remarks which now follow.

### Concluding Contextual Remarks

We conclude by urging the reader again to make a “personal encounter” (using the Pope’s own words once more) with *VD* and drink directly from its rich source. To assimilate its rich fruits for personal life and make it the soul of Christian life and spirituality, liturgy and all the church’s activities; like Ezekiel to eat and digest this word; like Mary to conceive and give birth to Christ in life; like the early Christian community, to share with others both in word and in all things; like Paul, to let God’s word transform life and serve as yardstick for evangelising our cultures. Paul did this in imitation of Jesus himself who used the gospel to challenge the torah traditions of his people distorted (cf. Matt 23:13-39).

In the Nigerian context, we need to pay special attention in our seminaries and church institutions to the need to make **Scripture “the soul” of all theological and other ecclesiastical studies**. It is regrettable that some, if not many, of our seminaries currently do not have a full time lecturer in Scripture. Is a Catholic institution that ignores Scripture or treats it as appendage or at a par with other disciplines and educational activities true to its identity and mission?

The *call for a true hermeneutic* that guards against selective or one sided hermeneutic of Scripture is also very pertinent in our Nigerian context. In history this type of hermeneutic was operative in the Qumran community. The hermeneutic claims all biblical blessings for oneself and members of one’s community or group, and assigns all curses to real or perceived enemies. The destruction of the Qumran community by their very archenemies, the Romans (whom they were religiously bound to curse three times a day) is a sober reminder that God does not subscribe to such hermeneutic. For quite a number of people today, the Bible has become nothing more than a book of divine



blessing (a Code of Prosperity Gospel) preached by people who see preaching the word of God is an easy, cost-free and lucrative business. Others see it as an effective God-given resource for cursing enemies, Christ's injunction to love one's enemies notwithstanding. The Church has a sacred duty firstly not to pitch into this deceitfully alluring, lucrative trade; whether for personal gains or for raising funds for projects, at the expense of the gospel and to the ruin of God's people. Secondly the Church needs to actively discourage the people from using the Bible as a Great Code of Curses. The sure alternative in this growing and escalating trend is to return to the gospel, to start life afresh with Christ as John Paul II urged.

On the issue of **methodology**, we need to be aware that most of us have been formed in western methods of exegesis. We therefore need to take seriously the call not to separate "scientific" biblical exegesis from the hermeneutic of life and of faith; or think that our work is finished when we have identified forms, detected sources and unveiled redactional layers in a text, without also exploring the theological and spiritual import of the biblical word where the ultimate meaning lies. In the year *Verbum Domini* appeared, a major study in historical criticism revealed that the historical critical method which has dominated biblical scholarship since the sixteenth century came to birth in the wake of the Protestant Reformation. Though it aimed at reinstating the Bible after the churches had lost authority and credibility over it because of their quarrels, it in effect succeeded to convert the study of Scripture (the book of the Church) into biblical studies (where the Bible became the book of the academia to be studied and analysed like any other ancient literature).<sup>67</sup> If we listen to patristic exegetes, and before them NT ones, we will never consider it unworthy of our scientific expertise to engage in theological and spiritual meaning in our study of the Bible. Rather we will order all scientific research methodologies towards discerning the meaning of God's word, God's message, for today's readers, ourselves included.

The **call to pay attention to culture** is also crucial. Often we think attention to culture is only for Africans, not for the universal church. Scripture itself is steeped in culture ("a great code for culture"). Attention to culture in the Bible will not only remind us that certain things in the Bible are culturally

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<sup>67</sup>Michael C Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies*; Oxford Studies in Historical Criticism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

conditioned, therefore, not universally normative (*VD* 15). It will obligate us to pay attention to the obsolete practices and beliefs in Scripture and equally stay alert to ways in which our own cultural world view, mindset and accepted practices can blind or lead us to distort the gospel message. The Gospel, which is essentially above culture, gives true meaning and redemption worth to culture. Cherished practices in our culture have their lasting worth if they are also our gospel, God's gospel for us.

In Scripture we encounter God's abiding relationship with us. We hear it call us to a deeper and truer relationship with God and with one another. If encounter marks the relationship between God and us, it should also mark the relationship between us and other human beings. If intimate communication and collaboration define the interpersonal relationship between the three persons of the Trinity (such that the Son and the Spirit can be described as "the two hands of the Father"), these virtues should equally define and characterise our relationships with each other at all levels. We pray for the grace to cultivate this faith-based relationship with God, with Scripture and with all human beings by committing ourselves to a hermeneutic of love, of life and of faith in union with the universal Church, as *VD* counsels.

### **Final Word of Encouragement from Benedict XVI**

We end this presentation of *VD* with the concluding words of encouragement addressed to all by Benedict XVI. "I wish once more to encourage all the People of God, pastors, consecrated persons and the laity, to become increasingly familiar with the sacred Scriptures". Since the Synod itself testified before the Church and the world "to the immense beauty of encountering the word of God in the communion of the Church", "I encourage all the faithful to renew their personal and communal encounter with Christ, the word of life made visible, and to become his heralds, so that the gift of divine life - communion - can spread ever more fully throughout the world" (121).

## Appendix II

### The 55 Propositions of the Synod on the Word of God

These 55 *Propositions* were the conclusions of the Twelfth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Word of God, held at the Vatican, October x .. y, 2008. The synod approved these 55 propositions and submitted them to Pope Benedict XVI at the end of the World Synod of Bishops on the "Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church." Nearly all these propositions were by overwhelming majorities approved by the 243 Synod Fathers. The Pope took into account the various documents produced by the synod including the propositions and the message when he wrote the post-synodal exhortation. These propositions were published by the Vatican on 2 December 2008. The translation is by ZENIT. They are reproduced here verbatim for easy access. Essentially they form part of the resources used by the Pope to produce the official outcome of the Synod, *Verbum Domini*. By themselves, they are matter for future research on what the Spirit is saying to the Church. They are reproduced here for research purposes. The only editorial work is the merging of most paragraphs of each proposition for practical purposes.

#### Introduction

#### Proposition 1: Documents that were presented to the Supreme Pontiff

Presented for the consideration of the Supreme Pontiff — in addition to the documents on the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church relating to this Synod, namely the *lineamenta*, the *instrumentum laboris*, the reports before and after discussion, and the texts of the interventions, whether those presented in the hall or those written, the reports of the minor circles and their discussions — above all some specific proposals, which the fathers held to be of particular importance. The synodal fathers humbly requested the Holy Father to take the opportunity to offer a document on the mystery of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church, also in the light of the Year dedicated to St. Paul, Apostle of the Gentiles, on the 2,000th anniversary of his birth.

**Proposition 2: From the dogmatic constitution  
*Dei Verbum* to the synod on the Word of God**

The synodal fathers, at more than 40 years after the promulgation of the dogmatic constitution on the divine revelation *Dei Verbum* to the work of the Vatican II ecumenical council, acknowledge with gratitude the great benefits contributed by this document to the life of the Church, at the exegetic, theological, spiritual, pastoral and ecumenical level. Throughout the history of the "*intellectus fidei*" and of Christian doctrine, this constitution brought to light the Trinitarian and historic salvific horizon of revelation. In these years the ecclesial awareness has undoubtedly grown that Jesus Christ, God's Word incarnate, "by the very fact of his presence and with the manifestation he makes of himself with words and works, with signs and miracles, and especially with his death and his resurrection from the dead, and at last with the sending of the Spirit of truth, fulfills and completes Revelation and corroborates it with the divine testimony, that is that God is with us to deliver us from the darkness of sin and death and resurrect us for eternal life" (*Dei Verbum*, 4).

All this has allowed for further reflection on the infinite value of the Word of God that is given to us in sacred Scripture, as inspired testimony of revelation, which with the living Tradition of the Church constitutes the supreme rule of faith (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21). It is this same Word that is kept and interpreted faithfully by the Magisterium (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 10), which is celebrated in the sacred Liturgy and which gives itself to us in the Eucharist as bread of eternal life (cf. John 6). Treasuring all that emerged in these years, the Church feels today the need to reflect further on the mystery of the Word of God in its different articulations and pastoral implications. Hence, this synodal assembly expresses the hope that all the faithful will grow in the awareness of the mystery of Christ, only savior and mediator between God and men (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 9:15), and the Church renewed by the religious hearing of the Word of God might undertake a new missionary season, proclaiming the Good News to all men.

## **First Part: The Word of God in the Faith of the Church**

### **Proposition 3: Analogy "*Verbi Dei*"**

The expression Word of God is analogical. It refers first of all to the Word of God in Person who is the Only-begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, Word of God made flesh (cf. John 18) is the unique and definitive Word entrusted to humanity. To receive the Revelation, man must open his mind and heart to the action of the Holy Spirit that makes him understand the Word of God present in the sacred Scriptures. Man responds to God in full liberty with the obedience of the faith (cf. Romans 1:5; 2 Corinthians 10:5-6; *Dei Verbum*, 5).

Mary, Mother of Jesus, personifies this obedience of the faith in an exemplary manner, she is also the archetype of the faith of the Church that hears and receives the Word of God.

### **Proposition 4: Dialogical Dimension of Revelation**

When dialogue refers to Revelation it implies the primacy of the Word of God addressed to man. In his great love, in fact, God willed to encounter humanity and took the initiative to speak to men calling them to share in his very life. The specificity of Christianity is manifested in the event of Jesus Christ, summit of Revelation, fulfillment of the promises of God and mediator of the encounter between man and God. He, "that has revealed God to us" (cf. John 1:18), is the unique and definitive Word entrusted to mankind. To receive the Revelation, man must open his mind and heart to the action of the Holy Spirit who makes him understand the Word of God present in the sacred Scriptures. Man responds to God in full liberty with the obedience of the faith (cf. Romans 1:5; 2 Corinthians 10:5-6; *Dei Verbum*, 5).

Mary, Mother of Jesus, personifies this obedience of the faith in an exemplary way; she is also archetype of the faith of the Church that listens to and receives the Word of God.

### **Proposition 5: Holy Spirit and Word of God**

The sacred Scriptures, being a gift entrusted by the Holy Spirit to the Church Bride of Christ, have in the Church their own hermeneutical place. The Spirit himself, who is Author of the sacred Scriptures, is also guide of their correct interpretation in the formation of the "fides Ecclesiae" through time. The Synod recommended to pastors to remind all those baptized of the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiration (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11), in the interpretation and understanding of the sacred Scriptures (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 12). Consequently, all of us disciples are invited to invoke the Holy Spirit frequently, so that he will lead us to ever more profound knowledge of the Word of God and to the testimony of our faith (cf. John 15:26-27). They remind the faithful that the sacred Scriptures close evoking the common cry of the Spirit and the Bride: "Come Lord Jesus" (cf. Revelation 22:17-20).

### **Proposition 6: Patristic reading of Scripture**

Not to be neglected for the interpretation of the biblical text, is the Patristic reading of Scripture, which distinguishes two senses: literal and spiritual. The literal sense is that signified by the words of Scripture and found among the scientific instruments of critical exegesis. The spiritual sense concerns also the reality of the events of which Scripture speaks, taking into account the living Tradition of the whole Church and of the analogy of the faith, which implies the intrinsic connection of the truths of the faith among them and in the totality of the design of divine Revelation.

### **Proposition 7:Unity between Word of God and Eucharist**

It is important to consider the profound unity between the Word of God and the Eucharist (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21), as expressed by some particular texts, such as John 6:35-58; Luke 24:13-35, in such a way as to overcome the dichotomy between the two realities, which is often present in theological and pastoral reflection. In this way the connection with the preceding Synod on the Eucharist will become more evident. The Word of God is made sacramental flesh in the Eucharistic event and leads Sacred Scripture to its fulfillment. The Eucharist is a hermeneutic principle of Sacred Scripture, as Sacred Scripture illumines and explains the Eucharistic mystery. In this sense the Synodal Fathers hope that a theological reflection on the sacramentality of the Word of

God might be promoted. Without the recognition of the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist, the intelligence of Sacred Scripture remains unfulfilled.

### **Proposition 8: Word of reconciliation and conversion**

The Word of God is word of reconciliation because in it God reconciles all things to himself (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18-20; Ephesians 1:10). God's merciful forgiveness, incarnated in Jesus, raises the sinner. The importance of the Word of God in the sacraments of healing (Penance and Anointing) must be underlined. The Church must be the community that, reconciled by that Word that is Jesus Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:14-18; Colossians 1:22), offers all a space of reconciliation, of mercy and of forgiveness. The healing force of the Word of God is a living call to a constant personal conversion in the listener himself and an incentive to a courageous proclamation of reconciliation offered by the Father in Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:20-21). In these days of conflicts of all kinds and of inter-religious tensions, in fidelity to the work of reconciliation fulfilled by God in Jesus, Catholics are committed to give example of reconciliation, seeking to share the same human, ethical and religious values in their relationship with God and with others. Thus they seek to construct a just and peaceful society.

### **Proposition 9: Encounter with the Word in reading sacred Scripture**

This Synod re-proposes forcefully to all the faithful the encounter with Jesus, Word of God made flesh, as event of grace that reoccurs in the reading and hearing of the Sacred Scriptures. Taking up a thought shared by the Fathers, Saint Cyprian reminds: "Attend assiduously to prayer and to *lectio divina*. When you pray you speak with God, when you read it is God who speaks with you" (*Ad Donatum*, 15). Hence, we sincerely hope that from this assembly a new season will spring of great love for sacred Scripture on the part of all the members of the People of God, so that from their prayerful and faithful reading in time the relationship with the very person of Jesus will be deepened. In this perspective, it is hoped — in so far as possible — that each of the faithful will personally possess the Bible (cf. Deuteronomy 17:18-20) and enjoy the benefits of the special indulgence connected with the reading of Scripture (cf. *Indulgentiarum Doctrina*, 30).

### **Proposition 10: The Old Testament in the Christian Bible**

Jesus prayed the psalms and read the laws and the prophets, quoting them in his preaching and presenting himself as the fulfillment of Scripture (cf. Matthew 5:17; Luke 4:21; 24:27; John 5:46). The New Testament has drawn constantly from the Old Testament the words and expressions that allow it to recount and explain the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (cf. Matthew 1-2 and "Es passim"; Mark 6:3; Luke 24:25-31). At the same time, of the rest, his death and resurrection "gave these same texts a fullness of meaning that at first was inconceivable" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," III A 2). Consequently, apostolic faith in Jesus is proclaimed "according to the Scriptures" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15) and presents Jesus Christ as the "yes" of God to all the promises (cf. 2 Corinthians 1:20).

For these reasons, knowledge of the Old Testament is indispensable for those who believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, because — according to the word of St. Augustine — the New Testament is concealed in the Old and the Old is revealed in the New (cf. *Quaestiones in Heptateucum*, 2, 73). Hence, we hope that in the preaching and in catechesis due account will be taken of the pages of the Old Testament, explaining it appropriately in the context of the history of salvation and help the People of God to appreciate it in the light of faith in Jesus Lord.

### **Proposition 11: Word of God and charity toward the poor**

One of the characteristic features of sacred Scripture is the revelation of God's predilection for the poor (cf. Matthew 25:31-46). Jesus of Nazareth, Word of God incarnate, went through this world doing good (cf. Acts 10:35). The Word of God, willingly received, generates abundantly in the Church charity and justice towards all, above all towards the poor.

As the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* teaches, the first to have the right to the proclamation of the Gospel are in fact the poor, in need not only of bread but also of words of life. However, the poor are only the recipients of charity, but also agents of evangelization, in as much as they are open to God and generous in sharing with others. Pastors are called to listen to them, to learn from them, to guide them in their faith and to motivate them to be architects of their own



history. Deacons in charge of the service of charity have a particular responsibility in this ambit. The Synod encourages them in their ministry.

### **Proposition 12: Inspiration and truth of the Bible**

The Synod proposes that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith clarify the concepts of inspiration and truth of the Bible, as well as their reciprocal relationship, in order to understand better the teaching of *Dei Verbum* 11. In particular, it is necessary to highlight the originality of the Catholic biblical hermeneutics in this field.

### **Proposition 13: Word of God and natural law**

The synodal fathers are well aware of the great challenges present in the current historical moment. One of these touches the enormous development that science has realized in regard to knowledge of nature. Paradoxically, the more this knowledge increases the less one sees the ethical message that stems from the same. In the history of thought, ancient philosophers already used to call this principle *lex naturalis* or natural moral law. As Pope Benedict XVI has recalled, this expression seems to have been made incomprehensible today "because of a concept of nature that is no longer metaphysical, but only empirical. The fact that nature, being itself is no longer permeable to a moral message, creates a sense of disorientation that makes decisions of daily life precarious and uncertain" (Feb. 12, 2007).

In the light of the teaching of sacred Scripture, as recalled above all by the Apostle Paul in the Letter to the Romans (cf. Romans 2:14-15), it is good to underline that this law is written in the depth of the heart of each person and each one can access it. Its basic principle is that one must "do good and avoid evil"; a truth that is evidently imposed on all and from which other principles stem that regulate ethical judgment on the rights and duties of each one. It is good to recall that to be nourished by the Word of God also increases knowledge of the natural law and allows for progress of the moral conscience. Hence, the synod recommends to all pastors that they have special solicitude in which the ministers of the Word are sensitive to the rediscovery of the natural law and its function in the formation of consciences.

## **Second Part: The Word of God in the Life of the Church**

### **Proposition 14: Word of God and liturgy**

The assembly, convoked and gathered by the Spirit to hear the proclamation of the Word of God, is transformed by the same action of the Spirit that is manifested in the celebration. In fact, there, where the Church is, Lord's Spirit is; and where the Lord's Spirit is, the Church also is (cf. Saint Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, III, 24, 1). The synodal fathers reaffirm that the liturgy is the privileged place in which the Word of God is fully expressed, both in the celebration of the sacraments as above all in the Eucharist, in the Liturgy of the Hours and in the liturgical year. The mystery of salvation narrated in sacred Scripture finds in the liturgy its own place of proclamation, listening and acting.

For this reason, it is imperative that:

- The book of sacred Scripture, even outside liturgical action, has a visible and honorable place in the church.
- Silence should be encouraged after the first and second reading and after the homily is finished, as suggested in the General Order of the Roman Missal (cf. No. 56).
- Celebrations of the Word of God are provided, centered on the Sunday readings.
- Readings of sacred Scripture be proclaimed from worthy liturgical books, namely the lectionaries and the Gospel, to be treated with the most profound respect for the Word of God they contain.
- Highlight the role of the servers of the proclamation: readers and cantors.
- Men and women lectors be adequately formed, so that they can proclaim the Word of God in a clear and comprehensible way. The latter must be invited to study and witness with their life the contents of the Word they read.
- The Word of God be proclaimed in a clear way, with control of the dynamics of communication.

- Persons for whom the reception of the Word of God, communicated in the usual way is difficult as well as persons with sight or hearing disabilities not be forgotten.
- Competent and effective use be made of acoustic instruments.

Moreover, the synodal fathers feel the duty to remind of the grave responsibility of those who preside over the Eucharist so that the texts of sacred Scripture are never substituted by other texts. No text of spirituality or literature can have the value and wealth contained in sacred Scripture, which is the Word of God.

### **Proposition 15: Homiletic updating and "Directory on the Homily"**

The homily that updates the proclaimed Word: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). It leads to the mystery celebrated, invites to mission and shares the joys and sorrows, the hopes and fears of the faithful, thus disposing the assembly both to the profession of faith (Creed) as well as the universal prayer of the Mass.

There should be a homily in all Masses *cum populo*, even during the week. It is necessary that preachers (bishops, priests, deacons) prepare themselves in prayer, so that they preach with conviction and passion. They must ask themselves three questions:

- What do the proclaimed readings say?
- What do they say to me?
- What must I say to the community, taking into account its concrete situation?

The preacher should above all allow himself to be questioned first by the Word of God he proclaims. The homily must be nourished by doctrine and transmit the teaching of the Church to strengthen the faith, call to conversion in the framework of the celebration and prepare for the action of the Eucharistic paschal mystery.

To help the preacher in the ministry of the Word, and in continuity with the teaching of the post-synodal apostolic *Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis* (No. 46), the synodal fathers desire the elaboration of a "Directory on the Homily," which should show, together with the principles of homiletics and

of the art of communication, the content of the biblical topics that appear in the lectionaries that are used in the liturgy.

### **Proposition 16: Lectionary**

It is recommended that an examination of the Roman Lectionary be initiated to see if the present selection and ordering of the readings are really adequate to the mission of the Church at this historic moment. Specifically, the relation of the reading of the Old Testament with the evangelical periscope should be reconsidered, so that it does not imply a too restrictive reading of the Old Testament or the exclusion of important passages. The revision of a Lectionary could be done in dialogue with ecumenical counterparts who use this common Lectionary. It is desirable that an authoritative examination of the problem of the Lectionary be carried out in the liturgies of Oriental Catholic Churches.

### **Proposition 17: Ministry of the Word and women**

The synodal fathers acknowledge and encourage the service of the laity in the transmission of the faith. On this point, women especially have an indispensable role above all in the family and in catechesis. In fact, they are able to awaken interest in the Word, the personal relationship with God, and to communicate the meaning of forgiveness and evangelical sharing. It is desirable that the ministry of the lector be open also to women, so that the Christian community will recognize their role as heralds of the Word.

### **Proposition 18: Celebrations of the Word of God**

The celebration of the Word of God is recommended according to the different forms received from the liturgical tradition (cf. SC 35). Many ecclesial communities, which do not have the possibility of the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, find in the celebration of the Word the food for their faith and for Christian testimony. The celebration of the Word is one of the privileged places of encounter with the Lord, because in this proclamation, Christ makes himself

present and continues to speak to his people (cf. SC 7). Even in the midst of today's noise, which makes effective listening very difficult, the faithful are encouraged to cultivate a disposition of interior silence and of listening to the Word of God that transforms life.

The Synodal Fathers recommend that ritual directories be formulated, based on the experience of Churches in which formed catechists regularly lead Sunday assemblies round the Word of God. The purpose is to avoid such celebrations being confused with the Eucharistic liturgy. Reception of the Word, the prayer of praise, thanksgiving and petition, which make up the celebration of the Word of God, are manifestations of the Spirit in the heart of the faithful and in the Christian assembly, gathered round the Word of God. The Holy Spirit, in fact, makes the proclaimed and celebrated Word of God fruitful in the heart and life of those who receive it. We also believe that pilgrimages, celebrations, different forms of popular piety, the missions, spiritual retreats and special days of penance, reparation and forgiveness are a concrete opportunity, offered to the faithful to celebrate the Word of God and enhance their knowledge.

### **Proposition 19: Liturgy of the Hours**

The Liturgy of the Hours is a privileged way to hear the Word of God because it puts the faithful in contact with sacred Scripture and with the living Tradition of the Church. Hence, the Synod hopes that the faithful will participate in the Liturgy of the Hours, above all in lauds and vespers. Hence, it would be useful to prepare a simple form of the Liturgy of the Hours where it does not exist yet. Bishops, priests, deacons, religious and those already delegated to it by the Church must remember their sacred duty to pray the Liturgy of the Hours. This is very much recommended to the lay faithful, so that this liturgy becomes, in an even greater sense, the prayer of the whole Church.

### **Proposition 20: Word of God, marriage and family**

The Word of God is at the origin of marriage (cf. Genesis 2:24). Jesus himself inscribed marriage among the institutions of his Kingdom (cf. Matthew 19:4-8), giving it a sacramental statute. In the sacramental celebration, the man and woman pronounce a prophetic word of reciprocal self-giving, being "one

flesh," sign of the mystery of the union of Christ and the Church (cf. Ephesians 5:32). Through the fidelity and unity of family life, spouses are to their children the first heralds of the Word of God. They must be supported and helped in developing prayer in the family, the domestic celebration of the Word, reading of the Bible and other forms of prayer. Spouses must remember that the Word of God is a valuable support also in the difficulties of conjugal and family life.

### **Proposition 21: Word of God and small communities**

The synod recommends the formation of small ecclesial communities where the Word of God is heard, studied and prayed, also in the form of the rosary as biblical meditation (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*). In many countries there are already small communities, which can be made up of families living in the parishes or connected to the different ecclesial movements and new communities. They meet regularly, around the Word of God, to share among themselves, and receive strength from it. Some only rarely have the possibility to celebrate the Eucharist. They experience the sense of community and encounter the Word of God personally. Through the reading of the Bible they feel themselves loved personally by God. The service of the laity that leads these communities must be appreciated and promoted as they carry out a missionary service to which all the baptized are called.

### **Proposition 22: Word of God and prayerful reading**

The synod proposes that all the faithful, including young people, be exhorted to approach the Scriptures through "prayerful" and assiduous "reading" (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 25), in such a way that the dialogue with God becomes a daily reality of the people of God.

Therefore, it is important:

- That the prayerful reading be profoundly related to the example of Mary and the saints in the history of the Church, as those who carried out the reading of the Word according to the Spirit;
- That it be ensured that pastors, priests and deacons, and in a very special sense future priests, have adequate formation so that, in turn, they can form the people of God in this spiritual dynamic;

- That the faithful be initiated — in keeping with the circumstances, categories and cultures — in the most appropriate method of prayerful reading, personal and/or community (*lectio divina*, spiritual exercises in daily life, "Seven Steps" in Africa and in other places, various methods of prayer, sharing in the family and in the grassroots ecclesial communities, etc.);
- That the practice of prayerful reading be encouraged, using liturgical texts that the Church proposes for the Sunday and daily Eucharistic celebration, to better understand the relation between Word and Eucharist;
- That care be taken that the prayerful reading of the Scriptures, above all by the community, result in a commitment to charity (cf. Luke 4:18-19).

Conscious of the present widespread diffusion of *lectio divina* and of other similar methods, the synodal fathers see in them a true sign of hope and encourage all ecclesial leaders to multiply their efforts in this sense.

### **Proposition 23: Catechesis and sacred Scripture**

Preferably, catechesis should have its roots in Christian revelation. It should take as model Jesus' pedagogy on the road to Emmaus. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus opens the heart of the disciples to an understanding of the Scriptures (cf. Luke 24:27). His way of proceeding shows that the catechesis that plunges its roots in Christian revelation implies an explanation of the Scriptures, inviting us also to approach the men of today to transmit to them the Gospel of salvation:

- With special attention to the youngest children;
- To those in need of a more profound formation rooted in the Scriptures;
- To catechumens who must be supported on their path, showing them the plan of God through the reading of sacred Scripture, preparing them to encounter the Lord in the sacraments of Christian initiation, to be committed in the community, and to be missionaries.

The pre-baptismal catechumenate is followed by a post-baptismal mistagogy, a continuing formation in which sacred Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church must hold center place.

### **Proposition 24: Word of God and consecrated life**

Consecrated life is born from listening to the Word of God; it receives the Gospel as its norm of life. In the school of the Word, it rediscovers its identity continually and becomes a *testificatio evangelica* for the Church and the world. Called to be living "exegesis" of the Word of God (cf. Benedict XVI, Feb. 2, 2008), it itself is a word with which God continues speaking to the Church and the world. The synod thanks consecrated persons for their testimony of the Gospel and their willingness to proclaim it in the geographical and cultural frontiers of the mission through their charismatic services. At the same time, it exhorts them to take care of the personal and community spaces of listening to the Word of God, and to promote schools of biblical prayer open to the laity, above all young people. They must be able to listen to the Word of God with the heart of the poor and express their response in a commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation.

The synod highlights the importance of contemplative life and its valuable contribution to the tradition of "lectio divina." Monastic communities are schools of spirituality and give strength to the life of local Churches. "The monastery, as spiritual oasis, points today's world to what is most important, in a word, the only decisive thing: there is an ultimate reason which makes life worth living, namely, God and his inscrutable Love" (Benedict XVI, Angelus, Nov. 18, 2007). In contemplative life, the Word is received, prayed and celebrated. Care must be taken, therefore, so that these communities receive the biblical and theological formation appropriate to their life and mission.

### **Proposition 25: Need for two levels in exegetical research**

The biblical hermeneutic proposed in *Dei Verbum*, 12, continues to be of great present importance and efficacy, which envisages two different and correlative methodological levels.

The first level corresponds, in fact, to the so-called historical-critical methods that, in modern and contemporary research, often was used with fruitfulness and that entered the Catholic field, above all with the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* of the servant of God Pius XII. This method is



necessary by the very nature of the history of salvation, which is not mythology, but a true history with its apex in the incarnation of the Word, divine and eternal, who comes to dwell in men's time (cf. John 1:14). The Bible and the history of salvation, therefore, also call for study with the methods of serious historical research. The second methodological level necessary for a correct interpretation of the sacred Scriptures, corresponds to the nature, also divine, of human biblical words. The Second Vatican Council justly recalls that the Bible must be interpreted with the help of the same Holy Spirit who guided its writing.

Biblical hermeneutic cannot be considered carried out if — along with the historical study of the texts — it does not also seek its theological dimension in an adequate manner. *Dei Verbum* identifies and presents the three decisive references to arrive at the divine dimension and, therefore, to the theological meaning of the sacred Scriptures. It is a question of the content and the unity of the whole of Scripture, of the living tradition of the whole Church and, finally, of attention to the analogy of the faith. "Only where the two methodological levels are observed, the historical-critical and the theological, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis adequate to this book" (Benedict XVI, Oct. 14, 2008).

### **Proposition 26: To enlarge the perspective of today's exegetical study**

The positive fruit contributed by the use of modern historical-critical research is undeniable; at the same time, however, it is necessary to look at the state of present-day exegetical studies by looking also at the difficulties. While current academic exegesis, including the Catholic, works at a very high level as regards the historical-critical methodology, including its happy and most recent integrations (cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"), the same cannot be said about the study of the theological dimension of the biblical texts. Sadly, the theological level indicated by the three elements of *Dei Verbum*, 12 very often is almost absent.

The first consequence of such absence is that the Bible becomes for present-day readers a mere book of the past, incapable of speaking to our time. In these conditions, biblical exegesis runs the risk of becoming pure historiography and history of literature.

The second consequence, perhaps even graver, is the disappearance of the hermeneutics of the faith pointed out in "Dei Verbum." Instead of believing hermeneutics, what is then insinuated in fact is a positivist and secular hermeneutics that denies the possibility of the presence and access of the divine in the history of man.

The synodal fathers, while sincerely thanking the many exegetes and theologians that have given and give essential help in the profound discovery of the Scriptures, request from all a growing commitment in order to reach with greater force and clarity the theological level of biblical interpretation. To truly arrive at a growing love for the Scriptures, hoped for by the Council, greater care must be taken to apply the principles that Dei Verbum itself pointed out with thoroughness and clarity.

**Proposition 27: To overcome the dualism  
between exegesis and theology**

For the life and mission of the Church, and for the future of the faith within contemporary cultures, it is necessary to overcome the dualism between exegesis and theology. Sadly, not infrequently an unproductive separation between exegesis and theology occurs even at the highest academic levels. A worrying consequence is uncertainty and scarce solidity in the intellectual formative path including that of some future candidates to ecclesial ministries. Biblical theology and systematic theology are two dimensions of that unique reality that we call theology. The synodal fathers, therefore, with esteem address an appeal, both to theologians as well as exegetes, so that, with a clearer and more harmonious collaboration, they will not fail to give contemporary theology the force of the Scriptures, and not reduce the study of the Scriptures to the historiographic dimension of the inspired texts. "When exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology and, vice-versa, when theology is not essentially interpretation of Scripture in the Church, such theology loses its foundation" (Benedict XVI, Oct. 14, 2008).

**Proposition 28: Dialogue between exegetes,  
theologians and pastors**

Episcopal conferences are requested to favor regularly meetings between pastors, theologians and exegetes to promote greater communion in service to the Word of God.

We hope that exegetes and theologians will be able to share ever better the fruits of their science for the enhancement of the faith and the edification of the People of God, always keeping in mind the characteristic dimensions of the Catholic interpretation of the Bible (cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," III).

### **Proposition 29: Difficulty in the reading of the Old Testament**

At times difficulties arise in reading the Old Testament because of texts that contain elements of violence, injustice, immorality and scarce exemplarity, even in important biblical figures. Consequently, an adequate preparation of the faithful is required for reading these passages and a formation that teaches them to read the texts in their historical and literary context, so that a Christian reading is favored. The latter has as central hermeneutical key the Gospel and the new commandment of Jesus Christ fulfilled in the paschal mystery. Hence, it is recommended that the reading of the Old Testament not be neglected, which, despite some difficulties, is essential to fully understand the history of salvation (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 15).

### **Proposition 30: Biblical pastoral ministry**

*Dei Verbum* exhorts that the Word of God not only be made the soul of theology but also the soul of the whole of pastoral care, of life and of the mission of the Church (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 24). Bishops must be the first promoters of this dynamic in their dioceses. To be a herald and a credible herald, the bishop must first nourish himself with the Word of God, so that he can sustain and make ever more fruitful his own episcopal ministry. The synod recommends increasing "biblical pastoral ministry" not in juxtaposition to other forms of pastoral care but as biblical animation of the whole of pastoral care. Under the guidance of pastors, all the baptized participate in the mission of the Church. The synodal fathers wish to express their most profound esteem and

gratitude, as well as to encourage the service of evangelization that so many lay people, especially women, offer with generosity and commitment in communities spread throughout the world, following the example of Mary Magdalene, first witness of paschal joy.

### **Proposition 31: Word of God and priests**

The Word of God is indispensable to form the heart of a good pastor, minister of the Word. To this end, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* recalls: "The priest must be the first 'believer' of the Word, with full consciousness that the words of his ministry are not 'his' but of him who has sent him. He is not the owner of this Word; he is servant. He is not the sole owner of this Word; he is debtor vis-à-vis the People of God" (John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 26). Priests, especially parish priests, are called to nourish themselves every day with the sacred Scriptures and to communicate them with wisdom and generosity to the faithful entrusted to their care.

### **Proposition 32: Formation of candidates to holy orders**

Candidates to the priesthood must learn to love the Word of God. Therefore, Scripture should be the soul of their theological formation, underlining the indispensable circularity between exegesis, theology, spirituality and mission. Hence, the formation of priests should include multiple approaches to Scripture.

- Prayerful reading of *lectio divina*, both personal as well as in community, in the framework of a first reading of the Bible. It will be necessary to continue it during the whole process of formation, taking into account what the Church establishes in regard to retreats and spiritual exercises in the education of seminarians.
- Nourish himself assiduously with the Word of God, also through the richness of the Divine Office.
- The discovery of exegesis in its various methods. A precise and ample study is necessary of the hermeneutical rules to overcome the risks of an arbitrary interpretation. The methods of the exegesis must be understood in an appropriate manner, with its possibilities and limits, allowing for correct and fruitful understanding of the Word of God.

- Knowledge of the history of what produced the reading of the Scriptures in the Fathers of the Church, the saints, the doctors and the masters of spirituality down to our day.
- Intensification, during the seminary years, of the formation for preaching, and vigilance of permanent formation during the exercise of the ministry, so that the homily can speak to those who hear it (cf. Acts 2:37).
- Parallel to formation in the seminary, future priests will be invited to take part in meetings with lay groups or associations, gathered around the Word of God. These meetings, held during a sufficiently long amount of time, will foster in future ministers the experience and taste for hearing what the Holy Spirit inspires in believers gathered as Church, whether they are young or old. Serious study of philosophy must not be neglected; it will lead to evaluate with clarity the assumptions and implications contained in the various hermeneutics applied to the study of the Bible (cf. *Optatam Totius*, 15).

To this end, it is hoped that philosophic and cultural thought (art and music) open to transcendence will be addressed and taught in philosophic faculties, so that disciples can hear and understand better the Word of God, the only one that can satisfy the desires of the human heart (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 83). What is hoped for is a renewal of academic programs (cf. John Paul II, apostolic constitution *Sapientia Christiana*) so that the systematic study of theology in the light of sacred Scripture is manifested better. Moreover, a revision of the courses in seminaries and in houses of formation must take care that the Word of God has its due place in the various dimensions of formation.

### **Proposition 33: Biblical formation of Christians**

Love of the Bible is a grace of the Holy Spirit that permeates the whole life of the believer. Hence, Christians must be formed in appreciation of this gift of God. "If you knew the gift of God" (John 4:10), says the Lord. Hence, it is hoped that in each cultural region centers of formation will be established for the laity and for missionaries of the Word, where they learn to understand, live and proclaim the Word of God. Moreover, that institutes specialized in biblical studies are created so that exegetes may have solid theological understanding and sensibility to the contexts of their mission. This can also be done by a re-

examination or reinforcement of existing structures, such as seminaries and faculties. Finally, it is necessary to offer adequate formation in biblical tongues to persons who are translators of the Bible into various modern languages.

### **Proposition 34: Promoting the Bible among the youth**

As Jesus invited a youth to follow him, so the invitation must be proposed again today to boys, adolescents and young men so that they can find the answer to their search in the word of the Lord. In promoting the Bible among youth, Benedict XVI's invitation will be taken into account: "Dear young people, I exhort you to acquire familiarity with the Bible, to have it at hand so that it will be for you as a compass that indicates the path to follow (Message to the 20th World Youth Day, April 9, 2006). It is hoped that Scripture will be presented in its vocational implications, so that it will help and orient many young people in their vocational decision, even up to total consecration. That the Christian community receive, hear and support the young generations with love, so that they are initiated in knowledge of the Scriptures by educators, true and impassioned witnesses of the Word of God. In this way, that young people may also be led to love and communicate the Gospel, above all to their contemporaries.

### **Proposition 35: Bible and health ministry**

During his life, Jesus took care of and healed the sick and showed in this service of his a sign of the presence of the Kingdom of God (cf. Luke 7:22). Yet today, Scriptures continue to offer the sick and all those who suffer a word of consolation and encouragement, and also of spiritual and physical healing. The prayer of the Psalms touches one profoundly and gives each one the very words of God to express their own suffering, and also their own hope. Hence, the synodal fathers exhort all those who approach persons afflicted by all sorts of evil to take to them humbly but audaciously the vivifying Word of the Lord Jesus both in Scripture as well as in the Eucharist. Indispensable also today is that the Word of God inspire the whole of health pastoral care, leading the sick to discover through faith that their suffering makes them capable of participating in the redeeming suffering of Christ (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:8-11. 14).

### **Proposition 36: Sacred Scripture and Christian unity**

The Bible is truly a privileged place of encounter between the different Churches and ecclesial communities. To listen to the Scriptures together makes us live a real though not full communion (cf. *Relatio Post Disceptationem*, 36). "To listen together to the Word of God, to practice the '*lectio divina*' of the Bible (. . .) is a path to follow to attain the unity of the faith, as response to the listening of the Word" (Benedict XVI's Address, Jan. 25, 2007). Hence, common listening of the Scriptures stimulates the dialogue of charity and makes that of truth grow. An open ecumenical problem is the understanding of the individual authorized in the interpretation of the Church (especially the magisterium); therefore, common study and biblical research should be intensified. Likewise, common efforts in the translations and diffusion of the Bible must be intensified, as well as inter-confessional celebrations of listening to the Word of God.

### **Proposition 37: Presence of His Holiness Bartholomew I**

The synodal fathers thank God for the presence and interventions of the fraternal delegates, representatives of other Churches and ecclesial communities and, in a special way, for the prayer of Vespers presided over by the Holy Father Benedict XVI, together with His Holiness Bartholomew I, ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople. The words of the ecumenical patriarch addressed to the synodal fathers have made it possible to experience a profound spiritual joy and to have a living experience of real and profound communion, though still not perfect; in them we have tasted the beauty of the Word of God, read in the light of the sacred liturgy and of the fathers, a spiritual reading strongly contextualized in our time. Thus, we have seen that, going to the heart of sacred Scripture, we really find the Word in the words, which opens the eyes of the faithful to respond to the challenges of today's world. Moreover, we have shared the joyful experience of having common Fathers in the East and West. May this meeting become a fervent prayer to the one Lord that Jesus' prayer "*Ut omnes unum sint*" may be a reality as soon as possible (John 17:20).

### **Third Part: The Word of God in the Mission of the Church**

#### **Proposition 38: Missionary task of all the baptized**

The mission to proclaim the Word of God is a task of all the disciples of Jesus Christ as a consequence of their baptism. This awareness must be deepened in every parish, community and Catholic organization. Initiatives must be proposed that make the Word of God reach all, especially baptized brothers who are not sufficiently evangelized. Given that the Word of God was made flesh to communicate with men, a privileged way to know it is through an encounter with witnesses that make it present and alive. By the force of their own charism experience, a special collaboration is contributed in the mission by missionary institutes. Moreover, the reality of the new ecclesial movements is an extraordinary richness of the evangelizing force of the Church at this time, so much so as to stimulate the Church to develop new forms of proclaiming the Gospel.

The laity is called to rediscover its responsibility to execute its prophetic task, which stems for them directly from their baptism, and witness to the Gospel in daily life: at home, at work and wherever they are. This witness often leads to persecution of the faithful because of the Gospel. The synod appeals to leaders in public life to guarantee religious liberty. Moreover, it is necessary to open itineraries of Christian initiation in those who, through listening to the Word, the celebration of the Eucharist and brotherly love lived in community, might practice an ever more adult faith. To be considered is the new question stemming from mobility and the migratory phenomenon, which opens new prospects of evangelization, because immigrants not only need to be evangelized but they themselves can be agents of evangelization.

#### **Proposition 39: Word of God and commitment in the world**

The Word of God, contained in the sacred Scriptures and in the living Tradition of the Church, helps the mind and heart of men to understand and love all the human realities and creation. In fact, it helps to recognize the signs of God in all man's fatigues directed to making the world more just and habitable; it helps



in identifying the "signs of the times" present in history; stimulates believers to commit themselves in favor of those who suffer and are victims of injustices. The struggle for justice and transformation is an integral part of evangelization (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 19).

The synodal fathers direct a special thought to those who, as believers, are committed to political and social life. They desire that the Word of God sustain their forms of testimony as well as inspire their action in the world, in search of the true good of all, and in respect of the dignity of every person. Hence, it is necessary that they be prepared through an adequate education according to the principles of the social doctrine of the Church.

#### **Proposition 40: Word of God and liturgical art**

The great tradition of East and West has always esteemed all the artistic expressions, specifically sacred images, inspired in sacred Scripture. We appreciate all artists enamored of beauty: poets, men of letters, painters, sculptors, musicians, people of the theater and cinema. They have contributed to the decoration of our churches, to the celebration of our faith, to the enrichment of our liturgy and, at the same time, many of them have helped to make the invisible world perceptible and to translate the divine message in the language of forms and figures. For all this, the synod manifests its profound gratitude. In every cultural area a new epoch must be aroused in which art can re-encounter biblical inspiration and be an instrument capable of proclaiming, singing, and enabling contemplation of the manifestation of the Word of God. In the construction of churches, bishops, duly helped, must endeavor to make these places adequate for the proclamation of the Word, for meditation and for the Eucharistic celebration. Sacred spaces, also outside liturgical action, must be eloquent, presenting the Christian mystery related with the Word of God.

#### **Proposition 41: Word of God and culture**

The Word of God is addressed to all mankind. It must be acknowledged that, in the course of the centuries, it has inspired different cultures, generated fundamental moral values, excellent artistic expressions and exemplary lifestyles. In the Word of God are found different applications that can help

both science in its discovery of ever new conquests as well as enhance the dialogue with all those who share our own faith. Hence, the synodal fathers encourage a dialogue between the Bible and culture, above all given the questions about meaning present in our time, so that the definitive answer to the search will be found. It would be good to organize biblical reading groups, including in secularized environments or among nonbelievers, as a way to open the world to God through the Word of the Bible.

#### **Proposition 42: Bible and translation**

The synod recommends that, in compatible cultures and in similar linguistic regions, the same translation of the Bible be approved and used, both in the liturgical use as well as in private. Many Churches spread around the world are still deprived of Bibles translated into their local languages. Important above all, therefore, is the formation of specialists dedicated to the various translations of the Bible.

#### **Proposition 43: Bible and dissemination**

The synod wishes to remind how necessary it is that all the faithful be able to have easy access to the reading of sacred texts. Together with this, it requests a general mobilization so that sacred texts are disseminated as much as possible and with all the instruments available that modern technologies offer, above all for people with different abilities, who have our preferred attention.

Such an endeavor calls for an exceptional form of collaboration between the Churches so that those that dispose of more means share more to respond to the needs of the Churches that are in greater difficulty. The synodal fathers recommend support of the commitment of the Catholic Biblical Federation for ample access to sacred Scripture (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 22) so that there is an ultimate increase in the number of translations of sacred Scripture and its capillary dissemination. This should be done in collaboration with the various Biblical societies.

#### **Proposition 44: Means of social communications**

The synod underlines the importance of the means and languages of communication for evangelization. The proclamation of the Good News finds new amplitude in present-day communication, characterized by the interaction of the means. The Church is called not only to disseminate the Word of God through the means but also and above all to integrate the message of salvation in the new culture that communication creates and amplifies. The new communicative context allows us to multiply the ways of proclamation and in-depth study of sacred Scripture. The latter, with its wealth, calls for reaching all communities, including the most remote through these new instruments.

It recommends thorough knowledge of the means of communication, a sympathetic attitude to its rapid changes, and more investment in communication through the different instruments that are offered, such as television, radio, newspapers, Internet. They are, in any case, ways that can facilitate the exercise of obedient listening to the Word of God. It is necessary to prepare competent Catholics of conviction in the field of social communication.

#### **Proposition 45: Word of God and world congress**

In these times, meetings of worldwide character are multiplied. Hence, it is not considered opportune to institute a specific congress on the Word of God. Episcopal conferences are invited to support and promote events to disseminate the Bible.

#### **Proposition 46: Faithful reading of Scripture: historical authenticity and fundamentalism**

Faithful reading of sacred Scripture, practiced since antiquity in the Tradition of the Church, seeks the truth that saves for the life of each faithful and for the Church. This reading acknowledges the historic value of the biblical tradition. It is precisely because of this value of historic testimony that it desires to rediscover the profound meaning of sacred Scripture destined also for the life of today's believer. Such a reading of Scripture differs from "fundamentalist interpretations," which ignore the human mediation of the inspired text and its literary genres. To use *lectio divina* fruitfully, the believer must be educated "not to confuse unknowingly the human limits of the biblical message with the

divine essence of the message itself" (cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, I F).

**Proposition 47: The Bible and the phenomenon of sects**

We are profoundly concerned over the increase and mutation of the phenomenon of sects. In fact, the sects of various origins seem to offer an experience of God's closeness to a person's life and promise an illusory happiness through the Bible, often interpreted in a fundamentalist way.

We propose:

- Through a vital correct hermeneutic of the biblical pages, to intensify pastoral activity to provide the food of the Word to the faithful seeking it;
- To learn from the rich experience of the first centuries of the Church, which, however, knew similar phenomena (cf. 1 John 2:19; 4:2-3);
- To know better the peculiar characteristics, the causes and promoters of the sects exactly as they present themselves today;
- To help the faithful to distinguish well the Word of God from private revelations;
- To stimulate groups that share and meditate in order to counteract the attraction of the sects and fundamentalism.

It is necessary that priests are adequately prepared to address this new situation, making them capable of proposing a biblical animation of pastoral care, adapted to the problems that people face today. We ask the Holy See to study, in collaboration with the episcopal conferences and the competent structures of the Catholic Eastern Churches, the phenomenon of the sects in its global scope and also in its local repercussions.

**Proposition 48: Bible and inculturation**

Revelation was constituted by taking from the different human cultures the authentic values capable of expressing the truth that God communicated to men for our salvation (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 11). The Word of God, in as much as revelation, introduced in cultures the knowledge of truth that would otherwise have been unknown and created cultural progress and development. The Lord's

command to the Church to proclaim the Word of God implies taking the Word of God to all peoples on earth and their cultures. This implies the same process of inculturation of the Word of God as occurs in Revelation. Hence, the Word of God must penetrate every environment so that culture produces original expressions of life, liturgy and Christian thought (cf. *Catechesi Tradendae*, 53). This takes place when the Word of God, proposed to a culture, "fertilize as from within the spiritual qualities and traditions of each people, confirms them, perfects them and recapitulates them in Christ" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 58), thus eliciting new expressions of Christian life.

For a genuine inculturation of the evangelical message, the formation of missionaries with adequate means must be ensured, to know in-depth the vital ambience and the socio-cultural conditions, so that they can be inserted in the environment, the language and the local cultures. It corresponds to the local Church in the first place to achieve a genuine inculturation of the evangelical message, paying attention of course to the risk of syncretism. The quality of inculturation depends on the degree of maturity of the evangelizing community.

#### **Proposition 49: Mission *ad gentes***

The Word of God is a good for all men, which the Church must not keep to herself but share with joy and generosity with all peoples and cultures, so that they also can find in Jesus Christ the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. John 14:6). Looking at the example of St. Paul, of the Apostles and of so many missionaries that, in the course of history, took the Gospel to peoples, this Synod reaffirms the urgency of the mission *ad gentes* also in our time — a proclamation that must be explicit, made not only within our churches but everywhere and must be accompanied by a coherent testimony of life, which makes the content evident and reinforces it. Bishops, priests, deacons, persons of consecrated life and laymen must also be close to persons who do not participate in the liturgy and do not frequent our communities. The Church must go out to all with the strength of the Spirit (cf. 2 Corinthians 2:5) and continue to defend prophetically the right and liberty of persons to listen to the Word of God, seeking the most effective means to proclaim it, not excluding the risk of persecution.

### **Proposition 50: Bible and interreligious dialogue**

The dialogue with non-Christian religions is a significant moment in the life of the Church and in the dialogue with men. Monotheisms, the traditional religions of Africa and Australia, the ancient spiritual traditions of Asia have values of respect and collaboration that can greatly foster understanding between persons and societies. The guidelines of this dialogue are in the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II. The synod also reminds of the need to effectively ensure for all believers the freedom to profess their own faith in private and public, as well as freedom of conscience.

### **Proposition 51: Holy Land**

Paul VI called the Holy Land the "Fifth Gospel." The synod recommends pilgrimages and, if possible, the study of the sacred Scriptures in the Holy Land, and following in the steps of St. Paul. Through this experience, pilgrims and students will be able to understand better the physical and geographical environment of the Scriptures and especially the relation between the two Testaments. The stones on which Jesus walked could become for them stones of living memory. In the meantime, Christians in the Holy Land need the communion of all Christians, especially in these days of conflict, poverty and fear.

### **Proposition 52: Dialogue between Christians and Jews**

The dialogue between Christians and Jews belongs to the nature of the Church. Faithful to his promises, God does not revoke the Old Covenant (cf. Romans 9 and 11). Jesus of Nazareth was a Jew and the Holy Land is the motherland of the Church. Christians and Jews share the Scriptures of the Jewish people, which Christians call the Old Testament. As Abraham's descendants, Jews and Christians can be a source of blessing for humanity (cf. Genesis 17:4-5). Jewish understanding of the Bible can help Christians in the understanding and study of the Scriptures. Christian biblical interpretation is based on the unity of

the two Testaments in Jesus, Word made flesh. He realizes in his person the full meaning of the Scriptures with continuity and discontinuity as regards the inspired books of the Jewish people. It is suggested that episcopal conferences promote meetings and dialogues between Jews and Christians.

**Proposition 53: Dialogue between Christians and Muslims**

"The Church also looks with esteem at Muslims that adore the one God" (NA, 3). They refer to Abraham and render worship to God above all with prayer, alms and fasting. Dialogue with them allows for better knowledge of one another and collaboration in promoting ethical and spiritual values. In this dialogue, the synod stresses the importance of respect for life, human rights and women's rights, as well as the distinction between the socio-political order and the religious order in the promotion of justice and peace in the world. Another important topic in this dialogue is reciprocity and freedom of conscience and religion. It is suggested to the episcopal conferences of countries where it is beneficial to promote circles of dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

**Proposition 54: Cosmic dimensions of the Word of God and custody of creation**

The Word of God communicates to us the beauty of God through the beauty of creation and also through sacred images, such as icons of the incarnate Word. They are modalities with which the invisible mystery of God is in some way made visible and perceptible to our senses. The Fathers of the Church, moreover, always affirmed the cosmic dimensions of the Word of God made flesh; each creature bears in a certain sense a sign of the Word of God. In Jesus Christ, dead and risen, all created things find definitive recapitulation (cf. Ephesians 1:10). All things and persons, therefore, are called to be good and beautiful in Christ. Sadly, the man of our time has lost the habit of contemplating the Word of God in the world he inhabits that has been given by God. Hence, the rediscovery of the Word of God, in all its dimensions, impels us to denounce all the actions of contemporary man that do not respect nature as creation.

To receive the Word of God attested in sacred Scripture and in the living Tradition of the Church generates a new way of seeing things, promoting a genuine ecology, which has its deepest root in the obedience of the faith that receives the Word of God. Hence, we hope that, in the pastoral action of the Church, commitment in favor of the safeguarding of creation will be intensified, developing a renewed theological sensibility to the goodness of all things created in Christ, Word of God incarnate.

## Conclusion

### **Proposition 55: Mary *Mater Dei* and *Mater Fidei***

The synod, whose intention is above all to renew the faith of the Church in the Word of God, looks at Mary, the Virgin Mother of the Word Incarnate, who with her yes to the Word of the Covenant and to its mission, perfectly fulfills humanity's divine vocation. The Synodal Fathers suggests the dissemination of the Angelus prayer among the faithful, daily memorial of the Word Incarnate and of the Rosary.

The Church of the New Testament lives where the Word Incarnate is received, loved and served in full availability to the Holy Spirit. Mary's faith then develops in the love with which it accompanies the Incarnate Word's growth and mission. Under the Son's cross, faith and love become the hope with which Mary accepts to become the Mother of the beloved disciple and of redeemed humanity.

Devout and loving attention to Mary's figure, as model and archetype of the Church's faith, is of capital importance to realize also today a concrete change of paradigm in the relation of the Church with the Word, both in the posture of prayerful listening as well as generosity in the commitment to the mission and the proclamation. The synodal fathers, united to the Holy Father in prayer so that the synod "will carry fruits of genuine renewal to each Christian community" (Benedict XVI, Angelus in Pompeii, Oct. 19, 2008), invite pastors



and faithful to look at Mary and ask the Holy Spirit for the grace of a lively faith in the Word of God made flesh.

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