

THE BIBLE AND GOD'S REVELATION IN HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of God's revelation is of primary importance for Christian theology. It is important first, because from the point of view of logic it preceeds any other Christian doctrine. That is to say that the doctrine of God's revelation is the foundation upon which the whole structure of Christian doctrines rests. Remove that foundation and the whole system collapses.

It is of primary importance for Christian theology, second, because it is closely related to God's existence. To deny God's revelation, is to deny His capacity to reveal Himself, and to deny His capacity to reveal Himself, means to limit His power, and to limit His power means in the last analysis to deny His existence. This leads to the premise that the concept of God's self-revelation is the basic presupposition of Christian theology, after God's existence itself.

Third, the doctrine of God's revelation is part of the essence of Christianity. For the Christian, God's self-revelation is not a mere hypothesis, a theory or a supposition. To believe in God's self-revelation is part of being a Christian. This also leads to this other premise, that a person cannot be a Christian and at the same time deny the revelation of God.

THE IDEA OF REVELATION

Our verb "to reveal" comes from the Latin *revelare*, which means to show, to discover something which is hidden. The noun "revelation" indicates the act and effect of revealing, that, is the process of making something known. The terms *gala* from the Hebrew and *apokalypto* from the Greek which have been translated into our English Bibles by the verb "to reveal" and the noun "revelation" convey basically the same idea—to reveal or discover something which was hidden in order to be known by its own nature. Besides *apokalypto* and *apokalypsis*, in the New Testament we also find other terms which express the idea of

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revelation, like *phaneroo* (to manifest, to make clear); *epiphaino* and *deiknuo* (to show); and *exegeomai* (to make known).

The term "revelation" and its synonyms "to show," "to declare," "to make clear," "to make known," etc., used in this sense is a vocabulary extensively used in both Testaments. It is true that in the Old Testament these terms are not used primarily with a theological connotation. In the New Testament, however, these terms are always used in a theological context in connection with God's self-revelation. One of the best examples of this is Jesus words: "I thank Thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matthew 11:25-27 RSV).

In these words of our Lord we find the true meaning of revelation. This act of disclosure or taking off the cover to make God's nature known to everybody is not the result of human activity, but the work of grace of a God who is the Creator of the universe. That is to say, that this is a self-revelation of God.

The biblical doctrine of revelation is that God has revealed himself in a general way in the universe, but in a special form in Jesus Christ—the Logos—and it is through Him alone that man can perceive a proper knowledge of God. Therefore, according to the Bible, revelation is a definite act of God through which He performs a self-disclosure of His person and purpose to men through the different means which He has chosen.

A complete treatment of the doctrine of revelation includes (1) the nature of revelation, (2) the purpose of revelation, (3) the divisions of revelation, and (4) the methods or modalities of revelation. The purpose and scope of this paper, however, are limited to the modes of revelation used by God in His self-disclosure to man, especially His self-revelation in history.

THE BIBLE—THE FASCINATING BOOK

To be sure, God has chosen more than one method to reveal himself to mankind. And that is what the author of the epistle to the Hebrews had in mind when he wrote: "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers." These "many and various ways" which God chose to reveal Himself to mankind took the form of theophanies, angels, dreams, visions, direct contacts with men, miracles, signs, the prophets, and in a very special way in the Person of Jesus Christ. All these different forms of revelation given to individuals and to generations now passed away, are registered in an inspired Book—the Bible, which is a summary of the totality of God's revelation. And what a fascinating Book the Bible is!

What is the Bible? What is the reason for its continuous and extraordinary influence? Why have millions and millions of men and women read and loved it and have followed its rules and precepts? Why has the Bible been so effective in maintaining in such a uniform way the moral and spiritual life of man? Why have even people of the highest social position believed that the Bible contains the plan of salvation for man? Why have kings, presidents, dictators, scientists, lawyers and scholars read it and have given it a central place in their libraries and have gone to its pages as a source of inspiration for their words?

When I open a book of medicine, philosophy, law, science, history and even theology, I read words, formulas, symbols and precepts. These books have been written by professional doctors, philosophers, lawyers, scientists, historians and theologians, who have written about their particular subjects of interest and research, and therefore, no matter how well written these books are, they tend to be dry, mechanical and systematic. But the Bible is a different Book. It was written in a different form and by different people. The least that we can say about this Book is that it is a fascinating book. In fact the most fascinating Book of all. And the reason is that the Bible contains theology, ethics, science, history, law and religion. But the Bible is not primarily a Book of systematic theology, or social ethics, or physical science, or professional history or ritualistic religion. When I open my Bible I do not read scientific terminology—even though the Bible contains much science; not a long list of ethical precepts—even though the Bible contains much ethic; neither an exposition of systematic theology—even though the Bible is full of theology; or examples of devotional prayers and spiritual exercises—even though it contains many.

What do I find in my Bible then? I do not read just words, formulas, symbols and precepts systematically arranged. When I open my Bible I see things and objects. I see houses and buildings; roads and streets; deserts and woods; mountains and fields. But I see not only things and objects, I also see people. I see kings, prophets, shepherds, warriors, fishermen, tax collectors. And these things and people are not dead like the scenes in a wax museum. They are alive and in them and through them I see events. I see acts of love and acts of hate; acts of revenge and acts of mercy; weddings and burials; friendships and rivalries; peace and war; grief and happiness; I see people running away from God and people seeking the mercy of God; I see people disobeying God and people walking with God. In short, when I open my Bible I see a world of reality—God's world—populated by a real people—God's people—a people who are alive, and struggling through the experiences and frustrations of their everyday life like you and me. Even though the Bible contains much theology, ethics, science and religion, it is above all a Book of history—it tells a particular history, the history of God's people, the history of God's plan of salvation for men.

THE GOD OF HISTORY

A group of modern and contemporary scholars, among them Oscar Cullman, Bernard Ramm and George Eldon Ladd, support the theory that although God's revelation took place "In many and various ways" (Hebrews 1:1), it took place *primarily* in history. This school of thought affirms that God's self-revelation to man did not consist primarily in the communication of certain ideas, propositions and doctrines about God to be believed by human beings, but rather consists in the confrontation of God with man in real historical events. George Eldon Ladd, for instance, in an article published in *Christianity Today* some years ago, writes that "the Hebrew-Christian faith did not grow out of lofty philosophical speculations or profound mystical experiences. It arose out of historical experiences of Israel, old and new, in which God made himself known."¹

The Israelites saw God in all events of the Hebrew history. Samuel, the prophet, spoke to the people of Israel "concerning all the saving deeds of the Lord which he performed for you and your fathers" (1 Samuel 12:7). And the multitude at Pentecost said that they heard the disciples speak in their own language about "the mighty acts of God" (Acts 2:11)—this is one of the peculiar phrases in the Old Testament. The Bible is, if nothing else, a record and summary of those saving acts of God, among them the call of Abraham, the liberation of the Hebrew people from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the conquest of Canaan, the incarnation of Christ, His death, resurrection and ascension. These events took place in order to communicate a message. They were performed in order to reveal God as a redeeming God who is active in the universe and in history. As Ladd says: "The God of Israel was the God of history."² The Bible could well be called the Book of the Acts of God, and therefore must be read in the context of its purpose such as John explains it: "But these (Jesus works) are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

In other words, the primary purpose of the Bible is not to teach history, cosmology, ethics, science and not even theology. The *primary* purpose of the Bible is to narrate, by means of the particular history of the Hebrew people the redemptive acts of God in relation to man. God decided to provide, through this particular line of history a way of salvation for the human race. This particular line of history is called the holy history, the history of salvation or redemption.

The peculiarity of this modality of God's revelation in history is that the initiative for this dialogue between God and man is taken by God. Other religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Mohammedanism, etc., present man in his endless search for the meaning and reason of his existence. But in the Christian religion it is exactly the opposite—man

1. "The Saving Acts of God," *Christianity Today*, January 30, 1961.

2. *Ibid.*

runs away from the presence of a holy God, but all of a sudden he finds himself confronted with his Creator who enters in the current of human history.

Of course the Bible contains its own theology—a “historical theology”—which runs as a golden thread throughout the Scriptures and which helps to interpret the meaning of those redemptive events. The Biblical writers wrote history, laws, hymns, sermons, philosophy, theology around one theme and religious message which constitutes the contents of this Book—that theme is the *history of man's redemption*. And no doubt that the Bible contains much more than historical theology—matters of archeology, ethics, culture and even religion. But for the Biblical theologian these matters are important only when they help him to understand the historical theology of the Scriptures.

Therefore, the Bible is not primarily an anthology or collection of religious ideas of great religious thinkers. Neither is it primarily a systematic presentation of theological concepts, nor a system of philosophical speculation. Neither is the Bible primarily the description of profound mystical experiences of saints or religious persons, although it contains many examples of this type of religious experiences. As George Eldon Ladd says: “The Bible is first of all a record of history. But history is recorded because it embodies the acts of God.”³

The substance of the special revelation of God is His redemptive action in history—the history of salvation. “The emphasis throughout the Bible is that God has acted in redemptive history.”⁴ God is not a transcendent God who cannot be reached by man. The God of the Bible is a God who inserts Himself in the current of human history, a God who makes wonders and powerful acts and through them carries on His redemptive purposes. These redemptive acts of God begin with Genesis 3:15. This is considered by some Bible scholars as the first promise of a Messiah or Redeemer of man. Commenting on this verse, Paul K. Jewett says: “And what is this Protevangelium but the promise that God will not cease to act in history till he has destroyed man's mortal foe and undone the mischief which he wrought?”⁵ And he is right because the Bible is the narration of the history of the events divinely designed through the particular history of a people—Israel—which culminated in the fulfilling of this promise in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The saving acts of God are real historical events and as such they take place within the flow of human history in precise moments and places. The Bible has a redemptive purpose and as such forms part of the history of salvation. The Bible is a drama about God and man—it tells the history of redemption of the human race. Beginning with Genesis 1:1 and ending with Revelation 22:21, the content of the Bible is woven with

3. *Ibid.*

4. Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom*, Preface, p. XII.

5. *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 47.

a golden thread of salvation history which goes through Calvary and ends with the "New Jerusalem." That golden thread tells a very special history—the history of salvation of the human race.

God decided to save man, therefore he designed a plan of redemption and then He set Himself to work to carry on His plan. The history of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis and later the history of the Hebrew people, leads to one place—Calvary—where Jesus completed the fulfilling of God's promise with the words "It is finished" (John 19:30).

The good news which the Bible proclaims is that God has come to visit man. God spoke to Abraham, to Moses, to Joshua and to the prophets. In other words, the divine revelation does not originate in history but rather, the Lord of history, who controls the universe, also controls history and acts through it. Therefore, the primary purpose of Christianity is not that man may come to accept certain ideas and concepts about God, but rather that man come to know God in a personal and redemptive way. His encounter with this deity is not the encounter with an object but with a Subject—a Person. This is the story of the Bible—the history of man's salvation.

DEED—WORD REVELATION

But to say that the Bible is *only* a book of history would be an understatement. On one side the Biblical writers were not professional historians, therefore they did not write the Bible in an objective and impartial way, according to the canons of modern historiography. To be sure the sacred writers came from all walks of life: among them were kings, judges, heroes, poets, legislators, tax collectors, farmers, fishermen, statesmen, theologians, etc. These writers had a faith, and when they wrote they recorded the historical events and with them they also recorded their interpretation. Speaking of the Gospels, Ladd says: "Form criticism has taught us that even the Synoptic Gospels are not impartial reports from neutral observers; they are the witnesses of a believing Christian community to its faith in Jesus Christ as Messiah and Son of God."⁶

That is to say that the acts of God in the history of redemption are not events which took place as cold historical facts. These events are accompanied by their word of interpretation and are inseparable from them. By themselves these events cannot communicate any meaning. Ramm says that "Historical events without the God-given interpretation would be like television dramas without sound."⁷ And Ladd adds: "These events are not . . . self-explanatory but require the Word of God to interpret the revelatory character of the acts of God. The Bible is both the record of these events and the inspired interpretation of the divinely intended meaning of these events."⁸

6. *Jesus and the Kingdom*, Preface, p. XL.

7. *The Special Revelation and The Word of God*, p. 79.

8. *Jesus and The Kingdom*, Preface, p. XIV.

Therefore, the God of the Bible not only *acts*; He also *speaks*. He does not leave the interpretation of his wonderful redemptive acts to the reason of the human mind. Ramm says: "To present God as acting and man as interpreting as well as he can is to misrepresent the structure of revelation. These events occur by reason of a divine intentionality, and therefore they must await their significance from the same God."⁹ He reveals the interpretation and meaning of these events to His messengers, through divine inspiration. That is what Peter means when speaking of the sacred writers says that "no prophesy of scripture is a matter of one's interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (II Peter 1:20-21, RSV).

The word of interpretation is as much a part of the history of salvation as the events themselves. The spoken word of God always *accompanies* and explains the revealing character of the event, therefore, the historical events are revelatory only when they are accompanied by the revelatory word. Emil Brunner says: "This revelation takes place through the 'words' of God and through the 'acts' of God. Both together, equally, constitute the fact of historical revelation. This 'speaking' and this 'acting' of God took place within Israel, and nowhere else. It took place in a chain of historical events in which word and act were fused into an indissoluble unity."¹⁰

Very often the event preceeds the word of interpretation, but it is the word which explains the meaning of the event and complements it. Both, the event and the word are essential elements in God's message. Redemption is the substance of revelation, but there is no revelation apart from the divine word which interprets the redemptive action of God. The God who redeems is also the God who speaks. "Revelation," says Ladd, "has occurred in the unique events of redemptive history. These events were accompanied by the divinely given word of interpretation. The word, both spoken and written, is itself a part of the total event. The Bible is both the record of this redemptive history and the end product of the interpretative word."¹¹

The difference between secular history and biblical history is the same as between a silent movie and a sound movie. Secular history is interested in the *what* of the event; but biblical history is interested not only in the *what* but also in the *why* of those events. Bernard Ramm says: "Biblical history is interpreted history. All historical writing is interpretation. Common events are the subject of historians, but the part that those events and persons had in the plan of God are known only through divine interpretation."¹² Let us consider three specific cases:

9. *Op. Cit.*, p. 81.

10. *Revelation and History*, p. 84.

11. "The Saving Acts of God," *ibid.*

12. "Biblical Faith and History," *Christianity Today*, March 1, 1963.

In the Old Testament we find the story of Joseph who was the victim of his brothers' jealousy. He was sold to a caravan of Ishmaelites who took him to Egypt and in turn was sold to Potiphar, the captain of the guard of Pharaoh. Throughout a series of events, Joseph became second to Pharaoh in Egypt. This is the *what* of the story and this is what secular history would tell us. But the Bible, the holy history goes a step beyond and interprets for us the meaning of that chain of events and tell us *why* they took place. In these events we see God working in the history of His people. The call of Abraham, the birth of Isaac, the selling of Joseph and the migration of Jacob's family to Egypt were not the product of mere chance. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are the key instruments in the fulfilling of the divine plan to create a chosen people. The history of Joseph, together with the migration of Jacob and his family to Egypt, is the explanation of why Israel was in Egypt. In these events we see God working in history in a mysterious way. That was Joseph's conviction when he explains to his brothers the events which took him to Egypt: "As for you, you meant evil against me: but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Genesis 50:20). This is the key verse in the interpretation of Israel's history from the time of Abraham to the time of the slavery of the people of Israel in Egypt.

The second case is the deliverance of the Hebrew people from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan. A leader emerged, by the name of Moses, who with mighty arm delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He led them in the crossing of the Red Sea and during the forty years of wandering in the desert. After his death, another leader, Joshua, led the people of Israel across the Jordan and during the strategic conquest of Canaan. Again this is the *what* of the story and this is what secular history would tell us. But again the holy history goes a step beyond and tells us *why* all these things took place. This is found in the book of Deuteronomy on what has been called the "Deuteronomic emphasis." In his final speeches to the Hebrew people recorded in this book, time after time Moses reminds them that the reason why they are there and are ready to take possession of Canaan is not because they deserve it, or because of their own power, but because that was God's plan. God had chosen Israel as his own people out of love (Deut. 7:6-9). He had made a pact with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and now He was fulfilling His promise giving them the land which He had promised them. He had taken them out of Egypt with a powerful arm and had protected them during the forty years of wondering in the desert, and had brought them to the edges of the promised land, not because they deserved it but because God was fulfilling His promise (Deut. 4:29-31; 9:4-6).

The third case is found in the New Testament and it is the classical example used by many writers. It is the scandal of the cross. For a person observing the crucifixion of Christ outside the gates of Jerusalem it would have not had any special meaning. For him it would have been one out

of many such executions. But the holy history again goes one step further and tells us *why* Christ died. A historian would only say that Christ died; but the Bible says that Christ *died for our sins*" (I Cor. 15:3). The scandal of the cross needed the scandal of preaching. The scandal of the event needed the scandal of the word of interpretation. Ramm says: "The strong event of the cross without an equally strong word of revelation would have lost its power in the Church and then in the world."¹³

Paul Achtemeier says that the term *saving history* "points to the fact that the biblical history is not like any other history, but rather that it is a record of events in which a divine action is taking place. God is on the move in the Bible. He is working toward a goal. When He speaks his word into the realm of time and space, he thereby declares his intention. And then he does not rest until he has fulfilled his intention and brought history to the goal which he has set for it. The instrument of his working is his word. The word which speaks is fulfilled. In short, the word and action of God are synonymous, and what God says, he does."¹⁴

CONCLUSION

We conclude then that the God of the Bible is a personal God and as such He has revealed Himself to man. This revelation was made in "many and various ways" (Heb. 1:1). But since God is a personal God, He is a God who acts in history and does what He pleases in order to carry on His redemptive purposes.

But the God of the Bible is also a God who speaks. In the first chapter of Genesis we find him not only acting, but also speaking. And throughout the Bible He speaks. The difference between the God of the Bible and the heathen gods is that the God of the Bible is a God who speaks. His acting and his speaking go hand in hand. Ramm says: "The event and the word must be held with equal firmness. A revelatory word separated from the redeeming event is an abstraction; a saving event separated from the interpreting word is opaque. The word is the hard datum in the area of truth; the event is the hard datum in the area of history. The event of redemption awaits the word of revelation: the word of revelation finds its substance in the redemptive work of God."¹⁵

One of the greatest glories of the gospel is that God has spoken to man in history. But the greatest glory of all is that man can answer back and speak to him and carry on a constant dialogue with his Creator.

13. *The Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 78.

14. *The Old Testament Roots of Our Faith*, p. 22.

15. *The Special Revelation and the Word of God*, p. 82.