

# III. IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

## HYPOSTASES OF “THE WORD” IN BIBLICAL TEXTS

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### **Abstract:**

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“The word” of the Holy Scriptures is much more than what is known in everyday speech. It is, of course, a verbal communication tool and also the embodiment of Divinity as well as a message addressed to people. The complicated relationship between these three major meanings represents the substance of this study entailed by the frequency of the term in biblical texts.

### **Key-words:**

Word, biblical texts, polysemantism, symbolic values, pragmatic values.

### **1. The word-divinity and its embodiments**

Even in everyday speech – lay or, in any case, located outside exegeses and theological environment, the term *word* is polysemantic. It is not only the association of a sound and a meaning which relates to interhuman communication, but it may also mean “reason”, “thinking”, “science”, “honour”, “covenant”, “message” and so on (cf. DLR, s.v.).

However, once one has read the biblical texts, one may be surprised to find that this term denotes much more, including the embodiment of divinity. This means that particular attention should be paid to decoding all the other meanings because the one that has the ultimate value,

“Word=Divinity”, radically changes the nature of relationships within the huge polysemantic sphere of the *Word*. This is what we aim to do further on.

The semantic plethora becomes apparent once one attempts to find the meanings of the term in question in specialised dictionaries, as in any other lexicographic tool, for that matter. Thus, in the French *Vocabulaire théologique orthodoxe* (VTO), the term *parole* ‘word’ only appears as the headword of a dictionary ‘entry’, which refers to *Christ*, in the same volume. Here there is already an extremely revealing definition, through the mere sequence of headwords, for it results in the *Word = Christ* equivalence. Then we note that for the latter the lexicographic definition is replaced by two other headwords: *Messiah* and *Verb* (meaning ‘speech’), cf. VTO, *s.v.* As regards the first equivalence, the etymology is first explained to us; thus, the Hebrew word *Messiah* means ‘anointed’, corresponding to the Greek *Christos*, which also means ‘anointed’. A strictly theological analysis follows, with reference to the *Old Testament* texts. The etymology is provided for *verbe* ‘word’, ‘speech’, according to the structure of the dictionary, with reference to the Latin *verbum* and the Greek *logos*, both meaning *parole*, in the Saussurean sense of the term, i.e. ‘speech’, practical use in everyday communication of linguistic signs that make up the system of a language (F. de Saussure, 1998, *passim*). From a theological point of view, the explanation starts with the fact that, throughout the *Bible*, the living God speaks to people. In the Old Testament, He addresses the “chosen people”, i.e., the prophets. In the New Testament, He reveals Himself to us, for our redemption, becoming man, while His Word, which is eternal, becomes flesh. The scriptural basis of these explanations is, as expected, the well-known verses in the *Gospel of John*:

“*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*”<sup>1</sup> (*John*, 1:1)

“*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” (*John* 1:14)

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<sup>1</sup> The English biblical quotes are taken from *Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc., available at <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-NIV-Bible>.

The string of “correspondences” with other verses in the OT and the NT is very long, therefore the biblical exegesis has relied on a solid base to clarify these claims of the Evangelist: the only Son of God, Jesus Christ, is the Word. In this capacity, He is the creative speech and creation itself, for “the world was made through Him”, as we find out in the *Creed*, cf. Psalms 33:6 as well:

*“By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,  
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.”* (OT, *Psalms* 33:6)

A defining feature which the old church fathers and modern exegetes much insist on, for the biblical text requires such clarifications, is the value of the divine “message” addressed to people. By becoming incarnate, the Word is directly addressed to us, the OT says, which means that the one who receives Christ keeps the Word of God within oneself. This allegation is justified by the corresponding verse in the *Gospel of Luke*:

*“He replied, ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.’”* (Luke 8:21)

*“He replied, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’”* (Luke 11:28)

## **2. The human word and the divine word**

As one gradually immerses in the study of the biblical text, one notes that there are several attestations of the two fundamental hypostases of the concept of “word”: human and divine. This is what the modern researchers André Feuillet and Pierre Grelot do in their short monograph on the term “Word” in the very extensive dictionary entitled “*Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*”. Starting from the “word/person” equivalence and the dynamism of the latter, the authors of these entries in the VTB point out that this energy was imprinted on all forms of speech manifestations, as it appeared in biblical texts, including human speech. Naturally, as a divine gift, the Word has all possible qualities – creativity, power of creation, ability to reveal and enlighten, to comfort and strengthen within.

But, on the other hand, as a communication tool used by people, the word may stray from its righteous design, serving human sins such as lie,

pride, humiliation of fellow human beings. Ultimately, the spoken word of men has the power over life and death, cf. *Proverbs* 18:21:

*“The tongue has the power of life and death,  
and those who love it will eat its fruit.”* (*Proverbs* 18:21)

Therefore, words often function as touchstones for the virtues of a good Christian, cf. *Sir* 27:4-7; ancient sages would always draw attention to the need to properly employ words, to carefully use “the right word at the right moment”, to express the truth, freedom, love, regardless of the social, economic and spiritual context in which we find ourselves, as members of human society. We are well aware that folk wisdom concentrates such teachings in the paremiological treasury of peoples, in formulas tailored to the nature of each language. In Romanian, such parables encourage the preservation of speech appropriate to the social status of the speaker or the economy of speech for the benefit of efficient practical activity:

*“Ori vorbește cum ți-e portul, ori te poartă cum ți-e vorba!”* (‘Practise what you preach’)

*“Vorba multă, sărăcia omului.”* (‘Many words will not fill a bushel’)

To put it differently, words function as a mirror of the human soul, revealing thought and human behaviour. It is this value of marker of human nature, with its best and its worst, that the entire exposition on the “human word” of the abovementioned scholars relies on. For our part, we have noticed that the *topoi* they found in the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament* are more numerous for the negative determinations of the spoken word of men than are for the positive ones. In the subchapter entitled “On the misuse of the word”, the word is associated with stupidity, indiscretion, loose tongue, pretence, only in the series of relatively benign faults, recorded in such verses as *Proverbs* 10:8; 13:3, *Proverbs* 20:19; 20:18; 10:19; 29:20. However, as we know, there are also bigger flaws than spreading empty talk, in that, people may utter wicked, harmful words, with a serious effect on their fellow men, such as gossip (*Sir* 5:14; 28:17; *Proverbs* 12:18), denunciation, slander (*Proverbs* 26:22; *Psalms* 5:10; 10:7 etc.). Finally, there is a third category in the series of sinful speech, such as blasphemy, perjury, and the lowest of them all, expression of black magic, sorcery, pagan superstitions. There are many

such biblical references, cf. *Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach* 23:12-21; *Exodus* 20:7; *Numbers* 30:3; *Deuteronomy* 23-22, and *Matthew* 5:33; *1 Corinthians* 1:17 and so on. As known, such exegeses often quote the *New Testament* epistle of Jacob regarding his advice for the believers when they have to choose the words to communicate among themselves and the words used in their prayers to God.

In the second section of the mentioned micro-study, entitled “On the proper use of the word”, the biblical references are fewer, but by no means insignificant. If humans, following the parables of the wisemen from the *Bible* and the supreme divine model, thoroughly ponder their words, the latter may become “treasure and joy” cf. *Proverbs* 15:23; 25:11. There is “a time to be silent and a time to speak”, cf. *Ecclesiastes* 3:7, just as there are many situations in life when it is better to “set a guard over [one’s] mouth” if one fails to mind what one says (*Psalms* 39:2; 141:3; 31:26). If one manages to use them wisely, words bring contentment and spiritual comfort; taken out from the depth of one’s heart as from deep waters, they become a treasure, a support in everyday life, for they begin to drink more and more from the “Word of God”, cf. *Luke* 6:45; *1 Corinthians* 14:3 and so on and so forth.

As regards the divine hypostases of speech, the cited authors elaborate on the *Word of God* (cf. VTB, pp. 147-152). Showing that the biblical revelation of the living God who speaks to the people in the OT prepares the central event of the NT, in which the Word becomes body, the entire exegesis is organised on two main sources – OT and NT, but especially on three major directions of research of the values of the word in the *Holy Scriptures*. Studying various “aspects of the word”, they point out that through speech God reveals and acts. In the first hypostasis, the Word becomes law and rule of life, cf. *Decalogue*, *Exodus* 20:1-17; *Deuteronomy* 5:6-22 etc., about its essential existence, whereas the second is no longer about the message addressed to the people, but about the dynamic reality of the occurrence of divine effects in humans’ life: “*He spoke, and it came to be*” (*Psalms* 33:6-9).

As shown above, the effects of the divine word are countless. The Word preaches with authority (*Matthew* 7:29); heals the sick (*Matthew* 8:8; *Mark* 2:10); wards off evil spirits (*Matthew* 8:16); resurrects the dead (*Luke*

7:14); calms storms (*Mark* 4:39); reinforces the words of the messengers (apostles), cf. *Mark* 16:20 etc.

The *New Testament* presents divine works – healings, multiplication of loaves, fish, wine, resurrection and so many others, which are manifestations of the Word, at the level of usual perception.

But a careful study of the *Bible* reveals the values of the “incorporeal Word”, of God’s subsistent mystery through the work of Jesus Christ. In His double work, we are told, revelator and maker of salvation, the only Son made His Father known to people (*John* 1:18). To redeem them, He brought Grace and Truth into the world (*John* 1:14; 1:16). Before these achievements, people have the duty to behave appropriately. This is discussed in numerous exegeses devoted to the divine Word.

### **3. Humans’ relationships with the divine Logos**

#### **3.1. The word as a divine message**

A specialist in biblical language, William Barclay, a professor at Trinity College in Glasgow, Scotland, believes that the main significance one should give to the *Word* is that of *message* (Barclay, 1992, pp. 330-339). He uses the term *logos* because his semantic analyses of biblical terms mainly concern the *New Testament* texts, written in *Koiné*, i.e., common Greek, from which the Greek language of the *New Testament* emerged. Naturally, he acknowledges the entire wealth of meanings of *logos*, but argues that its most frequent uses in the *Holy Scriptures* mean “Christian message”. It often appears in the phrase “*The Word of God*” (*Logos tou Theou*), with a subjective genitive for *Theos* “God”, which means that the message to the people starts from it, cf. *Luke* 5:1; 11:28; *John* 10:35; *Acts* 4:31; 6:7; 13:44; *1 Corinthians* 14:36; *Hebrews* 13:7. It may also occur as *God’s Word* (*Theou logos*), which is roughly the same thing, except the fact that this is an objective genitive, which means it is a word *about* God, uttered by Jesus Christ. We find it as such in *1 Thessalonians* 4:15; *2 Thessalonians* 3:1. The phrase *The Word of Christ* is also mentioned once, in *Colossians* 3:16.

### **3.2. The functions of the logos according to W. Barclay**

Pointing out that in general the Word of God circulated more in the oral than the written version, at the beginning of Christianity and then in the centuries of the Evangelists (dec. II-II AD), the cited author lists the numerous “functions” of the biblical *logos*, many of which are also found in the synthesis of A. Feuillet and P. Grelot, in *Vocabulaire de théologie biblique*. In W. Barclay, they are more numerous and more clearly explained.

#### **3.2.1. “The Word judges”**

Based on *John* 12:48, the exegete shows that he who has heard the scriptural truth, has read it in the *Bible* and yet ignores it in his daily life, assumes the responsibility of a true Christian. The verse goes as follows:

*“There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; the very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day”.*

(*John* 12:48)

Therefore, receiving the Word is not a privilege, but a great responsibility.

#### **3.2.2. “The Word purifies”**

Showing what is good and rotting the evil in the world, the Word is a guide, helping humans to cleanse themselves from evil. The words of John and of others stand proof of that:

*“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”*

(*John* 15:3)

*“For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer.”* (1 *Timothy* 4:4-5)

#### **3.2.3. “The Word brings Faith”**

One cannot become aware of the divine message until one hears/reads the divine Word. If one understands it well and passes it on to others, one will grow on God.

*“But many who heard the message believed; so the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand.”* (*Acts* 4:4)

### **3.2.4. “The Word facilitates rebirth”**

W. Barclay starts from a statement by G. K. Chesterton, regarding man’s destiny: “*Whatever man is, he is not what he was destined to be*” (apud W. Barclay, 1992, p. 331). In other words, the real Christian undergoes such a great change, once he has acknowledged the Word of God, that he becomes unrecognisable. In biblical terms, this radical change in thought and feeling, in social behaviour, is called “rebirth”. The scriptural argument chosen by the Scottish scholar is this:

*“For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” (1 Peter 1:23)*

### **3.3. People’s duties with regard to the Logos**

In terms of their views of the divine Logos, the three abovementioned researchers have similar opinions as to people’s duties to it. W. Barclay lists no less than twelve situations to which the Christian must conform. Through a dynamic of opposites, they develop and, at the same time, concentrate all of the old teachings regarding the biblical message. We shall merely enumerate them here without resuming the interpretation of each exhortation, as that would mean an independent exegetic study due to the extensiveness and depth of the ideas discussed. Thus, one must hear the Word (*Matthew 13:20; Acts 13:7; 13:44*); receive it in “one’s heart and mind”, i.e., thoroughly learn it (*Luke 8:13; James 1:21; Acts 8:14; 11:1; 17:11*); one must religiously follow it (*Luke 8:13*); one must “remain in it” (*John 8:31*), i.e., live it day and night, with one’s whole being. On the other hand, starting from the Logos towards man, it must be obeyed (*John 8:51; 14:23*); confessed (*Acts 8:25*); served (*Acts 6:4*), boldly spoken (*Acts 4:29*); explained (*Acts 18:11*). By relating to the worldly order in which we live, the Logos requires its concrete application in life, not just its theorisation (*James 1:22*), even though this may mean persecution and acts of martyrdom (*1 Thessalonians 1:6; Revelation 1:9*).

The research we have mentioned points to mistakes that we or our fellow men may make in relation to the Logos. There are at least four such deviations:

a) Forgetting or suppressing the Logos under the pressure of aversive facts of life are evoked by the Evangelists, cf. *Matthew 13:22* or *Mark 4:15*.



b) There is a possibility that the Logos will not be believed. This may happen either because the receiver considers it “too good to be true” or because a common man fears dogmatic constraints that he feels unable to bear, as they would radically change his life. The verse *1 Peter 2:8* is illustrative in this regard, for it speaks about the Word as “a stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall”.

c) Spreading the word might alter it by improperly conveying it, with or without intention. Maybe a poor understanding of the meanings of the Logos or maybe a hostile attitude causes the essence of the Logos to be skewed, falsified, drawn away from its true missions. Such contexts are attested in biblical texts, e.g. verses 2:17 and 4:2 in *2 Corinthians*.

d) *Mark 7:13* refers to the possible inefficiency in preaching the logos. Through the parable of those who do not treasure their parents based on old traditions, the evangelist shows that situations from life and arguments cannot be invoked in accepting the Logos. The Logos requires complete involvement, otherwise it does not reach its goal of raising the people to the stage of “rebirth”.

Finally, W. Barclay conducts a morphological and syntactic analysis of the expressions which contain the term *Word* in the Bible and identifies “seven genitives” that give it different meanings, analysed in terms of the conveyed Message: “word of Annunciation”; “word of Truth”; “word of Life”; “word of Justification”; “word of “Reconciliation”; “word of Redemption”; “word of the Cross”. Naturally, for each explanation, the author refers to the texts of the Evangelists or to other books and verses in the *New Testament*.

#### **4. The meanings of “the Word” in the Old Testament**

In the Hebrew-Aramaic language of the *Old Testament*, the noun usually used for the concept of “word” is *dābār*, which has several meanings, as the equivalents in all the other languages – ancient or modern. However, the two basic meanings are not, as in Greek or Latin, *word/speech* vs *thought/reason*, but *word/speech* vs *thing/object/act*, cf. DEB, s.v. *Cuvînt*. In other words, the abstraction in the second meaning, which illustrates the

cognitive act, is replaced by the notion which denotes the concreteness of things and acts in everyday life. Still, the verb expressing the act of speech, 'āmar 'to speak', 'to say', also has a secondary meaning that refers to the act of thinking, 'to be called'. It is an indirect form of expressing reason, on the one hand, and it is a rarer use of this secondary meaning, on the other hand.

*Old Testament* exegetes do not see a disadvantage here, a deficiency in comparison with the *New Testament logos*, but rather a benefit in terms of the “divine work” rendered by the biblical Word. The authors of the “entry” quoted from the DEB say that in the OT “*The Word is not only the expression of a thought or will, but reality itself, the fact that it designates*”. Although it is “unseen”, the Word in the NT is something real, which comes out of the mouth of the one who utters it together with the sound – the signifier. The biblical text confirms this view of the word. In *Genesis 27:35-37*, Isaac cannot take back the blessing he has given to Jacob. The exegetes use these verses to prove that, in terms of the ancient Christians, once uttered, the word “remains active and efficient”. In modern linguistic-pragmatic theory, it is a “speech act” from J. L. Austin’s theory. In *How to do Things with Words*, 1955/1962, he claims that a blessing as well as all formulas by which a marriage etc. is declared (administratively and religiously) legal are “performative speech acts” unlike the constative ones (“It is raining outside”) or the assertive ones (“I love you”). The performatives really do what they denote, hence the phrase in the title of the French version of J. L. Austin’s book, *Quand dire, c'est faire* (‘When to say means to do’). It is precisely this equivalence that exegetes rely on when analysing old biblical texts. Of course, the magical value of words is also taken into account, such as the meaning of people’s names (which should put one under the protection of a saint, such as *Petru, Gheorghe, Maria, Ana, Elena* etc.), the meaning of place names etc. We should also include here the hidden meanings in the poetic forms of the OT, where the prophets become aware of the extraordinary power of words. That is why it is said that a word may act “like a sword” (*Isaiah 49:2*), like a “consuming fire” (*Jeremiah 5:14; 23:29*) etc. and some biblical figures, such as Moses, were “mighty in word and deed”, cf. *Ecclesiastes 45:3*.

Finally, the authors of the abovementioned encyclopaedic treatise show that in the OT, the Word never took on a personified form precisely because the aforesaid efficiency of words was totally instilled by God and God alone. We should also note that in the NT, black magic words (spells, curses etc.) are rejected, as they are not to God's liking.

## **5. Conclusions**

Therefore, the *Word* is the touchstone of human qualities, for it conveys the message that helps Christians "to be born again". The balanced, correct, sober, efficient use of words in everyday life should conform to the qualities transmitted by the *Word of God*. From the meaning of reading sacred texts to prayers, this *Word* should be treated with respect and responsibility.

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