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REVELATION IN THE BIBLE

I THE IDEA OF REVELATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The customary definition of revelation given in the manuals of apologetics—for instance Garrigou-Lagrange's *De Revelatione*—makes it consist essentially in *locutio Dei*. It is God speaking to us. The classic text to support this definition is Heb. 1:1: 'God, who in many and various ways spoke of old to the fathers by the prophets, has spoken to us in these last days by the Son.'

I want to test this definition, which I feel gives us a rather thin idea of revelation, against the language of the New Testament; to see how it uses the words 'reveal,' 'revelation' (*apokaluptō* and *apokalupsis*), the synonym 'manifest' (*phaneros, phaneroō*), and of course 'speak,' (*laleō*). Before we begin it is worth reflecting that we are unlikely to find the New Testament authors talking with any deliberation about revelation as such, since their dominant concern is with the substance or content of revelation, namely the gospel of salvation. So we will be trying to ascertain what they assume revelation to be, without any expectation of finding them explaining it.

Let us begin with the word 'speak.' We are interested only in its theological use, when it has God, or Christ, as its subject. We find immediately that the text of Heb. 1:1, already quoted, enjoys a splendid isolation. The author employs the word, with God constructively as subject, only twice more, in 12:24-5: '. . . and to the mediator of a new covenant, Jesus, and to blood sprinkled speaking better things than Abel. See that you do not despise the speaker.' His concern in the epistle is to contrast the old and new covenants, and so by implication he contrasts the manner of God's revealing speech in the old and the new. The only comparable uses of the word, with God as subject, occur in the *Magnificat* and the *Benedictus*, Lk. 2:55: 'as he spoke to our fathers, Abraham and his seed for ever'; and 2:70: 'as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets.' In these texts God's speech is confined to the old covenant; it signifies His promises, which are fulfilled, and therefore not *spoken* in the new.

For the rest, the books of the New Testament do not obviously use the word 'speak' in a theologically significant way, with one most important exception, and that is the Gospel of St John. When Jesus speaks in the other Gospels, it is not the fact of his speaking that is important, but what he says. The opposite is the case in John; it is the fact of Jesus' speaking that is significant. One of the signs of this is the number of times in this Gospel that the word 'speak' occurs in the first person, on the lips of our Lord. In this Gospel, to speak is very much the thing which he had come to do.

The explanation is, I think, clear. It is not that St John is more interested in revelation as such than the other New Testament authors; it is that he is more interested in the *person* of Jesus Christ than in his *doctrine*—or rather he identifies his doctrine with his person in a way that sharply distinguishes his Gospel from the others. The sayings of Jesus in John, if one can say it without irreverence, are all quite frankly self-centred. Jesus is his own message; his act of speaking is significant in itself, because it is the utterance of the Word, the Logos.

Let us look at the merest selection of texts:

Jn. 3:11, the conversation with Nicodemus: 'Amen, amen I tell you, we speak what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen.'

Jn. 7:16, the discourse at the feast of Tabernacles: 'My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me; if anyone wants to do his will, he will recognise the teaching, whether it is from God, or whether I am speaking as from myself.'

As in the first passage Jesus' speaking is tied to his witness to the things which he has seen with the Father, so in the second it is tied to the teaching which he has received from the Father, and which he has been sent to speak; and the teaching is nothing other than himself. It is on this passage—'my teaching is not mine'—that St Augustine most acutely comments: '*Suam doctrinam dixit seipsum et non suam, quia Patris est Verbum. Quid enim tam tuum quam tu, et quid tam non tuum quam tu?*'¹ He speaks because he has been sent, and he speaks himself, the Word which has been sent.

Jn. 8:26ff., controversy with the Jews: 'I have many things to speak and judge that concern you; but he that sent me is true, and as for me I speak to the world what I heard from him. . . . When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you shall recognise that I am, and that I do nothing as from myself, but that as the Father taught me so I speak.'

Jn. 8:38; 'I speak what I have seen with the Father.'

¹ *In Joann.*, Tr. 29. Homily for Tuesday after fourth Sunday in Lent

Again, his speaking is a function of his being from the Father.

Jn. 4:26, conversation with the Samaritan woman : 'I, who am speaking to you, am he.'

Jn. 9:36-7, conversation with the man born blind : 'And who is he, Lord, that I may believe in him? Jesus said to him, "You have both seen him, and he that is speaking to you is he."'

Jn. 7:46 : 'Never did man speak as this man speaks.'

In these three passages the speaking of Jesus is presented as a sign or indication of his person and office.

In the discourse of Jn. 14-17 the word 'speak' occurs eighteen times, nearly always with the same pregnant meaning, in the first or third person. Here also it occurs for the first time with the Holy Ghost as subject, Jn. 16:13 : 'When *he* comes, the Spirit of truth, he will lead you into all truth; for he will not speak as from himself, but whatever he hears he will speak. . . .' Just like the Son, the Holy Ghost only speaks what he hears and receives, and speaks because he is sent.

The Holy Ghost will continue the speaking of Christ to the apostles and disciples—'he will teach you all things and remind you of all I myself told you' (14:26)—but he will also speak in and through the apostles; so we get his witness and their witness bracketed in Jn. 16:26 : 'When the Paraclete comes whom I will send you from the Father . . . he will bear witness about me; indeed you too shall bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.'

Perhaps in order to appreciate what John makes of speaking, we should remind ourselves that this Gospel was written long after the Acts; and whether or no the author was familiar with Acts, he looked back on the events there described as part of his own experience. Now the Acts, naturally enough, are very preoccupied with the speaking of the apostles. The first use of the word in the book is highly significant, and is treated as a recurring versicle in the office of Pentecost : *Repleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto et coeperunt loqui* (Ac. 2:4). The apostles speak what they have been sent to speak, and what they have received. Their speaking is a function of their being sent. What John is telling us is that there is an important analogy here with a more august speaking and sending. The speaking of the Word and of the Spirit of God is a function of their being sent. So the apostolic mission of the Church is a continuation of the divine mission of the divine persons, and the *locutio Dei* in Christ is continued by the *locutio Dei* in the Church. Thus the pattern of divine revelation that John suggests to us is that

of a pouring out from above, a deployment downwards and outwards of the Word and the Spirit in *missions*. *Mission* of the divine persons, followed up by *transmission* in the Church. Revelational speaking in this sense is clearly proper to the new dispensation, for there was no mission of divine persons in the old, properly speaking. The messengers sent in the Old Testament by God were angels and prophets, not His consubstantial Word and Spirit. Such speaking of the 'word of the Lord' as there was in the Old Testament was indeed preparatory, a clearing of the ground, but in no sense proportionate to that speaking in the New Testament which consists in the utterance of the Word to men by the Father.

In contrast the pattern of revelational speaking suggested by Heb. 1:1 is of a progressive revelation. In such texts as the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus* the divine speech is indeed proper to the old rather than the new dispensation, for it is the utterance of promises, which under the new covenant are fulfilled not by words, but deeds. This pattern stresses the continuity between old and new; the former stresses the discontinuity, the absolute newness of the new.

Turning now to the words 'reveal' and 'manifest' and related words, we will find that their use also presents us with revelation as something patterned, organised into stages. It is worth beginning with a reminder of the obvious that both are visual words; things are revealed or uncovered, manifested or shown up, to sight and not to hearing. More important still, both are climax words, signifying what happens at the climax of an action, at the 'moment of truth'; when, for example, after all the preliminary patter the conjurer produces the rabbit out of the hat, or the lady at the fair swallows the sword—that is the moment of revelation.

To begin with 'reveal' and 'revelation'; the word is often used in an eschatological context, precisely of the final climax of all. Thus 1 Pet. 1:7, 13; 2 Thess. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:7; in all these texts the expression is used, 'the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,' which is something we are expecting, looking forward to. Elsewhere, 1 Pet. 4:13; Rom. 8:18, it is his glory that is going to be revealed, or uncovered. This ultimate revelation is to take place on the Day, 1 Cor. 3:13; Rom. 2:5. In this latter passage the thought is of the Day and the revelation of God's wrath. A text from the Gospels, Lk. 17:30, talks of 'the day on which the Son of man is revealed.'

Lastly, 1 Pet. 1:5: 'You who are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.' The point to notice here is the reference of *present* expectation—faith—to *future* climax, the ultimate revelation. What is particularly interesting about the passage

is its resemblance in construction and vocabulary to Gal. 3:23 : ' Before faith came, we were being guarded under law for the faith that was going to be revealed.' Again, a reference of expectation to climax, but this time of *past* expectation—under law—to *present* climax, the revelation of faith. Here the revelation is not *prima facie* eschatological.

But it might very well be said that the application of the word ' reveal ' to present faith, to the new dispensation as it is now, suggests the axiomatic New Testament idea of ' realised eschatology ' ; the end, the *eschaton*, is already here, in Christ. Thus in Rom. 1:16-18 : ' The gospel is the power of God for salvation for every believer . . . For God's justice [i.e. His ' justification programme,' His purpose to justify the sinner] is being revealed in it from faith to faith. . . . For God's wrath is being revealed from heaven upon all impiety ' etc. Here I think St Paul is stating the eschatological, ultimate effectiveness of the Gospel as it is now being preached, in uncovering God's saving justice and His punishing wrath. The preaching of the Gospel is the beginning of the end.

In the Gospels we have a similar use of the word for present, not future, revelation, but again in a distinctly eschatological context, in Mt. 11:25-7 (Lk. 10:21) : ' I thank thee Father because thou didst hide these things from the wise and prudent and reveal them to little ones . . . No one recognises the Father but the Son, and whoever the Son wills to reveal him to.'

It transpires from a number of texts that revelation is not simply a matter of making God and His mysteries known, but also involves a reciprocal making of *us* known ; ' that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed ' (Lk. 2:35) is one of the purposes of that divine judgment which revelation both proclaims and effects. As St Paul says, 1 Cor. 3:13 : ' each man's work will be manifest ; for the Day will show it, because it will be revealed in fire, and what sort of work each man's is the fire will test.' The mutual involvement of the revelation of God and of the thoughts of the heart is shown in a very interesting manner by one saying of our Lord's given by Matthew, Mark and Luke in different contexts. Mt. 10:26 : ' There is nothing covered up that shall not be uncovered [revealed], and hidden that shall not be known.' Here the reference is ambiguous ; on the one hand to the ' skulduggery ' of the Pharisees, who had been accusing him of casting out devils by the prince of devils ; but on the other hand to the words of Christ. For he continues : ' What I say to you in the dark, utter in the light, and what you hear whispered in your ears, shout from the roofs.' In Mk. 4:22, however, the reference of the parallel saying (in which the word used is not ' reveal ' but ' manifest ') is unambiguously to the light of the gospel, while in Lk. 12:2 it is equally unambiguously to the

hypocrisy of the Pharisees, or at least to the thoughts and utterances of men, whether good or bad.

An examination of the word 'manifest' will show almost exactly the same results, and no purpose will be served by going through the texts in detail. It may however be enlightening just to glance at John's use of the word. He uses it in preference to 'reveal,' which only occurs in his Gospel in a quotation from Isaias (12:38); and besides using it in senses analogous to those we have seen for 'reveal,' he uses it twice of the supreme act of manifestation or revelation, our Lord's resurrection (21:1, 14). But it is in his First Epistle, where the word appears four times in seven verses, that the New Testament reality of revelation, an eschatological event which has already happened in the first coming of Christ and is still awaited in his second, and which also involves a manifestation of us, is presented in a nutshell: 'Beloved . . . it has not yet been *manifested* what we shall be. We know that when he is *manifested* we shall be like him . . . And you know that he was *manifested* in order to take away sins . . . For this reason the Son of God was *manifested*, to undo the devil's works' (1 Jn. 3:2-8).

Thus we see that like the reality of revelational speaking in St John, the reality of revelation, manifestation, as presented by the New Testament, is something proper and peculiar to the New Testament; this eschatological climax has no place in the Old. On the other hand it extends beyond the New Testament to the final revelation of the glory of Jesus Christ in his second coming. So it is both a wider and a more restricted reality than revelation as defined in the manuals of apologetics. For it does not include the Old Testament Scriptures; but neither does it end with 'the death of the last apostle.' This does not mean that the definition of the manuals is wrong. It is a useful and workable concept, solidly based on the Church's tradition. But it seems that there is room for further concepts, to do justice to the revealed reality of revelation.

In the next article we will take a look at the *manner* of revelation in the New Testament.

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(to be continued)