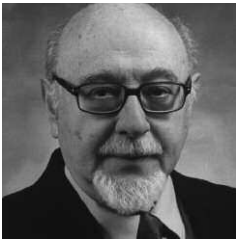




Studying Sacred Scripture in Two Dimensions: Reflections on *Dei Verbum* after Forty Years

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The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, is formulated with theological precision, and exhibits a distinctive documentary structure. *Dei Verbum* regularly introduces its new pronouncements against the background of existing doctrine, as if to emphasize their traditional justification. At the same time, Article 6, in particular, recognizes the need to engage ongoing intellectual inquiry, and to take human reason into account in the effort to understand the Word of God. There is a strong precedent for this view in Jewish philosophical literature reaching back to medieval times, and, in fact, there is much else in *Dei Verbum* that corresponds in a striking manner to Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible. What is more, I sense an awareness of some of the same issues that face Jewish scholars in balancing traditional interpretation with historical-critical inquiry.

To assess the impact of *Dei Verbum* properly requires a consideration of other documents emerging from Vatican II, particularly *Nostra Aetate*, the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions”, which also appeared forty years ago. “The Book” is inevitably bound up with “The People of the Book.” Moreover, important statements have appeared in the interim, both on behalf of national Catholic Churches and in the name of the Universal Church. Of particular interest to the present discussion are two publications by the Pontifical Biblical Commission. The first is a 1993 text, published in its English version in 1995 as: The Biblical Commission’s Document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. It provides a commentary by my American colleague, Professor Joseph Fitzmyer, S.J. The second is entitled *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, which appeared in 2001. Both documents bear a preface by the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.

In preparation for this paper, it has been my good fortune to be able to turn to learned colleagues for clarification

on any number of questions, most notably to Professor Michael Patrick O’Connor, S.J. of Catholic University of America, who has, among other things, provided information on Catholic liturgy. In the necessarily brief comments to follow, I find it preferable, however, to limit myself to reflections on *Dei Verbum* as my principal text. In this way, I hope to present one Jewish scholar’s view of the differences between representative Jewish interpretations of the Sacred Scriptures and Catholic interpretation as presented therein, calling attention as well to significant similarities between the two.

Context and community: The two dimensions of biblical interpretation

It might help to assess the impact of *Dei Verbum* if we were to explore what are observably two principal modes of biblical interpretation, which I call, respectively, “context” and “community.” By context I mean the original context of Sacred Scripture, of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament; namely, what the biblical texts meant, to the best of our knowledge, to those who first wrote them, heard them, and read them at the time. It has been the primary objective of modern, critical biblical research to retrieve original context, in contradistinction to earlier, traditional scholarship, which was largely community oriented. By community I mean the reception of the Bible by successive communities of believers, Christian and Jewish, (also Muslim, for that matter), and its continuing interpretation by them in the light of contemporary experience. In this mode, we seek to know what the Bible came to mean to these communities at various periods of their history, and what has been its role in their lives.

It is the search for original context that prompts scholars to study ancient Near Eastern and classical languages, so as to be able to read external sources, employing the comparative method. We follow archeological discoveries, and benefit from the insights of historians and social scientists. We seek to identify *Sitz im Leben*, and analyze literary forms, to trace the formation of the biblical text through compilation and redaction. We acknowledge inner-biblical development over the cumulative periods of composition of the two Testaments, while being attentive to the holistic coherence of the canonical texts in their complete form. In this spirit, scholars apply the contextual approach not only to the original environments of the Old and the New Testaments, but also to the realities



faced by religious communities during the subsequent periods of history. We seek to understand the contemporary intellectual universe of the Tannaim and Amoraim of Talmudic literature, as we do of Saint Jerome and Saint Augustine.

Viewing the two Testaments as foundation documents of ongoing communities of believers directs us to hermeneutics and to homily. These are the principal methods employed to translocate the biblical narratives, as well as laws, prophecies and wisdom, to new contexts, so that their message may be seen as addressing the ongoing needs of differently structured communities, living under differing external conditions. The religious mind urgently seeks to explain the changing fortunes of the community, to retain a vision of destiny amidst change. It is the focus on community that accounts for the monumental creativity represented in Judaism by Rabbinic literature, and in Christianity by the writings of the Church Fathers. The role of Sacred Scripture in the life of the community is also evident in the respective liturgies of the Church and the Synagogue, both of which include scriptural texts.

The contextual approach to Scripture, which had been present, but relatively recessive in both Jewish and Christian exegesis since late antiquity, surged during the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Age of Humanism, and has continued to develop ever since. It has often been resisted, even opposed in Jewish, Catholic and conservative Protestant circles, out of concern for maintaining the authority of Sacred Scripture and the unity of the respective communities. Increasingly, though, the contextual approach has justified itself to scholars from all confessions, perhaps because the salutary effects of its realism have been perceived as outweighing its challenges to tradition. It adds immediacy to the content of Sacred Scripture; the actors, the places, and the events become real.

There has often been tension between these two foci, context and community, but in my view they are not intrinsically incompatible so long as we do not become confused into thinking that there are no differences between them, or that contextual inquiry is sufficient in itself. Just as we would lack something in our religious appreciation of the words of Sacred Scripture if we knew, and were concerned only with the real past, so would we lack something in our understanding of the enduring meaning of Divine Revelation if we failed to investigate that real past. "Context" and "community" complement each other as dimensions of interpretation.

On methodology in general, consider Article 12 of *Dei Verbum*, in part:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate

to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words. To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given among other things, to "literary forms". For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse.

This theme is elaborated further, and continues through Article 13. It has a familiar ring. The Latin: *Dei enim verba, humanis linguis expressa* (for the words of God, expressed in human language) immediately recalls the Hebrew of the laconic Talmudic dictum: *dibberah torah kileson benei adam* (the Torah speaks in accordance with human language, Babylonian Talmud, *Berakot* 31b, and parallels). In original context, this comment was intended to explain the use of a particular literary form in the Hebrew Bible, the infinitive-absolute followed by the finite verb (specifically, in 1 S 1:11). This syntax is not the most economical way to communicate, but rather than seeing in its use an added specification, or intended inference, the view is expressed that it merely accords with the way people express themselves. Moses Maimonides, in his treatise, *The Guide to the Perplexed* (Book One, chapter 26) seized upon this particular Talmudic dictum, applying it to the great medieval debate on the subject of divine attributes, the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic features attributed to God in biblical diction. These are not to be taken literally, but are rather a concession to the limits of human perception, on which see note 11 to Article 13 of *Dei Verbum*. By endorsing a literary approach, *Dei Verbum* opens the door to the contextual mode of interpretation, as I have outlined it, and it is my sense that it is forthcoming in this respect.

Dei Verbum does not explicitly address the issue of the sources of knowledge. Article 6, in its reference to Romans 1:20, and in its pronouncement on the capacity of humans to know the nature of things from created reality (*rebus creatis*) would probably allow scholars to bring to bear on their understanding of Sacred Scriptures what the sciences and the humanities make available to them. Once again, we observe similar views in Jewish thought.

Dei Verbum has helped to create an atmosphere of mutual understanding across confessional lines, and this is true of other Christian confessions that have published similar statements on Scriptural interpretation in recent decades. We have arrived at a common language of discourse, for Jewish, Catholic and other Christian scholars with respect to our shared heritage, the Hebrew Bible. I recall two great, contextual scholars out of many in the twentieth century, the American Protestant, W.F. Albright, and the French Dominican, Roland de Vaux. They and their colleagues brought the Hebrew Scriptures into the western canon on a new basis.



The same can be said for New Testament research, which is of growing interest to Jewish scholars, just as early Judaism is now of greater interest to Christian scholars.

The complexities of dialogue in the mode of community

When we move to the dimension of community, however, dialogue is complex, and basic differences between Judaism and Christianity often obstruct the unimpeded communication that we have achieved in the contextual dimension. The respective situations in Judaism and Christianity are no longer symmetrical. *Dei Verbum* proclaims that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament; the perfection of revelation, realized through the presence, words and acts of Jesus Christ. As we read at the end of Article 4:

The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tm 6:14 and Ti 2:13).

It is important to emphasize that in official Judaism, prophetic revelation was thought to have ceased several centuries before the advent of Christianity. Traditionally, the last Hebrew prophets were Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi of the Second Temple period. We are taught that prophecy will only be renewed in preparation for Israel's redemption and restoration to Zion, which will usher in the Messianic era. I will return to this important subject further on.

What is interesting, at this point, is that neither Jewish nor Catholic teaching accepts the notion of continuous, public revelation subsequent to the sealing of their respective canons, until the future redemption, as each community foresees it. For its part, the Church accepts the entirety of the Old Testament as Sacred Scripture, consonant with the principal role that it projects for it as preparing the way for the Gospel. This role is reiterated for emphasis, as a central theme, in Articles 3, 11 and 14 of *Dei Verbum*. Historically, Judaism, having what may be called "historic priority," has not acknowledged the New Testament as a new revelation. Theologically speaking, it can be said that the Jewish people continue to await the fulfillment of their covenant promise of redemption as pronounced in the Hebrew Bible. Here, then, is the central difference in the respective roles of the two Testaments in Judaism and Catholicism.

Dei Verbum further ordains in Chapter II: "Handing on Divine Revelation" that it is the Catholic Church, exclusively, which preserves Apostolic tradition, and transmits it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. From the Jewish perspective, this may be regarded as a matter of internal Christian concern. In a parallel manner, Judaism has

traditionally insisted on the authority of Rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible down through the centuries, especially in the area of religious law. It must be taken into account that within Jewry there has been, since late antiquity, no single, authoritative individual, or body that could speak for the Jewish people collectively, in the same way that a Pope or an ecumenical council can speak for the Church. What I am about to say should be seen merely as an attempt to summarize representative Jewish teachings, as I understand them.



The differing roles of the Hebrew Bible in Judaism and Catholicism

I was interested in what Article 15 had to say about the books of the Old Testament, which "remain permanently valuable" (end of Article 15):

These same books, then, give expression to a lively sense of God, contain a store of sublime teachings about God, sound wisdom about human life, and a wonderful treasury of prayers, and in them the mystery of our salvation is present in a hidden way. Christians should receive them with reverence.

With fairly obvious qualifications, I would say the same about the books of the New Testament, simply because I find in them expressions and amplifications of Jewish teachings. The approach of Jewish scholars to the New Testament, if it goes beyond the contextual, will be necessarily selective, but it can be positive, nonetheless. Reading the New Testament I am strongly impressed by the authority it ascribes to the Hebrew Bible, an authority that peers through the many passages from the Hebrew Bible that are cited as proof-texts. In a related way, The Lord's Prayer could be recited in any synagogue, for every word and formula in it is paralleled in Hebrew or Jewish Aramaic writings. Hypothetically, if I



had been present at the Sermon on the Mount, I would not have thought that Jesus was preaching a new religion. I would have thought that he was introducing his interpretations of Judaism, and challenging accepted interpretations, just as Jewish Sages were wont to do. There are, furthermore, pinnacles of spirituality in the New Testament, such as Paul's elegy on love, preserved in 1 Corinthians. It would surely be valuable for Jews, as for all human beings, to know this Christian text, and be guided by it. These epitomes, only a few out of many, are cited to support my view that those scholars who locate the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity regarding the sanctity of the New Testament within the area of teachings about human behavior, of relations between man and man, have it wrong!

It is my view that the core issue between Judaism and Christianity on the subject of the New Testament as Divine Revelation pertains to the historic identity of the Jewish people; to polity more than to theology, strictly speaking. This conclusion emerges from a consideration of both context and community. There are, to be sure, serious theological factors involved, beliefs basic to Christianity which were foreign to Judaism. In the polemical literature we usually find reference to the Holy Trinity and to certain sacramental practices. But, as I try to comprehend why successive Jewish communities have not accepted the New Testament as Divine Revelation, and have resisted conversion to Christianity, often under extreme duress, theological issues, alone, do not explain the phenomenon to my satisfaction. In significant ways, the same caveat would apply to Jewish resistance to Islam. Christianity is, after all, a monotheistic religion rooted in Judaism, itself; a religion whose canon includes the entire Hebrew Bible, and which has even preserved ancient Jewish writings regarded as apocryphal in the Jewish tradition. Hence my impression that the issue centered on identity. To become a Christian was to enter a new polity, to lose one's belonging to the historic Jewish people, to be absorbed. This is what happened to those who did convert, both to Christianity and to Islam, and there were many that did so over time in differing circumstances. I am compelled to conclude that persistent Jewish communities believed that there was special significance to the continued existence of the Jewish people as part of God's plan. If there is a cardinal, theological issue involved it is to be found in the differing conceptualizations of redemption, as between Judaism and Christianity. Redemption is the link between theology and polity.

It is in this connection that I now return to a consideration of the canonization process within ancient Judaism, and the determination that prophetic revelation ceased sometime in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. This is perhaps the most obscure chapter in the history of Jewish religion. The most probable explanation is that prophecy ceased as a consequence of the shock of

national disaster after the destruction of the First Temple and the Exile. This is signaled in 1 M 9:27, and in the Babylonian Talmud, e.g. in *Baba Batra* 12b. In sociological terms, we could say that the national spirit was depressed, but that it revived after the Return, only to sink once again. The unhappy situation of continued dispersion, and life in the homeland under successive empires, finally brought an end to the acceptance of prophecy. In theological terms, we can say that the Shekinah, a manifestation of the divine presence associated with the gift of prophecy, does not abide with us amidst the sadness and distress brought about by Israel's sinfulness, but only amidst the joy of fulfilling the commandments. So it was that the Shekinah withdrew from the people of Israel after the destruction of the First temple, and was only intermittently present during the period of the Second Temple (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 9b). The nexus of Israel's gift of prophecy and its national destiny is highly suggestive.

It reminds us that, along with all else, the Hebrew Bible envisions an enduring future for Israel as a covenant people throughout history, a vision endorsed by Rabbinic Judaism. The Hebrew Bible projects a national restoration to Zion, to the Holy Land, where Israel will dwell in security, and where God will reign in Zion over Israel and all humankind. The individual Jew is to seek redemption amidst his people, by working to make of it a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, a blessing in all the earth. Beyond this, he is to join with those of all nations in working to bring about the Kingdom of God. The salvation history of Israel as narrated in the Hebrew Bible tells how God made a covenant with Abraham and his seed and granted them the land of Canaan, in the hope that this people would listen to His voice and exemplify His truth. Across the centuries, and despite repeated disappointments; through the punishments of defeat and exile, the God of Israel never abandoned His people, or annulled His covenant with them, although, for their part, they had been less than faithful to it. This is divine providence, God's *khesed*, His steadfast love for Israel.

The universal vision of the later Jewish tradition, pursuant to that of Isaiah and Micah, is one of humankind united under God, in a world of peace and justice. This universal vision is expressed in the traditional Jewish liturgy for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, in a sequence of four beautiful prayers of petition. Here is what we pray for:

- That the Lord will instill awe in all He has created, so that all His creatures may form one fellowship to worship Him, who alone is powerful, with a perfect heart.
- That dignity will be restored to His people, Israel; hope to those who seek God, and vindication to those who hope in Him; "joy to Your land and gladness to Your city," and ascendancy to the Messiah, scion of David, speedily in our own day.



- That all wickedness and political oppression will be brought to an end.
- That the Lord will reign alone over all His creatures; in Zion and Jerusalem, the locus of His earthly abode, as it is written: “The Lord will reign forever; your God, oh Zion, for all generations, Halleluyah.” (Ps 146:10).



In the two millennia since the advent of Christianity the Jewish people has not been dormant. It has been continuously creative, both for the enrichment of its own life, and, when permitted, for the benefit of humankind. Under unprecedented threats to its security in modern times, and despite losing one third of its sons and daughters within a period of less than ten years, the Jewish people possessed the collective vitality to rebuild its ancestral homeland. There it has revived the language of the prophets, and created a vibrant, Hebraic culture. Israel has gathered in multitudes of fellow Jews from many lands. We are hopeful that the curtain is rising on the next act in the drama of modern Israel, the establishment of peace in the land, and friendship between Israelis and Palestinians, and among all the nations of the region. Only then can we fully rejoice in the rebuilding of Zion.

A postscript

Perhaps I can clarify my thoughts on polity and identity as central to an understanding of Divine Revelation, by reference to a specific prophecy. In chapter 31 (31-34), Jeremiah speaks of “a new covenant,” Hebrew *berit khadasha* between God and the House of Israel that will be enacted in days to come, a covenant written in their hearts, not etched in stone. This beautiful prophecy of consolation is clearly resonated in the New Testament, where Jesus is “the mediator of a new covenant” (*diatheikheis neas*) at the Eucharist, and its guarantor (Lk 22:20, 1 Co 11:25, 2 Co 3:6, Heb 12:24). In the Catholic lectionary, Jer 31:31-34 is one of the readings, occurring

once every three years, for the Fifth Sunday of Lent, where it serves to prepare the Church for its remembrance of the sequence of events from Palm Sunday, technically the Sixth Sunday of Lent, through Easter Sunday. It is part of the configuration of redemption in Christ.

For my part, I regard the several, related New Testament interpretations of Jeremiah 31 to be wholly acceptable methodologically. They represent exactly the sort of hermeneutic that we find so often in Rabbinic Midrash, whereby the future orientation characteristic of prophecy is further extended in time, and its venue relocated. Rabbinic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible is based on the principle of the multiple meanings of Scripture. Therefore, I, as an adherent to Judaism, am ready to accept the Christian understanding of Jeremiah 31 as one of several, legitimate readings of that text; not, of course, as the only legitimate reading.

From the Jewish perspective, such Christian interpretations of the Hebrew Bible should not be considered as misinterpretations, but rather as alternative interpretations. There is room for more than one interpretation of Scripture, and added value in knowing more than one interpretation.

For myself, I take my cue from context, from what immediately follows in Jeremiah 31, verses 35-37, because the terms of the new covenant are, in my judgment, integral to its meaning. The God of Israel makes a solemn promise:

*Thus said the Lord
Who set the sun for light by day,
The fixed order of moon and stars for light by night;
Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves,
Whose name is the Lord of Hosts:
'If this fixed order were ever to cease from My presence.'
– Speech of the Lord –
'Only then would the seed of Israel
Cease to be a nation in My presence for all time'
Thus said the Lord:
'If the heavens above can be measured,
And the foundations of the earth below fathomed,
Only then would I, as well, cast off all the seed of Israel
On account of all they have committed.'
– Speech of the Lord –*