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## THE IMPACT OF THE REAL-LIFE SITUATIONS OF LANGUAGE ON THE LEARNING OF SACRED SCRIPTURE\*

EL IMPACTO DE LAS SITUACIONES DE LA VIDA REAL DEL IDIOMA EN EL  
APRENDIZAJE DE LAS ESCRITURAS SAGRADAS

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### ABSTRACT

The learning of Sacred Scripture in Theology courses moves between different linguistic registers. Sometimes, those records are hardly different, other times, they become antagonistic. The first field in which these differences become perceptible is that of the differences between the language of the teacher and the languages of the students. But that's almost nothing. The greatest difference appears between the languages in which the Bible was written: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and the language spoken by students and teacher. It is not only about the difference of languages that could be transposed by the use of the Bible in a translation, but to perceive that there is a universe of words from the daily life of students and absent teacher of the Bible, as well as the opposite: common words in the Bible, absent from the daily life of teacher and students. The words reflect different worlds. The student who entered the world of the Bible would perceive, in ten minutes, that in that world there is no portable. God does not communicate by portable. However, according to the Bible, he speaks. How do you speak? Talking? How to repeat what God speaks? The Bible records numerous direct discourses of God, also records cases of people who, after hearing a divine message, said nothing: one was speechless, another covered the mouth, another heard the unspeakable. In those cases, what God speaks can not be routed. The Bible moves, then, between what is said and what is unspeakable and, in a similar way, more than equivalent,

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between the spoken and the silence. There is still the nameless territory through which, on the other hand, the Bible passes. The food given to the people in the desert calls Manna because the Israelites asked, What is that? The nameless is also the territory of the name of the Bible, which means books. And what is the name of God? The present communication proposes to take up these linguistic registers in the process of learning the Sacred Scripture in a Theology course.

## RESUMEN

El aprendizaje de la Sagrada Escritura en los cursos de Teología se mueve entre diferentes registros lingüísticos. Unas veces, esos registros son apenas diferentes, otras veces, llegan a ser antagónicos. El primer campo en que esas diferencias se tornan perceptibles es el de las diferencias entre el lenguaje del profesor y los lenguajes de los estudiantes. Mas eso es casi nada. Diferencia más grande aparece entre las lenguas en las cuales la Biblia fue escrita: hebreo, arameo y griego, y la lengua hablada por estudiantes y profesor. No se trata solamente de la diferencia de idiomas que se podría transponer por la utilización de la Biblia en una traducción, más de percibir que hay un universo de palabras del cotidiano de la vida de estudiantes y profesor ausente de la Biblia, como también el contrario: palabras comunes en la Biblia, ausentes del cotidiano de profesor y estudiantes. Las palabras reflejan mundos distintos. El estudiante que entrase en el mundo de la Biblia percibiría, en diez minutos, que en ese mundo no hay portable. Dios no se comunica por portable. Sin embargo, según la Biblia, él habla. ¿Cómo habla? ¿Qué habla? ¿Cómo repetir lo que Dios habla? Se la Biblia registra inúmeros discursos directos de Dios, también registra casos de personas que, después de oír un mensaje divino, nada dijeron: uno se quedó mudo, otro tapó la boca, otro oyó lo indecible. En esos casos, lo que Dios habla no puede ser encaminado. La Biblia se mueve, entonces, entre lo dicho y lo indecible y, de modo semejante, más no equivalente, entre lo hablado y el silencio. Aún hay el territorio sin nombre por el cual, vez por otra, la Biblia pasa. El alimento dado al pueblo en el desierto llama se Maná por que los israelitas preguntaban ¿Lo que es eso? El sin nombre es también el territorio del nombre de la Biblia, que significa libros. ¿Y el Dios cómo se llama? La presente comunicación se propone retomar esos registros lingüísticos en el proceso de aprendizaje de la Sagrada Escritura en un curso de Teología.

## INTRODUCTION: DIFFERENT LINGUISTIC RECORDS IN THE PROCESS OF DOING BIBLICAL STUDIES

The question that we are dealing with in this communication is that of the different registers of language that can be identified in the process of the teaching of Sacred Scripture in a program of Theology, and if those registers approach or receive some impact from the real-life situations of language. Three fields of language immediately distinguish themselves with different linguistic registers: the language of the students,



that of the teacher and that of the Sacred Scripture. At first, the language of the students is the one that more closely approaches the language of the real-life situations.

It can happen, nevertheless, that the language of the students has drifted away from daily language and has turned into a fictitious language, stylized to attend to procedures of behavior that are expected from them. This danger can also happen to the language of the teacher. When this happens in both cases, then it is the language of Sacred Scripture that more closely approaches the real situations of life.

## **1. THE LANGUAGE SPOKEN BY STUDENTS AND TEACHER AND THE BIBLICAL LANGUAGES.**

It does not cease to be paradoxical, that, even if there is a difference between the language of the students and the language of the teacher, --almost always motivated by the difference of age between them--, there is a still greater difference that exists between their language and the language of the Bible.

This difference appears, first of all, with regard to the languages in which the Bible was written: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, and the language spoken by students and teacher. There are programs of theology that include, in their curricular structure, courses in Biblical languages, especially Greek and Hebrew, as obligatory or elective disciplines. The study of these ancient languages requires effort, but it can also be rewarding, if one manages to take advantage of the playful side that comes with the learning of a new language, stimulating oneself to overcome obstacles and to discover a new field of knowledge.

It is true that the study of the Biblical languages in a program of theology will always be introductory. This, however, does not mean that it is unnecessary or useless. These courses can serve as a bridge to the world of the Bible, a very different world, in which other languages are spoken.



## 2. WORDS REFLECT WORLDS

There is no doubt that this difference of languages would be more easily overcome by the utilization of the Bible in translation. But it should not prevent one from perceiving clearly that the world of the Bible is a *different* world. Countless words that students and teacher use in their daily life are not found in the Bible; the inverse is also true: common words in the Bible are absent from the daily language of teacher and students.

Words reflect worlds. The student who enters the world of the Bible will realize, in less than ten minutes, that in this (biblical) world there is no cell phone. The world of the text is uncompromisingly different, provoking a sensation of wonder. The daily life of prominent figures in the biblical accounts is deeply different from daily life in our contemporary society.

Nevertheless, the biblical accounts show these prominent figures experiencing dramas and conflicts similar to those of many persons of today, even the very same ones. In this sense, the study of the Sacred Scripture can be an open door for the real-life situations of language to enter the classroom, as a reflection of a less artificial and more real-to-life world, including its aspects of daily living.

In addition, Sacred Scripture introduces an important theological concept: the notion of the People of God. The prominent Biblical figures are not only persons considered individually --which would already be no small matter-- but they are also persons who participate in a collectivity which gives them a feeling of belonging to a people, the People of God. Now, this people continues up to the present, such that to recognize oneself as a member of the People of God is to feel part of this collectivity and to recognize Sacred Scripture as the written record of the origins and of the trajectory of this people with their God.

## 3. THE GOD WHO SPEAKS

Sacred Scripture reports how, in daily life, God becomes present and communicates with his people. In the Bible there are numerous direct speeches attributed straightforwardly to God. These speeches raise the question of the way in which God



communicates, as well as the question of the literary and theological procedures that are the basis of the mode of production of the Biblical text. In the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews, there is a spectacular text in this respect: "In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a Son" (Heb 1,1-2a, NAB).

In the Old Testament, many times God appears as a character in the story, and frequently he intervenes speaking. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews, does not seem have taken this fact into account. On the other hand, the author of Hebrews refers to God's communication with his people by means of the prophets, and his last communication by means of his Son, Jesus.

#### 4. THE LANGUAGE OF THE SUBLIME

If the Bible registers an infinity of God's direct speeches, it also records cases of people who, after hearing a divine message, said nothing: Zechariah remained mute (Lk 1:20), Paul affirms that he heard ineffable words, which one must not repeat (2 Cor 12:4), Job admits that he dared to speak of things that surpassed him, and that he spoke senseless words (Job 42,3). In these cases, the Bible moves between statements and the unspeakable, and, in a similar but not identical way, between speech and silence.

In the point of contact between these elements -sayings and the unspeakable, speech and silence- is *the sublime*. The Biblical language is one that touches the sublime, often communicating more, the less it says. On Mount Horeb, having heard the murmuring of a soft breeze, Elijah hid his face (1 Kings 19:12-13).

The language of daily life of students and teacher is also like that; it, too, is constructed in relation to the sublime. Our daily language is also permeated with speeches and silences, with sayings and the unspeakable. The one who wants to say everything may say little, in any case he/she will not communicate what is essential. Said differently: the language of real-life situations need not be made known (explicitly) in the class in order for it to be present in situations of learning.



## 5. TO BEFRIEND WITH THE WORD.

In the Bible, different genres appear, the most common of which are the narrative genre, the poetical genre, the epistolary genre, the juridical genre and apocalyptic. These are forms that are intrinsically related to the message they convey, forms that permit communication to occur. Theological discourse is different; it speaks about God in a wholly different register, something which is also important. Nevertheless, for theology to return from time to time to Biblical language seems to be healthy. It is something like rediscovering an elementary language or rediscovering the real-life situations of language.

In a program of theology, the constant reading of the Sacred Scripture can help students and teacher to construct the narrative of their own lives, and, thereby, help the real-life situations to find a language so that they too can find expression.

## 6. A NAME YET TO BE DISCOVERED

We must still call attention to the unnamed territory through which, time and again, the Bible passes. The food given to the people in the desert is called *Manna* because the Israelites were asking "What is it?" --Without knowing the name of the food, they named it by the question about what it was called.

Also without a proper name, in some sense, is the 'territory' of the Scripture itself. In the Christian tradition, it is commonly called the Bible, Sacred Scripture or God's Word. All three names have limitations. The expression "God's Word" can lead to thinking that the Bible is God's *only* Word, as if to prohibit God from speaking by other channels. The expression "Sacred Scripture" is invalidated by its use, which accentuates more the adjectival aspect (Sacred) than the noun (Scripture), reproducing the imbalance between the divine and the human that often occurs in religion. The term "Bible", in turn, comes from the Greek: (tá) biblía, which means (the) books. It is as if someone were asking: And these books, what do you call them? To which the answer is given: They're called books! The transformation of the plural of the Greek term that is at the origin of our word 'Bible', to the singular in our current usage constitutes, from a certain



perspective, an impoverishment: one loses from view the plurality of the writings, which come to be considered as a single book.

This brief list can also include God's name, a name revealed in order that, by invoking it, the Israelites might keep alive the remembrance of the God who brought them out of Egypt (Ex 3:15). The Jewish tradition, however, followed the custom of not mentioning God's name. In the Hebrew manuscripts, signs were inserted in order that the divine tetragramme was replaced, in the reading, with the form *Adonay*. The Greek version of the LXX, making still more strict the principle that God's name was not to be pronounced, *translated* the divine tetragramme with *Kyrios*. This custom was followed by the major Christian translations of antiquity, and is still followed by the majority of current translations.

The language of daily life also passes, time and again, by what is as of yet still unnamed, or what is imperfectly named, or what again has a name that cannot or must not be pronounced. And so Biblical language also approaches the language of real-life situations, fostering reverence in the face of mystery, whose depth, if it were told, would sound like a banal expression.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present reflection has tried to show how different linguistic registers are interwoven in the process of learning the Sacred Scriptures in a program of theology. There was a question that guided this presentation: do the real-life situations of language cause some impact in this process?

At first sight, the impression is that, in this learning process, the real world, with its real-to-life language, is replaced by an artificial language that reveals an artificial world. In this case, it is the Sacred Scripture itself that opens the door to the real-to-life language of daily existence, even though it was written in other languages and reveals an uncompromisingly different world.

This world is inhabited by persons who identify themselves as the People of God and by a God who communicates. As a written record, the Bible moves between sayings



and the unspeakable and between speech and silence, showing another form of incorporation of reality, both sublime and subliminal. With its varied genres, the Bible teaches varied forms of narrative for existence itself.

Maybe because of this, Biblical language can be more direct, precisely for not trying to say everything. This could be the principal point of learning which the study of the Sacred Scripture offers, promoting the gradual change from the fictitious and stylized language of teacher and students to the language of real-life situations, and, insofar as this is possible, with a certain warmth and less aggressivity.

