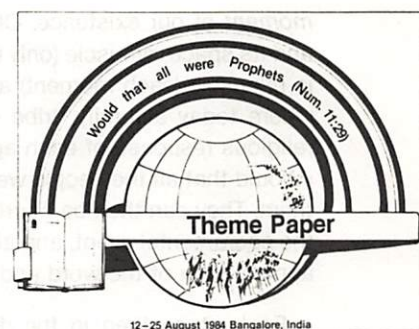


»Would that all were Prophets!«

An Exegetical, Historical Study for the World Biblical Apostolate



Moses's response, »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« (Num 11:29) is at once vague and clear! Vague, because it hardly settles Joshua's complaint against Eldad and Medad. They had presumed to prophesy, even though they had not assembled with the seventy elders before the meeting tent to receive the gift of the spirit. Yet Moses's words are clear enough to reach into centuries of theological development and pastoral ministry.

In the »Theme Essay« of *Word-Event* (No. 51; XIII-2-1983; pg. 10), Glen Levandowski, OSC, catches quickly the kaleidoscopic variations in this passage of Num 11:29,

Moses's »would that« is not exactly a prayer, not really a promise, nor a proposal, not a softened imperative. [It is] sustaining, provocative, and impelling, forward-looking, at once athirst and quenching.

Not only Moses's crisp reply to Joshua, but the entire chap. 11 of Numbers reaches into many moments of Israelite history. This biblical text, as a result, has become ensnared in problems of transmission and interpretation. This chapter in the book of Numbers reflects many divergent moments of prophecy, struggling against religious and civil leadership, or at other times cooperating with it and actually forming an integral part with it.

Part One: A Complex Text for the Many Forms of Prophecy Today

The missionary enterprise of the Church needs all of these nuances of text, all of these reinterpretations throughout the history of Israel into our post-biblical times. St. Paul transformed the »would that« of Moses's reply into a clear, demonstrative sentence: »Everything written before our time was written for our instruction« (Rom 15:4). »All Scripture is inspired of God« (2 Tim 3:16). »Everything written« in »all [of] Scripture« about Num 11:29 »was written for our instruction.« We need to attend to the various moments of interpretation about this passage in order to properly appreciate the full impact of Moses's words: »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!«

Two annotations should be added. *First*, in the history of Num 11:29 or of any biblical text, the final moment of development before Christ is not necessarily the holiest nor the most instructive. It may be – or it may not be! In fact, the Mosaic age (1250 – 1210 B.C.) or that of the classical prophets from Amos to Second Isaiah (760 – 550 B.C.) is far superior, at least in my judgment. From a missionary viewpoint, therefore, we are not required to run a text (or a proselyte) through the entire gamut of Israelite history; each age with its own culture and hopes can be a doorway to Christ. No one has developed this position more forcefully than Karl Rahner in a now famous, oft quoted article, »Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II« (*Theological Studies* 40, Dec. 1979, pgs. 716 – 727).

Second, everything that happened in the *small area* of Canaan or Israel over a *wide* expanse of almost two thousand years is now reflected somewhere across the *wide geographical expanse* of planet earth in each *small*

moment of our existence. Old Testament time was expansive (2000 years) and its space minuscule (only 6000 square miles); for missionaries today time is minuscule (each moment) and space is as expansive as the earth. Somewhere today a family, tribe or country is reliving the secular culture and religious response of each age and person in the Bible. Moses's response, »Would that all the people were prophets!« is asking Church recognition for them. They can then be nourished by *Word and Event*, the biblical word and the sacramental event, and also begin to make their own contribution to our appreciation of the word and to our fulfillment of the event.

Each stage then in the development and Interpretation of Num 11:29 speaks a relevant message for the *World Catholic Federation for the Biblical Apostolate*, particularly in its prophetic mission.

Since prophecy is at the heart of Num 11:29 and of this third Plenary Assembly, it will be helpful to provide at least a provisional definition of prophecy. We speak from a biblical perspective. Prophecy, we propose, is visible in those gifted individuals or groups, (a) thoroughly within the community of faith of God's people, (b) with a summons immediately by God, often from an unpredictable or secular setting, (c) to reach back into the heroic element of Israel's or the Church's origins, (d) and so by eloquent words and impressive symbolic actions, (e) to challenge and revitalize the contemporary community of God's people (Stuhlmüller, 1979; pg.36). While prophecy, therefore, is deeply rooted in tradition, it is always addressing the contemporary moment. The present, cultural and religious setting, in fact, adds a necessary ingredient to the prophetic message before we arrive at God's word within it. Prophecy does not bring the letter but the heroic spirit of the past into each new moment of time and into each new place of the apostolate. World geography and its diverse cultures contribute to prophetic interpretation. As Catholics (with a capital »C«) we cannot become truly prophetic until our prophecy becomes catholic, that is universal. How appropriate: »Would that all the people were prophets!«

We now proceed to investigate Num 11:29 in its complex but exceptionally rich setting in the Bible. Then we will study an important implication of Num 11:29, namely, that Israelite religion and prophecy developed from the secular area of life, often enough from its peripheral or insignificant events. Even Moses's incidental response in Num 11:29, defending Eldad and Medad against Joshua's misplaced fervor and blatant jealousy, may have originated in exasperation, yet it later becomes a key sentence in the theological development of Israelite prophecy.

Part Two: Numbers 11:29 Within the Elohist Tradition

Robert R. Wilson wrote that chapter 11 of Numbers manifests a »complex literary and tradition history: (Wilson: 151) and J. de Vaulx speaks about »la juxtaposition de divers éléments« and »une rédaction fort complexe« (de Vaulx: 148, 149). In a recent commentary, Rita J. Burns writes more specifically:

The wilderness stories in Numbers were recorded by Yahwist and/or Elohist sources and in many cases these early traditions were later supplemented and reshaped by the Priestly writer (Burns: 220).

We now attempt to unravel some of this complexity by concentrating on one of the four sources of the Pentateuch, that of the Elohist. We will notice at first a positive approach towards prophecy, and then a growing distrust towards it and its more decentralized form of religious life. This negative attitude shows up in the Priestly writer who shaped the Pentateuch. By wrestling with this complex literary and historical situation, we will discover many ways by which Num 11-12 intercepts the world apostolate today.

An outline of Numbers 11-12 will clarify some of the crisscrossing of traditions (see Wilson: 151-3):

Num 11:1-3. The people complain against Moses and are saved by his intercession.

Num 11:4-9. A negative story about the people's greed, despite the gift of manna.

Num 11:11-17. A positive story about Moses's burden in caring for the people and the Lord's answer in the choice of elders.

Num 11:18-23. A continuation of the negative story.

Num 11:24-30. Again the positive story, with the Lord's validation of the elders by granting them the prophetic spirit.

Num 11:31-34. Once more the negative story, with the Lord's answer to the greedy people by punishing them through the food which they devoured.

Num 12. Miriam and Aaron complain against Moses; Miriam is saved by Moses's intercession.

The editor did a splendid job in weaving these various strands together: the first and last episodes with the intercession of Moses; inbetween, the interchange of negative and positive stories; the cycle of burdens and God's answer (both the people's and Moses's burden over their troubles and God's answer either with the assistance of elders or the gift of the quail). Moreover, the episodes of elders and quail are knit together by the identical Hebrew word *rûah* which can be translated either spirit or wind (de Vaulx: 155). As spirit, the *rûah* rests upon each of the elders that they may share in the office of Moses; as wind, the *rûah* brings the quail. We will return to this crisscross of traditions and interweaving of stories. First, we attend more closely to the positive story of the elders in Num 11:16-17, 24-30.

The office of elders is created at the Lord's command. Moses is told to »assemble for me seventy of the elders, men you know for true elders and authorities among the people. . . I will take some of the spirit that is on you and will bestow it on them, that they may share the burden of the people with you.« Elders, accordingly, are to be chosen for their trustworthiness, wisdom and popular acceptance. They are men loyal to Moses and the ancient traditions of Israel. They represent a strong momentum towards decentralization and the sharing of authority, typical of the Mosaic age.

Prophecy, therefore, does not create the office of elders but authenticates it in the eyes of all the people (Wilson: 153). These men were not ordained to be prophets but to be elders; in the midst of performing their office as elders, moments of prophetic insight and contagious enthusiasm will break forth. We read:

Taking some of the spirit that was on Moses, the Lord bestowed it on the seventy elders; and as the spirit came to rest on them, they prophesied. (The difficulty of this last phrase and its variant translations will be discussed later.)

The Hebrew word, »they prophesied,« occurs in the intensive, reflective form of the verb (*hithpa'el*), as we find also in 1 Sam 10:5-6. It indicates the a-rational, certainly the total involvement of the person (Wilson: 154).

The text incident insists upon the free gift of prophecy. Prophecy is not a prerogative of any institution, nor is it bestowed only in a sacred place like the meeting tent, nor again in the immediate presence of a holy person like Moses: Now two men, one named Eldad and the other

Medad, were not in the [sacred] gathering [at the meeting tent] but had been left in the camp. . .yet the spirit came to rest on them also, and they prophesied in the camp.

At this point the famous incident – and theme of this assembly – occurred. »A young man quickly told Moses [about] Eldad and Medad,« and Joshua »who from his youth had been Moses's aide, said, 'Moses, my Lord, stop them.' But Moses answered him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets! Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all.'«

This entire account firmly establishes and honors the institution of elders by its association with Moses. It expects, at least, occasional manifestations of prophetic fervor, even if the normal qualities for an elder are honesty, wisdom and acceptability. In Israel authority is to be shared, not restricted. Moreover, it can blossom suddenly in places least expected, in the secular arena of daily living in the »camp.« Because of a similarity of words and context with 1 Sam 10, some commentators see here »an attempt to legitimate Israel's adaptation of the Canaanite phenomenon of ecstatic prophecy« (Burns: 229). This acceptance of non-Israelite forms of religious expression will be seen more clearly as we now relate Num 11 to other parts of the Pentateuch.

Num 11–12 is linked to other sections of the Pentateuch by belonging to what scholars call the Elohist or »E« Tradition. The Elohist fragments (as Wolff: 1982; pg 67, refers to them) are difficult to detect and are even denied by some scholars like Paul Volz, Wilhelm Rudolph and Sigmund Mowinkel (see Jenks: 1; Fretheim: 259–260). The Elohist survives only as fragments because this northern tradition was eventually prescribed by a southern editor at Jerusalem who was suspicious of prophetic developments. The Elohist incidents are important for they support aspects of prophecy, important though seemingly accidental, at times abrupt and even foreign in origin.

Gen 20 gives the Elohist account of the patriarch's presenting his wife as only his sister! The foreign king Abimelech of Gerar shows up as a God-fearing man, seriously intent on doing what is right. Honesty becomes an important aspect of leadership. When Abraham intercedes for Abimelech, the latter's wife and maidservants again bear children. Abraham is here called a »prophet,« in Hebrew, *nabi* (see Jenks: 21). We are reminded of Moses's intercession for the people and for his sister, Miriam, in Num 11–12.

The crucial role of the foreigner becomes still more apparent in another Elohist story, that in Exodus, chapter 18. Here the office of elders is traced to Moses's father-in-law, Jethro, a Midianite priest. Like Abimelech, he too is called »a man who fears God.« And as Wolff writes: »What follows shows that here 'fear of God' means being reliable and rejecting dishonest gain« (Wolff: 1982; pg. 74). The foreign origin of prophecy will show up again in the Elohist tradition with the sudden appearance of »Balaam, son of Beor [who lived] at Pethor on the Euphrates in the land of the Amawites« (Num 22:5). Balaam's moment of greatness is linked with integrity (Num 22:18) and his eventual execution as a criminal with venality and sensuality (Num 25; 31:8, 16). The Elohist maintained severe moral requirements for prophecy.

Already, the Bible is flashing some warnings about prophecy. True, not only Balaam, but the entire institution at times manifested heroic greatness in defending the poor and in loyally returning to the roots of the Moasic revelation. This we see in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 17–21), closely related to the Elohist tradition in the Pentateuch (Jenks: 100–101). Yet the very next chapter in 1 Kings tells of »Prophet against Prophet,« the title of Simon John DeVries' excellent monograph. So decadent did prophecy become that the first of a new type of prophet, Amos from Tekoa, flatly declared: »I am no prophet nor a member of any prophetic band« (Amos 7:14; see Wolff, 1977; pg. 312–2; Stuhlmueller: 1964; chap. 2). A later prophet, Micah, condemns the survivors of the earlier prophetic bands for their greed and manipulative practices:

Thus says the Lord regarding the prophets
who lead my people astray;

Who, when their teeth have something to bite
announce peace,
But when one fails to put something in their mouth,
sanctify a war against that one (Mic 3:5).

In other words, feed them properly and these prophets will say whatever their generous donor wants!

Returning to the Elohist passage in Numbers chap. 11, we can draw upon this history of prophecy's decline. We understand why the priesthood at Jerusalem, in editing the material, introduced subtle shifts towards a more cautious view of prophecy. This editor surrounded the account of elders-prophets with the negative account of the people's clamoring for more tasty food than »this manna« (Num 11:6). This passage almost seems like a condemnation of the venal prophets in Micah's time. Prophets, moreover, had to be reminded not to pretend to be another Moses:

Should there be a prophet among you,
in visions [and] in dreams will speak with him;
Not so with my servant Moses! . . .
face to face I speak to him (Num 12:6–8).

The Elohist tradition in Num 11 is also seen to be veering away from the freer, more secular expression of authority in Exod 18. In Num 11, Jethro's name has been deleted; it is the Lord who commands Moses to ordain elders. This is to be done before the Meeting Tent, the sacred place of worship. Another restriction of the prophetic element appears in the Hebrew text of Num 11:25, translated literally by the *Revised Standard Version*: »But they did so [that is, prophesied] no longer.« By a slight change of vowels, the verb can be traced to a root *asap*, different from *sup*, found in our present Hebrew Bible, as was done long ago by the Samaritan Pentateuch; or it can be traced to still another root, *yasap*, as we see in Aramaic versions of the Targum and in the Latin Vulgate. As a result the phrase reads: »They continued [or did not cease] prophesying.« The New American Bible makes still another emendation, to arrive at a positive interpretation. This intricate textual work leads to some serious doubts about the negative tone of our Hebrew text; a more positive reading may have been original (Noth: 89 discusses this textual question; also Burns, 228). Later when prophecy fell into disfavor, the negative overtones were emphasized. The text thus modulated to its present form, disassociating the elders from prophecy.

Still other restrictions and complications caught up with Num 11. The openness to foreign influences and the non-complimentary correction of Joshua bothered later Jewish commentators. The Aramaic Targums (the vernacular versions read in the synagogue) explained that Joshua wanted Eldad and Medad silenced for reasons of personal modesty; they were announcing his succession to the role of Moses (de Vaulx: 156–7). Moses, therefore, according to this interpretation was not speaking in defense of the free gift of the spirit for everyone to prophesy but rather was defending the institutional line of authority and the naming of his successor!

The interpretation of Exod 18 and Num 11 continued to evolve. Christian writers recognized in these passages a defense of gentile sources of inspiration, at times even with anti-Jewish innuendo. Origen and Clement perceived in Exod 18 Moses's willingness to learn »divine truths from a pagan priest. . . a warrant for seeking knowledge from non-Christians.« Cyril of Alexandria viewed Jethro as a foreshadowing of the Christian faith in being converted from an older, inferior faith to the new, superior faith (Childs: 333). Cyril was following an earlier Jewish tradition that Jethro converted to the faith of Moses.

With quiet understatement de Vaulx writes: »No one is surprised that a text as complex and also as nuanced as this one, the fruit of a long elaboration, has been interpreted diversely« (pg. 156).

To apply this long, complex tradition about prophecy and the office of elders to our own contemporary world, we attach these reflections:

1) Significant religious movements emerge from non-biblical, non-Christian sources. Also from our own Christian ranks, insignificant people like Eldad and Medad (never again heard of in the Bible!) continue to be summoned freely by God for religious offices in the Church. Sadly enough, the original Elohist source warns us, we can show ourselves as jealous and outraged as Joshua: »Moses, my Lord, stop them!« Happily enough, God will find a way to respond: »Are you jealous for my sake? Would that the Lord might bestow his spirit on them all!«

2) Israel's dependence upon world resources and non-Mosaic expressions of worship is accepted in the Pentateuch. Are we able, with biblical humility and openness, to recognize and receive the rich developments of culture and styles of leadership across our world? Are we close enough to this »outside« world (Moses married into a Midianite or Cushite family, Exod 2:15–22; 18:1; Num 12:1) to appreciate what other world religions offer us!

3) Jethro's advice and the emergence of Eldad and Medad from the secular camp seemed to happen almost by chance. In Exod 18 Jethro finds Moses on this particular occasion, not wrapt in contemplation on top of Mount Sinai but over-involved in secular business. In Num 11 we are never told why Eldad and Medad remained behind in the camp while an important ceremony was taking place at the Meeting Tent. Are we quiet enough to hear the voice of prophecy from unlikely, even accidental situations? Or do we restrict where the gift of the spirit may reside?

4) Charismatic prophecy declined and needed to be corrected both by new forms of prophecy and by the more stable forms of leadership at Jerusalem. Prophecy is not for its own sake, nor does its certification by God bestow on it an unconditional charter of holiness. Prophecy and institutional offices today will survive only by enrichment and correction within the tradition of faith and within the environment of common sense.

Moses's words, »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« places before us a challenge, a hope and a warning. Pastorally we must decide which of these moments of biblical history applies to our particular situation. As mentioned already in this article, the latest period of biblical history is no holier than the first. Each has been written for our instruction.

Part Three: From the Secular to the Religious, from the Insignificant to World History

Already in our discussion of Num 11:29, »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« a number of doubts or hesitations arose about details: exactly what did happen in the days of Moses? What was read back in view of later problems and events into the Mosaic traditions? The Torah, like the Gospels, combines the words and deeds of a great leader, Moses or Jesus, with later preaching and application (see *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Revelation of Vatican II, chaps. 4&5; the *Instruction* of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1964, *Sacra Mater Ecclesia*). The original event, in many ways was secular and insignificant. An outsider or a »non-believer« would have viewed the exodus out of Egypt and the crucifixion of Jesus as small episodes, either the liberation of a few slaves or the execution of a criminal. How, we ask, did these incidents become »history,« drawing the attention of the entire world, even of atheists? How did they develop into elaborate biblical accounts with profound theological implications?

We first present the general rubric and then expand each of the five stages of development (see Senior-Stuhlmüller: 13–15; Stuhlmüller: 1978):

1) a secular event, insignificant in scope and ignored by annalists and

archivists, is undertaken by a person with faith in the compassionate, all-providing God. This person could be Moses. The majority of the people may have remained within a secular mentality of seeking freedom.

2) a secular celebration was held, whenever the people were relieved from bondage or from other serious difficulty. There was gratitude to God on the part of the more religious-minded persons.

3) a formal liturgical celebration is prepared by people of faith, when the memory of the initial event is being forgotten and a new and more numerous generation needs to be instructed and involved. Here is where »history« begins, that is, the *remembered past with ever widening impact*; here too is where »religion« is inaugurated, that is, a *structured form* to draw many people together in remembering and reliving God's past redemptive acts.

4) Prophetic challenge occurs when liturgy loses its contact with the pre-religious stage of liberating the poor and degenerates into a self-serving formality for the privileged class.

5) Prophetic liturgy unites followers around the words and actions of the earlier prophets and incorporates these into ceremonies for other poor and persecuted people.

It is helpful to expand these remarks and strengthen these five steps. The exodus under Moses was only one instance among other flights of Asiatic slaves from Egypt (see de Vaux: 370–373); it was also of a secular nature and of insignificant proportions. Despite the voluminous documentations from ancient Egypt, not a hint is made about Israel's departure. The exodus does not seem to have dented in the least the economy, government and religion of Egypt. The Egyptians quickly closed ranks and life went as usual. We are reminded of various exoduses of Jewish people out of Soviet Russia.

The advice from Jethro that Moses choose elders, »God-fearing«, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain.« (Exod 18:21), could have remained what it initially was, a friendly suggestion from a worried father-in-law to an over-worked son-in-law (cf., Exod 18:13–18). Like many other discretionary decisions of Moses, this one too could have remained a temporary solution for handling problems in the wilderness. The summoning of Eldad and Medad and Moses's response, »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« also could have been lost in the desert sands of the Sinai peninsula, if it did not become a rallying call favoring later individuals, like Elijah, Elisha and Mecaiah, son of Imlah (1 Kings 17–21; 22; 2 Kings 2–9), who advised and challenged even kings.

It is our contention that later liturgical celebrations turned the earlier, real but insignificant episodes of Israel's existence into »history.« When memories began to fade, when earlier events were seen for their crucial importance by sons and daughters of a later age, when the first moment could not be re-lived realistically (Israel could not return each year to Egypt to reenact the exodus), then it became necessary to create a liturgical or symbolic renewal (cf., Deut 6:20–23).

The liturgical renewal made a series of demands upon Israel. There was the need of: 1) a *sacred place* like a temple or sanctuary, or a publically recognized spot like a city gate where elders passed judgment (cf., Deut 21:19); 2) *sacred narratives and songs* which highlighted the Lord's part in the earlier narrative, as in Num 11:16–17 where Jethro's part is forgotten and it is the Lord who advises Moses and transfers the spirit from Moses to the seventy elders; or the refrain, »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« which will live forever in memories; 3) *sacred actions*, not only the processions in Ps 68 or Josh 6, but also the gathering of the elders before the meeting tent or place of worship for their ordination in Num 11; 4) *sacred personnel*, who preserved the wisdom and the ritual of previous generations.

The fourth step in our rubric, that of prophetic challenge to civil and

religious leaders, occurs when worship and government degenerate into formalistic routine for the sake of the officeholders. Institutions would then be maintained principally as a support system for careers and the privileges of the propertied class. Then it is that a new type of prophet cries out against the charismatic prophets and the elders:

The Lord enters into judgment
with his people's elders and princes;
It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
the loot wrested from the poor
is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people,
and grinding down the poor when they
look to you? (Isa 3:14–15).

In the light of this passage from the Jerusalem prophet, Isaiah, we can understand the negative additions about greed which the Jerusalem traditions added to Numbers chap. 11.

New religious forms evolved out of the prophets' defense of the poor. The author of Ps 22 not only drew heavily from Jeremiah for a lament (vv. 2–23) but this person then wrote a thanksgiving song (vv. 23–27) for a liturgical meal at which participants »will fulfill...vows [while] the lowly eat their fill.«

In order to apply the rubric from the secular to the sacred to the prophetic, instructors across the world must decide what are the central acts of liberation within the pre-religion stage of their own country which parallels the exodus, the call of elders and the settlement in the land. Or Christian teachers must ask whether or not religion is being »used« and manipulated to sustain the privileged »elders« and ruling class, whether religious or secular. If so, then an heroic prophetic stance must condemn such ritual and its self-serving theology. If local leaders are not being affirmed and native talents are being suppressed, then instructors must respond in the words of Moses: »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« Or if the prophetic role of elders betrays the people as in the days of Isaiah, then »Woe!« must be called down upon them. Or with the prophet Amos, the originator of a new style of prophecy over against the ecstatic type, one must declare: »I am no prophet nor a member of a prophetic band!« In this case, Moses would reverse his cry: »Would that none of the people of the Lord were prophets!«

Conclusions

Applications have already been made after each of the three sections of this study. A few general observations can be appended.

1) Each major biblical passage, like Moses's exclamation, »Would that all the people of the Lord were prophets!« needs interpretation against the environment where we minister God's word. The Bible itself did not slavishly apply the earlier inspired word but adapted it, positively or negatively, according to new, local conditions.

2) Prophecy, like the Church on her pilgrim way, is being summoned »to that continual reformation of which she always has need, insofar as she is a human institution here on earth« (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, Vatican II constitution on Ecumenism, chap. 2, no. 6).

3) The canonical shape of the Bible points out the need of church unity, where institutions are preserved by elders and priests and challenged by prophets. Here too insignificant secular events are turned from occasional responses into enduring tradition. Because of Jerusalem we hear the echoing challenge of Moses: »Would that all people of the Lord were prophets!«

4) The Bible sanctions the initiative to seek the insignificant events in each one's culture and locale, those small episodes, those sleeping talents and ideals in youth, those age-old, seasoned instructions from our »Jethro's,« be these people even pagan priests. All can be turned into the eternal word of God. Among the insignificant moments are those that hap-

pen suddenly. »The moral is: keep your eyes open, for you know not the day or the hour« (Matt 25:13).

This 1984 Plenary Assembly of the *World Federation for the Biblical Apostolate* may be that day and hour!

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Other Scriptures and the Christian

Are the scriptures of other religions inspired? Do we hear God speaking to us through them? Can they nourish our prayer, reflection and action? Can we proclaim them in our Liturgy? A Christian cannot avoid these questions when s/he realizes that all peoples share a single origin and goal, that God's loving plan extends to all peoples and that the people look to the various religions for answers to the mysteries of life.¹ The questions become even more urgent when one believes that the religions are not merely human efforts searching for God or the ultimate, but represent also, at least partially, God's effort to reach out to people. Whatever be one's view regarding the precise place to be given to other religions in the plan of God for the world in the context of his self-revelation in Jesus, most theologians would accept today that people find salvation in and through their religions, not merely in spite of them.² Some of these religions have Scriptures, acknowledged as such: for example, Hinduism and Islam. If our appreciation of other religions is not just negative, what value do we give to their Scriptures?

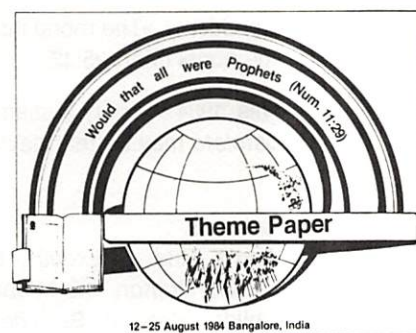
The Bangalore Seminar

Ten years ago the questions were addressed by a group of exegetes, theologians, liturgists, philosophers and students of Hinduism and Islam, at a seminar in Bangalore, India.³ The answers of that seminar may be a good starting point to the present inquiry.⁴

Professing a functional approach, the seminar places the other religions and their scriptures in the context of the »Universal economy of the Spirit who is bringing peoples in diverse ways to the eschatological realization of fellowship in God« (49).⁵ The Church, though it is aware of possessing »the guaranteed sacramental sign of Christ's Word« (56) and has in the Gospel a sure criterion of true revelation, is called to show respect and openness to the Spirit speaking through other Scriptures (56), and thus be led to the fulfilment which is God's future for mankind in Christ. In the liturgy, the other Scriptures open the Christian Community to a living contact with the authentic religious experiences of the non-Christian Community and relate this experience to the Christian faith expressed in the liturgical celebration. The seminar foresees that such use of the Indian Scriptures »would ultimately result in a radical re-orientation of the Indian Church. . . Never can the Church be truly Indian without imbibing her religious and humanistic traditions, without being familiar with and feeding on her Scriptures« (71). A strong Christocentric understanding of the history of salvation, progressing through the Cosmic, Judaic and Christian Covenants, Constitutes the background of the Final Statement. The Focus is on the use of non-Christian texts in prayer and liturgy.

One realises that such texts need not be Scriptures. Therefore other religious Scriptures are not considered as such in the Statement and the word »inspiration« is studiously avoided. There is, for instance, this disarming statement: »Considering the nature of the Scriptures of other religions and their place in the liturgy, it would seem less appropriate to finish their reading with the relatively recent formula »this is the Word of the Lord«. (61)⁶

The Statement obviously represents the consensus of the whole group. While it favoured the use of other religious Scriptures in prayer, reflection and liturgy, it did not wish to pronounce itself clearly on their inspired character. But in the preparatory research papers and in the reports of workshop discussions there are a few ideas that I would like to evoke here. Some see in the other Scriptures the »Seeds of the Word«, which are to be discerned in the light of the Word in the Bible.⁷ Others point to the positive use and ap-



preciation of ancient Near Eastern religious and wisdom material by the Old Testament and suggest that we can do the same.⁸ The Exegetes see the term »inspiration« as analogical and speak of three types: eschatological (New Testament), prophetic (Old Testament) and illuminative (Other Scriptures).⁹ One places christocentrism in the context of the Cosmic economy of the Spirit.¹⁰ Another tries to move away from a christo-centric to a theo-centric perspective.¹¹ There is a clear and definite shift from the »natural/supernatural« to the »cosmic/historical« perspective which sees a unity in difference among Christianity and other religions.

The situation has not changed much in the last ten years. However, further reflection can help us to pose the questions more sharply, offer a more nuanced answer, point to directions along which our search should continue and suggest possible avenues of action. This is what I shall try to do in the following pages. While the problem should not be narrowed down to the inspiration of other Scriptures, that remains the central question. Any inspiring text can nourish our prayer and reflection. The question is precisely about some texts that claim to be in some way God's Word in a given religious tradition. We cannot talk about them without talking about »inspiration«. Hence the question: Can the Scriptures of other religions be considered inspired? What does it mean? What is the living context in which such an assertion could be made? What would be the practical consequence with regard to the way in which they are used? What difference would it make to our attitude to and our use of our own Scriptures?

A Phenomenological Analysis

To call any text »Scripture« is to imply that it is sacred, inspired. A religious community has a memory of its beginnings. This memory refers back to a time when, through a founder or founders, the community as such came to be. The ultimate founder, operating through human intermediaries, is recognised to be God himself. This foundational event consists of three elements: community structures, rituals and narrative. The community structures regulate order and internal relationships in the group in view of the style of life or goal that the community has set for itself. The group is animated by leaders and priests. The same person(s) may fulfil both roles. They derive their authority from God himself through means recognised as such by the group. The community comes together occasionally to celebrate events in the ongoing life of a member or of the community, finding in these events a meaning related to the foundational experience and to the goal towards which the community is moving. This meaning is spelt out in stories and other texts which are proclaimed during the ritual, making it meaningful. These texts, when written down, become the Scriptures. To call a text »Scripture«, therefore, is to refer to the foundational experience which it proclaims in the context of a ritual which actualises that experience here and now.

Though it is customary to call Scripture only the written texts, the term could legitimately be extended to all foundational texts. All the written texts of today have had their oral stages and what is oral tradition today could be written down later. The foundational experience need not refer to a single event or to a limited stretch of time. The foundational experience of the Bible covers a few thousand years and a series of events or periods. Though the Vedas are considered basic to Hindu tradition and eternal, the Bhagavad Gita, the Bhagavatam and the corpus of devotional literature may be more important to different sub-groups within the Hindu tradition.¹²

Scriptures are normally spoken of within the theistic tradition. Do the Buddhists have Scriptures? They do have their foundational texts. One speaks of the »Pali Canon«. It is not necessary for us here to discuss whether Buddhism is a religion and whether it has Scriptures, though one can justifiably answer both questions in the affirmative.

Inspiration-talk is therefore meaningful only in the context in which a religious community attributes divine or superhuman influence and authority to its foundational experience and to all its elements. The general process

is called revelation: God's self-communication to people. People then respond in faith. A dialogue is inaugurated and is continued. This on-going dialogue takes place in the context of a community, its symbol-system and particularly its language. The foundational experience becomes institutionalised and normative. The text, oral or written, shares in this normative, authoritative character. It has a double individuality. It is the text that spells out and specifies the meaning of the symbolic structures that are closer to life. In that very process it becomes a fixed, autonomous element that needs constant re-interpretation. It is in this broader context that we must understand the words of the second Vatican Council which says that the Old and New Testaments, »having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, have God for their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself«.¹³

Though inspired by God, the text is in human language, expressing the experience of a prophet or a community conditioned by space, time and culture, but meaningful to the on-going life of the community and hence with the need to be continually re-interpreted to make it relevant to the moment. The context of this re-interpretation is the current experience of the community which is made meaningful in relation to the foundational experience.

What I have been trying to do in the preceding pages is to outline a phenomenology of the reality of Scripture as such, to whatever religious tradition it may belong. I am not here interested in the way the theologians explain this phenomenon in each religious tradition. The Hindus may think of their vedas as eternal sound, heard by Seers and recorded in their present form.¹⁴ The Muslims may consider the Suras of the Koran as dictated by an angel.¹⁵ The scholastic theologians of the Christian tradition may spin intricate theories of instrumental causality. These theories do not interest me at the moment. What interests me is the scriptural function in the on-going life of a religious community.

Inspired Scriptures?

After these necessary preliminary observations, I come back to the question: Are the Scriptures of other Religions inspired?¹⁶ It would be clear from what I have been saying so far that inspiration is not an independent, self-evident characteristic that can be discerned in itself in a given text. It is not like asking: Has this text literary merit? I do not either ask this question in a relative sense: Scriptures are considered inspired by the people whose Scriptures they are. Neither do I ask a question on the manner of a student of the phenomenology of religions, who finds that every religion has a text (myth), oral or written, considered foundational and authoritative. I am asking two direct questions: Can I, a Christian, accept that God speaks to my brothers and sisters of other religions through their Scriptures? Can I discover God speaking to me in and through the Scriptures of other religions?

My answer to these questions will depend on the value I give to the other religions. If I believe that other religions do mediate a salvific dialogue between God and a community, this dialogue will certainly take place also through their Scriptures as an element of their foundational experience. Such religions then belong to the salvific plan of God for the world, and God, in some way, also speaks to me through them. In what way will depend on how I picture the plan of God. Let me now elaborate these two answers.

Extreme Positions

Let me state from the very beginning that I am distancing myself from two extreme positions that some may be holding as not being worth our consideration at the moment.¹⁷ One extreme would be a negative view of all other religions or of religion as such. Either one holds to the axiom: there is no salvation outside the Church or one opposes religion as such, including Christianity, to salvific faith. This extreme simply denies the universal salvific will of God and the human, social and tangible ways in which this will oper-

ate. Another extreme view would be a relativistic view of all religions as equally salvific: all rivers lead to the sea. So it does not matter which religion one follows. Each is self-sufficient. But if God has one plan of salvation for the world, then the various religions must be somehow related to one another as elements in the one divine plan. Concrete visions of the plan might vary, but the plan is there. With these two extremes out of the way let us look at the other options.

All Scriptures are Inspired?

It is the common opinion of theologians today that God's universal salvific will, which extends to all men, reaches out to the members of other religions not only in the secrets of their hearts, but in and through their religions, so that these can be called ways of salvation. Some may call it the cosmic activity of the Spirit. Others may see in it the active presence of the unknown Christ. In whatever way, God's saving love has been present to people through their prophets, their scriptures and their rituals. Not that these are free from human limitations. But these limitations do not radically vitiate God's self-manifestation in them. In the words of J. Dupuis:

By speaking personally to the prophets of the nations in the secret of their hearts, God intended to manifest and to reveal himself in his Spirit to the nations themselves. This was the way in which, secretly and unobtrusively, he entered into the history of the nations and directed that history towards the realization of his own designs. Hence the social character of the »sacred Scriptures« of the nations may be said to be willed by God himself. . . They contain words of God to men in the words of the rishis.¹⁸

These words of the rishis, then, may be called in a certain sense inspired words of God. If the sacred Scriptures of other religions are real and authentic words of God, then they are such not only for them, but also for us. The inspired nature of their Scriptures does not simply depend on their belief. It is an objective revealing act of God. If God has really spoken through these Scriptures, are not his words relevant to any one who is open to God's self-manifestation, even if he does not belong to the community to which God's words are addressed? This leads me to my second question and a complete answer will depend on how I perceive the interrelationships of the various religions in the one plan of God for humankind and the particular place given to Christianity in this plan. I can see three broad perspectives emerging in the discussion among theologians on this question. All the three would agree that we can hear God's Word in the Scriptures of other religions. But they would differ in the value they give to it and in the way they relate it to the Christian Scriptures.

An Eschatological Perspective

The first view holds that God's self-manifestation in Jesus Christ is final, definitive, eschatological and historical. The other manifestations of God do not share these characteristics. Not that they are not authentic; but they are not historically related to the only normative one. Inspiration can be attributed in the strict sense only to the Scriptures that are part of this eschatological, normative manifestation. G. Gispert-Sauch writes:

Christian theology acknowledges a divine causality in the order of grace which is not however of the same type as the absolute will with which God »decrees« the Incarnation of the Son or brings the Church into existence, inspiring the Bible as one of its constituent elements. Such a causality is the outcome of the salvific presence of the Spirit of God in the world, both before the Resurrection of Jesus Christ as an »entelechy« leading to the risen Lord, and after the Resurrection as the manifestation of his victory in the lives of those who share in it.¹⁹

The Scriptures of other religions therefore are as meaningful to us as St. Augustine's Confessions or the Poems of St. John of the Cross. We discern in them the work of grace or the Spirit. But we cannot place them alongside the Christian Scriptures.

The Three Covenants

The second point of view sees a continuity in the self-manifestation of God in human history. Jesus Christ is the final, definitive Word. Every other word leads to it. One speaks, for instance, of three progressive covenants of God with humanity: the Cosmic, the Judaic and the Christian. J. Dupuis writes:

The sacred Scriptures of the nations can only contain initial and hidden words of God which do not have the official character that must be attributed to the Old Testament, much less the definitive value of the New Testament. These hidden words may nevertheless be called divine words, in so far as they are spoken by God through his Spirit; and the sacred books in which they are contained deserve, in a certain sense, to be called, from a Christian theological view-point, sacred Scriptures²⁰.

Jesus Christ is the final Word, the fulfilment. All that precedes must be read and interpreted in the light of the final Word. In the words of J. Neuner:

Not only all individuals, but all values contained in religious traditions are at once to be judged, purified, fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The aspirations of these religious communities are expressed in their sacred writings. If, therefore, the religions are related to Christ and through him to the Church, and are to be perfected in him, also their sacred books belong in a broad sense to the Church and have to find their final interpretation in Jesus Christ. They wait to be read by Christians who would be able to place them into the wide context of God's universal plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. . . The Christian is able to read texts of other religions in a fuller sense.²¹

G. Soares-Prabhu speaks of the possibility of considering the Scriptures of other religions inspired, but only when they are related to the New Testament. He cites the analogy of the Old Testament. He says:

The Old Testament is authoritative, inspired, God's Word, not in itself, but in as much as it is illumined by the New. In itself the Old Testament is a Jewish book: it becomes an inspired Christian text (and so the normative Word of God for the Christian) only when read and interpreted in the light of Christ. Inspiration is not a static property somehow in the material text of the Old Testament, but a quality which comes to it from its interaction with the New.²²

It is interesting to stop here for a moment and visualize the images that picture the relationship between the Scriptures of other religions and the New Testament. Partial – full, implicit – explicit, anonymous – acknowledged, first – final, tentative – definitive, promise – fulfilment, etc. The view of God's plan for the world is strongly Christ-centred. One who has Christ has everything. He may be interested in discovering traces of his passage in the Scriptures of other religions. But they do not bring him anything which he does not already have.

Pluralism and Complementarity

The third view evokes a perspective of complementarity of the Scriptures of various religions. This perspective is based in two related approaches. First of all, there is a hesitation to identify the Church (and its various foundational elements, including the Scriptures) with the Kingdom.

A difference is seen between the mystery of God and its historical manifestation in Jesus Christ. The action of Christ and the activity of the Spirit are not simply identified without distinction. Secondly, revelation is effected through symbols. A symbol is never an adequate manifestation of the mystery it symbolises. Besides, different symbols of the same mystery reveal its different aspects; they are complementary. Let me further explain on the theology of religions. I shall limit myself to a few indications that will throw the required light on the question that we are busy with at the moment.

We make usually too many and too easy identifications. The Bible is the book of the Church, but the Church is not the Kingdom. The Bible is not a full and adequate report of God's action and self-manifestation in the world. Even the New Testament is an official, but not an adequate expression of God's Word in Jesus Christ. J. Dupuis writes:

The fulness of revelation is not, properly speaking, the written word of the New Testament, but the person of Jesus Christ himself, his deeds and his words, his life, death and resurrection, in one word, the event of Jesus Christ, of which the New Testament itself claims to contain an incomplete record²³.

The Christ-event, which is reported to us in the New Testament, however inadequately, and which took place in Palestine 2000 years ago, cannot be simply equated with the Mystery, the plan of God for the world of which Paul speaks. Whatever be the key place we give to the Christ-event in this plan, the Mystery itself is cosmic and would be complete only on the »last day«. It is not simply a question of distinguishing Christ from the Spirit or from God and Christo-centrism from theo-centrism. It is to point out that even the Christ-event has a historical and a trans-historical or cosmic aspect that correspond to his reality as God-Man. *Communicatio idiomatum* should not lead one to a simple identification of the two aspects. If one understands this, it is easier to accept what Avery Dulles has to say:

Could a Christian affirm that the same divine Lord whom Christians worship in Jesus is worshiped, under other symbols, by the devotees of the Lord Krishna and of the Lord Buddha? Fidelity to the Christian Confession, it would seem, excludes the idea that there is any Lord except Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 8:6). In company with Lucien Richard, I would reject an extreme »archetype Christology« that would see the Jesus story as »the historicization of an archetype which is already found at work everywhere«. On the other hand, it need not be denied that the eternal Logos could manifest itself to other peoples through other religious symbols. Raimundo Panikkar, who proposes a »universal Christology«, stands in a long Christian tradition of Logos-theology that goes back as far as Justin Martyr. On Christian grounds, it may be held that the divine person who appears in Jesus is not exhausted by that historical appearance. The symbols and myths of other religions may point to the one whom Christians recognize as the Christ.²⁴

Therefore, the different symbols of different religions and their Scriptures refer to the same mystery, but reveal different aspects of the mystery. Even for me, as a Christian, the Scriptures of other religions have something to say that I have not heard from my own Scriptures.

If this is the case, I can hardly use my Scriptures as a criterion to judge the Scriptures of other religions. The principle of judgement is God, the Spirit, the Mystery of Christ which I have experienced in my own Scriptures as well as in the Scriptures of other religions. It is a criterion of compatibility and consistency, not of conformity. This is the same criterion we use to interpret the Bible itself with its variety of perspectives and theologies. If I may permit myself another long quotation. J. Wijngaards has written:

The Word of God is a living reality that cannot be pinned down to any external expression. In fact, Christ himself is the Spirit (2 Cor 3,17). He is the Word of God whom we encounter in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the fellowship we have with our brethren. The New Testament itself is a sign of this living Word, which is Christ; it is not the Word itself *secundum se et simpliciter*. The scriptural traditions of other religions also are »signs« of God's presence in them, records of the work of the Spirit, tokens of the same »Word« proclaimed in the New Testament. When we compare the Bible and non-Christian Scriptures, we are asking the question how the »sign« which is the Bible relates to the »sign« on other Scriptures. It is not the Bible that should pronounce a »judgement« on other Scriptures, but the Spirit of Christ in us who should make us discern all that is »true, noble, right, pure, lovely and honourable« (Phil 4.8); »Only God's Spirit knows all about God« (1 Cor 2,11)²⁵.

I think we have enough theological grounds to say that, speaking as a Christian, I can affirm that the Scriptures of other religions are inspired and that they have a message for me, which is not just a repetition, much less an inchoate version, of biblical revelation.

Consequences

What are the consequences of this attitude to other religious Scriptures? I can see three. First of all, I am called to listen to God speaking to me through the Scriptures of other religions. Such listening will enlarge my understanding of the horizons of the mystery of God. Secondly, such a broadening of horizons will lead me to interpret my own Scriptures in a new light. Thirdly, it will challenge me to enter into dialogue with others and to commit myself to a joint project of building up a new humanity. I shall say a few words on each of these consequences.

Prayer

If, according to the seminar referred to above, the Scriptures of other religions can have a place in our prayer, spiritual reflection and worship, the new realization regarding their inspiration will almost demand such a place. Moreover, some of these other Scriptures, the Indian Scriptures, for example, are my own patrimony and will help me to discover my own deeper and fuller identity. The use of these Scriptures in the liturgy will be further facilitated if the liturgy is not understood in an overly christo-centric manner, as the seminar did²⁶, but makes room for broader mysteric and pneumatic dimensions in the manner of the Oriental Churches.

Interpretation

It is already a fact of experience that an Indian reading St. John's Gospel in the light of his Scriptures discovers in it themes, perspectives and depths that an European Christian would not find²⁷. Talking about a biblical hermeneutic for India today G. Soares-Prabhu suggests:

Such an »Indian« method will not be a matter of elaborating specifically Indian techniques for interpreting the Bible, but of adopting a specifically Indian perspective from which the Bible will be interpreted. An Indian reading of the Bible is a reading from an Indian point of view: a reading guided by a sensibility shaped by Indian culture, and provoked by questions emerging from the Indian situation²⁸.

Religions are an important part of the Indian cultural situation and their Scriptures would certainly help us acquire that Indian sensibility. The Seminar recognized this: »Never can the Church be truly Indian without imbibing her religious and humanistic traditions, without being familiar with, and feeding on her Scriptures«²⁹.

Common Commitment

But the function of Scriptures in a community is not primarily to be vehicles of its culture. Its role is to make the life of the community meaningful in the context of its foundational experience and in reference to its goal, namely self-realisation and fulfilment, Moksha. It supports moral values and promotes the quality of life. In a country like India where people of all religions are working together to build up a new humanity, religion should be a force for collaboration. The kind of complementarity that I have suggested would enable the followers of different religions to help each other through earnest dialogue to develop an intergral vision of man and of the world that would provoke and support a common commitment to creative action. Each religious group, without losing its identity, would be taken up in a converging movement which would be a historical, dynamic expression of God's plan for humanity. I have traced elsewhere the possible path that such a dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity could take in India³⁰. A mutual understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures would certainly be an essential element of such dialogue. One recalls the prayer meetings of Mahatma Gandhi in which Scriptures of the various religions were read and people prayed together. It is certainly an easier form of dialogue than common liturgical celebration or community organisation.

In the history of the world, religious pluralism has always been a source of strife, more or less serious. But religions can become sources of unity and collaboration and not of division. Common reading of the Scriptures can be a means of promoting such unity. The analysis of the problem of inspiration of the Scriptures of other religions that I have attempted here seems to indicate that a common reading of the Scriptures is not only tolerated or allowed, but even demanded. Perhaps, today, that is the best way of proclaiming and making effective the Good News of the Kingdom.

H. Amaladoss, SJ.

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4. For a critical review of the Seminar, see M. Amaladoss, »Non-Biblical Scriptures in Christian Life and Worship«, *Vidyajyoti*, 39 (1975) 194–209.
5. This and the following numbers within brackets refer to the Final Statement of the Seminar. cf. RSNBS, 681–695.
6. Even this relatively low-key use of the Scriptures of other religions was disallowed by Church authorities.
7. Cf. J. Neuner, »Holy Scripture and Community«, 179–189; L. Legrand, »Letter and the Spirit: The Role of the Book in the Christian Economy«, *ibid.*, 53–77.
8. J.N.M. Wijngaards, »The Intergration into Scripture of Originally non-Jewish Religious Literature«, *ibid.* 78–98.
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11. J. Puthiadam, »Reflections on Hindu Religious Texts«, *ibid.*, 300–314.
12. Cf. G. Michael, »The Divine Origin of the Prabhandam«, *ibid.*, 418–430; X. Irudayaraj, »Self-Understanding of Saiva Siddhanta Scriptures«, *ibid.*, 445–454.
13. *Dei Verbum*, 11.
14. Cf. RSNBS, 280–383. See also G. Gispert-Sauch, »Sacred Scriptures in Indian Religions«, *Vidyajyoti* 39 (1975) 217–222.
15. Cf. RSNBS, 489–545.
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