

MELITA THEOLOGICA

The Review of the
Faculty of Theology
and the
Theology Students' Association
Malta

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INTENTION AND THE EXPLANATION OF HUMAN ACTIONS

Joe Friggieri

1. In 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink' J.L. Austin introduces the notion of intention in this way:

"As I go through life, doing, as we suppose, one thing after another, I in general always have an idea — some idea, my idea, or picture, or notion, or conception — of what I'm up to, what I'm engaged in, what I'm about, or in general 'what I'm doing' . . . I must be supposed to have *as it were* a plan, an operation-order or something of the kind on which I'm acting, which I am seeking to put into effect, carry out in action: only of course nothing necessarily or, usually, even faintly, so full-blooded as a plan proper".⁽¹⁾

When we draw attention to this aspect of action, we use the words connected with intention.

In the same passage, Austin (acknowledging Anscombe⁽²⁾) points out that the kind of knowledge involved in intention is not knowledge following observation.

"I don't 'know what I'm doing' as a result of looking to see or otherwise conducting observations: only in rare and perturbing cases do I *discover* what I've done or *come to realize* what I am or have been doing in this way. It is not in such fashion that I know what I'm doing when I strike the match in the vicinity of the haystack".⁽³⁾

Austin asks us to *contrast* the sense in which 'in general and obviously' (i.e. in doing something intentionally) I know what I'm doing with the sense

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1. J.L. Austin, 'Three Ways of Spilling Ink', *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock, 3rd edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979, p. 283.

2. See G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed., Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, paras. 8,9,16, 28–32.

3. 'Three Ways', p. 283.

"in which you *suppose*, dubiously, that I know what I'm doing when I strike the match so close to the gasoline".⁽⁴⁾

Austin's example gives us the opportunity to clarify some of the misunderstanding which the expression 'knowing without observation' can give rise to. Here I am, sitting by the haystack, five minutes before I strike the match, mentally rehearsing the details of a carefully worked out plan and letting nobody into the secret. The kind of knowledge I have of my intentions in this situation is both non-observational and private — in the sense that *you*, for example, sitting nearby and eyeing me with suspicion — will never know what my intentions are unless I tell you (without lying).

But now let us proceed to the stage where my intentions are going to issue, or become embodied, as we say, in action. I strike the match in the vicinity of the haystack. At this point both you and I can observe (see) what I am doing; and although, for a short while yet, only *I* may know what I'm up to, if and when I proceed to set fire to the haystack, then my intentions no longer remain hidden from you; and what you feared and suspected — and I non-observationally knew — that I would do, now both of us know that I have done.

2. We may contrast this story with one of those "rare and perturbing cases where I *discover* what I've done or *come to realize* what I am or have been doing . . . as a result of looking to see or otherwise conducting observations". If I absentmindedly flick my cigarette-ash in your brandy, then I can come to realize or discover by observation what I have absentmindedly done (I come to realize what I've done as soon as I see the ash floating in your drink). Even here, however, what I discover with observation is *not* my intention (for I did not flick my ash into your glass intentionally), but *what I did*. If, before I realized what I'd done, you quickly hid your drink behind your back and asked me 'What have you done just now?', I might still have answered 'I flicked my cigarette ash in a glass ashtray' — believing (wrongly) that *that* was what I had done. I knew, without observation, what my intention was; I discovered, or came to realize later, following observation, what I'd done.

Consider another example. I am playing an old and fairly complicated Chinese board game, or one whose rules I have read and learnt and you haven't. You observe in silence as I move the red and blue counters up and down the board and turn the cards one at a time with each throw of the dice. After ten minutes of careful watching you confidently announce: 'Now I see

4. *Ibid.* A.R. White suggests that we interpret the distinction between 'knowledge through observation' and 'knowledge without observation' in terms of the distinction between consciousness and realisation. "The example given of things known without observation, such as the position of one's limbs, one's reflex kick or spasm or any one of one's intentional actions, are all of the things which one would be said to be conscious of, but not things one knows of by coming to realize or by discovering that they have happened". A.R. White, *Attention*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell (1964), p.63.

what you're doing'. What is it you see now which only a minute ago you weren't seeing? Certainly not a new move or series of moves. What you come to see or discover is a plan. You understand the rules of the game. You discover, come to realize, what my intentions are, what I'm doing or trying to achieve.⁽⁵⁾

Although intentions are 'private' in the precise sense already described – the sense in which, in general, I can decide not to reveal my intentions 'before the right time' – in another sense they are as public as my words and actions. Intentions are embodied in actions: they are typically intentions to act and are therefore essentially world-involving. This is what we mean when we say that you can 'read' or 'see' my intentions in my actions.

3. One of the central tenets of a rather widespread and influential trend in art criticism which flourished in the late forties and fifties, and which came to be known as the New Criticism, was that considerations of the artist's intentions are not relevant to the evaluation of art. This view seems to be the perfect mirror image of the view, held by some Idealist philosophers, that we should totally ignore the work of art and concentrate upon the artist's intentions. Both these doctrines, as Richard Wollheim points out, share a common assumption, namely,

"that there exist inner states of a certain kind – states which occur frequently in the process of making – and which can be understood independently of the product in which they issue".⁽⁶⁾

The examples discussed above show why this assumption is mistaken.

4. We must distinguish, more systematically than Austin does, between the various uses of the concept of intention described by Anscombe,⁽⁷⁾ namely, doing something intentionally, doing it with a further intention, and intending to do it.

If I do something, such as play the piano, with the intention of doing another thing, such as give pleasure to my friends, then I do the first thing intentionally. But I may play the piano without having any further intention. This would not mean that I play the piano unintentionally. Further, I may now intend to play the piano next week. But despite my intention, for reasons within or beyond my control, I may not play the

5. You need not, of course, discover all these things simultaneously or all at once. I can see that you are trying to make your black man jump over the other player's white man, but I do not necessarily understand your strategy or aim. I can see that you've got to put a black card on a red, or vice versa, and that you're not allowed to put two blacks or two reds together, but I do not yet understand *why* you're doing it. Grasping what an agent's intentions are is not an all-or-nothing affair. It might happen in stages. And you might infer to rules from intentions, or the other way round.

6. Bryan Magee, 'Conversation with Richard Wollheim', in *Modern British Philosophy*, London, Secker & Warburg (1971), 185–6.

7. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, para 1.

piano next week. It may happen as simply as this: I change my mind, or I forget. Some of our intentions, like some of our promises, remain unfulfilled, are not carried out or put into effect.⁽⁸⁾

The use of 'I intend' in 'I intend to Φ ', Austin remarks,

"is, as it were, a sort of 'future tense' of the verb 'to Φ '. It has a vector, committal effect like 'I promise to Φ ', and, again, like 'I promise to Φ ', it is one of the possible formulas for making explicit, on occasion, the force of 'I shall Φ ' (namely, that it was a declaration and not, for example, a forecast or an undertaking)".⁽⁹⁾

Actually, 'I will come to the meeting' is much stronger than 'I intend to come to the meeting' in giving assurance about my coming to the meeting.⁽¹⁰⁾ Austin makes virtually the same remark in connection with the stronger commitment involved in saying 'I promise to come to the meeting' rather than saying merely 'I intend to come to the meeting'.

"When I say 'I promise' a new plunge is taken: I have not merely announced my intention, but, by using this formula . . . I have bound myself to others, and staked my reputation, in a new way".⁽¹¹⁾

5. Austin compares intention to a miner's lamp on our forehead

"which illuminates always just so far ahead as we go along".⁽¹²⁾

Although Austin says that

"it is not to be supposed that there are any precise rules about the extent and degree of illumination it sheds",⁽¹³⁾

he is, nevertheless, keen to emphasize that

"the illumination is always *limited*, and that in several ways. It will never extend indefinitely far ahead".⁽¹⁴⁾

I do not think that Austin is right in making this restriction, nor in thinking of it as a general rule (in fact as 'the only general rule')⁽¹⁵⁾; for it is clear that apart from the day-to-day intentions which Austin seems to have in mind, we also form long-term plans according to which we conduct our affairs. It is generally in the light of these long-term intentions that our lives

8. "A man can form an intention which he then does nothing to carry out, either because he is prevented or because he changes his mind: but the intention itself can be complete, although it remains a purely interior thing". Anscombe, *Intention*, p.9.

9. 'Three Ways', p. 279.

10. See Brice Noel Fleming, 'On Intention', *Philosophical Review* LXXIII (1964), p. 304.

11. J.L. Austin, 'Other Minds', *Philosophical Papers*, op. cit., p. 99.

12. 'Three Ways', p. 284.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

and careers are structured and that a great deal of our activities form a coherent pattern. So, with regard to our intentions for the future, there doesn't seem to be any restriction limiting the time over which they can extend. I may intend to go to the cinema tomorrow, but I may also intend to send my son to University in ten years' time. And many people intend to stay in their job until they retire. These intentions extend a very long way into the future, though certainly not 'indefinitely'. (But note: 'I intend to buy a boat *someday*').

On the other hand, as far as acting intentionally is concerned, we do not have to engage in any thought process before acting. Nor do we have to form the intention to ϕ in order to ϕ intentionally. Even the most unreflective and habitual actions can be intentional.⁽¹⁶⁾ None of the things we do as a matter of routine have to be preceded by any particular intention or thought-process for them to be intentional. What we do intentionally, although of course we may have intended to do it, we can do without any forethought at all.

6. Austin notes, moreover, that 'intentionally' cannot be used to describe a certain *style* or manner of performance, as 'deliberately' can and 'purposefully' always does. Anscombe makes the same point when she says that intention is not 'a style-characteristic of observable human proceedings'.⁽¹⁷⁾

7. Austin is right, I think, to connect the concept of intention with that of knowing, or having an idea, of what we're up to or of what we're doing. However, if an action is the doing of many things, then we must make sure that, in asking whether someone knew what he was doing, we mention the *relevant* thing among the things he did. If you want to know whether I trod on the snail intentionally, then at least you must find out whether I knew that I was treading on it. Like the legendary Thales I may have been so completely absorbed in contemplating the stars that I didn't notice the poor creature at my feet. Or, I may know that in treading (intentionally this time) on the snail I am making Peter sad, but I may be quite unintentionally making Peter sad — what I do intentionally (what I *mean* to do) is prevent the snail from eating your fresh cabbages. Finally, I may tread on the snail intending to make Peter sad, without knowing whether my treading on the snail will make him sad or not. Nevertheless, I tread on it *just in case*.

16. See A.R. White: "Carelessly, impulsively or automatically throwing away a lighted match does not preclude my having thrown it away intentionally or with the intention of protecting my new gloves. It is worth emphasising the compatibility of automatic and intentional actions, since it throws doubt on the traditional view that an intentional action is one immediately preceded by the thought of doing it". *Attention*, p. 19.

Compare, Larry Wright 'Emergency Behaviour', *Inquiry* 17 (1974), 43–7; and James Hopkins, 'Mental States, Natural Kinds and Psychophysical Laws', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* LII (1978), 221–36; and contrast D.G. Brown, *Action*, Toronto University Press (1968).

17. G.E.M. Anscombe, *Intention*, p. 30.

Again, if I succeed, then there is no doubt that I have intentionally made him sad.⁽¹⁸⁾ This is the rather interesting case, quite common in everyday life, where I do not know (cannot tell) in advance what the result of my action will be, but only what it *may* be – or what I hope it will be, or strongly desire it should be – and have to decide whether or not to take the risk.

Although Austin says that

“all that is to follow, or to be done thereafter, is not what I am intending to do, but perhaps consequences or results or effects thereof”,⁽¹⁹⁾

our analysis shows that among the consequences of our actions we must distinguish between those which are intended and those which are not.

8. What is the relation between Φ -ing intentionally and wanting to Φ ? As with the relation between knowing and intending, it is rather complex; for I may either want or not want to do what I do intentionally. Sam may set fire to his house intentionally and quite cheerfully – it's such an eyesore, and it's full of rats, and he's been wanting to get rid of it for years, only he couldn't get the permission to burn it down, but now. . . Or he may set fire to the house intentionally but quite reluctantly and unwillingly – it had become too small for the family, certainly, and he had to build a new one to please his wife, still he couldn't bear the thought of seeing his little old cottage go up in flames. Many of the things we do, we do only as means to end; and of these some are undesirable in themselves. Sheila has an obsessive fear of the dentist's chair; still she decides to face up to the ordeal in order to get rid of her toothache, which has become quite unbearable.

9. A discussion of intention in terms of knowing (§7) and wanting (§8) has the advantage of bringing together the two elements which most philosophers writing on the subject have thought of as constitutive of rational behaviour. In this tradition, intentional action is seen as resulting, via the right causal links, from appropriate beliefs and desires.⁽²⁰⁾ When I

18. This will be true even if I remain ignorant of my success. Other examples (1) I may intend to make Sue happy by sending her a rose. I succeed in making Sue happy in this way but for a year I have no means of finding out. (Sue lives in New Zealand and she dislikes writing letters even to people who make her happy by sending her roses). It seems clear that I have made Sue happy intentionally without knowing that I have. (Of course this does not mean that I made Sue happy by accident; for I *meant* to make her happy and her happiness is a consequence of my action).

(2) I fire the torpedo with the intention of sinking the *Bismarck*. If I sink the *Bismarck* I sink it intentionally – even though I might not know (yet) that I've sunk it. This account of intention has the (Davidsonian) feature of giving 'intending to Φ ' primary status. See D. Davidson, 'Intending', *Essays on Actions and Events*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1980, chapter 5.

19. 'Three Ways', p.284.

20. The seminal paper in this area in recent philosophy is Davidson's 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'. See also Christopher Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation*, Oxford Clarendon Press (1979); David Wiggins, 'Weakness of Will, Commensurability, and the Objects of Deliberation and Desire', in A.O. Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, London, University of California Press, (1980), p.245.

want to explain to an interested or inquisitive audience why I did what I did on a particular occasion, I do so typically by mentioning a belief and a desire. Why did you switch on the television set at that time of night? There was a boxing match being shown live via satellite from America which I wanted to watch. My belief that the event was being televised, coupled with my desire to watch the match, explain why I pressed the button. This simple model can be seen to work even on those occasions when, as often happens, the agent acts on a mistaken belief that something is the case. My mistaken belief that it is Friday, together with my desire to watch the late Friday film, explains why I press the button on Thursday night.

10. Aristotle's practical syllogisms offer explanations of actions which reconstruct, in the way just described, the reasons the agent himself has for his action. Austin followed Aristotle more or less closely in describing the various stages which lead to action, together with the dangers attending each successive stage. Aristotle's first or major premiss mentions a desire, or at any rate something of which there could be a desire (*orexis*).⁽²¹⁾ The desire may be for something quite generic (e.g. physical fitness or health) or for something which the agent considers good or attractive in the situation (e.g. a desire to watch a favourite television programme). The second or minor premiss mentions the opportunity presented here and now to the agent which, if taken, could lead to the satisfaction of the desire expressed in the major premiss. If the agent decides to take the opportunity, then his action could be explained in the light of its antecedents (i.e. in terms of the reasons the agent has for doing what he does). His desire to keep healthy and his belief that going for a walk in the parks is one thing he could do (in the circumstances) to keep healthy, explain why he puts on his track-suit and goes for a walk.

Two remarks are called for here. *a*. The question one aims to answer in seeking to provide an explanation of action is: what was the reason the agent had for doing what he did? To answer that question it will not be sufficient to provide *any* reason, for it can easily be the case that the agent had such a reason and either did not proceed to do what he had good reason for doing, or did what he did for some quite different reason. The doctor says I should go for long walks because this would keep me healthy. I resolve to go for long walks because I care about my health. The telephone rings. A friend, who lives two miles away, invites me to go and have tea with him. Though it is a rather long walk, I decide to go on foot. I take this decision without thinking for a moment about my health, or about the doctor's advice. Although I have a good reason for taking long walks, I do not, in this particular instance, act *for* that reason. In giving explanations for actions we must establish not only that the agent had a reason for acting, but that

21. See G.E.M. Anscombe, 'On Practical Reasoning', in Joseph Raz ed., *Practical Reasoning*, Oxford University Press (1978), pp.32–45; and also G.H. Von Wright, 'On so-called Practical Inference', in the same collection (Raz), pp.46–62.

that reason was *efficacious* in the context. In other words we must show that the agent acted *for* or *because of* that reason.

b. The second point is this. From the fact that we explain actions by mentioning antecedent desires and beliefs we should not conclude that whenever we detect, in ourselves or in others, the presence of a particular belief or desire, then we can *predict* that such-and-such an action will occur. There simply are no laws stating that if an agent has such-and-such desires, or if he entertains such-and-such beliefs, then, he will act in such-and-such a way.⁽²²⁾ As Davidson puts it:

“There is no more reason to suppose that a person who has reasons for acting will always act on them than to oppose that a person who has beliefs which entail a certain conclusion will draw that conclusion”.⁽²³⁾

22. A.J. Ayer once suggested that the main characteristic of explanations in terms of reasons is that “They serve to establish a lawlike connection between different pieces of behaviour”. (A.J. Ayer, ‘Man as a Subject for Science’, *Metaphysics and Common Sense*, London, Macmillan, 1969, p.230). But as C.A.B. Peacocke has recently shown, “There is no correlation between beliefs and action-types such that necessarily anyone who has a given belief performs an action of the kind correlated with that belief”. (C.A.B. Peacocke, *Holistic Explanation*, op. cit. p.5).

23. D. Davidson, ‘Freedom to Act’, in *Essays on Actions and Events*, op. cit., p.77.

GENESIS 15: A NON-GENETIC APPROACH

Anthony Abela

Ever since M. Noth's famous note 85 of his *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch*⁽¹⁾ wherein he declared that notwithstanding the presence of different strata "gehören daher beide Szenen literarisch zusammen und können nicht voneinander getrennt werden," the unity of Gen 15 has remained a matter of controversy.⁽²⁾ On the one hand we encounter scholars who sustain the substantial unity of the two halves of the chapter: vv. 1–6, 7–21. J. Hoftijzer does not consider as possible "Eine Scheidung des Kapitels in zwei selbständige Teile",⁽³⁾ and passes on to refute the various arguments advanced in favour of such division. L.A. Snijders follows Hoftijzer in reading Gen 15 as a unity; he bases his thesis upon the text's "logical coherence": "This account... has been presented to us as a coherent and connected whole. One can understand why promises about a son, posterity and the land are bound together. The subject shows essential connection".⁽⁴⁾ N. Lohfink distinguishes not between the two 'traditional' parts of the periscope, but between "einem einziger literarischen (Oder vorliterarischen) Schöpfungsakt entstammender Haupttext" consisting of vv. 1–2, 4–12, 17–21 and "zwei Zusätze, ein den Text erklärender in 15,3, und ein den Inhalt interpretierenden in 15, 13–16".⁽⁵⁾ J. Van Seters stresses that Gen 15 is organically one unit notwithstanding the multiplicity of genres employed. These literary genres "are drawn from the royal court, the cult, prophetic narrative conventions, and legal spheres. Yet in spite of this variety there is no reason form-critically why any particular verse should be separated from the basic account and considered as secondary or why there should be a general source division into more than one source".⁽⁶⁾

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1. (Stuttgart 1948) 29.

2. Cfr. E. Blum, *Die Komposition der Vätergeschichte* (WMANT 57; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1984) 377.

3. *Die Verheissungen an die drei Erzväter* (Leiden 1956) 17.

4. "Genesis XV. The Covenant with Abraham", *OTS* 12 (1958) 265.

5. *Die Landverheissung als Eid* (SBS 28; Stuttgart 1967) 40. Read also Blum's discussion on these presumed additions, *Komposition*, 377–381.

6. *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven/London 1975) 260.

There follows a brief presentation of the text's structure as reconstructed by Westermann and Lohfink.⁽⁷⁾ Van Seters concludes that "The balanced structuring of the whole as well as of the two parts and the interconnections between the two are such that they could not have resulted from a series of fortuitous additions and reworkings. The plan of the whole chapter is far too deliberate for that".⁽⁸⁾

On the other hand we meet scholars who posit separate origins for the two halves of Gen 15; methodologically this requires the discussion of the two parts as different units. O. Kaiser considers as a sure result of literary criticism to date "das die beiden Abschnitte vv. 1–6 und vv. 7–21 nicht ursprünglich zusammengehörten"⁽⁹⁾, and attempts to trace back the history of the traditions that have crystallized into the present text. Basically Kaiser identifies one original tradition that concerned the establishment of a covenant with Abraham; this tradition has by time flowered into a narrative that now stands beneath vv. 7–21. It was only later that vv. 1–6 were written as an introduction and as literary context to this original narrative.

C. Westermann states that in Gen 15 "zwei zentrale Verheissungserzählungen zusammengestellt worden sind, die in späteren Zeit entscheidend wichtigen Verheissungen zum Gegenstand haben."⁽¹⁰⁾ These basic promises developed into two narratives which a redactor artificially combined simply by altering the introduction of one (that coincides with vv. 7–21) in the sense that one narrative seems to be a continuation of the other. "Diese Änderung kann aber an der Tatsache nichts ändern, dass es sich um zwei Verheissungserzählungen von annähernd gleichen Aufbau . . . handelt, deren eine die Mehrungs-, deren andere die Landverheissung zum Gegenstand hat".⁽¹¹⁾ In his 1964 essay Westermann has treated the two sections of our chapter separately. Gen 15, 1–6, 18 classified with the "Familien-geschichten"⁽¹²⁾ but is discussed with those texts that carry the "Verheissung des Sohnes mit Mehrungsverheissung".⁽¹³⁾ We have here a "sekundäre Kombination" of the two promises and one may ask if behind our text there stood a narrative in which the two promises existed separately. "Man könnte fragen, ob sich hinter der jetzigen, sicher späten Fassung von 15, 1–6 eine ältere Erzählung erschliessen lässt, deren Grundelemente Abrahams Klage (in erzählter Form) und Gottes Verheissung eines Sohnes waren".⁽¹⁴⁾ Gen 15, 7–21 is discussed together with texts which treat the

7. *Abraham*, 260–261. Cfr. C. Westermann, "Arten der Erzählung in der Genesis", *Forschung am Alten Testament: Gesammelte Studien* (Munich 1964) 22; Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 45–49.

8. *Abraham*, 261.

9. "Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung von Genesis 15", *ZA W* 70 (1958) 109.

10. *Gensis* (BKAT s/2; Düsseldorf 1981) 255.

11. *ibid.*

12. "Arten", 61.

13. "Arten", 19–24.

14. "Arten", 24.

“Landverheissung allein”.⁽¹⁵⁾ Here again he posits a long history of tradition: “Man kann dann annehmen, das hinter Gen 15, 7–21 eine alte Erzählung von der Verheissung des Landes steht, die aber stark verändert und stark überarbeitet wurde.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Westermann’s hypothesis, further elaborated by Lohfink,⁽¹⁷⁾ that behind our text there stands an ancient narrative tradition about *Yhwh*’s theophany and promise to Abraham, has been strongly contested by Van Seters.⁽¹⁸⁾ Westermann’s influence on subsequent scholarship, however, has been decisive. Notwithstanding the formal structure said to run through the “Haupttext” verse 6 does constitute for Lohfink “den Abschluss des ersten Teils, in dem sich der Erzähler etwas Abstand begibt und zusammenschaut”.⁽¹⁹⁾ To wit “von der Formalstruktur her ist V.6 das Bindeglied zwischen den beiden Hälften Abrams Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit, die nicht nur im Geiste Gottes zu denken ist, sondern sich als ein Tun Gottes zeigen muss, verwirklicht sich in der Konkretisierung der anfänglichen Lohnverheissung als Landverheissung – und das ist der Inhalt der zweiten Hälfte”.⁽²⁰⁾ For all his emphasis on the organic unity of Gen 15 Van Seters too considers verse 6 as a “most appropriate conclusion, form-critically, to a unit that contains a salvation oracle and lament.”⁽²¹⁾ Another form-critic whose “form-critical analysis of OT narrative calls... for evaluation of the narrative for itself...”⁽²²⁾ is G.W. Coats who describes Gen 15 as an isolated unit composed entirely of speeches. These speeches are moreover “arranged in a rather loose order. Nevertheless, one can recognise two segments of speeches that hang together, each as a dialogue between Yahweh and Abram. The two segments develop parallel lines and, though embracing quite diverse traditions, qualify as complements.”⁽²³⁾ Concerning verse 6, Coats writes that it stands as a conclusion: Abram now accepts the sign and the promise(s) given by *Yhwh* (vv. 1–5). In other words Gen 15 is not discussed as a unit but as a conglomeration of promise speeches that somehow combine two traditions, originally independent into a single crux.

These approaches to Gen 15 are all diachronical, that is, they attempt to understand the present text by reconstructing its prehistory. The interpretative dynamics are similar whether the starting point is presumed to be one basic tradition that grew through successive re-interpretations and elaborations (Kaiser) or several traditions that flowered into narratives that

15. “Arten”, 27-34.

16. “Arten”, 29.

17. *Landverheissung*, chs 6 and 7.

18. *Abraham*, 261-263.

19. *Landverheissung*, 46.

20. *Landverheissung*, 46-47.

21. *Abraham*, 256.

22. *Genesis. With an Introduction to Narrative Literature. The Forms of OT Literature*, 1 (Michigan 1983) 3.

23. *Genesis*, 123.

became the basis for the present text (Westermann), or still several traditions that offered material to the one writer responsible for Gen 15 in its actual form (Van Seters). These diachronical approaches constantly introduce a caesura between vv. 1–6 and 7–21. This caesura is at times considered to be substantial in the sense that the two parts constitute separate materials of tradition artificially put together; at other times it is taken as simply structural, that is, the two halves of the chapter are said to constitute sub-units of the same unity.⁽²⁴⁾

Is it possible to arrive at an evaluation of Gen 15 for its narrative qualities and for its message without resorting to its prehistory? In other words, is a synchronic rather than a diachronic approach to this chapter viable? The present author believes that a positive answer to this query may be given. Yet before passing out to review how our text is functioning, two important clarifications are due: the first concerns the relationship of the individual(s) responsible for the definitive form of the text to the material of tradition he/they received; the second touches the problem of the wider context of our pericope, a context which it somehow echoes and influences.

Some Methodological Considerations

Two basic intuitions of Hermann Gunkel into the nature of biblical narrative seem to have greatly influenced subsequent research on Gen 15. The first takes the form of a principle of literary interpretation: "... jede Einzelsage zuerst immer aus sich zu erklären. Je selbständiger eine Erzählung ist je sicheren ist sie in alte Form erhalten"⁽²⁵⁾; consequently critics must start with the identification of these small individual units. "From this point of view the combination of stories would appear always to be a misguided enterprise – a botching of a smaller perfection in an attempt to create a larger literary unit."⁽²⁶⁾ This principle led scholarship to study Gen

24. We have not mentioned here the approach of source criticism. J. Wellhausen considered the two halves of Gen 15 as two autonomous texts; he attributed one text to J and the other to E. Cfr. *Die Composition des Hexateuch und der historischen Bücher des AT* (Berlin⁴ 1963) 21–22. H. Cazelles, "Connexions et structure de Gen XV", *RB* 69 (1962) 321–349 does not accept the division of the text in two parts; but he posits the presence of two sources, J, which in our text he calls "texte de posterité" and E, which he describes as "texte guerrier". These two sources were put together with minor touches here and there "par un théologien proche au Deutéronome mais non deuteronomiste" (325). This approach of source criticism entered a cul-de-sac when attribution of the text to separate sources become difficult in detail. "The chapter shows unmistakable signs of composition but the analysis is beset with peculiar and perhaps insurmountable difficulties", J. Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis* (ICC: Edinburgh 1910) 276. "Umstritten und fraglich ist das Zugehören von v.1–6 und 7–21 zu Joder E. . Die Zurechnung von v.1–6 oder eines aus Einzelversen zusammengesetzten Stranges aus 15, 1–21 zu E ist in der Vorsehung fast völlig aufgegeben; sie ist auf jeden Fall "äusserst fraglich", Westermann, *Genesis*, 256.

25. *Genesis* (HKAT 11; Göttingen 1901) XXI. Cfr. W. McKane, *Studies in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Edinburgh 1979) 27–28.

26. McKane, *Studies*, 28 Cfr. also pp. 37–41. "Der 'Zusammenhang' aber der zwischen den einzelnen Sagen besteht, ist in vielen Fällen späterer Herkunft, wenn nicht einfach eine Illusion der Exegeten", Gunkel, *Genesis*, XXI.

15 in sheer isolation from the present literary context even though lately some tribute has been paid to the connections of our pericope with Gen 14.⁽²⁷⁾ The contacts of Gen 15 with the rest of the Abraham narrative was considered to be secondary and recent redaction-history-wise; one should never forget the tendency among modern scholars to posit a late datation for the pericope as a whole.⁽²⁸⁾

The second intuition of Gunkel which seems to have influenced modern scholarship is that in the development of characterization, action has priority over speech. "Dringt man aber weiter in diese Sagen ein, so erkennt man, das diese eigentümliche Kargheit im Reden in dem Stil der Erzähler begründet ist. Die Erzähler haben Alles der Handlung untergeordnet. Sie haben solche Reden nicht aufgenommen, die die Handlung selbst nicht weiter fördern."⁽²⁹⁾ This led to a depreciation of the narrative form employed in Gen 15. Lohfink's description of this form has been adopted by subsequent works: "So werden wir es hier nicht mit einer ursprünglichen Erzählung im strengen Sinn, sondern mit einer *nachgeahmten Erzählung* zu tun haben".⁽³⁰⁾ The supposition stands that this text "composed entirely of speeches. . . . arranged in a rather loose order,"⁽³¹⁾ constitutes an inferior product from the point of view of narrative art; this may explain how this chapter was hardly appreciated for its expressive qualities.

Literary criticism, understood as the study of literature for literature's sake⁽³²⁾ puts into the limelight three factors:

(a) A biblical text may have had a long form-tradition redactional history behind its current form; yet in its present shape it has its own narrative dynamics and is conceived of by the last narrator/redactor as a unity. These narrative dynamics cannot be ignored, while the concept of literary unity that subsists beneath the text has to be discovered perhaps even at the expense of having to suspend our own way of conceiving this unity. "The composite texts of the Bible sometimes confront us with discontinuities, duplications and contradictions which cannot be so readily accommodated to our own assumptions about literary unity. What I should like to propose here is that the biblical writers and redactors . . . had certain notions of unity rather different from our own, and that the fullness of statement they aspired to achieve as writers in fact led them at times to violate what a later age and culture would be disposed to think of as canons of unity and logical coherence. The biblical text may not be the whole cloth imagined by pre-modern Judeo-Christian tradition, but the confused textual patch-work

27. Cfr. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 84-86; Coats, *Genesis*, 123.

28. Cfr. Westermann, *Genesis*, 256; Blum, *Komposition*, 367-383.

29. *Genesis*, XXX. Cfr. McKane, *Studies*, 35-36.

30. *Landverheissung*, 33. Cfr. Westermann, *Genesis*, 255-256; Coats, *Genesis*, 123-125.

31. Coats, *Genesis*, 123.

32. Cfr. D. Robertson, *The Old Testament and the Literary Critic* (Philadelphia 1977) 1-15; K.R.R. Gros Louis, "Some methodological Considerations" *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, II (Nashville 1982) 11-24 for this approach.

that scholarship has often found to displace such earlier views may prove upon further scrutiny to be purposeful pattern."⁽³³⁾

A synchronic approach to a biblical narrative may offer a different explanation to what source criticism used to identify as proofs of separate sources and strata. "There are gaps, inconsistencies, retelling and changes in vocabulary in biblical narrative, but these can be viewed as part of a literary technique and are not necessarily signs of different source."⁽³⁴⁾ One may concede that behind Gen 15 there subsists various promise traditions (Lohfink) and that we have here the amalgamation of two narratives (Westermann); yet the text as it stands has clearly been conceived as a unity. The formulation of verse 7 proves this; this verse introduces a new theme but not a new unit.⁽³⁵⁾

(b) Far from accepting Gunkel's statement that the connections between the various individual narratives are secondary and hence dispensable for an understanding of the narratives themselves, if not "einfach eine Illusion der Exegeten,"⁽³⁶⁾ we consider the present literary context as essential for the proper understanding of the single narratives.

What is probably happening in modern scholarship is that the concept of "biblical narrative" is changing. By 'biblical narrative' we no longer mean Gunkel's "Einzelerzählung" but wider unities made up of a series of stories one may term 'episodes'⁽³⁷⁾ that must be read together in order to grasp the complexity of the human reality they purport to describe. "Old Testament stories are all rather short, especially when compared with narratives in other literatures. Most of them can be read by themselves, with a little background information remembered from the context. In other words, long and complex chains of events are presented in loose sequences of independent, rather than in long, closely knit narratives consisting of interconnected episodes. Each story is about a single main event. . . ."⁽³⁸⁾ The

33. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York 1981) 133.

34. A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield 1983) 121. "The whole thrust of source criticism is toward the fragmenting of the narrative into sources, while at the same time it ignores the rhetorical and poetic features which bind the narrative together." 121 "Synchronic poetics of biblical narrative can have a bearing on the historical criticism of biblical narrative; at the very least it can prevent historical-criticism from mistaking as proof of earlier sources those features which can be better explained as compositional or rhetorical features of the present text." (112).

35. Verse 7 "cannot be regarded on the literary level as an entirely new beginning, because both the subject and indirect object of the opening verb have their antecedents in the previous unit", Van Seters, *Abraham*, 257. Westermann understands that here a slight change into the original text has been artificially introduced by a redactor in order to transform two "Verheissungserzählungen" into one "Erzählzusammenhang" *Genesis*, 255.

36. *Genesis*, XXI.

37. As O.L. Petersen chooses to label Gen 12, 10-20; 20, 1-18 and 26, 6-11 in "A thrice-Told-Tale: Genre, Theme and Motif" *BR* 8 (1973) 34.

38. J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem 1978) 27-28. "What Licht means by 'independent stories' is not what form critics mean. Licht means that biblical narrative is composed of short, discrete parts, each roughly equivalent to a major episode, and that this discreteness of parts is characteristic of biblical narrative", Berlin, *Poetics*, 125.

important point to underline here is that while the individual stories of these "loose sequences" are rather autonomous where their internal narrative dynamics are concerned they depend upon their context for complete significance. "To give an analogy, the stories in the Bible are like the frames from which films are made. Each one exists separately, and they are combined in a certain order to make the greater narrative, but an individual frame has no life of its own outside the film as a whole".⁽³⁹⁾ Consequently it is not enough to study the narrative dynamics of the single episode to grasp its richness; one must read it as part of a larger whole which is its literary context, conceived of at least by the final narrator/redactor as a unity. To neglect this literary context is to neglect an essential factor for exegesis.

In a comment over E. Auerbach's analysis of Gen 22, 1–19,⁽⁴⁰⁾ Gros Louis laments that "Auerbach, who is so concerned with the context of the Eurycleia-Odysseus episode and who contrasts the Homeric style with the Old Testament style by drawing examples from other scenes in the Odyssey (and indeed from a few scenes in *The Iliad*) says so little about the narrative context of the Abraham and Isaac story. Auerbach does not deal with the entire narrative; his discussion concerns what happens from the moment of God's commands to the time of Abraham's arrival at the appointed place of sacrifice."⁽⁴¹⁾ In leaving out this literary context Auerbach risked to advance "certain interpretations of the narrative that have no textual justification"⁽⁴²⁾; Gros Louis quotes Auerbach's assertions about Abraham's "bitterness" on receiving God's command as a nuance which cannot be read in the text. And what holds for Gen 22 may be said to apply to Gen 15.

This episode presupposes at least three elements mentioned in the Abraham episodes that precede Gen 15: (i). It takes for granted childlessness a basic problem for Abraham. One should note how in the sketchy presentation of the principal characters at the opening of the Abraham narrative (11,27–31) enormous emphasis is put on Sarah's infertility: *watt'hî saray ʿāqārāh ʿēn lāh wālād* (v.30); this contrasts sharply with *Yhwh*'s initial communication to Abraham, characterized by the promise of increase and by the root BRK (12, 1–3). The text says nothing explicitly about how the couple coped with this existential problem; however, there are two interesting details that may throw some light on this hushed aspect: if we compare the two lists of persons and property items "taken" by Terah (11, 31) and Abraham (12, 5) respectively we notice that Lot appears ahead of Saray in that of the former and after Saray in that of the latter. This may indicate the degree of relatedness and importance Lot and Saray enjoyed

39. Berlin, *Poetics*, 125.

40. *Mimesis. Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der Abendländischen Literatur* (Bern 1946).

41. "Abraham II", *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives II* (Nashville 1982) 73.

42. Ibid. O. Eissfeldt has long written that the single episodes have to be read as parts of a larger unit; but it seems that he identifies this wider context with the sources that may have been used during the slow reduction process that gave birth to the text. Cfr. "Die kleinste Literarische Einheit in den Erzählungsbüchern des Alten Testament." *TB* 6(1927) 333-337.

with the leaders of the caravans.⁽⁴³⁾ If Saray was that close to Abraham her infertility must have been a burden to him as well. Incidentally, we read in Gen 16, 1 that Saray, Abraham's wife, *lō' ya^hdāh lō*. We can understand then how Abraham's first explicit speech to *Yhwh* consists of a "lament"⁽⁴⁴⁾ about having no natural heir: *hēn lī lō' nātattāh zara'* (15, 3). This outburst of insatisfaction has not come from naught. It points back to antecedents.

(ii) The text assumes that *Yhwh* has already promised Abraham a son. As a matter of fact in the preceding episodes *Yhwh* promises the patriarch to make him a great nation (12, 2), to make him a 'blessing' of universal significance (12, 35), to give 'this land' *l'zar'ākā* (12,7; 13,15) and to increase his *zera'* exceedingly (13, 16). In other words, even though *Yhwh* has never explicitly promised a son to the patriarch, Abraham could have understood that his becoming a nation involved physical fatherhood. Under the pressure of difficult circumstances this fatherhood has now become dire need: one should note how in the reiteration of his promise of a natural son to inherit Abraham *Yhwh* underlines the physicality of his son's sonhood: *kī'im āšer yešer mimme'ekā* (v. 4).

(iii) There is then the land promise made to Abraham to *Yhwh*. This theme is present within the Abraham narrative from the very beginning. *Yhwh*'s first communication to the patriarch (12, 1–3) opens with his command to leave his whereabouts and to travel *'el hā'ares āšer arekā* (12, 1). The second intervention of *Yhwh* (12, 7) helps to identify this unqualified destination with 'this land' which is promised to Abraham's *zara'*. The patriarch remains "emotionally uninvolved" with this promise, maybe because the land was still occupied (12, 6); this explains his departure from the 'land of the promise' as the first difficulty crops up (12,10–13,1).⁽⁴⁵⁾ On his return from Egypt Abraham receives the promised land as addressed to himself as well: *kī'et kol hā'ares āšer āttah rō'eh l'kā'etnennah* (13,15. cfr v. 17). This tied him to the land: he settled in Hebron (13, 18) where we meet him in the next episode (14, 13). Gen 14 informs us also that the patriarch started building relationships with the local community (v.13). In Gen 15, 7 *Yhwh* does not promise Abraham to give him 'this land', but expresses his original plan of giving it as an inheritance.⁽⁴⁶⁾ In the remaining verses of this second half of the chapter (vv. 8–17) *Yhwh* swears solemnly that this plan will be carried through; he also explains the modality and the

43. Cfr. the comments of U. Cassuto on 11, 31 in *A Commentary on the Books of Genesis*, 11, *From Noah to Abraham* (Genesis VI, 9-XI, 32) (Jerusalem 1964) 277-279.

44. Cfr. Westermann, "Arten" 22-23; *Genesis*, 259-261; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 255. Coats, *Genesis*, 124 reads verse 2 as a "request for surety or a sign related to the promise," while verse 3 he interpretes as 'complaint'.

45. Read the comments on Abraham in Gen 12 by P.O. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia 1983) 11-46.

46. Gen 15, 7 is usually labelled by form critics and historians of tradition as a formulation of a promise. But R. Rendtorff has marked the difference in formulation between this verse and others which carry the nuance of promise. Cfr. *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch* (Berlin/New York 1977) 43. 63-64.

‘timing’ of Abraham’s descendants’ taking the land in possession (vv. 13–16).

One may interpret this material diachronically, of course, in the sense that Gen 15 constitutes a chronologically more recent reflection, mostly in dialogue form, which is based upon earlier written material of tradition as found in Gen 12–13 (14). But the other (synchronic) explanation is not to be excluded: that the author/narrator composed Gen 12–15 together using as source written and/or oral elements of tradition which he moulds into a coherent literary creation. This literary entity is made up of a series of apparently loose episodes which play particular roles in the economy of the unity as a whole. The possibility of the synchronic explanation illuminates the several indirect contacts of Gen 15 with the preceding episodes of the Abraham narrative.

(c) On approaching the present text of Gen 15 in its actual wider context synchronically, one cannot escape the question about the extensive use of dialogue and direct speech in this episode. “In any given narrative event, and especially, at the beginning of any new story, the point at which dialogue first emerges, will be worthy of special attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter, constituting an important moment in the exposition of character”.⁽⁴⁷⁾ It is of some interest to note that here we have the first real dialogue between *Yhwh* and Abraham and that this rather prolonged dialogue happens after a series of episodes where (i) Abraham speaks to other human characters like Saray, Lot and the king of Sodom; in his speeches⁽⁴⁸⁾ Abraham expresses important ideas which throw light on the action being narrated;

(ii) *Yhwh* regularly intervenes to communicate to Abraham particular messages which will have a bearing on the events: during the settlement of *Terah’s* clan in Haran *Yhwh* enters into communication (*wayyōmer Yhwh ʿel ʾabrām*) with Abraham to urge his departure from this environment and his emigration *ʿel-hāʾāreṣ ʾāšer ʾarʾekā* (12, 1). *Yhwh* intervenes again when Abraham arrives *ʿad meqôm šekem* (12, 7) and promises to give ‘this land’ as a gift to the patriarch’s descendants; this information serves to identify the destination of Abraham’s journey from Haran.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Abraham’s subsequent movements occur mostly within Canaan. Then comes the patriarch’s sojourn in Egypt: we are told of a *Yhwh’s* intervention *ʿal d̄bar saray ʿešet ʾabrām* (12, 17), but it seems that the Divinity does not address his protégé in Egypt. Back in Canaan (13, 1–2) Abraham receives a new message from *Yhwh*, this time inviting him to travel the land through and through (that

47. Alter, *Art*, 74.

48. Only Gen 14, 21–23 may qualify as ‘dialogue’. “Direct speech is a common vehicle for conveying a character’s point of view”, Berlin, *Poetics*, 72.

49. Cfr. E. Ruprecht, “Vorgegebene Tradition und Theologische Gestaltung in Gen XII 1–3” *VT* 29 (1929) 179.

is, to settle down) as God intends to give the land as a gift to himself (*ʔkā*) and to his numerous progeny in the future (13, 14–17). Thereupon Abraham moves from the Bethel area and settles “among the Oaks of Mamre” (13, 8).

In Gen 15 we do not find a simple communication of God expressing his intentions about Abraham and his future, but also demands from Abraham for explanation (vv. 2,8) and bitter statements about *Yhwh*’s past promises (v.3).⁽⁵⁰⁾ Why has the narrator resorted to dialogue to express “the changing relationship between Abraham and God”,⁽⁵¹⁾ supposing this is the theme of the Abraham narrative as a whole (Gen 12–25)? One has probably to study this Abraham narrative in its entirety to be able to grasp the motivation for the use of dialogue here. One should note, however, that the episodes that precede that of Gen 15 ignore completely the time factor. We find in them no explicit chronological annotations. Yet one gets the impression that for the narrator the time continuum must have been of considerable length. We are not told how long it took Abraham to decide to go (*wayyelek*: 12,4) to the land to be shown by *Yhwh*, how long his journey was in terms of time; one may presume that if the expression *hālōk wēnāšōa* “to journey by stages”⁽⁵²⁾ indicates Abraham’s normal way of travelling, his journey from Hanan to the neighbourhood of Shechem (12, 5–6) must have been rather long.

Again we are not told how long do Abraham and his caravan stay in Canaan before *wayhî raʿab bāʾares* (12,10); but if one accepts U. Cassuto’s reading of the clause *ūʔʔabrām hētīb* as a natural increase of livestock owing also to favourable conditions⁽⁵³⁾ one may consider Abraham’s sojourn in Egypt to be rather of long duration. On their return to the Bethel area some time must elapse before Abraham’s household splits because the land proves to be inadequate to feed their flocks (13, 6). The narrator informs us that Lot chooses the Jordan Valley for settlement, settles (*yšb*) among the cities of the valley, but moves his tents up to Sodom (13, 12). When we meet him next Lot *yōšeb bisdōm* (14, 12).

Even though the narrator refrains from reporting explicitly the time element involved, the details he drops here and there hint that the lapse

50. Cfr. G. von Rod’s comments on vv. 2-3 in *Das Erste Buch Mose, Genesis* (ATD 2-4; Göttingen 1972) 142.

51. K.R.R. Gros Louis, “Abraham I”, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, II (Nashville 1982) 59.

52. S.R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London) 1913) 148. Cfr. *La Bible de Jerusalem; La Bibbia* (Nuovissima Versione dai Testi Originali) (Edizione Paoline; Rome 1983) ad hoc.

53. Gen 12,16 is usually interpreted as referring to Pharaoh’s favours to Abraham in view of Sarah. The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible translates *ūʔʔabrām hētīb baʾʔbūrāh* as “He treated Abraham well because of her.” Cfr. R. Davidson, *Genesis 12-50* (The Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge 1979) 24. Cassuto instead viewed *hētīb* as referring to the natural increase of Abraham’s cattle possessions which would require this sojourn in Egypt to last for some time, cfr *Genesis II*, 355.

between *Yhwh*'s initial call and promises (12, 1–4) and Abraham's situation in Gen 15 has been considerable. This would justify the narrator's choice of dialogue to explain *Yhwh*'s and Abraham's perspective concerning their mutual relationship.

A Synchronic Approach

In this section of the essay we shall first identify those elements of structuralization which would allow an understanding into the organization of the text as a whole. We shall then move to examine in particular how the various parts interweave into one whole.

(A) Elements of Structuralization

(i) *A bridge-phrase*. Gen 15 opens with the formula *ʾahar hadd*ḇārîm hāʾelleh* (v.1a) that serves as a "quite indefinite temporal connection"⁽⁵⁴⁾ between this episode and the previous ones of the Abraham narrative. This formula not only introduces the section under study,⁽⁵⁵⁾ but marks its boundary as an episode⁽⁵⁶⁾ and builds the literary context for the episode itself⁽⁵⁷⁾ by linking it both to the immediate episode that precedes it (Gen 14)⁽⁵⁸⁾ as well as to all that has been told so far of the Abraham narrative.⁽⁵⁹⁾ The formula "after these events" is structurally relevant, therefore, because it indicates the beginning of a new episode, gives the episode a loosely determined time setting,⁽⁶⁰⁾ and hints that we should read the on-coming unit in the light of Abraham's experiences narrated so far.

54. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 253.

55. C. Conroy, *Absalom Absalom!* (AnBib 81; Rome 1978) 42. The author includes 15,1 among instances where the formula introduces *pericopes*; he adds that the formula(s) may "serve as transitions to new episodes within pericopes." This note is important for a synchronic approach which sees Gen 15 as an episode within the larger 'pericope' which is the Abraham narrative as a whole.

56. Cfr. D.W. Baker "Diversity and Unity in the Literary Structure of Genesis" in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (eds A.R. Millard and D.J. Wiseman) (Leicester 1980) 192.

57. Coats, *Genesis*, 123.

58. Ibid.

59. Commenting on the use of the formula in Gen 37-50 Westermann writes: "Das jetzt zu Erzählende soll an das vorher Erzählte anschliessen. Aber es markiert nie die Einfache Fortsetzung, sondern überbrückt immer einen Abstand zum Vorhergehenden, besonders deutlich Gen 40,1. Im Abrahamkreis (Gen 15, 1; 22, 1; 22,20) setzt die Formel schon eine zusammenhängende Abrahamerzählung voraus", *Genesis*, 257. The same scholar traced its origin to the redactional activity involved. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 253, cautions against an unqualified labelling of the formula as redactional or editorial: "To describe it as 'editorial' maybe a little misleading if this suggests that it does not belong to the author of what follows. But it is certainly the mark of written prose style of an extended prose work."

60. From what we have said about Gen 12-14 it seems that this loosely determined time factor reflects the narrator's manner of narrating.

(ii) *Quotation Formulas*.^(60a) Another characteristic feature of this episode is the rather elevated number of quotation formulas. One should note:

(a) How they are concentrated mostly in the first nine verses of the chapter; there are only two other instances of formulas introducing speech after verse nine: in verse 13 and perhaps in verse 18.

(b) Their variety in formulation; they range from the simple *wayyōmer* of verse 5, the subject and indirect object of which have to be gleaned from the context, to the solemn *hayah dēbar Yhwh el abram bamahazeh lē mor* (v.1) and again to the explicative *le mor* of verse 18 which combines the technical phrase *karat b'erit* to the direct speech in verse 18b meant to convey the contents of this *b'erit*.⁽⁶¹⁾

(c) The alternation of subject of the verbs of saying in the formulas; there are here two who speak, talk to each other. We have in this episode dialogue not a communication of a message. This dialogue takes place within the first nine verses which carry no report of change of location, time or personages. These nine verses, therefore, are to be considered as depicting *one* dialogue scene.

(d) In only two cases for the two personages, *Yhwh* and Abraham, is the subject explicitly indicated; we meet these cases in the initial stages of the dialogue, and in all of them there seems to exist an element of the impersonal. We do not read at the scene's opening that *Yhwh* spoke to Abraham but that "the word of *Yhwh* came to Abram".⁽⁶²⁾ Likewise, although we know from the context who the addressee is, we are told simply twice *wayyōmer 'abrām* (vv.2.3) which may also be translated "And Abram thought"⁽⁶³⁾ as if the whole experience to be narrated is essentially internal and spiritual.⁽⁶⁴⁾ In the other instances it is the context which guides us to identify the speakers. In verse 5 we read that after promising Abraham a natural son to inherit him *wayyōšē'ōtō hahûsâh wayyōmer* to look towards heaven and count the stars if he could. There follows a second *wayyōmer* without specifications as regards speaker and addressee. But from the contents of the speech we can deduce that it is

60a. For a discussion on the hypothesis that in the Pentateuch divine speech formulas are used according to a symmetrical pattern, cfr. C.J. Labuschagne "The pattern of the divine speech formulas in the Pentateuch" *VT* 32 (1982) 268-296; "Additional Remarks on the Pattern of the Divine Speech Formulas in the Pentateuch" *VT* 34 (1984) 91-95; P.R. Davies and D.M. Gunn, "Pentateuchal Patterns. An Examination of C.J. Labuschagne's theory." *VT* 34 (1984) 399-406; C.J. Labuschagne, "Pentateuchal Patterns: A Reply to P.R. Davies and D.M. Gunn" *VT* 34 (1984) 407-413.

61. Westermann, *Genesis*, 272.

62. According to scholarship this formula is the terminus technicus for the report of divine speech to prophets. Cfr. Kaiser "Traditionsgeschichtliche", 110; Van Seters, Abraham, 253; Westermann, *Genesis*, 25-7; Coats, *Genesis*, 124. Readers should have noted that for the sake of simplicity we have preferred to use in this essay the full name *'abrāham* even though in Gen 15 the patriarch's name is still *'abrām*.

63. Cfr. Alter, *Art*, 67-68.

64. Cfr. B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora. Genesis* (Berlin 1934) 392.

Yhwh who promises Abraham a progeny as numerous as the stars. In the same manner addresser and interlocutor of *wayyōmer ʿēlāw* in verse 7 may be identified only from the contents of the speech itself: *ʾānī Yhwh ʾāšer hōšē tīkā mēʾūr kasdīm*. Abraham's reaction to *Yhwh*'s declaration of intention in leading Abraham to 'this land' follows immediately: *wayyōmar adonay Yhwh* (v.8). In verse 9 *Yhwh* answers Abraham's plea for a sign⁽⁶⁵⁾ and gives him instructions about a rite. In verse 13 the subject is again not specified; but as the only speaking characters in the episode are *Yhwh* and Abraham we can easily deduce who the subject of *wayyōmer ʿēlāw* which introduces a prophecy about Abraham and his progeny (vv. 13 – 16) could be. The gerundial *le mor* of verse 18 can hardly be described as a quotation formula since it only introduces the narrator's interpretation of the rite just performed by *Yhwh* (v. 17) as a *bʾrīt* the contents of which are given in vv. 18 – 21.

(iii) *Narration Sections*. Since this episode consists essentially of speeches, the few elements of narration, visible at its structure's surface, must be of extreme importance for an evaluation of the episode itself. The truth of this statement comes out clearly from the functions of narration that is woven around dialogue: to carry the narrator's point of view⁽⁶⁶⁾ and to convey actions deemed essential to the unfolding of the plot "which could not be easily or adequately indicated in dialogue."⁽⁶⁷⁾ We may classify these narration elements into (a) quotation formulas; (b) interpretative sections; (c) pure narration of facts.

We have seen how quotation formulas are concentrated in the first part of the episode. One may detect the narrator's perspective in the choice of some of the formulas and the variations in their formulation. On linking the present episode with the previous ones through the indefinite *ʾahar haddēbārīm hāʿēlleh*, the narrator opens the unit with a solemn formula of quotation said to belong to the prophetic milieu:⁽⁶⁸⁾ *hāyāh dēbar Yhwh ʿel ʾabrām bamaḥāzeh le mōr*. The formula qualifies the ensuing dialogue as a dream; but this dialogue is experienced by Abraham as a particular event (*hāyāh*). The exceptional character of this experience is underlined by the solemnity of the formula which is rarely adoperated in the pentateuch as a whole.⁽⁶⁹⁾

Yhwh's intervention which opens the dialogue is succeeded by two laments of Abraham, both introduced by the formula *wayyōmer ʾabrām* (vv. 2 – 3), in the first Abraham comments on *Yhwh*'s assurance of *sēkārkā harbēh mʾōd*; in the second he complains for *Yhwh*'s failure to provide him

65. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 258.

66. Berlin, *Poetics*, 64.

67. Alter, *Art*, 76-77.

68. Kaiser, "Traditionsgeschichtlich", 110; Cazelles, "Connexions", 325; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 253; Westermann, *Genesis*, 257-258.

69. Coats, *Genesis*, 124.

with *zara*^c. The addressee is not mentioned in the formula itself; but we can easily understand that it is *Yhwh* from what Abraham says. *Yhwh*'s answer to Abraham's provocative complaint is introduced by the same formula of the beginning but with two significant variations: the phrase ³*el ʾabrām* of verse 1 logically becomes ³*elāw* in verse 4 as by now we know who *Yhwh*'s interlocutor is. This change functions as a cohesive element. Another variation concerns the replacement in verse 4 of the verbal form *hāyāh* of verse 1 by the particle *w^ehinneh*. This particle often carries the nuance of surprise and astonishment when it is preceded by verbs of perception;⁽⁷⁰⁾ it is often used, even without the verb of perception, to indicate a shift in point of view.⁽⁷¹⁾ This *w^ehinneh* in verse 4, which contains basically the same formula as verse 1, seems to mark the narrator's reaction of astonishment and marvel that *Yhwh* should answer Abraham's lament at all. The basis for this reaction may have been the narrator's own experience of divine transcendence which would not tolerate Abraham's daring criticism of *Yhwh*'s behaviour.⁽⁷²⁾

The next speech of *Yhwh* follows the report of an action: *wayyôṣēʾōtô hahûṣah* presumably of the tent in order to look at the starlit sky. According to Van Seters⁽⁷³⁾ *Yhwh*'s "bringing someone out" belongs to the category of visionary experience so that verse 5 recalls verse 1. It is evident that "this first dramatic element of the chapter" (Van Seters) is auxiliary to *Yhwh*'s second speech about the numberlessness of the stars of heaven (v. 5a), as it is clear that the simile of the stars points to the climax of God's intervention in v.5b where he declares to Abraham: *kōh yihyeh zar^c ʾākā*. One should notice how this climax is separated from *Yhwh*'s second speech about the stars by the quotation formula *wayyō³mer lô*; here we have an example of the use of quotation formula being used for dramatic emphasis.⁽⁷⁴⁾ One presumes that as *Yhwh* utters his speech and indicates the stars Abraham meditates in silence on his future fulfilment as a large community.

The narrator avails himself of this silent meditation to wedge in his own comment on Abraham's internal reaction to *Yhwh*'s promises: *w^ehe³ ʾemin bāYhwh*. One should notice the grammatical inversion⁽⁷⁵⁾ to signal the interruption of the narrative flow, as well as the hapax form of the verb *w^ehe³ ʾemin* to spotlight the extraordinary character of what is happening in

70. Cfr. Dennis J. McCarthy, "The Uses of *w^ehinneh* in Biblical Hebrew", *Bib* 61 (1980) 332-333.

71. Berlin, *Poetics*, 62.

72. Contra Westermann, *Genesis*, 262, who reads this *w^ehinnēh* simply as a formal element to balance the *hēn-hinnēh* of verse 3.

73. *Abraham*, 256.

74. "A strictly logical choice of formula would prescribe the use of the longer and more explicit variations at the beginning of dialogues and wherever misunderstanding is to be avoided. The actual choices made by the storytellers are quite independent of this logic; aesthetic considerations of time manipulation and dramatic emphasis are the determining factor", Licht, *Storytelling*, 104.

75. Cfr. Lohfink, *Landverherrschung*, 33.

Abraham's spirit: "Now Abraham believed *Yhwh*".⁽⁷⁶⁾ But the omniscient narrator is informed too of how *Yhwh* considers this trust on the part of the patriarch: *wayyaḥš'behā lō š'dūqāh* (v.6b). *Yhwh* looks favourably on Abraham's putting his trust in God's promises.

This comment by the narrator should not be judged as the conclusion to which the dialogue between *Yhwh* and Abraham has been leading⁽⁷⁷⁾ for in that case another grammatical form (*wayyiqtol*) would have probably been used.⁽⁷⁸⁾ Instead we have here an aside intervention of the narrator who attempts to lead us into Abraham's life of the spirit since after all he is narrating a spiritual experience presented as a vision.⁽⁷⁹⁾ The narrative role of this comment, expressive of the narrator's perspective, determined the grammatical form of *w^ehe³ēmin*. Besides, this interruption of the narrative flow by the narrator serves another purpose: that of slowing down the 'tempo' and of creating the illusion of a long period of silent reflection on Abraham's part.⁽⁸⁰⁾

For the narrator the dialogue between *Yhwh* and Abraham does not stop with the promise of numerous progeny (v.5), but continues. To introduce *Yhwh*'s next speech he employs a quotation formula in which neither addresser nor addressee are specified: *wayyō³mer ēlāw* (v.7a). It is from the contents of the direct speech that we understand who the speaker is: *Yhwh*; he introduces a new theme, that of Abraham inheriting 'this land'. The revelation of *Yhwh*'s intention of granting(*tātef*) the possession of Canaan to Abraham evokes in the latter a demand for assurance: *bammāh ēda³ kī³īrasennāh* (v.8).⁽⁸¹⁾ The dialogue here moves swiftly: the quotation formula for Abraham's request for a sign is made up of only *wayyō³mar*, while *Yhwh*'s answer is opened simply by *wayyō³mer ēlāw*

76. It is the context which determines the temporal value of this unique *w^ehe³ēmin* – cfr *GHB*, 119u. One should still find out whether this verb is referring here to a particular act of faith (Gunkel, *Genesis*, 162) or to a state of belief (*GHC*, 112ss; R. Kilian, *Die vorpriesterlichen Abrahamsüberlieferungen literarkritisch und traditionsgeschichtlich untersucht*" (BBB24; Bonn 1966) 45. The use of the weqatali form would point to this second explanation.

77. "V. 1-6 ist ein in sich abgeschlossener Text der in V. 6 seinen Abschluss hat", Westermann, *Genesis*, 263. "Das Zeilwort dieser ersten Szene von Kap 15 aber wird unverkennbar in V.6 erreicht", W. Zimmerli, *1 Mose 12-25: Abraham*, (ZBK 1.2; Zurich 1976) 51. Cfr. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 256-257; Coats, *Genesis*, 124...

78. Consult the suggestion of BHK to read *wayyā³āmen* instead of *w^ehe³ēmin*. Jacob considers this suggestion as a "Überlieferungsfehler", *Genesis*, 394. He parses *w^ehe³ēmin* as consecutive perfect.

79. Concerning vv.6 and 8 Lohfink writes: "Während ferner in ursprünglichen biblischen Erzählungen der Erzähler hartan den erzählten Einzelvorgängen bleibt, zeigt sich durch die am Ende der beiden 'Szenen' vollzogene Distanzierung des Erzählers vom Geschehen eine eigene Erzählerperspektive: der Erzähler fasst mehrfaches Verhalten Abrams zusammen, wenn er in V.6 feststellt, Abram habe auf Jahwe, vertraut, und der habe ihm das al Gerechtigkeit anerkannt" *Landverheissung*, 32-33.

80. "Passages of description and comment take up telling time without corresponding action time, and are drastic slowing down devices." Licht, *Storytelling*, 97.

81. "Die Frage Abrahams ist eigentlich eine Bitte; sie bittet um ein bestätigendes Zeichen", Westermann, *Genesis*, 266; Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 48-49; Van Seters, *Abraham*, 257-258.

(v.9).⁽⁸²⁾ In this reply *Yhwh* instructs Abraham to 'take for him' a number of animals and fowls.

With God's instructions about the things to prepare (v.9) the dialogue scene comes to a close. What rests of the episode in Gen 15 consists of narration and speeches (but not dialogue). There are four elements here which play important structural roles:

(a) we have the link phrase *wayyiqqah lô* (v.10) which recalls the imperative *q̄hah lî* in verse 9.⁽⁸³⁾ This is a case of what we may call a command – execution sequence in which the same verb is employed in both elements of the sequence (Gen 1,3; 6,14,22; 12,1,4; 22,2–3). In our text the sequence serves a cohesive function although it also creates the problem of deciding whether vv.10–11 belong to the same scene as vv. 1–9. These two vv. differ in character from the first nine vv. of the episode because, while in the dialogue scene nearly no action takes place, in vv. 10–11 one counts no less than six action verbs with Abraham as the subject of five of them. This raises the problem of whether Abraham actually carries out the described activity; or is he still having his vision experience wherein he dialogued with *Yhwh*? Jacob answers this question in the affirmative: "Auch dies ist nur Vision . . . in Wirklichkeit hat sich die Situation nicht geändert".⁽⁸⁴⁾ One should remember, however, that the narrator employs no special technique here, as he will in verse 17, to distinguish his own perspective from that of the character, Abraham.

In verse 11 we are told how birds of prey (*hā^cayit*) swooped down upon the carcasses and how Abraham drove them away (*wayyaššeb ʔotām*). We have here pure narration that depicts what the narrator himself has seen. If verse 11 reflects only the narrator's perspective we may detect a narrative technique that has a double function. The narrator includes this curious detail of the birds as a retardation device,⁽⁸⁵⁾ probably to create suspense by prolonging his telling time; but this detail may be intended as a discreet time indicator just like the simile of the stars in verse 5. Birds can swoop down on carcasses only in daytime. During the night Abraham dialogues with *Yhwh* and receives instructions concerning a particular rite; the following morning Abraham carries out these instructions and awaits for the requested sign (v.8) to be given. But a whole day passes before anything happens (v.12). During daytime the incident of the birds occurs, but Abraham defends the carcasses. Verses 10–11, therefore, constitute a distinct scenic unit⁽⁸⁶⁾

82. For this use of quotation formulas cfr. Licht, *Storytelling*, 104.

83. The verb LQH "is commonly used when preparation of animals for sacrifices is spoken of", Cassuto, *Genesis II*, 73. But do *Yhwh*'s instructions in verse 9 involve sacrifice? On the real significance of the rite described here we refer to S.E. Loewenstamm "Zur 'Traditionsgeschichte des Bundes Zwischen den Stücken,'" *VT* 18(1968) 500-506.

84. *Genesis*, 397.

85. Cfr. Westermann, *Genesis*, 268.

86. Cfr. A. Abela, *Reading the Abraham Narrative in Gen 11, 27-25, 18 as a Literary Unit* (Dissertation presented to the Pontifical Biblical Institute; Rome 1985; still unpublished) 48-49. For change of time as indication of discontinuity cfr. Baker, "Diversity and Unity", 190-192.

narrating a separate action, but which is closely knit to the dialogue scene through the command execution sequence (vv. 9–10).

(b) Verses 12.17 contain two slightly different time indications:

v. 12 *wayhî haššemeš lābōʾ*

v. 17 *wayhî haššemeš bāʾāh*

Together with their respective verses these phrases constitute essential structural elements within the narrative. (1) The *wayhî* of verse 12 is an element of discontinuity in that it introduces a new scene:⁽⁸⁷⁾ Abraham has been waiting all day for the desired sign; only just before sunset does something happen. The time indication in verse 17, again introduced by *wayhî*, does not open as a new scene but a new action for which we have been prepared since verse 12.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Verse 17 constitutes the climax of the scene, perhaps of the entire episode (Zimmerli).^(88a) (2) The fact that the time indication in verse 17 is not meant to open a new scenic unit leaves unanswered the question about its structural role in the narrative. The position of the sun in the two chronological expressions of vv. 12.17 is significant; in verse 12 the sun is not yet set but it is about to do so (*lābōʾ*);⁽⁸⁹⁾ in verse 17 sunset has already taken place:

wayhî haššemeš bāʾāh⁽⁹⁰⁾
wā ʾlātāh hayāh

The two chronological details, therefore, enframe the experience narrated within a definite time span. This inclusio⁽⁹¹⁾ defines the length of the scenic unit and at the same time distinguishes this scene from the ensuing concluding section which we have identified as the narrator's interpretative comment. (3) A stylistic analysis of both vv. 12.17 would confirm the intuition expressed above concerning the presence of an inclusio in this text. On the level of syntax a number of parallels can easily be detected; (α) Both start with *wayhî* which has *haššemeš* for subject. (β) There follows a verb form of root BW². (γ) Next came two clauses introduced by a noun

87. For this use of *wayhî* cfr. *GHC*, 111 f-h; Baker "Diversity and Unity", 191-192. This imperfect consecutive of *hayāh* introduces not only new narratives or episodes but also scenic units, cfr. G.W. Coats, *From Canaan to Egypt* (Washington 1976) 21; Berlin; *Poetics*, 125-126.

88. Contra Van Seters, *Abraham*, 259 who stated "The two temporal introductions only make sense if they set off two different events." Westermann considered v.12 as a doublet of v.17, entered into the text to introduce vv. 13-16, *Genesis*, 268. This may be diachronically true; however, in the present text v.12 plays roles which are essential to the proper functioning of the episode.

88a. Cfr. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 33.

89. *GHB*, 124f.

90. "Après un wayyiqtol si l'on veut exprimer l'action comme durative, au lieu d'un simple wayyiqtol on emploie *wayhî* avec le participe", *GHB*, 121f.

91. On inclusio cfr. D. Minguez, *Pentecosté's. Ensayo de Semiótica Narrativa en Hch 2* (AnBib 75; Rome 1976) 24-25.

linked to what precedes through *waw*; the verb in both clauses is in perfect tense. (8) In the two verses we then meet the particle *w^hinnēh* which opens the final clause. These parallels alone already point to some structural role of the two syntactical complexes.

But on further scrutiny one finds other interesting details. In v. 12 we read that while the sun has not yet *w^tardēmāh naplāh ʾal ʾabrām*,⁽⁹²⁾ Abraham is being prepared for some awesome experience. The *w^hinnēh* clause contains very queer syntax, may be, consciously chosen by the narrator to convey the strangeness of Abraham's experience. We have two words in a syndeton, *ʾēmāh hašēkāh*, both subjects of the principle *nōpelet* which agrees, however, only with the nearest subject *hašēkāh*.⁽⁹³⁾ In this verse we are not told explicitly where did this 'terror' falling upon Abraham came from; but the unspecified subject of *wayyōʾmer k^ʾabrām* in v. 13 gives us to understand that Abraham's fear is due to the presence of the numinous.⁽⁹⁴⁾ What is stylistically more important here is Abraham's experience of darkness with the sun still in the sky. In v. 17 the narrator emphasizes that it was dark indeed when the event to be narrated took place: *wayhī haššemēs bāʾah wāʾālāṭāh hāyāh*. The use of the rare term *ʾālāṭāh*⁽⁹⁵⁾ seems intended to attract attention; one should notice also the inclusio *wayhī – hāyāh* in order to indicate that these two opening clauses play the same role of describing the external circumstances of Abraham's experience. The reason for the stress on external darkness appears to be the wish to create contrast with what is going to happen.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Through the particle *w^hinnēh* the narrator adopts in v. 17 Abraham's perspective: it is through his eyes that the narrator beholds *tannūr ʾāsān w^lappīd ʾēs* passing across the carcasses. Fire and smoke are "Zeichen, die gott repräsentieren".⁽⁹⁷⁾

92. This *tardēmāh* offers "the condition most favourable for the reception of visions... The bloody ceremony just described was no perfunctory piece of symbolism; it touched the mind below the level of consciousness; and that impression (heightened in this case by the growing darkness) induced a susceptibility to physical influences readily culminating in ecstasy or vision", Skinner, *Genesis*, 281. On *tardēmāh* cfr. Snijders, "Genesis XV", 275-277.

93. The phrase *hašēkāh g^dōlāh* (v.12) is usually dismissed as a gloss in both older and recent exegetical works. It is supposed to have been introduced into the text to explain the provenance of Abraham's fear – cfr. A. Clamer *La Sainte Bible: Genèse-Exode*, 1/1-2 (Paris 1953) 266; Kaiser, "Traditionsgeschichte", 118; Kilian, *Abrahams*, 50. This mysterious fear and darkness do not derive from 'historical' circumstances: the narrator emphasizes that at the beginning of this experience the sun was about to set (*lābō*) – contra Cazelles, "Connexions et structure", 340. This darkness is spiritual just as the *ʾēmāh*, and supernatural in origin. So that, notwithstanding the queer grammar involved both terms are to be retained as essential. The standard exegesis of the verse, which would label this phrase as additional, may have influenced grammarians not to quote *ʾēmāh hašēkāh* as an asyndeton case. The combination of the two nouns cannot be viewed as impossible syntax: "Die Substantiva stehen unverbunden nebeneinander, das zweite erklärt das erste. Es war ein tiefer angstvoller Schlaf im schwersten Döster, da Gott dem Abraham das Folgende ins Ohr flüstert", Jacob, *Genesis*, 398.

94. Cfr. Zimmerli, *Abraham*, 54.

95. Cfr. Cazelles, "Connexions et Structure", 342.

96. Jacob, *Genesis*, 401.

97. Westermann, *Genesis*, 271.

And this would bring us back to verse 12. There, with the sun still on the horizon, Abraham experiences darkness; here, with thick darkness all around Abraham sees fire, symbol of light.

(c) The episode comes to a close with an intervention (vv. 18–21) from the narrator who steps in to interpret what has just been interpreted in verse 17. Great stress is put on the time dimension of the experience: *bayyôm hāhûʔ*, “on that day”. The phrase may also be an indice of an overarching temporal structure: the experience being narrated started as a nightly vision (v.5), went through the entire following day (vv. 10–11) and reached its climax towards late evening at sunset (v. 17). This structure contributes to the unity of the episode as a whole. The narrator interprets what has happened that day as covenant making (v.18a) the clauses of this covenant (*bʾrît*) are given in direct speech, even though we can understand from gerundial *lēʾmôr* that Abraham heard no such words ‘on that day’.⁽⁹⁸⁾ The narrator has as is customary avoided indirect speech to describe the terms of what in his mind was a *bʾrît*.⁽⁹⁹⁾

Interweaving Structures

In this final section of the essay we shall offer a re-reading of Gen 15 as one unit; the observations made so far in our discussion will be taken in consideration; but comments shall be added on minute interweaving structures that have not yet been mentioned.

The episode’s introduction is quite formulaic in character; yet it does not constitute an ‘exposition’, “which has the normal function of describing the initial situation.”⁽¹⁰⁰⁾

This may appear to be supporting the thesis of the poetic character of the episode as a “nachgeahmte Erzählung” (Lohfink); but it adds further weight to what we have been saying about Gen 15’s logical links with the preceding episodes of the Abraham narrative. This dialogue between *Yhwh* and Abraham could have taken place only *ʾaḥar hadḏ bārîm hā ʾēlleh*. The close succession of *ʾḏbar* to *hadḏ bārîm* tends to bring to light the ambivalence of the latter as simple ‘events’⁽¹⁰¹⁾ or as “events brought about by *Yhwh*’s word.” The experience to be narrated in Gen 15 presupposes an indefinite time continuum (Van Seters) from what has already been told (12–14). According to the narrator this experience of Abraham was essentially an event of *Yhwh*’s word which came (*hāyāh*) to the patriarch *bammaẖzeh*.

It has become an accepted datum among scholars that *hāyāh ʾḏbar*

98. Cfr. Westermann, *Genesis*, 272.

99. Cfr. Alter, *Art*, 67 for this tendency in biblical narrative to avoid indirect speech.

100. Licht, *Storytelling*, 71; cfr. Alter, *Art*, 80-81.

101. Cfr. G. Rouiller, “Le Sacrifice d’Isaac (Genèse 22, 1–19)” *Exegesis, Problemes de méthode et exercice de lecture (Genèse 22 et Luc 15)*, (eds F. Bovon/G. Rouiller) (Neuchâtel-Paris 1975) 17.

Yhwh ²*el* together with *bammaḥāzeh* derives from the prophetic milieu. This already hints to the narrator's wish of underlining the importance of the episode. It remains to be seen whether *bammaḥāzeh* qualifies the entire episode (Jacob) or simply the 'dialogue scene' (vv. 1–9); besides it is not easy to decide whether this reference to a vision "is meant to suggest a nocturnal experience and thus anticipate v.5 or not."⁽¹⁰²⁾

The contents (*lē² mōr*) of this 'word of *Yhwh*' is contained in a tripartite sentence that consists of an exhortation not to be afraid (this "derives entirely from the sacred context of the revelation (Ex 3,5–6)",⁽¹⁰³⁾ and two parallel noun clauses that probably mean to provide the motivation for Abraham's encouragement. In the first *Yhwh* presents himself as Abraham's *māgēn* "sovereign"⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ while in the second he promises that the patriarch's 'reward' (*š^ckarkā*)⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ will be very great. Reference to the preceding episode in Gen 14 is impossible to deny:⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ *Yhwh*'s self-presentation as *māgēn* recalls Melchizedek's *miggen* in the blessing formula (14,20), while the ŠKR motif cannot but remind us of Abraham's refusal to be paid by Sodom for his service to the Canaanite population (14,21–24). Abraham need not be afraid since his sovereign is *Yhwh* himself who promises a rich reward to his protégé.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾

Yhwh leaves unspecified his promise of rich ŠKR; yet it is this promise of great recompense which generates in Abraham a profound reaction defined by form critics as a 'lament'.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ The narrator represents the patriarch as 'answering back' (*wayyō²mer 'abram*) his divine interlocutor concerning this promise of ŠKR. This answer of Abraham takes the form of two interventions, each endowed with its respective quotation formula, that are structurally intertwined. Abraham actually develops two ideas. The quotation formulas indicate where the development of each idea begins.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

102. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 253-254.

103. Coats, *Genesis*, 124. Formcritics identify this ²*al tîra²* with the formulation of the 'Heilsorakel' cfr. Westermann *Genesis*, 258. For a discussion consult A. de Pury *Promesse Divine et Légende Culturelle dans le cycle de Jacob. Gen 28 et les traditions patriarcales* (Paris 1975) 295-317.

104. For this reading of *magen* cfr. J. Coppens, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*, XLVII (1971) 123-124; L. Viganò, *Nomi e titoli di YHWH alla luce del semitico del Nord-ovest* (Rome 1976) 23.

105. For this neutral meaning of ŠKR cfr. Abela, *Reading*, note 186.

106. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 84-86; Coats, *Genesis*, 123; Gros Louis, "Abraham I", 62.

107. The Samaritan version which alters *harbeh* to *arbeh* makes this point even more clear, cfr. Westermann, *Genesis*, 259.

108. Westermann, *Genesis*, 259.

109. Conroy's observation on the use of two quotation-formulas in two successive uninterrupted discourses by the same speaker is relevant here: "One should probably see these double occurrences as having a function on the level of narrative rhetoric (sharpening the reader's attention; signalling a new point of major importance within the discourse) rather than as signs of composite narrative", *Absalom*, 130. This observation would render useless the suggestions to consider verse 3 as a doublet of verse 2, introduced to smooth out some of the difficulties raised especially by verse 2b, cfr. Westermann, *Genesis*, 259-261, which offers also a bibliography of the various solutions proposed to resolve the problems of verse 2b.

In the first part (v.2) Abraham laments that *Yhwh*'s speech about ŠKR is incongruent since he is still without a son: *wē²ānōkî hōlēk²ārîrî*,⁽¹¹⁰⁾ in the second part he protests with *Yhwh* that *lî lô²nātattāh zara²*. Abraham's is therefore one intervention that has two parts. Syntactically this intervention consists of two main sentences (vv. 2a.3a) and two result clauses (vv. 2b.3b). An abāb pattern may easily be detected. Elements a/ā parallel in:

- both open with a quotation formula
- both have an attention caller; in (a) we have the vocative *ādōnāy Yhwh* which recalls *Yhwh*'s self-presentation as Abraham's *māgēn* (v.1); in (ā) we find the interjection *hēn*, lo!
- both possess a statement involving verb NTN with *Yhwh* for subject and Abraham for indirect subject. But there is one important difference; in (a) the statement is interrogative in character: *mah titten lî*, in (ā') is declarative. Besides, the direct object in (a) remains undetermined, *mah*, while in (ā') Abraham laments that *Yhwh* has not given him *zara²*. *Yhwh*'s discourse about ŠKR is due to remain airy as long as the problem of Abraham's fatherhood is not solved. The interjection *hēn* carries the nuance of astonishment for *Yhwh*'s failure, and seems to be referring to *Yhwh*'s previous promises concerning descendants (Gen 13,16).

Verse 2a is not a perfect parallel to verse 3a since it also contains a subordinate clause *wē²ānōkî hōlēk²ārîrî* that plays an explicative role. This means that the result clause of verse 2b depends thematically not only on *ādōnāy Yhwh mah titten lî* but also on this explicative clause. We suggest this translation: "My Lord *Yhwh*, what will you give me, seeing that I am dying childless, so that . . ."

Westermann⁽¹¹¹⁾ has already listed the correspondences between vv. 2b and 3b. Both stichoi express the consequences that derive from the situation described in the first halves of the two verses. Again vv. 2b and 3b carry slightly different though complementary ideas. The parsing of verse 2b has been a crux for interpreters owing to "its anomalous grammatical construction and problematic phrase *ben meseq*".⁽¹¹²⁾ With regards this latter phrase we accept F. Vattioni's suggestion to translate *ben meseq bēlî* as "he who pours libations on my grave".⁽¹¹³⁾ The pronoun *hū²* functions as a copula playing an emphatic role,⁽¹¹⁴⁾ deemed necessary to express

110. For *ārîrî* as childless cfr. Lev 20, 20-21; Jer 22, 30; Cazelles, "Connexions et Structure", 329. The participle *hōlēk* may carry the nuance 'to die', cfr. Jos 23, 14; Ps 39, 14; BDB, 234a.

111. Genesis, 260.

112. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 255.

113. "Ancora su Ben-Meseq in Gen 15", *RSV* 40 (1965) 9-12. Cfr. M. Dahood, *Ugaritic-Hebrew Philology* (Rome 1965) 65.

114. Cfr. *GHB*, 154 i.j. for this use of *hū²*.

Abraham's disappointment that this service has to be done by a non-relative. Whatever the origin and earlier purpose *dammešeq* – it is usually considered as a gloss – in the present shape of the text, the word is part of a composite name: *dammešeq ʿēlī ʿezer*.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ The grammar in v. 3b is not complex, we have *w^ehinneh*, introducing a result clause⁽¹¹⁶⁾ then comes the compound *ben-bēlī* with the meaning 'house-born slave'.⁽¹¹⁷⁾

From this passage of the single elements one can see how vv. 2b and 3b are chiasmically arranged:⁽¹¹⁸⁾

ūben-mešeq bēlī hū dammešeq ʿēlī ʿezer
w^ehinneh ben bēlī yôreš ʾôtī

From this chiasmus results that he who performs the funeral rites for Abraham will also inherit him. The individual who will do these actions is *dammešeq ʿēlī ʿezer*, Abraham's household slave.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

Yhwh does not leave Abraham's lament without an answer. To the astonishment of the narrator (*w^ehinnēh*)⁽¹²⁰⁾ Abraham receives another *d^ebar Yhwh* with a message about the theme of inheritance mentioned by Abraham himself in the second half of his intervention: *ben bēlī yôreš ʾôtī* (v.3). For the sake of variety the narrator alters slightly the quotation formula by converting it into a noun clause, and replaces *ʿel ʾabrām* by *ʿēlāw*. The similarity of the two formulas contributes to the text's cohesion. The two instances of *d^ebar Yhwh ʿel* counterbalance the two *wayyômer ʾabrām*.⁽¹²¹⁾ *Yhwh* speaks about Abraham's future heir. This speech is made up of a tricolon, with the second pivoting the rather two. Again the individual elements are concentrically disposed:⁽¹²²⁾

lō yīraškā zeh
kī ʾim ʾāšer yešē mimmē ʿēkā
hū yīrašekā

The chiasmus here brings to light the elements of a contrast: *lō yīraškā* –

115. Consult Cassuto, *Genesis II*, 293. For a short discussion on composite names cfr. *UT Grammar* 8: 61-72.

116. Cfr. McCarthy "Uses of *w^ehinneh*", 340.

117. Consult *BDB*, 120b; F. Vattioni, "Due Note sull'Ecclesiaste" *Annali XVI* (1966) 161-163.

118. Abela, *Reading*, 69. 165.

119. Cfr. Vattioni, "Ancora su Ben-Meseq", 12.

120. *W^ehinnēh* "ist jetzt eigentlich nicht recht am Platz: sie setzt etwas mehr vorangegangene Handlung und Spannung voraus", Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 52. This is an unfortunate comment because it pretends to limit the creativity of language. The narrator drops in his negative comment on what he is narrating. This *w^ehinnēh* is not there simply to balance the *hēn-hinnēh* of verse 3 (contra Westermann).

121. Jacob, *Genesis*, 392.

122. Cfr. Abela, *Reading*, 69.

yīrašēkā and *zeh-hūʔ*, that is, who is going to be Abraham's heir. From the context it is easy to deduce that *zeh* refers to the *ben bayit* indicated by Abraham as his sole heir (v.3). The demonstrative pronoun *hūʔ* points to the structure's pivot (v.4b), a relative clause introduced by the adversative *kīʔim*, rather,⁽¹²³⁾ "rather he who shall come from your loins", a technical expression to describe natural sonship/fatherhood. Abraham's heir (*hūʔ*), therefore, has to be his natural son. The term *ben* is avoided (Jacob) perhaps to spotlight the contrast between *ʔāšer yēšēʔ mimmeʔēkā* and *ben bēfi*.

Yhwh gives Abraham no chance to respond; he leads him 'out' and invites the patriarch to look towards the heavenly vault and count the stars if he can (v.5a). From critics read in this *wayyōšēʔ ʔōtō haḥūzāh* "the first dramatic element" of the episode (Van Seters); moreover, the heavenly vault studded with innumerable stars is said to provide the sign that confirms *Yhwh*'s promise of numerous progeny (Westermann). This interpretation meets two problems:

(a) We are still in the context of a vision experience (*bammahāzeh*); and although the clause combined with *wayyōʔmer* in v.5a does have an introductory function, it is itself part of the vision experience.⁽¹²⁴⁾ Likewise the reference to the stars forms part of the literary reality of the episode and may not be taken as an "indication of a narrative tradition".⁽¹²⁵⁾ One might say that the simile of the stars used to describe the numberlessness of Abraham's progeny as well as Abraham's profound communication with *Yhwh* belong to tradition; but the scenic representation of this reality belongs to what Licht termed "the storytelling aspect" in biblical narration.⁽¹²⁶⁾

(b) Is the interpretation of verse 5 as a confirming sign a *requirement of a predetermined form*?⁽¹²⁷⁾ The answer seems to be positive. The present author has some doubt whether this verse actually describes what is to be taken as a sign. Westermann admits that the vision of the starlit vault of heaven is not meant to confirm the promise of a natural son (v.4), which promise has already been given, "sondern die Überbietung der Sohnesdurch die Mehrungsverheissung".⁽¹²⁸⁾ Besides, this scene is never again referred to in the Abraham narrative as a sign.⁽¹²⁹⁾ Rather than a sign we

123. Cfr. BDB, 475a.

124. We need not consider *wayyōšēʔ ʔōtō haḥūzāh* as "eine Variante zu bamahazeh v.1" (Jacob, *Genesis*, 393).

125. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 256. "Der Satz ist nur eine formale Einleitung, der zur Verlebendigung die Gestalt einer realen Handlung gegeben ist. Das ist die Art prophetischer Rede", Jacob, *Genesis*, 392-393.

126. Licht, *Storytelling*, 11-14.

127. Westermann, "Arten der Erzählung", 23; *Genesis*, 262.

128. *Genesis*, 262.

129. "Nicht der mit der Augen erschaute Himmel kann das Vergewissernde sein, sondern allein das angesichts dieses Himmels als Verheissung ausgesprochene Wort Gottes, das von Abraham als Versprechen Gottes anerkannt zu werden fordert", Zimmerli, *Abraham*, 51.

have here "ein schönes und stolzes Bild der unendlichen Volkszahl"⁽¹³⁰⁾ of Abraham's descendants.

What progress does the episode show in verse 5? (a) The clause *wayyôšē'ôṭô* without the specification of subject and object⁽¹³¹⁾ plays the same role of *hāyāh d^ebar Yhwh el* of verse 1; both somehow render formal *Yhwh's* contacts with Abraham. The clause is combined with the verb *wayyô³mer* which carries out the same function of gerundial *lē³mor* in vv. 1.4.

(b) *Yhwh* invites (*nā³*) Abraham to look at the heavenly vault and count the stars. This invitation consists of bicolon; its second colon is concentrically patterned:

	<i>habbet nā³haššamaymāh</i>	
<i>ûs^epor hakkôkâbîm</i>	<i>'imtûkal</i>	<i>lišpôr 'ôṭām</i>
(a)	(b)	(a)

The central position of (b) indicates the narrator's will to stress the impossibility of counting the stars. The emphasis is on numberlessness.

(c) *Yhwh's* speech comes to a climax in his declaration (the second *wayyô³mer*): *kôh yihyeh zar^eākā*. This declaration makes it clear that the theme is Abraham's *zara^e*. The concluding word (Jacob) of *Yhwh's* speech, *zar^eākā* which attracts great attention, recalls Abraham's declarative *hēn lî lô³ nātattāh zara^e* (v.13) and reveals that in the dialogue there exists a conscious patterning of the thematic elements into a chiasmus. Abraham states that *Yhwh's* discourse about ŠKR cannot be taken seriously since the patriarch remained without *zara^e* (v.3) (A); the absence of *zara^e* gave rise to the situation where Abraham will have an adopted slave (ben-bêtî) as heir (B). *Yhwh's* answer opens with the exclusion of 'this' (*zeh*) adopted slave from heirdom; instead, a natural son is indicated as the would be heir (B); but *Yhwh* continues by promising that Abraham's *zara^e* shall become numerous indeed (v.5) (A). This ABBA pattern would exclude the description of v.4 as "Abschluss eines Abschnitts"⁽¹³²⁾ which would consequently isolate verse 5. Besides this chiasmus would present verses 1 – 5 as thematically coherent (Snijders).

(d) The second *wayyô³mer* in *Yhwh's* speech does not serve simply to signal "a new point of major importance in the discourse" (Conroy), but functions also as pause indication⁽¹³³⁾ meant to stress the contents of *Yhwh's* declaration *kôh yihyeh zar^eākā* as Abraham ponders silently the grandeur of the starlit vault of heaven as similitude to the patriarch's fulfilment as multiplicity.

130. Gunkel, *Genesis*, 164.

131. This lack of specification is probably meant to create the impression of immediate passage from *Yhwh's* first speech (v.4) on the second (v.5).

132. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 33; Cfr. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 256 for other arguments against considering verse 4 as a conclusion.

133. Cfr. Abela, *Reading*, 70.

The narrator leaves Abraham's silence undisturbed. But he suspends (inversion) the narrative flow to usher us stealthily into the world of Abraham's relationship to *Yhwh*. Abraham's silence shades a process of change from initial scepticism (vv.2–3) to belief in *Yhwh*'s *w^ehe²ēmīn bā Yhwh*.⁽¹³⁴⁾ The syntactical emphasis on Abraham's reaction is structurally and thematically important as a balance to Abraham's crisis of belief in *Yhwh*'s promises in vv.2–3.⁽¹³⁵⁾ The narrator is well informed also of *Yhwh*'s positive evaluation (*wayyaḥš^e behā lō šedāqāh*)⁽¹³⁶⁾ of Abraham's *he²ēmīn*. This approval of God is considered in the context as essentially spiritual in character; only after this encounter of Abraham with *Yhwh* can this *wayyaḥš^ebehā* be transformed into a "Tun Gottes".⁽¹³⁷⁾

The dialogue continues (*wayyō²mer²elāw* (v.7)); *Yhwh* breaks the silence to comment in a rather long colon upon all his dealings with Abraham sofar: *ʾanī Yhwh ʾašer hōšē²tikā mē²ūr kašdim lātēt l^ekā ʾet hā ʾareš hazzō²t l^erištāh*. This is often interpreted as a promise of the land.⁽¹³⁸⁾ But it rather consists of an "erweiterte Selbstvorstellung"⁽¹³⁹⁾ describing in a nutshell Abraham's entire travelling experience seen from *Yhwh*'s perspective.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ This self-presentation of God builds upon the previous episodes of the 'Abraham narrative', information about Abraham's travelling from Ur under divine protection, as well as the identification of 'this land' cannot be understood from the episode alone. The wider context is necessary. Besides, we may not accept the opinion that in verse 7 *Yhwh* speaks as if he was unknown to Abraham.⁽¹⁴¹⁾ The structural parallelism, for instance, between Abraham's way of addressing *Yhwh* in vv.2.8 points to the narrator's view that verse 7 continues from verse 6. If we have anything new here it is in re-reading Abraham's adventures from a different perspective, *Yhwh*'s. The patriarch's adventures were not haphazard after all, but formed part of an original plan of *Yhwh*. *Yhwh* has led Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans⁽¹⁴²⁾ to give him 'this land' for inheritance.

The verbal forms *hōšē²tikā* and *l^erištāh* recall their occurrence in vv.

134. This intuition excludes the parsing of *w^ehe²ēmīn* as pluperfect, cfr. Jacob, *Genesis*, 394.

135. Westermann, *Genesis*, 263.

136. For the possible historical contexts that may have influenced the terminology employed here semantically consult commentaries. For a short bibliography cfr. Abela, *Reading*, note 295.

137. *Wayyaḥš^e behā*: "die nicht nur im Geiste Gottes zudenken ist, sondern sich als ein Tun Gottes zeigen muss", Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 47.

138. Cfr. Rendtorff, *Problem*, 42-45.

139. Westermann, "Arten der Erzählung", 29.

140. Abela, *Reading*, 215-216.

141. Zimmerli, *Abraham*, 53.

142. On the historical problem involved in indicating Abraham's place of origin we refer to R. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia 1978) 186-200.

3–5 and serve as cohesive elements within the episode as a whole.⁽¹⁴³⁾ A similar role play the two self-presentations of *Yhwh* in vv. 1 and 7 (Westermann); the use of ³*ānī* instead of ³*ānōkī* may be explained by the exigency of style (variation) rather by a different *Sitz im leben* of the language adoperated.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾

Two remarks on *Yhwh*'s self-presentation:

(1) It remains to be seen whether the similarity in formulation of the concepts of *Yhwh*'s leading Abraham and Israel out of Ur and Egypt respectively (Ex 20,2; Lev 25,38; Dt 5,6) reflects the narrator's conscious presentation of Abraham as model for later Israel.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ This would require widening the literary context of our episode to include the entire Pentateuch.

(2) Whatever the vital environment from which the language of this verse derives, we have still to discover the need for *Yhwh* to re-represent himself ³*ānī* *Yhwh* at this stage. On the surface it seems that a new theme is being introduced, that of the land (Van Seters). Yet one wonders whether this self-presentation is not simply a resumption of *Yhwh*'s initial discourse about ŠKR abruptly interrupted by Abraham's lament about his own childlessness. It is true that the contents of the two self-presentations do not appear to coincide; but one must grant that the two self-presentations are complementary concerning *Yhwh*'s relationship to Abraham. Another possible explanation is that the illusion of a long pause created by the narrator's intervention (v.6) required a rather formal resumption of dialogue.

Abraham reacts once more (*wayyō³mar*) to *Yhwh*'s revelation of his original intention of giving *hā³āreš hazzō³t* as possession. He prayerfully⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ asks how can he be sure of coming into possession of the land: *bammāh³ēdā³ kī³ ʾirašennāh*. The parallels in address indicate that we have to read this reaction as taking place *bammahāzeh* (v.1). The vision scene has not yet finished. *Yhwh* answers Abraham straightaway (*wayyō³mer³ ʾēlāw*) by giving instructions about a rite (v.9): *q³hah lī*; there follows a list of animals and fowls to be 'taken'. The animals have to be *m³ē šullešet* which Cazelles⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ translates "divided into three parts", so that *Yhwh*'s instructions are quite specific.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾ From the text we learn also that the birds are to be treated

143. "The theme of inheritance in vv. 7-8 returns to that of vv. 3-4 but with a shift of interest from the question of an heir to the question of the land", Van Seters, *Abraham*, 257-258; cfr. Jacob, *Genesis*, 395.

144. Zimmerli, *Abraham*, 53.

145. Cfr. Cassuto, *Genesis II*, 336.

146. Since Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 38-39 formcritics interpret Abraham's question for a sign as a prayer of a believer. Cfr. Westermann, *Genesis* 266-267 and Jacob's comments in *Genesis*, 396.

147. "Connexions et Structure", 336-338.

148. Contra Westermann, *Genesis*, 267 who writes, "Es ist vorausgesetzt, dass der Auftrag, die Tiere zu bringen, genügt, Abraham wissen zu lassen, was er zutun hat". This interpretation follows from his reading MSLT as "dreijährig".

differently.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾

With *Yhwh*'s instructions ends the dialogue scene. We next meet Abraham faithfully carrying out these instructions: *wayyiqqah lô kol 'ellêh* (v.10). The narrator seems interested in insisting on Abraham's prompt obedience. Through the use of the link clause *wayyiqqah lô* the impression is created that we are still in the realm of vision (Jacob). The narrator avoids explicit time indications; the usual *wayyāskem . . . babbōqer* (Gen 21, 14; 22,3) employed when the character carries out divine instructions imparted in nightly visions, does not appear. But this narration section (vv. 10 – 11) is dominated by action words, mostly with Abraham for subject. Verse 10 alone has no less than four verbs: *wayyiqqah*, *waybattēr*, *wayyittēn*, *lô' bātār*. One should note how Abraham's treatment of the victims is included within the two instances of root BTR, evidently a characteristic action-word of this ceremonial.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ He divided the animals and placed the pieces in rows in front of each other. The birds were not divided.

The inclusion *waybattēr* – *bātār* would suggest that Abraham's preparations for the rite were the only activity to be done. But then takes place the curious incident of the birds of prey (*hā'ayit*) swooping down upon the carcasses, with Abraham defending the victims by scaring the fowls away (v.11). Van Seters considers the incident as "unnecessary" unless one would read in it "a clue to ill omen".⁽¹⁵¹⁾ Of course, the economy of the text's representation requires a necessary role also of this detail. We take it for a retardation device as well as a discrete indication of the time factor.⁽¹⁵²⁾

With verse 12 a new scene opens. The narrator informs us that as the sun was about to set (*lābō'*) Abraham experienced deep sleep (*tardēmāh*) and fear together with great darkness (*'ēmāh hašēkah g'dōlāh*). These phenomena struck Abraham contemporaneously (*w'ēhinneh*).⁽¹⁵³⁾ The presence of sunlight (the sun has not yet set) points to the supernatural origin of the darkness phenomenon).

But verse 12 with its *wayhî* plays another essential role: its 'sauber Parallelismus' (Lohfink) with verse 17 indicates that the two verses draw an inclusion; our task now is to examine what has been thus enveloped. The contents of this inclusion consists of a speech of *Yhwh* to Abraham about his descendants' future till their definitive settlement 'here' (*hēnnāh*). This oracle (Skinner) was usually judged as diachronically secondary to the rest

149. The text does not develop the symbolic value of these animals and birds. It is the context in which the text operates that specifies further the meaning of these details as well as of the entire rite indicated here.

150. Westermann, *Genesis*, 268. This activity is further characterized by T and R alliterations.

151. *Abraham*, 258.

152. Abela, *Reading*, 61.

153. For this use of *w'ēhinneh* cfr. McCarthy, "Uses of *w'ēhinneh*", 337-338.

of the episode because it presumably interrupts the oath ceremony;⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ according to this thesis *Yhwh*'s speech has been added later to account for the divergence between the promise of the land and the factual occupation of Canaan by Israel.

Although our approach to the text is synchronic and as such may take the unity of the whole and essentiality of vv. 13–16 for granted⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ we would like to offer a few considerations to show that this essentiality is not a methodological a priorism. Before coming to the matter of the speech's role within the episode as a whole one should examine whether there passes any relationship between these verses and the rest on the level of language and contents. In other words is there a discontinuity in language and thought which would justify the description of these vv. as a later insertion?

The present author believes that there is enough evidence to consider these vv. as one piece with the wider context of Gen 15. Jacob⁽¹⁵⁶⁾ has already noted that the quotation formula *wayyōmer* is the same as the one used in v.5: in both texts it is the context to identify the subject of *wayyōmer*; as in v.5 we encounter here *zar'ākā* to be parsed as a collective noun⁽¹⁵⁷⁾ subject of verb *yihyeh*. There is also the term *r'kūš* which appears in Gen 14, 21. One may grant that this speech of *Yhwh* deals mainly with the fortunes of Abraham's *zara'* and not with the theme of the land which predominates in the immediate context;⁽¹⁵⁸⁾ but this does not mean that the land theme is not present in this speech. *Yhwh* mentions Abraham's descendants as future inhabitants for a determined period of a 'land not theirs'; these inhabitants will in time return 'here' which, from Abraham's perspective, coincides with *hā'ares hazzōt*. Lastly one should include the important contact between verses 12.17 and verse 15. In the latter Abraham is promised a 'beautiful death' (Westermann): *w'attāh tābō'el 'ābōtēkā b'sālōm*. According to Cazelles this is an exceptional expression for this concept, since the usual verbs employed are *SP* and *SKB*. "Cette locution exceptionnelle a sans doute pour but de souligner le symbolisme entre le coucher (*bō'*) du soleil et la mort d'Abram",⁽¹⁵⁹⁾

The language of the oracle, therefore, and the elements of the land theme that are found in this speech, demonstrate that *Yhwh*'s speech presupposes the preceding part of the episode; naturally, vv. 13–16 are

154. Cfr. Wellhausen, *Composition*, 21-22; Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 40; Rendtorff, *Problem*, 39-40. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 259 and Blum, *Komposition*, 377-379 consider vv. 13-16 original to the wider context of Gen 15; yet both consider the entire episode as late. One ought to mention as well the other hypothesis which sees in these verses the amalgamation of various sources, cfr. Cazelles, "Connexions et Structure", 340-341; H. Seebass, "Zu Genesis 15", *Wort und Dienst* 17 (1963) 138-142.

155. Gros Louis, "Considerations", 15.

156. *Genesis*, 398.

157. Abela, *Reading*, 72.

158. Skinner, *Genesis*, 282; Abela, *Reading*, 217.

159. "Connexions et Structure", 241 note 89.

endowed with their dynamics and with peculiar elements of contents. But this is due to the thought progression. *Yhwh*'s speech is not thematically incoherent with respect to the rest of the episode. Let us examine the text in some detail.

The oracle has a general structure. Towards the centre of this structure we find the formula *w^eahārē kēn* which serves as a transition from one set of experiences (vv.13 – 14a) to another (vv.15 – 16);⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ physical movement is involved when the first situation switches into the second; Abraham's *zarā^c* are supposed to go out of this 'land not theirs' *binkuš gādōl* (v.14b). Besides a close reading of vv.13 – 14a and 16 will discover that they are parallel⁽¹⁶¹⁾ in that both sections have place and time indications qualifying some action, concentrically disposed (xyy'x'), and a 'judgement statement'. Sandwiched between these two groups of stichoi, just after *w^eahārē kēn* we encounter three statements that may be considered as the nucleus of the structure. Notice the parallelismus membrorum between

v 16b: *yēš^eū birkuš gādōl*

v 15b: *tiqqābēr b^ešēbāh tōbāh*

We have here an action implying movement (*tiqqābēr* actually parallels *tābō^c el* in v.15a), a going out, a leaving of some place. Both actions are qualified by a phrase that means success. These parallel statements revolve around the clause that describes Abraham's death:

w^eattāh tābō^c el ābōtēkā b^ešālōm

There is the same pattern of an action qualified by a phrase that shows that the action has been positive. The presence of this movement may have determined the choice of *bō^c* for the description of Abraham's death: a verb of motion qualified by phrase *b^ešālōm*. But one cannot deny the other contacts of this *tābō^c* in verse 15 with the BW^c of verses 12.17 (Cazelles). One should note also the emphatic position of the pronoun *attāh* which betrays the narrator's desire to contrast Abraham with his *zarā^c*. This becomes even clearer in the parallelism between vv. 14b and 15b. The reference to Abraham's fortune is not accidental and there exists no justification for considering v.15 as secondary.⁽¹⁶²⁾ The entire structure seems to be geared to put Abraham's successful finale at the centre: *zar^cākā* will have to bear with hard experience in a land not theirs, but after God's intervention against their oppressors they shall leave this land enriched (*birkuš gōdāl*) just as you will die *b^ešālōm*, in good old age (*b^ešēbāh tōbāh*). For the patriarch himself his own positive death will constitute the sign that his descendents will return 'here' to possess the land. He himself has become a sign.

160. Cfr. Conroy, *Absalom*, 42.

161. Cfr. Abela, *Reading*, 314.

162. Contra Westermann, *Genesis*, 269-270.

A few minute details. After that in v.12 we have read about the phenomena that befell Abraham just before sunset, v.13 opens with a quotation formula which specifies who the addressee is but leaves it to the reader to guess who is the subject: *wayyō³ mer l³ ʾabrām*. The first words in *Yhwh*'s oracle are the verb *ʾēda^c* qualified by the infinitive absolute: *yādō^c ʾā ʾēda^c*. This is meant to emphasize the solemnity of the speaker's declaration.⁽¹⁶³⁾ This YD^c recalls of course the *bammah ʾēda^c* of Abraham's last intervention (Lohfink) and functions as a cohesive element.

The message Abraham is called to know consists of a number of statements introduced by *kî*. Several of the statements have *zara^ckā* as subject: these descendants (collective sense of *zara^c*) is supposed to live as *ger* in a 'land not theirs' that remains unidentified; they are to live there as slaves (*wā^c ʾābādūm*). Their masters will oppress them (*we^c innū ʾōtām*) for four hundred years. There follows the divine intervention described through a participle (*dān*) that functions as finite verb with *ʾānōkî* for subject. The emphasis in the statement (v.14a) lies on the object *haggōy* placed at the head of the sentence. The second instance of root ^cBD suggests that for the narrator slavery was a characteristic of this first period of the history of Abraham's *zara^c*. It is possible to delineate a chiasmic disposition of the material: the experience starts with Abraham's descendants living as *ger* in a land not theirs, here they shall slave to a nation whom God shall finally judge. The turning point in this history is marked by the adverbial *wē^c ʾāḥārē kēn*; after this period of slavery these descendants 'will go out' with great property and return (*yāšūbū*) 'here'. The time indication which throws all these events in the future, *wēdōr rēbī³* is essential because of the second judgement statement: *kî lō³ šālēm ʾāwōn hā ʾēmōrî ʾad hēnnāh* (v.16b). The return 'here' of Abraham's descendants has to wait till this *ʾāwōn* of the Amorites will reach the brim (*šālēm*). We are not told who these Amorites are and what their *ʾāwōn* is. The audience is supposed to know especially if it is true that vv.13–16 are a "vaticinium ex eventu" as Van Seters has written.⁽¹⁶⁴⁾

Most of the time *Yhwh* speaks from Abraham's perspective; his descendants will return 'here', but have to wait since to 'this day' (*ʾad hēnnāh*) the Amorites' *ʾāwōn* is not consummated. The audience is supposed to know from tradition the length of time these 'descendants' spent into slavery and the time of their return. The two time indicators *ʾarbā mēʾōt šānāh* and *wēdōr rēbī³* (accusative of time) that created enormous difficulties for interpreters. These time phrases indicate rather an indefinite time duration. After all we have here an incubation experience⁽¹⁶⁵⁾ which allows room for vague chronological and geographical localization of this

163. Jacob, *Genesis*, 398.

164. Abraham, 259.

165. Cfr. Wellhausen, *Composition*, 21; de Pury, *Promesse Divine*, 320-321; Abela, *Reading*, 168.

experience — this explains why the oppressing nation remains unspecified; the same holds good for the general term *hā'ēmōrî* and their *ʿāwōn*.

What is the narrative role of this speech of *Yhwh* within the literary dynamics of Gen 15 as a whole? We answer this question now. The examination of the text's grammar and structure has shown the narrator's wish to read this speech intimately combined to the 'including' elements in vv. 12.17. Before performing in front of Abraham the oath rite (v.17) in order to confirm his intention of giving 'this land' as Abraham's possession (v.7), *Yhwh* explains how this land is going to pass on into the patriarch's hand. Abraham has asked how *he* was going to inherit the land (v.8). *Yhwh* combines in his oracle Abraham's future to that of his descendants: he also places Abraham himself as parable of how this future is meant to evolve. Abraham is going to inherit this land 'in his descendants', so that *Yhwh*'s oath of giving this land to *Abraham* is actually fulfilled even though this fulfilment is meant to remain a strictly future event.⁽¹⁶⁶⁾

The end of *Yhwh*'s oracle is followed by a chronological report enveloped within the verbal forms *wayhî-hāyāh* (v.17a). The sun has by now set (*bā'āh*) and thick darkness covered all around. This brief description of the external circumstances prepares us for the climax of the episode. The narrator adopts Abraham's perspective (*w'hinnēh*)⁽¹⁶⁷⁾ as he tells what actually happened. The symbols of divine presence (smoking stove and fire-brand) are seen crossing (*ʿābār*) in between the animals' pieces. One should note

(i) that the word for 'pieces' (*hāggēzarîm*) is a hapax, perhaps chosen to enhance the unique character of the event;

(ii) the term *haggēzārîm* is qualified by the demonstrative pronoun *hā'ēlleh* in order to link the present moment of the experience to that of the preparations (vv.9 – 10). Abraham looks as if he knew the meaning of this passage of *Yhwh* in between the corps of the victims: he needs no explanation. What *Yhwh*'s oracle explains is how the divine solemn promise (Lohfink) is supposed to involve Abraham as well as his *zara'*.

The episode comes to a close when the narrator steps in once more to offer an interpretation of what has just been narrated (Lohfink). To mark the presence of explicit comment the narrator resorts to a grammatical

166. Rendtorff has interpreted the variously formulated promises of the land as an indication of subsequent theological editing of the traditions, "Der 'Jahwist' als Theologe. Zur Delema der Pentateuchkritik", *Supplements to Vetus Testament* 28(1975) 158-166. Cfr. *JSOT* 3(1977) 2-60. The structure within *Yhwh*'s speech which weaves into one Abraham's future and that of his descendants seems to prove that the addressing of *Yhwh*'s promise now to Abraham now to his *zara'* need not reflect subsequent editing. (Cfr. *JSOT* 3(1977) 14), although it has to be granted that a diachronical interpretation of Gen 15 is still possible. Without this speech of *Yhwh* in vv. 13-16 Abraham's prayer for a sign would receive only an ambiguous answer for he would still not know how he himself was involved in the dynamics of the land promise. Verse 18 gives most of all the narrator's perspective (Lohfink).

167. McCarthy, "Uses of *w'hinnēh*", 332-333.

inversion:⁽¹⁶⁸⁾ *bayyôm hāhū?*, which interrupts the narration flow. The contribution of the narrator (vv. 18–21) consists of a general statement *kārat Yhwh ʔet ʔabrām bʔrît* and the contents (*lēʔmōr*) of this *bʔrît*, expressed in direct speech. The symmetrical disposition of the explicative statement is evident. The language of the contents is highflown (Jacob), mostly derived from the legal environment.⁽¹⁶⁹⁾ According to the narrator *Yhwh* made a covenant with Abraham that involved a divine grant of land⁽¹⁷⁰⁾ with its geographical and political boundaries (Westermann) specified.

Some comments are in order:

(a) The inversion together with the fact that we haven't been prepared for the *bʔrît* theme within the episode himself confirms that here we are in front of an interpretation by the narrator.

(b) Whatever the precise meaning of the legal phrase *kārat bʔrît*, in the present episode it links with the ceremony described in verse 17: it probably carries the nuance of oath⁽¹⁷¹⁾ or solemn promise.⁽¹⁷²⁾

(c) The fact that these vv. carry the narrator's perspective does not justify considering them as a whole or in part secondary. This interpretation of the narrator forms part and parcel of the present text. Verse 18 is usually admitted as original by scholarship, but vv. 19–21 are often scissored off as secondary for reasons arising from the history of traditions.⁽¹⁷³⁾ Yet there is no form critical reason for making any source division in vv. 18–21.⁽¹⁷⁴⁾ Moreover, the list of peoples occupying the land is necessary because it explains Abraham's question in v.8. If there Abraham asks how he may know that he is to inherit this land it is because 'this land' is not uninhabited: there is the 'Amorite' whose guilt is not yet felt (15,16). In his answer (vv.13–16) *Yhwh* made Abraham's future the sign of his *zard*'s future, so that in declaring the future grant of the land *Yhwh* has to include its current inhabitants who will be given to Abraham's descendants 'together with' (*ʔet*) their land.⁽¹⁷⁵⁾

168. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 33.

169. Westermann, *Genesis*, 272–273.

170. Cfr. M. Weinfeld, "The Covenant Grant in the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East", *JAOS* 90 (1970) 184–203.

171. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 101–113.

172. Westermann, *Genesis*, 272.

173. Cfr. Lohfink, *Landverheissung*, 65–78 for a discussion.

174. Van Seters, *Abraham*, 260.

175. Cfr. Abela, *Reading*, 217 for this meaning of *ʔet*.

VERIFICA SPERIMENTALE E METAFISICA DEL LINGUAGGIO RELIGIOSO

Battista Mondin

Tra pensiero e linguaggio il vincolo è molto stretto. Tra queste due attività dello spirito l'interdipendenza è così profonda che nell'uomo lo sviluppo intellettuale è fortemente condizionato dall'apprendimento del linguaggio, mentre, viceversa, l'apprendimento del linguaggio è sempre proporzionato allo sviluppo del pensiero. C'è di più: si è registrato un rapporto di interdipendenza anche tra procedimenti logici e strutture linguistiche, e tra la cosmovisione di una popolazione e la sua lingua. Per esempio le lingue ad alfabeto iconico sono meno propizie all'argomentazione logica e alla razionalizzazione scientifica e filosofica delle cose di quanto non lo siano le lingue dotate di un alfabeto convenzionale.

Ciò che vale per il nesso pensiero-linguaggio *in actu exercito*, si ritrova pienamente confermato anche nella speculazione filosofica. La storia della filosofia ci dice che le teorie epistemologiche corrono sempre di pari passo e si coniugano regolarmente con determinate teorie semantiche e viceversa. Così, l'esemplarismo concettuale dei platonici si sposa con l'esemplarismo linguistico; il convenzionalismo concettuale dei sofisti con il convenzionalismo del linguaggio; l'empirismo, il positivismo, il fisicalismo della conoscenza di molti filosofi moderni si accoppia con lo sperimentalismo linguistico, ecc.

Sullo sfondo dei reciproci rapporti tra pensiero e linguaggio, tra teorie gnoseologiche e teorie semantiche si possono agevolmente leggere ed intendere i recenti sviluppi del problema del linguaggio religioso, problema che è stato al centro di numerosi e vivaci dibattiti anche in passato, ma in modo particolare lo è divenuto dopo la svolta linguistica che ha subito la filosofia durante il secolo XX.

Di questo complesso e difficile problema nella presente circostanza affronterò brevemente tre aspetti: 1) la crisi del linguaggio religioso; 2) il valore del linguaggio religioso secondo il criterio della verifica sperimentale; 3) il valore del linguaggio religioso secondo il criterio della verifica metafisica (l'analogia).

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1. La crisi del linguaggio religioso

La società contemporanea, non solo nel Vecchio Mondo ma anche nel Nuovo e nel Terzo Mondo, da qualche decennio, sta attraversando una crisi culturale che ha rari riscontri nella storia; per questo motivo viene spesso qualificata come crisi "epocale". Noi stiamo vivendo la fine di un' epoca, con la sua cultura e la sua civiltà, e stiamo vivendo l'alba di una nuova epoca, che darà vita ad una nuova cultura e ad una nuova civiltà.

La crisi della nostra cultura sembra davvero crisi mortale: essa ha colpito mortalmente tutte le strutture della società e tutti i pilastri della cultura: la morale, il diritto, la politica, l'educazione, la scuola, la famiglia, lo stato, la patria, la religione, la Chiesa, i simboli, i valori, i miti, le ideologie, le utopie. Stiamo davvero assistendo ad un immenso rogo che minaccia di ridurre tutto in polvere. Nessuna verità sembra reggere ai colpi furenti del Nulla.

Preso nella triplice morsa del nichilismo, della crisi religiosa e della crisi simbolica, il linguaggio religioso sta attraversando un momento di estrema gravità. Esso viene sempre più spesso accantonato come roba vecchia, d'altri tempi, di altre culture. Si pensi alla scienza, alla politica, alla morale, all'economia, alla scuola, al teatro, al cinema, allo sport, al lavoro, allo stesso conversare comune tra la gente, ecc. Sono tutti settori dell'esistenza in cui il linguaggio religioso non trova più posto. E anche là dove non gli si nega e non gli si può negare il diritto di cittadinanza, come nella liturgia, nella catechesi, nella pastorale, nella teologia, sono oggetto di discussione e contestazione alcuni aspetti fondamentali del linguaggio religioso, quali l'intelligibilità, la corretta interpretazione, il valore oggettivo. "Ovunque si può constatare che l'uso del linguaggio ecclesiastico è sempre meno compreso da coloro che lo parlano, e cioè dai fedeli stessi. Il gioco del linguaggio ecclesiastico si è fatto problematico precisamente per gli stessi fedeli".⁽¹⁾

Qualche anno fa il famoso vescovo anglicano J.A.T. Robinson per illustrare la condizione di profonda crisi in cui versa il linguaggio religioso ha adoperato l'immagine della carta monetata. Sin quando resta chiaro il rapporto che questa ha con la riserva a cui si riferisce, tutti l'accettano, le riconoscono valore; ma dal momento in cui tale rapporto diviene oscuro, nessuno la vuole più. Scoppia allora la crisi monetaria. È ciò che sta succedendo al linguaggio religioso ai giorni nostri: non si comprende più il suo rapporto con la verità che deve esprimere. "Viviamo nel mezzo, o comunque agli inizi d'una *crisi monetaria*. Ne risentono tutte le valute tradizionali tuttora in corso, che pure erano servite magnificamente da mezzi di scambio tra i cristiani e col mondo in cui essi vivono: formulazioni dogmatiche, valori morali, riti liturgici e via dicendo (...) Il compito che dobbiamo affrontare è duplice. In primo luogo dobbiamo essere pronti a chiederci, con schietta sincerità quale sia il valore corrente effettivo delle nostre

1. E.Schillebeeckx, *Intelligenza della fede*, Paoline, Alba 1976, p. 50.

massime e delle nostre formule (. . .) In secondo luogo, abbiamo l'obbligo di trovare una valuta che risulti convertibile nel mondo moderno. E la caratteristica specifica di quest'ultimo è quella di essere un mondo *secolare*".⁽²⁾

I problemi che interessano il linguaggio religioso non sono semplicemente due (come vorrebbe J.A.T. Robinson) bensì quattro: oltre ai problemi *critico* (che riguarda il valore del linguaggio) e *kerygmatico* o pastorale (che riguarda la ricerca di un linguaggio che conservi l'intelligibilità del messaggio cristiano anche per l'uomo moderno), che sono i due problemi indicati da Robinson nel suo famoso e discusso saggio *Honest to God*, ci sono il problema *ontologico* (che concerne la natura e la proprietà del linguaggio religioso) e il problema *ermeneutico* (che si occupa della corretta interpretazione dei testi sacri). I problemi ermeneutico e kerygmatico riguardano direttamente e specificamente la teologia e non li prendiamo in considerazione in questo scritto, che vuole essere strettamente filosofico. Toccano invece l'ambito della filosofia gli altri due problemi, quello critico e quello ontologico. Di quest'ultimo ci siamo occupati poco più sopra. Ci resta quindi da esaminare solamente il problema critico, che di tutti i problemi che investono il linguaggio religioso è senz'altro il più delicato e più difficile.⁽³⁾

2. Il valore del linguaggio religioso

Il problema critico verte sulle questioni: che senso e che valore ha il linguaggio religioso. Così, per es., quando diciamo che Dio è buono, è padre, è sapiente, è provvidente ecc. che cosa intendiamo dire? Che senso hanno parole di per sé così perfettamente chiare come le parole "buono", "padre", "sapiente", "provvidente" e simili, quando le applichiamo a Dio? È Dio una realtà esprimibile, effabile, dicibile, descrivibile alla pari delle cose che sperimentiamo in questo mondo? Siamo noi in grado di dire qualche cosa di sensato su di Lui? Se adoperiamo una parola, di cui conosciamo bene il significato, per qualsiasi realtà di cui abbiamo una conoscenza adeguata, possiamo stabilire subito se ne facciamo un uso corretto o sbagliato, proprio o improprio, sensato o insensato. Così se un amico ci dice che il suo cane è bello oppure che ha mal di pancia, accettiamo le due espressioni come corrette. Se ci dicesse, invece, che è "misericordioso" cominceremmo a pensare che egli non conosce esattamente il significato della parola "misericordioso"; se poi dicesse che il suo cane "vola", cominceremmo addirittura a dubitare che le rotelle del suo cervello non girino per il verso giusto. Possiamo fare altrettanto per le parole che adoperiamo per descrivere la realtà di Dio (e degli altri abitanti del "cielo")?

2. J.A.T. Robinson, *Dio non è così* (tr. it. di *Honest to God*), Firenze 1965, pp. 185 – 186.

3. Del linguaggio religioso mi sono occupato in vari scritti, in particolare: *Il problema del linguaggio teologico dalle origini ad oggi*, Queriniana, Brescia 2 ed. 1975; *Il linguaggio teologico: ha senso parlare di Dio oggi?*, Paoline, Roma 1978.

Il caso del linguaggio religioso è particolarmente arduo, perchè Dio "nessuno l'ha mai visto né conosciuto". Sappiamo che esiste e che, essendo Dio, è massimo in tutto ciò che riguarda l'ordine dell'essere e del bene, ma proprio perchè è il massimo, Egli sta talmente al di là d'ogni nostro concetto che non esiste parola atta a descriverLo adeguatamente.

Quanto conosciamo di Lui ci basta certo per parlare con Lui, talora con grande familiarità e confidenza, tal'altra con grande timore e tremore. Ma di Lui sappiamo infinitamente poco. È così, anche quando applichiamo a Lui parole che nell'uso comune hanno un senso ovvio e preciso, ci accorgiamo che abbiamo compiuto un'operazione azzardata, irriverente, per non dir di peggio. Di una persona umana dire che pensa, che vuole, che è libera è il minimo che si possa dire; ma di quella persona singolarissima che è Dio, possiamo dire altrettanto?

Ma, allora che senso ha il nostro parlare di Dio? Non è qui il caso di seguire la raccomandazione di Wittgenstein: "Di ciò di cui non si può parlare è meglio tacere"? Ma questo è un cattivo consiglio, perchè per quanto imperfetto sia il nostro linguaggio, esso rimane l'unico strumento a nostra disposizione per dare espressione alle nostre idee e per comunicare con gli altri. E per noi è necessario esprimere e comunicare soprattutto le idee che contano di più, che hanno per noi e per gli altri un'importanza vitale, le idee che riguardano la nostra liberazione, promozione, elevazione, salvezza. Tali sono in primo luogo le idee che riguardano Dio, perchè in Lui che "noi viviamo, ci muoviamo e siamo" (san Paolo). Perciò invece di ammutolire e chiuderci in un silenzio di tomba, dove parlano soltanto i battiti del cuore mentre si chiude in tenebrosa cecità la mente, occorre riflettere profondamente, occorre indagare tenacemente onde far funzionare nel modo migliore il nostro linguaggio quando lo usiamo per parlare di Dio.

Ciò che è certo è che parlando di Dio noi non intendiamo battere l'aria bensì dire qualche cosa. Ma esiste qualche criterio per verificare, con una buona dose di certezza, qual è il significato di ciò che diciamo quando parliamo di Lui?

I neopositivisti avevano assunto per ogni tipo di linguaggio un unico criterio, la *verifica sperimentale*, e in base ad essa avevano negato al linguaggio religioso qualsiasi significato descrittivo (oggettivo, conoscitivo) e gli avevano riconosciuto soltanto un significato emotivo, soggettivo. Ma fu facile provare l'assurdità della pretesa dei neopositivisti. In effetti "il criterio della verifica sperimentale riduce all'assurdità sia la conoscenza sia il significato (...), poichè l'intenzione di riferirsi a qualche cosa che trascende l'esperienza immediata è dell'essenza sia della conoscenza sia del significato".⁽⁴⁾ Certo, non si può negare che alcune parti del discorso religioso non intendono comunicare un significato oggettivo, ma mirano ad agire come stimoli per favorire l'evocazione di certe esperienze (emotive) nei

4. C.I. Lewis, "Experience and Meaning", in *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, New York 1949, p. 113.

destinatari. "Ma quando consideriamo il corpo del discorso religioso, soprattutto le sue parti centrali, cioè la Scrittura, i Credi e così via, troviamo che gli autori di tali parti del discorso religioso intendono evidentemente comunicare qualcosa per mezzo dei termini di cui fanno uso e, inoltre, intendono certo riuscirvi. Ciò è forse più evidente in quelle parti del discorso religioso che comprendono i comandamenti; ma se ne può avvertire chiaramente la presenza in molte altre parti del discorso religioso. Il fatto che tali autori, e anche tutti i predicatori e gli insegnanti di religione si sforzino al massimo per essere compresi dai propri ascoltatori e lettori, porta nella stessa direzione".⁽⁵⁾

Ma se il discorso religioso non è teso nè unicamente nè primariamente ad evocare reazioni emotive e mira invece a comunicare delle informazioni su Dio, sulle sue iniziative a favore dell'umanità, sui rapporti di questa con Lui (e con gli altri abitanti del "cielo"), e, d'altra parte, se per determinare la validità di tale linguaggio non si può ricorrere alla verifica sperimentale (a motivo del carattere trascendente dell'oggetto del linguaggio religioso), a quale altro criterio ci si può affidare per accertare la verità e la validità d'un asserto religioso?

Karl Popper ha proposto il criterio di *falsificabilità* per distinguere gli asserti scientifici da quelli non scientifici: mentre per i primi ci sono dei casi, delle situazioni in cui risultano o possono risultare falsi, per i secondi questo non succede mai. A me pare che questo criterio pecchi per eccesso: è un setaccio con i buchi troppo larghi e lasciano passare tutto. In effetti ogni conoscenza umana, proprio perchè umana, è fallibile.

Recentemente alcuni studiosi (J. Hick, W.F. Zuurdeeg, D. Antiseri) hanno suggerito il criterio della *testimonianza*. Esso stabilisce che ciò che diciamo di Dio (per es. che è buono, giusto, misericordioso, padre, provvidente, ecc.) acquista credibilità e diviene significativo per gli altri, se noi ci comportiamo in conformità con quanto diciamo di Lui: se nella nostra vita quotidiana lasciamo trasparire la nostra fiducia in Dio, il nostro amore per Lui e per il prossimo ecc.

Questo criterio è importante perchè la verità religiosa non è una verità astratta, una verità logica, o una verità esclusivamente oggettiva, ma è una verità esistenziale, che impegna nella prassi ed esige di farsi soggettiva, come diceva Kierkegaard. Ma il criterio della testimonianza (o dell'*ortoprassi* come qualcuno preferisce chiamarlo) è insufficiente, e questo per due ragioni. In primo luogo, perchè per molte verità che noi pronunciamo di Dio (per es. che è infinito, onnipotente, onnisciente, creatore ecc.) e che gli appartengono in modo essenziale, noi non siamo in grado di offrire nessuna testimonianza. In secondo luogo, perchè la testimonianza è un criterio di verifica per gli altri, ma non per noi stessi. La testimonianza può servire affinché gli altri riescano a percepire qualcosa di ciò che noi intendiamo dire quando discorriamo di Dio. Ma a ciascuno di

noi occorre anzitutto, per non dare una testimonianza stolta e cieca, un criterio che ci consenta di stabilire, proprio per noi stessi, che senso hanno parole come onnisciente, onnipotente, misericordioso, creatore, padre ecc., quando le applichiamo a Dio.

3. Verifica metafisica del linguaggio religioso

Il linguaggio religioso o teologico ha come referente principale e primario Dio, una realtà trascendente, la quale, per definizione, non può essere né verificabile né falsificabile. Questa situazione ha indotto, come s'è visto, molti studiosi a ripiegare su criteri di verifica privi di oggettività, come l'ortoprassi e la testimonianza. Ma tale ripiegamento è necessario soltanto se si fa coincidere l'oggettività con la empiricità. Ora siffatta equiparazione è del tutto arbitraria: è in se stessa metaempirica, trascendente, metafisica (proprio come osservava Joad contro il diktat della verifica sperimentale). Pertanto, in linea di principio, è necessario riconoscere un orizzonte del reale che spazia al di là dell'empirico, del verificabile e del falsificabile mediante criteri empirici: è l'orizzonte della metafisica, il quale dispone naturalmente di criteri di oggettività e di verifica propri, diversi da quelli del sapere scientifico.

Essendo la realtà di Dio essenzialmente metafisica, metafisico è necessariamente anche l'universo semantico che si riferisce a Lui. Di conseguenza il criterio di verifica del linguaggio religioso va ricercato in quel metro di significatività che è proprio del sapere metafisico: tale è il principio dell'analogia.

In effetti, da sempre, filosofi e teologi hanno considerato l'analogia come unico criterio valido per determinare il significato del linguaggio religioso. Con una serie di passaggi rapidi e rigorosi questo criterio riesce a chiarire con esattezza ciò che si può dire e non si può dire di Dio.⁽⁶⁾

Le ragioni che giustificano la scelta dell'analogia come unico criterio adeguato per determinare il senso del linguaggio religioso le ha fornite san Tommaso mostrando che questo linguaggio non può essere inteso né in modo equivoco né univoco perchè nel primo caso ci si espone all'agnosticismo e nel secondo al panteismo.

I punti fermi nella dottrina dell'analogia sono i seguenti:

1. Il linguaggio religioso descrittivo (le nostre parole su Dio) ha valore oggettivo e non solamente soggettivo: intendere dire qualcosa che riguarda la realtà di Dio e non soltanto esprimere certi sentimenti o atteggiamenti del nostro spirito.

2. Il suo significato supera infinitamente ciò che le stesse parole significano normalmente quando sono usate per esseri finiti e mortali. Di

6. Per un'ampia storia del principio dell'analogia e delle svariate interpretazioni che di esso sono state elaborate rinvio il lettore ai miei volumi: *The Principle of Analogy in Protestant and Catholic Theology*, Nijhoff, 1968; *Il problema del linguaggio teologico dalle origini ad oggi*, Queriniana 1975.

tale significato non è mai possibile cogliere la modalità effettiva (il *modus praedicandi*, secondo la terminologia di san Tommaso), ma solamente il contenuto essenziale (la *res praedicata*).

3. Mediante l'analogia si cerca di *trascendere* (superare) tutti i limiti che accompagnano il linguaggio umano in quanto linguaggio creato dall'uomo allo scopo di esprimere realtà di questo mondo. Per superare tali limiti e adeguarlo alle esigenze del suo oggetto trascendente, il credente ed il teologo cercano di sfruttare tutte le risorse che la lingua mette a loro disposizione, in particolare gli avverbi, i prefissi, i superlativi, le negazioni, le circollocuzioni ecc. Di questi procedimenti lo Pseudo-Dionigi ci ha lasciato un esempio memorabile che sarebbe opportuno tener sempre presente.

4. Per infrangere i limiti del linguaggio umano e adeguarlo per quanto è possibile alle esigenze della realtà divina, l'analogia integra la *via affirmativa*, che percorre il tratto iniziale del cammino, con la via negativa (*via negationis* e via eminentiale (*via eminentiae*). Con quella negativa si escludono da Dio non solo le qualità non compatibili col suo essere spirituale (come corporeità, materialità, corruttibilità, spazialità, temporalità ecc.), ma anche ogni genere di qualità anche le più perfette (come vita, sapienza, verità, bontà, essere ecc.) per quanto concerne la loro modalità finita. Con la via eminentiale, infine, eliminata la modalità finita, si cerca di suggerire la modalità infinita e perfettissima che è propria di Dio. Così, mentre dell'uomo diciamo semplicemente che è buono, vivente, intelligente, libero, sapiente, giusto ecc. di Dio diciamo che è sommamente, infinitamente, stupendamente, buono, vivente, intelligente, libero, saggio, giusto, ecc. Mentre dell'uomo asseriamo che è sostanza, persona, essere, causa, ecc., di Dio diciamo che è sostanza, persona, essere, causa, ecc. al massimo grado.

Con siffatti accorgimenti (superlativi, avverbi, congiunzioni, prefissi ecc.), che i filosofi del linguaggio chiamano qualificatori (*qualifiers*), le nostre deboli e apparentemente impotenti parole riescono a significare correttamente la realtà divina, anche se non potranno mai né descriverla né definirla adeguatamente.

Abbiamo chiamato l'analogia "criterio di verifica metafisica" per due ragioni. In primo luogo, in forza della natura del suo oggetto, Dio, realtà squisitamente metafisica. In secondo luogo, a causa del procedimento che occorre seguire per stabilire che il linguaggio religioso è effettivamente dotato di un senso analogico; ora questo si consegue soltanto col puro ragionamento (i puri *logoi* li chiamava Platone) che è esattamente il metodo della metafisica.

L'impegno speculativo (del puro ragionamento) è particolarmente oneroso sia quando si tratta di fondare la somiglianza tra le creature e Dio, che è ciò che giustifica l'uso analogico del nostro linguaggio, sia quando si vuole giustificare l'applicazione a Dio in senso proprio e non semplicemente metaforico di alcune espressioni del linguaggio umano. Per provare la somiglianza occorre far appello (e pertanto dimostrarne la validità) al

principio *omne agens agit simile sibi*, come fa sistematicamente san Tommaso: allora diventa abbastanza ovvio che essendo Dio l'agente principale (e nel caso dell'essere anche unico) di tutto quanto esiste, non può non avere impresso sulle sue creature qualche somiglianza, qualche tratto di se stesso. Mentre l'applicazione a Dio di certe espressioni del linguaggio umano in senso proprio è giustificata facendo vedere che ci sono tra le qualità o perfezioni di cui sono dotate le creature oltre quelle miste anche perfezioni semplici, vale a dire perfezioni (come vita, bontà, verità, bellezza, ecc.) che non sono necessariamente vincolate alla materia, allo spazio e al tempo. Tali perfezioni competono *per prius* a Dio e *per posterius* alle creature. La loro predicazione avviene in modo analogico e si predicano propriamente e primariamente di Dio.

Conclusione

Le sorti del linguaggio umano sono strettamente legate alle sorti del pensiero. Quando il pensiero blocca il suo orizzonte dentro i confini spazio-temporali dell'*homo faber*, che sono quelli delle scienze sperimentali e cioè della *ratio inferior*, gli stessi confini vengono necessariamente imposti anche al linguaggio. Mentre se al pensiero si spalancano orizzonti metafisici – che sono quelli della *ratio superior* – allora anche il linguaggio guadagna una intenzionalità che attinge l'assoluto, l'infinito, l'eterno... Dio.

L'impegno principale degli agenti culturali del nostro tempo è quello di gettare le basi di una nuova cultura che faccia spazio ai valori assoluti (oltre che quelli strumentali) ai valori perenni, trascendenti, e pertanto a colui che è il valore supremo e fondamento di qualsiasi valore, sia assoluto sia strumentale, Dio.

Ciò significa anzitutto mettere un po' d'ordine in casa della ragione, collocando al proprio posto la *ratio inferior* e la *ratio superior*, assegnando a quest'ultima la priorità che le spetta.

Artefice della cultura è l'uomo, l'intelligenza umana, la ragione: solo una ragione sana produce un sapere sano, una cultura sana. Solo quando la *ratio superior* è la regina del sapere, il linguaggio religioso non è più arbitrario ma sensato; non è semplicemente emotivo ma anche cognitivo, non soltanto espressivo ma anche descrittivo, non solo ortoprattico ma anche ortodosso.

Sapere e linguaggio sono, quindi, strettamente solidali: il secondo è necessariamente specchio del primo. Il principio vale in assoluto e pertanto anche per la dimensione religiosa.

ECUMENISM AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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(This is a Paper read at the Interfaith Symposium held at Mount St Joseph, Malta, from the 11th to the 21 July 1984).

Church unity is a gift of God to the Church. We can never begin to discuss the subject of Ecumenism in any relevant way unless we bear this truth in mind and consider it throughout as a most basic principle. And since unity is a gift of God, a grace, the recipient must prepare himself for it and dispose himself in a truly realistic way, lest it should remain unheeded and therefore ineffective. It is therefore the entire Church that must be ready for the grace of union, of fuller union, of that union which is willed by Christ and for which Christ has died on the Cross.

Ecumenical efforts at higher levels remain useful and even indispensable, and in this respect one cannot but thank God for the great efforts which have been made in this regard between the leaders of different Christian Communions or their representatives, efforts which have yielded very good fruit. But it would be simplistic and naive to think that, if and when agreement is reached on the top levels, Church unity has been attained and there is nothing left for us to do but to thank God and relax in peace.

Here comes to mind a very important event in the Church, which took place more than one hundred years before the beginning of the Reformation. I am referring to the Council of Florence, which was the 17th Ecumenical Council held from 1439 to 1445 under the Pontificate of Eugene IV. The purpose set by this Council was to bring about the reunion between the Orthodox Churches of the East and the Catholic Church. Sure enough the goal was attained, on paper; several Decrees of reunion were signed: with the Armenians, then with the Greeks, with the Jacobites, with the Copts, with the Syrians, with the Chaldeans and with the Maronites. That list included most of the separated Oriental Churches. But what happened when the representatives of these Churches returned to their respective countries? Their peoples would not ratify the agreements because everything had been done "behind their backs". The Churches at the local level were not yet prepared for union. Hence the agreements reached were only shortlived, apart from a few small groups here and there today known as the "Uniate Churches", i.e. in full union with the Roman Catholic Church.

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But here another consideration comes to mind. The theme "Ecumenism at the local level" does not merely regard the question of how the top-level decisions can be put into practice in the various local Churches. Were it so, local ecumenism would be only a problem of the practical application of things that are already clearly given. Undoubtedly, even such questions of application should not be underestimated, for in the last resort only the road from thought to practice can prove the thought itself, can test its validity. At the same time, this road will also have a feedback effect on the form of the thought itself; it will modify the thought, criticize it, limit it, or even develop it. In other words, practice does not just follow the discovery of truth as something secondary, but rather forms an essential part of this discovery itself.

In saying this, we have already arrived at the new rank, the new dimension, that the theme "Ecumenism at the Local Level" is clearly acquiring. It no longer appears as a mere practical annex, but rather as an independent aspect of the ecumenical problem as such, an aspect of equal or even perhaps superior rank. Just as the local Church is not just the lowest shading of the universal Church, but rather the immediate and concrete realization of the Church itself, local ecumenism is not just an executing organ of centralized, top-level ecumenism, but rather an original form of ecumenism and an independent starting point for theological insights. This conclusion forces itself upon us with increasing insistence.

This conclusion, in fact, seems to be supported by the historical experiences that were made in the struggle for Christian unity, particularly in the Catholic sector. Here ecumenism clearly began from below, and the way was opened by charismatic individuals and small communities — Abbé Couturier, Yves Congar, and the monks of Chevetogne in France, to mention just a few, or Robert Grosche and the Paderborner Kreis in Germany. And it also fell to local ecclesial situations to prepare the terrain for the encounter. Thus Congar relates how the destruction of the Catholic church in his native town of Sedan by the German troops in 1914 led to a rapprochement with the Protestants and the overcoming of the estranged parallel existence of the two communities, while in Germany they were helped to rediscover each other when the masters of the Third Reich challenged the faith of all Christian believers. Everything seemed to change with the Second Vatican Council and the setting up of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity.

Even within the Catholic Church ecumenism now sallied forth from its previously substantially local and more or less charismatic form: it became official and the concern of the whole Church. And this to such an extent, that official declarations were well ahead of the living and comprehensible reality in the communities, and therefore prone to create the impression that the problem of unity would be solved from above, step by step, and within the foreseeable future.

But now, the very opposite of the previous situation, there was

resistance from below. Perhaps this resistance was even less in the Catholic Church than it was elsewhere; it certainly made itself felt in the Orthodox Churches of the East and in wide sectors of world Protestantism. And this in itself was a reason why the accent had once again to be placed more strongly on the local level.

When is unity really unity, and when does it become an empty fiction that will simply fade away because it no longer has any content? Here it is no longer possible to make progress with the help of pragmatic solutions, for the very heart of the ecclesial conception of the faith now stands in debate. The previously rapid progress of top-level ecumenism thus runs headlong into its limits. The ministry, up to now a pathfinder, now finds itself once again demoted to the task of testing and braking. Of course, this cannot but cause delusion among those who in the meantime have gained the impression that there are no longer any insoluble problems and that unity is only a question of good will and tact. In this way too there has come into being a demand for the ecumenical work to be returned to the plane of the local Churches.

In parallel with the pioneering work of the years 1920–1962 and its eventual acceptance by the universal Church in the course of the Council, people now seem to want the remaining problems to be put back into the hands of pioneers and thus experiment at a local level what only at a later stage can become universal. In this connection it is quite significant that the first draft documents of the commissions of the Synod of the German Dioceses deal with the problems of intercommunion under the heading “Ecumenism at the Local Level”, evidently in an attempt to render the problem soluble by transferring it to this plane.

This has also made clear the problematics of the new way of posing the question. Today the theme “Ecumenism at the Local Level” cannot be adequately dealt with by simply examining all the things that can usefully be done at the level of the local Church with a view to promoting ecumenism. One must rather examine the sense of the question itself, together with its principal *motifs*. Only in this way will the prospects and the dangers of the new trend become really clear. It seems to me that three principal *motifs* are acting in the background and contribute to the overall configuration of the theme, although they are not by any means everywhere present or felt to the same extent.

1. The idea of the “base”: construction from above or from below?

I feel that first place should be given to mentioning the increasing scepticism vis-a-vis institutional ecumenism, an ecumenism that is giving rise to the suspicion of constituting a conspiracy of the forces that make up the establishment from time to time. With this we encounter a factor that has not hitherto been named, i.e. the fact that even ecumenism is interlaced with the worldwide phenomenon of contestation. The criticisms levelled

against institutional ecumenism in this connection cannot by any means be lumped together under the concept of "immobility". Indeed, notwithstanding the limits that have so far remained insurmountable, one cannot seriously speak of immobility. Nevertheless, influential forces within the World Council of Churches, one of the top-level organizations in ecumenism, are exerting pressure for a Council of all the Churches and are thereby putting forward a stimulating demand whose significance has as yet been barely considered.

In this connection one must also point to the practical realization of sharing the Eucharist between the Catholic Church and Orthodoxy, for this process, too, has so far been pondered only in a wholly insufficient manner. Although the break in the communion between East and West was never complete, we are here concerned with a step that really could usher in a new millennium in the history of the Church, a third millennium that will give concrete historical significance to the text of *Lumen Gentium*.

Let us return to the point under consideration. As we were saying, it is not immobility that is being criticized, but criticism is rather directed against the institutions as such. It has been expressly said, for example, that a reunification on an institutional level was not desirable in the near future, because this would lead to such a concentration of establishments as would threaten to strangle the progressive forces in the Churches. Be it noted that the background of all this is not constituted by a general hostility towards institutions such as could be observed in the early stages of the marxist youth movement. What can be recognized, however, is a hostility towards the existing official bodies, which are being regarded as the tools of repressive, reactionary and progress-preventing forces. Thus, arising out of a particular sociological conception, an ecumenism from below, the ecumenism of the base, is necessarily opposed to the ecumenism from above, the ecumenism of the institutions.

The matter-of-course way in which the word "base" has asserted itself in linguistic usage, even in the language used by the holders of high ecclesial offices, forms part and parcel of the surprising features of ecclesial developments of recent years. And yet this word applies a system of values that is anything but matter-of-course. Indeed, it presupposes that the various action groups that are coming into being, and which understand themselves as the base of a future and changed society, really constitute the base from which the Church must take its measure today. Particularly fatal is the ambiguity with which the word "base" oscillates between the meanings "lowest ecclesial unit" (i.e. local Church) and "self-constituted spontaneous group". In most cases, moreover, this oscillation involves the element of protest against the existing societies as organizations of oppression; structurization starting from the base wants to allow the so called "oppressed" to become vocal, and thus at last to overturn and correct the previous false structure.

Of course, such implications of the concept "base" are not always

identical. One must therefore be very careful to guard against false accusations and global suspicions. What remains true, however, is that there exists a trend in ecumenical activity that transfers the problem not from the Church as a whole to the local Churches, but rather from the traditional Church to the base groups of the Church to come, the figure of this Church being essentially designed on the basis of the schematics of a sociology inspired by neo-marxism. The "downward" displacement of the problem is at the same time essentially a "forward" displacement: liberation from the past, a mouldable Church for a mouldable history. The endeavour is directed not simply toward the unity of the Church as such, but primarily towards the merging of the so-called progressives who, of course, in the long run want themselves to become the Church of the future.

The more strongly this tendency takes form in certain circles, the more it brings in its wake a further schism in ecumenism. We no longer have a mere opposition of institutional ecumenism and base ecumenism, but also an opposition of the ecumenism of the mouldable Church, the Church that can be made, and ecumenism of the founded Church granted in the Holy Spirit. Suddenly the very people who previously hardly participated in ecumenism, preferring to believe quietly within their own Church, are beginning to realize that they are fundamentally one when compared with that new "Church" whose outlines they can readily imagine from its already visible base. Compared with this, the present confessional boundaries become of secondary importance. The Credo as a "base" directly creates ecumenism. But the paradox of the situation is found in the fact that even this ecumenism of the experienced unity of the Credo adopts a sceptical attitude vis-a-vis the institutions, to such an extent, that in certain respects it is even further removed from them than the base ecumenism that delights in action. Apart from some chance testimonies, it remains inarticulate and therefore without effect, although not by any means without value.

Here it seems to me that both the problem and the prospects of this state of affairs are coming to the fore with some clarity. The unity in the substance of the Credo, the very unity that is revealing its unifying force in the confrontation of the present, must also be given express representation. The people who are discovering it should find the courage to put aside their mistrust of the institutions. They should be encouraged to reach out for the forms and possibilities that are offered and can be developed on this basis. Only in this way will it be possible to create alternatives to a gradual sliding-away into self-constructed units that receive no adequate cover through the faith. In this way alone will it be possible to bring to a halt the gradual falling asunder of ecumenism into a number of ecumenisms that oppose each other with a hostile attitude.

Indeed, the institutions depend on the spontaneous forces of everything that is alive in the communities. Unless they are covered by these forces, they will degenerate into an empty formalism. It cannot really be their task to create something new by means of directives from above. Rather, it is

their task to discern the good things that may come into being in any place whatsoever, to transmit them, to distinguish them from unsuitable things, and to turn them into possibilities for the whole. They therefore have a task of stimulation, of discernment, of purification, and of transmission. They should help the hesitant to grasp the positive things that have already grown and, viceversa, they should make it clear to those who rush ahead that they have a responsibility towards the whole and thus bring them to serve the unity of all. Of course, this also requires that the communities, or any other promoters of ecumenical life at the local level, should maintain themselves open and ready for such a transmission to the whole. They do not by any means have to delay what they do in expectation of directives from above. But everything they do must be done with a sense of responsibility towards the whole, and in a spirit of openness towards the whole. For the sake of local unities they must not endanger the unity of the whole.

Only examples can explain the meaning of such general pointers. Undoubtedly, for more than a decade now, Taizè has been the best example of ecumenical inspiration originating in a local centre that has become "charismatic". In a similar manner, community of faith and life should be practised elsewhere, a community in which renunciation of sharing in the Eucharist does not lose any of its gravity, but its necessity becomes comprehensible and is circumvented by a community of prayer that does not of its own accord grant the ultimate object of its prayers, but lives fearlessly in the conviction that it will be granted. It should be the aim of all live forces that strive for unity to seek and find alternatives to intercommunion, possibly in connection with the ancient liturgy of the penitents and the catechumens. Origen gives us a wonderful interpretation of Jesus' words of renunciation spoken during the Last Supper: "Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mk 14,25). Origen comments that Jesus could not by himself drink a chalice that he only wanted to drink together with all his disciples. And therefore Jesus' ceremonial drink remains postponed until such time as he can drink it together with all.

In the light of this, is it not a meaningful form of liturgical behaviour if separated Christians, who already meet as such, also follow consciously in the footsteps of Jesus' renunciation? If through the very act of fasting from the Eucharist they communicate with Christ and therefore with each other? If they participate in Jesus' self-excommunication from the eschatological joy of Israel and thus celebrate the "Eucharist" of hope? Would this not also be a way of making people more conscious of the fact that reconciliation must precede the celebration of joint Communion, and that we must first learn to be penitents together, to celebrate the liturgy of penitence, before we dare to take the next step forward? Bearing in mind problems of this type, one would perhaps not be far wrong when one says that present-day ecumenism, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, is trying to avoid the passion and the imagination of responsible action at the

local level, preferring to play out the game at the level of Churches as a whole. In this way it misses both the local and the universal aspects of the problem.

2. Local Church and Universal Church

These considerations lead directly to the second tendency that is of importance in connection with the theme of Ecumenism at the Local Level. To me, at least, it seems that it consists of a quite general displacement of the ecclesiological accent from the universal Church to the local Church. Up to a certain point this corresponds to the orientations of the Second Vatican Council, but it is now developing with increasing rapidity into a new onesidedness in which we tend not only to take over many correct insights of the Reformation, but also to create new problems and dangers, most of the time without realizing it. When comparing Catholic ecclesiology with the Reformed one, it was hitherto possible to say with a certain amount of justification that in the latter the Church as a whole carried too little weight compared with the community, while in the former the local Churches carried too little weight when compared with the universal Church.

Historically speaking, the two disproportions would seem to condition each other. Just a few brief remarks on this matter. Even the pseudo-Augustinian *Sermo 15, de sanctis* – a strongly papalist Roman text of the fifth century – says, as if it were a matter of course, that Peter received his function “for the good of the Churches” (*pro ecclesiarum salute*). This plural tends to disappear increasingly during the Middle Ages, so much so that the term “ecclesia Romana” at times comes to assume the same meaning as “ecclesia catholica”. On the one hand, this means that now there is only a single local Church that counts. On the other hand, it tells us that this local Church is identified with the universal Church, thereby substantially eliminating the idea of the multiplicity of local Churches.

The contrary trend among the Reformed communities is well known. Particularly within the domains of the Holy Roman Empire, they adopted the “Landeskirche” as their organizational structure, and this meant that the link provided by the universal or “catholic” Church ceased to exist as a concrete reality. But even the “Landeskirchen” could not want to be “Churches” in the theological sense of “ecclesia”. They were random formations, brought about by particular political circumstances, which lacked the sense of origin necessary for “ecclesia” and therefore also its spiritual character. They furnished institutional-administrative frameworks, and nothing more. Putting matters very forcefully, but in the circumstances not by any means inappropriately, one may say that, after interruption of communications with the universal Church, all that remained of Church was the community.

Of course, seen from Luther’s point of view, this was not a mere accident, the consequence of political circumstances, but rather the

expression of a particular theological concept. The universal Church, as he encountered it in its Roman-Papal structure, did not appear to him as a Church, i.e. a Church identified with the universal Church and therefore as a spiritual reality which it was necessary to preserve. Linguistically this shows itself, for example, in the almost complete elimination of the word "Church" from Luther's translation of the Bible.

In the Catholic domain, the Second Vatican Council, by virtue of its turning to the theology of the Church Fathers and to the whole of the Christian *oikoumene*, has ushered in a new discovery of the interrelatedness of pluralism and unity. Not by any means the least effect of this discovery was the new emphasis placed on the ecclesial weight of the "local Churches" in the universal Church. In the intentions of the Council Fathers, "local Church" was here defined in terms of the bishop, and not in terms of a geographical "locality", although one can hardly deny that a certain ambiguity is to be found in some of the texts. The general ecclesial public, particularly in countries where the Reformation had left a strong imprint, did not really grasp this patristic or theological concept of the "local Church", and the term was thus given an arbitrary content of associations that were closer to people's immediate experience, i.e., in the general sense of "national Church" (linguistic or national orientation), or the general sense of community. Be it noted, moreover, that the transformation of "local community" into "base" group, i.e. an ideological rather than a geographical circumscription, is appearing with increasing frequency.

This process of the transformation of the Council's concept into other traditional types is now having a variety of back effects on the official image that the Church gives of itself, and this must be borne in mind if one does not want to obtain a false picture of the importance of "Ecumenism at the Local Level". If baptism is something that involves only the "community", then communion is also a matter for the community and the problem of intercommunion will be solved in individual communities, according to their level of maturity, rather than being solved by reference to such things as the problem of succession, the "communion" of the universal Church, or the confession of the universal Church.

It is not, and indeed it cannot be, the intention of these considerations to throw suspicion upon the idea of the local Church or, worse still, once again, to banish it in favour of a centralized concept of Church unity. What is rather at stake here is to get a correct view of the proportions, and to formulate the questions in a proper manner. The first task that presents itself would seem to be a more precise definition of the concept "local Church". All our previous considerations have surely made it clear that the term is highly misleading. Indeed, nobody thinks of the local Church in terms which are primarily geographical, this being equally true for each of the three principal conceptions that we encountered: the conciliar conception is based on the bishop, a theological criterion; the post-Reformation

concept thinks in terms of political, linguistic or social units; and the modern one ("community", "Gemeinde") bases itself on ideological impulses. How can these three starting points be related to each other, how can they be made to support and fertilize each other? In a certain sense, presumably, all three of them form a part of a living realization of "local Church", the important thing being the correct dosage and coordination of the elements, since their opposition or conflict would destroy the *ecclesia localis*.

It is of primary importance, particularly in our situation, that there should be a concrete "community" capable of supporting and effectively supporting its members, a community in which the individual experiences the "communio ecclesiae" as real communio. The collapse of the natural communities that hitherto fulfilled this supporting function, and the consequent anonymity of technical civilization, makes it all the more essential that there should be an experienceable community of faith. After all, similar things existed in earlier times in the form of brotherhoods and associations. But what gained its vitality from the particular feelings of those times has now become inaccessible in many cases and must therefore be replaced or complemented by the formation of "communities" that can offer a home to seeking men of today. However, such "formed communities" must know themselves as subordinate to the bishop and as part of the universal Church; indeed, they form an introduction to this Church and do not replace it, but rather open the way to it. They must be "catholic", i.e. it must form part of their basic principles that their life is drawn from the whole and is orientated towards the whole – and this applies also on all the subsequent planes.

This observation can be extended, almost as a matter of course, to a further insight: inasmuch as this may be required by their "catholicism", and rightly understood this means "ecumenism", every "community" and every "local Church" (as a grouping of communities) must live its faith in an ecumenical manner. As a "community", the local Church cannot attempt to tackle those problems that can only be solved by the universal Church as a whole. But for this very reason it must all the more concentrate on those tasks that can only be performed "in situ", in the field as it were. Through its experience of the faith, through its patience, as well as through its creative imagination, it must fertilize the universal Church. And the universal Church, in turn, must be open to such fertilization, must pass it on to the whole through the communion of the bishops and, whenever this may be necessary, must use the experience of the whole to purify and develop it.

3. Theory and Practice

This leads me to a final remark. As I briefly suggested at the beginning, the emphasis that is being nowadays placed on the theme "Ecumenism at

the Local Level" is in some part also due to the new view of the theory and practice problem that is finding wide acceptance today. According to this view, practice is not just the execution of previously recognized needs, but is itself creative; change brings forth truth, because it turns a possible future into reality. In our particular context this means that people no longer expect a solution of the problem of intercommunion, for example, from a clarification of the theoretical and theological problems, a clarification that would eventually be accepted at the summit of the various top institutions. People are now inclined to think that the facts have to precede theory, and these facts cannot be created at the top but only at the base. Indeed, it is one of the characteristics of the "base" that it alone can give rise to new facts.

What can one say about all this? Unfortunately, an adequate answer would call for a discussion of the entire problem of theory and practice, and this essay is hardly the place for doing this. I shall therefore just limit myself to a brief pointer. Even the fully awake and freer marxist thinkers are today quite agreed that Marx made things far too easy for himself when he claimed that the task of philosophy was not to interpret the world, but rather to change it. New voices are now coming to the fore and saying insistently that it is high time to re-interpret this hastily changed world of ours if people are once again to live meaningfully in it. *Logos* and *ethos* form an invisible whole. True, a person who neither acts nor suffers will not understand anything. Likewise, however, a person who does not think and understand will not be able to create any facts that have an understandable and meaningful content. It will therefore be surely impossible to create anything fertile if facts are simply produced in headlong flight from serious thought.

But there is one thing that remains, and it is this. The "local Church" is the place of experience, the place of suffering, and therefore also the place where understanding is obtained, for understanding grows out of suffering. It would seem that we must really conclude that the period of top-level ecumenism, begun in 1962, is now coming to a stop and that matters cannot be properly pushed very much ahead on this plane. Everything that had grown up as a result of particular experiences has now found universal acceptance, and time-tested local experience provides no further coverage for new steps. It does not by any means follow from this that the top-level ecumenical bodies are now becoming superfluous for the transmitting, examining, stimulating and recognizing of new roads. Far from it. But it does mean that the "local Churches" and the experiences that can only be made within them are once again called upon to play their part.

It is here that one's imagination and sense of creativity, stimulated by one's faith and zeal for unity, are once more faced with a challenge. The *Ecumenical Directory*, issued by the Catholic Secretariat for Christian Unity, lists a number of avenues along which this can be done. Local Diocesan Commissions are encouraged, prayers for unity, interfaith meetings, sharing in liturgical worship, cooperation in social work and

other projects for the promotion of peace and the advance of the sciences and the arts in a truly christian spirit, common effort for the promotion of justice at home and abroad.

These are only a few indicative examples. But if this is rightly understood, we would be thoroughly justified in saying that we are once more in need of pioneers of the future. Unfortunately one does not become a pioneer by simply doing something different, but rather by doing something which today we might call "prophetic", that is by doing the meaningful thing, the right thing for today. And this can only be done if one is moved by an innermost oneness with the universal Church, if one conforms to the image of the Church such as we find it reflected in the book of the Acts and in the Church's traditions, but above all if one has truly understood Christ's wish and prayer "that all may be one".

PAUL TILlich'S PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE

Brennan Hill

An understanding of Tillich's Protestant principle is crucial if one is to deal with this significant theologian's theology of culture. This "principle" is fundamental in Tillich's rejection of pure autonomy and heteronomy, as he moves toward the ideal in theonomy. The purpose of this article is first of all to define the principle and then locate and explain its main tenets: justification through faith; refusal to leave the boundary; resistance of dogma; support for theological development; and rooting authority in Grace. We will conclude with Tillich's remarks on the future significance of this principle.

A. Definition

The Protestant principle is "the theological expression of the true relation between the Unconditional and the conditioned or religiously speaking, between God and man."⁽¹⁾ It is a principle concerned with faith or the state of mind wherein one is grasped by the power of something Unconditional, something manifested to man as the ground and judge of his existence. The major objective of this principle is to insure that the power which grasps man's faith is not something finite posing as the Infinite. Rather, it insists that all finite things grasp man's faith by pointing beyond "their finite existence to the infinite, inexhaustible, and unapproachable depth of their being and meaning."⁽²⁾ Therefore, this principle stands in prophetic judgement against all idolatry, religious pride, ecclesiastical pride, and secular self-sufficiency. For Tillich, this principle is fundamental

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1. Paul Tillich, "The Protestant Principle and the Proletarian Situation," in *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 163. This collection of essays will be referred to as *PE*.

2. *Ibid.*, Cf. George Tavard, "The Protestant Principle and the Theological System of Paul Tillich," in Thomas O'Meara (ed.), *Paul Tillich in Catholic Thought* (Dubuque: The Priory Press, 1964), pp. 85-97.

for confronting the abuses of pure autonomy and heteronomy, and for sustaining theonomy. While it protects man's genuine autonomy and rejects the absolute exercise of authority, it insists that the source of authority and law in culture is God.

B. Basic Tenets

1. *Justification through Faith*

In Tillich's early considerations of the Protestant principle, he was very much influenced by his mentor, Martin Kaehler. In his lectures, Kaehler was preoccupied with the question of justification through faith. He approached this question from a classical, humanistic perspective. This approach, of course, appealed to Tillich's own background and mentality, for it enabled him to use his philosophical background and approach the problem through reason. From this viewpoint, salvation pertained not only to the moral life, but to the intellectual life as well. Therefore, "not only he who is in sin but also he who is in doubt is justified through faith."³ From that point on, Tillich would discuss justification and its fulfillment in theonomy in terms of the structures of the mind and cultural creativity, as well as in terms of morality. This search for God could now be carried out amidst the rational struggle with doubt.

The situation of doubt, even of doubt about God, need not separate us from God. There is faith in every serious doubt, namely the faith in the truth as such, even if the only truth we can express is our lack of truth. But if this is experienced in its depth and as an ultimate concern, the divine is present; and he who doubts in such an attitude is 'justified' in his thinking. So the paradox got hold of me that he who seriously denies God affirms him. Without it I could not have remained a theologian.⁴

This insight gave Tillich the courage to risk facing reality in all its dimensions, open all questions, and confront his culture without fear of losing justification. His faith was a rational commitment, consistent with the structures of the mind. Since it was his conviction that rational structures were in fact rooted in the divine, and that all reality was grounded in God, there was now no room for "something beside the divine." There was no room for a genuine atheism or a wall between the religious and the non-religious, between the sacred and the secular. To be truly religious was

3. Paul Tillich, "Author's Introduction," *PE*, p. x. Cf. Arne Unhjem, *Dynamics of Doubt: A Preface to Tillich* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 13ff; and Theodore Siegfried, "The Significance of Paul Tillich's Theology for the German Situation," in Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall (eds.), *The Theology of Paul Tillich* (New York: MacMillan, 1964), pp. 80ff.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. x-xi.

to be ultimately concerned, and this concern could be expressed in all forms. Yet, Tillich was conscious that man's estrangement forces him to carry on his search in doubt and often despair. Justification occurs in the experience of the presence and the absence of the divine.

This unconditional seriousness is the expression of the presence of the divine in the experience of utter separation from it. It is this radical and universal interpretation of the doctrine of justification through faith which made me a conscious Protestant.⁽⁵⁾

Tillich dealt with pure autonomy and heteronomy in this context of justification. To say that faith is a rational commitment is not to say that man is justified through right thinking. The rationality of faith is not mere speculation; it is reason grasped by revelation, reason acting out of its depth and in relation to the ultimate. Pure autonomy, then, is a distortion of reason, as well as of faith. It must be returned to the ultimate, and this can be done in terms of the very emptiness and meaningless experienced when it is exercised. Therefore, justification can indeed be brought out of the secularity and the meaningless that often is experienced in the modern technological and capitalistic culture. By the same token, justification can come in the midst of the tyranny of either ecclesiastical or political authority. This is not achieved, of course, through blind submission to these authorities, but through a persistent search for the authority of God. Justification, then, is achieved through faith in self and reality, both of which are grounded in the ultimate. In this, is realized theonomy.

2. *Refusal to Leave the Boundary*

One of the most vehement protests in the Protestant principle is against any attempt to draw man away from his "boundary situation." It is from the boundary between finite and the infinite, between faith and reason, between the human and the divine, between pure autonomy and heteronomy that man must search for the theonomous synthesis. This is not to say that man searches in a world of dichotomies. Rather he searches in a world of estranged reality, and reaches out for unity and meaning. Despite the anguish, man can never leave this boundary and solve his dilemma by jumping to either side. Neither complete independence of the divine, nor acceptance of absolute law masquerading as the divine is safe ground for man. Therefore, the Protestant principle objects to any conditioned form, theory, structure, authority or person that claims unconditionality and denies man's boundary situation.

The boundary situation is a recognition of the limits of human existence, the limits which threaten this existence. Each person faces these limits in death, the ultimate threat to bodily existence. Everyone faces these limits in freedom of choice, whereby vital existence can be destroyed.

5. *Ibid.*, p. x.

To be a man involves this transcending of vital existence, the freedom from himself, the freedom to say 'Yes' or 'No' to his vital existence. This freedom, which is an essential part of him and from which he cannot escape, carries with it the fact that he is radically threatened. Man is in a genuine sense the threatened creature because he is not bound to his vital existence, because he can say 'Yes' or 'No' to it. This is manifest in the fact that man can raise the question of the true and that he can demand the fulfillment of the good.⁽⁶⁾

Humans, then, raise the question about true reality from a posture of being in some sense separated from this reality. We make demands on a reality, which is not fully at hand. Yet, we must raise the questions and make the demands, even though this results in a tension, a deep restlessness, and a threat to existence. When we experience this situation in its ultimate character, we are experiencing the boundary situation. "The point at which not-being in the ultimate sense threatens us is the boundary line of all human possibility, the human border situation."⁽⁷⁾

The original Protestant insight refused to evade this ultimate threat by turning to either the autonomy of secularity or the heteronomy of ecclesiastical authority. The "solutions" were viewed as being finite, with no guarantee in themselves, and so they were rejected with the same independence with which one rejects any finite solution. Yet, Tillich argues, this rejection was not done in a spirit of arrogance, as Catholics so often think. Nor was this an assertion that the individual is the ultimate arbiter of religion. It was a matter of proceeding as one who finds himself in a situation in which he shares the lot of everything human to be subject to the ultimate threat of not-being. True, a great deal of religious substance was lost in the process, but not in a spirit of pure autonomy.

Perhaps Catholicism is right in thinking that the religious substance is better preserved in the authoritarian community. But certainly Catholicism is wrong in thinking that Protestantism is to be explained as an attempt of the individual to become the bearer of the religious substance.⁽⁸⁾

The Protestant, then, is willing to sacrifice religious substance, with its richness, depth and tradition, rather than accept a false security against the unconditioned threat that exists in the boundary situation. Thus this principle resists sacraments, which attempts to "magically" circumvent the ultimate threat; it avoids mysticism, which offers immediate unity with the Unconditioned. It rejects a priesthood, which offers false spiritual security.

6. Paul Tillich, "The Protestant Message of the Man of Today," *PE*, p. 195. Cf. Unhjem, *op. cit.*, p. 53; and John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), p. 140.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 198.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 199. Cf. Guy Hammond, "Tillich and the Frankfurt Debate about Patriarchy and the Family," in John J. Carey (ed.), *Theonomy and Autonomy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), pp. 109ff.

It ignores ecclesiastical authority that claims to have the absolute truth. Tillich is well aware of the risk here, for rejection of these can mean anguish and loss of substantial meaning. Nevertheless, Tillich maintains that this position has its own strength, the strength of the cross, the cross that is carried in the boundary situation. "In this power, indeed, in this impotence and poverty, the Protestant church will stand so long as it is aware of the meaning of its own existence."⁽⁹⁾

There seems to be a bit of rigidity in this position. Are we to assume that at the time of the Reformation all ecclesiastical forms had become idols and thus had to be dispensed with? If this is so, then how are we to explain Tillich's observation that in eliminating them true religious substance was lost? Merely following Tillich's own line of reasoning, it would seem that forms which are still able to point beyond themselves are theonomous. Considering the premium which Tillich puts on substantial meaning, one wonders how he can endorse the elimination of forms without more careful discernment as to the depth of their meaning.

With this reservation, we do agree that simplistic or superstitious answers to the mystery of human life are unsuitable. Humanity's independence and authority are existentially always inadequate in answering the questions of human existence. The boundary situation is essential to human existence. Nevertheless, this does not rule out the possibility of legitimate forms bearing substantial meaning for humanity.

There is a paradox involved in living in the boundary situation. Tillich insists that we must retain the radical experience of threat and thus refuse to accept traditions or utopias which attempt to assuage this experience. At the same time, the Protestant principle asserts that we discover the meaning of life in the midst of our boundary experience. Therefore, Protestantism, if it is to be genuine, must

pronounce the 'Yes' that comes to man in the boundary—situation when he takes it upon himself in its ultimate seriousness. Protestantism must proclaim the judgement that brings assurance by depriving it of all security; the judgement that declares us whole in the disintegration and cleavage of soul and community; the judgement that affirms our having truth in the very absence of truth (even of religious truth); the judgement that reveals the meaning of our life in the situation in which all the meaning of life has disappeared. This is the pith and essence of the Protestant message.⁽¹⁰⁾

Apparently, this "meaning of life" is discovered through man's affirmation of the New Being, as manifest in Jesus as the Christ. Protestantism lives in the power of his New Being, and through its persistent exercise

9. *Ibid.*, p. 200. Cf. James Luther Adams, *Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Culture, Science and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 17ff.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 204. Cf. Daniel O'Hanlon, S.J., "The Influence of Schelling on the Thought of Paul Tillich" (excerpts from a dissertation, Rome: Gregorianum University, 1958), pp. 41ff.

of its principle, it is able to come to substantial meaning. Jesus was the example "par excellence" of one who never allowed anything finite, including himself, to assume the role of the ultimate. Through his power, Protestantism is able to transcend the finite and discover the holy within and beyond cultural forms.

Culture is not subjected to religion, nor is religion dissolved in culture. Protestantism neither devaluates nor idealizes culture. It tries to understand its religious substance, and spiritual foundation, its 'theonomous' nature. And Protestantism neither idealizes nor devaluates religion. It tries to interpret religion as the direct, intentional expression of the spiritual substance which in the cultural forms is presented indirectly and unintentionally. In this way the Protestant principle denies to the Church the holy sphere as its separate possession, and it denies to culture a secular sphere that can escape the judgement of the boundary situation.⁽¹¹⁾

Thus the Protestant principle is expressed both inside and outside the Church. It is expressed wherever the boundary situation is preached, and this may be done by movements which are not ecclesiastical. It may even be expressed by individuals or groups which do not use Christian symbols, for this principle manifests the universal human situation, wherein people reach for the beyond within a limited situation.

3. *Dogma to be Resisted*

The Protestant principle rejects the absolute definition of dogmas and the enforcement of these dogmas on the faithful. Tillich submits that this is particularly protested in the modern era of doubt. He maintains that the major doctrines of the Christian faith, i.e., the doctrines concerning God, Christ, the Church and revelation are so seriously questioned by the modern world that they can no longer be presented in their traditional forms. Therefore, the Protestant principle, as operative in the modern world, protests the direct proclamation of the religious truth of the Bible and tradition.

It cannot be required of the man of today that he first accept theological truths, even though they should be God and Christ. Wherever the Church in its message makes this primary demand, it does not take seriously the situation of the man of today and has no effective defense against the challenge of many thoughtful men of our day who reject the message of the Church as of no concern for them. . . . The profoundest aspect of justification, in our situation and for the man of today, is that we can discern God at the very moment when all known assertions about 'God' have lost their power.⁽¹²⁾

11. *Ibid.*, p. 205.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 202 – 203. Ronald Modras, *Paul Tillich's Theology of Church* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), pp. 224ff.

When reading this last quotation, we must remember that Tillich was writing during the dismal years between the wars. Even then one wonders if he is not overstating the case when he says that "all known assertions about God have lost their power." Nevertheless, it is true that the modern period has experienced a breakdown in "God language," and that there is a decided need to re-formulate doctrines in terms that can be understood and believed by modern people. One wonders, however, if this rules out the proclamation of religious truth of the Bible and tradition in new forms. Furthermore, is the rejection of doctrine by modern people an adequate criterion for the invalidity of these doctrines? In Tillich's own terms, is it not possible that they could be acting out of pure autonomy, or even intent on enforcing their own views with a new kind of heteronomy?

4. *Support for Theological Development*

Tillich places the Protestant principle at the very heart of theological development, in order to prevent either extreme liberalism or orthodoxy, the theological expressions of pure autonomy and heteronomy. At the same time, this principle guides these movements in theology. It has moved liberal theology, for instance, to break through the limits of literalism and approach the Bible with critical methods and scientific honesty. In other words, this principle gave biblical studies a new freedom from the restraining dogmatism of the church. It brought liberal theology to the realization that it could not be cut off from the cultural development of humanity. It stressed that theology must be involved in the changing structure of human life, and thus brought theology to a new relevance.⁽¹³⁾ At the same time, it brought liberal theology into confrontation with the supranaturalism of the Roman Catholic system of theology, with its dualism between nature and grace, its metaphysical devaluation of the natural, and its heteronomous authority.⁽¹⁴⁾

The Protestant principle also served to lead orthodox theologians to view scripture "as the original document of the event which is called 'Jesus the Christ' and which is the criterion of all Scripture and the manifestation of the Protestant principle."⁽¹⁵⁾ By bringing orthodoxy back to the gospel, it was able to challenge orthodoxy's rigid doctrinaire identification of scripture and dogma. It reminded orthodoxy of the many demonic distortions which have occurred in the history of religions. It emphasized the infinite distance between God and man, and brought the judgement of the Cross to all human possibilities. Thus it confronted the assured smugness of orthodoxy, by proclaiming that nothing can overcome the estrangement

13. Paul Tillich, "Author's Introduction," *PE*, p. xxiii.

14. *Ibid.*, Cf. Gustave Weigel, S.J., "Contemporaneous Protestantism and Paul Tillich," *Theological Studies* II (1950), pp. 187ff.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. xxiii-xxiv. Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III, p. 177.

between man and God except "the paradoxical and reconciling act of divine-giving."¹⁶

Tillich successfully uses this principle to prevent either rationalism or dogmatism in theological development. It is his conviction that both attempt to eliminate the paradox, the mystery of life, while they establish a false security. He refused to settle for a conditioned solution to man's threatened condition. By limiting the solution to an act of divine selfgiving, it may appear that Tillich, however, is moving into the very supernaturalism which he is trying to avoid. However, his attitude toward Barth clarifies how he avoids such a move. First, he grants that Barth saved contemporary Protestantism from sectarian seclusion and secularism through his radical protest in the name of the unconditional character of the divine. Yet, Tillich objects that Barth overstressed the "No" of the Protestant *Gestalt* and neglected the "Yes." Barth made revelation a one-way process, from the divine to the human, and Tillich objects that this is, in fact, a new kind of orthodoxy, a new form of heteronomy.¹⁷ Therefore, in reaction, Tillich insisted on the "Yes" regarding our ability to receive the Unconditioned in the very structures of reason and reality. This point is central in the theonomous synthesis of Tillich.

5. *Grace as the Source of Authority*

Since heteronomous authority is rejected by this principle, the key question is: "By what authority *does* Protestantism raise its protest against every sacred and secular reality that lays claim to unconditionality?" First of all, this protest cannot come from a human authority because of the obvious finite limitations. If Protestantism is going to protect the majesty of the Unconditioned against all attempts of idolatry, then somehow Protestantism must participate in the Unconditioned. This participation in the unconditional, trans-human authority involves a living in the reality of grace, or the sacred structure of reality. "No Protestant protest is possible unless it is rooted in a *Gestalt* in which grace is embodied."¹⁸ Yet, Tillich realized that to speak of "grace embodied" or the "reality of grace" or the "*Gestalt* of grace" would be considered dangerous by many Protestants. For them, grace must be something intangible, while a *Gestalt* would seem to indicate something that can be grasped or touched. An embodied grace could well sound too much like Catholic sacramentalism and a return to the Roman system of legalized grace, the papacy and hierarchical authority, all

16. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv. Cf. Newport, *op. cit.*, pp. 117ff.

17. Paul Tillich, "The Formative Power of Protestantism," *PE*, p. 206. Newport, *op. cit.*, p. 176. Cf. also Theodore Runyon, "Tillich's Understanding of Revolution," John J. Carey (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 268; and O.C. Thomas, "Barth and Tillich: A Conversation on Contemporary Theology," *Religion and Life*, XXXIII (Autumn, 1963), pp. 508 - 520.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 209. Cf. Thomas G. Bandy, "Tillich's Limited Understanding of the Thought of Henri Bergson as 'Life Philosophy'," in John Carey (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 14.

the things which deprived the church of its spiritual, invisible character. Could this not be a regression to the conditioned structures that attempted to eliminate the boundary situation? Tillich is well aware of this danger, but does not think that the *Gestalt* of grace is such a regression. This proposal is neither a return to Romanism, nor is it a re-assertion of unstructured (Gestalt-less) Protestantism. This is a new direction that moves beyond the former life and death struggle with Rome, and even beyond the classical Reformation position, both of which must now be subject to the criticism of the Protestant principle. This is not a solution that takes either side in a now dated controversy, but the new application of the Protestant principle in the contemporary situation. Thus Tillich moves beyond what he considered the idolatry of past Catholicism and the formlessness of contemporary Protestantism to the center of the Protestant doctrine, to the "divine structure of reality," as appropriated by faith.

The divine judgement, in spite of its transcendence and independence, has meaning and power only if it is appropriated by faith, in the church and in the Christian. Faith is the faith of man. It does not come *from* man, but is effective *in* man. And in so far as faith is in a community or personality, they are embodiments of grace. Faith is created by the hearing of the 'Word.' The Word is said from beyond us, to us. But if it is received, it is no longer only transcendent. It is also immanent, creating a divine structure of reality. Thus it creates faith as the formative power of a personal life and of a community. The Word is said from beyond man, but it is said through men. Men must be able to say it, they must be grasped and transformed by it, and this must have happened ever since the Word became manifest in history. Structures of grace must be permanently actual *in* history — if in *any* moment of history the Word is to be pronounced.⁽¹⁹⁾

Substantial meaning, then, is transcendent, and yet it becomes embodied in man and in history. It would seem that these structures of grace, which grasp the personal life of the individual carries with it its own authority. This, of course, is the authority of the divine itself, immanently expressed in man and in history. Exactly how this authority is to be exercised and implemented is really not sufficiently treated by Tillich. He does successfully challenge any authority that is cut off from the divine, i.e., heteronomous authority, but he deems it difficult to propose a concrete authority that can recognize the validity of what appears to be the divine structure of reality. Does faith become its own authority, and if so, how does one arrive at a consensus of the truth as it appears in history?

The main contribution of this theology of grace is that it does avoid viewing grace as a tangible, objectified reality. Grace remains as a divine gift, but it appears through a living *Gestalt*. Meanwhile, both grace and the

forms through which grace is conveyed remain unconditioned and conditioned in their own right.

The divine appears *through* the humanity of Christ, through the historical weakness of the church, through the finite material of the sacrament. The divine appears through the finite realities as their transcendent meaning. Forms of grace are finite forms, so to speak selected by grace, that it may appear through them; but they are not forms that are transmuted by grace so that they may become identical with it. . . . Such identification is, according to the Protestant principle, demonic *hybris*.⁽²⁰⁾

As a consequence, finite forms are able to maintain their own autonomy. They are not identified with the divine, yet they are able to point beyond themselves to the ultimate. The theonomous culture, therefore, is one in which the forms offer this directional dimension; forms that do not become idols in themselves.

Even though the *Gestalt* of grace is not something tangible, it is able to be perceived through a certain "imaginative intuition." There is a certain transparency in this *Gestalt*, which allows the ultimate to shine through and be perceived by grace.

A *Gestalt* of grace is a 'transparent' *Gestalt*. Something shines through it which is more than it. The church is church because it is transparent as the *Gestalt* of grace. The saint is saint, not because he is 'good', but because he is transparent for something that is more than he himself is. Faith alone can perceive the grace in a *Gestalt* of grace: for faith means being transformed by grace.⁽²¹⁾

If the Protestant church lays claim to be such a *Gestalt* of grace, the question arises as to how this church can protest against itself. In other words, once the Protestant principle has become embodied within a church, what is to prevent this church from identifying itself with grace, rather than being a bearer of grace? Tillich attempts to answer this by submitting that Protestantism must associate itself with secularism, which consistently resists the sacred sphere and ecclesiastical authority. In this way a so-called "Protestant secularism" evolves, which is critical of anything that is falsely sacred, and which, at the same time, can locate the holy on all levels of reality.

In so far as secularism is an offspring of Protestantism and is related to it in cooperation or enmity, we may call it 'Protestant secularism.' According to the Protestant principle, it is possible that within the secular world grace is operating not in a tangible but in a transparent

20. *Ibid.*, p. 212. Cf. W.L. Rowe, *Religious Symbols and God: A Philosophical Study of Tillich's Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

21. *Ibid.*, Cf. Modras, *op. cit.*, pp. 115 – 116.

form. This possibility implies that grace is not bound to any finite form, not even to a religious form. It is sovereign even with respect to forms that by their very nature are supposed to be bearers of grace, such as the churches.⁽²²⁾

Tillich, of course, realizes that the relationship between Protestantism and secularity is a precarious one. If Protestantism surrenders to secularism, it ceases to be a *Gestalt* of grace. On the other hand, once Protestantism retires from the critical position of secularity, it loses its powers of protest. We might add, in light of our earlier treatment of secularity, that in this relationship Protestantism runs the risk of becoming completely autonomous, and thus losing contact with its proper depth of meaning. Tillich is aware of this danger and thus he establishes four principles that must be followed in Protestant form creation, to make these forms effective in pointing to the ultimate:

- 1) In every Protestant form the religious element must be related to, and questioned by, a secular element. The secular element expresses the finite structure of reality and indirectly shows the relations of the finite to the infinite. The secular element also serves as a corrective against Protestantism identifying itself with the unconditioned. In addition, secular forms are not rigid, and are always open to transformation by autonomous creativity.
- 2) In every Protestant form the eternal element must be expressed in relation to the "present situation". This does not mean bondage to the moment or abandonment of form to total relativity. It does mean contact with the depth of the present, the dynamic structure of the present historical situation. This allows for a change in forms and for a constant transcending of past forms to the reality that is expressed in these forms.
- 3) The given reality of grace in every Protestant form must be expressed with daring and risk. This does not mean arbitrariness, but venturing forth with the willingness to discover.

The 'really real' cannot be reached under logical or methodological guarantees. A daring act is demanded, an act that penetrates to the deepest level of reality, to its transcendent ground. Such an act is what in the religious tradition is called 'faith' and what we have called a 'belief-ful' or 'self-transcending realism.'⁽²³⁾

22. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 215. Cf. Paul Tillich, "Realism and Faith," *PE*, p. 68; Guyton Hammond, *The Power of Self-Transcendence* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1966), p. 37; Melvin Watson, "The Social Thought of Paul Tillich," *Journal of Religious Thought*, X, No. 1 (1952-53), pp. 6ff.; Raymond F. Bulman, *A Blueprint for Humanity: Paul Tillich's Theology of Culture* (East Brunswick, N.J.: Assoc. University Presses, 1981); Ronald H. Stone, *Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980).

- 4) This attitude of belief-ful realism must be expressed in every Protestant form. Protestant formative power must not build on a place that is either before or beyond the really real. It must grasp reality in its unconditional and irresistible seriousness.

In this perspective, the secular forms approach religious forms, without becoming religious themselves. The secular and the *Gestalt* of grace become related in such a way that true theonomy is achieved, while both secular autonomy and heteronomy are rejected.

Under this 'silent' influence of Protestantism on the culture to which it belongs, secular thinking is driven to the question of its own foundation and meaning, i.e., to the question of religious knowledge; and secular action is driven to the question of ultimate purpose and fulfillment, i.e., to the question of religious action, individual and social. For this 'dialectical' relation between the secular world and the *Gestalt* of grace I like to use the word 'theonomy' which indicates that neither ecclesiastical heteronomy nor secular autonomy can have the last word is human culture.⁽²⁴⁾

C. The End of the Protestant Era?

In 1937 Tillich asked Protestantism a rather alarming question: "Is the Protestant era coming to an end?"⁽²⁵⁾ In his discussion of the question, he pointed out that the traditional forms of Protestantism would probably not outlast the current period of mass disintegration. In this sense, the Protestant era could well be coming to an end. In addition, the very Protestant principle itself was being contradicted by the emerging social principles and organizations. The meaninglessness of life that was largely brought about by the autonomy of capitalism had caused an emptiness and sense of drift among the masses. They were in turn moving toward heteronomous state structure in order to gain security.

They are longing for a leader, for symbols, for ideas which would be beyond criticism. They are longing for the possibility of enthusiasm, sacrifice, and self-subjection to collective ideas and activities.⁽²⁶⁾

Such a movement, of course, would be completely against the Protestant principle, which maintains that "no individual and no human group can claim a divine dignity for its moral achievements, for its sacramental power, for its sanctity, or for its doctrine."⁽²⁷⁾ According to this principle, as we

24. *Ibid.*, p. 220.

25. Paul Tillich, "The End of the Protestant Era?" *PE*, pp. 222 - 233.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 225.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 226. Tillich notes that in fact Protestantism is participating in the disintegration by establishing its own absolutes. The "protest" of Barth is too negative and has not been able to capture the middle class or young. The leadership in the Protestant churches is in the same process of disintegration as society because it was too dependent on the state and other social groups.

have seen, there can be no sacred system or authority, whether ecclesiastical or political.

Tillich at that time outlined the task that faced Protestantism, if it was to survive, at least in its basic principle. First, Protestantism would have to reformulate its message and its symbols in such a way that it would be received by a world that was disintegrating. Secondly, it would have to take more advantage of its special ability for dealing with the secular world. It would have to tear down the wall between the sacred and the secular and bring secular culture to its proper depth of meaning.⁽²⁸⁾ Finally, Protestantism would have to continue to protect itself against every power, church, state, party, or leader that claimed divine character for itself. Only then would Protestantism be able to save modern culture from the disintegration that results from subjection to such absolutism. Should Protestantism give up its mission to protest to such heteronomy, the Protestant era and indeed the Protestant principle would have come to an end.⁽²⁹⁾

Despite the limitations which we have noted during our discussion of the Protestant principle, it is a valuable effort to return to the initial insights of Protestantism. It is very much in line with the ecumenical currents in contemporary theology. Its tenets are basically sound, and its application, with perhaps more openness to the possibility of valid ecclesiastical forms, would move culture toward the theonomy that Tillich envisioned.

28. *Ibid.*, pp. 229 – 230. Cf. Raymond F. Bulman, "Theonomy and Technology: A Study in Tillich's Theology of Culture," in John J. Carey (ed.), *Kairos and Logos* (Cambridge: North American Tillich Society, 1978).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 232. Tillich notes that for Protestantism to survive, it may have to work through orthodoxy, Catholicism, Fascism or Communism. In all these movements it will take the form of resistance against the distortion of humanity and divinity which necessarily is connected with the rise of the new systems of authority.

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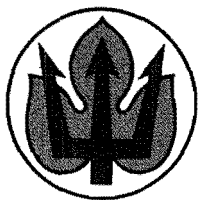
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