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DIVINE REVELATION AND HUMAN FREEDOM: A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

This article was borne out of a desire to answer a number of preliminary questions concerning the relationship between divine revelation and human freedom in the context of scriptural texts. What is the fundamental way in which God reveals himself in the Bible? Are we, human beings, free to accept or reject God's revelation? Is revelation necessarily linked to worship, or are both of them independent from each other? Can we accept the divine revelation communicated in and through Scripture, and yet remain impervious to the sphere of cult and liturgical celebration? As is often the case, initial research on these issues leads to the discovery that the above questions stem from a clearly defined viewpoint: the viewpoint of modern readers seeking answers to their questions in ancient sacred texts. While such an enquiry seems common, it is based on the presupposition that the hermeneutical horizon of scriptural texts and that of modern readers can fully interact. Therefore one of the objectives of this article is to discuss the validity of that presupposition.

Modern readers interact with ancient texts on a regular basis, and as Anthony C. Thiselton rightly remarks, this interaction is a two-way process.¹ Its important characteristic is that "every reader brings a horizon of expectation to the text."² This article will demonstrate that when it comes to answering questions centred on the relationship between divine revelation and human freedom in scriptural texts, the interaction between the modern reader's horizon of expectation and the horizon of scriptural texts should be viewed as a clash. That clash is beneficial. It leads to a renewed focus on the narrative world of scriptural

¹Thiselton states: "Texts can actively shape and transform the perceptions, understanding, and actions of readers and of reading communities. ... But texts can also suffer transformation at the hands of readers and reading communities" (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 31).

²THESELTON, *New Horizons*, 34. The term "horizon of expectation" is an essential critical category for Hans Robert Jauss.

texts and helps formulate a set of different questions, which are rooted in the reality of the biblical text rather than imposed by an external reality. In view of that, this article will discuss four issues. First, it will characterize the world of biblical meta-narration. Secondly, it will explain the nature of revelation and freedom in the light of scriptural data. Thirdly, it will elucidate the relationship between human freedom and divine revelation. Finally, it will mention wider hermeneutical problems arising in the context of the questions asked in the opening paragraph.

I

To analyse the relationship between divine revelation and human freedom, we need to introduce a hermeneutical model which will serve as a methodologically correct basis for our discussion. We ask questions regarding “biblical” revelation and “biblical” freedom. Although these concepts appear in scriptural texts, an attempt to present the understanding of revelation and freedom in different canonical books of the New and Old Testament needs to be based on a set of clearly defined criteria. Which texts should be given prominence, and which might be sidelined? To what extent should we take into consideration the historical evolution of biblical theological concepts? The methodology adopted in this article bypasses these complex questions by focusing on the world of biblical meta-narration, rather than on recreating the historical evolution of biblical thought.³

The concept of biblical meta-narration is a theological construct. However, it is a highly influential construct which shaped biblical exegesis and theology for many centuries, and which continues to inspire modern theologians.⁴ The concept of biblical meta-narration presented in this article is rooted in the work of two influential scholars: Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005) and Hans W. Frei (1922–88). It combines Ricoeur’s understanding of the original meaning of revelation with Frei’s attempt to recreate the tenets of the pre-critical, i.e. pre-18 century, biblical hermeneutics.

Ricoeur’s efforts are aimed at “rectifying the concept of revelation,” and getting beyond “the accepted opaque and authoritarian understanding of this con-

³The historical evolution of the concept of freedom is a subject in its own right, and many questions regarding the influence of classical thought on the biblical understanding of freedom are still left unanswered.

⁴See e.g. GEORGE A. LINDBECK, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1984); STANLEY HAUERWAS and L. GREGORY JONES, eds., *Why narrative? Readings in narrative theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); WILLIAM C. PLACHER, *The Triune God: An Essay in Postliberal Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007).

cept.”⁵ Ricoeur explains that our understanding of divine revelation becomes obscured when we mix up different meanings of the concept. Ricoeur focuses on the first and fundamental level of understanding of revelation, and calls it the “level of the confession of faith.” That level must be clearly distinguished from the “level of ecclesial dogma,” and from the third level, which is “the body of doctrines imposed by the magisterium as the rule of orthodoxy.”⁶ It must be said that Ricoeur does not neglect the importance of dogma or an established body of doctrines. Yet he is concerned about putting an equals sign between the foundational meaning of revelation mediated by scriptural texts and the subsequent understanding of revelation as a system of theological propositions.

Ricoeur makes this idea clear when he subsequently discusses different kinds of discourse found in scriptural texts: prophetic, narrative, prescriptive, wisdom, and hymnic discourse. Revelation cannot be identified solely with any one of them. Only when we look at all kinds of scriptural discourse, do we understand that the concept of revelation is “pluralistic, polysemic, and at most analogical in form.”⁷ Ricoeur emphasizes that the content of revelation is inseparable from the literary style and form of biblical texts. Hence our primary goal as readers is not to extract theological truths from those text, but to grasp the interplay between content and form. What is more, revelation is not communicated by mere words, but by events that are narrated. It is not a static and unchangeable concept. It results from God’s dynamic action.

The most important corollary of such a treatment of the concept of revelation is the emphasis placed on the unity between the content and form of scriptural texts through which the first Jewish and Christian communities spoke about their encounter with God: “A hermeneutic of revelation must give priority to those modalities of discourse that are most originary within the language of a community of faith; consequently, those expressions by means of which the members of that community first interpret their experience for themselves and for others.”⁸ Therefore, when we reflect on the relationship between divine revelation and human freedom, we must resist the temptation to translate the original conceptual world of biblical texts into the language of a much later philosophical tradition. We must also understand that the message communicated by those texts is inseparable from the experience of the original communities of faith. Indeed, an aphorism coined by Gabriel García Márquez renders this idea very well: “Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers and how

⁵ PAUL RICOEUR, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 73.

⁶ RICOEUR, *Essays*, 74.

⁷ RICOEUR, *Essays*, 75.

⁸ RICOEUR, *Essays*, 90.

one remembers it in order to recount it.”⁹ The cultural and ideological world of biblical writers profoundly shaped the way in which they communicated divine revelation, and we need to understand that world if we want to understand the revelation conveyed within its boundaries.¹⁰

For the purpose of this article, the most important concept introduced by Frei in his analysis of pre-critical biblical hermeneutics is that of the world of biblical narrative. Spanning from the creation story in Genesis to the final chapters of the Apocalypse, this world embraces “the experience of any present age and reader.”¹¹ As a result, the personal world of every reader of Scripture becomes part of the all-encompassing world of biblical meta-narrative. Furthermore, the meta-historical vision created by biblical narrative was the only description of the universe that the pre-18 cent. (European) readers knew. Their own life-stories became part of the universal story told by Scripture. As Frei rightly states: “He [the reader] was to see his disposition, his actions and passions, the shape of his own life as well as that of his era’s events as figures of that storied world [of biblical narrative].”¹²

Eric Auerbach’s analysis of biblical narrative should be mentioned in this context since it helps grasp the ideas behind Frei’s reconstruction of the world of meta-narrative. In his famous essay, in which he compares book 19 of the *Odyssey* with chapter 22 of Genesis, Auerbach presents the features of biblical narration which further characterize the world of biblical meta-narration: “The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. ... [The text of the Biblical narrative] seeks to overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world, feel ourselves to be elements in its structure of universal history.”¹³ Hence the world of biblical meta-narrative, rooted in the “level of the confession of faith,” encompasses and surpasses the mundane world of the reader. It makes the claim to be unique and to overcome the reader’s reality.¹⁴

⁹ GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, *Living to Tell the Tale*, trans. Edith Grossman (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), epigraph.

¹⁰ This does not mean that we should denigrate the efforts to render the original revelation in the conceptual language of later historical periods. A classic example, which could be mentioned here, is the following question: Does the creation hymn in Gen 1 imply the idea of creation *ex nihilo*? This question can be legitimately asked and answered by modern readers. However, since the idea of creation *ex nihilo* did not exist in ancient Jewish thought before the Hellenistic period, such a question could not be asked, let alone answered, before the 4th cent. bc.

¹¹ HANS W. FREI, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 3.

¹² FREI, *Eclipse*, 3.

¹³ ERIC AUERBACH, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 14–15.

¹⁴ The concept of biblical meta-narrative does not ignore the complexity of the Bible and its

II

When we speak of divine revelation we make a certain assumption whose importance we do not always fully acknowledge or express. According to most Christian theologians, human beings are able to discover the very fact of God's existence, but they cannot learn much more beyond that by relying merely on their own cognitive powers. The foundational tenet of Judaism and Christianity—the two religions deeply rooted in the Bible—is that God communicates the truth about himself to human beings. Through words and actions, he reveals the mysteries of his inner nature, his purposes, and the nature of the relationship between the divine and human realms. Thus any religion rooted in the Bible is by definition a revealed religion, a religion of divine self-disclosure. Some scholars would even say that “phenomenologically, every religion finds its starting point in a revelation.”¹⁵

Various communities of faith explain the precise nature of revelation in different ways, but it seems that the Constitution of the Second Vatican Council on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* promulgated in 1965 grasps in its opening paragraphs some aspects of divine revelation which are common not only to the Christian religion, but to all three monotheistic faiths. It states:

Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God (see Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex. 33:11; John 15:14–15) and lives among them (see Bar. 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them.¹⁶

The emphasis placed on the importance, or even prominence, of divine deeds in the process of revelation is characteristic of modern theology, and we have to agree with the view that “there has been an increasing tendency among many modern theologians to insist that Divine revelation reaches us largely, and even

internal discrepancies. The following remark made by Israel Abrahams in the context of the Hebrew Bible confirms the viability of the concept despite the presence of so many inconsistencies in biblical texts: “The Bible is essentially a unity; its theology is *sui generis* and must be studied as a whole to be seen in true perspective. This total view of biblical doctrine does not seek to blur differences and to harmonize the disparate; rather it resolves the heterogeneous elements into a unitary canonical ideology—the doctrine of the final editors of the Bible” (“God: In the Bible,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik et al., 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 7:652).

¹⁵ EDWARD LIPINSKI, “Revelation,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 17:253.

¹⁶ *Dei Verbum* 2, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html (accessed 2 November 2012).

primarily, through God's activity (His 'mighty acts', *magnalia Dei*; cf. Acts 2:11), rather than in propositional statements."¹⁷

Are we really free when confronted with the reality of divine revelation? The answer to this question depends on our understanding of the concept of freedom. Yet a preliminary and common-sense answer seems positive. Freedom is often defined as the freedom of choice, and this definition of freedom has its roots in antiquity. As a consequence, free human beings can either choose or reject divine revelation.

Aristotle regards freedom as a constituent element of the state. "The state," Aristotle says emphatically, "is an association of free men."¹⁸ At the same time, freedom, together with wealth, education, and good birth, is one of the "qualities" of the state.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Aristotle mentions the concept of freedom (or in other words, liberty) again in Book 5 of *The Politics*, where he discusses the conditions for a stable democracy. In this particular context, he thinks that freedom understood as the freedom of choice can be dangerous to democracy:

There are two marks by which democracy is thought to be defined: "sovereignty of the majority" and "liberty." "Just" is equated with what is equal, and the decision of the majority as to what is equal is regarded as sovereign; and liberty is seen in terms of *doing what one wants* [my emphasis]. So in such a democracy each lives as he likes and for his "fancy of the moment," as Euripides says. This is bad. It ought not to be regarded as slavery to live according to the constitution, but rather as self-preservation.²⁰

Another well-known ancient author whose is acquainted with the understanding of freedom as the freedom of choice is Cicero. In *De Officiis*, Cicero praises famous philosophers and other "thoughtful men," who decide to withdraw from public life: "Such men have had the same aims as kings—to suffer no want, to be subject to no authority, to enjoy their liberty, that is, in its essence, to live just as they please."²¹

Nevertheless, such an understanding of freedom is hardly compatible with the understanding of freedom presented by a whole range of scriptural texts. Even if the basic possibility of "doing what one wants and living as one pleases" is attested in Scripture, it does not occupy a prominent place there. The concept of freedom which pervades the world of biblical meta-narration is different and,

¹⁷ F.L. CROSS and E.A. LIVINGSTONE, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1402.

¹⁸ ARISTOTLE, *Pol.* 3.6 (trans. T. A. Sinclair, rev. Trevor J. Saunders (London: Penguin, 1992), 189).

¹⁹ ARISTOTLE, *Pol.* 4.12 (p. 271).

²⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Pol.* 5.9 (p. 332).

²¹ CICERO, *Off.* 1.70 (trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library 30 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1913), 71).

as will soon be demonstrated, multi-layered. This is why we should now turn to an analysis of the biblical understanding of freedom.

The Hebrew language has a relatively small number of abstract nouns and adjectives. The noun *hufsha* (freedom) occurs only in Lev 19:20²², whereas the adjective *hofshi* (free) appears in less than 20 verses.²³ Most of the Hebrew Bible texts which speak of freedom understand this concept in purely social terms. Persons who are not slaves are free. They have always enjoyed that status or have been freed by their former owners.²⁴ What is more, the gift of freedom is a result of the redemptive activity of the God of Israel. Deuteronomy 15:12–15 illustrates this case:

If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed; you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press; as the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.²⁵

Surprisingly, although the book of Exodus tells the story of Israel's liberation from enslavement in Egypt, it would be difficult to prove that Exodus offers any kind of comprehensive "theology of freedom." As F. Stanley Jones correctly observes, "Israel was ransomed in order to be God's servants (Lev 25:42; cf. Deut 6:20–25), and the language used to describe this event is primarily that of 'redemption', not of 'freedom.'"²⁶ Thus Deut 6:21–24, one of the so-called "credal" passages in the Hebrew Bible, emphasizes both the event of liberation and Israel's obligation to observe religious law:

We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the Lord showed signs and wonders, great and grievous,

²² The abstract noun *hofshit* (freedom, separateness) in 2 Kgs 15:5 and in its parallel 2 Chr 26:21 is used as the *nomen rectum* following the noun "house," and the whole phrase means "a separate house."

²³ The topic of freedom in the Bible has been presented comprehensively by numerous authors. An interested reader may find the articles by F. Stanley Jones and H. Schlier a good starting point for further study. See F. STANLEY JONES, "Freedom," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:855–59; H. SCHLIER, "eleutheros, eleutheroo, eleutheria, apeleutheros," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 2: 487–502.

²⁴ See e.g. Exod 21:2, 26–27; Job 3:16–19; Isa 58:6; Jer 34:8–17.

²⁵ The Revised Standard Version is quoted from now onwards.

²⁶ JONES, "Freedom," 2:855.

against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes; and he brought us out from there, that he might bring us in and give us the land which he swore to give to our fathers. And the Lord commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as at this day.

However, this purely social understanding of freedom has also a political component. The history of Israel and Judah is a history of struggle for independence from their powerful neighbours and oppressors. As Michael K. W. Suh notes, "This motif of freedom then became a powerful force in the Jewish national psyche, with a longing to re-establish the nation of Israel in the promised land."²⁷ The powerful force of freedom was later channelled in various directions. In New Testament texts, it is no longer a social but a spiritual category.

On the pages of the New Testament, the concept of freedom is usually expressed by the adjective *eleutheros* (*free*, occasionally used substantively), or by the abstract noun *eleutheria* (*freedom*). There are different ways to summarize the New Testament teaching about freedom, but it is possible and legitimate to cover this topic under five headings.

First, for Paul the Apostle, the social distinction between the free and the enslaved is no longer important from the point of view of the Gospel that he preaches. As in the book of Exodus, it is God who redeems his people and makes them their own servants. Paul writes: "Every one should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (1 Cor 7:20–23). Paul's christological approach sheds new light on the old tension between free citizens and slaves, and becomes one of the defining features of his theology. This is why he proclaims in Gal 3:28: "there is neither slave nor free ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus."²⁸

Secondly, in the world of biblical meta-narration, freedom is granted to those who believe in Christ. The words of Jesus, "if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36), and the words of Paul, "for freedom Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1), express the same basic conviction: freedom is a spiritual gift bestowed on the believers.²⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer comments: "Christ Jesus has set human beings free, has given them the rights of citizens of a free city or state. As a result, 'our

²⁷MICHAEL K.W. SUH, "Freedom," in *Dictionary of the Bible and Western Culture*, eds. Mary Ann Beavis and Michael J. Gilmour (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 170.

²⁸See also 1 Cor 12:13; Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:11.

²⁹See also Matt 17:26; Gal 4:30–5:1; Rom 8:21; 2 Cor 3:17; Gal 2:4.

commonwealth (*politeuma*) is in heaven' (Phil 3:20); and while here on earth we are already a colony of free heavenly citizens."³⁰

Another two aspects of the concept of freedom in New Testament texts are closely interrelated. Christians are called to be free from sin, since the latter results in death: "But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life" (Rom 6:21–22). We are not surprised to discover in this quotation the overtones of the theology of redemption, which we have already seen in other Pauline texts, and which stem from Exodus. Yet Christian freedom is not only the freedom from wrongdoing. More importantly, it is the freedom to show mercy to others and to act with love: "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be servants of one another" (Gal 5:13).³¹

Paul often alludes to the improper use of freedom, and this constitutes the final heading under which the New Testament speaks of freedom. The gift of freedom is often misunderstood and leads to malpractice. 1 Peter 2:16 reads: "Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God."³² It is then clear that the understanding of freedom as the freedom of choice, mentioned by Cicero and Aristotle, is known in the world of biblical meta-narration. Yet there is no doubt that the emphasis is not on the mere possibility of choice. The sole focus is on the ability to use one's freedom at the service of the Gospel.

In brief, Old Testament texts understand freedom in socio-political terms. When free Israelites meet their God, they are always reminded of their ultimate obligation of servitude to the Creator. Such an understanding of freedom is further developed and refined in the New Testament. Socio-political overtones are partly suppressed and set in a new context. Social distinctions matter little in the light of Christ's redemptive work, and a person's freedom should spur him or her on to living the life of virtue. The common-sense understanding of freedom as the freedom of choice is sidelined, and the human propensity to choose evil rather than good is deplored.

³⁰JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, "Pauline Theology," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown et al. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 1400.

³¹See also 1 Cor 9:19; Jas 1:25; 2:12.

³²See also 2 Pet 2:19.

III

Even though the possibility of choosing between good and evil, which is a logical result of the freedom of choice, is known in the world of biblical meta-narration, it is by no means a central topic. What is more, and perhaps surprisingly, that topic does not primarily appear in the context of human freedom. Rather, its proper theological context is defined by such antithetical terms as wisdom and folly, blessing and curse, righteousness and sin. A classic example of this approach is found in the Deuteronomistic tradition: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known" (Deut 11:26–28).

In the world projected by scriptural texts, God is the central figure who powerfully and skilfully knits together the diverse threads of biblical meta-narration. Scripture does not attempt to prove God's existence. Instead, from the first pages of Genesis, where "God created the heavens and the earth" (1:1), to the final pages of the book of Revelation³³, God's existence permeates the biblical landscape.³⁴ This is why the psalmist declares: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Ps 19:1).

It is true that human beings have freedom of choice and self-determination. Yet this fundamental dimension of human nature is characteristic of all people: slaves and free (in the Old Testament), believers in Christ and non-believers (in the New). In the second account of Creation, God speaks: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:16–17). Implicit in this order is the first couple's freedom to obey or reject God's command. Nonetheless, this freedom of choice does not include any possibility of rejecting divine revelation. The first couple cannot negate the obvious fact of God's presence and his revelation. C. S. Lewis puts this axiom another way: "A man can no more diminish God's glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word 'darkness' on the walls of his cell."³⁵

³³ See e.g. Rev 22:19.

³⁴ Even the most "secular" of the biblical books, Esther, contains veiled allusions to the divine sphere if it is interpreted in the light of rabbinical tradition. See my remarks in *Truth, Beauty, and Goodness in Biblical Narratives: A Hermeneutical Study of Genesis 21:1–21* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 16–17.

³⁵ C.S. LEWIS, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 1972), 41.

In consequence, scriptural texts mention two kinds of attitudes towards God's revelation.

First, they speak of "fools and sinners." Fools and sinners are unable to reject the axiomatic event of revelation. Yet what they can reject is the effort to follow the commandments revealed by God. As the Bible often puts it, they "do evil in the sight of the Lord" (cf. 2 Kgs 21:6). The underlying assumption here is that it is impossible to do anything "outside the sight of the Lord." Thus we have a long list of biblical villains beginning in Genesis with the first couple and ending in Rev 22:15 speaking of "the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and every one who loves and practices falsehood." All these categories of people receive divine revelation, while at the same time rejecting its moral demands.³⁶ Even the oft-quoted Ps 14:1 (cf. Ps 53:1), "The fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'" is not an example of a biblical atheistic manifesto. Its context makes it clear that the statement made by the fool is not ontological but ethical. The fool makes the decision to ignore God's existence in everyday conduct, but in the end, the fool and the wicked "shall be in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous" (Ps 14:5).

It is the righteous who represent the second group. While the evil king Manasseh did "evil in the sight of the Lord," the good king Josiah "did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left" (2 Kgs 22:2). The imagery of walking down the straight path of virtue belongs to the theological repertoire of Deuteronomist (cf. Deut 11:26–28), and reinforces the link between the possibility of choice and the antithetical terms of blessing and curse. As expected, there is no major emphasis placed on the theme of divine revelation in this context. The righteous wholeheartedly accept divine revelation and its content, they delight in and meditate on it (cf. Ps 1:2). However, they accept revelation in the same way as the unrighteous do, because there is no alternative attitude towards it. What makes the difference is only the subsequent application of God's commands to everyday conduct in which the righteous succeed and the sinners fail.³⁷

Finally, we have to touch on the issue of cult. It has to be said that the question of cult and worship is both parallel and secondary to the topic of divine revelation. As we have seen, in the world of biblical meta-narration, human

³⁶ See also Luke 12:16–21; Rom 1:18–23.

³⁷ The reader of this article should not have the impression that there exists a rigid dichotomy between the righteous and the sinners. The world of biblical meta-narration presents various and complex personages. By way of example, among the righteous, we have a subcategory of "heroes" (see Sir 44–50 and Heb 11). They follow God's commands in an exemplary manner, and their faith is often put to the test.

beings cannot reject the axiomatic reality of revelation. They can only become deliberately and temporarily ignorant of it. Yet those who decide to respond to it positively have to find an appropriate way to communicate with the divine. It is then worship that provides the best and most natural way to relate to God in both personal and communal contexts.

The first pages of Scripture introduce this conviction, and the book of Revelation ends with a description of heavenly worship. We find the first account of a cultic act in Gen 4:3–4: “In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of their fat portions.” However, already in Gen 2–3, the symbolic description of the garden in Eden and the imagery found in the narrative of the first sin point to the Temple in Jerusalem and its splendid cultic ceremonies.³⁸ What is more, the garments of skins which God made for Adam and his wife in Gen 3:21 hint at animal sacrifice. K. A. Matthews explains: “Through an oblique reference to animal sacrifice, the garden narrative paints a theological portrait familiar to the recipients of the Sinai revelation who honoured the tabernacle as the meeting place with God. Sacrifice renewed and guaranteed that special union of God with his people.”³⁹ In consequence, cultic acts are mentioned on almost every page of Scripture, and the Bible ends with the glorious vision of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21:9–27 and with the angelic encouragement: “Worship God!” (Rev 22:9)

IV

The questions asked in the opening paragraph are based on the assumption that human beings can freely exercise their freedom of choice. Nevertheless, such an assumption does not occupy a prominent place in the world of biblical meta-narrative, and when it comes to the reality of divine revelation, no choice is possible. It is so because the biblical world is based on a different set of rules. In that world, divine revelation cannot be rejected since it belongs to its very foundations. This is one way of answering the opening questions.

A different, and methodologically more correct, way of solving the problem consists in distinguishing between the ideological horizons of the cultural worlds that we inhabit and the horizons of expectation that we readers bring to texts.⁴⁰ Asking ancient texts modern questions leads inevitably to a clash of

³⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews elaborates on this topic in *Genesis 1–11:26*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 208–10, 257–58.

³⁹ MATTHEWS, *Genesis*, 255.

⁴⁰ Cf. THISELTON, *New Horizons*, 34.

those horizons, which is not always fully recognized. As a result, ancient answers given to modern questions are often perceived as unsatisfactory and puzzling.

Claus Westermann points to a similar problem in his discussion of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives. Westermann explains that those narratives' genre has little to do with historical writing. What follows is that questions about the historicity of the patriarchs simply cannot be answered: "The patriarchal traditions are in no sense history, and the question about the historicity of the patriarchal stories and figures is a question wrongly put. ... As the patriarchal stories are neither history nor historical writing, one cannot even raise the question about their historicity or that of the figures concerned."⁴¹ Mutatis mutandis, the question whether human beings can freely accept or reject divine revelation is a question wrongly put, and, strictly speaking, it cannot be answered within the boundaries of biblical meta-narration. Even the theoretical possibility of answering that question conflicts with the most important principle governing that world: its existence, unity, and its claim to "overcome our reality" result from the axiomatic and foundational character of divine revelation.

Yet the very fact that we, modern readers, ask the above questions proves that our own horizon of expectation is rooted in a post-biblical world. In European intellectual culture, that world had gradually come into prominence from the end of the 17 century, and became fully established in the 19th century. Hans Frei convincingly describes this process in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.⁴² It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss and analyse new modern meta-narratives which eclipsed the old scriptural narrative. However, one example will be given to identify a meta-narrative which makes the question of acceptance or rejection of divine revelation possible.

A different horizon of expectation usually appears when old socio-cultural conditions give way to new ways of thinking about and organizing society. John Stuart Mill, a brilliant exponent of liberal political philosophy, believes that human nature can and should be developed by self-culture. As John Skorupski explains: "Self-culture opens access to higher forms of human happiness, but it has to be *self*-culture, first because human potentialities are diverse and best known

⁴¹ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36: A Continental Commentary*, trans. John Scullion (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 43.

⁴² Two important features of pre-critical exegesis were realistic reading and figural interpretation. Those features collapsed and were replaced by other modes of exegetical enquiry. Frei comments: "Realistic, literal reading of the biblical narratives found its closest successor in the historical-critical reconstruction of specific events and texts of the Bible. ... Figural reading, concerned as it was with the unity of the Bible, found its closest successor in an enterprise called biblical theology, which sought to establish the unity of religious meaning across the gap of historical and cultural differences" (*Eclipse*, 8).

to each human being itself, and second because only when human beings work to their own plans of life do they develop moral freedom, itself indispensable to a higher human nature.”⁴³ Mill was one of the most influential thinkers of the 19 century whose works helped create a new and convincing meta-narrative. As a consequence, within the boundaries of that narrative, new sets of questions could be asked and answered.

Mill states: “The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs, or impede their efforts to obtain it. ... Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest.”⁴⁴ When we inhabit the world of Millian narrative, and ask the opening questions, the answer is clear. Human beings can freely accept or reject divine revelation as long as they do not deprive their fellow human beings of their own freedom of choice. When we, however, ask the same modern questions in the context of ancient texts, we get oblique answers, and we recognize that many of those questions are wrongly put.

Instead, we should rather ask: how can we use the gift of freedom to obtain wisdom, blessing, and righteousness? The world of the biblical meta-narrative provides the following answer: we should embrace the reality of divine revelation and follow its ethical demands. If this answer sounds deceptively acceptable within the context of modern culture, it is because we often yield to the illusion that the biblical categories of wisdom, blessing, and righteousness are identical with our modern understanding of these terms. They are not, but to prove this, we would need another study.⁴⁵

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⁴³JOHN SKORUPSKI, “Mill, John Stuart (1806–73),” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 6:373.

⁴⁴JOHN STUART MILL, *On Liberty*, in *The Collected Works*, vol. 18, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), chapter I: Introductory, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/-title/233/16552> (accessed on 2 November 2012).

⁴⁵It should be added that the conclusion of this article provides a strong argument against biblical fundamentalism. One of the practical consequences of fundamentalism has been summarized in *The Biblical Commission's Document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church”*: “The fundamentalist approach is dangerous, for it is attractive to people who look to the Bible for ready answers to the problems of life. It can deceive these people, offering them interpretations that are pious but illusory, instead of telling them that the Bible does not necessarily contain an immediate answer to each and every problem” [JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, ed. (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1995), 108]. Distinguishing between the ideological content of various literary and cultural worlds, on the one hand, and the reader's horizon of expectation, on the other, provides a useful tool to defend readers against fundamentalist interpretation.

OBJAWIENIE A WOLNOŚĆ CZŁOWIEKA: BIBLIJNA PERSPEKTYWA

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