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# God's Acts As Revelation

By MARTIN H. SCHARLEMANN

**T**H**ERE IS!**" replied Jeremiah to the secret query of King Zedekiah whether there was a word from the Lord for the problem at hand. In this instance it was a message of judgment, "You shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon" (Jer. 37:17). Just how did the prophet know this? In what way did God make His will known in this case? By a dream? In a vision? By some special intuition or divine insight? We are not told more than that "the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah" (c. g., 37:6). We are, however, assured of the fact that there was and is communication from God to man.

To this mysterious phenomenon of intelligible and personal contact between heaven and earth we apply the term "revelation." It designates a movement from God toward man; it speaks of God breaking in from the other side for the purpose of disclosing Himself in such a way as to make it possible for men to know His will so that they may repent and live. If God had never spoken, we would need to accept as final Pascal's observation: "The eternal silence of these vast infinite spaces frightens me." Ignatius reminds us, "Jesus came forth from silence," from beyond the emptiness of our expanding universe, to be God's greatest and final Revelation. He came as the Word, validating every other word of prophet and apostle. Man cannot discover God in His grace and mercy. Without revelation, he has only his own home-made religion.

Had God never spoken, men would still live devoid of hope, for they would be

without God. Now, according to our Scriptures, God's "speaking" took place in various ways. At times His Word was "heard" in a vision. In other contexts it came to man in a dream. On still other occasions it was made known by way of an oracle or a prophetic utterance. Finally we must not fail to mention the fact that God also revealed Himself of old by what the Scriptures refer to as His "mighty acts."

In recent decades much has been written on the subject of the deeds of God as revelation. Partly as a reaction against a previous period in theology, which inclined toward overlooking God's deeds as revelation, some of our contemporary literature tends to ignore the divine interpretative word as constituting part and parcel of God's revelation of Himself in acts. Thereby the exponents of God's great deeds violate their own better knowledge that, according to the Scriptures, "word" and "act" may not be sundered from each other without risking the loss of both the authority of Scripture and its function of providing us with an understanding of the redemptive significance of God's ways.

Deed and word must be kept in proper balance, as they are in Luther, for example. To establish such an equilibrium, few passages can be more useful than Ps. 103:7: "He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the people of Israel." We shall do well, therefore, to reflect on this sentence in some detail for the purpose of gaining a fuller understanding and appreciation of the fact that God revealed Himself to man

in a sequence of events described and interpreted for us by what our Confessions call the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.

Let it be said, first of all, that these words from the Psalm could under no conditions be used of Aristotle's great Uncaused Cause, a being (if he was that!) removed from the realm of events and, in fact, quite indifferent to the affairs of men. Nor would the psalmist have uttered this sentence to describe the gods of Babylon or Egypt, for these deities inhabited either the realm of myth or the closed circle of nature. Least of all would these words apply to a god who might be no more than a projection of the psalmist's own ideas and concerns. The God of this psalm, and of this particular verse, is one who has acted within history to produce certain occurrences which He Himself arranged to have interpreted by such men as Moses.

Now, what was it that God revealed to Moses? His very own ways, says the psalmist. In this context God's ways are not so much the paths that men are to walk but rather those which He Himself has followed in the course of His redemptive activity. The expression itself is a reminder of that moment when Moses asked to see these very ways of God (Ex. 33:13). In this context he was persuaded that he could not view the naked majesty of God and survive, but that, as a man, he might possibly get a glimpse of God's "goodness." Moses was indeed given the chance to see God as He clothed Himself in acts of grace and judgment. These are His "ways," His manner of doing things to and with His people in the light of His own statement, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy."

In Chronicles the royal acts of kings are referred to as their "ways." Of Jehoshaphat, for example, it is said (2 Chron. 17:3) that he "walked in the earlier ways of David." What he did and how he acted disclosed the attitude and nature of this royal ruler. In the same way, God, our great King, has opened His heart to us, so to speak, by His ways, as these were made known to Moses. Several of the psalms, notably 78 and 136, list some of the outstanding acts of God which He undertook to accomplish this end.

Now, we must keep in mind that these mighty deeds of God are at times synonymous with His words. When He "speaks" His creative power is made manifest by what happens in consequence. This thought is carried forward into the New Testament. Hence Luke can, for example, say in Acts 6:7 that "the Word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly." Here the "Word of God" surely refers to the power of God at work in the early church as she went about her task of worship, witness, and welfare.

From the Old Testament point of view God's most significant redemptive act was the Exodus. This event as such is described in terms of judgment upon Pharaoh and of redemption for Israel (Ex. 6:6). To this act the Children of Israel responded in faith, as we read in Ex. 14:30, 31: "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in His servant Moses." From this it is evident how Israel was led to

know that by this event God had acted in both judgment and liberation. In other words, they now saw this wondrous deed in terms of both Law and Gospel.

The Exodus must, of course, be understood as including all that God did and said to liberate Israel and to establish His covenant (Ex. 19:4,5). So important is this whole cluster of acts and words that even the creation of the world is linked to this decisive deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. As a case in point, Is. 51:9,10 conjoins God's first conquest of chaos, here symbolized by Rahab and the dragon, with the redemption of God's people from Egypt. Later events, too, especially the return from Babylon, are described to a large extent in language borrowed from the account of the Exodus. This practice is carried forward into the New Testament. There the work of John the Baptist, for example, is interpreted in terms of both the Exodus and the return, especially by St. Mark. That is why he quotes both Ex. 23:20 and Is. 40:3 as well as Malachi 3:1 in introducing John. The first of these passages is taken from a context describing God's dealings with Israel in the desert, and the second one describes the return. John baptized in the wilderness because the time had come for God to create a new Israel. Like God's ancient people, it was to begin in the desert by a Baptism of water. Luke applies the very word "exodus" (9:31) to the subject of the discussion that took place on the Mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus, Moses, and Elijah spoke of what was going to happen in Jerusalem very shortly. In the New Testament it is particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus that are likened to the Exodus for their decisive role in God's plans of redemption.

Crucifixion and resurrection were preceded, of course, by the Incarnation. They were followed, moreover, by Pentecost, the Ascension and the Session. All of these might be called mighty acts of God, undertaken by Him to make Himself known to men as the God of grace and judgment. In fact, the last three in the series are called just that in 1 Peter 1:11, for the Greek word used there — sometimes translated "glories" — signifies the manifestation of divine power in acts that excite wonder. With all of these works God has reached into the closed circle of man's existence, so to speak, for the purpose of unfolding His purpose and His will. To these great deeds, therefore, prophets and apostles bear witness. These men were chosen and called for this particular task. They play a crucial role in making known God's ways to men.

The psalmist is quite specific in this matter, too. He names Moses as the person to whom God revealed the significance of His actions. Raw occurrences in history do not of themselves convey much meaning, if any at all. True, Pharaoh and the Egyptians might conclude from the Exodus that Israel's God was greater than their own deities (Ex. 14:4), but they had no way of realizing that the departure of this slave people had any broader significance, involving the fate of all mankind, unless, of course, they had listened to Moses and Aaron — and this they had no intention of doing! Nor, for that matter, would the Children of Israel have understood the full dimensions of their liberating experience unless an interpretation of this event had been given to Moses and through him to the Children of Israel.

This man, reared at the royal court and

later living in exile in Midian, was raised up not only to be Israel's political organizer and leader but also to serve as God's prophetic instrument in delineating the full import of what was happening to Israel and to Egypt in terms of God's redemptive will and intent. Through Moses Israel was to learn that God is one who acts in righteousness and in judgment for the oppressed, to use the words of the previous verse in our psalm. This whole people, a race of slaves in a foreign land, was the special object of God's gracious choice. It could not, however, have come to this awareness, had not God revealed to Moses His plan for redeeming mankind.

From the Biblical point of view Moses was the great mediator of God's ancient revelation and in that sense the prophet par excellence. Of this our Scriptures leave us in no doubt whatsoever. Jesus Himself is described in various parts of the New Testament as the Mediator of the new and final revelation, and so as the second Moses, who came in fulfillment of the promise given in Deut. 18:15: "The Lord, your God, will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you. . . ." Moses can therefore quite properly be said to represent all those persons whose task it was to interpret the acts of God.

Such occurrences as were proclaimed to be God's mighty acts often looked quite different from a purely human point of view. Very few of them had the earmarks of extraordinary dimensions or of special splendor. King Cyrus, for example, was most certainly not impressed by the small number of Jews that returned to Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon under his own permissive decree. That the God of heaven and earth should identify Himself in His

eternal purposes with this uninspiring company of exiles was surely the last thing that would have occurred to him. He could have had an inkling of the vast importance of this event only with the insight granted to and by one of God's prophets. Again, when Pontius Pilate submitted his official report on the events of the first Good Friday, there was in this notice no suggestion of anything more than that he had had another disagreeable task, what with an excitable mob on his hands asking a murderer to be set free rather than one who in some way claimed to be different from other people! Even the disciples were at a loss to understand the crucifixion until they were guided into seeing this event in the light of the resurrection and especially of Pentecost. That Christ died was the event; that He died for men's sins is the interpretative word. These two go together.

Some years later there was not much to distinguish Paul from other traveling teachers and rabbis. True, he was spreading some strange doctrine about a certain Jesus, who had been crucified and then had been raised from the dead; but, of course, it was a remarkable age, people remarked again and again, and one had to allow for all kinds of vagaries of this sort! After all, Caesar still ruled the Empire, and he did not seem to feel threatened by another king named Jesus (Acts 17:7). Little did men realize then that in centuries to come people would call their sons Paul and their dogs Nero, by that mysterious process with which the Gospel inverts human values. It was, in fact, impossible to recognize the mission of St. Paul for what it really was except from his own witness to Christ and to himself as an apostle.

Returning to the verse from our psalm, we must remind ourselves that Moses first gave an oral explanation of God's ways, as these had been made known to him. He taught Israel the song of Ex. 15, for example, as a way of bringing into divine perspective all of the events through which Israel was passing. This hymn contains the lines which, for all practical purposes, summarize the whole story of God's dealings with His ancient people:

Who is like Thee, O Lord, among the gods?

Who is like Thee, majestic in holiness,  
terrible in glorious deeds, doing  
wonders?

Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand,  
the earth swallowed them.

Thou hast led in Thy steadfast love the  
people whom Thou hast redeemed,  
Thou hast guided them by Thy strength  
to Thy holy abode.

The people have heard, they tremble;  
pangs have seized on the inhabitants  
of Philistia.

Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;  
the leaders of Moab, trembling seizes  
them;

all the inhabitants of Canaan have  
melted away.

Terror and dread fall upon them;  
because of the greatness of Thy arm,  
they are still as a stone,

till Thy people, O Lord, pass by,  
till the people pass by whom Thou hast  
purchased.

Thou wilt bring them in, and plant them  
on Thy own mountain,  
the place, O Lord, which Thou hast  
made for Thy abode,  
the sanctuary, O Lord, which Thy  
hands have established.

The Lord will reign forever and ever.  
(RSV)

Other prophets, too, after Moses, were endowed by the Spirit of God with the gift and the task of explaining the ways of God to men. This was often done orally at first. In fact, some of these servants of God, notably Elijah and Elisha, left nothing at all in writing for us. The interpretation imparted to and by Moses, on the other hand, is given in the Pentateuch. The five scrolls containing this account were surely available in some form to the poet who wrote Ps. 103. In addition, this sacred author had, of course, heard of God's mighty acts in the ritual of the festivals of the temple and in the homes of Israel. Pentecost would recall the giving of God's Law; Tabernacles served as the occasion to rehearse the desert wanderings; and the Passover invariably provided the opportunity to tell and hear of Israel's liberation from the house of bondage. The remembrance of these acts kindled the poet's soul, and under the impulse of God's Spirit he composed our psalm.

Whether or not it was David who actually wrote Ps. 103 is a moot question, since the headings of the psalms may have been added later. It is quite possible that some unknown Israelite wrote this psalm. He did so as God's instrument to instruct His people and to help beautify the service of the temple and later of the synagog. There were many such psalms. One hundred and fifty of them, many of them done anonymously, were gathered into what is often called the hymnal of the second temple, our Psalter. When the question of the canon came up later on, this collection of psalms was included in the list of authoritative documents. In this way Ps. 103 has got down to us as part of the book of God's people, our Bible.

At this point it is necessary to raise the question of the connection between the Biblical documents and the acts of God that were made known through Moses to Israel. For the only information we have of these events as deeds of God is given in the Scriptures. These are the last step, so to speak, in God's act of giving us His own explanation of what He was doing.

Without going into a detailed discussion of what we know as the doctrine of inspiration, let us note, in the first instance, that the sacred authors record certain happenings as mighty acts of God. Their writings, therefore, serve to "publish and tell the wondrous acts of the Lord" (Ps. 26:7). Luke's expression for this side of his task was that of "compiling a narrative of things accomplished" (1:1). The third evangelist went on at once to name his sources, most of them oral; namely, the tradition that had its sources in the eye-witnesses to the events themselves. In addition, he took whatever written accounts were available to him and checked them against the facts as known to him and reported by these witnesses. In short, he did research work in the preparation of his Gospel.

This mention of sources must not be overlooked in any attempt to understand the way in which our Biblical documents came into being. The incident of Joshua making the sun to stand still, for example, was taken from a work known as the Book of Jashar (Joshua 10:13). Num. 21:14 mentions "the Book of the Wars of the Lord" as the source of some of the information concerning the events at the Red Sea. A document known as the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah is referred to a number of times (e.g., 2 Kings 14:18).

Since the Biblical authors sometimes made use of certain written materials on the subjects presented, we can assume that they did not hesitate to employ oral sources. In fact, we have already pointed out that Luke says that he did just this. A close study, moreover, of Judges or of the Gospel of Mark will reveal a strong likelihood that some of the matter there presented was first shaped orally by kerygmatic, didactic, or liturgical needs and practices within the community of God's people, and then reshaped by the individual author to conform to his particular purpose and style—all under the special guidance of God's Spirit, of course!

The Biblical documents, however, not only reliably record the great deeds of God; they also witness to them. That is to say, the purpose of the written Word of God is to point to God's acts of redemption and judgment. Nowhere is this made more clear than in Rom. 3:21-26. There St. Paul makes a point of the fact that God's righteousness was made manifest in Christ, whom God "put forward as an expiation by His blood." This righteousness, revealed in the event of the crucifixion of Jesus, was witnessed to by both the Law and the prophets, the apostle assures us. That such a statement should occur in what is Paul's most elaborate theological treatise is not without its own special significance. We are reminded thereby that he wrote Romans as an inspired explanation and interpretation of what God had done in Christ. In this way the epistle, too, serves as a witness to the prior acts of God in Jesus Christ.

It may be useful in this context to point out that the sacred authors wrote as particular individuals of their own age. That

is to say, Jeremiah was not Amos, and Paul was not Isaiah. Serving as the authoritative instrument of God's revelation, each one wrote as a distinct personality living at a certain time and in given circumstances. Each author, therefore, gives his own peculiar testimony. This can be illustrated from the way in which Matthew and Mark handle the account of the transfiguration. Mark, we should note, does not mention the shining face of Jesus as Matthew does (17:2). Instead he stresses the brilliance of Jesus' garments (9:3). Why this difference? Very possibly because Matthew is interested in witnessing to his Savior as the new Moses, for of the latter we read (Ex. 34:29) that his face shone brightly as he came down from Mount Sinai. Mark, on the other hand, is more concerned with bearing testimony to Jesus as the true Israel; the glittering garments quite possibly represent this accent. This would help explain why Mark omits the words "in whom I am well pleased" from the utterance of the Father's voice out of the cloud.

God chose to reveal Himself just in this kind of particularity, through men who stood at given points within history and wrote within the framework of their respective times. This is why not only their language but also their manner of presenting historical information at times differs from ours. These factors belong to their specific background and personalities, as our Australian brethren have pointed out in their official statements on Scripture.\* This situation, however, does not

detract from the utter reliability of the record and witness of the Biblical authors of God's great deeds. On the contrary, it underlines God's faithfulness in dealing with His children during each period of their history.

If we keep in mind this relationship of the Biblical documents to God's mighty acts, always to be understood as "deed-words," we shall be preserved from the error of Judaism, which saw and often sees in the Biblical documents themselves an authority independent of those acts to which they testify. As a result, Judaism has often determined an individual's attitude toward God on the basis of his response to Old Testament documents as such, especially as these were interpreted by the tradition of the elders. By not going beyond the documents to the prior acts of God, to which they bear testimony, men turn revelation into tradition. This perversion is the source of all legalism.

This is not said to belittle the significance of our sacred writings. In fact, our observation magnifies them by giving them their full due. For the written documents, too, are God's creation, as has already been indicated. In fact, we are reminded by 2 Peter 1:21 that "no prophecy ever came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (RSV). The word "moved," by the way, is the same one used in previous verses of the voice that was heard on the Mount of Transfiguration. Its use in both contexts is a reminder that God must break in

\* "We believe that the holy writers, whom God used, retained the distinctive features of their personalities (language and terminology, literary methods, conditions of life, knowledge of nature and history as apart from direct reve-

lation and prophecy). God made use of them in such a manner that even that which human reason might call a deficiency in Holy Scripture must serve the divine purpose." (*The Australian Lutheran*, August 22, 1956, p. 265)



"to speak" if we are to hear anything from Him. Again, its presence recalls us to the realization that we are here dealing with a miraculous action involving the Third Person of the Trinity in that movement of God toward us which we call revelation.

All three persons of the Godhead are part of the mystery of revelation. The Father has "spoken"; the Son is the very Center of what God did and said to make Himself known; and the Holy Spirit is the Source of that special guidance, commonly referred to as inspiration, given to the men who wrote the Biblical books. What these men wrote puts us into contact with those wondrous acts of God by which He redeemed His people. The written Word of prophet, apostle, and evangelist stands in the place of the eyewitnesses, to allude once more to Luke's preface. The sacred authors, we may say, then, occupy a very special and unique place in the whole process by which God has made Himself

known. They were raised up within Israel and within the church to bear their particular testimony to God's ways. This makes their writings a means of revelation, for they are the instruments by which we ourselves are made contemporaneous with that sequence of events which is often referred to as *Heilsgeschichte*.

We can be so bold as to say all this because the creation of the church is God's last great act before the Lord returns. Of that church we are a part, and as her members we are made heirs of all that God has done by way of disclosing Himself to men as a God of mercy and of judgment. Moreover, to us has been given the responsibility of declaring "the wonderful deeds of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9). To us, as to Moses and to the Children of Israel, He has made known His ways.

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