

An Initial Reflection on the Mystery of Jesus

The Book of Deuteronomy contains a promise that is completely different from the messianic hope expressed in other books of the Old Testament, yet it is of decisive importance for understanding the figure of Jesus. The object of this promise is not a king of Israel and king of the world—a new David, in other words—but a new Moses. Moses himself, however, is interpreted as a prophet. The category “prophet” is seen here as something totally specific and unique, in contrast to the surrounding religious world, something that Israel alone has in this particular form. This new and different element is a consequence of the uniqueness of the faith in God that was granted to Israel. In every age, man’s questioning has focused not only on his ultimate origin; almost more than the obscurity of his beginnings, what preoccupies him is the hiddenness of the future that awaits him. Man wants to tear aside the curtain; he wants to know what is going to happen, so that he can avoid perdition and set out toward salvation.

Religions do not aim merely to answer the question about our provenance; all religions try in one way or another to lift the veil of the future. They seem important precisely because they impart knowledge about what is to come, and so show man the path he has to take to avoid coming to grief. This explains why practically all religions have developed ways of looking into the future.

The Deuteronomy text we are considering mentions the different methods used by the peoples surrounding Israel to open a “window” onto the future: “When you come into the land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord” (Deut 18:9–12).

The story of Saul’s downfall shows how difficult it was, having renounced these things, to hold firm and to manage without them. Saul himself had tried to enforce this command and to banish sorcery from the land. But faced with the imminent prospect of a perilous battle with the Philistines, he

can no longer bear God's silence, and he rides out to Endor, to a woman who conjures the dead, asking her to summon the spirit of Samuel so as to afford him a glimpse into the future. If the Lord will not speak, then someone else will have to tear aside the veil that covers tomorrow (cf. 1 Sam 28).

Chapter 18 of the book of Deuteronomy brands all of these ways of seizing control of the future as an "abomination" in God's eyes. It contrasts this use of soothsaying with the very different way of Israel—the way of faith. It does this in the form of a promise: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you . . . him you shall heed" (Deut 18:15). At first glance this seems no more than a declaration that God will establish the prophetic office in Israel and assign its holder the task of interpreting present and future. The harsh critique of false prophets that occurs again and again in the prophetic writings underscores the danger that in practice prophets will assume the role of soothsayers, acting like them and being consulted like them. When this happens, Israel relapses into the very thing that the prophets had been commissioned to prevent.

The conclusion of Deuteronomy returns to the promise and gives it a surprising twist that takes it far beyond the institution of prophecy. In so doing, it gives the figure of the prophet its true meaning. "And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses," we read, "whom the Lord knew face to face" (Deut 34:10). A curious melancholy hangs over this conclusion of the fifth Book of Moses. The promise concerning "a prophet like me" has not yet been fulfilled.

And it now becomes clear that these words do not refer simply to the institution of prophecy, which in fact already existed, but to something different and far greater: the announcement of a new Moses. It had become evident that taking possession of the land in Palestine did not constitute the chosen people's entry into salvation; that Israel was still awaiting its real liberation; that an even more radical kind of exodus was necessary, one that called for a new Moses.

And now we are told what set the first Moses apart, the unique and essential quality of this figure: He had conversed with the Lord "face to face"; as a man speaks to his friend, so he had spoken with God (cf. Ex 33:11). The most important thing about the figure of Moses is neither all the miraculous deeds he is reported to have done nor his many works and sufferings along the way from the "house of bondage in Egypt" through the desert to the threshold of the Promised Land. The most important thing is that he spoke with God as with a friend. This was the only possible springboard for

his works; this was the only possible source of the Law that was to show Israel its path through history.

It now becomes perfectly clear that the prophet is not the Israelite version of the soothsayer, as was widely held at the time and as many so-called prophets considered themselves. On the contrary, the prophet is something quite different. His task is not to report on the events of tomorrow or the next day in order to satisfy human curiosity or the human need for security. He shows us the face of God, and in so doing he shows us the path that we have to take. The future of which he speaks reaches far beyond what people seek from soothsayers. He points out the path to the true “exodus,” which consists in this: Among all the paths of history, the path to God is the true direction that we must seek and find. Prophecy in this sense is a strict corollary to Israel’s monotheism. It is the translation of this faith into the everyday life of a community before God and on the way to him.

“And there has not arisen a prophet since in Israel like Moses.” This judgment gives an eschatological flavor to the promise that “the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me.” Israel is allowed to hope for a new Moses, who has yet to appear, but who will be raised up at the appropriate hour. And the characteristic of this “prophet” will be that he converses with God face-to-face, as a friend does with a friend. His distinguishing note will be his immediate relation with God, which enables him to communicate God’s will and word firsthand and unadulterated. And that is the saving intervention which Israel—indeed, the whole of humanity—is waiting for.

At this point, though, we need to recall another remarkable story that the Book of Exodus recounts concerning Moses’ relationship with God. There we are told that Moses asked God, “I pray thee, show me thy glory” (Ex 33:18). God refuses his request: “You cannot see my face” (Ex 33:20). Moses is placed near God in the cleft of a rock, and God passes by with his glory. As he passes, God covers Moses with his own hand, but he withdraws it at the end: “You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Ex 33:23).

This mysterious text played an important role in the history of Jewish and Christian mysticism; it served as the basis for attempts to discern how far contact with God can extend in this life and where the boundaries of mystical vision lie. In terms of the present question, the main point is that although Moses’ immediate relation to God makes him the great mediator of Revelation, the mediator of the Covenant, it has its limits. He does not behold God’s face, even though he is permitted

to enter into the cloud of God's presence and to speak with God as a friend. The promise of a "prophet like me" thus implicitly contains an even greater expectation: that the last prophet, the new Moses, will be granted what was refused to the first one—a real, immediate vision of the face of God, and thus the ability to speak entirely from seeing, not just from looking at God's back. This naturally entails the further expectation that the new Moses will be the mediator of a greater covenant than the one that Moses was able to bring down from Sinai (cf. Heb 9:11–24).

This is the context in which we need to read the conclusion of the prologue to John's Gospel: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (Jn 1:18). It is in Jesus that the promise of the new prophet is fulfilled. What was true of Moses only in fragmentary form has now been fully realized in the person of Jesus: He lives before the face of God, not just as a friend, but as a Son; he lives in the most intimate unity with the Father.

We have to start here if we are truly to understand the figure of Jesus as it is presented to us in the New Testament; all that we are told about his words, deeds, sufferings, and glory is anchored here. This is the central point, and if we leave it out of account, we fail to grasp what the figure of Jesus is really all about, so that it becomes self-contradictory and, in the end, unintelligible. The question that every reader of the New Testament must ask—where Jesus' teaching came from, how his appearance in history is to be explained—can really be answered only from this perspective. The reaction of his hearers was clear: This teaching does not come from any school. It is radically different from what can be learned in schools. It is not the kind of explanation or interpretation that is taught there. It is different; it is interpretation "with authority." Later we will ponder Jesus' words, and then we will have to return to this judgment on the part of his hearers and delve more deeply into its significance.

Jesus' teaching is not the product of human learning, of whatever kind. It originates from immediate contact with the Father, from "face-to-face" dialogue—from the vision of the one who rests close to the Father's heart. It is the Son's word. Without this inner grounding, his teaching would be pure presumption. That is just what the learned men of Jesus' time judged it to be, and they did so precisely because they could not accept its inner grounding: seeing and knowing face-to-face.

Again and again the Gospels note that Jesus withdrew

“to the mountain” to spend nights in prayer “alone” with his Father. These short passages are fundamental for our understanding of Jesus; they lift the veil of mystery just a little; they give us a glimpse into Jesus’ filial existence, into the source from which his action and teaching and suffering sprang. This “praying” of Jesus is the Son conversing with the Father; Jesus’ human consciousness and will, his human soul, is taken up into that exchange, and in this way human “praying” is able to become a participation in this filial communion with the Father.

Adolf von Harnack famously claimed that Jesus’ message was about the Father, not about the Son, and that Christology therefore has no place in it. The fallacy of this argument is evident from what we have been saying. Jesus is only able to speak about the Father in the way he does because he is the Son, because of his filial communion with the Father. The Christological dimension—in other words, the mystery of the Son as revealer of the Father—is present in everything Jesus says and does. Another important point appears here: We have said that in Jesus’ filial communion with the Father, his human soul is also taken up into the act of praying. He who sees Jesus sees the Father (cf. Jn 14:9). The disciple who walks with Jesus is thus caught up with him into communion with God. And that is what redemption means: this stepping beyond the limits of human nature, which had been there as a possibility and an expectation in man, God’s image and likeness, since the moment of creation.