

Keys to the Bible

by

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Editor's note: The following is from an updated translation of the essay, approved by the estate of Frithjof Schuon.

In order to understand the nature of the Bible and its meaning, it is essential to have recourse to the ideas of both symbolism and revelation; without an exact and, in the measure necessary, sufficiently profound understanding of these key ideas, the approach to the Bible remains hazardous and risks engendering grave doctrinal, psychological, and historical errors. Here it is above all the idea of revelation that is indispensable, for the literal meaning of the Bible, particularly in the Psalms and in the words of Jesus, affords sufficient food for piety apart from any question of symbolism; but this nourishment would lose all its vitality and all its liberating power without an adequate idea of revelation or of suprahuman origin.

Other passages, particularly in Genesis, though also in texts such as the Song of Songs, remain an enigma in the absence of traditional commentaries. When approaching Scripture, one should always pay the greatest attention to rabbinical and cabalistic commentaries and—in Christianity—to the patristic and mystical commentaries; then will it be seen how the word-for-word meaning practically never suffices by itself and how apparent naïveties, inconsistencies, and contradictions resolve themselves in a dimension of profundity for which one must possess the key. The literal meaning is frequently a cryptic language that more often veils than reveals and that is only meant to furnish clues to truths of a cosmological, metaphysical, and mystical order; the Oriental traditions are unanimous concerning this complex and multidimensional interpretation of sacred texts. According to Meister Eckhart, the Holy Spirit teaches all truth; admittedly, there is a literal meaning that the author had in mind, but as God is the author of Holy Scripture, every true meaning is at the same time a literal meaning; for all that is true comes from the Truth itself, is contained in it, springs from it, and is willed by it. And so with Dante in his *Convivio*: “The Scriptures can be understood, and ought to be explained, principally in four senses. One is called literal. . . . The second is called allegorical. . . . The third sense is called moral. . . . The fourth sense is called anagogical, that is, beyond sense (*sovrasenso*); and this is when a Scripture is spiritually expounded, which, while true in its literal sense, refers beyond it to the higher things of the eternal Glory, as we may see in that Psalm of the Prophet, where he says that when Israel went out of Egypt Judea became holy and free. Which, although

manifestly true according to the letter, is nonetheless true in its spiritual meaning, namely, that the soul, in forsaking its sins, is made holy and free in its powers” (*Trattato Secondo*, I).

As regards Biblical style—setting aside certain variations that are of no importance here—it is important to understand that the sacred or suprahuman character of the text could never be manifested in an absolute way through language, which perforce is human; the divine quality referred to appears rather through the wealth of superposed meanings and in the theurgic power of the text when it is thought and pronounced and written.

Equally important is the fact that the Scriptures are sacred, not because of their subject matter and the way in which it is dealt with, but because of their degree of inspiration, or what amounts to the same, their divine origin; it is this that determines the contents of the book, and not the reverse. The Bible can speak of a multitude of things other than God without being the less sacred for it, whereas other books can deal with God and exalted matters and still not be the divine Word.

The apparent incoherence in certain sacred texts results ultimately from the disproportion between divine Truth and human language: it is as if this language, under the pressure of the Infinite, were shattered into a thousand disparate pieces or as if God had at His disposal no more than a few words to express a thousand truths, thus obliging Him to use all sorts of ellipses and paraphrases. According to the Rabbis, “God speaks succinctly”; this also explains the syntheses in sacred language that are incomprehensible *a priori*, as well as the superposition of meanings already mentioned. The role of the orthodox and inspired commentators is to intercalate in sentences, when too elliptic, the implied and unexpressed clauses, or to indicate in what way or in what sense a certain statement should be taken, besides explaining the different symbolisms, and so forth. It is the orthodox commentary and not the word-for-word meaning of the Torah that acts as law. The Torah is said to be “closed”, and the sages “open” it; and it is precisely this “closed” nature of the Torah that renders necessary from the start the Mishnah or commentary that was given in the tabernacle when Joshua transmitted it to the Sanhedrin. It is also said that God gave the Torah during the day and the Mishnah during the night and that the Torah is infinite in itself, whereas the Mishnah is inexhaustible as it flows forth in duration. It should also be noted that there are two principal degrees of inspiration, or even three if the orthodox commentaries are included; Judaism expresses the difference between the first two degrees by comparing the inspiration of Moses to a bright mirror and that of the other prophets to a dark mirror.

The two keys to the Bible are, as already stated, the ideas of symbolism and revelation. Too often revelation has been approached in a psychological, hence purely naturalistic and relativistic, sense. In reality revelation is the fulgurant irruption of a knowledge that comes, not from an individual or collective subconscious, but on the contrary from a supraconsciousness, which though latent in all beings nonetheless immensely surpasses its individual and psychological crystallizations. In saying that “the kingdom of God is within you”, Jesus Christ

means not that Heaven—or God—is of a psychological order, but simply that access to spiritual and divine realities is to be found at the center of our being, and it is from this center precisely that revelation springs forth when the human ambience offers a sufficient reason for it to do so and when therefore a predestined human vehicle presents itself, namely, one capable of conveying this outflow.

But clearly the most important basis for what we have just spoken of is the admission that a world of intelligible light exists, both underlying and transcending our consciousness; the knowledge of this world, or this sphere, entails as a consequence the negation of all psychologism and likewise all evolutionism. In other words, psychologism and evolutionism are nothing but makeshift hypotheses to compensate for the absence of this knowledge.

To affirm then that the Bible is both symbolistic and revealed means, on the one hand, that it expresses complex truths in a language that is indirect and full of imagery and, on the other, that its source is neither the sensorial world nor the psychological or rational plane, but rather a sphere of reality that transcends these planes and immensely envelops them, while yet in principle being accessible to man through the intellective and mystical center of his being, or through the “heart”, if one prefers, or pure “Intellect”. It is the Intellect which comprises in its very substance the evidence for the sphere of reality that we are speaking of and which thus contains the proof of it, if this word can have a meaning in the domain of direct and participative perception. Indeed the classical prejudice of scientism, or the fault in its method if one wishes, is to deny any mode of knowledge that is suprasensorial and suprarational, and in consequence to deny the planes of reality to which these modes refer and which constitute, precisely, the sources both of revelation and of intellection. Intellection—in principle—is for man what revelation is for the collectivity; in principle, we say, for in fact man cannot have access to direct intellection—or *gnosis*—except by virtue of a pre-existing scriptural revelation. What the Bible describes as the fall of man or the loss of Paradise coincides with our separation from total intelligence; this is why it is said that “the kingdom of God is within you”, and again: “Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” The Bible itself is the multiple and mysterious objectification of this universal Intellect or *Logos*: it is thus the projection, by way of images and enigmas, of what we carry in a quasi-inaccessible depth at the bottom of our heart; and the facts of sacred History—where nothing is left to chance—are themselves cosmic projections of the unfathomable divine Truth.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

(Ptolemy) desired Eleazar the priest to send him the Old Testament, whereof he had heard great commendations, and therefore he meant to put it into his famous library. Eleazar sent it in Hebrew, and then he desired interpreters of him, and he sent him seventy-two, six of every tribe, all most perfect in the Greek and Hebrew. Their translation (into Greek) do we now usually call the Septuagint. The report of their divine concord therein is admirable: for Ptolemy having (to try their faith) made each one translate by himself, there was not one word of difference between them, either in sense or order, but all was one, as if only one had done it all, because indeed there was but one spirit in them all.

De Civitate Dei, XVIII, xlii.

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Meister Eckhart says, and so do other masters, that in the course of nature it is really the higher which is ever more ready to pour its power out into the lower than the lower is ready to receive it. The highest heaven, for instance, is turning far more rapidly than the rest which run against it. However fast the lower heavens race against the upper, in order to receive the influx from it, the highest heaven will go harder still both as to pace and influx. So God is vastly quicker to pour out his grace than man to take it in. There is no dearth of God with us; what dearth there is wholly ours who make not ready to receive his grace.