

# DIALECTIC AND BIBLICAL REVELATION: A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH

## THE WORLD OF PHYSICS

The philosophy, ladies and gentlemen, dear brothers and sisters, - the Western philosophy, has upset our perception! Because our dialectical philosophy, of which we are so proud here in the West, has drawn a line between what we can see and imagine, which is physics, and what we *cannot* see and imagine, namely, metaphysics.

In the world of physics we find the whole of finite creation: this earth, the air we breathe and every person with his emotions and behavior. But it also includes the sun, the moon, the stars which we can see as well as all the planets and galaxies that we cannot see. This is what we call the world of physics. For physics is all what we can see and imagine.

On the other hand there is the so-called world of metaphysics, - as it is called in classical philosophy - the dimension to which all the infinite, which a person can not imagine and what is seemingly incomprehensible to him, is confined to. This includes death, the migration of the soul after death, the angelic beings and not least, God himself.

All that is unknown to man, what he can neither understand nor comprehend - because it does not belong to the world of physics - man has simply rationalized

away and confined it into the world of metaphysics. Therefore this metaphysics seems to be a world that does not exist for the "rational" thinking, because everything that we mean by it, cannot be verified empirically.

Many people who think they are objective and rational, brag about it saying there is no such thing as "God", "angelic beings" or life after death. They think this is only myth. But reality shows us that every person likes to live as long as possible and experience happiness and joy. That is why so much is invested into medicine, because everyone hopes to prolong his life through these measures and find a replacement for metaphysics, which will bring his existence to an end.

Because - and this is a fact of the world of physics - most phenomena of life are not explicable or precisely measurable by scientific terms, especially when it comes to the threshold of life and knowledge: e.g. the limits between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness or being awake and sleep. Here, metaphysical elements are always involved, which are not verifiable with the usual test methods of physics, and respectively are not compatible with our present state of knowledge.

Regarding this subject I am not only concerned about supernatural phe-

nomena. Normal life itself is often so complex that it is incomprehensible. Why, for example, must there always be war in our world? Why is there so much hatred and discontent among people? Why is peace such an unrealistic goal? For me, "peace" is more of a metaphysical concept, which is used verbally by every politician, but in reality can not be achieved by anyone.

These are simple facts in life that constantly make us curious, because they happen to us every day and we have no solution for them. In my opinion, these are metaphysical processes that actually exist in the midst of our physical world. We do not have to reach out for the stars nor do we have to approach the limits of life in order to delve in metaphysical questions. They are much closer to us than we are aware of. We only neglect them so that we may not be confronted with them.

Just as our politics is doing it currently, by virtually detaching the debt of our global financial system from the banks through so-called "bad" banks, in order to make it look as if we still have a healthy financial system, we have also virtually separated the reality of metaphysics from our world of physics. We think that metaphysics has nothing to do with our world and that the world of metaphysics does not exist at all. This is not true, though. Because reality always brings us back down to earth.

So there is *no* dividing line between the world of physics, the explicable world, and the world of metaphysics, which is mostly inexplicable. On the contrary, if only for the consideration of our everyday life, we face so many different processes and phenomena in life, both comprehensible and *in*comprehensible,

which interact with each other and affect our lives. Trying to draw a line in between these two dimensions would create an illusion and alienate us from the real world which we live in. Only by accepting the reality of both dimensions of life, can we actually live. Anything else would make us strangers to the real life.

A *logical* separation between the two worlds of physics and metaphysics can indeed be useful in order to investigate the theoretical aspects of each corresponding world. But defining physics as the "real" and metaphysics as the "unreal" world would be fatal, since it would prevent us from developing our awareness rather than promoting it. Therefore the philosophical separation between physics and metaphysics has to *disappear* in rational thinking, otherwise we are at risk of limiting our God-given knowledge rather than developing it further.

## THE WORLD OF METAPHYSICS

Now, metaphysics, as already indicated, is not always comprehensible for us humans and very difficult to measure, compared with physics. That is why we have to rely on the world of metaphysics to open itself for us so that we may have access to it and understand the problems and phenomena of its world. These phenomena include the questions dealing with the threshold of life, such as birth and death etc., upon which we as humans have very little influence. This also includes the behaviour between people, whose problems can be analyzed and influenced by psychology and sociology, but can not be resolved. These basic questions of life which belong to metaphysics remain largely unanswered although many abstract

theories have been discussed. But it remains impossible to respond clearly to them since there is more to it than what we know from our physical world – much more.

The Book of Job from the Old Testament is an excellent example of the struggle between the physical reality and meta-physical encounter with the facts of life, of happiness and unhappiness, which any human being must go through every day! How can man be in control of his own life as long as this meta-level exists which determines his life from outside and which again and again upsets his own plans?

This is the tragedy that we see in this book and the tragedy in which the counselors of Job found themselves, who wanted to explore the psychological, sociological and theological causes of his misfortune. But as is often the case in life, the advice of people who are trapped in the physical dimension of our world themselves, has no more value than hot air. Their advice can not succeed even if their intentions were good. Because the meta-level, i.e. the meta-processes, which determine our lives and which cannot be directly influenced, remain unaffected by it.

But, and here we see the profound wisdom of this book, Job finds hope in his despair and a light that illuminates out of the world of metaphysics into the darkness of the world of physics, in which he is caught, and shows him the way out of his despair. This causes him to say (Job 19:25): **I know that my Redeemer lives!** Job has recognized that the dimension of metaphysics really exists, even though we humans cannot explain it rationally, and that it radiates a force which determines our lives. But it is not only that

Job *confesses* this meta-level, which is of relevance here, but he also recognizes, and indeed, *believes* that this highest authority, God, who cannot be proven and cannot be influenced - as his three advisers have been trying to do - does not want to be to his disadvantage but rather to his advantage and, indeed, to his salvation!

What led Job to this realization and this unshakable faith?

It is the WORD of God that spoke to Job, and which revealed to him the depth and breadth of the glory of God. It is this revelation that God gave his righteous servant Job, that made him take a look at the limited human apprehension and the unlimited presence of God, especially in this world we call physics and in which we live in. Generally speaking, there were no great philosophical insights that led Job to this “rational” faith. It is his knowledge about the physical dimension of life in which he lives in and the enormous metaphysical processes which have affected his life, which evoke in him respect for the Almighty. After all, **the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom** (Job 28:28; Ps 111:10).

But the central event in the Book of Job is not the fear of God in itself, which is the basis for God to speak with Job, rather the fact that this all-powerful and omnipotent God of hosts tried hard to convey himself to Job and interpret to him the metaphysical dimension and make it clear that HE is God, who is behind the metaphysical processes which Job has experienced. This God is not only the One who gives life but also the One who preserves it, so that not a hair falls off the head on the ground without his knowledge.

While the righteous Job becomes so small and insignificant in the face of the speeches of God, at the same time he is incredibly comforted through the efforts of God, to explain to him, the non-comprehending Job, the metaphysics of life which the Almighty alone overlooks and controls and to bring him to reason and not to make of himself a fool as his advisers did, who claimed to be able to understand and to evaluate everything under the sun, physics and metaphysics. God saved him from this pride. This confirms also that Job realized that man can never understand metaphysics on his own. Only the person to whom God reveals this knowledge will be able to understand it. *Thus the knowledge of mankind is directly related to what God has revealed.*

The whole world of physics which we perceive with our senses, is nothing else than what God has previously spoken of and revealed to us. Because what we see, feel and understand is what God has spoken of beforehand and commanded it to be. Thus, our physics was generated from the metaphysics of God. And all that God has not spoken of or not revealed yet, man can not know either, because it has not yet become "real" physics. This in turn means that the metaphysics which we cannot grasp yet, such as the promises of God in the Bible, is no unreal world, but only that it has not yet been made physically manifest for us humans by the revelation of the Almighty. For example, the promise of the *eternal covenant* which God promised to Abraham in his son Isaac, or the eternal throne of David, which He promised to his descendant, the Messiah. All of these promises we can conceive today, because God revealed it and made it "tangible" in the person of Jesus Christ: in his birth, in his

life, in his death and, finally, in his physical resurrection. But even though Jesus Christ is risen from the dead according to these promises, we must all *die* by faith in this promise until the day when the Son of man will be revealed by God himself, according to Daniel 7 and 12, and make physically visible the day of Judgment which will implement the phenomenon of the resurrection of the dead into reality. However, we have received a deposit for this physical reality: the Holy Spirit which was poured out into our hearts. This "physical" reality, however, is exclusively based on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ from the dead. Anyone who does not confess the truth of the resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth, can not receive the Spirit of promise as a reality in his life<sup>1</sup>.

This is the profound value of the word of God which has created our physical world. Each revelation of the living God creates a new reality in our physical world, which is *irreversible*. Thus, it is the metaphysics of God, which brings about the physics of our world. This is done through His Word alone.

Thus we are given access both to the world of physics and to the world of metaphysics only through the word of God. Because it is so, God has seen to it that his word is also written down and transmitted to us. Not to tell stories, but because they are revelations out of metaphysics that God has given us. These are revelations that have created the world (Gen 1:1ff), and these are revelations that have obtained salvation for us. These revelations of God are valid until the day of resurrection.

These revelations of God, which are all given by his word, always have created a new reality, a new "physics". First, the

original creation and then throughout salvation history (Abraham to the resurrection of Jesus Christ). The ultimate metaphysical process or reality which God initiated on earth aims towards the resurrection of the dead which will begin with the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

## THE REVEALED WORD OF GOD IN SEMITIC LANGUAGE

Now in Western cultures, where we see ourselves as rational people, we have a basic problem. All persons who we know from the Bible and who received the revealed word of God, did not experience this in the complicated German language, nor in the pragmatic English language. It was not even given in the language of philosophers, in Latin or Greek. That creates now a problem for us because we cannot therefore rely directly on our linguistic and cultural-historical tools which could help us to interpret this revelation of God in the right way.

These revelations of the Bible happened indeed in a Semitic language, Hebrew first, then Aramaic. The Semitic language structure, however, in no way resembles the Indo-European languages and has no direct relationship to it. This fact makes it even more difficult for us in the Occident to properly classify the hermeneutical, culture-historical as well as the etymological<sup>2</sup> contexts of this language. For a language is not just about words and phrases, but also consists of a preconception, how certain words and in which context they are used. This is especially a problem if the languages are different structurally, both in the sentence structure as well as in the grammatical structure.

This uncertain interpretation of the Semitic language has led to the problems of Western theology in the translation of the Old Testament and its interpretation, with some strange results. Not least, liberal theology has even tried to separate the entire Old Testament from the New. It has forgotten that the New Testament without the Old Covenant can have no meaning and basis at all. For where there is no Torah and the Prophets, through whom the word of God could be revealed, it follows that there can be no process of revelation which could make the new messianic understanding of salvation become a reality (physics / flesh). Because these facts can only be revealed and implemented into reality from God through His Word. Whoever does not have these words, therefore cannot *recognize* the Messiah and understand his true meaning. And that's exactly what creates confusion in today's Christianity. Because the fundamental *importance* and *impact* of the Messianic salvation history is established only *through* the word of revelation.

The Jewish scholars in the third century BC, have already recognized that through the increasing Hellenization of the ancient world, many Diaspora Jews could no longer understand their own scripture properly, because through the Greek language, many Semitic patterns of language and thought were lost. Therefore they considered it important to translate the canon of the Old Testament into the Greek language, while taking over as much as possible of the Hebrew pattern of scripture into the translation. However, if one reads today the so-called Septuagint and does not consider the Semitic background of the translation, a lot will be locked out from the original revelation of God.

Therefore it is essential for any theological and scientific interpretation of Holy Scripture, to consider the foundations of the Semitic language for understanding the Bible. Without this basic view of Scripture, a proper interpretation of God's revelation cannot be guaranteed. This Biblical-Semitic approach applies to both the grammatical level of the Hebrew and Aramaic language and its literary structure. Only a good and solid knowledge of these language structures and their literary characteristics allow the exegete and interpreter to draw correct conclusions from the text. Because it happens very easily that "foreign" views are introduced into the text – for us in the West these are the Greek philosophical approaches – which would alienate the proposition of a Hebrew text.

One simple example is the Greek word LOGOS and its Hebrew opposite DAWAR. Usually translated, this means in German "the Word". But the term LOGOS in Greek language means "truth", "wisdom" or "enlightenment." In Hebrew, however, DAWAR means "God's utterance," "law" or even "existence". Because God's word and utterance is as much as the physical reality and is therefore "the law of life." If you want to try to translate the contents of the term "word" into your own language, then you should know what the term means in its Semitic origin, before it was translated into Greek, and having received an intrinsic change through this translation.

As Westerners, we will remain beginners in these intercultural issues of the Semitic language. On the other hand, this question is not insurmountable, if the problem is recognized. Because then you are able to work and do research

in this direction. It only becomes a real problem if theology is not willing to be corrected in order to consider these deeper layers of the Semitic language and literature. Then there will be fatal mistakes, as we have seen them in the past and as we know them today which appear in the many so-called "modern" translations of the Bible. Martin Luther had already recognized the relevance of this Biblical-Semitic hermeneutics. Because of this problem he translated some verses of the Bible dynamically, since a literal translation would have changed the Biblical-Semitic proposition of the original text.

We are happy to be able to lay another milestone in this history of research of the revelation of God with this conference (and this volume of STT), and that Dr. Meir Sternberg, Professor of Literature at Tel Aviv University in Israel, has accepted our invitation to give us an insight into the Semitic literary science of the Bible and to introduce us to its linguistic and cultural-related issues in his wonderful and articulate manner.

## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Romans (5,5-8; 10,10). Here we see how two metaphysical facts depend upon each other.

<sup>2</sup> Explanation of the o word or phrase in a given meaning.

PETER WASSERMANN, Stuttgart, is Mission Director of EUSEBIA-Missionsdienste, founder of EUSEBIA School of Theology (EST) and co-editor of STT. International lecturing in the area of Biblical Theology, Islam and Missions.