tribes, and peoples, and tongues: standing before the throne, and in sight of the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands: and they cried with a loud voice, saying: Salvation to our God, who sitteth upon the throne, and to the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and the ancients, and the four living creatures: and they fell down before the throne upon their faces, and adored God, saying: Amen: benediction, and glory, and wisdom and thanksgiving, honour, and power, and strength to our God for ever and ever.'[2]

[2] Apoc. vii, 9.

THE WORD OF GOD INCARNATE[1]

H. J. RICHARDS

ANY treatment of the Incarnation would obviously have to give some consideration to the two heresies which have distorted the truth contained in this mystery. At one extreme lies Arianism, which wanted to treat Christ as if he was exclusively human, with the divine about him no more than superimposed by a sort of adoption. At the other extreme is Docetism, which wanted to treat Christ as if he was exclusively divine, with the human about him only a sort of optical illusion. Both are heresies. The truth lies between the two extremes. Christ is the Word of God incarnate, one person in two complete natures, divine and human.

For an article appearing in a number devoted to BIBLE AND WORSHIP, this excursion into speculative theology will appear less enigmatic if it is realized that Christ was not the first time that the Word of God had become flesh. A sort of incarnation had taken place for over a thousand years beforehand, when the Word of God slowly took shape in the books which we accept as the Bible. And you can be as wrong about the Bible as you can about Christ. You can imagine that it is an exclusively human book which has been subsequently approved of and adopted by God—in which case I will call you a Biblical Arian. Or you can imagine that it is an exclusively divine work, with the various

[1] Reprinted with kind permission from *Scripture*, April 1958.

human authors acting merely as God's dictaphones—in which case I will call you a Biblical Docetist. The truth lies between the two extremes. The Bible is the Word of God incarnate, completely divine and completely human.

Which of those two errors are we most in danger of falling into? Fifty years ago it would almost certainly have been the first. Anyone living in any sort of intellectual atmosphere would be an incipient Arian. He would be terribly excited about the amount of light that was being thrown on the Bible by the new discoveries in the field of archeology, geology, anthropology, ethnology, psychology and the rest. For the first time, perhaps, he would be seeing the Bible in its full human context, seeing it as a thoroughly human book, subject apparently, like any other human book, to every human limitation. And he would be tempted to come to the conclusion, like so many others were doing, that all this nonsense about the Word of God had been exploded by Science.

That danger does not exist any longer today, at any rate not for Catholics. The Church has condemned that conclusion, and reasserted in even stronger terms the divine nature of the Bible. As faithful children we naturally accept the Church's decision. Our real danger lies in imagining that that is the end of the matter. Evelyn Waugh put across the point to perfection when he described the eager convert in *Brideshead Revisited*, who was asked how many persons there were in the Trinity and replied: 'However many you say, Father.' As far as he was concerned, if the Pope said it was going to rain, then it would. And if in fact it turned out a fine day, then, as he puts it, it would be 'sort of raining spiritually, only we were too sinful to see it'. Our real danger lies in accepting our dogmas not only unquestioningly (as we should) but unintelligently. If, in spite of all the discoveries made at the beginning of the century, the Church insists that the Bible is the Word of God, she is not asking us to stop thinking. She is inviting us to think harder still. The discoveries have not thereby ceased to exist, and the human nature of the Bible is still there whether we like it or not. The Church's ban on Arianism is not a permission to lapse into a sort of Docetism.

In fact, we did not really need the scientific approach to the Bible to teach us that it was written by men and not by automatons. We knew beforehand, without being told, that the

various books of which it is made up reflect the whole range of the human temperament, from the bleak pessimism of Ecclesiastes to the self-satisfaction of Ecclesiasticus, from the pedantic clumsiness of the author of Paralipomena to the effortless poetry of some of the psalms, from the fire and passion of St Paul to the peaceful calm of St John. St Paul dictated his highly complicated thought at top speed, and the fact that the result is inspired does not stop it being highly complicated. The author of the second book of Maccabees, on the other hand, found writing a laborious and painful business, and his inspiration did not prevent him from concluding his work with 'That is the best I could do'. The human personalities stand out, and anyone who opens the book to read it can discover it for himself. What we needed the scientific approach for was to show us that this human nature of the book is not merely a question of style and personality. It goes much deeper, to affect the whole background of these authors, their whole mentality, their whole outlook. What we needed the scientific approach for was to show us that this book is so thoroughly human that from the first page to the last every possible human allowance has to be made if we are to understand it.

Some examples may put the point more clearly. These authors *thought* like men of their time. If all men of the time conceived of the earth as the centre of the universe, a flat disc covered with a sort of colander through which the rain came down, then your biblical author is going to think and express himself in that way too. It was impossible, outside of a miracle, for him to conceive of it in any other way, and it would be pointless to demand that he should.

These authors *wrote* like men of their time. It was the custom of the time to compose the history of your tribe or your people or your nation by simply stringing together all the various records and traditions you could lay your hands on (whether they agreed with each other or not), and leaving it to the reader to make his choice between the inconsistent details, then your biblical author is going to do the same. To read his work as if it were history in our sense of the word would be to make nonsense of it.[2]

[2] An evening paper recently advertised a series of articles under the title of (one might have expected it) 'The Bible is True'. It promised to devote one of its contributions exclusively to showing that Goliath *was* a giant; new discoveries had made it possible to tell within half an inch how tall he was. It is difficult to conceive what such discoveries

The *approach* of these authors was the approach of a particular civilization and mentality. When a Westerner is presented with a story (Eden, the Tower of Babel, the Flood), his very first question is almost certain to be, 'Did it really happen?' The Semite, when he is told a story, asks, 'What does it mean?' The biblical authors are Semites (and that is true even of the New Testament writers). They are going to write with the firm conviction that the significance of a story is the most important (not to say the most interesting) thing about it. Not that they are going to invent facts or deliberately falsify the facts at their disposal; but their eye is always going to be on the theological meaning of the traditions with which they are dealing, and they will not be half so concerned as we are over their historical accuracy.

These examples, and a thousand others that one could pick, are generally put under the heading of *literary form*. Some scholars have given the unfortunate impression that the existence of different literary forms was a new discovery. We are, of course, using them constantly without even adverting to the fact. The speaker on a platform does not have to inquire into the genealogy and social status of every member of his audience before he allows himself to address them as 'Ladies and Gentlemen'. It is the accepted literary form for that sort of occasion. Even the business man who is guilty of the sharpest practice is addressed not as 'Offspring of Satan' but as 'Dear Sir'. It is the accepted literary form. It is difficult to conceive of anyone in this century obtuse enough to misunderstand these words. It is, however, possible to envisage such a letter being dug up in two thousand years' time, and the conclusion drawn that the person to whom the letter was addressed was an intimate friend of the writer (and even possibly a member of the peerage). The same words mean different things in different contexts. When a thing is taken out of its context it tends to make nonsense.

All this is very obvious when it is pointed out; but when we read the Bible, we treat it so uniformly as the Word of God,

might be, but even the discovery of a document describing the colour of his boots could not hide the fact that Goliath is a very secondary detail inside one account of David's rise to fame, and that there is a second account which does not even mention him. There is even a third record at the end of David's story which puts down Goliath's death to one of David's generals. The biblical author could hardly have made it clearer that the reader must make his own judgment about the Goliath story (and if necessary about his height).

it is printed so uniformly in the same print, that we forget to make allowance for the fact that it is a whole library, containing prose and verse, history and legend, legislation and prayer, national epics and private diaries, and a whole host of other literary forms for which no equivalent exists in our own literatures. Each of these must be recognized for what it is, and judged according to the rules for that form. Otherwise we will only understand the meaning of the words, not the meaning of the man who wrote them. What we needed the scientific approach for was to put us back into the full context of the men who wrote these books, and to show us that whether or not this is the Word of God transcending time and place, it is first of all a thoroughly human book, so rooted in time and place that it is unintelligible without reference to it.

Anyone who has learnt to see the Bible in this way will no longer be shocked by the men and women it portrays. We tend to think of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the abstract, as a series of noble and edifying personages, walking across the stage of history with the dignity of stained-glass figures. We open the Bible to find that they were rather primitive bedouins, with moral standards that were lamentably low, if not offensive to pious ears. Anyone who feels that, wants to do a lot more Bible-reading than he does. He needs to make the Bible his constant examination of conscience to see whether his ears are not perhaps too pious, to ask himself whether he has not become rather more fastidious than the God who came down to the level of men like this, the God who was not afraid to walk with them in order to draw them to himself. When the Bible speaks of man, it speaks of him as he is, not as we would like to think him to be.

It speaks of people like Adam, whose first thought on being found out was to find an excuse and put the blame on someone else; people like Jacob, who decided that the ambition he had set his heart on was more important than the question of whether he told a few lies or not; people like Moses, who pleaded his lack of training in order to try and escape the responsibility put on him; people like Jephtah, who in the enthusiasm of the moment made a vow to God and then had to break his heart to be faithful to it; people like Samson, with his roving eye and fickle heart; people like Ruth, who showed such unusual devotion to her mother-in-law that a book had to be written about it; people like Saul,

who found it easy to fight God's battle but difficult to obey God's instructions; people like David, who one moment could dance like a child in the happiness of his intimacy with God, and the next fall from grace as miserably as anyone else; people like the Levite in the parable, who looked the other way after the accident on the Jericho road because he did not want to get mixed up in anything; people like Simon Peter, who had so much faith that he jumped into the sea and so little faith that he went under, who was willing to defend his master with a sword and then broke down under the questions of a serving maid . . . people in fact like ourselves. Because when all is said and done, this book is about us. Not about the comings and goings of some primitive Middle Eastern tribe, but about us, about our aspirations and falls, about our joys and our misery, about the beauty of our calling and our failure to be worthy of it. Here is man as he is, as we know him to be, in all his weakness. And here is God as he is, not an abstract Prime Mover or First Cause, but a God who is interested in men of flesh and blood, a father who bends down to appeal to his wayward children. If we had had the job of inspiring this book, of laying out a blueprint of the sort of thing that God's Word should speak to us, what a strange mixture we should have turned out of speculative theology and hot-house piety. And how very inhuman we would have made it.

The Bible is utterly human. From beginning to end, from the men who wrote it to the men about whom they wrote, from the crossing of the first *t* to the dotting of the last *i*, this book is human through and through. The first thing it asks of us is to accept it at that human level. There are people who are shocked at such a suggestion, who think that such an approach is disrespectful to the divine nature of this book. They might as easily be shocked by the human nature of Christ. This is the flesh in which the Word of God has become incarnate. It is in this humble form that God has revealed his Word. There is no point in saying that we are only interested in what God has to say. We cannot begin to hear what he has to say until we have tuned into the human wavelength on which he has spoken.