



# I

## The Language of Biblical Revelation

Religious sentiments are a universal phenomenon. Atheists are fooling themselves. They substitute equivalents for the God, or gods, they reject, and integrate these into their ideologies. They are prone to imposing their “religion” by force if they come to dominate a society. The twentieth century has provided some striking examples of this.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, we are looking into a different kind of question. We are taking it as a given that we believe in the revelation of the one true God, the living God, in a specific place and

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<sup>1</sup>Within Christendom, distantly descended from the laws by which the emperor Theodosius II made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, monarchies were given religious sanction in this way: James I of England expounded the theory of the “divine right of kings.” In the eighteenth century, rationalist ideology issued paradoxically, during the French Revolution, in the cult of the goddess Reason. In the nineteenth century, the atheistic ideology of Karl Marx conferred an absolute value on its fundamental concepts. The states founded on this ideology canonized it by threatening all who opposed it with death (a situation that persists in some places). Hitler’s national-socialist regime in Germany forcibly imposed a “myth of the twentieth century” (in Rosenberg’s phrase) that represented something of a revival of German paganism. The worshipers of the true God must themselves be on guard against the temptation of totalitarianism, which would impose by force the cult of their God and the rules of the community that is dedicated to him. Examples of this, past and present, are not difficult to find. The true God is thereby misrepresented by social authorities that claim to have faith in him.

time, within a particular human community, within a people and a culture chosen by God in keeping with a secret design that God does not have to explain to us, and supremely in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, heir of this community's tradition.

That God chose this people, and that God directed its history, leaving signs that permit his presence and action to be recognized, are mysterious realities that can be recognized only by faith. This is not to say that the religious instinct that has manifested itself at all times and in every culture has not sketched out paths to lead people toward God, paths that have a measure of authenticity and that God himself has inspired in a certain way.<sup>2</sup> But God's revelation in its entirety has only come once, in Jesus, who was, paradoxically, rejected and put to death by humans, but who became for them the mediator of salvation by his resurrection from the dead. This ultimate reality—as mysterious as God himself—cannot be recognized except by faith. The problem being posed here is this: What language is capable of translating this faith in order to give people a glimpse into the mystery of God and the salvation that is theirs in Jesus Christ?

The language capable of translating this faith is that of the Bible, which was born in the course of a certain history and within the framework of a certain culture. Under what conditions was it written? What characteristics did it receive from its immersion in that history and that culture that made it capable of “speaking God”—that is, translating the mystery of God to which we owe our salvation? These are questions of capital importance for those of faith who are seeking understanding. We will examine two aspects of these questions: (1) In what culture(s) and in what languages(s) did the sovereign action of God take up human speech in order to make that speech a bearer of its own revelation? (2) What traits must

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<sup>2</sup>This is what makes the Christian attitude toward the followers of other religions problematic. Their inward sentiments, their representations of the divine or of the problems posed by human existence, their ideas of morality and of life in community, may contain aspects that derive from a valid interior intuition to which the grace of God is no stranger. This is why, for example, the church fathers did not reject the precise intuitions of Stoic morality. Should not this insight guide our responses today to the religious traditions of India or of Buddhism?

human speech exhibit in order to be capable of translating the inexpressible mystery of this action and of God himself?

## CULTURES AND LANGUAGES

The Bible is inseparable from the cultural framework within which it took shape. We might imagine that for its self-revelation Divine Providence would have chosen one of the great cultures characterized by advanced social development, political power, and a flourishing literature: in the ancient Near East, those of Sumer and Akkadia; or that of Egypt, whose abundant literature we have recovered; or in the Far East, those of China, India, or Japan. The cultures of the ancient Near East nourished those that developed on their ruins, while those of the Far East have left us their ancient masterpieces, and their religious traditions have passed their values on down to the present day. These cultural and religious values—those of the past that have now disappeared in the dust of time and those of the present that the biblical and Christian revelation has not yet profoundly penetrated—should not be condemned, even though their limitations become clearly apparent when they are confronted with the gospel.

Nevertheless, to reveal itself to people, and to make itself a part of humanity through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Divine Providence in fact chose a humble human community undistinguished by either political power or cultural resources: the people of Israel, who were the source of the Judaism into which Jesus was born. Israel, a humble nation amidst the small Canaanite states that surrounded it, was distinguished from them by the continuity of a prophetic ministry that was responsible for the development of monotheistic faith, a phenomenon unparalleled in the history of religion. It contained, of course, beliefs, customs, and cultic rituals inherited from ancient times in a Semitic milieu that was strongly attached to its traditions. The cult of the true God was not imposed in a single day in its fully evolved form; on the contrary, it had to be continually reasserted. It was deepened through difficulties and crises, thanks to the inspired persons who transmitted the divine message in a way faithful to its original revelation. We need not retrace this whole story here.

This message, which culminated in the gospel of Jesus Christ, took form in texts that successively made use of different languages. The first was Hebrew, a Canaanite dialect like Edomite and Ammonite, Phoenician, and, even earlier, Ugaritic. Then, after the national disasters of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., the Babylonian captivity, and the exile and dispersion of the Jews, Aramaic (a Semitic relative of Hebrew) came to dominate as the spoken language.<sup>3</sup> Finally came Greek, into which the ancient texts were translated.

This is not the place to review this entire history. The important observation here is that those persons whom God inspired to deliver and to deepen the divine revelation took up these languages in order to make them vehicles of the word of God. “The word of God”—that is the very expression that they themselves used to describe their actions and their message. It was not the fruit of human philosophical reflection, as took place in Greece and in Hellenistic civilization, but rather a message directly from God, which these persons brought at great risk to their own lives. What kind of speech did they find to transmit the message with which they were entrusted, and to designate the One who had entrusted it to their care?

## THE DESIGNATION OF GOD

### The Word “God” in the Bible

Those who transmitted the revelation did not begin by inventing a special word to designate the One whose messengers they were. They simply took up the existing name of the power that reigned

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<sup>3</sup>In actual Jewish usage Aramaic supplanted Hebrew progressively. This is already observable in the fifth century B.C.E. (see Neh 13:24). Starting in the third century B.C.E., many pseudepigraphical books were written in Aramaic, as is seen in the manuscripts discovered at Qumran (*Enoch*, *Testament of Levi*, other fragments). Five manuscripts of the book of Tobit were recovered there, four in Aramaic and only one in Hebrew. The oldest chapters of the book of Daniel (Dan 2–7) are in Aramaic. The Aramaic portions of the book of Ezra (4:7–22; 5:6–6:12) are diplomatic documents dating from the sixth or fifth century B.C.E. in the Persian Empire.

over the Semitic pantheon. The Hebrew *'El* and the Aramaic *'Elah* (corresponding to the Hebrew *'Eloah*) represent a common word attested in both East Semitic<sup>4</sup> (*Ilu* in Akkadian texts) and West Semitic languages (*'El* in Ugaritic, taken into biblical Hebrew). The root appears in Arabic as *'Ilah*: *Allah* = *'al-'Ilah*, “the God.” Before Islam there was a feminine divinity *'Allat* (= *'al-'Ilat*, “the Goddess”). This name, common to all divinities, sometimes was used in Hebrew in the plural to designate “divine beings” (Ps 58:1 [58:2 MT], metaphorically). But the biblical tradition prefers to use the plural *'Elohim*<sup>5</sup> with a singular meaning. It is a matter not of a plurality of the divine, but of its intensity in its own instruments. The root of the word seems to be the Semitic radical *y/l*, which designates vigor or force—hence its use for animals, *'ayil*, “ram,” and *'ayyal*, “stag,” and for a “great tree,” *'elon*. This connotation also accounts for the associations of the word, in a construct state, in descriptive expressions such as “God of faithfulness” (Ps 31:5 [31:6 MT]), “God of eternity” (Gen 21:33 [= “the eternal God”]), or “God of vengeance” (i.e., of a justice that visits evil upon those who perpetrate it); in allusions to places where God has been revealed—for example, “God of Bethel” (a word that already signifies “house of God,” *beyt-'el*); and with the name of the people whom God protects: “God of Israel” (frequently).

The recognition of God’s uniqueness developed over time, beginning with a practical monotheism that first excluded the worship of any other divinities. The source of this exclusion was not philosophical reflection; it came from a concrete experience of being in relationship with God, an experience that Israelite tradition traced all the way back to the nation’s ancestors, the patriarchs. God was the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” the “God of our fathers” (as in, e.g., Gen 26:24; 28:13; Exod 3:6). God’s absolute uniqueness is affirmed clearly in Deuteronomy (Deut 32:39) and in the “Message of Consolation” contained within the book of Isaiah (Isa 43:10; 44:6; 48:12). The matter is clear in Psalms, where the creator God (cf. Gen 1:1–2:4) is recognized as the God of the interior

<sup>4</sup>See F. M. Cross, “*ל'el*,” *TDOT* 1:242–61, a philological study of this root that takes Semitic parallels into account.

<sup>5</sup>See H. Ringgren, “*ל'elohim*,” *TDOT* 1:267–84.

life, as “my God” (Ps 42:6 [42:7 MT]) or “our God” (Ps 66:8). This is not metaphysical speculation; the people of the Bible were not inclined to abstraction. But God nevertheless constitutes the essential aspect of an original spiritual experience that deepens as the biblical revelation develops. Under these conditions the rejection and negation of other gods is automatic, without the need for any abstract reflection on God’s nature. There are sufficient indications of how God acts in the world and in the lives of people to recognize that God is the Unique One, the Creator, the One to whose initiative people must respond by entering into relationship.

### The Name of God

Within the biblical revelation there is a specific revelation of the “name” of God—that is, of God’s original designation—within narrative texts, prayers, and prophetic discourses. In two important passages in the book of Exodus, which come from different sources (Exod 3:1–14; 6:1–9), God describes himself by revealing his name. How should we understand this name, which expresses the “nature” of God, as every name in the Hebrew language does, describing the reality that it designates? It is likely that there was an older designation that has been preserved in proper names: *Yaho* or *Yahu* or *Yah*. This designation, whose origin is uncertain,<sup>6</sup> is preceded by the account of the “burning bush,”<sup>7</sup> in which Moses interrogates the One who calls himself “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod 3:6), and asks

<sup>6</sup>See D. N. Freedman, P. O’Connor, and H. Ringgren, “יהוה YHWH,” *TDOT* 5:500–21. An excellent clarification is provided by H. Cazelles, “Yahwisme, ou Yahvé et son peuple,” in *Études d’histoire religieuse et de philologie biblique* (SB; Paris: Gabalda, 1996), 35–47. It is interesting that among the Aramaic-speaking Jews who lived at Elephantine in the fifth century B.C.E., the divine name was written as *YHW* (*Yaho* or *Yahu*).

<sup>7</sup>The literary genre of the account must be recognized. It is not “history” in the modern sense of that word; rather, it evokes artistically the origin and meaning of the name that the Israelite tradition gave to God, connecting it with Moses and the Sinai covenant. But the image of the burning bush that is not consumed, symbolic of the eternal God, whom no death can ever overtake, is without parallel in the pagan environment within which the religion of Israel grew up.

by what name he should identify him to his fellow Israelites. In the parallel account from the Priestly tradition God takes the initiative in declaring, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *’El Shadday*,” a problematic designation whose meaning has not been fully elucidated.<sup>8</sup> The answer that God gives in the first dialogue, when interrogated by Moses, is difficult to translate into our language.

This answer depends on a play on words using the verb “to be,” *hayah*, which must be understood in the sense of presence (“being there,” “being present”), not in the abstract sense of existence, as in Greek speculative thought. But the “presence” of the One who “is there” certainly implies that this One exists. Moses poses the question “If . . . they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” (Exod 3:13). God answers in Hebrew, *’ehyeh ’asher ’ehyeh* (Exod 3:14a). The repetition of the verb *hayah* requires the use of the first person in the expression introduced by the relative pronoun; this is a grammatical convention. But the verb has one nuance in the principal proposition, “I am,” and a different one in the subordinate clause, which defines what the subject who speaks is. It is difficult for our language to express the relationship: “I am Who is” would be an unacceptable solecism. The Greek version translates the phrase as “I am the Being” (*ho ōn*), speculatively drawing out the existential value of the verb *einai*. All things considered, we could paraphrase by translating, “I am the one who I AM [spoken of oneself].” Indeed, as the account continues, it depicts God as saying, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod 3:14b). But in what sense should we understand the verb “to be” in this context? Certainly it includes an allusion to existence, but the verb should be understood primarily in the sense of presence: “I am-there,” “I am-with-you.” It is the living God who speaks.

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<sup>8</sup>The current discussion of the origin and meaning of this name is very well presented by H. Niehr and G. Steins in “שַׁדַּי *šadday*,” *TDOT* 14:418–46. The article, written in 1993, contains two full columns of bibliographic references. Parallel terms in other Semitic languages are discussed by H. Niehr, who includes a corresponding bibliography (cols. 1080–83). The closest parallel is the mention of gods called *šaddayin* alongside the *’elabim* in an eighth-century B.C.E. Aramaic inscription from Deir ‘Alla. Nevertheless, the meaning of the word remains obscure.

As for the name “YHWH,” a third-person conjugation of a root related to the attested Aramaic verb *hawah*, “to be,” how was it pronounced? The later cultic tradition, out of respect for the mystery of God, allowed only the Jewish high priest to proclaim it, inside the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. Judging from certain Greek transcriptions of magical texts, we can presume that the word was originally pronounced *Yahweh* (since it was transcribed into Greek as *Iaoue*). The consonants would have had an early vocalization in texts of the prophets and the psalms, but eventually they were given the vowels of the word *Adonay*, “Lord,” by the Masoretes, not out of fear, but out of respect. This is the source of the faulty transcription found in modern languages, *Jehovah*. In the Hebrew manuscripts from Qumran, which are not vocalized, the tetragram “YHWH” often is replaced by four dots or by the pronoun *hu*, “he.” In Greek manuscripts copied by Christian hands the divine name has most generally been replaced by *Kyrios*, “Lord,” a practice bequeathed to the texts of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> But in the Gospels and other books the word *kyrios* is generalized in order to be applied to Jesus. We will examine this point in detail below.

How the name of God would be designated was thus firmly established, and qualifiers began to accumulate to indicate God’s interior dispositions toward humanity as well as God’s acts in creation and in the history of the chosen people and of other nations. By this means, God’s power, goodness, mercy, and interventions in the world to subdue the elements and to send people on religious and political missions were underscored. Each of these things will be examined in detail as we take up the language that refers to them. The essential thing to note here is the concrete character of this language, which nearly always avoids abstraction, until the Greek language begins to be used. We therefore do find abstract language in the New Testament, where God is revealed through the mediation of the person of Jesus, his words and his acts in history. But when the proclamation of the good news and the reflection that unveils the meaning of Jesus’ acts transmit the legacy of the First Testament,

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<sup>9</sup>In Greek texts of both Testaments the word *kyrios* preceded by the article should be translated as “the Lord,” but the absence of the article indicates a proper name that may correspond to the tetragram “YHWH.”

the texts then generally take up the concrete language of the Bible as a whole. As a result, we find the language of both Testaments making use of symbols.

## THE NEED FOR, AND FUNCTION OF, SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE

### Ordinary Language and Symbolic Language

God, the only true God, is not accessible to our senses. We have been given a direct perception of God, but we cannot use it to designate and describe him. Yes, God is present and active, but what is this presence? The prophets of the First Testament evoked God's presence only by communicating God's word; but how did they themselves receive this word, and how were they able to communicate it in intelligible language? In the Christian faith Jesus is the one who revealed this word definitively, by his own words, by his actions, by his life and even his death, and ultimately by his resurrection from the dead. But did he ever *define* God? For that matter, how could God be defined other than by the simple affirmation of his existence? Thomas Aquinas, in one article of his *Summa theologiae*, poses the question of whether God's essence and existence are identical. He answers, "We cannot know what the *esse* of God is [God's existence], any more than we can know God's essence [what God is]. . . . What we do know is that the proposition we form with regard to God when we say 'God exists' is a true proposition: we know this by the effects of this existence."<sup>10</sup>

In other words, even if by faith we know with certainty that God exists, we still have no direct view or clear definition of this existence. The "mystery" of God is *above* what we are able to say about it. In that case, what language must we use to speak of God?

The same question must be posed regarding Jesus Christ, but not regarding his existence and his activity on earth right up to his death; on that point, we may conduct historical inquiries, drawing

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<sup>10</sup> Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* Ia, q. 3, a. 4. The text has been lightly paraphrased to make its very dense Latin more intelligible.

on witnesses who speak of him and allow our inquiry to take place within the purview of rational understanding.<sup>11</sup> Critical discussions of the texts that speak of Jesus would be meaningless if they did not rest upon the same kind of facts that would be adduced for any other person in human history. His entrance into the glory of God by his resurrection, however, is a matter for another kind of understanding.

Thus these questions are raised: How are we to speak of Christ in glory? How does his present admission into the glory of God retrospectively clarify what his human condition was, and what his relationship was to God during his life on earth? In short, how does it clarify the reality of the mystery of his person, the meaning of his deeds and of his death, his decisive role in the salvation of humanity, and so forth? The New Testament is centered on these mysterious realities, which are beyond any historical inquiry.<sup>12</sup> But how can it speak of them, since their existence also belongs to the invisible domain where the reality of God is hidden? What language does the New Testament use to speak of these things?

We can point to many places in the New Testament itself that demonstrate the inability of ordinary language to describe realities that are inaccessible to our senses. In his first letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul must correct the ideas that his correspondents hold regarding the Christian hope, which ultimately is oriented toward the resurrection. He takes up a question that the Corinthians have posed, a question that they have formed in keeping with Greek thought: What can the resurrection of the body possibly mean?

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<sup>11</sup>Nevertheless, it must be observed that if we seek at all costs to achieve an *exact* historical understanding of Jesus, we risk imposing an undue restraint on the truth of the texts that evoke his person. When it comes to the facts of his life and to his words, these witnesses can present a true understanding of him, even if they remain vague as to what his exact deeds and words were, in keeping with the accepted conventions of the time in which they were written and the development that the interpretation of his memory experienced as the gospel was proclaimed.

<sup>12</sup>I touch on these questions in chs. 20–25 of my book *Jésus de Nazareth, Christ et Seigneur: Une lecture de l'Évangile* (2 vols.; LD; Paris: Cerf, 1997–1998), 2:347–522. I treated the chapters of Luke and Matthew that evoke the birth and infancy of Jesus in this section of my book because they are told in light of his resurrection.

“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” (1 Cor 15:35). After drawing on some simple analogies that are not in any way demonstrative (1 Cor 15:36–41), Paul comes to define the condition of resurrected bodies negatively: “What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable” (1 Cor 15:42 [repeated in vv. 50, 52–53]). Then, in 1 Cor 15:53, another contrast appears, between “being mortal” and “immortality.” Paul thus contrasts *phthartos* and *aphtharsia*, then *thnētos* and *athanasia*. These words in no way describe the condition of resurrected bodies; they simply say *what they are not*, by contrast with the condition of the body during life on earth.

The state of resurrected bodies in the “world to come”—to borrow an expression from Jewish eschatology—is identical to the condition of the resurrected Christ, even if, in his appearances to the witnesses chosen by God to attest to his resurrection (Acts 10:40–41), he took a concrete form that enabled them to recognize who he was. Therefore, in order to speak of his current presence and of his activity in bringing about our salvation, we must renounce all pretensions to description. No one knows what his entry into the “glory of God” consisted of, because God is beyond any possibility of description.<sup>13</sup> This mystery of Christ in glory, in intimate relation with God, reflects back upon the intimacy that he enjoyed when he was active down here in our midst: it was, from the beginning, the background of his historical existence and activity. The Gospel texts give us a glimpse of it from time to time, particularly when they evoke his relationship with “the Father.” Here we meet in the New Testament the same difficulty in speaking of God that we observed in the First Testament.

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<sup>13</sup>The fact of the resurrection is not described in any way by the canonical Gospels, but the presence of angelic messengers in the resurrection accounts shows that they depart from historical facts that could be verified by any observer. They manifest, on the narrative plane, the presence of the “world above” in this earthly world. Only an apocryphal Gospel from the middle of the second century C.E., the *Gospel of Peter*, shows the sky opening and the guards at the tomb witnessing the scene of Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension into heaven. The text is available in François Bovon and Pierre Geoltrain, eds., *Écrits apocryphes chrétiens* (vol. 1; Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 251–52.

## The Role of Symbolic Language

It is here that the role of symbolic language intervenes. A symbol does not describe the reality that it envisions and of which it gives a glimpse beyond the limits of natural understanding; rather, it evokes certain aspects of it, leaving the spirit to construct representations that, by intuition, will grasp something of the mystery evoked. In the literature of every religion literary genres exist that situate themselves immediately on the symbolic plane: parables, fables, myths, legends, and so on. The essential thing is to understand what the authors who make use of these genres are trying to say through them. However, a symbol, in itself, does not constitute a particular literary genre.<sup>14</sup> It is a kind of developed metaphor that suggests realities inscribed in the understanding of faith. Faith itself is intuitive and global, but diffuse in terms of its object, which it does not permit to be defined in clear terms. Thus the enumeration of God's "perfections" only acquires full resonance when it is grafted onto a general perception that has already put the human person in concrete relationship with God. A symbolic evocation of God's presence is needed to inaugurate this relationship, and so reflection on the perfections of God only sharpens what a prior intuition has already sensed.

By beginning with a collection of symbolic expressions to evoke the presence of God, of the "world to come," and of the resurrected Christ in action, human language acquires the ability to make us sense the mysterious realities that it has in view, using veiled words, even if it cannot give clear definitions of these realities. The Scrip-

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<sup>14</sup>See J. Vidal, "Symbole," *DR* 2:1937–42, followed by applications to different religious systems. Vidal's bibliography (p. 1942) documents the study of this problem since 1952. Naturally, a "symbol" as such has a wider application than its use in religious language. The verses of Baudelaire are well known: "Nature is a temple in which living pillars / sometimes let out confused words; / Man walks through forests of symbols / that observe him, wearing familiar expressions" ("Correspondances," in *Les fleurs du mal*). The "correspondences" that nature contains remain vague. When religious language takes them up, it projects onto them specific meanings that are in keeping with the beliefs it has in view. Christian faith, which is closely tied to biblical revelation, turns spontaneously to symbolic language to envision those things that, in themselves, cannot be defined clearly.

tures of the two Testaments are able to make their distinctive affirmations by putting them in this form of expression: the uniqueness of God as revealed within the framework of the Scriptures, and nowhere else in as authentic a way; the choice of a historical community to be God's people, with a vocation unlike any other; the successive transformations of that community in anticipation of salvation; the uniqueness of the salvation that Jesus of Nazareth brought about, as a manifestation of God himself in a person whom faith recognizes as "God's Son" (eminently symbolic language!). Thus the role that God's messengers played within history, a role taken up after the return of Christ Jesus to the Father by those whom he sent into the world as heralds of the gospel, reaches its culmination.

This is the framework within which we must situate the character of the symbolic language through which the revelation of God has been transmitted to humanity. To be sure, symbolic language is present in all religions. In the specific case of the biblical writings, however, it is essential to identify with precision the different categories of symbols that are to evoke all aspects of God's revelation.<sup>15</sup> Some types may also be found elsewhere, in the language of other religions, but their selection and their internal correlations are decisive for determining their exact significance and meaning within the Bible. We will see later that a certain category of symbols has no counterpart in other religions, because it reflects an aspect of biblical revelation that is unique in its kind. I will develop this point carefully because it is essential for an exact understanding of the Christian revelation.

### **The Categories of Symbols in the Language of the Scriptures**

We will not be working here with abstract classifications, but rather examining the two Testaments to see how their authors constructed symbols that corresponded to their faith experience, in order to evoke diverse aspects of the mystery of God in his relationship

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<sup>15</sup>This interpretation of symbols is crucial for an exact understanding of the texts in which they appear. Their correlation constitutes a system that distinctively characterizes the language of the Bible in the midst of all the religious traditions that use this form of expression.

with humanity and of the mystery of Christ as the ultimate and definitive realization of this relationship. To create a suitable language, the various biblical writers, and before them those who proclaimed the word of God in the oral tradition of the two Testaments, depended to a certain extent on the symbolic language used within the religious contexts that preceded them. However, they transformed this language according to the specific experience of faith that they had. For an entire range of experience that has no counterpart in other religions of the ancient East, they created a new symbolism that plays an essential role in the language of the New Testament. We can identify four categories of symbols,<sup>16</sup> to which I assign specific names: analogical, mythical, figurative, existential (using this last term for lack of a better one). These categories will serve as a guide for examining in detail the use of symbolic language in the biblical texts.

### *Analogical Symbols*

These symbols are the simplest, and they can be observed at use in every religious language to speak of the relationship between a divinity and humans. But within the Christian faith this symbolism is grounded in an essential point of revelation: if we can speak of God in the image of humanity, it is because humans are created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). As a result, it is possible to draw an analogy between the realm of people’s relationships with one another and that of their relationship with God, presented directly in the First Testament and continued in the New Testament thanks to the mediation of Jesus Christ. Two realms of relationships among people can provide a starting point for such analogical symbols: that of human families, and that of human society as it functioned insti-

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<sup>16</sup>I have briefly presented this classification of symbols in the language of the biblical writings elsewhere: “Le langage symbolique dans la Bible: Note méthodologique,” in *Kecharitomene: Mélanges René Laurentin* (Paris: Desclée, 1990), 43–69. I used this classification again to present “Un examen critique du langage symbolique” (“a critical examination of symbolic language”) in my *Réponse à Eugen Drewermann* (Théologies: Apologies; Paris: Cerf, 1994), 56–70. In that response I sought to critique the “archetypal” interpretation of the biblical language that Drewermann derived from Jungian psychoanalytic theory.

tutionally during the times when the Bible was written. I will make this general observation more precise as we examine the symbols found in the biblical texts, since not every form of family or social organization actually provides materials suitable for symbolic use in biblical language.

### *Mythical Symbols*

The words “myth” and “mythical” are not used here in the sense of the imaginary constructions that have led to the elaboration of mythologies within religious cults that are strangers to the monotheistic revelation of the two Testaments.<sup>17</sup> These words are used simply to describe cases where the language of the Bible has had to construct imagery that evokes two domains that are radically inaccessible to human experience, or at least to clear definitions of the realities they contain.

In the first place, human experience sets each person between two poles that certainly exist but are impossible to describe; the only way to speak of them is by constructing imagery that suggests their opposing characteristics: on the one hand, the “world of God,” to which every experience of goodness, joy, and life pertains; on the other hand, the “world of evil,” where we locate everything that we sense as bad, whether it be physical (sickness, death) or moral (human failings and those faults that religion describes as “sin”). God, in mystery, is the source of everything good, and our imagination instinctively locates God’s “place” above, in an inaccessible “heaven” where light reigns. By contrast, the ultimate source of evil cannot be defined, because of its absolute obscurity. It can only be

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<sup>17</sup>Nor am I taking the words “myth” and “mythic” in the sense that R. Bultmann gave to the words “mythology” and “mythological” to promote the “demythologization” of the New Testament texts in order to bring out an “existential” interpretation. These words had an extensive significance for him, which he regarded as normative. See, for example, the long article “Nouveau Testament et mythologie” in the anthology *L’Interprétation du Nouveau Testament* (ed. O. Laffoucrière; Les religions 11; Paris: Aubier, 1955), 139–83. Rather than “demythization” (*Entmythisierung*), we should speak of “demythologization” (*Entmythologisierung*)—that is, the “interpretation of myth” rather than the “exclusion of myth” after the manner of nineteenth-century theological liberalism. But I am using the word “myth” here in a purely literary sense.

located “below,” in an infernal domain that our imagination populates with nefarious personalities: Satan and his demons—that is, the spirit of evil and his minions, subjects of imaginative portrayal in every culture and in every religion. Here, the religion of the true God must be careful to moderate the representations that it generates of these infernal realities, ensuring that they are subordinated to God himself.

In the second place, the historical experience of humanity unfolds between two equally inaccessible poles of time. Unable to represent them objectively, the human spirit wonders about the “beginning” and the “ending” between which its present experience unfolds. More than one mythology has projected onto this unfolding of time the image of the cycles that, in nature, perpetually renew themselves in an “eternal return.” Biblical revelation reacts against this “eternal return,” which would lower humanity to the level of nature around it. Faith in the true God and in God’s design within human history instead situates the unfolding of time between an inaccessible beginning and an equally inaccessible ending. When it comes to the beginning of time, to origins, biblical revelation demonstrates great sobriety, reacting against the prolific myths of origin that developed within a polytheistic framework in Mesopotamia and Egypt, in which the elements of the world were elevated to divine status. A few demythologized images, derived from Canaanite sources, still remain, but the rest of the Bible’s images of origin are parabolic or didactic constructions transformed into poetic imagery. We will examine their specific features below. When the Bible evokes the end of time, which is equally inaccessible to direct comprehension, it mixes mythological images with historical reminiscences that have been transformed by a figurative interpretation, as we will also see.<sup>18</sup>

We should be clear about the Bible’s use of symbolic representations that can be considered “mythological”: even when it uses

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<sup>18</sup> In the biblical books human history culminates in the realization of God’s design. However, when the prophets evoke this “end,” this is not an exercise in “futurology” (if I may use that word). It is only in the third century B.C.E. that this endpoint of time begins to be evoked as “the last days,” in the strong sense of the word (*to eschaton*), allowing us to apply the term “eschatology” in its literal sense.

them, it remains strictly within the bounds of a revelation that breaks deliberately with earlier mythologies, and it subordinates the imagery in its language to clear affirmations of faith in the true God.

### *Figurative Symbols*

Symbols in this category are not to be found in any other religious language. This is because it is only within biblical revelation that the unfolding of human history is valued positively as the realization of God's design.<sup>19</sup> However, it is necessary to take a step back from historical events in order to recognize their deeper meanings, which we can see God's messengers doing when they speak of events that have taken place within the history of the "people of God."

We must first understand how Israel can be described as the "people of God." The events at Sinai made them the "people of the covenant." As a result, the events of their history had meaning on two levels. Fortunate events, right up to the establishment of David's kingdom and the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, were manifestations of God's benevolent intentions. The defeats they suffered were, on the other hand, the result of God's judgments on his unfaithful people, right up to the final defeat that put an end to their national life with the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., the deportation of their elites to Babylon, and the subsequent dispersion of the Jews. However, at the same time, the prophets who announced these events as signs of God's judgment also offered visions of the future that depended on a figurative interpretation of past experiences: a new covenant with God's law written on the people's hearts, a new nation governed by an ideal king, a new temple with purified worship, and so forth. The details of this figurative interpretation of past history will be explored below. We will see that the role of the suffering and death of the righteous was not unappreciated within this reflection on past expectation, but it was not yet connected with the promises of a new covenant and the Messiah.

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<sup>19</sup>The principles of this figurative interpretation of First Testament history and the texts that relate to it are presented in detail in the chapter devoted to them. For the moment it suffices to note the general principles behind this interpretation.

In the New Testament the essential fact of the mystery of Christ Jesus, the reality of the Word made flesh, and the details of his life are presented as something absolutely new. Nevertheless, as these things are interpreted in light of God's design, appeal to figurative passages in the prophets plays a dominant role, first in the thinking of Jesus and in his own words, and then in the apostolic faith that is founded on his resurrection. The essential language of Christology takes shape thanks to this figurative rereading of prophetic texts that significantly predate the Christian hope. We will have to go over this third category of symbols with the greatest care.

### *Existential Symbols*

This category refers to cases in which various aspects of common human experience, whether in our perception of the world (the feel of the wind, light, etc.) or in our interpersonal relationships, are transposed metaphorically onto the plane of relationship with God. The identification of symbols of this type will become straightforward once we have examined a few significant examples. The category under consideration here will serve as guide for examining in detail the uses of symbolic language in the biblical texts.