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The Theology of the Word of God
in the Old Testament
WALTER R. ROEHRS

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The Theology of the Word of God in the Old Testament

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

IN attempting to describe the Word of God we soon become aware of resorting to a process which from a purely logical point of view may be regarded as reasoning in a circle.

We have to a certain extent obscured this closed-circuit feature in the formulation of our topic by the use of a Greek derivative. Expressed fully in English, it actually reads "The Word about God of the Word of God."

By resorting to such phraseology we have already confessed our inability fully to comprehend and to describe the Word of God. We cannot define it by dissecting or breaking it down into self-contained logical parts. At any one point of our description we must not forget that we have indeed broken into a closed circle that cannot be segmented. We cannot take its various arcs and arrange them in separate heaps, detached from one another and labeled by distinctions of our thought processes. What we take apart and subdivide in vertical subdivisions of distinctions and categories always belongs together and involves every other part. For in this Word the transcendent God is breaking in upon us finite beings, and any thinking to comprehend Him and what He does can only make our weak minds spin in dizzy circles. We always come back where we started and never reach the end of a full comprehension.

The formulation of our topic also reminds us of the circular motion involved

in our validation of what the Word of God is. The Word of God is—we are going to say—what the Word of God says it is, namely, as we have it in the written Word, "in the Old Testament." We are going to let our understanding of the Word flow from Scripture by adducing passages from the Old Testament as our authority.

But our topic with its circular and therefore apparently illogical procedure does not repel or disturb us. It is for us not a vicious circle. For by faith we are in the very center of that circle. From all points of the circumference, lines charged with life and power radiate inward upon us, engulf us, enliven and enlighten us. Here we experience cause and effect, presupposition and proof, at the same point. We know by faith that what surrounds us is God's Word because it has moved us into the center of that circle; we know by faith that we have been put into that circle because what surrounds is the Word of God.

So we do not at all feel hemmed in, disturbed, or frustrated. We have no desire to break out of that circle, for here we are in the heart of God, His grace, His mercy, His help for our hopeless lives. For the radii of this circle converge upon us only because they also center in the Word of God made flesh, our Savior and Redeemer, promised and expected in the Old Testament.

Far from complaining, we fall on our knees in praise, adoration, and thanksgiving.

ing that we are so encompassed by the Word of God. In this spirit we shall try to understand what the Word of God in the Old Testament says about the Word of God.

In the present study we appear to be doing precisely what we have just said should not and cannot be done, namely, to break down the Word of God into various ingredients and component parts. The indivisible nature of the Word of God does not, however, preclude our viewing its various aspects in some orderly fashion. As we discuss one of its features and distinguish it from other facets, we must remember of course that at any given point there is in operation a "communication of attributes" which defies neat definitions and does not yield to categorical distinctions.

I have attempted therefore to summarize what the Old Testament says about the Word of God in three statements, or theses, each of which has some subdivisions. In the first thesis the accent falls on the term "word"; in the second, on the modifying prepositional phrase "of God"; in the third, these two phases are combined for a review of how and why the Word of God achieves its purpose.

I

We begin our study by asking: Why is God's communicating with us called Word? Our first answer is:

A

The term "the Word" ("of God") denotes the acts of God's revelation as designed for man.

Because man is the recipient and beneficiary of these revelatory acts of God, the term "Word" indicates that God is using

a mode of disclosing Himself that corresponds to man's ability to assimilate them and to respond to them. The Word (of God) characterizes what God is communicating as "adjusted" to those faculties and capacities of man which even after the Fall are able to serve as the channels by which God reaches man to bring him back to Himself. This fact, however, should not be interpreted as implying that the Word does not convey and is not something real, as we shall emphasize in B. "The word does not point to a reality of which it is only the intellectual expression. It is that reality itself."¹

1. The Word of God communicates with man by producing upon him (a) an auditory effect.

Designated a "Word," the revelation of God is represented as coming to man in a mode to correspond to man's ability to catch sound waves and to extract communication from articulate sounds. Hence the repeated statements that the Word is spoken and the added admonitions that man should hear the Word of God.

The Word of God communicates with man also by producing on him (b) a visual effect.

This is to say that the revelation of God comes to man in a form to correspond to man's sense of sight. He sees the Word of God because it comes to him in:

- visions and dreams;
- the written alphabetic symbols of human language;
- the visible phenomena that are also called the works of God's hand: the created world and its preserved state, events

¹ Jean-Jacques von Allmen (ed.), *A Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 460.

of judgment and deliverance which man witnesses.

Finally, the Word of God communicates with man by producing on him (c) a sensation of touch and taste.

These effects upon man are not mentioned often, but there are some instances in which man's reaction to the Word is described as something felt and tasted.

2. Designated the Word, God's acts of revelation are represented above all as communicating with man through his capacities as a rational and volitional being.

Words are the products and the conveyors of thought and meaning. Inasmuch as the revelatory acts of God are words, they make contact with man and communicate with him through his capacity of receiving and responding to thought. Entering his mind, words also give direction to man as a volitional creature.

What we have said so far adds up to the following: the very term and concept "Word" as a means of God's self-disclosure to man is an anthropomorphism. His revelation reaches man because it is adjusted to man's limited powers of comprehension. It "makes sense" to man only because it comes to him in the anthropomorphic signals, forms, and formulation of man's means of perception and communication: the word. To say therefore that "God speaks" or that there is such a thing as a "word of God" is actually to think of God in man's image. Man's inability to see and know God as He is requires that He be seen and heard in a humanly comprehensible medium of communication. When God appeared to Abraham in the likeness of man, this manifestation or revelation is, in the final analysis, no more primitive or grotesque than to say that God

"speaks" or sends His "Word." Consequently everything that this Word says concerning God, even the expression "God is a spirit," belongs to "anthropomorphic language."² And this is the miracle of the Word: Through this imperfect means of communication and in spite of man's limitations of comprehension, God "gets through" to man and fully achieves His purpose, as we shall stress later.

3. Designated the Word, the acts of God's revelation are His means of resuming communication with man, cut off in an absolute separation from Him by sin, and of restoring in this fallen creature the life and image of his Creator.

Since it is the purpose of God to restore His life and image in man, the Word is the act of God by which He establishes a "point of contact" in man to bring about His design. The Word reaches man, who was created with the capacity of a blissful communion with God, in order to pick up the lost connection and to restore to him what he had lost. The Word, therefore, is ultimately that channel of communication by which God enables man to have transmitted to him the life-giving power of God's grace. Man is endowed not only with the powers of seeing, hearing, and rational thinking. He is also a creature in whom God can evoke a response of faith to His Word.

It was evident that we have not been able to get along without the phrase "of God" even as we described the Word as designed for man, its recipient and bene-

² So says the Roman Catholic scholar Edmund Jacob in his *Theology of the Old Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958), p. 121: "Spirit and word belong to anthropomorphic language."

ficiary. Now, however, we want to focus particularly on that phrase and emphasize that

B

The Word of God denotes the acts of God's revelation as embodying and charged with all the characteristics of God. In and by the Word, God acts, conveys, and communicates Himself:

1. Without intermediate agents

God Himself and all His divine attributes are directly and immediately the Word,

which created the heavens and earth and preserves them;

which shapes the destiny of individuals and nations;

which comes to man to communicate God's purpose and will for man;

God fashions the Word with His own finger in the written form of the Ten Commandments.

The Word, however, is no less the Word of God when it comes in another way.

2. Through intermediate agents

These agents, themselves the result of the creative Word of God, become transmitters of divine revelation when God through them communicates Himself to man. Because it is the Word of God it does not lose any of its divine character or power when it comes to man through His chosen instruments. Through these channels God

speaks the Word in the sounds of human language;

pantomimes the Word in symbolic actions;

writes the Word in characters of human script.

What they say, write, and do is *of God*

as much as the heaven and earth are of God.

Partly in a mediate and at the same time in an immediate form are those instances where God Himself speaks and acts clothed in human form.

C

Designed for man and coming from God, the Word of God denotes the acts of God's revelation as achieving their purpose.

1. The Word in all its forms is God's medium to achieve perfectly the *dianoetic*³ purpose of His revelation.

The Word of God makes man "wise unto salvation." It informs, teaches, convicts, reproves, judges, promises, gives. Nothing remains unrevealed and uncommunicated that man needs in order to be reunited with God (Law and Gospel).

The dianoetic purpose of the Word is actually achieved although and because it is adjusted to man's capacity to receive it, as set forth in A above, whether immediately or mediately, as set forth in B above.

2. The Word of God in all its forms achieves the purpose of God's revelation precisely because it is the *dynamic* Word of God.

Throbbing and charged with power from God, it produces the effects that God

³ This Greek derivative stresses the communicative aspect of the word as achieved through (*διὰ*) man's mental capacities (*νοῦς*). At times the shorter form "noetic" is used with the same meaning. In this paper we are using the word "dianoetic" in the rigidly etymological sense in which some European theologians have come to use *dianoetisch* (as well as the shorter *noetisch*) rather than in the conventional English meaning of "pertaining to reasoning, especially discursive reasoning."

wants. There is nothing that can impede or deflect the ultimate mission that its Speaker intended.

None of its power is lost because it is adjusted to man's capacity to receive it. It remains the same dynamic and creative Word of God, even when it comes through creatures who speak, act, and write it.

II

This brief outline and description of the Word of God is drawn from the written Word of God as we have it in the Old Testament. No Old Testament passages have been quoted, however, to substantiate this description. I have refrained from doing so mainly because the Old Testament says so much about the Word of God and says it by employing so many different vocables (nouns and verbs), terms, and concepts that we cannot at this time test and examine all of them. I have therefore chosen to draw from the Old Testament only what it says about the Word of God by means of the one Hebrew vocable, *dabar* (דָּבָר) in its form as a noun and verb.⁴ It can serve our purpose because it is no doubt the basic term. It embraces in the scope of its connotations what the Old Testament has to say about the Word of God also by other specific vocables and their particular emphases and by statements of a general nature regarding the nature, purpose, and effect of the Word of God. It occurs so frequently that only a sampling of its usage can be given in a few representative passages. In doing so I shall reverse the order of the outline followed above, however, and begin with

⁴ We shall use the simplified transliteration *dabar*.

what was said under C and then proceed to B and A.

The dianoetic and dynamic character of the word of God is indicated in part by the etymology of the root d-b-r. Etymology is of course not as decisive in establishing the meaning of a term as its actual usage. But when the etymology explains and exemplifies its usage, it can be very helpful in giving us the genius of a term. It seems to me that this is the case with respect to the Hebrew root d-b-r.⁵

There is considerable agreement that d-b-r originally denoted a "being behind" or "in back of something." This original local meaning explains why the derivative דְּבַרִּיר (RSV, "inner sanctuary"; KJV, "oracle") is applied to the Holiest of holies — it was the "back" room of the temple, *der Hinterraum*. (Cf. e. g., 1 Kings 6:5 ff.)

Being behind or in back of something puts one into the position also of exerting pressure to push or drive something forward. So the derivatives דְּבָר (pasture) and מְדִבָּר (pasture land) are the places where a shepherd is in back of the flock, drives his flock (cf. German *Trieft*, from *treiben*). Perhaps דְּבוּרָה (bee) was thought of as the insect swarm that drives man forward to seek cover. Perhaps also דְּבַר (pestilence).

In view of its root meaning, *dabar* then pre-eminently denotes not a thing in itself but that which is behind a thing, first locally and then in a transferred sense, namely, its meaning, its νοῦς, its λόγος. It is dianoetic. Proksch sums it up in this

⁵ I shall not enter the discussion whether this term originally was a noun and that the verb forms are therefore denominative, or whether the reverse is the case.

epigrammatic dictum: "Nothing in itself is a dabar, but everything has a dabar."⁶

Its root meaning (of being behind and pushing forward locally) also gives to dabar its dynamic connotation in a more general and transferred sense. It is the power behind a thing through which it achieves a designed purpose. "Dabar could then be defined as the projection forward of what lies behind, that is to say, the transition into the act of what is at first in the heart" (Jacob, p. 128). "Every dabar is charged with power which can manifest itself in various [forms of] energies."⁷

In the course of usage both basic etymological meanings were generalized. A dabar at times became equated with the thing itself in the pronominal sense of "that which" (e. g., Lev. 5:2; Num. 31:22). It also can denote the inherent power itself. In the first case it is never referred to as the dabar of God; in the second, it is what has been termed the hypostatized Word.

C

It was therefore in keeping with this etymological meaning of dabar when we observed above:

1. The Word as a revelatory act of God

⁶ "Kein Ding an sich ist dabar, aber jedes Ding hat einen dabar." He goes on to say: "Der dabar enthält, dianoetisch betrachtet, jedesmal einen νοῦς, einen Gedanken. In ihm erhellt sich der Sinn eines Dinges, so dass dabar immer dem Erkenntnisgebiet angehört. Durch seinen dabar wird jedes Ding erkennbar und dem Denken unterworfen. Wer den dabar eines Dinges erfasst hat, der hat es selbst erfasst. Es wird klar und durchsichtig, so dass sein Wesen darin zutage tritt." Cf. Kittel's *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, s. v. λόγος, Vol. IV.

⁷ "Jeder dabar ist mit Kraft erfüllt, die sich in den verschiedenen Energien kundtun kann" (Proksch, loc. cit.).

has a dianoetic purpose, and as the Word of God it achieves its purpose perfectly.

It remains for us now to establish that the Old Testament bears witness to this usage of dabar on almost every page. The concordance statistics on the noun is as follows:

The noun dabar in the construct singular followed by the divine name (234 times it is Jahweh; 10 times, *elohim*, or *adonai*) occurs 244 times (in Jeremiah, 52 times; in Ezekiel, 60 times). Of these 244 instances, it refers 225 times to the communication which prophets receive for their instruction and/or which they are to transmit for the instruction of others. For example the expression: "The dabar of Jahweh was to" such and such a prophet, or with some variation, occurs no less than 112 times (so again very often in Jeremiah: 30 times; and in Ezekiel: 50 times).

Grether (*Name und Wort Gottes im A.T.*, ZAW, Beiheft 64) has tabulated and grouped the 244 occurrences of this construct singular of dabar followed by the divine name. He summarizes his investigation and says: "D'bar Jahweh ist fast überall *terminus technicus* für die prophetische Wortoffenbarung." (P. 76)

The plural construct of dabar followed by the divine name occurs less frequently—20 times all told. In about half of these instances Grether finds that it too is "Bezeichnung prophetischer Gotteswörter." (P. 78)

In over 300 more instances dabar is connected with God either by a suffix or in a direct context. "Ungefähr drei Viertel dieser (300) Stellen verstehen unter dabar, bzw. d'barim, die prophetische Wortoffenbarung." (P. 79)

The same situation prevails in the occurrences of the verbal form of *dabar*.

That God's dianoetic purpose is achieved perfectly should a priori be evident by the fact that *dabar* is followed by the modifier "of God." It must be true of this *dabar* what is said of the *dabar* of God which resulted in the creation of the universe: "And God saw that it was good"—the result was exactly what God intended it to be.

It is also true a posteriori. When we examine the information, instruction, and enlightenment that came to man through the *dabar*, we find that it contains all that man needs to know of God's will and purpose to be reunited with God. To demonstrate this would involve all of Old Testament theology as embracing Law and Gospel.

Perhaps we should at this point stress particularly the fact that this *dabar* achieves its dianoetic purpose perfectly because it is true—true in all it says. The *dabar* represents the thing exactly as it is. "In dem gesprochenen Worte soll ein Wahrheitsverhältnis zwischen Wort und Sache und ein Treuverhältnis zwischen Redendem und Hörendem sein." (Proksch, loc. cit.)

By bringing Benjamin, Joseph's brothers were to be tested whether their (words) *debarim* were true (אָמַתְּ Gen. 42:16, 20). It is stressed again and again that the *dabar* and the thing itself are a perfect equation. The Word is truth not only in this sense that God is faithful in carrying it out but also that He is faithful to Himself in what He says through the Word. He can carry the *debarim* out because they have truthfully represented what He meant. "The beginning of Thy *debarim* is truth" (אָמַתְּ Ps. 119:160; 2 Sam. 7:28; Proksch: "Die

Summe ist Wahrheit"). When God has pronounced His curse upon transgressors of His commandments, all the people are to answer in refrain: Amen (אָמֵן, Deut. 27:15 ff.; cf. Num. 5:22). In the Hiphil verb form, 'āmēn is translated "believe" i. e., as trustworthy. When the queen of the south visited Solomon we are told: And she said to the king: אָמַתְּ was the *dabar* which I heard in my land of thy *debarim* and of thy wisdom; howbeit I did not believe (אָמַתְּ) the *debarim* until I came and mine eyes had seen it and behold" etc. (1 Kings 10:6, 7)

Therefore Israel was expected to believe the *dabar* of God, but often did not. (Ps. 106:12, 14)

This correspondence of *dabar* and truth also emerges when a predicted event turns out to be "according to the *dabar* of the Lord." 2 Kings 1:17: "And he (Abaziah) died according to the word of Jahweh יהוה קִדְבָר which Elijah had spoken קִדְבָר (cf. 2 Kings 9:36)."

The Old Testament also asserts that the *dabar* of God achieves its dianoetic purpose in all its forms.

Most of the passages already cited have reference to the *dabar* in its oral or spoken form. When Jehoshaphat and Ahab want to know the outcome of the war, Micaiah says: "Hear thou therefore the *dabar* of the Lord" (1 Kings 22:19). Samuel informs Saul of God's intentions with him and says to Saul: "Stand thou still awhile that I may cause thee to hear (אֲשַׁמְעֶךָ) the *dabar* of God" (1 Sam. 9:27). The *dabar* of the Lord which came to Rehoboam through Shemaiah, the prophet, instructed him in the course he and the people should take: "They hearkened therefore to the *dabar* of the Lord and returned to depart יהוה קִדְבָר

(1 Kings 12:24). The man of God is directed to speak and act *יְהוָה גִּדְבָר* which came to him (*לְאֵמֹר*), saying. (1 Kings 13:1, 2, 5, 9, 17, 32)

There should be no need to demonstrate that the *dabar* in its written form serves a dianoetic purpose and actually fulfills this function. For what is written is denoted by the same term: the *dabar* of the Lord. The prophetess Hulda tells Josiah that he can find out what the Lord will do from "all the *debarim* of the book which the king of Judah hath read." (2 Kings 22:16; cf. Ps. 119)

The Ten Commandments are God's direction to man. "And Moses wrote upon the tables of stone, the *debarim* of the covenant, the 10 *debarim*" (Ex. 34:28) which God Himself had written (Ex. 31:18). Deut. 4:13: "And He declared unto you His covenant which He commanded you to do, [even] the 10 *debarim*" (also Deut. 10:4). The written *dabar* is complete and adequate to teach man God's will. Deut. 4:2: "Ye shall not add unto the *dabar* . . . neither diminish that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord, your God." (Cf. also Deut. 13:1; 17:17; Joshua 9:34, 35; 1 Chron. 15:15; 2 Chron. 34:21; 35:6)

Because the written *dabar* conveys fully and adequately God's will for man, God is not unjust when He pronounced judgment upon the disobedient "because he hath despised the *dabar* of the Lord and hath broken His commandments" (Num. 15: 31). The *dabar* of the Law is adequate in informing man how God wants him to walk: "How shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed thereto according to thy *debarim*" (Ps. 119:9; cf. vv. 101, 105). (*Dabar* is pre-eminently the written Torah in Ps. 119.)

The dianoetic purpose which the *dabar* serves has been stressed because it is minimized and even denied in some quarters today. Lest this emphasis be misunderstood, however, I want to repeat that I have underscored only one aspect of the indivisible *dabar*. This aspect should not be thought of as isolated or detached from everything else that the Old Testament says about the *dabar* of God.

2. The *dabar* of Jahweh achieves the purposes of God's revelation perfectly because it is the dynamic Word of God in all its forms.

There are passages in the Old Testament in which the stress is on the dynamic aspect. So we are told that the *dabar* of the Lord never is deflected from achieving its intent. Events happen according to the *dabar* of the Lord which He spoke previously. Jehu says of dead Jezebel: "This is the *dabar* of the Lord which he spake (*דִּבֶּר*) by the hand of his servant" (2 Kings 9:36). In Is. 40:8 we are told that the *dabar* is not limited in its power to any period of time: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the *dabar* of our God endures forever." Joshua 21:45: "There failed not any *dabar* of all the good *debarim* which spake the Lord unto the house of Israel" (cf. also 1 Kings 8:56). Ps. 33:6: "By the *dabar* of the Lord were the heavens made." Here the Lord is represented as speaking, for v. 9 goes on: "He spake (*אָמַר*), and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." Natural phenomena take place as the result of the *dabar*. Ps. 147:15-18: "He sendeth forth His commandment upon earth; His *dabar* runneth swiftly" (the result is snow, hoarfrost, ice); v. 18: "He sendeth out His *dabar* and melteth them." Ps. 148:8:

“. . . fire and hail; snow and vapors, stormy wind fulfilling His *dabar*.” The destiny of individuals and nations is shaped because the *dabar* of the Lord is fulfilled. 1 Kings 2:27: “Solomon thrust out Abiathar from being priest that he might fulfill the *dabar* of the Lord which he spoke concerning the house of Eli in Shiloh” (cf. Judg. 13:17).

By its dynamic power the *dabar* of the Lord distinguishes itself from the empty impotent prattle of the false prophets: “The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream, and the prophet that hath My *dabar*, let him speak My *dabar* faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not My *dabar* like as a fire? saith the Lord, and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?” (Jer. 23:28-32). Joseph was in prison “until the time that His [God’s] *dabar* came: the *dabar* of the Lord tried him. The king sent and loosed him” (Ps. 105:19, 20). Likewise in the case of Israel: “Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and He saved them out of their distress. He sent His *dabar* and healed them and delivered them from their destructions.” In Ezek. 37:4 the prophet is told: “Prophecy upon these dry bones and say unto them, Hear the *dabar* of the Lord.” Is. 44:26: God is He “that confirmeth the *dabar* of the Lord and performeth the counsel of His messengers, that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited.”

The written *dabar* is invested with the same dynamic. Moses restates the written Law and concludes (Deut. 32:46 f.): “Set your hearts unto all the *debarim* which I testify among you this day, which you shall command your children to observe to do, all the *debarim* of the Law, for it is not

a vain (Cf. Is. 55:10: “it shall not return void”) *dabar* for you, because it is your life, and through this *dabar* ye shall prolong your days” (cf. Deut. 29:9). Disobedience to the Word of the covenant written by Moses results, says God through Jeremiah, in this, that “I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant which I commanded them to do, but they did them nor” (Jer. 11:1-10; cf. 2 Kings 22: 11, 13, 16, 17). The *dabar* that melts the ice and causes the wind to blow (cf. above), has the same power when (next verse) God “sheweth His *dabar* unto Jacob, His statutes and His judgments”—here obviously the written Torah—“unto Israel” (Ps. 147:19). So the *dabar* in Ps. 119 is equated with the Torah almost throughout, and it produces this effect: “My heart standeth in awe of Thy *dabar*. I rejoice at Thy *dabar*, as one that findeth a great space” (Ps. 119:161 f.; cf. Is. 66: 2, 5). The *dabar* of God is close at hand in the written Word which brings life or death. “For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee . . . but the *dabar* is very nigh unto thee—see I have this day set before thee life and good, and death and evil.” (Deut. 30:11-20)

The dynamic power of the *dabar* is stressed to the extent that in a number of instances it results in what is called hypostatization.⁸ A few passages will serve as

⁸ According to Mowinckel (in *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* ed. Gunkel and Zscharnack, 2d ed., II [1927], col. 2,065) an hypostasis is that which is of divine origin and appears partly as an *independent* entity and partly as a *form of revelation* to denote the personification of an attribute, a function, or member of the deity. It appears to me that in this hypostatization there is, to say the least, an adumbration of the incarnation of the Logos.

illustration. Is. 9:8: "The Lord hath sent a *dabar*, and it hath lighted upon Israel." The next verses describe the catastrophes that are to take place as a result. Here the *dabar* is the bearer or agent of divine power; like a time bomb it lands in Israel and explodes at the appointed time. (Cf. Ps. 33:6; Zech. 9:1.) The *dabar* controls events in time to bring about the purposes of God. Is. 45:23: "I have sworn Myself; the *dabar* is gone out of My mouth in righteousness and shall not return, that unto Me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear" (cf. Is. 55:10 f.; Ps. 107:20; Ps. 147:18). The Lord speaks His *dabar* into the cosmos to control and direct it, just as He made it by His *dabar*. (Cf. Ps. 33:6, 9; Gen. 2:4 ff.; Jer. 39:16)

The hypostatized *dabar* does not, however, take its abode in the temple in the same way as the "name" or the "glory" of God does although these are also revelations of God.

B

The passages that we have just mentioned could all be adduced again at this point to testify that in the *dabar* God acts, conveys, and communicates Himself. There is, however, one phase that we have not emphasized before that should not be left unstressed. The *dabar* is not in any way less the *dabar* of God when His chosen instruments speak, write it, and demonstrate it in symbolic actions.

We recall first of all that in 214 out of 244 instances where *dabar* in the construct is followed by the divine name it denotes the Word received and/or transmitted by a prophet. Hence the expression: "The *dabar* of the Lord came to" and "God spake" (*דַּבַּר*) alternate interchangeably. Jeremiah, asked by Zedekiah, "Is there a *dabar* from

the Lord?" answered: "There is; for, said he, Thou shalt be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon" (Jer. 37:17; cf. 38:14; 42:3 f.). The prophet does what God does without a prophet. Ex. 25:1: "And God spoke (*דַּבַּר*) to Moses, saying: Speak (*דַּבַּר*) unto the Children of Israel." (Cf. Ex. 6:29; 31:2; 33:17, 32)

God sent His *dabar* through the prophet at His good pleasure. It is not controlled by man. Jer. 42:7: "Then at the end of 10 days the *dabar* of the Lord came to Jeremiah." This happened when the people had entreated Jeremiah: "Pray for us . . . that the Lord God may shew us . . . the *dabar* that we may do it" (v. 2). V. 9 continues: "And [Jeremiah] said unto them: Thus saith the Lord" (cf. Jer. 28:11; 1 Sam. 3:1; Amos 8:11, 12; Is. 44:26).

The same is true of the written *dabar*. It comes from God directly as its writer. Ex. 34:1: "I will write upon these tables the *debarim* that were in the first tables." (Cf. Ex. 32:16: ". . . and the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God." Ex. 31:18: "And He gave to Moses . . . the tables of stone written by the finger of God.") Ex. 34:27, 28: "And the Lord said to Moses, Write thou these *debarim*, for after the tenor of these *debarim* I have made a covenant with thee and with Israel. And he [Moses] wrote the *debarim* of the covenant, the 10 *debarim*." There is no distinction in what God does and what Moses does. Joshua 24:26: "And Joshua wrote all these *debarim* in the Book of the Law of God." This written Torah and its statutes are equated with the *dabar*, e. g., Is. 1:10: "Hear the *dabar* of the Lord . . . give ear unto the Law of God" (also Is. 2:3; 30: 9, 12). Transmitted in written form for

centuries these debarim still carry the power of God; they cannot be ignored with impunity. Hos. 4:1-5: "Hear the *dabar* of Jahweh [not to swear, lie, kill, steal]. . . . Therefore the land shall mourn, etc." (cf. Jer. 7:1-16). Moses speaks to Israel in the first person of what he has written, as God Himself does: "Ye shall not add unto the *dabar* nor . . . diminish from it that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord God which I command you" (Deut. 12:28; 32:46; 30:1, etc.; cf. Deut. 6:1). Whole books are introduced as the *dabar* of the Lord: "The *dabar* of the Lord which came to Hosea" (1:1), Micah (1:1), Zephaniah (1:1).

Even the hypostatized character of the *dabar* as God's power is present when the *dabar* is transmitted by the prophet. The debarim of the Lord put into Jeremiah's mouth will not return void but will root out and pull down and destroy and throw down and build and plant nations and kingdoms (Jer. 1:9, 10; cf. Is. 55:10). Jer. 5:14: "I will make My debarim in thy mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them." (Cf. 1 Kings 8:56)

A

We have arrived at A again. There remains to point out this phase of the *dabar*, that coming from God and conveying God, it is a means of God's revelatory acts designed for man. Man is so endowed by the Revealer Himself that he can absorb and appropriate the *dabar*. Deut. 29:29: "The hidden things are to Jahweh, but the revealed things to us and our children forever to do all the debarim of His Torah." Through the *dabar* of God the hidden things (תְּחִלְתֵּי דְבָרִים) become revealed things (תְּגִלְתֵּי דְבָרִים) to man.

1

God accomplishes the purpose of His revelation inasmuch as man hears the *dabar* of the Lord when He speaks it. The same vocable in the same forms (usually the Piel) is used of men when they communicate with one another through the Word that is spoken and heard. Ex. 33:11: "And the Lord spoke unto Moses face to face as a man speaketh unto his friend" (cf. Gen. 23:8; Lev. 1:1; 4:1, etc.). Jeremiah says: "Obey, I beseech thee, the voice of the Lord, which I speak unto thee. So it shall be well unto thee, and thy soul shall live" (Jer. 38:20). Samuel says to Saul: "I will cause thee to hear the *dabar* of the Lord" (1 Sam. 9:27). By letting him hear His *dabar*, God lets man stand in His secret council (Jer. 23:18, 22; cf. Deut. 4:36; 1 Sam. 3:8). God wants men to listen; "when I spake, they did not hear." (Is. 66:4)

Because of the genius of the term "*dabar*," as we saw it in its etymological meaning, *dabar* also communicates with man by producing upon him a visual effect. This flexibility of meaning is not a part of our Western vocables for word and speaking. So it seems strange to us to read that men "see" the *dabar* of the Lord. But that is exactly what we find over and over again in the Old Testament.

First of all there are those passages which combine hearing and seeing as the mode of apprehending the *dabar*. What Baalam transmits as the *dabar* of God is what he has heard and seen (Num. 24:4; cf. 22:20, 38; 23:3; cf. Jer. 23:18).

It is for this reason also that the introduction of the Book of Amos says: "The debarim of Amos . . . which he saw concerning Israel" (Amos 1:1). Likewise the

whole message of Isaiah is called: "The vision of Isaiah, the son of Amoz, which he saw" (Is. 1:1; cf. Nah. 1:1)

Individual *debarim* are also seen by the prophet. Jer. 38:21: "But if thou refuse to go forth, this is the *dabar* which the Lord caused me to see"; v. 22 brings the *dabar* in its audible form. (Cf. Jer. 24: 1, 4)

The written Torah which conveys meaning through sight is equated with the *debarim* of the Lord, e. g., 1 Chron. 15:15: "And the children of the Levites bare the ark of God . . . as Moses commanded according to the *dabar* of the Lord" (cf. Num. 15:31; Joshua 8:35; Deut. 4:2; 13:1; Zech. 1:6; Ps. 119:9, 16; 2 Kings 22:11, 13; 23:2).

Even taste and touch are employed as media of the *dabar*. (Jer. 5:16; 20:9)

2

The *dabar* of the Lord does not only create physically sensory effects upon man as it would upon an animal, but God's acts of revelation as His *dabar* communicate with man as a rational and volitional creature whom the Revealer has equipped with these capacities. This is implicit when we spoke of the *dabar* as fulfilling a *dianoetic* purpose.

The *dabar* makes sense to man to the extent that man can at all grasp the Revealer, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts.

Therefore God must speak even with Moses as a man speaketh with his friend (Ex. 33:11). The repeated phrase "the *dabar* of the Lord came to—" must be understood in this way. At the same time it emphasizes "the distance between God and man, which can be bridged only on the

part of God through revelation, but not on the part of man by means of a mystic penetration into God." Thereby it is also antithetic to what [Greek] philosophy "understands [by speaking of] the Logos as a cosmological rationality, detached from a dynamis, from a person who speaks it, and from the act-producing character of such speaking"; and thereby it is antithetic also "to the magical conceptions or the representations and emanations in nature, which the cosmological mythologies of the Orient designated as 'word.'" (Grether, p. 167)

What Amos sees ("Amos, what seest thou?") becomes revelation fully when God adds the *dianoetic* word that gives the meaning of the vision. Therefore God Himself explains it by speaking (Amos 8:2). What Micaiah saw is completed as God's revelation when he says: "Hear therefore the *dabar* of the Lord." (1 Kings 22:19 ff.; cf. the visionary calls of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel)

The same thing is true of the events that Israel sees and hears about. The instructing *dabar* of God is necessary for an understanding of what happened. Heaven and earth came into being by the creative *dabar* of the Lord. But He must act also in a *dabar* which enables man to know that He spoke this creative *dabar* and not Marduk, etc. Likewise the events of the Exodus are *Heilsgeschichte* (and not the rebellion of a slave people, as Pharaoh interpreted these events) when the *dabar* is added: I brought you up out of Egypt to be My people.⁹

⁹ "Die Geschichte als solche ist nicht Offenbarung; erst durch das deutende Wort des Propheten wird sie zur Offenbarung" (Grether, p. 175).

The *dabar* as command and exhortation presupposes that man has been given to know the will of God and has a will himself by which he can translate what he has understood into acts of his will. Hence the frequent denunciations of those who despise the *dabar* and refuse to hear (obey) it. Zech. 7:12: "Yea, they made their hearts as an adamant stone, lest they should hear the Law and the *debarim* which the Lord of hosts hath sent in His Spirit by the former prophets; therefore came a great wrath from the Lord of hosts."

Having previously added qualifications to forestall a false understanding, we can say the *dabar* has an intelligible aspect. Ps. 119:130: "The entrance of thy *debarim* giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple."

3

What we have said just now already anticipates in part what we mean when we say that the Word of God is that by which God communicates with man, a creature

in whom the life and image of God is to be restored.

God created man for a life in full communion with God. As a result of man's disobedience, man lost that life. The *dabar* of God takes dying man at that point and restores life with God to him. Because this *dabar* is the dynamic of God, it has the power to overcome man's resistance to it and to make of rebellious, death-bound creatures sons of God. To accept the *dabar* of God, as God wants it to be accepted, Scripture calls believing. The Children of Israel "believed His *debarim*; they sang His praises" (Ps. 106:12). Therefore the psalmist can pray: "My soul cleaveth unto the dust; quicken me according to Thy *dabar*." (Ps. 119:25)

So we have come full circle in our outline discussion of the Word about God of the Word of God. We are indeed happy to be in that circle. For blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.

St. Louis, Mo.