

## *Week One: Foundations of Old Testament Theology*

### The God Who Speaks

#### *Language and revelation*

- The Bible is the record of God communicating to humans through *words*.

There is no more common phrase in the Old Testament than, “And God said...”

**With language God creates the world; through language He reveals His design in history to men. There is a supreme confidence in an ultimate coherence of meaning through language that informs the biblical vision. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative***

- God’s word in creation. All that exists flows from the creative power of God’s word. The Bible begins with the dramatic pronouncement, “God said... and it was... and it was good” (Gen. 1:3—31). So *life itself reflects the ordered, rational structure of language*.

One can think of DNA as an instructional script, a software program, sitting in the nucleus of the cell. Its decoding language has only four letters in its alphabet (A,C,T,G). A particular instruction, a gene, is made up of hundreds or thousands of letters of code... All of the elaborate functions of the cell, even in as complex an organism as ourselves, have to be directed by the order of the letters in this script. Investigations of many organisms, from bacteria to humans, reveal that this genetic code, by which information is translated into protein, is universal in all known organisms. No tower of Babel was to be allowed in the language of life.

Francis Collins, *The Language of God*

Many biologists have capitalized on the close parallel between the principles of grammatical combination and the principles of genetic combination. In the technical language of genetics, sequences of DNA are said to contain “letters” and “punctuation”; may be “palindromic,” “meaningless,” or “synonymous”; are “transcribed” and “translated”; and are even stored in “libraries.” Immunologist Niels Jerne entitled his Nobel Prize address, “The Generative Grammar of the Immune System.”

Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 76

The scriptures teach that nature *declares* the creative, omnipotent power of God:

The heavens *proclaim* the glory of God. The skies *declare* the work of His hands. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. Psalm 19:1.2 NLT

- God’s word in history. The power of God’s word in creation is also manifested in history, as we will explore in greater detail. Old Testament prophets were careful to make the connection between God’s *omnipotent* word in creation and his *sovereign* word in history. God “calls” and “covenants” with his people...

Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, and his Maker: “Ask Me about the things to come concerning My sons [history], and you shall commit to Me the work of My hands. It is I who made the earth and created man upon it. I stretched out the heavens with My hands and I ordained all their host. [nature]” Isaiah 45:11,12

Just as nature bears the fingerprints of God, so history too is meaningful—biblical eschatology, a beginning and an end, reveal the plan of God.

### ***Revelation and “propositional truth”***

Correspondence of *word* (signifier) to objective *reality* (signified)

Proposition: “God is good”...

- Contrast with “poetic truth” or mythology

All of these wonderful poetic images of mythology are referring to something in you. When your mind is simply trapped by the image out there so that you never make the reference to yourself, you have misread the image... Now you can personify god in many, many ways. Is there one god? Are there many gods? Those are merely categories of thought...

Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*

Myth, in this view, is a symbolic pathway to the inner self, along the lines of Freud’s theory of myth and the subconscious or Karl Jung’s archetypes of the unconscious. Here *the signified is the self*. More traditional scholarship recognizes myth’s relationship to sympathetic magic—the attempt to control the spirits who animate nature. But the literary form of Hebrew narrative is polemical and historical (fact-based), not mythological.

The ancient Hebrew writers purposefully nurtured and developed prose narration to take the place of the epic genre which by its content was intimately bound up with the world of paganism, and appears to have had a special standing in the polytheistic cults. The recitation of the epics was tantamount to an enactment of cosmic events in the manner of sympathetic magic. In the process of total rejection of the polytheistic religions and their ritual expressions in the cult, epic songs and also the epic genre were purged from the repertoire of the Hebrew authors.

Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Comparative Method in Biblical Interpretation—

Principles and Problems,” in Robert Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*

see G.E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, 16-41

- Challenge of Logical Positivism—verification principle

The criterion which we use to test the genuineness of apparent statements of fact is the criterion of *verifiability*. We say that a sentence is factually significant to any given person, if, and only if, he

knows how to verify the proposition which it purports to express—that is, if he knows *what observations would lead him to accept the proposition as being true...* A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*

The *signifier*, “God is good” is meaningless, being *neither* true nor false, because the *signified* (*God and good*) is beyond the limits of empirical verification.

But what observations might verify the verification principle? Irony: A criterion for meaning that lacks all meaning—self-defeating.

- Challenge of Postmodern Theory—“Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”

*all thought is words— the signifier is the signified*

The forms of a person’s thought are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he is unconscious. These patterns are the unperceived intricate systematizations of his own language... every language is a vast pattern-system, different from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationships and phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.

Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality*, 214

Three problems with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis:

- Some moments of creative and rational insight come through images, not words
  - The psychical entities which seem to serve as elements in thought are certain signs and more or less clear images which can be voluntarily reproduced and combined... This combinatory play seems to be the essential feature in productive thought—*before there is any connection with logical construction in words or other kinds of signs which can be communicated to others*. The above-mentioned elements are, in my case, of visual type. Conventional words or other signs have to be sought for laboriously only in a secondary state, when the mentioned associative play is sufficiently established and can be reproduced at will. Albert Einstein, cited in Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 62
- Universal logical structure underlying all language making translation possible.
- Process of language acquisition with children presupposes the already existing mental mechanisms necessary to use and interpret language. Pinker concludes from his summary of the language acquisition research,
  - “If babies did not have a “mentalese” to translate to and from English, it is not clear how learning English could take place, or even what learning English would mean.”

- Propositional Truth and “Universal Grammar”
  - Are our thoughts couched in some silent medium of the brain—a language of thought, or “mentalese”—and merely clothed in words whenever we need to communicate to a listener? Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*

## Language and mind

A close-up examination of what it takes to put words together into ordinary sentences reveals that mental language mechanisms must have a complex design, with many interacting parts.... One now sees a common design to the machinery underlying the world’s language, a *Universal Grammar*. Unless this basic design is built in to the mechanism that learns a particular grammar, learning would be impossible. There are many possible ways of generalizing from parents’ speech to the language as a whole, and children home in on the right ones, fast... Just as language is an improbable feat requiring intricate mental software, the other accomplishments of mental life that we take for granted, like perceiving, reasoning, and acting, require their own well-engineered mental software. Just as there is a universal design to the computations of grammar, there is a universal design to the rest of the human mind... Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 424, 425

Flexibility in learned behavior requires innate constraints on the mind... the ability of children to generalize to an infinite number of potential sentences depends on their analyzing parental speech using a fixed set of mental categories.

Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct*, 434

- Adaptive instinct or image of God?

“awe,” “engineering excellence,” “mind,” “miracle,” “complex design,”...

*The gift of language.* Words are not just animal noises, like a bird chirping or a cow mooing, that cause neuro-chemical responses for the purpose of adaptation or reproduction. Words express *meaning* through propositions, or statements. Words are a symbolic form of communication possible only for conscious, rational, intentional beings concerned not merely with survival, but with the pursuit of the lofty notions of truth, beauty, goodness, and love. Through language, a person understands their inner life and discloses their thoughts and feelings to another. This ability is one of the evidences of humanity’s unique creation in God’s image and is the basis for His revelation to us.

**Side Bar: Reason, Language and the Case for God.** For a detailed study, see C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, chapters 1-3; Alvin Plantinga, *Religion and Science: Where the Conflict Really Lies* and *Warrant And Proper Function*; Moises Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics*, 21ff.

### Application: Language and Knowing God

*Ways of knowing.* When we say that we know something or someone, what do we really mean? What

does it mean to *know*? *The Bible presents us with interrelated modes of knowledge, rooted in how God created us as personal beings and relates to us through language.*

First, God’s word comes to us in the *propositional* terms of language, or *de dicto* knowledge. That is, truths *about* God are revealed in the sentences of scripture. These are statements of fact, meaning that they can be weighed against the evidence of science, reason, experience, and history (see Luke 1:1—4).

- If humans, in the image of God, share the same “cognitive wiring” as God, words describing God have objective, not mystical meaning and significance. God is infinitely greater, but not categorically different. Humans are “theomorphic”

Second, scripture provides *wisdom*, or *de re* knowledge. Wisdom is the practical art of understanding (Gr. *phronesis*) that comes from living out the truths of scripture. Cultivating wisdom brings forth awareness, an insight into the way things are, the essence of things (Gr. *sophia*). Like an apprentice learning his craft from a master, students of the Bible begin to think and assess life from God’s perspective, according to his priorities, creating clarity and a discerning eye for life that results in blessing (Heb. 5:14; 1 Cor. 2:14; Ps. 1, 119).

Third, the scriptures cultivate *personal*, or *de se* knowing. That is, the scriptures not only reveal truths *about* God, they are also a means through which we can enjoy personal communion *with* God mediated by the Holy Spirit. That God’s word is personal is evident in Christ: the Word made flesh (John 1:1—4). The written word, like the incarnate Word, is personal communication between God and His people.

*Word of God and the mind of man.* The scripture is more than mere words on a page. Biblical truth is “living and active” and able to expose the “thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). God communicates directly to our hearts and minds through His word. So scripture is “food” for the hungry (Deut. 8:3; 1 Pet. 2:2); a “shield” for the defenseless (Pr. 30:5); a “sword” for spiritual combat (Eph. 6:17); a guide to the perplexed (Ps. 119:105,169).

*Word of God and the mind of God.* The awareness that scripture is “God-breathed” (2 Tim. 3:16), that He speaks to us through His living word is truly transforming. More remarkable still is the realization that through the scripture, we actually think the very thoughts of God! This is worth a moment’s reflection. All fields of knowledge seek ultimate reality, ultimate answers. Physicists try to form a “theory of everything,” philosophers seek timeless, universal truth, religious seekers set out to discover transcendent reality. Humans by nature have a need deep within to fully know. As Socrates lay dying, he comforted his fellow seekers of truth saying,

Students of the Bible seek the Source of all truth. And the seeking is not without reward: Amazingly, through the scripture, we are transported into the counsel of heaven (Rev. 4:1,2). Because we are indwelled by the Spirit, we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:10—16). And like Moses at Sinai, we are transformed as we behold Him as in a mirror (2 Cor. 3:18), eagerly anticipating the moment we will “fully know, just as we are fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). This is the extraordinary pleasure and privilege

of scripture—to enter into the mind and heart of God! We really should view our time in God’s word as worship and preparation for eternity.

For a helpful discussion of the range of knowledge, see David Lewis, “Attitudes De Dicto and De Se,” *Philosophical Review*, 88:513—543. See also Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge*, 347—380.

### **Finding the Center: Unity of Biblical Theology**

*Is the Old Testament one coherent story?*

- Why unity matters

One or many contrasting narratives? eg: Hindu-myth; myths of national origin; validation for monarchy; man’s search for God... scriptures...

*How could we recognize the presence of actual unity?*

- Unity identified inductively from the text.

*Scripture interprets scripture.* In inductive reasoning, we look for *meaning drawn from the text itself*, not some meaning imposed on it. *The interpretative principles are found explicitly or assumed in the text.* Like detectives, Bible interpreters look to the evidence of scripture for clues to its meaning.

1. Explicit statements of purpose. Psalm 33:10,11; Isaiah 14:24; 46:8-11; Micah 4:12
2. Future-directed promises, blessings, covenants

The Bible’s linear view of history

The predicament of man is a predicament of God who has a stake in the human situation. Sin, guilt, suffering, cannot be separated from the divine situation. The life of sin is more than a failure of man; it is a frustration to God. Thus, man’s alienation from God is not the ultimate fact by which to measure man’s situation. The fact of God’s participation in the predicament of man, is the elemental fact. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*

Key promises are given, then repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments

3. “Inner-testamental commentary”—repetitions, etc.: marker/link; motif; repetitions...

Within the Bible we find hundreds of references and allusions to other passages that provide a clear foundation for understanding how the text is meant to be understood. In this way, the Bible supplies its own commentary, or guide to interpretation. Biblical writers used techniques like *repetition* to unify themes developed over hundreds of years by numerous authors. These repetitions are of four general types and provide the core of *inter-textual commentary*.

- *Technical terms.* Words used by numerous biblical authors to convey the same idea or a growing

theme in the scripture: “Branch,” “Son,” “Servant,” “Day of the Lord,” “Christ,” “kingdom,” “temple,” “grace,” etc.

- *Event repetition.* Reference to key events, especially in Israel’s history, that show a continuity and pattern of meaning over time: Exodus, creation, wilderness wandering, etc. This is called *motif*: the meaning of the present or future is defined in terms of a past event.
- *Direct quotes or allusions.* Almost every biblical writer quotes or alludes to other biblical texts. Careful analysis will show *how* a later author understood earlier texts, thus shedding light on both the scripture cited and the passage in which the citation occurs.

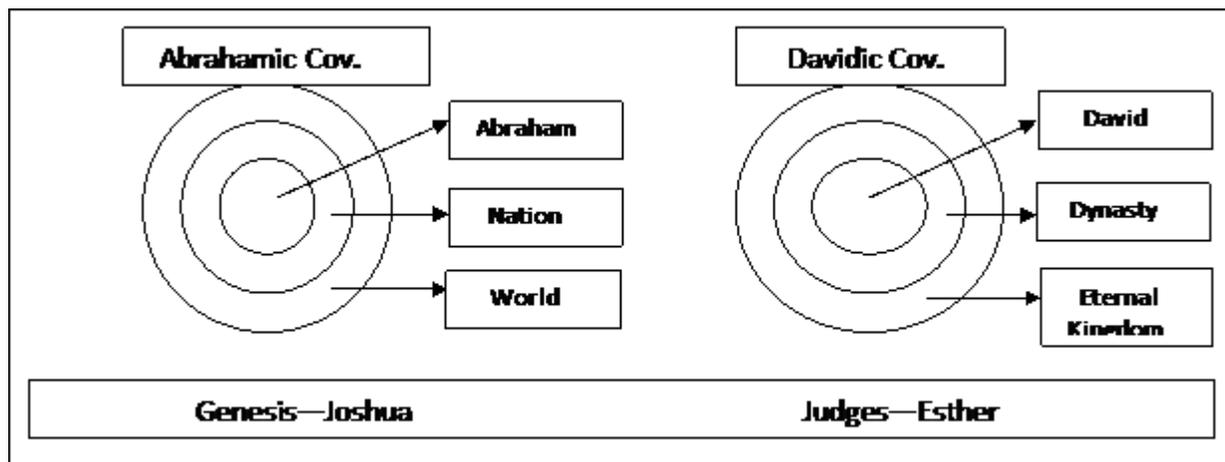
For an excellent explanation of the concept of repetition as a literary and theological technique and inter-textual commentary demonstrating continuity and unity throughout the Bible, see Walter Kaiser, *Toward An Exegetical Theology*; Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture and Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*; Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*.

*Outline of the Old Testament continuity:*

*Two key theological markers as structural literary centers of Old Testament narrative:*

Genesis 12:1—3 God’s promise to Abraham

2 Samuel 7:8—17 God’s covenant with David



*Abrahamic Promise as structural center of Genesis—Joshua narrative*

- Blessing on Abraham
- Nationhood
  - Gen. 15—Exodus 19: Forming a people
  - Exodus 20—40, Leviticus, Deuteronomy: Ruling a people
  - Joshua: Inheriting the land

*Davidic Covenant as structural center of Judges—2 Chronicles*

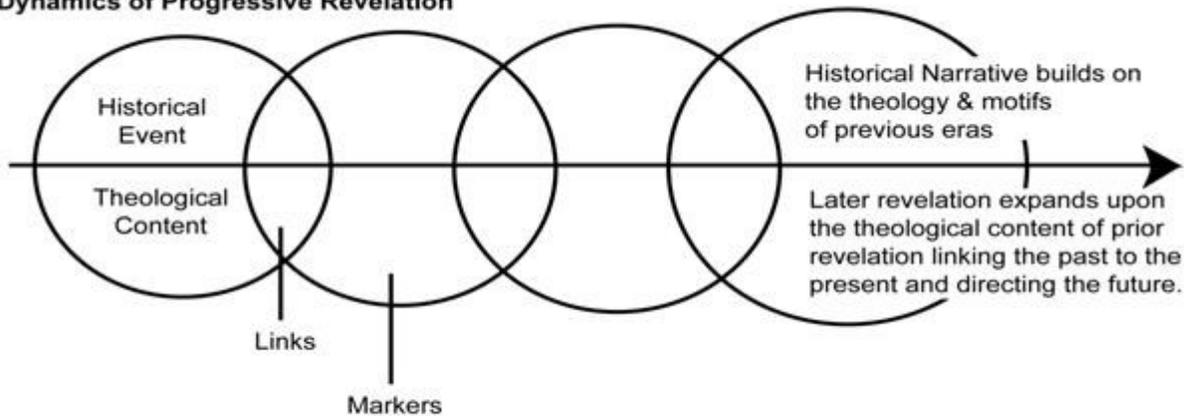
- Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel: Preparation for monarchy
- 2 Samuel 7—24 (1 Chron. 17—29): God’s blessing on David
- 1 Kings 1—11 (2 Chron. 1—9): God’s faithfulness to Solomon
- 1 Kings 12—2 Kings 25 (2 Chron. 10—36): God’s faithfulness to David’s line

See Walter Kaiser, *Toward An Old Testament Theology*, 41—70

*Connections between eras can be identified by the presence of “links” that connect the present with the past and future*

- Links are found at crucial *transitions* throughout biblical narrative, explaining how the present narrative relates to the broader structure of the Old Testament .
  - As past revelation is injected into a subsequent narrative, *progressive revelation* takes shape—the story builds
- Awareness of these links is central to demonstrating inductively the theological and literary unity of scripture.

**Dynamics of Progressive Revelation**



*Links uniting eras of biblical narrative: an overview*

- Prepatriarchal to Patriarchal:
  - “Fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 8:17; 9:1,7;17:6; 26:24)
  - “Seed” connecting blessing/curse of Gen. 3 to Noah (Gen 5:29)
  - Transfer of blessing from Noah to Shem (Gen. 9:26)
  - Transfer of blessing from Shem to Abraham (Gen. 11:10—32)
- Patriarchal to Egyptian Captivity and Exodus:
  - God remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 2:23—25; 6:5)
- Exodus to Conquest and Judges:
  - God with Joshua “just as” with Moses (1:5; 3:7)

- Repetition of Exodus events in Josh 3-5
- Joshua/Judges to United Monarchy:
  - Judges era plagued with the problem, “no king in the land” (Jud. 21:25)
  - Ruth’s genealogy as bridge to David
  - Prophetic words of Hannah linking final judge to king (1 Sam. 2:10)
  - Link of Judges era and Law to monarchy (1 Sam. 8:1—9 cf. Deut. 17)
- United to Divided Monarchy and Exile:
  - God will divide the nation, but remain faithful to the Davidic Covenant (1 Kings 11:4—13)
  - God will judge the nation based on the conduct of the kings (1 Kings 9:4—9)—Note the link to the Law.
  - Exile tied to obedience to the Mosaic Law (Daniel 9:2,11; Lev. 26,27)