

The Word of the Lord and the Power of Human Agency: An Appraisal of a Theological Dynamic

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1. Introduction

The topic of this convention “The Word of God, Alive and Active” relates to the general theme of God’s revelation of his will in human history. The Bible presents two basic forms of revelation: direct and indirect, which characterize periods of Israel’s history.¹ The period of direct communication marks the time from Creation through the Patriarchal period to the time of Tribal Confederacy. God’s direct speaking brought the world into being and held it firmly on its foundations. God also spoke directly to the patriarchs, and to the Judges he spoke through the *mal’ak Yhwh*, the heavenly messenger of God who announced salvation.

The period of indirect communication of God’s will began with the Monarchy. This period addressed the need for intermediation, which is presented prophetically in Deut 5, being fruit of the people’s request to Yahweh. Therefore, prophecy marks a period of indirect revelation when God no longer spoke directly to his people but is served by human messengers to communicate his will. The Deuteronomistic History presents Moses as the archetype of intermediation; the man with whom God spoke face-to-face as a man speaks to his friend.²

The word of God is a means of divine communication. It points to the character of God as one who speaks and who desires to be in relationship with his creatures. The Hebrew term for ‘word’ is *dabar*. After the general definitions of *dabar* as means of divine communication and after explaining its relational characteristics, this paper will concentrate on the importance of human agency for the fulfillment of God’s word in history. In the biblical tradition, human agency appears for the first time in the Mosaic tradition as a new theological dynamic. This dynamic belongs primarily to prophecy, where the prophet is the powerful and active agent that promotes the fulfillment of the word.

2. *Dabar* as Word and Event

The most important Hebrew term for the word is *dabar*. This paragraph investigates how the etymology of *dabar* contributes to the dominant biblical idea that the word of the Lord is powerful, dynamic, active or swift. In its secular meaning, ‘word’ is an articulate and intelligible utterance and a vehicle for intellectual expression. In the Bible, *dabar* goes beyond this secular use to denote potency derived from the authority of God. O. Procksch observes that *dabar* is to be distinguished from *omer* and *’imrah* which are used only poetically with the meaning ‘saying’.³ Scholars distinguish two meanings of the term in the Old Testament: “word” or “thing”. In the words of O. Grether, *neben der Bedeutung wort steht die Bedeutung sache*, and he adds that its meaning as ‘*sache*’ does not imply a ‘material thing’ but an event, affair or something.⁴ The gulf of difference between these two meanings makes the question of etymology a hard one, but it shows that we are dealing with a concept that goes beyond a verbal relationship.

The Bible presents the word of God as powerful and active in history. As an agent of the revelation of God’s will, the word is that which shaped the life and history of Israel.⁵ The idea of the power of the word is a thread that runs through the entire Bible. The accounts in Gen 1 and 2 present the created world

¹ C. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Louisville, Westminster, 1991), 99-100.

² Cf. Num 12:6-8; Deut 34:10.

³ O. Procksch, “The Word of God in the Old Testament” in *legw*, *TDNT* 4:91.

⁴ O. Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament*, Giessen: Alfred Töplemann, 1967, p59.

⁵ W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* 2, London: SCM, 1967, p72-73.

as a wonderfully organized structure that proceeds from the divine word of command.⁶ In the Exodus tradition, the word is given the name “the ten words”, and here, it is codified and presented as valid for all times. Eichrodt explains that the power of God’s word is given the highest emphasis in the prophetic tradition.⁷ The prophetic word achieves its effect not in opposition to the legal word but on the basis of it, seeing that events are described in terms of willed performance or disregard to the divine commands. The designation of the Law as *debarim* increased significantly in post-exilic prophets.⁸ Even the technical term for the prophetic word (*dabar Yhwh*) was applied to the Law.⁹ The prophets show that the word of the Lord is that which moves the world towards the objectives of God’s will. It would be right to say that while the idea pervades the Bible, the expression belongs primarily to prophecy.

Some scholars think that in this biblical idea, Israel was concerned with a magical understanding of the power of words, and the relation between words and the reality, which they signify.¹⁰ As a unified and creative entity, the word is thought to be an objective reality endowed with mysterious and autonomous power, which unavoidably worked to bring about what had been articulated. Therefore, once the word is brought to the historical scene, it can produce something new or an intensified form of something already in existence in every realm of existence – religion, theology, and politics.¹¹ This idea could be true of other religions. The creative word of the gods is a common theme in Mesopotamia and Egypt. In Sumeria, especially, the word of a god took effect as magic.¹² The application of this idea to Israelite thought occasioned an article in 1974, written by A. Thiselton and entitled “The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings”.¹³ This insight of Thiselton is influenced by the Speech–Act theory, which builds on the work of Jane Austin (1962). According to T.E. Fretheim, the previously magical understanding of the use of words in the OT is far from being a theological concern. Rather, it is rooted in a mistaken view of language.¹⁴ He adds, “The lack of an independent power for words is shown by the fact that words may be ineffective and cannot in and of themselves compel response (Prov 2:3-4; 17:10; 29:19)”. On the basis of the Speech–Act theory, Thiselton states that words are effective not because of the power they have in themselves but when there is the authority of a god behind them or when special kinds of utterance were spoken by specially appointed speakers on the basis of conventionally accepted procedures.¹⁵ In other words, the efficacy of the word is found in its performative character. It is dependent on the identity of the speaker, where and when the word is spoken, and the particular form in which it is spoken. If the wrong person speaks the word at the wrong time and in a wrong manner, the word might produce a contrary effect.¹⁶

In view of the foregoing, the function of the word in the Bible is to be explained in terms other than the magical and the mysterious. To bring the explanation home, we can understand that certain people exercise authority over our lives. There are people whom we accord great respect because we know they love us and they play vital roles in our lives. It could be a parent, guardian, benefactor / benefactress, elder sibling or anybody who could belong to this category. Any word spoken by such a person is not simply taken seriously. What they say commands our lives and actions. So also any word spoken by a political personality, who has proved that he / she has the interest of the local community at heart. The word simply assumes power from the authority of the speaker. This banal example could help us to understand why the Bible uses an objectifying language when it speaks of the powerful and creative force of the word of God.

⁶ Cf. also, Isa 40:26; 44:24; 50:2f; Ps 33:6,9; 104:7.

⁷ Cf. Eichrodt, 72-76.

⁸ Isa 66:2,5; Ps 50:17; 2 Chron 34:21.

⁹ Num 15:31; 1 Chron 15:15; 2 Chron 30:12.

¹⁰ For instance, J. Sanders, “The Word” in *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 869-872; G. von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM, 1993).

¹¹ von Rad, 61-65.

¹² A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 19-22.

¹³ *JTS* 24 (1974) 283-299.

¹⁴ E.F. Fretheim, “Word of God” in *ABD* 6:962.

¹⁵ Thiselton, 293.

¹⁶ Cf. Prov 27:14.

It does so only because it is the word of Yahweh and never attributes power to human words. The word of God is creative, powerful, dynamic, swift and eternal because its speaker is God himself.

In prophecy, however, there is a clear identification of Word of the Lord and word of the prophet. 1 Sam 4:1 reports, “for all Israel, the word of Samuel was as the word of the Lord...”. The word is therefore lifted out of the sphere of naturalistic determinism or magical caprice, as is found among Israel’s neighbours. In Israel, the divine command creates history which works out from within a divine–human relationship. The relational character of the word is the topic of the next paragraph.

3. Between the Word and the Event

Another dimension to the meaning of the word concerns its relational character. Although God’s word shapes the cosmic and human history, it does not do so deterministically, but in a relationship with human response. ‘Word’ is not an abstract concept or a bare statement. It is a verbal and relational term that generates a relationship in which one communicates and another receives or responds. When used of God, it refers to a medium of divine communication, although this can only be said metaphorically of God with all the differences and similarities in mind with respect to the human analogue.¹⁷ With the use of this concept, Israel testifies that Yahweh is a God who speaks and is always in communication with humans. It is a vehicle for the will of God. Biblical texts present us with images of the word of God as a relational category,¹⁸ and they express the eagerness with which God desires this communication with his people.¹⁹ God can speak and can be spoken to. From the ‘beginning’, the entire creation is called to respond to God’s creative word: vegetation, living creatures, beasts and human beings.²⁰ The word of God, therefore, is a relational category by means of which the relationship between God and people could be realized more fully.

Like every human relationship, this relational characteristic exposes the word to vulnerability. If God has considered the human being as an interlocutor, it implies that the human partner can hear and respond to the word of God, without his/her freedom being compromised. In other words, God’s word is not deterministic in the relationship. The creature could respond positively or negatively to God,²¹ and any response can affect the relationship. Individuals can shape or reshape their history depending on how they respond to God’s word.²²

The relational character of the word also implies that God has ongoing relationship with his word. Depending on the response from the human partner, God may change his mind or repent (*nihām*) of the word he had earlier spoken. A surface level reading of an Old Testament passage like Isa 55:10-11 could suggest that God’s words once spoken will move to fulfilment irrespective of human response or human resistance.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

¹⁷ Fretheim, 961.

¹⁸ Fretheim, 964.

¹⁹ Gen 18:7; Isa 65:1-2; Amos 3:7.

²⁰ Gen 1:1, 11, 22, 24, 28.

²¹ Ezek 2:7.

²² The word of God in creation and promise constitutes an exception to this relational understanding. In the perspective of creation, God’s word is powerful and effective in the beginning and in the natural and historical realms. What God says or commands comes to being (Gen 1; Ps 33:6,9; 107:20; Wisd 16:12). The tradition also shows that God’s doing also has creative effect (Isa 45:12; 48:13). Whether by word or deed, the creative word is a deliberate act of the divine will, which alters chaos decisively (Fretheim, p965). Similarly, God’s word of promise is reliable, irrevocable and permanent. While it will be fulfilled for the faithful, a rebellious generation may not live to see its fulfillment.

However, a more contextual reading has shown that it represents God's word of promise on which the faithful rely and which remains in force even in the face of rejection. On the other hand, Exodus 32 show how those who receive the word can misuse it, twisting it toward ends not consonant with God's purposes, and prevent it from having its intended effect. In other situations, God may reverse a word of judgment in the face of human repentance (Jer 26:3, 13) or prayer (Jonah 3:10) or intercession (Amos 7:3-6). The fundamental motivation for a divine reversal of a word of judgement is that God's desires that human beings live and not die. He always wants that his salvific intention be fulfilled in the world.²³ God can also stop the effects of judgment already administered so that they do not proceed to total destruction (Jer 42:10; Joel 2:13-14). In this way, human history is shaped not only by the word of God but also by human response to that word.

4. Between the Word and Human Response: The power of Human Agency

In view of the fact that the word may or may not reach its desired effect depending on the nature of human response, God takes yet another decisive step to ensure the efficacy of the word. In-between the word of God and human response, another dimension to this discussion appears in the biblical story in the form of a theological dynamic. This dimension regards the introduction of the human agent, whom God calls to embody the word and who sees to it that the word reaches its desired goal.

This dimension concerns the power of intermediation. In the Bible, it is a dominant theological dynamic that is developed especially in the prophets. God can speak directly and on the basis of his authority as God, his word can have creative and redemptive effects on nature and in history. God spoke directly to the patriarchs (Gen 12–Exod 2). However, for the first time in Israel's history, God's relationship with Moses introduces a new pattern of relationship. This marks a new beginning in the history of Israel, distinct from what preceded in the time of the patriarchs. God begins to speak through the agency of human beings whom God calls for that purpose. How this theological dynamic became a powerful means of eliciting human positive response to God's word is the topic of this paragraph.

4.1 The Background

The background to the story of Moses as an intermediary per excellence is found in Exodus 3:1-15. In the theophany that begins this story (Exod 3:1-6), God speaks to Moses and reveals to him his desire to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses was to become the agent for the accomplishment of this great task. Without making a detailed exegetical analysis of the story (the demanding character of God's word, human reluctance and feeling of inadequacy, and provision of divine assurance), it should be pointed out that in this foundational experience, God determines the way by which he would communicate with his people whom he was about to make into a nation. Moses is presented in the entire story as the archetypal agent of God's will, one who has a unique access to the mind of God.²⁴

Exodus 3:13-15 has a nexus of interrelated elements. The idea of Moses as being sent is in a very close connection with the revelation of the divine name by which Moses is to communicate the word. Yahweh is the historic divine name by which Israel encountered their God. This name, revealed to Moses, carries great significance and authority. It reveals divine commitment to the people as their God who would deliver them. It is the guarantee that the reality of God stands behind the promise and will execute its

²³ Ezek 12:25, 28; 24:14; Jer 4:28.

²⁴ For instance, J. Sanders, "The Word" in *IDB* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 869-872; G. von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM, 1993).

²⁴ von Rad, 61-65.

²⁴ A. Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 15.

fulfillment.²⁵ With the use of peculiar vocabulary of prophecy this text presents Moses as the classic Hebrew prophet who is sent to speak to Israel in Yahweh's name. The verb *šalah* (vv13-15) is commonly used in the OT to designate a prophet's commission from God.²⁶ Moreover, Moses characteristically introduces his message with the prophetic formula "Thus says Yahweh". This description of a foundational encounter is given classical exposition in Deut 5:22-33; 18:9-22. These texts establish that prophecy is the sole means of communication with God, with the exclusion of other means – angels, dreams, vision, divination, and sorcery. It also ensures the continuous operation of God's word in Israel by the promise of an unbroken line of prophets, whose mediation is comparable to that of Moses.²⁷ The text of Amos 3:7 presents the prophet as the privileged human agent to whom God communicates his intentions for the world.

4.2 The Word – Event Formula

The Bible speaks of the word as an event in which the prophet takes part. God sends it to the prophet to fulfill a particular command. According to von Rad, this formula represents the apprehension of the divine word as event, a unique happening in history.²⁸ Hence, it is called the 'word–event' formula (*dabar Yhwh*). Almost half of all the appearances of *dabar Yhwh* in the OT appear in this formula.²⁹ The phrase goes with the verb 'to be' (*hyh*) and translated as 'to come' (The word of the Lord came to...), which implies that something happened or came to pass. Since it is the subject of the sentence, one can understand it as an independent history creating force.

With regard to its function, the following assertions could be made. Firstly, the formula stresses the character of the divine initiative to communicate his will as an event. It employs the biblical term, *wayehi*, by which general historical events are described. In other words, through it the prophets do not merely reveal God's will or intention. Rather, with it they reveal God's word in an event. The Hebrew meaning of *dabar* as both 'word' and 'event' suggests this duality. Secondly, the vocabulary of the formula removes the impression that what is at issue is a physical speaking or an ordinary exchange of words between two persons. It rather entails that the prophet receives a revelation of God in his relation with the world and with history. Finally, one can say that the formula describes an act of communication in which the message is conveyed to the prophet for a people living in a particular situation.

At this point, it will be appropriate to present this particular Mosaic prophetic function to whom God entrusts the successful outcome of the word.

4.3 The Power of Human Agency: The Face-to-Face Knowledge

Backed by an understanding of the biblical idea about the Word of the Lord in itself and in prophecy, I shall present a text, which explains how prophetic mediation of the word works out powerfully in history. Given that Moses is the archetypical prophet that fulfills this function, it is necessary to choose a text in which Moses plays a major character. The text I have chosen to present is Deut 34:10-12.

Deut 34:10-12 closes the Pentateuch, the part of the OT in which Moses is the authority behind the traditions that are represented. It is most fitting therefore that the Torah should close with a statement that confirms the importance of this figure in the history of Israel. The issue is the statement about Moses' unequalled status in Israel:

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt,

²⁵ B.S. Childs, *Exodus*, OTL (London: SCM, 1974) 115.

²⁶ Cf. Isa 6:8; Jer 1:7; Ezek 2:3.

²⁷ J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 63.

²⁸ von Rad, 66.

²⁹ Grether, 67.

against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

This statement is “an all-inclusive retrospective evaluation of the period from the death of Moses to the time of writing”.³⁰ It affirms that since the death of Moses, there has never been any prophet like Moses. In this way, the statement places the entire history of prophecy on a level lower than the Mosaic covenant. This statement is augmented with a reference to the signs and wonders which Moses worked in Egypt and in the midst of all Israel (vv 11-12). Scholars consider these last verses as a gloss and as peripheral to the core issue of the text, which is the nature of the revelation to Moses.³¹

The nucleus of the text is the direct face-to-face communication to Moses, which affirms the difference between Moses and the well-known modes of communication familiar to subsequent prophets. The face-to-face communication of Deut 34:10 is rendered analogically in another text (Num 12:6-8) as a mouth-to-mouth communication. What is this face-to-face communication? Exod 33:11 explain it as an unstinting familiarity existing between friends. Exod 34:10 has a peculiar purpose:

- a. To contrast the revelation proper to Moses with that of the prophets (through visions, dreams and riddles). Since the sight of the deity's face was deemed fatal, this role was granted to him probably on the grounds that he was a covenant mediator. Tradition contemplated such nearness to God only within the covenant relationship (cf. Exod 24:11)
- b. Among the prophets, something close to the revelation proper to Moses is found in the claim of some prophets that they were members of the divine council, the *sod Yahweh*. By making this claim, Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:16-17), Amos (3:7), and Jeremiah (23:16-19) purport that they were present at the divine council when God was taking decision in matters that concern the world.
- c. Because of this model form of revelation, Moses was able to record more successes than any other prophet in history. Hence the appendix of Deut 34:11-12. The word from his mouth was the word of the Lord. Above all, he was the only prophet who changed God's mind in favour of the Israelites. His power of intercession is unequalled in the history of prophecy (cf. Exod 32; v 4 especially).
- d. Most fundamentally, the life of Moses was included in his message. His prophetic task did not begin and end with words. In fact the word of the Lord becomes an event in the person of the prophet. This is seen symbolically in the lives of Jeremiah and Ezekiel who after eating the word of God it became a part of their lives. Even without denying their freedom, the compelling character of the word, the fact that they could no longer resist it shows that it has become a part of them.

This speaks of a deep and personal knowledge of God's nature and character. God has revealed himself as a God whose will makes history for redemption. In the face of human negative response, he maintains an ongoing relationship to his word whereby he sees that it produces the desired salvific effect. Armed with this knowledge, the prophet takes advantage of this divine attitude and work for the redemption of humanity deserving of God's wrath.

5. Conclusion: Moses as Model of the Prophet for Africa

The last point raised in the last paragraph inspires a reflection on the meaning of the Jesus as the Word of the Father, made flesh and dwelling among us. Jesus' intimacy with the Father was so tight that his words and works are identical with that of the Father. On the basis of this relationship, the Father did whatever the Son asked him on behalf of the people for whom he worked. This closeness to God is found in the lives

³⁰ J. Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins*, Indiana: Notre Dame, 1977, p86.

³¹ Blenkinsopp (1977), p 87-89.

of such prophets like Hosea, Jeremiah and Amos. The prophet about whose life the most important information is provided is Hosea. It was indeed through the experience of his life that he got to understand God's endless love for his people. Hosea's life was a vehicle for conveying the message of judgment and hope to Israel. The prophet, therefore, is: not one who has ecstatic frenzy, not one who raises his voice loud to condemn the excesses of politicians, not a social reformer, but a prophet like Moses.