

RUACH AND DABHAR CHRISTOLOGY: A METAPHORICAL CORRELATION

INTRODUCTION

1. Especially in the last couple of decades there has been sustained attention to the development of Spirit Christology, which Roger Haight addressed in his recent article in *Theological Studies*, "The Case for Spirit Christology."¹ The thesis of this presentation is that the fuller development of Spirit Christology is to be achieved in *tandem* with a development of a *Dabhar*/Word Christology.

2. I am not a Scripture scholar. However, as a systematic and philosophical theologian, I recognize how possible it is for theology to be really quite innocent of biblical experience (especially true of philosophical theology). I have made an effort, therefore, usually dependent upon the original biblical work of others, to stay grounded in the data of biblical experience. I have found the work of James D. G. Dunn especially helpful in respect to Christology.²

THREE METHODOLOGICAL COMMENTS

3. *Metaphor*. My case for a *Ruach/Dabhar* Christology is rooted in an exploration of the metaphors for God that are employed in the New Testament. Because different metaphors for God also imply different meanings of God, whenever you change the metaphor for God, you change the christological meaning of Jesus as the Christ of God.

In this discussion I am especially attentive to Paul Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor,³ and to the further elaboration of Ricoeur's "metaphoric process" by Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell.⁴ I accept with Paul Ricoeur that while metaphors are used literarily for poetic embellishment, they also have a more fundamental epistemological use. "Metaphor is a thought process before becoming a language process" (Ricoeur). They mediate experience in the very act of its

¹Roger Haight, "The Case for Spirit Christology," *Theological Studies* 50 (1992) 257-87.

²James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980); *The Evidence for Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM, 1975).

³Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

⁴Mary Gerhart and Allan Russell, *The Metaphoric Process* (Ft. Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984).

occurring. It is that latter use, the symbolic mediation of presence, that I presume.

Metaphor works because one thing truly *is like* another thing. There is an ontological bond. But the one thing is not identical to the other, so there is always what Ricoeur calls a secret *is not like*. If we forget the *is not like*, we lapse into ontological naiveté. When a metaphor for God is ontologized, as theology is wont to do, it often forgets the *is not like*, and the mystery of God suffers from excessive clarity.

4. *Process/relational Megastory*. Let me say further that these reflections are partial, and that they lean into a modal understanding of God as triune, with a significant difference from the modalism of the early centuries. The triune experience of God is so central to Christian faith that modalism failed ultimately and deeply within a worldview that understands relations to be accidental. Nothing accidental can be a sufficient interpretation of a nonaccidentally triune God. In process/relational modes of thought, relation is constitutive and not accidental. Identity is an emergent from relationships (and choices made about them). Relationship is not merely "modal" but is a mode of being.

I call process/relational thought a megastory because I share the postmodern suspicion of metanarratives. This is a big interpretative narrative, but levies no metacultural or metahistorical claims. It is a big narrative that provides an interpretative framework.

5. *Empirical*. Our knowledge of anything or anyone is dependent upon its being available to us in some form or another in relationship. We can then intimate further through reason, intuition, and imagination. As Bernard Meland insists, if ultimate reality (God) is available to our experience, it can only be because God is in some way immanent in our experience. God is more than that (functional transcendence), but intimations of the "more than" can only be gleaned from immanence, that is, where ultimacy traffics with immediacy. Withness and otherness are coordinates.

The worldly appearances of God, then, are the appropriate data for theology. The biblical metaphors for God that I shall name are those that have mediated the human experience of God's traffic with our world.

The two major ways of assessing the meaning of God as revealed through metaphors are:

(a) We examine each historical event in which the metaphor mediates the experience of God, and ask whether the experienced effects of God in the many instances have some general characteristic. Are there family characteristics of these events? Is there some constellation of meaning? If there is some aggregated sense of how God is present, then there is some sense of how God is God. Of course God is always beyond God, as Meister Eckhardt observed.

(b) In second level reflection, one explores the ontological bond for the disclosure of presence: in what ways is God really and truly like a spoken word, or a wind/breath, or wisdom, or reason, order, and plan.

I have tried to apply this methodology to examine major metaphors of God in the Christian Scriptures, and the ways that these impact upon the christological meaning of Jesus in *Jesus and the Metaphors of God*.⁵ It is this exploration that leads me to the conclusion that *Ruach* Christology belongs in tandem with *Dabhar* Christology.

THE METAPHORS OF GOD

6. New Testament Christology has attended especially well to an analysis of the "titles" (metaphors) of Jesus. I am suggesting the fruitfulness of attending to the "titles" (metaphors) of God, and their impact upon the christological meaning of Jesus. Each of these metaphors of God is appropriated christologically. Whenever the metaphors of God change, God-meanings change. So then do interpretations of Jesus as the Christ of God. I will address each of them, the latter two more briefly. The major metaphors that mediate the experience of God in the New Testament are three (one is a pair): (a) Spirit/*Ruach* with Word/*Dabhar*; (b) Wisdom/Sophia; and (c) Word/Logos.

7. *Ruach* and *Dabhar* occur frequently in the prophetic literature as metaphors for the experienced presence and agency of God in Jewish history.

One of the literal meanings of *Ruach* is breath (related to wind or moved air). According to the physiological psychology of the time, spirit/breath names the depth of personhood, the "who" of a person. This becomes a metaphor for the "who" of God, the very depths of God's personal reality, as this is communicated to the depths of the human person. Heart is the human place where God's spirit is felt to touch us and work us into the likeness of God's self. It is as if the "Who" of God refashions the "who" of key people in Jewish history to enable them to be attuned to the heart of God for the sake of the community. This same understanding is clear in Paul, 1 Cor 2:10-16.

The Spirit of God transforms the human spirit so that it more closely experiences the world with the feelings of God for the world. Because the transformation sometimes requires so much change in us, the Spirit might have to pick us up and turn us around, as it did with Saul and with Ezekiel. It might plunge us into the furnace where we are cleansed as the dross of gold is cleansed. Or it may be gentle change, borne like the wind, gentle like running water that cleanses. Of the approximately 380 uses of *Ruach* in the earlier Scriptures, some 130 name or mediate the effective presence of God. *Nephesh*, another word for soul or spirit, occurs more frequently than *Ruach* (more than 750 times), but does not develop as a metaphor for God's presence.

8. *Dabhar*. The article on *Dabhar* in *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (TDOT) says that the Word of God tends to be "occasion specific," offering particular directives in specific historical circumstances. The Hebrew

⁵Bernard J. Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God* (New York: Paulist, 1993).

Dabhar is also, unlike the English word for "Word" or the Greek *logos*, a *Tatwort*, a deed-making phenomenon. Once Isaac pronounced the blessing on Jacob instead of Esau, even though he was tricked and spoke under deception, it was said and done and could not be undone. "Isaac remained silent and Esau burst into tears." Thorlief Boman⁶ and others have shown how different are the two words that normally get translated into the same word in Western languages, *Dabhar*/Word and *Logos*/Word. It's not just that the two words are different, but that the system of meanings implicated in the language itself create the differences.

The expression *Dabhar YHWH*, Word of God, occurs about 240 times in the singular, and nearly half of these are in the prophetic formula, "the Word of God came to me. . . ." The plural form, words of God, occurs about twenty times. And we also find the verb form that describes God as speaking.

The *Dabhar YHWH* tends to have a kind of historical particularity that does not so much characterize *Ruach*—what TDOT calls "occasion specific."⁷ *Dabhar* tends to promote historical transformation by shaping people and communities in quite particular ways. It is specific address to specific people in respect to the particularities of particular historical occasions. I think the major Christian way of naming *Dabhar* is with the expression, Good News/Gospel. Perhaps the earliest way of catching this sense resides in the expression The Way, with its deep affinity for *halakhah*, which is both the road to go and guideposts along the road that offer further clarity.

9. *Metaphorical Correlation.* There is not an utterly regular use of these two metaphors in the ways described above, but the ways that *Ruach* and *Dabhar* mediate God's presence are consistent enough for those meanings to constellate into a defensible and rather dependable pattern of meaning.

For a significant period of time *Ruach* and *Dabhar* are together the principal metaphors that mediate the Hebrew experience of God. Together they complete the picture of the enworlded presences of God in historical experience. Those ways of being in the world are who God is. "Modal" is an interpretation presupposing a Greek world view, and would have been foreign to the ancient Hebrews. I would interpret that *Ruach* and *Dabhar* are continuing presences of the creating and covenanting God, for they have a constitutive function in history and in turn constitute who God is with us.

What I am suggesting is that based upon a correlational and complementary experience of YHWH as *Ruach* and *Dabhar*, an equally correlational and com-

⁶Thorlief Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

⁷J. Bergman, H. Lutzmann, and W. H. Schmidt, *dābhar*; דָּבָר, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. Johannes Botterweck and Hilmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1990) 3:84-125.

plementary christological use of these metaphors would be the most fruitful development of Spirit Christology.

10. *Sophia*. In the literature that treats Sophia as a Wisdom figure, the language of *Ruach* and *Dabhar* does not disappear, but it wanes. What happens in fact is that the two different "effects" of God's presence named by *Ruach* and *Dabhar* are now attributed to the single agency of the Sophia figure, or else Sophia is explicitly linked with them. Sophia behaves more like *Ruach* than *Dabhar*. I spell out the case for this claim more fully in *Jesus and the Metaphors of God*.⁸

There are two further developments with Sophia that need noting. The first is that this metaphor mediates the experience of God in a very feminine way. The second is that in contrast with the so-called modalistic "way of being" for *Ruach* and *Dabhar*, the Sophia figure is a vivid personification. It is my judgment that this never crosses over into hypostasis.

11. *Logos*. There is an analogous event with Word as Logos, especially in John and in the opening of Hebrews. Logos has significant resemblances to Sophia in the Prologue, but also a significant resemblance to Philo-like Stoic meanings in Hebrews and in the Fathers. Logos tends like Sophia to do double duty for *Ruach* and *Dabhar*. In contrast with Sophia, Logos marks a return to a masculine metaphor. Also in contrast with the heart tendency of Sophia, Logos has more to do with reason and order, a tendency that flourishes in the doctrinal tradition that emerges from Logos Christology.

While it seems clear how to claim the christological agency of *Ruach* and *Dabhar* in Jesus, it is not so simple to correlate the work of Spirit with Sophia or with Logos. Because Logos Christology, which has dominated the Western Christian tradition, had a clumsy relation with Spirit, the early philosophical tradition could be clear about the Father and the Logos/Son, but lack a real philosophical home for Spirit. Thus, the creed of Nicea/Constantinople can only add that "together with the Father and Son, the Spirit is worshipped and glorified." It is a liturgical "solution" covering the philosophical awkwardness.

Thus, I conclude that a strong Spirit/*Ruach* Christology is most fruitfully developed in tandem with a Word/*Dabhar* Christology, a christological potential embedded in the biblical materials, but eclipsed, as much so as Sophia Christology, by the sudden domination of Logos.

CONCLUSION

12. There are several emerging convictions that add some urgency to the development of a *Ruach/Dabhar* Christology:

(a) It is likely that the *Ruach* and *Dabhar* experience of God would have been part of the assumed religious world of Jesus, and therefore part of his self-

⁸See *ibid.*, 123-44.

understanding. It is less likely that the Sophia figure would have been, and improbable for Logos. The recovery of the Jewishness of Jesus and of the Jewishness of Christian origins makes a case for the legitimacy of this exploration.

(b) The declaration of Vatican II in *Nostra Aetate* that God has not abrogated God's covenant with the Jews, and that "chosen people" is a true Jewish descriptor calls for a very difficult task: the development of a nonsupersessionist Christology that does justice both to Christian faith and to the legitimacy of God's continuing covenant with the Jewish people.

(c) Metaphorical theology is one of the many expressions of historical consciousness, and with its sense of the symbolic mediation of experience and thought it strains against an overemphasis on clarity in the tradition of philosophical theology. As we struggle to become a world Church, there must be room for more than a Eurocentric doctrinal appropriation of the Christ event. In this regard I find Joseph O'Leary's book *Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in the Christian Tradition*,⁹ an agenda-setting piece of work. No attempt at reinterpretation should be more connatural than the recovery of a more Hebrew hermeneutical approach to a thoroughly Jewish event. This effort will run into the same contemporary critique as did early attempts at christological understanding from Christian communities that remained within Judaism. The perspective of centuries should help us avoid the pitfalls and rediscover parts that can work as building blocks today.

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⁹(Minneapolis: Winston, 1985).