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Word as Power in the Ancient Near East

With the steadily mounting discoveries of texts from the ancient Near East and the publication of reliably translated and interpreted literature, we have never been in a better position to examine the concepts, ideals, and institutions of a world so different and yet so like our own. The alien character of that world warns us against a facile, and distorting, modernization of its ethos; yet a cautious and critical use of historical analogy points up elements shared by men of all ages, even though the appropriation of these elements may differ in quality and intensity. As Aristotle noted, man is a "being of the word" (*zōon logon ekon*), and it is the spoken and written word that signalizes man's preeminence amidst the silence of the plant world and the cacophony of sentient life.[1] A common theme in the ancient Near East is the power of the word. The evidence is now clear that the OT is but one of many ancient witnesses to the theme of the word endowed with power.

The Bible no longer stands alone as witness to this concept. In fact, the OT inherited, with only slight modifications, this dynamistic notion of the efficacious word, applying it according to its own theological needs and within the limits of its orthodoxy. Hypostatization of the divine word, for example, played little or no part in the OT, whatever may have been its extraordinary development in the NT.

It seems that at the very beginning, a magical significance was attached to the word in the ancient world. Pronounced under the right circumstances, this word was thought to have irresistible power for good or evil. Studies in comparative religion provide countless examples of the word conceived as a magical power by which men could gain some control over their pre-

carious environment. The spells, rituals, and execrations were so many techniques by which results were achieved. We, who make an essential distinction between an action and a formula, rite, or symbolic act, find it hard to understand the mentality of people for whom such distinctions had little or no meaning, since symbol and reality coalesced.

When the gods of Mesopotamia had conferred kingship upon one of their number, Marduk, they wanted assurance that Marduk's word really had that magical power which brought results. They devised a test:

> They placed a garment in their midst
> And said to Marduk their firstborn:
> "O Lord, thy lot is truly highest among the gods.
> Command annihilation and existence, and
> May both come true.
> May thy spoken word destroy the garment,
> Then speak again and may it be intact."
> He spoke – and at his word the garment was destroyed.
> He spoke again, the garment reappeared.
> The gods, his fathers, seeing [the power of] his word,
> Rejoiced, paid homage: "Marduk is king."[2]

In Sumerian culture, the basis of Mesopotamian civilization, the dogma of the divine word as creative power became firmly established.

> All that the creating deity had to do, according to this doctrine, was to lay his plans, utter the word, and pronounce the name. This notion of the creative power of the divine word was probably also the result of an analogical inference based on observation of human society: if a human king could achieve almost all he wanted by command, by no more than what seemed to be the words of his mouth, how much more was possible for the immortal and superhuman deities in charge of the four realms of the universe. But perhaps this "easy" solution of the cosmological problems, in which thought and word alone are so important, is largely a reflection of the drive to escape into hopeful wish fulfillment characteristic of practically all humans in times of stress and misfortune.[3]

A bilingual text (Sumerian and Akkadian) containing a hymn to the moon god Nanna, celebrates the power of his word:

> Thou ! When thy word is pronounced in heaven the
> Igigi[4] prostrate themselves.
> Thou ! When thy word is pronounced on earth the
> Anunnaki kiss the ground.
> Thou ! When thy word drifts along in heaven like the wind
> it makes rich the feeding and drinking of the land.
> Thou ! When thy word settles down on the earth

> green vegetation is produced.
> Thou ! Thy word makes fat the sheepfold and the stall;
> it makes living creatures widespread.
> Thou ! Thy word causes truth and justice to be,
> so that the people speak the truth.
> Thou ! Thy word which is far away in heaven, which is
> hidden in the earth is something no one sees.
> Thou ! Who can comprehend thy word, who can equal it ?
> O Lord, in heaven as to dominion, on earth as to valor,
> among the gods thy brothers, thou hast not a rival.[5]

A text from the Babylonian Records in the library of J. Pierpont Morgan explicitly associates the word of power with the phenomena of nature.

> [*umu*] *a-mat Anu*
> *umu a-mat Enlil*
> *umu uggat libbi ša Anu rabi*
> The storm is the word of Anu,
> The storm is the word of Enlil,
> The storm is the wrath of the great Anu.[6]

A somewhat more sophisticated notion of the word as something conceived underlies a difficult passage in the Sumerian "Exaltation of Inanna." Enheduanna, princess, priestess, and poetess, seems to describe her magnificent creative effort in this hymn to the goddess as something to which she gave birth. The word of this hymn was conceived by Enheduanna.[7]

Over sixty years ago, Stephen Langdon published translations of laments and hymns extolling the word of Enlil, a god of the Sumerian pantheon, and of lesser gods. The following is taken from a service of lament involving the word of Enlil:

> Of exalted heaven, lofty is his word.
> Of the divine heaven god lofty is his word.
> Of Enlil lofty is his word.
> If his word be brought to a seer, the seer falters.
> If his word be brought to a prophet, the prophet falters.
> If his word be pronounced to a youth, the youth
> breaks into sobbing.
> If his word be pronounced to a maid, the maid
> breaks into sobbing.
> When his word goes forth in its grandeur, it
> brings the land to ruin . . .[8]

The lamentation was a well-established literary form in ancient Sumer. The "Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur," occasioned by the fall of

Ur III and the collapse of the dynasty, pictures the catastrophe as resulting from the decrees (words) of the gods:

> After they [Anu and Enlil] had *pronounced* the utter
> destruction of my city;
> After they had *pronounced* the utter destruction of Ur,
> After they had directed that its people be killed—
> On that day verily I abandoned not my city;
> My land verily I forsake not . . . .
> Verily Anu changed not his word;
> Verily Enlil with its "It is good; so be it"
> soothed not my heart . . .
> Me of my city verily they *deprived*;
> My Ur of me verily they *deprived*.
> Anu changes not his command;
> Enlil alters not the command which he had issued.[9]

The verdict was passed in the assembly of the gods, and the word was allowed to run its course. From the viewpoint of the scientific historian, Ur was annihilated by the barbarian hordes which swept in from Elam. For the Sumerian, the invaders were only the outward manifestation and agents of the great storm god Enlil, executor of the decree passed in the assembly. The cosmic were more important than the historical forces in the catastrophe which overwhelmed Ur:

> On that day the word—who knows its meaning?—
> attacked like a storm,
> The word of Enlil that winds to the right, *knows* the left,
> Enlil who decrees the fates, this is what he did.[10]

The Sumerian lamentation was generally classed as a "*balag*," a characteristic genre in literature which specialized in mourning over great public disasters. The poem had a function beyond that of giving expression to grief. The *balag* was recited to the accompaniment of a drum (*balag*) and a similar instrument (*ùb*), and it was meant to soothe the wrath of the gods who had brought on the disaster.[11]

In the ideology of the Tammuz cult, celebrated at the end of spring and commemorating the death of the vegetation god, it is the word of lamentation which alone can compensate for the loss of the god and the waning vigor of natural life. The power of the word, inhering in its expression of intense human grief and longing, reassures the devotees of Tammuz that the god will return. The mourners will not permit him to sleep in death; they cannot resign themselves to the loss of him, for the life-energies of their world depend on bringing him back from the netherworld.[12]

A consistent characteristic of the word, when uttered by a king or, especially, by a god, was its unalterability. In a Babylonian text from the eighth century B.C., it is said of a god:

> . . . . whose word is favorable, whose utterance
> [cannot be changed], whose command cannot be altered . . . .[13]

In the Epilogue to the Creation Epic (*Enuma Elish*), Marduk's word is praised in these terms:

> Firm in his order, his command unalterable,
> The utterance of his mouth no god shall change.[14]

To these texts may now be added the recently translated supplement to the Sumerian Lament:

> The verdict of the assembly cannot be turned back.
> The word commanded by Enlil knows no overturning.[15]

At this stage of man's thinking, the word appears to be apprehended as a unit of power which has its own independent and fixed existence. The word's function as a term of signification does not seem to have emerged clearly; the line between the concept and the thing is blurred. Instead of pointing to some objective content, the word sets itself in place of this content, becoming a power which exercises its own proper influence upon events. It has an extracommunicative power.[16]

The discoveries at ancient Mari on the Euphrates have illuminated many phases of OT study, but none more than the phenomenon of prophecy. Without questioning the uniqueness of this great spiritual movement in Israel, scholars have become increasingly aware of the analogies existing between Israelite institutions, such as prophecy, kingship, priesthood, and their counterparts in the ancient Near East.[17] The contents of the prophetic texts from Mari range over a fairly broad field. In the first texts to be published, cultic matters, such as the care of a temple or an increase of mortuary offerings for a deceased king, formed the subject matter. The material came from towns other than Mari, such as Aleppo, Tuttul, and Terqa. Subsequent prophetic texts, coming from Mari itself, are almost wholly concerned with the person of the king, his security and prosperity, especially in military matters.

An example of one of these texts from Mari will illustrate the form and spirit of these unusual documents. King Zimri-Lim of Mari is addressed by his wife Šibtu, who reports on a message uttered in the local temple of

the goddess Annunītum by a certain Šelebum. He pronounced the message of the goddess (note that he speaks in the strict sense as the mouthpiece of the goddess, *in persona Dei*) while caught up in a trance:

> Speak to m[y] lord: Thus Šibtu your maid-servant. The palace is safe and sound. In the temple of Annunītum, on the third day [of the month] Šelebum went into a trance. Thus [spoke] Annunītum: "O Zimri-Lim, with a revolt they would put you to the test. Guard yourself. Put at your side servants, your controllers whom you love. Station them so they can guard you. Do not go ab[ou]t by yourself. And as for the men who wo[uld p]ut you to the test, I shall deliv[er] these men into your hand." I have now hereby despatched to my lord the hair and the fringe of the cult-[player]. [8]

Making all allowances for the similarities which exist between prophecy in Israel and Mari, extending sometimes even to the phrasing of oracles, it would be an error, methodologically, to conclude that the later was simply a borrowing from the earlier. The science of comparative religion is at its best when, alongside undoubted similarities, it can point up what is specific and unique in a given phenomenon. The differences between the two, Mari and Israel, touch subject matter more than form or style. In the OT, we are moving in a world far removed from that of Mesopotamia. The prophets saw themselves as spokesmen of a transcendent God who, in a mysterious and unique way, had chosen a people as his own by uniting them with him in covenant. The prophet had the task, essentially, of keeping the people faithful to covenant demands; his message grew out of an historical context, with all its attendant ambiguities, but there was in it a transcendent dimension peculiar to Israel.

> The words of the OT writing prophets, in particular, can in no way be compared with the statements of the Mari messengers. They deal with guilt and punishment, being and non-being, the present and the future of the Israelite people as a people chosen for a special service by God; they also seek to explain the present great and stirring world events as taking place according to the will of God, leading to a future goal which is itself also the will of God.[19]

In that other great center of Near Eastern civilization, Egypt, our closest attestation to the dynamic, creative word is found in the Memphite Theology. There is no single, canonical doctrine of creation in Egypt; but the Memphite Theology, so different from other crude creation accounts in Egyptian literature, comes close to an abstract, refined approach to the creation of the world. The extant text in which the Theology is expressed comes from about 700 B.C., but the material itself demonstrably comes from one of the earliest

periods of Egyptian history. At this time, the first dynasties established their new capital at Memphis, the city of the god Ptah. The theology expressed in the text was calculated to enhance the national prestige of this new site, Memphis.

Earlier creation texts portrayed the creative act in physical and sometimes repellent terms. In the Memphite Theology, which is unusually intellectual in its orientation, Ptah conceives the gods and the rest of the world through the thought of his heart and the utterance of his mouth. This notion of creation by means of thought and speech undoubtedly had its basis in the everyday experience of the ruler, who decides and then commands. The only relationship that this Theology has to the other, more materialistic, conceptions is the use of "heart" for thought and "tongue" for command.

> Ptah the Great, that is, the heart and tongue
> of the Ennead;
> [Ptah] . . . who gave birth to the gods; . . .
> There came into being as the heart and
> there came into being as the tongue (something) in the form
> of Atum. The mighty Great One is Ptah, who transmitted
> [*life* to all gods], as well as (to) their *ka's*,
> through this heart, by which Horus became Ptah, and
> through this tongue, by which Thoth became Ptah.
> [Ptah's first creation, through thought and word,
> was the creator-god Atum. Horus and Thoth, associated
> gods, stand for the organs of thought and speech.]
> (Thus) it happened that the heart and tongue gained
> control over [every] (other) member of the body, by
> teaching that he is in every body and in every mouth
> of all gods, all men, [all] cattle, all creeping things,
> and (everything) that lives, by thinking and commanding
> everything that he wishes.[20]

Further developments of this concept of the creative word are summarized by Wilson:

> Because the Egyptian thought of the word in physical, concrete terms and because the priesthood was the interpreter of what was divine, this "word of god" came to be treated as a body of literature, the sacred writings, but it was still the directive speech given by the gods. A dead noble was promised "every good and pure thing, in conformance to that writing of the word of god which [the god of wisdom] Thoth made." In another passage one scribe chides another for the impious presumption of his boasting: "I am astonished when thou sayest: 'I am more profound as a scribe than heaven, or earth, or the underworld!' . . . The house of books is concealed and invisible; the council of its gods is hidden and distant . . . . Thus I answer thee: 'Beware lest thy fingers approach the word of God!'" What

the gods have said is in itself directive and controlling; it sets an order within which man and the other elements of the universe operate.

Thus the "word of the god" is nothing so simple in these contexts as "divine writing" or hieroglyphic. It is the word or concern or business of the gods which applies to the elements which the gods have created . . . Creation was accompanied and directed by a word which expressed some kind of a divine order in order to comprehend the created elements.[21]

At least once, therefore, in Egyptian religious history, thought and word were conceived as instruments of world creation, giving to this act a new spiritual significance. A distinction was made between the spiritual, creative word which expresses thought and the world as an aggregate of observable, material beings.[22]

In connection with the Memphite Theology, it is pertinent to mention two personified deities, Hu, "authoritative utterance," and Sia, "perception," who appear in the earliest Egyptian texts. We have to do here with godlike qualities, perception or understanding, and authoritative utterance or command, which are able to create something new. Together, they added up to the authority to govern. In one of the Pyramid Texts (Pyr. 300), it is said that a ruling god leaves his shrine and hands over his office to the deceased king, because the king "has captured Hu, has control of Sia."

It has been suggested that Hu and Sia, as assistants of the creator god Re-Atum, have provided the model for the Memphite Theology, in which Ptah creates with his heart, seat of intelligence, and his tongue, organ of speech.[23] How similar the two theologies of creation are can be gathered from two texts, the first an obscure Coffin Text, and the second from the Denderah Temple:

> I am Hu; what I said was something good (?),
> which went forth from my mouth,
> and the good that I say is done accordingly.
> For I am Hu, I am Hu.[24]

The Denderah Text mentions both Hu and Sia as creative powers. Of Hu, it is said:

> The tongue of the child [i.e., the king], the judge of
> the Ennead,
> commanding among the gods, nothing has come into existence
> that he has not said (i.e., without his word).

And of Sia:

> Heart of Re, commanding in his beauty, the beloved of the
> Great one, leader of the Eternity, ten thousands live from
> that which he has created.[25]

To sum up, the Memphite Theology, which goes back to the First Dynasty in Egypt, articulates a creation belief in which the god Ptah, by the power of thought and commanding word, brings into being the fundamental elements of the universe. At the dawn of her history, Egypt formulated a cosmology which resembled a much later Logos doctrine.

In the spring of 1928, the ancient Canaanite city of Ugarit was discovered by accident at the small seaport town of Minet el Beida (Ras Shamra) on the coast of Syria. Beginning in 1929, with an interruption during World War II, and continuing up to the present, the French archeologist C. F. A. Schaeffer has excavated the site, which yielded material of primary value for our understanding of Canaanite culture and religion. The impact of the texts upon the study of the OT can hardly be exaggerated. Hebrew poetry and, to a lesser extent, its prose have been brilliantly illuminated in all aspects by the new material. It will take generations before the full significance of these texts for the elucidation of the OT has been realized and their riches adequately exploited.

It comes as no surprise that the Canaanites also shared the idea of a word endowed with power, mysterious and incalculable when it was the word of El or Baal. In the Ugaritic texts thus far published, "word, message" finds expression in three terms: *hwt* II, *rgm*, and *ṯḥm*.[26] The equivalence of *hwt* and *ṯḥm* is suggested by the parallelism of KRT A: 305:

> *ṯḥm* KRT *ṯ*ʿ
> *hwt* [*n*]ʿ*mn* [*ġlm*]
> Message of Keret the Noble
> Word of [Na]aman [the Lad][27]

On the assumption that Ugaritic *ṯḥm* underlies Hebrew *tanḥūmôt* of Job 15: 11, it may be possible not only to clear up an obscure passage in the biblical text but to provide the evidence for a parallelism between Ugaritic *ṯḥm* and Hebrew *dbr*. The transliterated and translated text follows:

> *hamᵉʿat mimmᵉkā tanḥūmôt ʾēl*
> *widᵉbārō* [MT *wᵉdābār*] *loʾ ṯaʿᵃmekā* [MT *lāʾa ʿimmāk*]
> Are God's replies inadequate for you,
> Or his word not to your taste?[28]

UT 51.iv.41–42 is a particularly interesting text from the point of view of both style and content. It features an *inclusio*, a stylistic device in which the same word begins and ends the verse. More important, the text joins in parallelism "word," "wisdom," and "life," an early association of concepts which is noteworthy in view of later developments in biblical literature:

ṯḥmk il ḥkm
ḥkmt ʿm ʿlm
ḥyt ḥẓt ṯḥmk
Your word, O El, is wise,
Your wisdom is unto eternity,
Lucky life is your word.[29]

Here the word of El has developed into an entity almost distinct from the one who pronounces it, as something close to an hypostasis. The wise word of the god is commensurate with the authority of El.

The biblical concept of thunder as the voice of God (Pss 18: 14; 29: 3 ff; 77: 18) derives from the identical image of Baal thundering in the storm in order to make men hear (obey) his command. In the Baal and Anat Cycle, we read in ʿNT III. 23–25:

abn brq dl tdʿ šmn
rgm ltdʿ nšm wltbn
hmlt arṣ atm
I shall create the thunderbolt in order that the heavens may know,
That men may know the command
That the inhabitants of the earth may understand . . . .

The evidence is thus far too meager for any well-rounded picture of the dynamic word in the culture of Canaan, but there is little reason to doubt that the Canaanites shared with the rest of the ancient Near East a concept of the word endowed with power. The word of El or Baal was a projection of the deity, and served purposes other than that of mere communication. As a unit of power, the word was proportioned to the nature and rank of the speaker.

The texts cited up to now deal almost exclusively with the cosmic power of the word. It was something effective in nature. Both the creation of the world and the maintenance of an established order depended upon the divine and power-laden word. It has been customary for scholars, anxious to save what was thought to be the specifically Israelite conception of the word, to distinguish between the natural world and history when discussing the efficacy of the word. Israel was thought to have made a unique contribution to the ideology of the word in its notion of the word as determining force in history.[30] Whatever the other religions might have professed about the dynamic word and the cosmos, Israel stood alone in her affirmation of the divine word as the controlling force in history.

Whether this is true or not depends upon the published texts. If it can be shown that in areas other than Israel the word of a god was judged to be a determining factor in the sequence of historical events, then the alleged

distinction between cosmos and history has no foundation in fact as far as the efficacious word is concerned. It appears that we now have evidence for the contrary view—that the power of the divine word, as understood throughout the ancient Near East, extended to history as well as to nature; in fact, there is reason to question the legitimacy of any such distinction, for it is very possibly due to a refinement in our own thinking, with little basis in ancient belief. While it is clear, especially from cultic texts, that the gods of the Near East were invoked for their indispensable aid in maintaining the life of nature, we can hardly conclude that it was *only* in nature that they operated:

> Yet it is easy to draw a wrong inference from the fact the gods of the ancient Near East may justly be called nature-gods. This knowledge sometimes leads to the conclusion, often drawn instinctively and almost unwittingly, that their only sphere of activity is necessarily nature or that particular realm of nature with which they are closely associated. This may be a very natural inference, but it is nevertheless mistaken. The activities of the so-called nature-gods are by no means restricted to what we call nature. There are a great many other texts to show that they were believed to have power over other spheres of life as well, and history is one section of that manifold reality which the gods are thought to control.[31]

It is through the divine word of Enlil that Ningirsu, the tutelary deity of Lagash, was able to straighten out a boundary dispute between Lagash and perennial rival Umma:

> (Then) did Ningirsu, Enlil's foremost warrior, do battle with (the men of) Umma in accordance with his (Enlil's) straightforward word; by the word of Enlil he hurled the great net upon them (and) heaped up their skeleton (?) piles in the plain in their (various) places.[32]

The cone inscription goes on to describe the continuing strife between the two cities, and then we read the following lines, toward the end of the inscription:

> Entemena, the *ensi* of Lagash, whose name Ningirsu had pronounced, made this (boundary) ditch from the Tigris to the Idnun in accordance with the straightforward word of Enlil, in accordance with the straightforward word of Ningirsu, (and) with the straightforward word of Nanshe, (and) restored it for his beloved king Ningirsu and for his beloved queen Nanshe, (after) he had constructed of bricks the foundation of the Namnunda-kigara. May Shulutula, the god of Entemena, the *ensi* of Lagash, whom Enlil gave the scepter, whom Enki gave understanding, whom Nanshe chose in (her) heart, the great *ensi* of Ningirsu, the man who had received the words of the gods, stand forever (literally, "unto distant days") before Ningirsu and Nanshe (and plead) for the life of Entemena.[33]

Urukagina, king of Lagash about 2350 B.C., was a socially minded monarch who fortunately left a record of his reforms. In the middle of this extremely valuable document concerned with social justice, we find the following lines:

> He (Urukagina) held close to the word which his king (Ningirsu) spoke to him. He banned (literally, "threw off") the man in charge of the boatmen from (seizing) the boats. He banned the head shepherds from (seizing) the donkeys and sheep. . . .[34]

It detracts nothing from the admirable social consciousness of Urukagina to call attention to the influence of the divine word in his reforming activities.

The "Lament over the Destruction of Ur" bewails the overthrow of the city by the fierce hordes of Elamites who swept down from the eastern mountains. From our historical viewpoint, the downfall of Ur was due to the military superiority of the barbarians who assaulted the city. From the Sumerian viewpoint, expressed in the poignant series of laments which commemorate the disaster, the Elamite warriors are secondary and of little consequence; the city was battered into defeat by Enlil, god of the storm, as he carried out the verdict of the divine assembly. It was, ultimately, the word of the council of the gods which sealed the fate of Ur:

> Enlil called the storm.
> The people mourn.
> Exhilarating winds he carried off from the land.
> The people mourn.
> Good winds he took away from Sumer.
> The people mourn.
> Evil winds he summoned.
> The people mourn.
> To Kingaluda, tender of storms, he entrusted them.
> The storm that annihilates the land he called.
> The people mourn.[35]

In his study of this text, Jacobsen has commented:

> The enemy hordes were but a cloak, an outward form under which that essence (Enlil's) realized itself. In a deeper, truer sense the barbaric hordes were a storm, Enlil's storm, wherewith the god himself was executing a verdict passed on Ur and its people by the assembly of the gods; and as that storm the enemy attack is seen and described. . . .
> In the great catastrophes of history, in the crushing blows voted by the assembly of the gods, there is Enlil, essence of the storm. He is force, executor of the verdicts of the gods.[36]

From the field of ancient law, the Epilogue to the Code of Hammurabi includes a series of curses directed against those who have ignored the law committed by Shamash to the king:

> May Enlil, the lord, the determiner of destinies,
> whose orders cannot be altered,
> who made my kingdom great,
> incite revolts against him in his abode
> which cannot be suppressed,
> misfortune leading to his ruin!
> May he determine as the fate for him a reign of woe,
> days few in number, years of famine,
> darkness without life, sudden death!
> May he order by his forceful word
> the destruction of his city,
> the dispersion of his people, the transfer of his kingdom,
> the disappearance of his name and memory
> from the land![37]

Two things may be noted. The course of history is not seen as something left to free decision, but depends upon the unalterable decision of the gods. Royal prosperity was not something for which the king could claim all credit; it was decreed by the gods. Second, violations of the code were to be punished, not so much by human agencies but by the powerful word of a god wreaking havoc upon the violator of ordinances which expressed the will of Shamash, judge of heaven and earth. History pivoted upon the divine word.

A hymn to Ishtar, written towards the end of the First Dynasty of Babylon, extols the supremacy of Ishtar in the divine assembly and then sings of the blessings, conferred by her word, upon King Ammiditana:

> She [Ishtar] is sought after among the gods;
> extraordinary is her station.
> Respected is her word; it is *supreme* over them.
> Ishtar among the gods, extraordinary is her station.
> Respected is her word; it is *supreme* over them . . . .
> In their assembly her word is powerful;
> it is dominating . . . .
> By her orders she has subjected to him [Ammiditana]
> the four world regions at his feet;
> And the total of all peoples
> She has decided to attach them to his yoke.[38]

As with other Mesopotamian kings, the dominion of Ammiditana is owed to the divine word which directs the course of history. War was waged

at the word of a god, probably derived through some divinatory method; victories were credited to the word in whose power the king had swept all before him. The royal inscriptions of Assyria and Babylonia swarm with the standard formula of undertaking a course of action "at the word [command] of a god," using such expressions as *ina qibit, ina pi, ina amat,* all of which are practically synonymous. Let one example suffice, from the annals of Tiglath-Pileser I, recalling his victorious expeditions to the west:

> Tiglath-Pileser, the legitimate king, king of the world, king of (all) the four rims (of the earth), the courageous hero who lives (guided) by the trust-inspiring oracles given (to him) by Ashur and Ninurta, the great gods and his lords, (and who thus) overthrew (all) his enemies; son of Ashurreshishi, king of the world, king of Assyria, (grand) son of Mutakkili-Nusku, also king of the world, king of Assyria.
>
> At the command of my lord Ashur I was a conqueror (lit. my hand conquered) from beyond the Lower Zab River to the Upper Sea which (lies toward) the West.[39]

Twice in the Moabite Stone it is said that Mesha carried out successful campaigns against two cities (Nebo and Hauronen) at the express word of his god Chemosh.[40]

The word of a god was thought to be able to restore a sick person to full health, as is clear from two passages in Hittite prayers. The wife of King Hattusilis says to the goddess Lelwanis:

> If thou, goddess, my lady, wilt grant him life and relay to the gods, thy peers, the good (word), and (if) thou wilt tread under foot the evil words and shut them out—O Lelwanis, my lady, may the life of Hattusilis, thy servant, and of Pudu-hepas, thy handmaid, come forth from thy mouth in the presence of the gods.[41]

In the Prayer of Kantuzilis, probably a member of the royal family, the sick man begs the sun god for restoration to health:

> Were I now to recover, would I not have recovered at the word of thee, my god? Were I to regain my strength, would I not have regained it at the word of thee, my god?[42]

Earlier we pointed out the highly sophisticated creation teaching of the Memphite Theology in Egypt. The text described the whole range of being affected by the heart and tongue of Ptah, the creator god. Who could doubt, then, that Ptah was more powerful than all the other gods? His influence, however, was not limited to the creative act. The power of Ptah extended to all the elements operating in the world—in other words, to ongoing history.

The order which the Egyptian saw in the sequence of events was not haphazard but something planned in the heart of Ptah. J. A. Wilson, to whom we owe the translation of the text, admits that, in his rendition, "the divine order" is something of a free paraphrase of the phrase "the word of god." He defends this in the following way:

> "The word of god" can and does mean "concern of the gods" or what we might call "divine interests." But the phrase "the divine order" implies that the gods have a system into which all the created elements should fit as soon as created. The context enumerates the created elements: gods, fortunes, food, provisions, town, districts, etc. These are summed up in the term "everything," after which we have "as well as the word of the god." What can this mean other than the directive order?
>
> One can argue this same sense in other Egyptian contexts. For example, an assertion that the righteous man is not wiped out by death but has an immortality because of his goodly memory is endorsed with the words: "That is the method of reckoning of the word of god"; in freer sense: "That is the principle of the divine order."
>
> Because the Egyptians thought of the word in physical, concrete terms and because the priesthood was the interpreter of what was divine, this "word of god" came to be treated as a body of literature, the sacred writings, but it was still the directive speech given by the gods. A dead noble was promised "every good and pure thing, in conformance to that writing of the word of god which (the god of wisdom) Thoth made." . . . . What the gods have said is in itself directive and controlling; it sets an order within which man and the other elements of the universe operate.[43]

If the evidence now available shows that others besides the Israelites had the idea of a divine word which was efficacious in both nature (creation and conservation) and history, it does not follow that the uniqueness of Israel's faith has been compromised. But uniqueness must not be purchased at the price of distinctions which cannot be supported in the texts. The specific quality of Israel's belief may not be sought, therefore, in what turns out to be a shared conception of the dynamic word operating in both nature and history. We must look elsewhere, concentrating less on the medium of revelation than on the revelation itself. It is the *content* of the divine revelation, whether in nature or history, which sets Israel apart in the ancient Near East. The message is more significant than the medium. Above all, this revelation in Israel takes place within a strictly monotheistic framework, absolutely unique in the ancient world. The nature and purpose of this God have no parallel elsewhere, for the God of Israel's prophets and psalmists was not enclosed in nature: he transcended nature and, indeed, the whole thrust of mythopoeic thinking.

The uniqueness of Israel's faith, especially in what concerns the word, can be estimated by comparing her basic outlook on the world with that of

her pagan environment. In a polytheistic milieu, the literature has accustomed us to see a point of view alien to both the biblical and modern way of thinking. Ancient Near Eastern man felt himself surrounded by threatening and mysterious forces which might engulf him at any moment. One writer has compared this dark, uncomfortable, and complex world to the vast and sometimes frightening world of the subconscious which modern psychoanalysis has exposed.[44] How was man to gain any security in this kind of world? These forces had to be reached in some way and, if possible, controlled. It was this need which drove him to the practices of magic, to the arts of divination. Deut 18: 9–14 has left an unforgettable picture of that eerie world along with the whole vocabulary of pagan superstition; all the while Yahweh solemnly forbids his people to have any truck with this world of the occult. God's will could not be coerced by the magic word or his plan disclosed by the arts of divination; he would reveal his will through the mouth of the prophet. This is the word which Israel was to heed.

Without surrendering its dynamic force, Israel delivered man from the magical concept of the word. This might be described as the shift from the magical to the semantic function of the word, though we cannot lose sight of Israel's belief in the noncommunicative function of the word. The moment when man could no longer put his trust in the magical word has been brilliantly described by Cassirer:

> When man first began to realize that this confidence (in the magic word which the powers of nature cannot resist) was vain—that nature was inexorable not because it was reluctant to fulfill his demands but because it did not understand his language—the discovery must have come as a shock. At this point he had to face a new problem which marked a turning point and a crisis in his intellectual and moral life. From that time on man must have found himself in a deep solitude, subject to feelings of utter loneliness and of absolute despair. He would scarcely have overcome these had he not developed a new spiritual force, which barred the way to magic but at the same time opened another and more promising road. All hope of subduing nature by the magic word had been frustrated. But as a result man began to see the relation between language and reality in a different light.[45]

In the world of magic, distinctions break down between the word and the thing, between the idea and the actuality. All reality becomes, as it were, consubstantial, sharing the same plane of being. It is not possible to classify this situation rationally. One effect, however, is to cover everything with the cloak of the sacred. When the Hebrews broke out of the tight ring of magic, they released man from the pansacrality of life, asserting the qualitative difference between the sacred and the profane. In no other

earlier or contemporary religion of the ancient Near East can we find a comparable revaluation of nature and human activity. This desacralization of the world was anything but a profanation; there was no denial of the close relationship between God and his creation. But there was a clear recognition of the infinite distance between the absolute and holy God and the rest of the world, including man.

Notes

[1] G. Steiner, *Language and Silence* (1967), p. 36.

[2] T. Jacobsen, in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (1946), p. 178. Cf Judg 6: 36–40.

[3] S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* (1963), p. 115.

[4] A group of minor deities in the Sumerian pantheon. For both the Igigi and the Anunnaki, see W. Lambert and A. Millard, *Atraḫasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (1969), p. 146.

[5] *ANET*[3] (1969), p. 386. Trans. F. J. Stephens.

[6] *CAD*, Vol. 1, "A" Part II (1968), p. 36. With this, compare Ps 29.

[7] W. Hallo and J. J. Van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (1968), p. 61.

[8] S. Langdon, *Sumerian and Babylonian Psalms* (1909), p. 59. See also p. xix and Nos. I, II, VIII, and IX. S. N. Kramer reports on a hymn, the text of which has only recently become available, whose opening lines read as follows:

> Enlil, whose command is far-reaching, whose
> word is holy,
> The lord whose pronouncement is unchangeable,
> who forever decrees destinies . . . . *Op. cit.*, p. 120.

[9] *ANET*[3], p. 458. Trans. S. N. Kramer.

[10] *ANET*[3], p. 614. Trans. S. N. Kramer.

[11] T. Jacobsen, *AJSL* 58 (1941), 219–24.

[12] T. Jacobsen, *Towards the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. W. L. Moran (1970), pp. 100–101. For other texts dealing with the "word" in Sumero-Akkadian literature, see under "amatu" in *CAD*, pp. 35–36.

[13] W. Lambert, "Literary Style in First Millenium Mesopotamia," *JAOS* 88 (1968), 129. The same writer has published "The Gula Hymn of Bulluṭsa-rabi," *Orientalia* 36 (1967), 105–32, in which we read the following lines:

> My word is not altered,
> the utterance of my mouth is not changed.

[14] *ANET*[3], p. 72. Trans. E. A. Speiser.

[15] *ANET*[3], p. 617. Trans. S. N. Kramer. Excerpts from many texts affirming the irreversibility of the divine word, once spoken, may be found in *CAD*, Vol. 4, "E" (1958), p. 175.

[16] E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. 2 (1955), p. 237.

[17] M. Noth, "History and the Word of God," *The Laws in the Pentateuch and Other Essays* (1966), pp. 179–93; A. Malamat, "Prophetic Revelations in New Documents from Mari and the Bible," *VT(S)* 15 (1966), 207–27; H. B. Huffmon, "Prophecy in the Mari

Letters," *BA* 31 (1968), 101–24; M. J. Buss, "Mari Prophecy and Hosea," *JBL* 88 (1969), 338; W. L. Moran, "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy," *Bibl* 50 (1969) 15–56.

[18] Translation of W. L. Moran, *op. cit.*, pp. 29–30. Sending of the hair and fringe of the prophet's garment was a common practice in public oracles. Possession of these personal articles gave one a symbolic, though genuinely legal, control over the owner. This was a check upon the authenticity of the oracle, and was calculated to restrain prophets from a too facile exercise of their skill. Once in the hands of the king, these articles made the prophet accountable for the words he transmitted.

[19] M. Noth, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

[20] *ANET*[3], p. 5. Trans. J. A. Wilson.

[21] J. A. Wilson, *Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, p. 60.

[22] J. Zandee, "Das Schöpferwort im alten Ägypten," *Verbum* (Obbink Festschrift, 1964), pp. 33–66.

[23] H. Ringgren, *Word and Wisdom* (1947), p. 12.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[26] C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Textbook* (1965), p. 171.

[27] See also KRT A: 125, 248–49, 268, transliterated and translated by H. L. Ginsberg, *The Legend of King Keret* (1946), pp. 17, 20. In texts 49: iv: 34 and 51: viii: 32–34, *ṯḥm* is paralleled by *ḥwt*, as in KRT A: 305.

[28] M. Dahood, "The Phoenician Contribution to Biblical Wisdom Literature," in *The Role of the Phoenicians in the Interaction of Mediterranean Civilizations*, ed. W. A. Ward (1968), pp. 125–26, 144, n. 16.

[29] S. Iwry, "New Evidence for Belomancy in Ancient Palestine and Phoenicia," *JAOS* 81 (1961), 27–34. He points out the double meaning of Hebrew *ḥeṣ* as "arrowhead" and "luck," taking *ḥṣt* of the text to mean "lucky," as in Arabic *ḥaziya*.

[30] O. Grether, "Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament," *BZAW* (1934), pp. 127, 139. This distinction has been vigorously challenged in the book of Bertil Albrektson, *History and the Gods* (1967), especially in chap. 4, "The Divine Word and the Course of Events," pp. 53–67.

[31] Albrektson, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17. F. Nötscher, in his book *Enlil in Sumer und Akkad* (1927), p. 45, had said of the chief god of the Sumerian pantheon, "There is hardly anything, with the possible exception of the nether world, which does not somehow belong to Enlil's sphere of action."

[32] S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, p. 314.

[33] Kramer, *op. cit.*, p. 315.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 318.

[35] T. Jacobsen, *Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, p. 141.

[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 141–42.

[37] *ANET*[3], p. 179. Trans. T. J. Meek.

[38] *ANET*[3], p. 383. Trans. F. J. Stephens.

[39] *ANET*[3], p. 274. Trans. A. Oppenheim.

[40] *ANET*[3], pp. 320–21. Trans. W. F. Albright.

[41] *ANET*[3], p. 394. Trans. A. Goetze.

[42] *ANET*[3], p. 400. Trans. A. Goetze.

[43] J. A. Wilson, *Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, pp. 59–60.

[44] G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (1950), p. 44.

[45] E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man* (1944), p. 110.