

Israel's Practice of Testimony

THE PRIMAL SUBJECT of an Old Testament theology is of course God. But because the Old Testament does not (and never intends to) provide a coherent and comprehensive offer of God, this subject matter is more difficult, complex, and problematic than we might expect. For the most part, the Old Testament text gives us only hints, traces, fragments, and vignettes, with no suggestion of how all these elements might fit together, if indeed they do. What does emerge, in any case, is an awareness that *the elusive but dominating Subject of the Old Testament cannot be comprehended in any preconceived categories*.¹ The God of the Old Testament does not easily conform to the expectations of Christian dogmatic theology, nor to the categories of any Hellenistic perennial philosophy. As a result, most of our categories are unhelpful for the elucidation of this Subject, and we shall have to proceed concretely, a text at a time, a detail at a time. The Character who will emerge from such a patient study at the end will still be elusive and more than a little surprising.

To cite God as the subject of theology, however, is to take only the *theos* of theology. There is also the speech (*logos*) element of theology. Thus our proper subject is *speech about God*, suggesting yet again that our work has to do with rhetoric. The question that will guide our work is, How does ancient Israel, in this text, speak about God? In addition to Israel's speech about God, much in the Old Testament is *spoken by God* to Israel. For our purposes, I do not make a distinction between the two modes of speech, because even where God speaks, the text is *Israel's testimony* that God has spoken so. Perhaps a greater distinction should be made, but in terms of our discussion, both sorts of speech function in the same way as testimony. It is remarkable that the Old Testament does not accent thought or concept or idea, but characteristically *speech*. God is the One about whom Israel speaks. Thus, in the formulation of Gerhard von Rad's credos, the introduction to the formula is "you shall make this response" (Deut 26:5), "then you shall say" (Deut 6:21), "And Joshua said" (Josh 24:1).² In Israel's more intimate practice of faith in the Psalms, moreover, the key activity is speech. It is "a joyful noise" (Ps 100:1), "I will sing" (Ps 101:1), "I said in my prosperity" (Ps 30:6), "To you, O Lord, I cried" (Ps 30:8).

1. See Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

2. Gerhard von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 1-8.

What we have available to us is the speech of this community, which has become text, and which is our proper subject of study.

Note well that in focusing on speech, we tend to bracket out all questions of historicity.³ We are not asking, "What happened?" but "What is said?" To inquire into the historicity of the text is a legitimate enterprise, but it does not, I suggest, belong to the work of Old Testament theology. In like manner, we bracket out all questions of ontology, which ask about the "really real."⁴ It may well be, in the end, that there is no historicity to Israel's faith claim, but that is not a position taken here. And it may well be that there is no "being" behind Israel's faith assertion, but that is not a claim made here. We have, however, few tools for recovering "what happened" and even fewer for recovering "what is," and therefore those issues must be held in abeyance, pending the credibility and persuasiveness of Israel's testimony, on which everything depends.

For this community and its derivative ecclesial communities that purport to stand with and under this text, the speech is the reality to be studied. Therefore while our subject is limited, it is not modest. For in this text, there is ample utterance about God, much of it on the lips of Israel, some of it on the lips of God, and some if it on the lips of God's (and Israel's) adversaries. We shall be asking, *what* is uttered about God? And this will require us to pay attention to *how* Israel

3. Clearly Israel's speech about Yahweh is deeply embedded in lived socioeconomic-political realities—the stuff that comprises history. The exilic experience, for example, clearly impinged on what Israel said about Yahweh and, conversely, on how Yahweh addressed Israel. Israel's speech about Yahweh is characteristically situated historically. I intend only to rule out questions of positivistic history that seek to limit Israel's imaginative utterance about Yahweh to recoverable happenings. Stated another way, the history to be reckoned with in this project is *emic*, i.e., as accepted by the Israelite cast of characters, and not *etic*, i.e., the past recoverable by the reckonings of the rationality of modernity. I have attempted to stake out this general perspective in *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991). The distinction made by James M. Robinson, "The Historicity of Biblical Language," *The Old Testament and Christian Faith: Essays by Rudolf Bultmann and Others* (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson; London: SCM Press, 1964) 124–58, between "historicity" and "historicality" is likely a useful one for our purposes.

4. This decision to bracket questions of ontology is parallel to the decision about bracketing questions of historicity. I do not deny that those who speak about Yahweh in the Old Testament had made some judgment about the reality and existence of Yahweh. But the ontology of Yahweh that is available on the basis of Israel's testimony in the Old Testament is *after* the testimony, based on finding the testimony credible and persuasive. After testimony, the Old Testament provides a rich statement on ontology.

A student of Old Testament theology must be alert to the problem of conventional thinking about ontology, thinking that is essentially alien to Old Testament testimony. M. Douglas Meeks has called my attention to two discussions that I have found greatly illuminating, which in very different ways make the same point. John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1985), resists the monistic, closed ontology of the ancient Greeks and insists that the early church fathers broke with Hellenistic ontology in seeing that the personal, communal propensities of God, who acts as a person in freedom, are prior to any substance or being. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being, Hors-Texte* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), follows Martin Heidegger in liberating God from the question of being, for the question of being is restrictive of God's freedom and of itself ends in idolatry.

Old Testament thought does not align with the categories of either patristic thought or that of Heidegger. What it has in common, and the point on which I insist, is that one must not foreclose Israel's witness to Yahweh by already settled categories of being. Jewish ways of speaking (and thinking) are simply not easily commensurate with our standard Western notions of being, and that difference is enormously important and must be recognized at the outset.

uttered about God, for the "what" of Israel's God-talk is completely linked to the "how" of that speech.⁵

I suggest that the largest rubric under which we can consider Israel's speech about God is that of testimony. Appeal to testimony as a mode of knowledge, and inevitably as a mode of certainty that is accepted as revelatory, requires a wholesale break with all positivistic epistemology in the ancient world or in the contemporary world. In an appeal to testimony, one must begin at a different place and so end up with a different sort of certitude.⁶ Here I am much informed by an essay of

5. No doubt the "how" and the "what" of biblical testimony are intimately related. One of the problems of much Old Testament theology is that it has been too cognitive and ideational, paying insufficient attention to the ways of Israel's rhetoric. We have the curious situation of rhetorical critics who pay primary attention to the ways of Israel's speech, but who look askance at theological claims; and, conversely, theological interpreters so focused on content that they neglect mode of speech. For a way to relate the two, see Gail R. O'Day, *The Word Disclosed: John's Story and Narrative Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); and *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).

6. The most helpful discussion of these issues known to me is C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992). Coady argues for an alternative mode of knowledge and certitude, which for being alternative is no less legitimate. Coady undertakes a serious critique of R. G. Collingwood's dominant positivistic objectivism.

As subpoints of the general rubric of testimony, I note the following:

(a) The appeal to testimony as a ground of certitude has particular and peculiar importance for the thought of Karl Barth. (I am grateful to Mark D. J. Smith for specific references.) See *Church Dogmatics* 1/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 98–124; *Church Dogmatics* 1/2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 457–740, especially 457–72, 514–26. See also Martin Rumscheidt, *Revelation and Theology: An Analysis of the Barth-Harnack Correspondence of 1923* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 29–53, especially 45–47. For efforts to understand Barth's peculiar assumptions, see David Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975); David Ford, "Barth's Interpretation of Scripture," *Karl Barth—Studies of His Theological Method* (ed. S. W. Sykes; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979); and Ford, *Barth and God's Story* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1981).

(b) Andrew Lincoln has helpfully pointed out that testimony is of crucial importance in the Fourth Gospel. See Andrew T. Lincoln, "Trials, Plots, and the Narrative of the Fourth Gospel," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 56 (1994) 3–30; A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 78–127; and Robert V. Moss, "The Witnessing Church in the New Testament," *Theology and Life* 3 (1960) 262–68. The importance of the linkage to the Fourth Gospel is the recognition that the epistemological claims made for Jesus in the early church also depend on the acceptance of testimony. The elemental case for this is the list of witnesses to the resurrection in 1 Cor 15:3–6.

(c) Much less directly, I mention in this connection the role of the Sophists in ancient Greece, practitioners of the public activity of rhetorical persuasion. The entire story of realist philosophy has tended to silence and discredit the Sophists, for their appeal to rhetoric continually subverted the would-be settled claims of the Platonic realists. From a perspective of rhetorical adjudication, however, it is clear that the realists wanted to shut down ongoing rhetoric, and therefore to foreclose the political process. See Eric A. Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957); Brian Vickers, *In Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Terence Irwin, *Plato's Moral Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

(d) The issue of testimony is particularly acute now, with reference to the evidence concerning the fact and the character of the Nazi Holocaust. That is, the primary evidence for the Holocaust is personal testimony, without which this unthinkable barbarity is to be lost. Elie Wiesel, "The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration," *Dimensions of Holocaust* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1977) 9, has understood the urgency of testimony in his aphorism: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony." See also Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Felman and Laub see that testimony is urgent when truth is in crisis, i.e., a crisis of evidence. Acutely so in the twentieth century, perhaps that is the characteristic circumstance of Yahweh's community of testimony.

Paul Ricoeur.⁷ Nevertheless, testimony as a metaphor for Israel's utterance about Yahweh is deeply situated in the text itself. Specifically, the disputation speech is a dominant form of witness in Second Isaiah, precisely in the exile when truth is in crisis and evidence is uncertain. Thus I regard testimony not simply as a happy or clever convenience for my exposition, but as an appropriate way to replicate the practice of ancient Israel.⁸

Testimony and Trial Metaphor

The proper setting of testimony is a court of law, in which various and diverse witnesses are called to "tell what happened," to give their version of what is true. In any trial situation the evidence given by witnesses is a mixed matter of memory, reconstruction, imagination, and wish. The court must then determine, with no other data except testimony, which version is reality. It is on the basis of *testimony* that the court reaches what is *real*.

Working with the metaphor of trial, we consider first the peculiar phenomenon of a witness. Here I make general comments, without particular reference to Israel's peculiar witness about Yahweh. The situation of a trial means that there is a reality in question, and there are different, competing accounts of what that reality is (or was). In the trial situation, presumably, some actual event or experience occurred, to which appeal is made and which is under dispute. The witness allegedly had access to that actual event, was there, saw it and experienced it, and so is qualified to give testimony. The actual event, however, is enormously supple and elusive and admits of many retellings, some of which are only shaded differently, but some of which are drastically different.

I do not suggest that all open rhetoric constitutes testimony as I am here using the term with reference to Israel's faith. I suggest, nonetheless, that these several different forms share a conviction that somehow reality is deeply contingent on speech. Therefore Israel's testimony about Yahweh is inherently subversive of all non-Yahwistic shapes of reality.

It is ironic that the same issue between reality as constituted by speech, on the one hand, and reality that resists speech, on the other hand, is a tension now resurfacing around issues of exclusive and inclusive language. In that tension, the subverting power of inclusive speech is here and there silenced by an appeal to metaphysical realism, which seems, on the face of it, to be essentially a long-accepted practice of rhetoric.

7. Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) 119–54. Ricoeur's study has been carefully expositied by Jean-Daniel Plüss, *Therapeutic and Prophetic Narratives in Worship* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), especially chap. 2. On the problems and possibilities of testimony in the pursuit of establishing "truth," see Richard K. Fenn, *Liturgies and Trials: The Secularization of Religious Language* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); and *The Death of Herod: An Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

8. Second Isaiah surely stands at the center of Israel's effort to utter Yahweh faithfully and effectively, in a most demanding and dangerous situation. Israel gave testimony to "the truth of Yahweh," which intended to subvert and undermine the dominant truth of Babylon's preeminence and Israel's commensurate despair. On this genre and its cruciality for Second Isaiah, see Claus Westermann, "Sprache und Struktur der Prophetie Deuteronesajas," *Forschung am Alten Testament; Gesammelte Studien* (ThB 24; Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1964) 124–44. It will be evident in much of what follows that Second Isaiah occupies a privileged place in my interpretation, a position informed by my study with Prof. James Muilenburg, but already in place for me as early as my B.D. thesis in 1955 under Lionel A. Whiston, Jr.

The court, however, has no access to the "actual event" besides the testimony. It cannot go behind the testimony to the event, but must take the testimony as the "real portrayal." Indeed, it is futile for the court to speculate behind the testimony.

From the perspective of the witness, we may observe three matters. First, the witness is able to choose the version of construal to be uttered. This choice may be made on advice of counsel or under the coaching of an attorney. It may be a calculated utterance, designed to produce a certain outcome, or it may be a happenstance utterance, made with no intentionality, but one by which the witness must subsequently stand. It is important to recognize that the witness had other options and could have spoken differently, could have chosen other words and images to portray reality with another nuance.

Second, when the witness utters testimony, the testimony is a public presentation that shapes, enjoins, or constitutes reality. In this sense, the testimony is *originary*: it causes to be, in the courtroom, what was not until this utterance. In this sense, the utterance leads reality in the courtroom, so that the reality to which testimony is made depends completely on the utterance.

Third, when the court makes a decision and agrees to accept some version of reality based on some testimony, the testimony is accepted as true—that is, it becomes true. In the decision of the court, by the process of the verdict, the testimony is turned into reality. The defendant is pronounced to be acquitted or guilty. In the parlance of the court, the verdict is the establishment of a legal reality.

If we describe this process theologically—or, more specifically, in the practice of the Old Testament—we may say that testimony becomes revelation. That is, the testimony that Israel bears to the character of God is taken by the ecclesial community of the text as a reliable disclosure about the true character of God. Here we touch on the difficulty of the authority of Scripture, which has usually been articulated in the scholastic categories of inspiration and revelation. It is simpler and more helpful, I believe, to recognize that when utterance in the Bible is taken as truthful, human testimony is taken as revelation that discloses the true reality of God.⁹

Thus, much of the Old Testament, the part that von Rad listed under "response," is explicitly human utterance.¹⁰ For example, the familiar utterance of Ps 23:1, "The Lord is my shepherd," is a human utterance, and a metaphor at that. That utterance is taken by the faithful as revelation, as a true and reliable disclosure of who God is. In less direct fashion, historical criticism has seen that all utterance in the Old Testament about God, even utterance placed in the mouth of God, has

9. The phrase "taken as" is informed for me by the analysis of David Bryant, *Faith and the Play of Imagination: On the Role of Imagination in Religion* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1989) 115 and passim. Bryant sees that to "take" something as reality is an active process of establishing reality. A lesser verb is "to see as," as expositied by Garrett Green, *Imagining God: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989) 139–42 and passim.

10. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 2:355–459, treated the Psalms and wisdom under the rubric of "response." The rubric does not fit the material very well, as has often been noted, but the notion employed by von Rad is important.

a human speaker or writer as its source. But that human utterance, as for example in Isa 40:1-11 or Job 38-41, is taken as a true and reliable disclosure. It is by no means clear how this odd transposition from testimony to revelation is accomplished, though we assume it all the time in our theological treatment of the Bible. This means that witnesses, who had other options available, who for whatever reasons chose to utter the matter in just this way, established through their utterance what is "true" about the character of God.

Our purpose in examining this strange transposition from testimony to revelation, from utterance to reality, is to indicate that for Old Testament faith, *the utterance is everything*.¹¹ The utterance leads to the reality, the reality of God that relies on the reliability of the utterance. Presumably other utterances could have been accepted as true, but these particular utterances are the ones that have been preserved, trusted, treasured, and given to us. The upshot of this process is, first, that Israel's claim of reality is as fragile as an utterance, and we must be exceedingly wary of flights from utterance to some presumed pre-textual reality. Second, this process makes it clear that a student of Old Testament theology must pay close attention to the shape, character, and details of the utterance, for it is in, with, and under the utterance that we have the God of Israel, and nowhere else.

Normative Shape of Israel's Utterance

We may now consider the peculiar and characteristic way in which Israel formulates its testimony about God. Here I suggest what appears to be a normative way in which such utterance is given in Israel, a way that constitutes the primary witness of Israel. We shall have to make important allowances, however, for much in Israel's testimony that does not conform to this way of speech. We must pay attention to Israel's characteristic speech about God. The term *characteristic* is important for my argument.¹² I do not say *earliest* or *most original*, as I do not want to become enmeshed in the difficulties that von Rad had with his insistence on the "early" credos of Israel. Rather, by *characteristic*, I mean the most usual modes of speech, so that one test is the quantity of use. Beyond quantity, I mean by *characteristic* the ways Israel spoke in its most freighted, exalted, or exposed situations. Israel's most characteristic testimony is the speech to which Israel reverted when circumstance required its most habituated speech.¹³

11. On the cruciality of utterance, see the general accent on "articulacy" for moral discourse in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), chap. 4.

12. I use the term *characteristic* to recognize that one cannot say "always" about such speech, because exceptions are inevitable. On the notion of characteristic speech, see Walter Brueggemann, "Crisis-Evoked, Crisis-Resolving Speech," *BTB* 24 (1994) 95-105.

13. Concerning the testimony of Israel, one may speak of Israel's "habits of the lips," as in the phrase, "Say in our heart." The phrase "habits of the lips" plays on the title of Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

It is important, first of all, to recognize that Israel's utterance about God is characteristically stated in full sentences, and the sentence is the unit of testimony that most reliably is taken as revelation. Here we do well to follow James Barr in his warning against overreliance on isolated words.¹⁴ I insist that God is embedded in Israel's testimony of full sentences and cannot be extracted from such full sentences. Moreover, we may identify the characteristic form of such sentences, even if they can be arranged in a variety of imaginative ways. The full sentence of testimony, which characteristically becomes revelation in Israel, is organized around an active verb that bespeaks an action that is transformative, intrusive, or inverting.¹⁵ Thus special attention may be paid to causative verbs in the *biph 'il* stem. In what follows, we shall give detailed attention to the regular stock of verbs used by Israel in its testimony. Each of these verbs regularly attests to the claim that the enactment of the verb creates a new situation or a changed circumstance that did not exist prior to its enactment.

Second, Yahweh the God of Israel, who may variously be designated by many titles and metaphors, is characteristically the subject of the active verb.¹⁶ Thus the characteristic claim of Israel's testimony is that Yahweh is an active agent who is the subject of an active verb, and so the testimony is that Yahweh, the God of Israel, has acted in decisive and transformative ways.¹⁷ Remember that we are

14. James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). It is Barr's now well-established urging that words can only be understood in the context of their usage in sentences. In what follows, my consideration of verbs, adjectives, and nouns that speak of Yahweh is an effort to treat Israel's characteristic terms in context.

15. On the privileged function of the verb, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (trans. A. M. S. Smith; New York: Vintage Books, 1973) 92-96. Foucault observes on p. 93:

The verb is the indispensable condition for all discourse; and wherever it does not exist at least by implication, it is not possible to say that there is a language. All normal presuppositions conceal the invisible presence of the verb.

Foucault also reflects on the verb *to be*, a matter that interests us in terms of nominal sentences. On the cruciality of verbs for Old Testament theology, see Terence E. Frétheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *HBT* 10 (1988) 47-70.

16. My way of approaching the character and identity of Yahweh provisionally precludes other approaches. Thus, for example, I will not deal with the several titles for Yahweh that reflect Israel's history of religion. On these, see Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God: The Meaning and Message of the Everlasting Names* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988). I am aware of the complex history of the antecedents of Yahweh; see Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990); and Trygve N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1982). These antecedents to Yahweh, in my judgment, belong to questions of the history of Israel's religion and do not directly concern Old Testament theology.

17. I have arranged my discussion of Israel's God-talk around the issue of verbs. It is important to recognize that in Israel's God-talk and in God's talk to Israel, an important body of material is expressed in nominal sentences, sentences without verbs. While I will not deal with these extensively or explicitly, what I have said of verbal sentences applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to nominal sentences. That is, Yahweh is, in nominal as in verbal sentences, embedded in full sentences and cannot be extracted from them. In these sentences, however, the consequence for characterizing Yahweh tends to be presence rather than action. It may be that Foucault's general judgment that nominal sentences conceal hidden verbs does not apply directly to Hebrew usage, but I do not doubt that the usages in verbal and nominal sentences are commensurate.

here paying attention to the utterance of testimony given by Israel as witness. This strange grammatical practice serves to give a version of reality that flies in the face of other versions of reality, and most often it wants to defeat the other versions of reality, which it judges to be false. There is, to be sure, a large and vexed literature about "the acts of God," literature that tends to proceed either by recognizing that such utterances make no sense historically, or by reifying the phrase into a philosophical concept.¹⁸ Israel's testimony, however, is not to be understood as a claim subject to historical explication or to philosophical understanding. It is rather

Two usages of nominal sentences are particularly important for Israel's witness to Yahweh. First, the enigmatic statement of Exod 3:14, "I will be who I will be," is exceedingly important, even if problematic. Frank M. Cross, "The Religion of Canaan and the God of Israel," *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of Israelite Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) 60–75, has made a powerful argument that the name of Yahweh, as reflected in Exod 3:14, was originally part of a verbal sentence, in which the verb *to be* is understood as *cause to be*, i.e., *create*, or *pro-create*. Such a way of understanding embeds the nominal sentence in an assumed verbal sentence. In any case, it is plausible that the entire Exodus narrative is an exposition of the name of Exod 3:14, requiring all of its powerful verbs for an adequate exposition.

Second, the salvation oracles of Second Isaiah (41:8–13; 43:5–6; 44:8; cf. Jer 30:10–11) are indeed nominal sentences, characteristically asserting, "Fear not, I am with you." On the form, see Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Edgar W. Conrad, *Fear Not Warrior: A Study of 'al tira' Pericopes in the Hebrew Scriptures* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985); and Patrick D. Miller, *They Cried to the Lord: The Form and Theology of Biblical Prayer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994) 141–73. There is no verb in any of these assurances. Nonetheless, in my judgment, even the nominal assertions bespeak an active, transformative agency, in some kind of verbal activity is implied or is to be inferred. The problem is in part a grammatical one. But it is also a substantive one, in that Yahweh's very person is itself a transformative force most often expressed in verbs. That is, "God is with" (*Immanuel*), and by "being with," circumstance is changed. That change, in its precise utterance, requires something like the articulation of a verb. Thus I wish to acknowledge the importance of sentences without verbs, but to include them in my general index of statements about the reality of Yahweh in Israel's utterance. On the grammatical issues of nominal sentences, see Francis I. Andersen, *The Hebrew Verbless Clause in the Pentateuch* (JBL Monograph Series 14; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

It is possible, as Patrick D. Miller reminds me, to distinguish between nominal sentences that state Yahweh's relationship to Israel and nominal sentences that attest to Yahweh's being or character. This distinction greatly enriches and complicates the matter, but I think it does not finally affect my decision to treat such claims as commensurate with verbal sentences in their "produce."

18. The notion of "God acting" is a long-honored one in Old Testament theology, especially with reference to the work of Gerhard von Rad and G. Ernest Wright. See especially Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (SBT 8; London: SCM Press, 1952). More recently, the notion has been recognized as having immense problems. The literature is as immense as the problems. The notion of "God's action in history" has been a privileged reference point in Old Testament theology, especially under the influence of von Rad and Wright. But while Old Testament theology had gone a long while with rather innocent reference to such a notion, it had at the same time been deeply problematized by theologians.

The familiar reference point for that problematizing is an early article by Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *JR* 41 (1961) 194–205. The subsequent discussion has largely been conducted by philosophically inclined theologians, with Scripture scholars contributing little. The most helpful discussion known to me is Thomas Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). See also William P. Alston, *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); Vincent Brümmer, *Speaking of a Personal God: An Essay on Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), especially 108–27; Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1967); A. J. Freddoso, ed., *The Existence and Nature of God* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); T. V. Morris, *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988); Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); and Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World: The Bampton Lectures for 1986* (London: SCM Press, 1986).

an utterance that proposes that this particular past be construed according to this utterance. For our large purposes we should note, moreover, that such testimonial utterance in Israel is characteristically quite concrete, and only on the basis of many such concrete evidences does Israel dare to generalize.

The third element of this standard testimony of Israel is that the active verb has a direct object, the one acted on, the one for whom transformation has been wrought.¹⁹ In the first instant, the direct object may be a personal pronoun—me, us—as the witness speaks about his or her own changed circumstance. Or this direct object may be expressed more formally as "Israel," who is regularly the recipient of Yahweh's direct activity.²⁰ But then, as we shall see, the direct object may vary greatly to include all of creation or even nonhuman parts of it, or the nations who are acted on by God in this rhetoric.

In this complicated grammar, we are close to the core claim of Israel's faith. In this faith, all of reality is comprehended in this simple sentence, organized around the verb. It is the verb that binds Yahweh to the object—variously, individual persons, Israel, creation, or the nations. The two parties, however, are bound in a relation that is profoundly asymmetrical, for Yahweh, as the subject of the verb, is the party who holds the initiative and who characteristically acts on the other party. The object is in the sentence to receive whatever Yahweh chooses to enact.

We notice immediately the manifold oddness of this claim, which constitutes the central fascination of Old Testament theology. First, the sentence governed by the verb promptly refuses any autonomy for the object, for all of the objects (which comprehend everything) are subject to the force of the verb and to the intent of the Subject. Second, God as the subject of the sentence is engaged in activity that binds God to these objects. Israel rarely and only belatedly can speak about God per se, but regularly speaks about God engaged transformatively with and on behalf

It is evident that a naive biblical notion of God's action is not plausible in the categories of modernism. Thus one is faced with either abandoning the notion of God's action or trimming it down to irrelevance, which an Old Testament theology can scarcely do, or refusing the categories of modernity that make one susceptible to the charge of fideism. The rich and suggestive discussion now available does not go far beyond these choices. In what follows, I have sought to explicate the rhetoric of ancient Israel in terms of its own claims, without submitting that rhetoric to the critique of modernist epistemological categories. I am aware that such a procedure begs the most difficult questions. I have taken this tack because, in terms of explicating Old Testament faith, any other strategy would end in being immobilized.

19. This subject-object transaction as reflected in the grammar of Israel's characteristic testimonial speech preserves the theological claim of Yahweh as the one who holds initiative and Israel as the one who receives what Yahweh gives. In my discussion of "Countertestimony" (Part 2) and "Unsolicited Testimony" (Part 3), I have indicated that the relationship between Yahweh and Yahweh's partners is not as simple as subject and object. The actual practice of Israel's testimony includes many variegated departures from that simple connection that has dominated scholastic theology. Jürgen Habermas, *Theology and Practice* (trans. John Viertel; Boston: Beacon Press, 1973) 244, comments that Christian theology preserves a distinction "between the subject of history and the subject who acts historically, between the Lord of history and those who are merely subjected to it."

20. In my exposition of Israel as Yahweh's object and partner, I refer to Israel as a theological entity, generated by the testimony of the text as a rhetorical exercise. I do not use the term with any assumptions about historicity for any part of the testimony. Judgments about historicity, in any positivistic sense, emerge only from a study of the history and culture of the ancient Near East. The results of such study bear only indirectly on the testimonial articulations of Israel in the text.

of the object. Third, the linkage of the subject God to the active verbs, while not unfamiliar to us, is intellectually problematic. It appears, according to our conventional horizons, to be an ill match of categories because the verb bespeaks forceful activity, whereas God is classically understood as Being or Substance. But of course Israel's way of utterance is not restrained by our conventional assumptions. Clearly Israel in its utterance is up to something that it is not willing to accommodate to our more commonsense notion of reality. And clearly it is willing to make such an utterance because the Subject so compels Israel that Israel must render a version of reality that is odd, given our more static or controlling ways of speech.

Thus while we recognize this peculiarity and Israel's repeated insistence on it, we must also recognize the fragility of the witness. No doubt other, more credible witnesses to reality were always available, even in the ancient world. The Old Testament is that literature which has in large rendered a verdict accepting this testimony as reliable. While we are paying attention to this testimony and hosting it as revelation, we must be aware that within and outside of Israel, alternative construals of reality were always more readily credible.

Normative Substance of Israel's Utterance

It is now possible to make some suggestion about the substance of the testimony that is characteristically expressed in this full and odd sentence. We may pay attention to the particular kind of sentence that seems most characteristic in Israel's testimony, whereby Israel's speech offers a version of reality that is from the outset in conflict with our versions of reality. Or we may see that Israel, from the outset, articulated a "sub-version" of reality that means to subvert other, more dominant versions.²¹

Testimony as Thanksgiving

I propose as a beginning point that Israel's testimony, in which it offers its version of reality (and therefore of God), is a sentence offered as a *tôdab*. It is a statement of gratitude and thanksgiving, offered in a confessional mode, whereby Israel expresses joy, wonder, and gratitude for a gift given or an action performed, a gift or action that has decisively changed Israel's circumstance.²² Moreover, the characteristic setting of the utterance of a *tôdab* is speech in a worship setting, wherein a material offering accompanies the speech. The speech and the offer-

21. I have taken over the notion of sub-version as an alternative version that means to undermine the accepted version from J. Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narrative* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1993). The effect of the term used this way is to insist that accepted reality is not a given, but simply one more version of what is there. Moreover, the usage suggests that there is nothing given behind the versions, but that everything about what is "there" depends on the embrace of some version.

22. On the *tôdab* as an important usage in Israel's liturgy and faith, see Harvey H. Guthrie, *Theology as Thanksgiving: From Israel's Psalms to the Church's Eucharist* (New York: Seabury, 1981); and Miller, *They Cried to the Lord*, 179–204.

ing together signify in a concrete way the grateful acknowledgment for the gift or action now narrated.

Several characteristic examples of the *tôdab* can be taken to be the standard context for Israel's most elemental testimony:

I will give to the Lord the thanks (*tôdab*) due to his righteousness (*šdq*),
and sing praise to the name of the Lord, the Most High. (Ps 7:17)

This utterance comes at the end of a psalm of petition, and so it *anticipates* God's positive response to its desperate plea. The term *tôdab* is parallel to "sing praise" (*zmr*), and therefore it is likely that the anticipated *tôdab* is cultic. Moreover, the substance of Yahweh's characteristic action is Yahweh's *šdqh*, which is the way in which Yahweh is present to this needy Israelite. Thus the *tôdab* in anticipation is a glad response to Yahweh's righteousness.

I will give thanks (*tôdab*) to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will tell (*spr*) of all your wonderful deeds.
I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise (*zmr*) to your name, O Most High. (Ps 9:1–2)

In this articulation of *tôdab*, the verb is matched by four others: *tell*, *be glad*, *exult*, and *sing praise* (*zmr*). All of these verbs bespeak utter and ecstatic joy in the presence of the community, joy that is enacted through speech. The body of this psalm then provides an inventory of the ways in which Yahweh has impinged in transformative ways on the life of the speaker.

With a freewill offering (*ndvb*) I will sacrifice to you;
I will give thanks (*'dh*) to your name, O Lord, for it is good.
For he has delivered me from every trouble,
and my eye has looked in triumph on my enemies. (Ps 54:6–7)

This utterance again comes at the conclusion of a petitionary prayer. In this case, unlike Psalm 7, the well-being given by God is not anticipated, but is *in hand*. Yahweh has delivered (*nyt*), and the speaker has enjoyed triumph over the adversaries. This usage also makes explicit the cultic setting for the *tôdab* as a vow (*ndv*) that is to be kept, certainly in the presence of the congregation.

I will come into your house with burnt offerings (*'olôth*);
I will pay you my vows (*ndr*),
those that my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
I will offer to you burnt offerings (*'olôth*) of fatlings,
with the smoke of the sacrifice (*qtr*) of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats.
Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell (*spr*) what he has done for me. (Ps 66:13–16)

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