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The Word of YHWH as Theophany

Richard A. Lammert

Most interpreters of the New Testament affirm that there are at least a few texts where “the Word” (ὁ λόγος) is a personal being, the Son of God (John 1:1, 14; Heb 4:12; Rev 19:13). The most widely recognized of these texts, the prologue of John, identifies the eternal Son as “the Word” who created all things (1:1-3) and “became flesh” (1:14) as Jesus, the incarnate Son. Many interpreters of the Old Testament, however, understand a very similar expression in the Old Testament, “the word of YHWH” (דְּבַר יְהוָה), as signifying merely a verbal word, spoken by God and heard by the prophet to whom “the word of YHWH came.”¹ The evident linguistic connection between the two terms is not readily extended to a theological connection. A close exegetical consideration shows, however, that the connection between the two is also theological: the word of YHWH is a theophany in several Old Testament texts.

I. The Word of YHWH as Divine Hypostasis

In the worldview of the Old Testament, divine attributes that are identified with God and yet exhibit some degree of independent identity – often called hypostases – play a much more prominent role than we in the Western world are accustomed to seeing. Charles Gieschen contrasts our typical (Western) way of viewing attributes, such as Word, as abstract concepts with the biblical (Eastern) way of viewing these attributes as tangible forms:

It has been affirmed through textual analysis that it is valid to speak of hypostases as aspects of God that have degrees of distinct personhood. It should be emphasized that our modern ways of conceptualization often resist giving a degree of personhood to these divine attributes or aspects. In spite of this, the textual evidence leads us to understand a world view that is based much more on tangible forms than abstract concepts. Thus, Name, Glory, Wisdom, Word, Spirit, and Power are not primarily abstract

¹ E.g., Jer 1:2, 4. The four-letter personal name of God in the Old Testament, יהוה, is transliterated as YHWH in this study rather than “Yahweh” or translating it with the title “the LORD” as in most English translations. The fact that the title “the word of YHWH” contains the divine name is significant: it links these visible manifestations to YHWH himself. Where his name is, there he is (e.g., Deut 12:5).

concepts in this world view; they are realities with visible forms.²

Gieschen's summary of his textual analysis serves as a base from which to view the exegetical evidence impelling us to understand several of *the word of YHWH* accounts in the Old Testament as actual theophanies, or appearances of God in visible form.

The major contribution to the study of the Word of God in the Old Testament is the work of Oskar Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament*.³ Despite having *Name* first in the title, the majority of the work focuses on the *Word* of God. Grether states the basis for his investigation in the foreword: "In the following work, Name and Word of God in the Old Testament will be investigated in their relation to revelation."⁴ Grether's point of departure appears to be conducive to understanding the word of YHWH as a theophany. Unfortunately, Grether exhibits the tendency of viewing the word of YHWH more as an abstract concept than as a personal being. In the following analysis, Grether's view represents one end of the spectrum of views on the word of YHWH as theophany, while Gieschen represents the other.

Grether collects all the word of YHWH (and related) phrases in the Old Testament, categorizing and examining them.⁵ He shows that the vast majority of the occurrences of the phrase occur in the prophetic literature. The few occurrences in the Torah are almost exclusively a reference to the covenantal word of God in the Ten Commandments. In the prophetic literature, however, the word of YHWH refers to what Grether calls the "prophetic Word of God." After his investigation of the word of YHWH in the Old Testament, Grether observes the following about *the word* as an hypostasis:

The hypostasization of the דבר [word] concept reaches its fullest development in the postcanonical time, that is, after the boundaries of the present work. Places such as Wis. 18:14 ff., where the Logos appears as a personality with a large measure of independence in order to kill the

² Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* 42 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 1998), 122. For a defense of hypostasis nomenclature, see 36–45.

³ Oskar Grether, *Name und Wort Gottes im Alten Testament*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 64 (Gießen: A. Töpelmann, 1934). This was Grether's *Habilitationsschrift*, presented at the Universität Erlangen in 1933.

⁴ Grether, *Name und Wort*, v. All translations of the German are mine.

⁵ All of the phrases that Grether examines are of the form דבר in the construct case plus יהוה, אלהים, and similar words. דבר in the absolute case has too wide a range of meanings (including "word," "thing," "event," "history") to provide any specificity.

firstborn of the Egyptians, is *not yet* found in the canon of the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the beginnings of hypostasization lie in it.⁶

It is this last statement of Grether's that we will investigate in detail. Is it only the *beginnings* of hypostasization of the Word that are to be found in the Old Testament, or is there *already* an hypostasization of the Word, with the word of YHWH appearing as a theophany in Old Testament texts?

It is difficult to answer this question. Grether admits that the decision is often more or less subjective.⁷ Granted that the decision is often subjective, one must consider upon what basis to make that judgment. Quoting G. Westphal, Grether himself gives us a basis upon which to make that judgment:

It is in any case a conspicuously fine distinction to notice in the use of the phrases *וַיְהִי דְבַר יְהוָה אֶל אֱלִיָּהוּ* [and the word of YHWH came to Elijah] (1 Kings 17:2, 8; 18:1; 21:17, 28), as long as Elijah is distant from Horeb, and *וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה* [and YHWH said], as long as Elijah is on Horeb and personally communes with Yahweh here (1 Kings 19:15). Thereby the voice that Elijah hears (v. 13) is designated as Yahweh's voice. One may conclude from this, that a deliberate distinction should be made here between mediate and immediate speaking with God. The Word, just as the Name, *plays a much more independent role in ancient times than we can feel*—we find ourselves here already on the way to a personification of the Word.⁸

Here Grether sounds surprisingly close to Gieschen. Since "the Word . . . plays a much more independent role in ancient times than we can feel," then we should be open—as faithful interpreters—to the possibility that word of YHWH is a title for YHWH's visible appearance or form. We must take into account that it is more difficult for us moderns than for the ancient Israelites to see a given account as a theophany.

II. An Examination of Word of YHWH Texts

Before we apply Westphal's axiom to Grether's analysis, we should note Westphal's own analysis of the Elijah pericopes. Westphal has concluded that there is a distinction between the "mediate" and the "immediate" speaking of God. In doing so, however, he is making a distinction that cannot be made exegetically. The biblical text stresses that (sinful) humans cannot see God and live: "Then Moses said, 'Now show me your glory.' And the LORD said, 'I will cause all my goodness to pass

⁶ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 150; (italics mine).

⁷ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 150-151.

⁸ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 151; (italics mine).

in front of you. . . . But,' he said, 'you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live'" (Exod 33:18-20). The knowledge among the Israelites that no one may see God and live is underscored by the incidents where an individual saw a person who was God, and marveled that he lived. Additionally, Deuteronomy ends by noting, "Since then [the time of Moses], no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Deut 34:10). If no one other than Moses warranted face-to-face communication—and even that must have been mediated, since Moses himself could not see God and live—then no prophet can claim to have an "immediate" communication from God. Because one cannot understand *exegetically* any communication to be immediately from God, the distinction that Westphal has found in the text evaporates. Since the fall, God always mediates his presence to sinful humans.

In addition, upon closer examination, one sees that Westphal has been somewhat selective in his presentation of the textual evidence. He correctly notes that *ויהי דבר יהוה אל אליהו* (and the word of YHWH came to Elijah) is used when Elijah is distant from Horeb, and *ויאמר יהוה* (and YHWH said) when he is on Horeb. However, he does not mention one other appearance of YHWH in the pericope:

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. . . . All at once an angel (*מלאך*) touched him and said, "Get up and eat." . . . The angel of the LORD (*מלאך יהוה*) came back a second time and touched him and said, "Get up and eat, for the journey is too much for you." (1 Kings 19:3, 5, 7)

If *the word of YHWH* and *YHWH* represent two different types of mediation, then *the angel of YHWH* would seem to represent a third type. It is better, however, to understand these variations as different *titles* for the same mediation, not as different *types* of mediation. Furthermore, *the angel of YHWH* is understood as a theophany elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁹

Westphal has ignored an important piece of textual evidence. As soon as Elijah reaches Mount Horeb, the text continues:

There he went into a cave and spent the night. And the word of the LORD came to him (*והנה דבר יהוה אלי*): "What are you doing here, Elijah?" He replied, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. . . ." He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the LORD (*לפני יהוה*), for the LORD (*והנה יהוה*) is about to pass by." (1 Kings 19:9-10)

⁹ See, for example, Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 51-69.

The word of YHWH speaks to Elijah not only when he is distant from Mount Horeb, but also when he is on Mount Horeb. There is no fine distinction (*pace* Westphal) between the phrases used for the two different locations. The only distinction that appears in the text is between “the word of YHWH” and “YHWH.” Both of them speak as YHWH; yet “the word of YHWH” tells Elijah that “YHWH” will pass by Elijah.¹⁰

Based upon the distinction between the two phrases that Westphal made, Grether applies that insight to a text from the Torah:

One could just as well [as the Elijah pericope] refer to the jahwistic report of the making of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:1 ff.). At first (v. 1 and 4) it is the דבר [word] that mediates the interaction of Yahweh with Abraham. In verse 9, which orders the preparations for making the covenant, it says, “Then He spoke to him.” Now Yahweh is thought of as nearer than before. Also indicative is the fact that in the history of the patriarchs only twice an expression composed with דבר is used for the speaking of God, otherwise however the verb אָמַר [to say] is used. Undoubtedly the expression “and the דבר יהוה [word of YHWH] came” stresses the distance between the speaker and the one spoken to more than “and He spoke” and perhaps occasionally an intention ruled in the choice of the expression. But that is by no means regularly so.¹¹

Using Westphal’s distinction, Grether arrives at a false dichotomy. The context hardly allows one to say that YHWH is nearer in Gen 15:9 (where YHWH himself speaks) than in Gen 15:4 (where the word of YHWH speaks). In Gen 15:5, the word of YHWH takes Abram outside; such a manifestation must be “near” Abram.

From the same pericope, Gieschen concludes that this is an account of a theophany:

The phenomenon described seems to begin with a vision (15.1), then progresses to a manifestation that comes to Abram in order to speak and lead him outside to see the stars (15.4–6), then concludes with the smoking fire pot and flaming torch going between the sacrifices that Abram prepared (15.7–21). There is good reason to compare this theophany to those involving the Angel of YHWH in subsequent portions of the OT. Thus, the Word of YHWH could be considered to be an angelomorphic figure, especially by later interpreters in the first century CE.¹²

The biblical text itself provides support for Gieschen’s conclusion that the

¹⁰ See the discussion of this pericope by Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 105.

¹¹ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 151.

¹² Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 103–104.

word of YHWH in this text is a theophany:

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision (אָבְרָם בְּמַחֲזָה אֵלָיו לְאָמֵר): . . . Then the word of the LORD came to him (וַהֲגִיבָה דְבַר־יְהוָה): "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said (וַיֹּאמֶר), "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD (וַהֲאֵמֵן בַּיהוָה), and he credited it to him as righteousness. He also said to him, "I am the LORD (אֲנִי יְהוָה), who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." . . . On that day the LORD made a covenant (בְּרַח יְהוָה) with Abram. (Gen. 15:1, 4-7, 18)

Gieschen notes that the word of YHWH not only speaks to Abram but also takes him outside. The word of YHWH here is obviously more than a title for a verbal event; it is a title for a personal appearance of YHWH. Abram accepts the statement made by the word of YHWH as if it were YHWH's own word: Abram believed YHWH. Then the word of YHWH identifies himself as YHWH. At the conclusion of the pericope, YHWH makes a covenant with Abram that same day. Since the only figure—other than Abram—who has been introduced in the text so far is the word of YHWH, it is reasonable to conclude that the word of YHWH is the same YHWH who made a covenant with Abram.

After Grether's analysis of Genesis 15, he continues with an examination of Jeremiah 13. He again relies on the false dichotomy between mediate and immediate speech of God; he does not allow his judgment to be influenced by the tendency within the Old Testament texts to present attributes of God (e.g., word, name, glory) as concrete, personal realities—a tendency Grether himself had noted. Concerning Jeremiah 13, Grether states:

Undoubtedly the expression "and the דְבַר יְהוָה [word of YHWH] came" stresses the distance between the speaker and the one spoken to more than "and He spoke" and perhaps occasionally an intention ruled in the choice of the expression. But that is by no means regularly so. Jer. 13:1, for example, introduces the speech of Yahweh to Jeremiah. [Discussion of various phrases in verses 2-8 follows], whereupon a "so Yahweh has spoken" (v. 9) followed. Where can one still establish a distinction in these nine verses between an immediate and mediate speech of God on the basis of the formulas "then Yahweh spoke" and "then the דְבַר יְהוָה came"? The two formulas are, in spite of the different colorings of the expressions, used fully promiscuously (*promiscue*). If that is the case, then

one cannot maintain that with the expression *then the* רַבַּר יְהוָה *came* we are "on the way to a personification of the Word." For then, the distinction with the plain "then He spoke" must appear more clearly.¹³

The key to the passage is Grether's comment, "The two formulas are, in spite of the different colorings of the expressions, used fully promiscuously." He maintains that, since this is the case, we cannot be "on the way to a personification of the Word." But his conclusion is not a given. If the Word has not yet become personified in any way, the two formulas, "and the word of YHWH came" and "and he spoke," could not be used successively. But the two formulas would be used successively if "the word of YHWH" was already understood to be a personal reality.

One cannot tell from the context, as Grether has already mentioned, which of these is the case. There is, however, certainly nothing in the text that *prevents* us from understanding the word of YHWH in these verses as a theophany. Applying the caution implied in Westphal's own comment above, we can conclude that Jeremiah has recorded a theophany; the word of YHWH that came to him was a visible manifestation of YHWH that he could see and still live.

Such is the conclusion of Gieschen when he looks at precisely the same phenomena as Grether (based, however, on the first chapter of Jeremiah, instead of the thirteenth):

This narrative follows the basic call *Gattung*. Here "the Word of YHWH" came to Jeremiah and spoke in the first person as YHWH (1.4, 11, 13; cf. 2.1). After Jeremiah's objection (1.6) and YHWH's verbal reassurance (1.7-8), Jeremiah relates that "then YHWH put forth his hand and touched my mouth" (1.9). What was the appearance of this "Word of YHWH" who was "YHWH" (1.7, 9a, 9b, 12; cf. 1.8, 15, 19) if he could be described as putting forth his hand to touch Jeremiah's mouth (1.9)? Is this not more than anthropomorphism? Here "word of YHWH" is most likely a figure in continuity with angelomorphic traditions that depict God appearing in the form of a man to a human.¹⁴

Gieschen applies the principle, "if there is no distinction between the word of YHWH and YHWH, then the two are synonymous, and the word of YHWH is a theophany."¹⁵ Grether applied the principle, "if there is no distinction between the word of YHWH and YHWH, then personification has not yet started."¹⁶ The two ends of the spectrum regarding hypostates

¹³ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 151-152.

¹⁴ Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology*, 105.

¹⁵ This is my summary of Gieschen's approach.

¹⁶ This is my summary of Grether's approach.

are clearly delineated here.

Grether's unwillingness to see an hypostasis in Jeremiah does not mean that he does not recognize that the word of YHWH is developing aspects of an hypostasis: "*The development of the theology of רבֵּר, which can be observed from Deuteronomy on, leads to its progressive objectification and hypostasization.*"¹⁷ He continues:

The more we regard the רבֵּר *as a principle that leads and rules over history*, the more it achieves a larger independence, until it finally practices the function of Yahweh's messenger and representative. In this sense we find the רבֵּר concept in the thirteenth chapter of First Kings: the man of God receives a command not from Yahweh, but ברבֵּר יהוה [by the word of YHWH] (v. 9) and to him something is said ברבֵּר יהוה (v. 17).¹⁸

Grether correctly notes that the word of YHWH appears as YHWH's messenger and representative. However, it is possible to say even more about the word of YHWH from the context. In the same pericope, a few verses after the ones to which Grether alluded, we read:

While they were sitting at the table, the word of the LORD came (דְּבַר־יְהוָה) to the old prophet who had brought him back. He cried out to the man of God who had come from Judah, "This is what the LORD says (יהוה) (כֹּה אָמַר): 'Because you were disobedient against the mouth of the LORD (וַעֲנֵן כִּי מָרִיתָ פִּי יְהוָה) and have not kept the command the LORD your God gave you (אֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ) . . .'" (1 Kings 13:20-21)

The disobedience of the man of God is "against the mouth of YHWH."

It is, of course, possible to understand *the mouth of YHWH* metaphorically,¹⁹ referring to an ambassador who has spoken faithfully what YHWH gave him to speak; if so, the word of YHWH could be said to speak from "the mouth of YHWH" and still be only YHWH's messenger and representative. In examining the occurrences of מרה אה־פי (to be disobedient against the mouth) in the Old Testament, however, it seems reasonable to conclude something more specific.

The phrase *to be disobedient against the mouth* occurs in only six verses in the Old Testament: Num 20:24; 27:14; 1 Sam 12:15; Lam 1:18; and the occurrence here in 1 Kings 13:21 and 13:26. In every case, the "mouth" who has spoken is demonstrably YHWH, represented either directly by the

¹⁷ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 153-154; (emphasis mine).

¹⁸ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 154; (emphasis mine).

¹⁹ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in veteris testamenti libros* (Leiden: Brill, 1958), 565, define מרה אה־פי as "against the order."

Tetragrammaton, or by a pronoun referring back to an immediately preceding Tetragrammaton. Both 1 Samuel 12:15 and Lamentations 1:18 refer in general to what YHWH has spoken; although no specific referents are given, it seems clear that the disobedience is against something that YHWH himself commanded.

In the case of Numbers 20:24 and 27:14, the reference to what YHWH commanded is clear: it is to the time when the children of Israel were at Meribah and needed water to drink. Exodus 17 unequivocally indicates that YHWH spoke to Moses, telling him what to do. Moses and Aaron were disobedient "against the mouth of YHWH," that is, against what YHWH himself had said. The context here in 1 Kings provides no reason for us *not* to understand that the disobedience of the man of God "against the mouth of YHWH" was disobedience against what YHWH himself spoke to him. In a similar way, the word of YHWH is a title for YHWH's visible manifestation; to see "the word of YHWH" was to experience a theophany.

Although Grether hardly emphasized the theophanic nature of the word of YHWH, his emphasis on the word of YHWH as primarily the "prophetic Word of God" is not without consequence for our understanding of the word of YHWH as a theophany. Grether's careful compilation of the occurrences of "the word of YHWH" (and related expressions) shows that the vast majority of the phrases are in the prophetic literature. A theophany of God as the word of YHWH is primarily associated with the prophets of Israel.

1 Samuel 3:1 supports this conclusion: "The boy Samuel ministered before YHWH under Eli. In those days the word of YHWH was rare [הָהֵם הָיָה יְקָר בְּיָמִים]; there were not many visions [אִין חִזּוֹן נִפְרָזִין]." Because the author of the text probably wrote in a later period when there were more frequent theophanies of God, he could say that in "those days" (as compared to the writer's day) the word of YHWH "was rare." The explicit connection between the word of YHWH and "visions" appears to underscore that the word of YHWH is not simply a spoken or written word of God but a manifestation of God that appears in a vision. Grether says about this:

The רִבֵּר on one side and revelatory dreams and visions on the other side do not build contradictions. Much more so, the רִבֵּר in this period was frequently transmitted through dream and vision. So Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10) receives the רִבֵּר that announces the fall of the house of Eli while he thinks

he is seeing Yahweh standing before him in his sleep.²⁰

If one understands the word of YHWH as a theophany, one would more readily say that the word of YHWH *himself* appears in the vision, announcing the word of prophecy. This can be demonstrated from the text.

The following text of Samuel makes no sharp distinction between the word of YHWH and YHWH (to use Grether's terminology, the two terms are used "promiscuously"). Thus, the impression is underscored that the two are the same:

Then the LORD called Samuel (וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֶל-שְׁמוּאֵל). Samuel answered, "Here I am." . . . Again the LORD called, "Samuel!" (יהוה קרא עוד שמואל) (וַיִּסַּף) . . . Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD (וְשָׂרָם יָדַע אֶת-יְהוָה): The word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him (וַיִּגְלֶה אֵלָיו דְּבַר-יְהוָה) (וְשָׂרָם). The LORD called Samuel (וַיִּסַּף יְהוָה קרא עוד שמואל) a third time. . . . The LORD came and stood there (וַיָּבֵא יְהוָה וַיִּתְעַב), calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" Then Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." And the LORD said to Samuel (וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-שְׁמוּאֵל): . . . The LORD continued to appear (וַיִּסַּף יְהוָה לְהֵרָאֵה) at Shiloh, and there he revealed himself to Samuel through the word of YHWH (בְּדַבַּר יְהוָה). (1 Sam. 3: 4, 6, 7-8, 10-11, 21)

This analysis of selected passages regarding the word of YHWH shows that they readily support the understanding of the Word as a theophany, a visible manifestation of YHWH. YHWH himself appears to the patriarchs and prophets, making known his revelatory word to them. This does not mean that all passages with the word of YHWH can be so understood. Some indisputably relate to the covenantal word of God in the commandments, or to other words. But this analysis allows us to conclude that several occurrences of the word of YHWH in biblical texts should be considered theophanies if the text indicates that the word of YHWH came and spoke with an individual or group.

When one grasps the word of YHWH as a theophanic expression, it is not surprising to find the Word as an hypostasis or theophany in the literature of the Second Temple period (such as the Wisdom of Solomon 18:15) or in the New Testament (passages in which *the Word* is a reference to Jesus Christ such as John 1:1, 14). When one views the word of YHWH as a theophany in the Old Testament, its explicit use as such in the Second Temple period and in the New Testament is understood not as a *development* of its use in the Hebrew Scriptures, but as a *continuation*. There is no lack of continuity of theology and language between the Old

²⁰ Grether, *Name und Wort*, 87.

Testament and the New Testament.

III. An Overview of Other Scholarship on Word of YHWH

A careful exegetical consideration of the Old Testament shows that Gieschen is correct in pointing us to understanding the word of YHWH as an hypostasis. There are shortcomings in Grether's reluctance to see actual hypostases in the Old Testament. However, an examination of subsequent scholarly literature shows that some think Grether has gone too *far* in identifying hypostases in the Old Testament. These exegetes prefer to see a complete *lack* of hypostases in the Old Testament (widening our spectrum of views on the word of YHWH as theophany). Representative of this view is G. Gerlemann, who writes in the *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*:

In the discussion about the so-called hypostatization of divine actions and attributes, רַבֵּר has also played a not insignificant role. The independence and personification of the רַבֵּר, which first reaches its greatest development in postcanonical time, already appears in its beginnings in the Old Testament. . . . It is however questionable, whether one may isolate the "hypostatization" of divine attributes from the general tendency to make abstract things personal and alive, which is at work overall in the Old Testament. Human affects and activities are personified and made independent as often as divine attributes are: wickedness, perversity, anxiety, hope, anger, goodness, truth, etc. (Ps. 85:11 f., 107:42; Job 5:16, 11:14, 19:10, and often).²¹

Bruce K. Waltke, in a parenthetical comment to the main article by Earl S. Kalland on רַבֵּר in the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, cites the three passages Isaiah 9:7, Psalms 107:20 and 147:15, and approvingly refers to Gerlemann's summary: "Gerlemann *rightly* calls into question the almost universal interpretation that sees the word in these passages as a Hypostasis."²²

Gerlemann questions the understanding of the Word as hypostasis by comparison with metaphors in the Hebrew language that are demonstrably more "metaphorical." Linguistically, however, his argument does not hold up. Every language uses metaphor, and some of those metaphors are "stronger" than others. If I say, "My anger boiled over when the court spoke," I have used two metaphors. But if I argue that my

²¹ G. Gerlemann, "רַבֵּר," in *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, 2nd ed. (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1975), 1:col. 441-42.

²² Earl S. Kalland, "רַבֵּר," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:180; (emphasis mine).

anger cannot *really* boil over, therefore the court cannot *really* speak, the court can very quickly persuade me of my error by citing me for contempt of court. The metaphorical nature of the first metaphor does not destroy the actual force of the second metaphor.

A representative viewpoint citing and mainly agreeing with Grether (now in the middle of the spectrum) is W. H. Schmidt, writing in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*.²³ Most theologians could probably be found somewhere in this area of the spectrum. There are some scholars, however, who understand the word of YHWH as a theophany as Gieschen does. Terence E. Fretheim, author of the "Word of God" entry in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, states that "the most important critique . . . is that the word of God as verbal event, particularly associated with the theophany, has been neglected."²⁴

Fretheim supports his understanding of the Word of God as theophany with this evidence:

Theophanies are in fact the vehicle for the most common and most articulate revelations from God. . . . Usually this entails the speaking of words by God, appearing often if not always in human form (cf. Genesis 18; Judg 6:11-18; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1), even in those contexts where the divine presence is veiled by fire or cloud (cf. Exod 3:2; 24:9-11;...). The word of God is thereby delivered through personal encounter in a quite direct way through a verbal communication, often "face to face" (cf. Exod 12:6-8). . . . The reception of the word of God in vision and dream is only a variation of the theophanic mode of revelation (cf. Gen 28:12-13; 1 Kgs 3:5; 9:2; cf. Gen 31:11-13; 15:1). . . . The word of God in dream and vision thus retains its character as personal encounter.²⁵

According to Gerlemann and Waltke, too much emphasis has been placed on Word as hypostasis. Fretheim argues that the idea of the word of YHWH as theophany has been neglected. What kind of understanding does one find in commonly accessible, standard commentaries? A brief sampling of mainstream, scholarly commentators on each of the pericopes cited above show that Fretheim's assessment is far closer to reality than that of Gerlemann and Waltke. A cursory overview of some commentator's viewpoints on some of the pericopes examined above bears

²³ W. H. Schmidt, "דְבַר," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis et al. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977-), 3:84-125.

²⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, "Word of God," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:965.

²⁵ Fretheim, "Word of God," 6:965.

this out.

E. A. Speiser (*The Anchor Bible*), John Skinner (*The International Critical Commentary*), Gerhard von Rad (*The Old Testament Library*), and Gordon J. Wenham (*Word Biblical Commentary*) consider the word of YHWH in Genesis 15 only as a verbal encounter, with no inkling of a theophany mentioned.²⁶ The pericopes in Jeremiah do not fare any better than those in Genesis. John Bright (*The Anchor Bible*) fails to make any particular note about the word of YHWH in either Jeremiah 1 or 13.²⁷ The closest that any commentator comes to calling the word of YHWH in Jeremiah a theophany is William L. Holladay (*Hermeneia*): "the phrase . . . covers both verbal and visionary material."²⁸

The only pericope of those examined where commentators find a theophany is the third chapter of 1 Samuel—although even here not universally. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. (*The Anchor Bible*), for example, apparently limits the content in the first few verses to a mere sound.²⁹ Walter Brueggemann (*Interpretation*) comes much closer to calling the appearance of YHWH to Samuel a theophany.³⁰ The only commentator who specifically calls the appearance of the word of YHWH in the third chapter of 1 Samuel a theophany is Ralph W. Klein (*Word Biblical Commentary*), although his view of the word of YHWH as theophany is not very forceful.³¹

IV. Conclusion

Based upon this cursory overview, one must agree with Fretheim that

²⁶ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), 111-112; John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, The International Critical Commentary (New York: Scribner, 1910), 277-280; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: a Commentary*, Rev. ed., The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), 183; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987), 327.

²⁷ John Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), 7, 95-96.

²⁸ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 32.

²⁹ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary*, The Anchor Bible 8 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 98.

³⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, *Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 25; he does call the appearance a "dream theophany," but the emphasis appears to be on *dream*, since he also uses the phrases "dream report" and "dream narrative."

³¹ Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary 10 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1983), 31.

the word of YHWH as theophany has been neglected. As one begins to grasp the theophanic nature of this phrase in some texts, however, some of the richness of the Old Testament can be seen. The connection of the Old Testament "word of YHWH" with the New Testament "the Word" is much more than a linguistic connection – it is a theological one as well. The Word of YHWH, who took on a visible manifestation from time to time, spoke not only on behalf of YHWH, but also *as* YHWH. God came to his people, not in his glorious majesty, but tangibly as the Word of YHWH. That same Word came to His people, enfleshed as Jesus Christ. The Son is not a new appearance on the scene but one who has been present from the time of creation, personally communicating with his people.³²

Although modern critical scholarship often opposes such a view, this understanding has strong historical roots. Only a few references can be given here.³³ The New Testament readily testifies to this connection of the Son with the Old Testament: It was Jesus who led His people out of Egypt (Jude 5); the Apostle Paul says that it was Christ who was with the people of Israel in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:1-10). Nor was Luther reticent about finding the Son in the Old Testament. Based on 1 Corinthians 10, he writes:

If Christ was contemporaneous with the children of Israel and accompanied them [1 Cor 10:4], if it was He from whom they drank spiritually and on whom they were baptized spiritually, that is, if the children of Israel believed in the future Christ as we do in the Christ who appeared; then Christ must be true and eternal God. . . . It follows cogently and incontrovertibly that the God who led the children of Israel from Egypt and through the Red Sea, who guided them in the wilderness by means of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire, who nourished them with bread from heaven, who performed all the miracles recorded by Moses in his books, again, who brought them into the land of Canaan and there gave them kings and priests and everything, is the very same God, and none other than Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of the Virgin Mary.³⁴

Bringing this overview to the present, we have Gieschen as a modern representative of Luther's viewpoint.³⁵

³² See Charles A. Gieschen, "The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology," *CTQ* 68 (2004): 105-126.

³³ Additional references can be found in Gieschen, "The Real Presence."

³⁴ Martin Luther, "Treatise on the Last Words of David" (1543), English translation from Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955-1986), 15:313.

³⁵ It is perhaps of more than passing interest to note that two of the commentators reviewed who were among the strongest proponents of the word of YHWH as

This understanding of the word of YHWH as theophany can also be related to the office of the holy ministry. In addition to his accurate analysis of the lack of emphasis on theophany, Fretheim also understands the implications of a correct understanding of this Old Testament phenomenon for the doctrine of the ministry. This Old Testament worldview, therefore, also has considerable implications for our own New Testament worldview. Fretheim clearly shows the connection between the worldview of the prophets and our own worldview as he elaborates on the word of YHWH as theophany. His thoughts are worth quoting at length:

In view of the importance of the theophany in any understanding of the word of God, one can say that the word of God so given is an embodied word. God assumes human form in order to speak a word in personal encounter. The word spoken is the focus for the appearance, but the fact that the word is commonly conveyed in personal encounter is of considerable significance. "Visible words" have a kind of import that merely spoken words do not. They render the personal element in the divine address more apparent and give greater directness and sharper focus to the word spoken. Words so spoken have the capacity of being more persuasive and effective. They also make clearer that the source of the word is not "of their own minds" (Jer. 23:16) but outside of the human self; God *appears* in order to speak.

This understanding of word is also seen in the fact that it is conveyed to the larger community in and through a human figure such as a prophet, who not only embodies the word of God but also engages in certain symbolic acts which give flesh to the word (e.g., Isaiah 20). The prophets, however, move beyond the theophanies at one point in particular. God does not just appear, speak a word, and then leave. God leaves the word behind imbedded in the prophet.

The idea of the embodied word becomes particularly apparent in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In Jer 1:9 (cf. 15:16; Deut 18:18) the word of God is placed by God's hand directly into Jeremiah's mouth; the word is conveyed into his very being without having been spoken. This is graphically portrayed in Ezek 3:1-3; the prophet ingests the word of God. The word of God is thereby enfleshed in the very person of the prophet. It is not only what the prophet speaks but who he is that now constitute the word of God. The prophet conveys the word in a way that no simple speaking or writing can. The people now not only hear the word of God from the prophet, they see the word enfleshed in their midst. The word of God is not a disembodied word; it is a personal word spoken in personal

theophany are also Lutheran, both pastors in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Terence E. Fretheim is Elva B. Lovell Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, and Ralph W. Klein Christ Seminary-Seminex Professor, Emeritus, of Old Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago.

encounter.³⁶

This “embodied” word was also found among the prophets, who spoke the word that God spoke to them. God did not speak personally to everyone of the children of Israel; instead, he spoke personally through the prophets, who embodied that word, and who spoke it personally to those around them. In the same way, pastors speak the word of God that has been given to them. They “enflesh” the word in the midst of the people, communicating that word not as mere automatons or rote speakers, but as those who have been personally affected by the word, and now speak that word as “a personal word spoken in a personal encounter.”

³⁶ Fretheim, “Word of God,” 6:966.