

The Speaking God: Dark Sayings of Old¹

Creation as an anonymous act or as something that exists is not an object of faith, because “creation” as such does not communicate. Rather it is Yahweh, as creator and Lord of the world who is the “object” of faith, of laud, and praise, and trust—because the goal of creation is not the self-disclosure of God. God’s revealing of himself in history through his saving acts is the presupposition for the medium of the knowledge and praise of God the creator.²

*Psalm 78*³

¹ *O my people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.*

² *I will open my mouth in parables;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old-*

³ *what we have heard and known,
what our fathers have told us.*

⁴ *We will not hide them from their children;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the LORD,
his power, and the wonders he has done.*

⁵ *He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,*

⁶ *so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.*

⁷ *Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.*

⁸ *They would not be like their forefathers—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,*

¹ From 78:2, The King James Version.

² Hans-Joachim Kraus, Theology of the Psalms, p. 64.

³ NIV.

*whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.*



Psalm 78 is a rather long psalm on the history of Israel. Psalm 78, as you found out, has 72 verses, verses that focus for the most part on the deliverance of the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt. Even for the psalmist that was a long time ago. The first eight verses of the psalm constitute its introduction. The poet (singer) says he is going to teach his reader what it means to have true faith by giving an example of bad faith. Actually the introduction could be a small study in itself. There are some very interesting words in just the first four verses: *my mouth, parables, hidden things, things from of old*. It is as though we were going to take a trip into the past, a hidden past, a past that can only be expressed in mysterious language, a language that is strange to us. So what are these mysterious teachings; what does the Lord say to us through this psalmist? The lesson is easy to grasp: Those who listen to YAHWEH are blessed; those who rebel against Him are treated as enemies.



It is amazing how many really important teachings sort of rise to the top as we read the Old Testament. There are places where the practical aspects of faith intersect with the mysterious theology of the ancient Hebrews. As a result, we are able to make short statements about faith, about us, and about God. Let's look at some examples of what I mean, without trying to exhaust the many features of Biblical thought.

1. We learn that human beings have free will, at least to the extent of saying no or yes to temptation or to God. As for as God is concerned, we can run away from Him or we can run to Him. This is a constant theme in the Old Testament, including the Psalm we are using as the text for this lesson. God's gift of free will is obviously risky, since people may choose what God does not want for us as well as what He might want for us! We are not robots; we are made in "the image of God."

2. This means that humans are responsible for the consequences of their decisions. If we do something bad, we will have to pay for it. If we do something good, God will remember it and bless us. We cannot blame anyone else for the wrongs we do. Of course there are bad circumstances and bad people that might influence us, but God is always with us to do good, and to give us power to do good.

3. At the same time, the Bible shows how much we humans need each other. We form communities and depend on each other for protection and security. In the Bible our communities are often part of our identity. For example, Jesus *of Nazareth*. A case can be made that what the Bible calls hell is really an individual life without God...or anyone else. We are alone with who we are, and that worsens as eternity rolls. That is a chilling thought!

4. While we Christians are quick to say God never changes, we need to be sure of what we mean by that. In the Old Testament, God is always free to be God and no one dictates how God will appear, what He will say, or even what He will do. The prophets

tell us that the Almighty occasionally used His enemies to carry out His will, as in punishing His people when they sinned. At the same time, The Lord God, YAHWEH, is constant in holiness, in the demand for justice, and in steadfast love. I wish I could tell you how magnificent that is.

5. Contrary to our modern world, in the Old Testament, the various nations are all based on faith in gods and goddesses. Yet, as the Prophet Jeremiah says, the divinities of Israel's neighbors are actually "*no-gods*". There is no word of salvation that comes from the lips of idols, according to the Old Testament. It is a personal tragedy to depend on them for anything, much less one's eternal destiny. Are there idols today? You bet! Just think for a while on the different things people love and serve. There are your idols!

6. Along this same line, no word of salvation comes from the world of nature either. *Nature does not announce the will of God*, although it may frighten⁴ us or overcome us with awe⁵. Naturally, we could think of God when we see something magnificent in nature, like a beautiful sunset or a majestic mountain range, but neither the sunset nor the tallest mountain can tell of God's love in Jesus.

7. We learn there are *two groups of prophets: true and false*. There are always those religious men who side with national powers, no matter whether they are good or bad. Most of us would think a man dedicated to God and recognized as a prophet would be God's man first and foremost. Yet, civil power is attractive and even deeply religious people can be sucked in, finding themselves speaking against God and for the status quo. We need to be careful to whom we listen and follow.

8. Hebrew faith has as its foundation *a firm belief in the full presence of God everywhere, with all of His power and love all the time*.⁶ This is the faith the boy Jesus was schooled in, confidence in the promise of God that the day was coming when the dominance of Rome would be over and the people would be free. This would happen when the Messiah (or deliverer) would come to set the people free!

9. The OT says that humankind is tainted with *a spirit of disobedience*. It is shocking what one human can do to another human. And many times the perpetrator has no sense of concern—no conscience! Sometime there is no reason for the random violence we read about; and for abuse, it is as if a dark presence came uninvited into our lives, and the next thing you know we are trapped! Unfortunately, this is a common experience of men and women alike across the generations (Psalm 78:1-8).

10. What kind of society does the Gospel confront in *America today*? In answering this question we take our last look at Old Testament societies in general before we turn to the New Testament. The OT says (1) All societies reach for the comfort of affluence. (2) Their societies were numbed by poverty, powerlessness, and war. (3) All societies are hunting grounds for those who want power and recognition. How is American society like those of the OT?

⁴ There are stories in the OT when earthquakes, storms, and floods terrify the people and make them aware of God.

⁵ In the Psalms nature joins the angelic choirs in astounding us with beautiful song about God's salvation. The weight of revelatory means in the Old Testament falls on (A) direct address, "So says the Lord," (B) true prophetic speech and writing, (C) teachings by scribes, (D) the Torah (Law), (E) visions/dreams, (F) and (G) prayers. The items in the list are not given here in the order of importance.

⁶ There are many ways of showing God's character in the Old Testament. For example, God is Creator, Sovereign Lord, King, Warrior, etc. In the prophets God is also understood as Father and Mother, although God as Mother is prominent in only a few places, as in some prophets and the Psalms.

Well, these are lessons we learn from probing the Old Testament to see how God wants to communicate with us, to say “I love you” to us and “Come to me and I will help you” to us. We know there is much more to be found in the Bible than what we have seen. I hope you have a regular plan for reading from the Bible; it will bless your life.

God and History

We have seen several times that the Lord God is the Lord of History. As such, He is also the Judge of History. Many people do not like thinking about this, but I find great comfort in it. How many times have we looked at a movement or a person who has done violent things to others, then perhaps died, and we thought he or she “got away with it?” But God as the Lord of History assures us that no one gets away with it. There is a lot of “court language” in Scripture discussions of evil. God stands as Accuser and as Judge. No one gets away with anything, whether they wore swastikas on their arms or are part of a terrorist group. Evil cannot hide.

In the Old Testament, God transcends the historical process. We believers confess this in at least two ways: (1) we believe God knows *what has happened* and *what is happening* in every sphere of life, (2) Not only this, but we believe God permits and/or causes present events to move into the future, including the consequences of human choice. There is a third aspect here for me, that is, God is working with believers so that their lives will end in a good way: in the kingdom of God. This part of our confession troubles a lot of people, especially non-churched folks and atheists.

Recently, while looking at books written by atheists, I noticed that their common problem with Christianity revolves around the idea of God’s presence and suffering. One author could not profess faith in God because God supposedly sat back and did nothing while terrorists flew airplanes into the Twin Towers in New York. He said that there could not be a God when things like that happen. Other atheists turned away from God because of the suffering of children in the world; it is easy to find horrible examples of such tragedy.

As a Christian, I believe in a personal God, a God who cares for each of us and who works for our best interests. I believe God gives us many chances to do good to others and if we do not do them, we will be in trouble with the Almighty. I believe that the day is coming when the blind will see, the deaf will hear, and the crippled will walk without help. How can I believe this in the light of what is happening in our world? Because I believe in God as the Bible teaches us about Him. I know how He loves us and the lengths He goes to in order to help us. History tells us that mankind is often mixed up and does what is wrong, but history tells us that there is a good end in view for those who believe and tough it out. Again, how do we know; He tells us so.

God Never Ages

Perhaps you have noticed in our brief study of God and man talking together in the Old Testament that God never ages. The history we work with is human history, not divine. God does not wear a watch, does not keep account of years, because God does not think in terms of aging. For God, everything happens “now.” There is no division of “time” into past, present, and future, because there is no “time” for Him. God is as ready

to converse with Adam as He is with Malachi, with Jesus, and with you. It is man that changes, that becomes a keeper of fields, a hunter of animals, a user of metals, a discoverer of fire, a gatherer into tribes and then cities, that must learn language and how to communicate with distant peoples by smoke and blanket, by bird, by horse and rider, by automobile, by train, and later by airplane, by wireless, by radio and television.

It is man that at first believes in God and later, through training in his colleges, laboratories, scientific investigations, regards God as a figment of the imagination of early man or, at best, an untouchable. Man changes, by his physical looks, what he wears, the language he speaks, the writing peculiar to his group. First man's culture revolved around what he knew about God; the culture of the morning news in America today revolves around few references, if any, to God. At one time God filled human history, now man fills human history. For man, history has been violent; the changes in his guns reflect his fears of his future. No, God does not change, not only in the depth of His love but in the course of His life: "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow."⁷

In the beginning God spoke and the spheres of human life burst into existence. Today humans speak and the spheres of human life are threatened by nuclear war, terrorist sword-rattling, and foreign gods shaking a hollow fist at Yahweh, God of the universe. In the old days, as we have seen, God sometimes used a foreign army to chastise His people, to jar them to the point of repentance and restoration. That was a tough way to go. Are we beyond that today? Is America so satisfied and confident that it fears nothing? Hardly. We don't need a war, take a look at the stock market, at the housing market, at the value of the dollar in foreign money markets. They give us jitters enough. Do we need a jihad to go with them? So what's the way out?

Thomas Merton said it well.

*My life is a listening,
his is a speaking.
My salvation is to hear and respond.*

The next installment of our series is entitled
The Speaking God: There is no other.
Please read Hebrews 3:1-6 and 2 Peter 2:4-10a.
Have we discovered anything in our readings
from the Old Testament that can help us understand
what the New Testament writers mean?
If you can, write a short paragraph on the
Hebrews and 2 Peter sections above.

*---Jerry L. Mercer
January 20, 2008*

⁷ Hebrews 13:8.