entspricht auch der sachbedingt fächerübergreifende Charakter der Beiträge. Das Spektrum reicht vom Alten Orient bis zur Spätantike. Trotzdem ist es das Spektrum *eines* Bandes - eines Kulturzusammenhangs - und zwar eines sehr 'dynamisch' schwingenden. Die *DBAT* setzen damit in der Beiheftreihe fort, wofür sie bereits 1991 mit der Festschrift für die Pariser Alttestamentlerin und Orientalistin Françoise Smyth-Florentin ein Beispiel gaben[3].

Wir danken den Beiträger/inne/n für ihr kooperatives Verhalten bei der Druckvorbereitung dieser Festschrift und auch allen, die es durch Subskriptionen und finanzielle Unterstützung ermöglichten, dass wir die Druckkosten prompt und bei Auslieferung begleichen können.

Ein besonders herzlicher Dank geht an den Genfer Freund und Kollegen Albert de Pury, der nicht nur ein renommierter Fachgelehrter ist sondern auch noch ein genialer Karikaturist. Er gestattete uns, bereits veröffentlichte und bislang noch nicht anderweitig publizierte Karikaturen aus seiner Feder abzudrucken. Davon machten wir erfreut, reichlich und äusserst gezielt Gebrauch.

Karel A. Deurloo   Bernd Jørg Diebner
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THE POWER OF THE WORD

By Rochus Zuurmond

1.   From Word to words

More than one philosopher of this century has been inspired by the pre-Socratics. The results have been noticeable in hermeneutics, not the least in biblical hermeneutics. What could then be wrong with trying to derive some inspiration from the conceptual material of the Old Testament, in particular when the understanding of biblical texts is involved? This article is primarily in the realm of biblical theology and hermeneutics, but the Old Testament concept of *dabhar* which I would like to introduce may also have its value beyond biblical studies.

Modern linguistics had recognised earlier this century that the general concept of 'language' is too vague. Distinctions have to be made. One might for example distinguish between language as a system of signs on the one hand and the language of someone who actually speaks or writes on the other. That would roughly correspond to de Saussure's distinction between Langue and Parole. Frege's distinction between Sinn (sense) and Bedeutung (reference) has a similar function. Sinn is more extensive than Bedeutung, it includes the way the Bedeutung functions. Competence against Performance is another attempt to distinguish between two aspects of language: the formal and the actual, the linguistic deposit and the living voice. Finally there is the fashionable concept of *discours*, which falls in the area of Parole and Bedeutung, but notably adds to this the ideological function of language. Where stands *dabhar*?

The Hebrew word *dabhar* (דָּבָר) is usually translated 'word.' When I use this translation I shall differentiate it from the common word 'word' by writing it with a capital W. To avoid confusion I will however mostly use the Hebrew word *dabhar* (plural *debharim* / דְּבָרִים). It does not make sense to look for a Hebrew word to represent our word 'word.' Closest would be *millah* (מִלָּה), which occurs mainly in the Book of Job, but it acquires our current sense of

'word' only in modern Hebrew. The word 'language' I reserve for the totality of words and the rules which determine the way they are used in a community.

A *dabhar*, in many ways not unlike Greek *logos*, is a narrative about something that is said to have happened focusing on its effect, or, if we are dealing with a non-narrative text, the *dabhar* is the whole of the argument under the aspect of its accomplishment. Words are as dead as a sign in itself can be, but a dabhar lives. It could be described as 'spiritual,' if we take that word in its biblical sense: a dynamic, transforming, creating, life giving power. The aim of a *dabhar* is to take the addressees away from their initial position by involving them in its movement. This has been beautifully expressed by Deutero-Isaiah when YHWH says:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it[1].

Consequently a *dabhar* wants to be heard, in the Old Testament sense of שמע : taken in, internalised, made a part of one's existence and therefore also - what we would call - 'obeyed.' Hence for example the biblical metaphor of 'eating' a *dabhar*[2] and the strong emphasis on hearing[3]. A *dabhar* which would permanently fall on deaf ears does not fulfil its duty. It must have been a pseudo-*dabhar*, powerless in the first place and, dissolving into just words, it eventually becomes a caricature of itself.

A *dabhar* always consists in *debharim*. Consequently there is no *dabhar* without *debharim*. They appear in several forms: stories, arguments, statements. The Old Testament obviously makes no distinction between a dabhar as described above and a *dabhar* as the singular of *debharim*. Biblical literature presupposes a *dabhar* as the constituent factor in every story etc. it tells. We do not necessarily do the same. If therefore it is useful for a moment to distinguish between *dabhar* as the spiritual dimension of a story or argument

1 Is 55:10f. in the RSV.

2 Cf. Jer 15:16; Ez 3:1.

3 Cf. Deut 6:4; Mark 4:23; Rom 10,14 etc.

and *dabhar* as story or argument in the modern, technical sense of these words, I will use term like 'story' or 'argument' or 'statement', whichever is appropriate. The intricate network of all *debharim* which comprise the language of an individual or a group I will call it 'speech.'

Texts, either spoken or written, are language-coded *debharim*. Breaking that code is the purpose of exegesis. From Plato to Schleiermacher and beyond interpreters have been aware of the fact that there is more to exegesis than explaining a text on the level of language, history and culture. All these elements are necessary, but ultimately the exegete hopes that the text will admit him or her into its own world. There one touches the *dabhar* of the text. It is however not possible for us to comprehend a *dabhar* totally. It would be more suitable to say that in the end the current *debharim* comprehend us.

A *dabhar*, if it works, is powerful in its effect upon humans, but it remains vulnerable. Plato argues the vulnerability of a written text[4], but his confidence in the *viva vox* is hardly relevant in the age of text processing, electronic mail and mass media, in which more than ever spoken *debharim* are dependent on written *debharim*. For that reason I make no distinction between spoken and written language.

In the above arrangement we have made a distinction between *dabhar* and language, not unlike the distinctions mentioned earlier. The starting point however is not language as a something we transcend when we begin to express ourselves. The starting point is a *dabhar*, shaping language and involving us in it. Language is the raw material of a *dabhar*. A *dabhar* happens and in happening it needs language.

There is no *dabhar* without (*debharim* without) words. They presuppose each other like head and tail of a coin. Therein lies a problem, even something of a paradox. As a sign a word is completely arbitrary. It may serve any master. It can be used in support of a *dabhar* as much as it can be used to twist that same *dabhar*. If there is a conflict of *debharim* one cannot trust words. Unfortunately we live in worlds of newspeak and doublespeak. Orwell's prophesies about 1984 have come true in more ways than some of us seem to realise. When the next myth we have grown up with is going to be demythologised is apparently just a matter of time[5]. We are overwhelmed by

4 *Seventh Letter* 343a ('the weakness of the words'); *Phaedrus* 275e (the word as a 'fatherless child'). The reference is to the whole of an argument, to 'Word' rather than the 'words'.

5 I refer to the recent demise of 'myths' about the Second World War, the Cold War, the Gulf War and the establishment of the State of Israel. And who in his right

debharim who serve multiple and often destructive masters. Weak as they may be, words can be very damaging to a *dabhar*. Yet a *dabhar* cannot do without them.

2. Formation and Transformation

A *dabhar* changes the person who hears. This is where traditional theories of interpretation fell into error. From Plato until the nineteenth century the general assumption was that the human mind was the master of understanding. After hearing an argument one could change one's mind, but that was supposed to be an act of free will; the basic structure of the mind remained intact. We know now that this is not the case. The mind is not to be described as an entity, let alone an entity with supposedly divine qualities like immutability. The mind is a function, a function of language or - rather - a function of speech. Whether there is anything beyond this, some dynamism which generates language or regulates speech, is a question for logicians, philosophers and linguists. It does not immediately regard the exegete.

We use language when we participate in speech, but at the same time language uses us. We can neither speak nor listen without entering the world of *debharim*. Actually we must go one step further. Language is not an instrument at our disposal. We can neither speak nor listen without escaping the various *debharim* in which we exist. Exegetes sometimes presume to operate from a level of meta-language which is free from any unwanted *dabhar*. That is a positivistic illusion which in my opinion unfortunately still dominates some sections of biblical scholarship. The only possibility is to move through the *debharim* in a dialectical way, one *dabhar* critically questioning the other and *vice versa*. We cannot really leave our system, we are part of it.

Obviously that applies to this essay as well. Nobody can claim 'objectivity' and those who do don't realize what they are talking about. I introduce the concept of *dabhar* not because it contributes to 'objective knowledge' but because it makes it possible to see a dimension of the text which otherwise might remain invisible. We should be aware that (following Gödel's theorem) no one can prove the validity of a system other than by introducing a meta-system, which would push the argument of 'objectivity' *ad absurdum*. Those who boast that we have free speech, i.e. that we - certainly we scholars - are

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mind believes that politicians and a gullible press tell us the 'truth' regarding the present Balkan War? P.R. seems to be all that counts.

free to choose our own arguments free of outside interference, do not seem to realise that this freedom is rather like the freedom Henry Ford gave his customers: they were free to choose the colour of their car as long as they chose black.

A text is not a bag of words. I take issue with those post modernists who regard a text like a sack of potatoes from which every exegete grabs a handful and fries chips to his or her own taste[6]. If it is any good a text represents a *dabhar* which has to play a dominant role in our exegesis. Understanding and explaining a (biblical) text is not to be described as our acting upon the text, neither is it suitably described as the text's acting upon us, but it is a process of interaction between our *debharim* and the *dabhar* of the text. During this process both parties change. Initially the *dabhar* of the text is completely determined by our *debharim*. The dabhar could however blow up some of the barriers it encounters and transform our *debharim*.

It is necessary to see that for us the text also changes. The thesis that 'the text (in) itself' is not changeable may help to free us from the idea that everything is identical with our private or collective perception, but is in the end misleading. It suggests that the text is a function of the exegete, whereas in fact the reverse is the case. 'The text (in) itself' is a coded *dabhar* and as such it is never completely in our grip. It does however set a limit to our understanding. At the end, both parties having undergone a transformation, we may say that we have understood a text. This end however is always preliminary. The *dabhar* of the text will never replace our *debharim*, neither will our *dabhar* ever become identical with the *dabhar* of a text. Exegesis is a procedure without end.

A *dabhar* changes he or she who hears. That is not all. We must go one step ahead. A *dabhar* is what Kant would call a 'transcendental object.' It is a condition of communication rather than its contents. It does not designate 'facts'; it is the category in which things like facts, embedded as they are in stories, arguments and statements, occur[7]. *Debharim* are not subject to verbal communication; verbal communication is subject to *debharim*. Not only does a *dabhar* transform the persons who hear, it forms them, shapes them, gives them their identity (שֵׁם / Name).

A *dabhar* creates reality. Without a *dabhar* nothing exists, unless one considers the undifferentiated chaos which would remain when every name fell

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6 This attitude has aptly been described as the 'porno-version' of Derrida's grammatology.

7 The distinction is similar to *fides qua* and *fides quae* in dogmatics.

away to be 'existing.' Genesis 1:2 called it *tohu wabohu* (תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ). Ancient philosophy[8] called it τὸ μὴ ὄν, shapeless chaos. Kant[9] argues along the same lines when he says that sense impressions are 'a blind play of representation' unless they are subsumed under the categories of understanding. It is no good saying that without *debharim* reality would still be reality, because 'reality,' no matter how one wants to define it, will be an element of some *dabhar* and the proposition therefore is false. 'Without mammals a cat would still be a cat' is an obvious nonsense. There is no such thing as extra-lingual reality.

I am not saying that every instinct, every feeling and every emotion, religious or ethical or aesthetical, presupposes language. That is obviously untrue. What I am saying is that these pre-lingual phenomena cannot be discussed unless they enter the world of language, which in fact they have done the moment we call them real. We should all follow Wittgenstein's advise: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent.'[10] To talk, let alone to pontificate, about things you claim you cannot talk about is not very convincing.

The matter can be illustrated with the narrative of creation in Genesis 1. The very first time God speaks is in Genesis 1:3 'God said: there be light, and there was light.' Unless one is ill advisedly prepared to call *tohu wabohu* in 1:2 'something'[11], there was nothing in creation which preceded these words. Common interpretation has it that light was produced in a divine act of creation *ex nihilo* and that God subsequently called a name for it and gave it a function. The latter is certainly correct: calling a name both in the Old and in the New Testament implies endowing someone or something with a mission. However, the calling of the name and everything it entails is identical with the act of creation. There was no light, in fact there was nothing, apart from that God spoke. His *dabhar* is presented as light in the darkness.

This applies to the whole story. *The creation of heaven and earth is nothing but the calling out of the names!* There should be no caesura between 'there be light' and 'there was light.' *The fact that God spoke is His act of creation.* Apart from Him speaking - Genesis tells us - there is nothing worth calling

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8 E.g. Plato in *Sophist* 237ff.

9 cf. I.Kant: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* A 112.

10 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, daüber muss man schweigen' (Proposition 7 of his *Tractatus*).

11 This problem was exhaustingly discussed in the early church; cf. my notes on the subject in *ACEBT* 7 (1986), p.15-17.

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anything. Only in retrospect and *via negativa* one might call it *tohu wabohu* or 'darkness upon the abyss.'

3. The Word 'God' and the Word of God

Theologians are occupied with the Bible, that is with texts which claim to testify the *dabhar* of God. There is a distinction here. Neither the written texts as such, nor the *debharim* they contain, can be considered identical with the *dabhar* of God. The *dabhar* of God is perceived through (biblical) *debharim*, but cannot immediately be assimilated with our *debharim* lest it becomes subjected to them.

The word 'God' needs some explanation. Theism suggests that God exists independent of his *dabhar*. Thomas Aquinas for example argues:

'In those things we assert of God, the way of truth is twofold. For there are things true of God which surpass every faculty of human reason - that He is three (trinus) and one, for example. But there are others which are within the scope of natural reason, such as, that He exists, that He is one, and others of that kind; these have been demonstratively proved by philosophers, following the light of natural reason.'[12]

However, not only are these proofs of the existence of the theist God very questionable, the God which tends to appear in philosophical analysis is very much unlike the God who under various names (*Elohim*, YHWH, *El Shaddai*, *El Elyon* a.o.) appears in the Old Testament and who is, one way or another, united with Jesus in the New Testament. John 10:30 ('I and the Father are one') is the clearest example, but the idea is not confined to Johannine literature. I do not see much point in the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable. One of the last authors who tried to do this was David A. Pailin[13]. In a sympathetic though somewhat tiresome study he defends a version of process theology as the only way to overcome the blatant contradictions between the theist God and the God of the Bible. It fails to convince.

I suggest a simpler solution. Would it not be much wiser to define 'God' just as what to us He is in the first place: someone who plays an all important

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12 *Summa contra gentiles* I c.iii. I quote the English translation from A.Caldecott, H.R.Mackintosh: *Selections from the Literature of Theism*. Edinburgh 1902 (2nd ed.), p.13.

13 Cf. *Probing the Foundations: A Study in Theistic Reconstruction*. Kampen 1994.

role in the *dabhar* of the various *debharim* of Scripture? God makes Himself known to us as a *literary character*; and in no way should that be understood as a qualification of inferiority, as I will explain below[14].

The problem has always been that theism required an ontological definition of God. It wanted to know who and what He is. However, in taking up that challenge we bring Him under the categories of human understanding. What else is 'is'? Even if theism maintains that God fits in no category ('*Deus non est in aliquo genere*') it positions Him *de facto* in a category of his own. Nor does it help much to call Him transcendent, because the question immediately arises: transcendent to what? The answer to that question will soon bring Him back into our categories of understanding. The theistic God is an element of our language, a constituent of our speech, an object of some *dabhar* of ours.

Rejecting theism means the consequent application of the rule that *God cannot be known*, neither by natural reason nor by religious speculation. The question whether or not He exists is a misleading question. The proposition 'God exists' is as useless as the proposition 'God does not exist,' because the reference 'God' cannot be talked about. This is not because we can find no word for Him, neither because He is still more or less caught up in *tohu wabohu*, but it is because even the slightest surmise of His existence simply cannot arise. God lies outside our 'event horizon'[15]. One could quote Wittgenstein again: 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereon one must be silent.' *Unless, of course, He spoke!*

According to Scripture God speaks the *dabhar* of God and the books of the Bible represent *debharim* which witness to that *dabhar*. It has to begin with the *dabhar* of creation. Before the story can unfold the stage (heaven and earth) must be set, the *dramatis personae* and their function (the names) must be known and there must be time (days) for them[16]. That has really little to do with the Big Bang and the origin of time-space. Those are *debharim* of a different kind, *debharim* that may supply useful insights and appropriate metaphors but that should be all. This is even more evident in the New Testament where Jesus is identified with the *dabhar* (Greek: λόγος) of God.

14 Cf. p.22.

15 I borrow this metaphor from Stephen W. Hawking's best seller: *A Brief History of Time*.

16 I adopt here the four basic words of F.H.Breukelman's biblical theology: 1. 'Words' (דְּבָרִים), 2. Names (שֵׁמוֹת), 3. Days (יָמִים), 4. The Earth under Heaven (הָאָרֶץ תַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם).

Jesus could be described as a 'singularity', but hardly in the cosmological sense of that word[17].

'No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has expounded him'[18]. To this 'Word of God' the texts of the Bible refer. Does that mean that now, with hindsight, since we 'have' the Bible, we may pontificate on God after all? Of course it does not. The word 'God' is and remains defined by the Word (*dabhar*) of God. God is and remains for us a concept exclusively set in his dabhar. That *dabhar* talks, transforms, creates. We, in our *debharim*, may follow it, be challenged, be transformed, be (re)created; we cannot master it.

God speaks his *dabhar*. It creates a new heaven and a new earth, new as compared with the pseudo-names and the pseudo-*debharim*, the newspeak and the doublespeak, which corrupt our world. That is what we call 'revelation.' It is the appearance of a particular *dabhar* among our *debharim*, not some divine information about the state of affairs in our world and the next. God's *dabhar* creates a world in its own right, with rules of its own, a history of its own and a perspective of its own. As such it is an inherent criticism of the *debharim* which we call reality.

Both the Old and the New Testament claim that man 'shall live by every *dabhar* which goes forth from the mouth of God'[19]. In the last analysis the question is: why should we pay any attention to this *dabhar*, since it is not even divine by any standard of ours? The answer lies not in some 'grand narrative' we ourselves devise, place on a meta-level and endow with authority,[20] but in the inherent authority and power of that particular *dabhar*.

4. Power

We are treading on dangerous ground here. Our kind of people, more or less progressive middle class, does not like power or authority. In economic and political terms the middle classes are the power basis of Western society, but

17 A singularity according to Hawking (cf. note 15) is 'a point in space-time at which the space-time curvature becomes infinite'.

18 John 1:18 (according to the better manuscripts).

19 Deut 8:3; Is 55:11; Matth 4:4.

20 I explored the theological usefulness of Lyotard's concept of 'grand narrative' in a lecture for the theological faculty of the University of Amsterdam. It was published in the periodical *Interpretatie* in July 1995.

they hate to admit it. It suits them well to glorify powerlessness, both in relation to those under them as to those above them. The triumph of the word 'democracy' in our present cultural jargon might well be based on the fact that it neatly masks the realities of power in our world. Christians in particular often admire Jesus' renouncing of all power, not realising the dialectics involved. I have heard moving sermons on 'the power of being powerless,' untouched by Nietzsche's poignant criticism of this paradox. Openly declaring that the Gospel is basically about power, one unfortunately risks forceful attacks by the advocates of powerlessness...

However, there is authority and authority. The rejection of all authority is a chimera. *Which* authority is the real question. That has been well understood by biblical authors. They do not think in terms of being but in terms of power and authority. The question about Gods and people is never who they really are (least of all as opposed to appearances), but what they are capable of doing. The very word 'God' in most Semitic languages *indicates* power or expresses some aspect of authority, and in Hebrew some words for 'man' are positively or negatively connected with power[21]. Power as such is not seen, but its effects are clear enough. That is why power is often connected with spirit / wind, not as an ontological definition (for that we have to turn to Plato), but as a description in terms of effect. The crucial question in the vast majority of texts from the Bible is: who is (ultimately) in charge? Because apparently there are many powers, 'powers of light' and 'powers of darkness,' the issue circles around the question whose power is the strongest in the end[22]. One would miss the point of much biblical literature if one did not realise that its purpose, either explicitly or implicitly, is to answer that question with 'God' (YHWH, Jesus).

Power, authority (Hebrew root *mšl* / משל , Aramaic root *šlt* / שלט) is one of the pre-eminent qualities of YHWH. Not just in the Royal Psalms (Ps 93 being a good example) and many of the prophesies, but in my opinion also in the texts which picture Him as the Creator. Deutero-Isaiah[23] is very explicit:

'Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who has created these?

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21 *El, Illu, Allah,* and the divine names mentioned above on p.17, however uncertain the etymology may be. Humans: גֶּבֶר from the root גבר ('to be strong'), אִישׁ / אִשָּׁה from the root אנשׁ ('to lack power').

22 Cf. 1Cor 8:5f.

23 Is 40:26.

He who brings forth their army in number
calls all of them by name.
Because He is great in potency and strong in power
none is missing.'

Genesis 1 expresses the same confidence. Are God's words in the story of Creation not rather those of a supreme authority than those of a Demiurge? The verb 'create' (*bara* / ברא) has this majestic ring about it. In Genesis 1 it clearly defines the other verb: 'to make' (*ʿasah* / עשׂה). The Greek versions translated both *bara* and *ʿasah* with 'to make' (ποιεῖν), thus blotting out the difference. That had an unfortunate impact on traditional exegesis. Instead of 'to make' being interpreted as 'to create', 'to create' was commonly interpreted as 'to make.' God as supreme authority no longer defined God as Demiurge; the reverse became standard. Yet the Psalms, reflecting Genesis 1, kept the original sequence: God's authority is not based on the fact that he happens to be the Creator, but he can be called Creator because of his supreme authority (Ps. 33:3-9, Ps. 148:5). The difference is subtle but far reaching.

In the New Testament Jesus' authority (power, ἐξουσία) is the very essence of its proclamation. Messiah Jesus has the power to remit sins, to cast out demons, to raise up the dead. At the end of the Gospel of Matthew Jesus declares that to Him is given 'all authority in heaven and on earth.' It is fair to say that Matthew's conclusion becomes John's starting-point. Jesus' all inclusive authority, although for the time being hidden from all, is the explicit presupposition of the Fourth Gospel. Consequently the Prologue describes him as the Creator.

For Paul, Jesus' authority is the basis of his preaching. Not only does he express this in places like Gal. 2:20 and Phil. 3:12, but his permanent use of the title 'Lord' (κύριος) is an unmistakable sign of his total reliance on Jesus' power. Col. 2:10, whether or not it was written by Paul, summarises the issue well: 'you are complete in Him who is the head of all principality and power.' Finally, the Apocalypse pictures in surrealistic images the power struggle between Christ and his adversaries. The outcome is already clear from the beginning (1:4-8): Jesus, the *Pantokrator*, shall reign from the divine throne forever (22:1-5).

Biblical texts express themselves in terms of power rather than in ontological terms. The reality of 'names' (in biblical terms: שֵׁמוֹת) in the world of *debharim*, is inseparably connected with their effectiveness. 'Real' is understood as a function of power. What we call 'reality' is in biblical

literature a secondary condition, derived from and dependent on power and effectiveness.

That is why we are inclined to call a literary character 'fiction,' whereas an biblical authors would look at the power and the consequent effect of that literary character and value it accordingly. Shakespeare's Hamlet for them would be much more real than the Danish prince of that name of which we know almost nothing. If we, in our speech, call God a character from literature, that sounds as if we are talking about something fictional and not real. Theists would immediately comment that God in this way is not taken seriously and demoted to a figment of imagination, what according to atheists he has in fact been all along.

Yet, if we can for a moment free our thoughts from the compulsion to identify reality and existence with what we, being programmed in twentieth century common sense, believe to be reality, we may achieve a better understanding of these texts. It might for example end a fruitless debate about the historicity of biblical stories. It is now rather commonly accepted that history must be seen in the context of our *debharim*. 'Historicity' is not necessarily identical with 'the real truth of the matter.' What 'the real truth' is remains an open question, depending on one's definitions of 'reality' and 'truth,' but as far as biblical stories are concerned one would come closer to their purpose and function if the interest of the exegete would shift from 'What is the historical truth of this story' to 'What does this story convey regarding the power (and the lack of power) of its characters'[24].

Power or Authority are in themselves not evil, although they can be used for evil purposes. It all depends on whose power and whose authority we are talking about. The power *of* a *dabhar* is in the last analysis the power of the one *dabhar over* the other. If we define God as he who appears in biblical *debharim*, or if we narrow this definition down to '*Jesus* is God,' we implicitly define the kind of power and its purpose. From what I said above about the unique origin of God's *dabhar* immediately follows that its power and authority cannot be anything but permanently and totally inherent in the *dabhar*. It could never, except in a state of total corruption, be imposed by someone else.

It also follows that human authorities who want to give their own powers a divine flavour are going to have a hard time. What Jesus says to Pilate in John

24 I will refrain from examples and just refer to my book on the Historical Jesus: *Verleden Tijd*. Baarn 1994.

19:11[25] as much as what Paul writes in Romans 13:1-8[26], far from condoning whatever self-styled authorities undertake, is a harsh criticism of authorities which have in fact lost most - or even all - of their authority. Recognising power as pivotal in reading the bible is a much better way to tackle an authoritarian tendency in Judaism and Christianity than crying wolf without having a good look at the animal.

4. Platonism

It is easy to see that in Platonism Old Testament *Debharim* and Speech somehow correspond to the world of ideas, whereas words and language correspond to the world of the senses. The transition from the one paradigm to the next was almost inevitable, in particular for those who had to convey the biblical message in a world where some kind of Platonism was the dominant philosophy. Accordingly concepts like *dabhar* were eventually adapted to their new environment. Philo is a case in point and he was followed by the Christian Fathers, although understandably the transition had far reaching implications.

This can be demonstrated by comparing words of the Old Testament with their equivalent in a Hellenistic context: 'reliability' becomes abstract truth (אֱמֶת / ἀλήθεια), 'heavens' as a power base become heavens as the world of Platonic ideas (שָׁמַיִם / οὐρανός), 'spirit' as a mover becomes spirit as a level of consciousness (רוּחַ / πνεῦμα), *dabhar* becomes λόγος which eventually develops towards 'reason' and last but not least 'God' as a supreme authority becomes God as (ultimate) Being (ὁ ὤν)[27].

Of course both in Judaism and in Christianity many of these Greek words often retain something of their Old Testament origin. For example the Johannine *logos*, although it was convenient to introduce as a well-known term, is in my opinion basically *dabhar*. The old controversy about the New Testament being a Jewish or a Hellenistic book is over: Jewish in the first century cannot strictly be distinguished from Hellenistic. The question of the influence of the Old Testament, whether one categorises it as Hellenistic or

25 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above'.

26 In particular v1: 'There is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God'.

27 Cf. Ex 3:14 (according to LXX) and *passim* in Philo.

not[28], is still there on various levels of language and speech of the New Testament. The contribution of the Old Testament to the New Testament remains an important exegetical issue.

5. Words and Morals

When theism is rejected and the concept of the Divine *Dabhar* and its authority moves to the centre, there will be important consequences for theology. Common concepts like faith, preaching, prayer, sacraments, sin, flesh, spirit, including some of the divine qualities like omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence which have played havoc with theism, ought to be redefined and described in terms of the power of God's *dabhar*. The foundations, and more than just the foundations for this project, have been laid by Karl Barth and by the Dutch theologians K.H. Miskotte and F.H. Breukelman.

I would like to highlight one particular aspect of biblical theology, commonly known as 'The ethics of the Bible.' The problems involved are particularly poignant since theism, from the days of Epicurus, is by many supposed to be at odds with the existence of evil, whereas on the other side moral arguments have been among the strongest to defend theism[29]. Obviously there is a moral universe, a world of ethical standards, which although it is part of the world of our *debharim*, has often been confused with the world of Gods *dabhar*.

First of all the question arises whether one can actually speak of 'ethics' of the Bible, and if one wants to preserve the word 'ethics' what it exactly is supposed to mean in a biblical context. In popular parlance ethics[30] is a set of standards by which a particular group or community decides to regulate its behaviour. These standards are usually derived from 'values,' ideal concepts, the realisation of which is to be pursued or sought. The ethics of the Bible

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[28] Large parts of it could with some historical justification be called 'Hellenistic' - but what else is after all than removing the goal-posts?

[29] Pailin (cf. note 13), p.133ff. - The Problem has been on the agenda almost permanently since Hume's *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion* (posthumously published in 1779). Cf. for recent examples G.J.Hughes: *The Nature of God*. London 1995; J.L.Mackie: *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford 1982.

[30] It would be more precise to speak of normative ethics.

would then comprise the assumed moral values of the Bible and the way they have been expressed in commandments.

It has often been recognised that the 'moral values' of the New Testament are not much different from those of contemporary authors. There is hardly an ethical precept in the New Testament which cannot be found in the works of the pagan philosopher Epictetus or the Jewish philosopher Philo[31]. Epictetus' *Enchiridion* sounds very much like Jesus in the Sermon of the Mount and decidedly more humane - some would say 'more Christian' - than many passages of the Apocalypse. Philo's attitude to sexuality prefigures the most rigid interpretations of the New Testament on this subject. The boastful attitude of some early Christians to the presumed inferior morality of Pagans and Jews must be seen in the context of apology and propaganda. The first albeit somewhat ambiguous example is Barn. 2:6 'The new law of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is without a yoke of necessity.' Later theologians like Tertullian however were very outspoken on this subject[32].

If one wants to include the 'moral values' of the Old Testament one really finds oneself in deep water. Almost any human behaviour can be justified with Old Testament texts, from the most gruesome forms of execution to wide scale and apparently divinely prescribed ethnic cleansing[33]. Wide variety and obvious contradictions in the morals of the Old and the New Testament also remain an insoluble problem for anyone trying to develop a biblical ethic. Marcion not only threw out the Old Testament, he also purified the New Testament; from his point of view rightly. I would not advocate the Bible for moral guidance either! Of course it is nonsensical to apply laws pertaining to societies of more than 1900 years ago to our societies, but theism, unless seriously watered down, will have to do just that.

The real difference between biblical ethics and contemporary Hellenistic ethic lies not with the quality of their moral values, but with authority. Let us not fool ourselves: rules for human behaviour are - generally speaking - rather easily set. Indeed there are complex cases in which it is extremely hard to

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[31] I mentioned this subject earlier in an article "Ethos ad Interim", in: J.P.Heering a.o.: *Jezus' visie op zichzelf*. Nijkerk 1991, p.142-152, and in my book on Paul's letter to the Galatians: *God noch gebod*. Baarn 1990, p.63-87; cf. also H.C.Chadwick: "The Originality of Christian Ethics", in: *James Bryce Memorial Lecture 1988*. Somerville 1990.

[32] Cf. e.g. his *Apology* 45f.

[33] Cf. e.g. K.Deschner: *Kriminalgeschichte des Christentums*. Bd.I: *Die Frühzeit*. Reinbek 1986, p.72ff. - Not a very nice book ...

decide[34], but finding a consensus on the principles of moral behaviour within a given society is usually not too difficult. In the vast majority of instances anyone with some knowledge of the situation and some experience can tell us precisely what ought to be done. We don't have to invoke God for that.

The problems are almost always problems of conditions and implementation. The excuses are well known. 'Of course we ought to do this or that, but the circumstances are such that unfortunately....' 'We all know that this or that ought to be done, but who can... ' Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it: 'So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!' (Rom. 7:21-24).

Authority is the decisive factor. In the Old Testament it is the authority of the Covenant with YHWH which empowers people to do the Torah. Paul, in the New Testament, realises that when the spiritual (i.e. authoritative) dimension of the Torah dwindles, all that remains is 'flesh.' Having a law or being the designer of a superior ethic does not mean anything when there is no power to live accordingly. It will only lead to 'boasting'[35]. The preaching of high morality in whatever form creates a powerful feel good factor leading to profound ignorance about what really happens in a group or society when moralism takes over. However, in the Messianic age people - this time people of all nations - are being empowered in Christ, through the Spirit of Christ, to live their lives according to God's will as decent, responsible and caring people[36].

The discussion whether Christian ethics have an extrinsic or an intrinsic value seems to miss the point. Values are not a part of the equation. Why in the world is Christianity so besotted about morality whereas it seems that the more they talk about it the worse it gets? Is it because it is steeped so thoroughly in its Greek background that it can see man's actual behaviour only as following some moral standard? It is certainly not what the Bible teaches. The 'law of the Messiah' (Gal. 6:2) should be understood as a *dabhar*, a spiritual impetus, a condition rather than a moral exhortation and in that respect not really different from the Old Testament Torah. The traditional view, even upheld by some today, that the νόμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ is a set of superior moral guidelines, is

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34 I am convinced that their number would decrease substantially if only we could get rid of some of our (often religiously based) prejudices.

35 Rom 2:23 (καυχᾶσθαι).

36 Cf. Rom 12:1f.

untenable in view of Paul's use of 'law.' 'The law of the Messiah' is the way of life inaugurated by Christ and offered for fulfilment to those who trust Him.

The power of the involvement in the Messianic *dabhar* makes all the difference. The idea is not that we have some marvellous moral ideas which then have to be put into praxis, where unfortunately everything goes wrong again, but that Christian (Messianic) behaviour - rather than ethic - is a way of life, given through the power of Christ to all who rally round his authority, that is: to all who have faith (πίστις) in him. The oppressive powers which prevent morality emerging have been beaten, thrown out of the sphere of heaven and therefore are doomed on earth.

I would suggest that this Messianocratic element in the theology of Paul is to a larger or lesser extent presupposed in the whole New Testament. The Old Testament Torah never was a set of values, it was a way of life on which the authority of the Covenant with YHWH carried you along. That authority is restored in Christ, with whom according to Paul and John it rested in the first place. According to Matthew the Sermon of the Mount was 'taught with authority' (7:29) which, read in its context, does not only mean that Jesus gave his own, independent interpretation of the Torah, but that at the same time the original authority of the Torah was restored in his teaching.

At the end of the gospel of Matthew Jesus claims that 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.' That is the authority over all human debharim, including those governing human behaviour. There is no such thing as normative Christian ethics, there is only the power of God's Word over our words.