

**SCRIPTURE'S SELF-ATTESTATION  
AND THE PROBLEM OF FORMULATING  
A DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE**

**I**n what sense is the Bible the Word of God for Christians today? And in what way should we perceive the nature and character of the Bible as we read it today? More specifically, how should we today think of the truthfulness of the Bible?

In order to answer those questions it will be profitable first to look at the Old Testament text on its own terms, asking initially not the theological question, "What should we believe today?" but the literary and historical question, "What views of God's word(s) are presented in the Old Testament text itself?" Then we can ask, "What views of the Old Testament text and of the emerging New Testament writings are found among the New Testament authors?"

After those questions have been answered in some detail, we can go on to attempt the formulation of a doctrine of Scripture, asking whether or not it is possible to decide what Christians today should think about the nature and character of the Bible, with particular focus on the question of the truthfulness of the Bible.

**OLD TESTAMENT REPORTS OF DIRECT SPEECH  
FROM GOD TO MEN AND WOMEN**

The Old Testament records several instances of speech from God to individual people. The most familiar instance is probably the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai:

And God spoke all these words, saying, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

"You shall have no other gods before me.

"You shall not make for yourself a graven image . . ." (Exod. 20:1-4).<sup>1</sup>

But there are many other examples, such as the speech by God to Adam and Eve both before and after the Fall (Gen. 1:28-30; 3:9-19), the call of Abram (Gen. 12:1-3), subsequent lengthy conversations with Abram in which God's covenantal provisions are established (Gen. 15:1-21; 17:1-21; note also Abraham's remarkable conversation with the Lord in Gen. 18:1-23), the extensive dialogue between God and Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:1-4:23), the revelation to Samuel concerning the doom of Eli's house (1 Sam. 3:10-14), the conversation with Elijah at Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:9-18), God's detailed (and poetic) response to Job (Job 38-41), and frequent conversations between

God and the prophets (Isa. 6:8–13; Jonah 1:1–2; 3:1–2; 4:1–11, et al.). In addition, large sections of the legal code found in the Pentateuch are represented as words spoken directly by God to Moses (see, for example, Exod. 20:22–23:33).

This list could be greatly expanded, especially from passages in the Prophets, but enough examples have been given to establish two points. First, the Old Testament frequently portrays God as communicating with people by using actual spoken words, not simply by communicating ideas or thoughts somehow apart from individual words. This concept of verbal communication from God was quite often opposed by scholars of a previous generation,<sup>2</sup> so much so that James Barr in 1963 said in protest:

Direct verbal communication between God and particular men on particular occasions . . . is, I believe, an inescapable fact of the Bible and of the OT in particular. God can speak specific verbal messages, when he wills, to the man of his choice. . . . If we persist in saying that this direct, specific communication must be subsumed under revelation through events in history and taken as subsidiary interpretation of the latter, I shall say that we are abandoning the Bible's own representation of the matter for another which is apologetically more comfortable.<sup>3</sup>

Second, these passages never view human language as a barrier to effective communication by God. There is no hint that some inadequacies inherent in human language may be used as a legitimate reason to disbelieve or to disobey anything God has said. The appropriate response, according to the Old Testament writers, is, "All the words which the LORD has spoken we will do" (Exod. 24:3). Similarly, Abram's belief in God's seemingly impossible promises is commended: "And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

So the Old Testament text speaks frequently of direct verbal communication from God, communication that demands absolute belief and absolute obedience. God is viewed as the Creator and Lord of human language ("Who has made man's mouth?" [Exod. 4:11]), who is able to use language however He wills in order to accomplish His purposes.

### OLD TESTAMENT REPORTS OF PROPHETIC SPEECH (GOD'S WORDS SPOKEN BY MEN)

#### PROPHETS ARE VIEWED AS AUTHORITATIVE MESSENGERS OF GOD

The Old Testament prophets are most frequently pictured as messengers sent by God to speak God's words to people.<sup>4</sup> James F. Ross lists several discernible characteristics of a "messenger speech" (*Botenspruch*) in the Old Testament narratives:<sup>5</sup> an introductory formula ("thus says Yahweh"), a standard conclusion ("says Yahweh"),

the frequent use of the verb *šālah* ("send") to indicate that the prophet is sent by God,<sup>6</sup> and a commissioning narrative in which Yahweh tells the prophet, "Go and say to \_\_\_\_\_, 'Thus says Yahweh. . . .'" Ancient Near Eastern parallels, especially those found in the Mari and Ras Shamra texts, provide additional examples of prophets as messengers of a god. (However, the evidence from such sources is not completely unambiguous.)<sup>7</sup>

It is characteristic of this kind of messenger that his words possess not merely his own personal authority but the authority of the one who sent him. So it is with the Old Testament prophets: their words carry the authority of Yahweh Himself, because He has called them as authoritative messengers who will speak for Him.<sup>8</sup>

Lindblom is no doubt correct when he points to the "council [*sód*] of Yahweh" as a reference to the source of a prophet's speech: "That the prophets are in possession of the divine word depends on the fact that they are admitted to the *sód* of Yahweh. . . . Thus the words of the prophets are words which they have heard directly from Yahweh."<sup>9</sup> But more basic even than this council to Old Testament thought is the simple hearing-speaking pattern Lindblom describes: "Yahweh speaks to the prophet, the prophet hears what Yahweh says, and then he pronounces what he has heard to the listening people."<sup>10</sup>

The Old Testament text, then, together with parallels in Ancient Near Eastern literature, portrays the prophets as messengers sent by God and bearing God's authority in the message He has given them to deliver.

#### "THUS SAYS THE LORD" AS A ROYAL DECREE FORMULA

The frequent use of the introductory formula ("thus says Yahweh [or the LORD]") or its equivalent is a further indication of the high degree of authority and reliability claimed for the words the prophets spoke in God's name.<sup>11</sup> This formula is one that would have been used in the Ancient Near East to introduce an edict issued by a king to his subjects.

An extrabiblical parallel to this phrase is seen by J. S. Holladay in the Neo-Assyrian phrase "*Amāt šarri ana \_\_\_\_\_*" ("Word of the king to \_\_\_\_\_"). This phrase is "almost invariable in the letters of the king to his subjects," says Holladay. "That *amāt šarri* is an especially authoritative, compelling mode of address (equivalent to 'edict of the king') is shown (a) by the fact that it appears as an introductory formula only in the king's letters . . . (b) by the fact that, when the king addresses his letters to presumed equals . . . he invariably uses the introductory formula normally reserved for more personal or familial communication."<sup>12</sup>

In the Old Testament text itself, this royal decree formula is used in an interesting conflict between Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, and Yahweh, the king of Israel, in Isaiah 36–37. The Rabshakeh's statement:

"Thus says the great king, the king of Assyria . . ." is set against Isaiah's statement: "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel . . ." (Isa. 36:4; cf. 36:13–14, 16; 37:6, 21). The "messenger verb" *šālah* is used several times (Isa. 36:2, 12; 37:14 of Rabshakeh; cf. 37:21).

On another level, Hezekiah is the king who sends (*wayyishlah*, Isa. 37:2) messengers to Isaiah saying, "Thus says Hezekiah" (Isa. 37:3).

Royal messengers from Ben-hadad also use this introductory formula in 1 Kings 20:2 (3), 5: "Thus says Ben-hadad." There is a response in kind to Ahab the prophet (1 Kings 20:13, 14, 28). However, once Ben-hadad has been defeated, he cannot use the royal decree formula, but instead sends messengers who say, "Your servant Ben-hadad says" (1 Kings 20:32!)

The formula is also used by Pharaoh's taskmasters to report Pharaoh's edict to the people (Exod. 5:10; note that the LORD sends messengers to speak to Pharaoh in the same way: Exod. 4:22; 5:1, et al.). In Jeremiah 28:2, 11, however, a false prophet uses the formula with disastrous consequences (v. 17).

The formula "Thus says the LORD," appearing hundreds of times in the Old Testament,<sup>13</sup> is a royal decree formula used to preface the edict of a king to his subjects, an edict that could not be challenged or questioned but simply had to be obeyed. God is viewed as the sovereign king of Israel, and when the prophets speak, they are seen as bringing the divine king's absolutely authoritative decrees to His subjects.

#### IT IS THOUGHT THAT EVERY WORD THE PROPHET SPEAKS IN GOD'S NAME MUST COME FROM GOD

The distinguishing characteristic of a true prophet is that he does not speak his own words or "words of his own heart," but words that God has sent (*šālah*) him to deliver (Deut. 18:18–20; Jer. 14:14; 23:16–40; 29:31–32; Ezek. 13:1–19; cf. Num. 16:28).<sup>14</sup> Throughout the Old Testament there is an emphasis not simply on the general content of prophetic speech as coming from God, but on the very words themselves. God says to Moses, the archetypal Old Testament prophet,<sup>15</sup> "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Exod. 4:12; cf. 24:3). The same is said of other prophets: "I will put my words in his mouth" (Deut. 18:18; cf. vv. 21–22); "I have put my words in your mouth" (Jer. 1:9); "The word that God puts in my mouth, that I must speak" (Num. 22:38; cf. 23:5, 16); "You shall speak my words to them" (Ezek. 2:7; cf. 3:27).

This emphasis on the actual words spoken by the mouth of the prophet indicates something more than a conviction that ideas have been given by God to the prophet, who will then express the ideas in his own words. Not just the general message but also the very words in which it is expressed are seen as coming from God. Any prophet who spoke a word "not from the mouth of the LORD" (Jer. 23:16) was a false

prophet. And "the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name which I have not commanded him to speak . . . shall die" (Deut. 18:20). The people refused to listen to "the words of the LORD which he [the LORD] spoke through [b'yad] Jeremiah the prophet" (Jer. 37:2). Many similar examples could be given (see 1 Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 9:36; 14:25; 17:23; 24:2; 2 Chron. 29:25; Ezra 9:10–11; Neh. 9:30; Zech. 7:7, 12, et al.), but the point is clear: When a prophet speaks, the people are to think of the words as words that God Himself is speaking to them.

#### WHAT THE PROPHET SAYS IN GOD'S NAME, GOD SAYS

One more indication of the absolute divine authority attributed to prophetic speech is seen in the frequency with which God is referred to as the speaker of something a prophet said. In 1 Kings 13:26, "the word which the LORD spoke to him" is the word the prophet had spoken in verse 21. Similarly, Elijah's words in 1 Kings 21:19 are referred to in 2 Kings 9:25–26 as the oracle that "the LORD uttered . . . against him," and Elijah is not even mentioned. To obey "the words of Haggai the prophet" is equivalent to obeying "the voice of the LORD" (Hag. 1:12; cf. 1 Sam. 15:3, 18).

An Old Testament Israelite listening to the words of a prophet, then, viewed the words as not merely words of a man but also words that God Himself was speaking through the prophet. The Old Testament text indicates that these words were to be accorded the same status and character as direct speech from God. For God to speak through a prophet was to use a different means of speaking to people than when He spoke directly to the people with a voice out of heaven at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 20:22; Deut. 5:22–26). But the speech that came forth was exactly the same in terms of its character and status. Whatever could be said about the authority, power, truthfulness, or purity of one form of divine speech could also be said about the other.

#### PROPHETS OFTEN SPEAK FOR GOD IN THE FIRST PERSON

If the Old Testament prophets are seen as God's royal messengers, and if they speak as though they are delivering unchallengeable edicts from a divine King to His people, and if it is frequently claimed that the very words of their messages have been given them by God, then it is not surprising that the prophets often speak for God in the first person (2 Sam. 7:4–16; 1 Kings 20:13, 42; 2 Kings 17:13; 19:25–28, 34; 21:12–15; 22:16–20; 2 Chron. 12:5, and the Latter Prophets, *passim*). The manner in which the prophet's words are so completely identified with Yahweh's words is seen when the prophet says things like, "You shall know that I am the LORD" (1 Kings 20:13), or, "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God" (Isa. 45:5). Clearly no Israelite would have thought that the prophet was speaking his own words in such cases; he was simply repeating the words of the one who had sent him.<sup>16</sup>

### GOD IS OFTEN SAID TO SPEAK "THROUGH" THE PROPHET

This identification of the prophet's words with Yahweh's words is so strong in the Old Testament that often we read of God's speaking "through" a prophet. That is, the prophet himself is speaking, but his words are also thought to be words that God is speaking to the people. Israel mourned for Jeroboam's son, "according to the word of the LORD, which he [the LORD] spoke by [beyad] his servant Ahijah the prophet" (1 Kings 14:18). Zimri destroyed the house of Baasha, "according to the word of the LORD, which he [the LORD] spoke against Baasha by Jehu the prophet" (1 Kings 16:12).

### TO DISBELIEVE OR DISOBEY ANYTHING A PROPHET SAYS IS TO DISBELIEVE OR DISOBEY GOD

If prophetic words are viewed as God's words in the Old Testament, then we would expect to find some indications of moral obligations placed on the hearers, obligations to hear these words and unquestioningly believe them and obey them. In fact, several indications of this sort are found in the Old Testament.

According to Deuteronomy 18:19, the LORD says of the coming prophet who would be like Moses: "Whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him" (Deut. 18:19).

When Saul disobeyed Samuel's command to wait seven days at Gilgal "until I come to you and show you what you shall do" (1 Sam. 10:8), Samuel rebuked him: "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which *he commanded you* . . . now your kingdom shall not continue . . . because you have not kept what *the LORD commanded you*" (1 Sam. 13:13-14). To disobey the prophet's words is to disobey God.

In 1 Samuel 15:3, God spoke through Samuel and commanded him to destroy the Amalekites, and to "utterly destroy all that they have." Again when Saul disobeyed, Samuel asked, "Why then did you not obey the voice (*qól*) of the LORD? . . . Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king" (1 Sam. 15:19, 23).<sup>17</sup>

To disobey a command of one of "the sons of the prophets" who is speaking "by the word of the LORD" (1 Kings 20:35) is to disobey "the voice of the LORD," and can lead to sudden death (1 Kings 20:36). When the people demand a king instead of Samuel the prophet, God says to Samuel, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them" (1 Sam. 8:7): To reject God's prophet is to reject God.

The parallelism in 2 Chronicles 20:20 indicates an equivalence between obeying God's prophets and obeying God:<sup>18</sup>

"Believe the Lord your God, and you will be established;  
believe his prophets, and you will succeed."

In fact, to reject a prophet's words is to invite certain destruction by God (2 Chron. 25:16; Isa. 30:12-14; Jer. 6:10-11; 16:19; 36:29-31).<sup>19</sup>

In summary, the words that a prophet speaks in God's name are throughout the Old Testament said to be words that God also speaks. What the prophet says in God's name, God says. To disbelieve or disobey anything a prophet says in God's name is to disbelieve or disobey God.

### WRITTEN WORDS FROM GOD

In addition to Old Testament records of direct speech by God, and of God's words spoken by men and women, there are several accounts of the writing of words that were then taken to be God's words in written form. Once again, the evaluation of the character of these words (they are both human and divine) and of their truth-status (they must be believed and obeyed) seems indistinguishable from the evaluations of direct divine speech and of divine speech spoken by people.

There is first the account of the giving of the two stone tablets by God to Moses: They were "tables of stone, written with the finger of God" (Exod. 31:18). "And the tables were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables" (Exod. 32:16; cf. Exod. 34:1, 28; Deut. 4:13; 10:4). Clearly, these words are seen as having absolute divine authority. The written words on the tablets are God's own words.

But there are also reports of men writing down words that God told them to write, words that are then understood as God's words. In most of the following instances the attribution of authorship to a prophet seems also to be significant, especially when viewed through the eyes of an Old Testament Israelite who had the high regard for the divine authority of prophetic words that was outlined in the preceding section.

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| Exod. 17:14 | "The Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a memorial in a book.'"  |
| Exod. 24:4  | "And Moses wrote all the words of the Lord."   |
| Exod. 34:27 | "And the Lord said to Moses, 'Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.'"               |
| Num. 33:2   | "Moses wrote down their starting places, stage by stage, by command of the Lord; and these are their stages according to their starting places." |
| Deut. 31:22 | "So Moses wrote this song the same day."   |
| Deut. 31:24 | "When Moses had finished writing the words of this law in a book, to the very end . . ."   |

- Josh. 24:26 "Joshua wrote these words [the statutes and ordinances, and the words of covenant renewal, v. 25] in the book of the law of God." (See 1 Kings 16:34; Josh. 1:5, 16-18, on Joshua as a prophet.)
- 1 Sam. 10:25 "Samuel told the people the rights and duties of the kingship, and he wrote them in a book and laid it up before the Lord."
- 1 Chron. 29:29 "The acts of King David, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles [*dibré*] of Samuel the seer, and in the Chronicles of Nathan the prophet, and in the Chronicles of Gad the seer."
- 2 Chron. 9:29 "Now the rest of the acts of Solomon, from first to last, are they not written in the Chronicles of Nathan the prophet, and in the prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite, and in the visions of Iddo the seer concerning Jereboam the son of Nebat?"
- 2 Chron. 12:15 "Now the acts of Rehoboam, from first to last, are they not written in the Chronicles of Shemaiah the prophet and of Iddo the seer?"
- 2 Chron. 13:22 "The rest of the acts of Abijah, his ways and his sayings, are written in the story [*midraš*] of the prophet Iddo."
- 2 Chron. 20:34 "Now the rest of the acts of Jehoshaphat, from first to last, are written in the Chronicles of Jehu the son of Hanani, which are recorded in the Book of the Kings of Israel." (Jehu the son of Hanani is called a prophet in 1 Kings 16:7.)
- 2 Chron. 26:22 "Now the rest of the acts of Uzziah, from first to last, Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz wrote."
- 2 Chron. 32:32 "Now the rest of the acts of Hezekiah, and his good deeds, behold, they are written in the vision of Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel."

This brings us well into the period of the classical or "writing" prophets.<sup>20</sup> The degree to which their speeches were primarily oral, or both oral and written from the beginning, need not concern us here.<sup>21</sup> But it is certain that there was at least some writing of prophecies either before or immediately after the oral delivery, and sometimes transcription of the words during the delivery by the prophet's followers.

For example, God said to Jeremiah, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Write in a book all the words that I have spoken to you" (Jer. 30:2). God commanded Isaiah concerning what had been revealed, "And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come, as a witness forever" (Isa. 30:8; cf. Jer. 29:1; 36:1-32; 45:1; 51:60; Ezek. 43:11; Hab. 2:2; Dan. 7:1). Lindblom

says, "We must, in fact, allow for the existence of both oral and written transmission from the beginning, though it may be that the former predominated in the earliest period."<sup>22</sup>

The purpose of this writing seems to have been intimately connected with the covenant relation between Israel and Yahweh. The words of the prophets were said to be written down as a witness to the covenant: an authoritative record of the provisions of the covenant, of the ratification by the parties involved, and of subsequent covenant-related behavior by Yahweh and the people. So the writing can be called "the book of the covenant" (Exod. 24:7; 2 Kings 23:2, 21; 2 Chron. 34:30), and Isaiah wrote in a book that it might be a witness against the people forever (Isa. 30:8; cf. Deut. 31:19, 26). The provisions of covenant behavior are often written in a book (Exod. 34:27; Josh. 24:26; 1 Sam. 10:25; Ezek. 43:11), and the historical narratives themselves may be seen as a record of activities performed by members of the covenant bond.<sup>23</sup> The latter prophets, then, are seen as covenant messengers of Yahweh reminding Israel of the terms of their covenant relationship and calling them to obedience to these terms.

This writing function is closely linked to the conception that the words of prophecy are God's words. As Lindblom says, since the prophets regarded their utterances as Yahweh's words, they thought they were significant for all times.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, their written words seem to have been considered just as authoritative as their spoken words. When Moses read the book of the covenant to the people, they responded, "All that the LORD has *spoken* [*dibber*] we will do" (Exod. 24:7). Later in the Old Testament narrative, the law of Moses (presumably this refers to the written law) is said to have been commanded by the Lord (2 Kings 14:6; 2 Chron. 25:4; Neh. 8:14; Mal. 4:4). The written words are seen as God's words in every way that direct speech by God and God's speech through the mouths of people are seen as God's words. The form of communication differs, but the character, authority, and truth status of the words do not.

Regarding the introductory formula "the word of the LORD which was to Hosea" (Hos. 1:1; cf. Mic. 1:1; Zeph. 1:1), Procksch writes, "It certainly implies that the whole book is regarded as 'the word of the LORD.' In the written form no distinction is made between the divine voice in the prophet and its expression in poetry, saying, and address. We have here a transition to the final view that not merely the prophetic book, but in the last resort the whole of the Old Testament is the Word of God."<sup>25</sup>

#### FURTHER STATEMENTS ABOUT THE WORD OF GOD

Up to this point we have seen indications of the kind of status and authority attributed to three forms of God's word in the Old Testament account:

1. Direct speech by God to men
2. God's words spoken by men
3. God's words written, usually through the writing activity of prophets<sup>26</sup>

We have not yet tried to specify how much of our present Old Testament consists of records of these three types but only to define the characteristics attributed to each type by the Old Testament authors.

There are now some remaining texts that make further statements about the nature or character of "God's word" or "God's words." In each of these texts that follow, one must ask, to which words of God is the writer referring? The initial referent cannot be the entire Old Testament, for at the time these passages were written the Old Testament was not complete.

On the other hand, when the Old Testament authors made statements about the character of God's word they probably did not intend to distinguish among God's words written, spoken by men, or spoken directly by God. The same characteristics were applied to each (see above), and what could be said of one could be said of the others. Statements not further specified by context, therefore, can legitimately be thought to refer to God's words in all three forms.

Nevertheless, God's words directly spoken and God's words spoken by men were not available for repeated hearing and inspection by others, or even by the initial hearers, at any time subsequent to the initial utterance (except through secondary oral reports or written records). So it would be primarily God's word written that an Old Testament author would be able to read or hear, ponder, meditate on, and write about. This is relevant for our investigation, because we are attempting to discover attitudes toward God's word written in Scripture.

#### NUMBERS 23:19; 1 SAMUEL 15:29

Balaam said to Balak, "God is not a man, that he should lie [*kāzab*, Piel] or a son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num. 23:19). The context shows Balak trying to get Balaam to curse Israel and thus nullify his earlier blessing (vv. 7–11). Although Balaam himself is not fully righteous in the entire episode (Num. 22:22, 34), he is certainly seen as a prophet who speaks God's words (Num. 22:35; 23:5, 12, 26; 24:2–4, 13, 15–16). The statement "God is not a man, that he should lie" is itself part of a prophetic utterance, spoken in response to the question in verse 17, "What has the Lord spoken?"

In this context, the purpose of saying that God does not lie is to tell Balak that there can be no falsehood in the previous prophecy that could be nullified by later prophecies. What God had predicted would certainly happen, for God does not lie.

This passage therefore refers to human words spoken by a

prophet in God's name as God's words. It further says of those prophetic words that the normal human proclivity for lying does not apply to them; even though they were spoken by human lips they can only rightly be assigned a truth-status that stands in clear contrast to one that normally describes human speech: the words of people contain lies, but God's words spoken by people do not.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Numbers 23:19 claims much more than the fact that God did not lie in the prophecy of Numbers 23:7–10. For the statement "God is not a man, that he should lie" is a general statement used to demonstrate the specific fact that He did not lie in the prophecy of verses 7–10. But as a general statement it speaks of the character of God's speech in all circumstances. It is because God *never* lies that Balak should be assured that God did not lie in the first prophecy. (Otherwise Balak might hope that one of these rare exceptions where God could lie would be in the first prophecy.) So Numbers 23:19 is an affirmation that in any case in which God speaks through human lips, there will be no "lie" or factually untrue statement in the speech. It will be completely truthful, and will faithfully correspond to reality.<sup>28</sup> In terms of its reliability and truthfulness it is to be treated as divine speech, not human speech.

First Samuel 15:29 is a similar passage. Samuel, speaking as a prophet, had told Saul that God had rejected him from being king of Israel (v. 23). Saul begged Samuel to change the verdict (v. 25) and grabbed Samuel's robe to prevent him from leaving (v. 27). The robe tore, and Samuel reaffirmed the judgment (v. 27). Then he said, "And also the Glory of Israel<sup>29</sup> will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent" (v. 29).

Once again the statement affirms the unchanging reliability of God's words spoken by men. Once again there is a contrast between human failure to live up to what one promises and divine faithfulness to every promise. Once again a divine standard of reliability and truthfulness is applied to prophetic speech, and a human standard is explicitly rejected.<sup>30</sup>

#### DEUTERONOMY 4:2; 12:32

Deuteronomy 4:2 records Moses as saying, "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it; that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." Similarly, Deuteronomy 12:32 (13:1) says, "Everything that I command you you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to it or take from it" (cf. Deut. 32:46).

It is significant here that the words of God spoken by Moses and, according to Deuteronomy 31:24, the words of God that Moses wrote in the Book of Deuteronomy, are seen to be unique and important in their entirety. The prohibition against adding to the commands indicates a unique kind of authority; no other words are fit to be added by

the people themselves, for no other words are seen as having an equivalent status; these words are unlike all other human words.

The prohibition against taking from the commands indicates a view that no parts of the spoken (or written) words of God are unimportant or insignificant. If anyone were to try to "take from" these words, it might often involve the taking of minor, less central or less significant details. Yet even that is forbidden, for all of God's words spoken or written through Moses are thought to be valuable.

#### PSALM 12:6 (7)

In the midst of despair over the faithlessness of people (Ps. 12:1-4), the psalmist exclaims:

"The words<sup>31</sup> of the LORD are words that are pure, silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Ps. 12:6 [7]).

The term used to speak of God's words is not *dāḥār* ("word, thing"), but *'imrāh* ("word, utterance"), a term that places emphasis on the actual words spoken or written as opposed to the general content of a message.

What words is the writer referring to? The immediate reference is to the message of comfort and deliverance in the preceding verse. This is not a quotation from elsewhere in the Old Testament, nor is it likely that a prophet was nearby providing a ready answer to his plea for help. Apparently verse 5 (6) is direct speech from God that came to the psalmist in a manner for us unexplained. Yet even if the primary reference is to direct speech from God, the general statement is one that has implications beyond its immediate reference to the preceding verse. The psalmist knows that the comforting words of the LORD in verse 5 (6) are pure because he is convinced that in general the words of the LORD are pure. Whatever words can be called "words of the LORD" are, according to the psalmist, "pure."

This attribution of purity is exceptionally strong. The term *tāhōr* ("pure") is used to describe freedom from imperfections or impurities, as with pure gold (Exod. 25:11, 17, 24, et al.), a pure heart (free from evil motives and desires, Ps. 51:10 [12]; cf. *tāhēr* in Ezek. 36:25), or ritual purity or cleanness (Lev. 10:10, 14; 13:13, 17; Deut. 14:11, 20; Mal. 1:11, et al.). Here the psalmist compares the purity of God's words to the purity of silver that has been refined in a "furnace of clay" or a "furnace on the ground."<sup>32</sup> The extremely hot furnace would enable the silver to be purged of all impurities; so the metaphor is apt. In order to prevent us from missing the point, he adds the phrase "purified seven times." Using a number that probably indicates a "perfect" number of times,<sup>33</sup> the psalmist is expressing in a forceful way the concept of absolute purity, total freedom from impurity or imperfection.

Against the contrasting background of unfaithful and lying words spoken by "every one" among the "sons of men" (vv. 1-2), this affirma-

tion of absolute purity acquires a clear epistemological aspect: All human beings' words contain lies and falsehood, but the words of the LORD do not, for they are absolutely free from any impurities in the sense of unreliable or untruthful speech. With respect to truthfulness, the words of the LORD are as pure as "silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." There is no untruthfulness in them.

This conclusion indicates how foreign it would be to the thought of at least some Old Testament authors to argue, as some do today,<sup>34</sup> that because God's words come to us in human language and through human spokesmen the words may therefore contain some degree of untruthfulness, such as factual errors in areas unrelated to "faith and practice," or misstatements of fact in matters unrelated to or only distantly related to the central purpose. The psalmist takes care to point out the great *contrast* between the total truthfulness of God's words and the falsehoods found in all merely human words. It is *all* God's words, argues the writer in Psalm 12:6 (7), that are pure from falsehood: Every word God speaks, no matter on what subject and no matter how tangentially related to the central purpose of a particular message, is free from falsehood: His words are as pure as perfectly refined silver.

#### PSALM 18:30 (31) (= 2 SAM. 22:31); PSALM 119:140; PROVERBS 30:5

The same word (*'imrāh*) that occurred in a plural form in Psalm 12:6 (7) is here used in a singular form to affirm a similar statement: "The word of the LORD [*'imrāh*-YHWH]<sup>35</sup> is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him" (Ps. 18:30 [31], NIV). The "word" the psalmist refers to seems to be the written words of God, the "statutes" and "ordinances" that he claims to have continually looked at (v. 22). "The word of the LORD" seems to be used here in a collective sense (see BDB, p. 57) to refer to all the words of God, especially written words that the psalmist had available to him at that time.

To say that the word of the LORD is "flawless" is again to indicate its freedom from imperfection. The verb *šārap* commonly means "to refine, smelt, test," and is used to refer to the refining of silver by fire (Ps. 12:6[7]; Jer. 6:29-30; Zech. 13:9). The passive participle (*š'rūpāh*) used in Ps. 18:30 [31] indicates that God's words are words from which all impurities have been removed: the words are "pure," or "flawless."

The context again emphasizes the reliability of God's words as the aspect of purity that the psalmist is especially concerned with. God had promised to reward righteous living and obedience to Himself, and in verses 20 and 24 there is a recounting of God's faithfulness to these promises. Again, the idea of "purity" suggests that according to the writer of this Psalm, there was nothing in God's word that could not be relied on or trusted: God's words are pure, and no unreliable statements can be found in them.

Psalm 119:140 says, "Your word is very pure [*š'rupāh*] and your servant loves it." As in Psalm 18:30 (31), the word referred to is the written word of God. That is even more clear in this Psalm, since the subject of the entire Psalm is the law of God, the "statutes," "commandments," "ordinances," etc., that the psalmist has available for meditation and repeated inspection (vv. 6, 15, 18, 23, et al.). As in Psalm 18, the word of God is said to be "pure"; in fact, here it is said to be "very pure." This emphasis indicates that the psalmist saw no element of untruthfulness or unreliability in the written words of God to which he had access, even though they were in human language and written by imperfect human beings. Ordinary human error did not attach to these words; unlike all other human words, these were "very pure."

This affirmation is even stronger in Proverbs: "Every word of God is flawless; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him" (Prov. 30:5-6). The first line again uses *š'rupah* to indicate the flawlessness and purity of God's words. The range of reference is more explicitly broad here: it is "every" word of God (that is, every utterance or speech from God to men), that is free from imperfection. According to the writer of this proverb, God always speaks in words that are pure, and no impurity exists in any part of His speech.

The next line, "he is a shield to those who take refuge in him," suggests the trustworthiness of God's words: to rely on every word spoken by God is to rely on God Himself, who will not fail those who trust Him. It is significant that in most contexts where the purity of God's speech is emphasized, this element of reliability lies near at hand. This fact suggests that the kind of purity intended is a purity from error, falsehood, or deception, elements that would make God's words unreliable. Other kinds of purity that might be imagined—a "mechanical" purity in the flawless copying of manuscripts, for example, or a "sophisticated grammatical purity" in the polished use of academically acceptable grammatical constructions, or a "stylistically uniformitarian purity" in the use of one impersonal, unvarying style of writing throughout all of God's written words—are not in view in the contexts we have examined. These considerations do not appear to have been of interest or concern to the Old Testament authors; in fact, there is no indication that these authors would have thought of such kinds of "purity." The purity is rather in regard to reliability or truthfulness.

I must emphasize that the Bible's insistence that God speaks pure words and is always truthful does not preclude Him from using a wide diversity of literary and/or oral devices: parable, phenomenological language, metaphor, hyperbole, and so forth. "True words" can include hyperbolic words, for instance; but they must be recognized as such and interpreted within that framework. If a narrative (for example, the story of the prodigal son) is not *historical* narrative, but belongs to some other genre, then the truthfulness of the narrative is

measured by its conformity to reality once it has been interpreted within the framework of the genre to which it gives evidence of belonging. These are hermeneutical issues largely dealt with by another chapter in this volume. In this chapter, I assume that these hermeneutical cautions are understood and do not have to be repeated constantly, and I recognize that in some instances they are difficult to apply. But once granted, they do not adversely affect the main point of this chapter but contribute to its applicability to all of the various literary styles and forms found in Scripture.

On the other hand, there is no hint from these Old Testament passages that the flawless reliability or truthfulness of God's words are limited to certain matters, such as matters of "faith and practice," or the "main points" of each message, or certain kinds of "revelatory" material. It is "every word" of God that is flawless (Prov. 30:5), not just some words, and these words are "flawless" and "pure," not marred by impurities in unreliable statements about minor details. Far from having small parts that are untruthful, God's words are said to be "very pure" (Ps. 119:140), "like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times" (Ps. 12:6). This kind of statement excludes the possibility of any untruthfulness on seemingly minor details.

#### PSALM 119:89

Psalm 119 is an extensive discussion of the qualities of the written words of God that are available to the psalmist (see above, p. 32). In this context, he says, "For ever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens" (Ps. 119:89). This is an unusual statement, because the context shows that "your word" refers to God's written words. How could he say that the words he reads are forever fixed in the heavens?

The word *niššāb* ("fixed," a Niphal participle from the root *nšb*) means "to stand, to be stationed," and here means "to stand firm."<sup>36</sup> God's word stands firm forever in the heavens, the place of God's abode. This implies that according to the psalmist God's written words are actually a copy of words that God in heaven has permanently decided on and has subsequently caused to be committed to writing by men. Briggs writes of this verse, "The divine Law was everlasting, preexistent in heaven before it came down to earth as the latter rabbins understood it . . . immutable for all future time in generation after generation of mankind."<sup>37</sup>

This immutability and perpetual establishment in heaven of these written words of God surely implied total reliability and truthfulness to the mind of the psalmist. For he was convinced that God hated all falsehood and untruthfulness (Ps. 119:43, 69, 86, 160, 163; cf. Ps. 62:4; Prov. 13:5; Zeph. 3:13, et al.). Therefore, he could see God's written words remaining forever in heaven by God's pleasure only if they were words wholly devoid of falsehood, words that would forever remain as a reminder of God's love for absolute truthfulness in speech.

## PSALM 119:96

"I have seen a limit to all perfection, but your commandment is exceedingly broad," writes the psalmist. The contrast is between all the human or creaturely works that he observes and God's written commandments, the subject of the psalm. The perfection (*tiqlāh*) of all that he sees has an end or limit (*qēš*), but God's commandment is different: he can see no limit, so far-reaching is its perfection. It is unlimited in its perfection. Once again the author sees a qualitative contrast between God's written words and all other works, including all other human words. God's written words are unlimited in their perfection; no other words can be assessed in that way.

## PSALM 119:160

"The sum of your words<sup>38</sup> is truth, and every one of your righteous ordinances endures forever" (Ps. 119:160). The second clause is similar in meaning to Psalm 119:89, except that it specifies "every one" of God's ordinances rather than calling them collectively God's "word."

The first clause speaks of the truth of God's words. "Sum" is used elsewhere to refer to the total of a census count (Exod. 30:12; Num. 1:2, 49, et al.). It here represents the result obtained by combining and evaluating all of God's words: the result is "truth." The word used here (*'met*) is the most common word for "truth" in the Old Testament and can signify both epistemological truth (truth as opposed to lies and falsehood, Deut. 13:14 [15]; 17:4; 22:20; 1 Kings 22:16; 2 Chron. 18:15; Ps. 15:2) and ethical truth (truth or faithfulness as opposed to sin, Gen. 24:49; 49:29; 1 Kings 2:4; 3:6, et al.). In this context the subject is the written words of God, but the emphasis is on their relationship to human behavior. So neither sense can be legitimately excluded.

When the psalmist adds together all the words of God, the result is truth: they are all reliable, truthful, firm, able to be trusted and depended on. There is no falsehood or unreliability in them. The NIV translates Psalm 119:160, "All your words are true."

Yet something more than the truth of all the individual words may be implied here. If the sum of them is truth, then there is affirmed an internal consistency to God's words as well: they do not contradict each other or show other words of God to be false.

## PROVERBS 8:8

Wisdom is pictured here as saying to people: "All the words (*'imré*) of my mouth are righteous; there is nothing twisted or crooked in them" (Prov. 8:8). The close connection of wisdom with God's eternal purposes in Proverbs 8:22–31 implies that to the mind of the writer the words of wisdom's mouth (v. 8) are probably words that God Himself has spoken. (Even if this is not so, the words of wisdom are very wise human words whose purity and truthfulness certainly cannot be

less than that of God's words. In either case, therefore, there is in this verse a characterization that can rightly be applied to God's words.)

Once again this verse indicates the total reliability of all parts of the words spoken by God. Nothing in them needs to be improved or straightened out because there is nothing "twisted" (*pātal*, Niphal) or "crooked" (*'iqqēš*, "twisted, perverted") in them. Although the emphasis is on moral guidance (the words are righteous), it should not be overlooked that the writer here affirms the total purity of these words in all their parts. The reader is encouraged never to suspect any element of these words, never to be "on guard," thinking that some minor imperfections will have to be filtered out because they are unworthy of full and complete trust. No untrustworthy words are ever spoken by this mouth of God's wisdom.

## ISAIAH 66:2

According to the following prophecy of Isaiah, God speaks to describe the kind of attitude that is pleasing to Him: "This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2). This prophecy advocates a response to God's word (*dābār*) that is appropriate only when responding to God Himself: to tremble in reverence and awe. This is an exhortation to respond to God's word exactly as if one were responding to God Himself. In terms of this text, it seems that to respond to God's word *is* to respond to God.

Furthermore, "trembling" suggests a complete acceptance of that word, an unwillingness to think any of it unworthy of trust or obedience, and a refusal to challenge or call into question any of that word. To tremble before God's word is to submit to it and accept it, to believe it and obey it absolutely.

## SUMMARY

We have by no means exhausted all the relevant Old Testament texts on this subject. Many other passages speak of loving God's words, of meditating on them day and night, treasuring them in one's heart, living by them, etc. But these few passages have at least given us a glimpse of the attitudes of several Old Testament authors toward God's words, especially God's words as spoken and written by men. These words are viewed consistently by the Old Testament authors as different in character and truth status from all other human words; in character, they are God's words, not merely man's. What these words say, God says. In truth status they are seen as being different from all other human words, for human words invariably contain falsehood and error (Ps. 116:11), but these do not; they are spoken by God who never lies (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). They are completely truthful (Ps. 119:160) and free from impurity or unreliability of any kind (Ps. 12:6 [7]; 18:30 [31]; 119:89, 96, 160; Prov. 8:8; 30:5–6). The

appropriate response to God's word is to tremble before it (Isa. 66:2).

There is not yet an indication of how much of our present Old Testament would be included in the intention of these authors when they speak of "God's words," especially God's words in written form. A final determination of that question is difficult to find within the limits of the Old Testament text itself, although some help can be found in later Jewish literature.<sup>39</sup> For our purposes, however, it is enough to note at this point that these categories of divine words (spoken directly, spoken through men, and written) were commonly acknowledged, and to note the extremely high view of the purity and truthfulness of whatever words were thought to be included in any of those categories.

### EXTRABIBLICAL LITERATURE

Space allows only a brief mention of the high views of the Old Testament Scriptures found in Jewish literature in the period after the completion of the writings now considered canonical. When the rabbis speak of Scripture, their views are every bit as strong as those found in the Old Testament when it spoke of prophets who were messengers of God. This is especially true of the supreme prophet, Moses, and his writing, the Torah. We read in the Talmud:

Another<sup>40</sup> taught, "Because he hath despised the word of the LORD" (Num. 15:31)—this refers to him who maintains that the Torah is not from Heaven. And even if he asserts that the whole Torah is from Heaven, excepting a particular verse, which (he maintains) was not uttered by God but by Moses himself, he is included in "because he hath despised the word of the LORD." And even if he admits that the whole Torah is from Heaven, excepting a single point, a particular *ad majus* deduction or a certain *gezerah shawah*—he is still included in "because he hath despised the word of the Lord" (*b. Sanh.* 99a).

Views such as this are common in rabbinic literature.<sup>41</sup>

G. F. Moore writes that for the rabbinical schools "it was an uncontested axiom that every syllable of Scripture had the veracity and authority of the word of God."<sup>42</sup> For a similar example in the targums, see Targum Onkelos on Exodus 14:31, where the Masoretic text speaks of believing in the LORD but the targum interprets this to mean believing in the word (*mymr'*) of the LORD.

Josephus shows a similar high esteem for the authority of the Old Testament prophets. Where an Old Testament narrative simply reports that "God said to [David, et al.]," Josephus understands that the Old Testament author is thinking of a prophet through whom God spoke, and so he often introduces a prophet into the narrative (*Antiq.* 7:72, 294, 371; 8:197; 9:139; cf. Loeb edition, vol. 5, p. 677, n.b.). So he apparently sees no difference between direct speech from God and speech through a human prophet.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, Josephus can

say of something that had been foretold through a prophet, "God prophesied it" (*Antiq.* 9:145; 10:126). He says that the prophets alone had the privilege of writing the history of their people under the inspiration (*epipnoia*) of God. As a result, their books do not conflict with each other but are a clear and accurate record (*Ag. Ap.* 1:37–38). Then, after thus attributing the Old Testament to the work of the prophets, he reiterates the common Jewish attitude toward the Scriptures:

We have given practical proof of our reverence for our own Scriptures. For, although such long ages have now passed, no one has ventured either to add, or to remove, or to alter a syllable; and it is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them as the decrees [*dogmata*] of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them (*Ag. Ap.* 1:42).

Regarding Old Testament prophecy, Philo had a stronger view than that found in the Old Testament or any of the other literature we have examined. For, according to Philo, the human prophet contributed virtually nothing.

For indeed the prophet, even when he seems to be speaking, really holds his peace, and his organs of speech, mouth and tongue, are wholly in the employ of Another (*Quis Her.* 266).

For no pronouncement of a prophet is ever his own, but he is an interpreter prompted by Another in all his utterances (*Spec. Leg.* 4:49).

When the prophets speak, it is God who is speaking, for Philo wrote that God prophesied through the mouth of the prophets. Philo then quotes Jeremiah 2:13 (*Fug.* 197; cf. *Spec. Leg.* 2:189). The writings of the prophets, the sacred Scriptures, "are not monuments of knowledge and vision, but are the divine commands and divine words" (*Q. Gen.* 4:140).<sup>44</sup>

### NEW TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVES ON THE OLD TESTAMENT

The high view of the trustworthiness and reliability of God's words written by human authors that is seen in the Old Testament writings is reflected in many ways in the writings of the New Testament authors as well. This is especially clear in their use of the Old Testament.

#### MANY OLD TESTAMENT WRITINGS ARE THOUGHT OF AS GOD'S SPEECH

Throughout the New Testament there are citations of Old Testament texts that indicate that the Old Testament writings are considered God's speech. It is impossible here to discuss each text at length, but many are noted briefly in the following list.

*Matthew 1:22:* Isaiah's words in Isaiah 7:14 are cited as "what the Lord had spoken by the prophet."

*Matthew 4:4:* Jesus says to the devil, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." In the context of Jesus' frequent citations from Deuteronomy to answer every temptation, the words that proceed "from the mouth of God" are here best understood to be the written Scriptures of the Old Testament.

*Matthew 19:5:* The words of the author in Genesis 2:24, not attributed to God in the Genesis narrative, are quoted by Jesus as words that God "said."

*Mark 7:9-13:* What Jesus calls "the commandment of God" in verse 9 is cited in verse 10 as "Moses said." But in verse 13, what Moses said is called "the word [*logos*] of God." If we accept Markan priority here, it is significant that instead of "Moses said," Matthew 15:4 has "God commanded."

*Luke 1:70:* In Zechariah's prophecy, God is said to have "spoken [*elalēsen*] by the mouth of his holy prophets" in the Old Testament.

*Luke 24:25:* Jesus calls the disciples "foolish men" because they did not believe "all that the prophets have spoken [*elalēsan*]." This is then taken to refer to "all the scriptures" (v. 27). Moral culpability seems therefore to attach to not believing the Old Testament Scriptures. This suggests that they are viewed as God's words.

*John 5:45-47:* Speaking of the writings of Moses, Jesus says, "If you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?" (v. 47). Apparently, Moses' writings and Jesus' words are thought to have the same authority to compel belief.

*Acts 1:16:* "The Holy Spirit spoke beforehand [*proeipen*] by the mouth of David" (the words of Pss. 69:25; 109:8). Words of Scripture are said to be spoken by the Holy Spirit.

*Acts 2:16-17:* In quoting "what was spoken by the prophet Joel" in Joel 2:28-32, Peter inserts "says God," thus attributing to God words written by Joel.

*Acts 3:18:* God "foretold [*prokatēngeilen*] by the mouth of all the prophets" the sufferings of Christ.

*Acts 3:21:* "God spoke [*elalēsen*] by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old."

*Acts 4:25:* The prayer of the church is addressed to God who "spoke" (*eipen*) the words of Psalm 2:1-2 "by the mouth of . . . David . . . through [*dia*] the Holy Spirit." (The sentence is complex and has led to some variation in the text, but the sense is clear: God through the Holy Spirit spoke through David's words.)

*Acts 13:47:* Isaiah 49:6 is quoted by Paul and Barnabas as something that "the Lord commanded us." An Old Testament prophecy is seen not only as God's command, but also as one that places moral obligation on first-century Christians.

*Acts 28:25:* Paul says that the Holy Spirit spoke through (*elalēsen dia*) Isaiah the prophet.

*Romans 1:2:* The gospel is something that "God promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures."

*Romans 3:2:* The Jews are entrusted with the oracles (*ta logia*) of God. The Old Testament Scriptures, which the Jews cared for and preserved, were the oracles spoken by God.

*Romans 9:17:* Paul quotes God's speech in Exodus 9:16 as what "scripture says to Pharaoh." Apparently there is in Paul's mind an equivalence between the nature of what Scripture says and the nature of what God says.

*First Corinthians 9:8-10:* The "law" of Deuteronomy 25:4 is something that God now "speaks" (*legei*, present tense) for our sake (v. 10). Written words of the Old Testament are seen by Paul as words that God not only spoke in the past but continues to speak in the present.

*Second Timothy 3:16:* "All scripture is God-breathed [*theopneustos*]." <sup>45</sup> Here "scripture" (*graphē*) must refer to the Old Testament written Scripture, for that is what *graphē* refers to in every one of its fifty occurrences in the New Testament. <sup>46</sup> Furthermore, it is the "sacred writings" (*hiera grammata*) of the Old Testament that Paul has just referred to in the previous verse.

Paul affirms that all of the Old Testament writings are *theopneustos*, breathed out (compare *pneō* in the sense of "breathe out": BAG<sup>2</sup>, p. 679) by God. Since it is writings that are said to be "breathed out," this breathing must be understood as a metaphor for speaking. This verse thus states in brief form what has been evident in many other passages so far: the Old Testament writings are regarded as God's words in written form. God is the one who spoke (and still speaks) them, although using human agents to write them down.

*Hebrews 1:1-2:* "In many and various ways God spoke [*lalēsas*] of old to the fathers by [*en* + dative] the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son [*elalēsen hēmin en hyiō*]." God's speech through the prophets is spoken of in the same way as His speech through Christ. This suggests an equivalence in character and authority for the words of Christ and those of the Old Testament prophets.

It is also significant to notice the vague way in which the manner of Old Testament inspiration is referred to: "many [or, many parts] and various ways." This is characteristic of both the Old Testament and the New Testament: while there is an abundance of evidence to affirm that the words of Scripture are God's words, there is almost no discussion of the *process* by which these words came to be written.

John J. Hughes is certainly correct at this point to call attention to the imprecise methodology of Jack Rogers and G. C. Berkouwer in their criticism of biblical inerrancy:

Both Rogers and Berkouwer fail adequately to distinguish the *mode of revelation* (dream, vision, dictation, etc.) from the *manner of inspiration* (the employment of various literary techniques and genres), from the *result of inspiration* (what Scripture says, God says), and the *purpose of inspiration* (to make us wise unto salvation). Apparently, they believe that to affirm both the purpose and manner of inspiration precludes affirming the result of inspiration.<sup>47</sup>

**Hebrews 1:6–7:** In quoting Deuteronomy 32:43 (LXX)<sup>48</sup> and Psalm 104:4, the author twice affirms that God “says” (*legei*) them.

**Second Peter 1:21:** Speaking of the prophecies of Scripture (v. 20), which means at least the Old Testament Scriptures to which Peter encourages his readers to give careful attention (v. 19), Peter says that none of these prophecies ever came “by the impulse [*thelēma*, “will”] of man,” but that “men moved [lit. “carried along,” *pheromenoi*] by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.” It is not Peter’s intention to deny completely human volition or personality in the writing of Scripture (the writers “spoke”), but rather to say that the ultimate source of every prophecy was never man’s decision about what he wanted to write, but rather the Holy Spirit’s action in the prophet’s life, carried out in ways unspecified here or elsewhere in Scripture. This is similar to the Old Testament warnings against prophesying words of one’s own mind, rather than words that God had given (Deut. 18:18, 20; Jer. 23:16, et al.). It indicates a similar belief that all of the Old Testament prophecies (and, in light of verses 19–20, this probably includes all of the written Scripture of the Old Testament) are spoken “from God.”

#### INDIVIDUAL WORDS AND LETTERS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT ARE RELIED ON

Consistent with the view that the Old Testament writings are God’s own speech is a willingness on the part of New Testament authors to rely on individual words or even letters of the Old Testament. Jesus’ affirmation of the abiding validity of every “iota” and “dot” of the Old Testament law (Matt. 5:18) indicates such confidence. So also does the statement of Jesus in Luke 16:17: “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void.” This is not foreign to New Testament thought: heaven and earth have been created by God and will one day be destroyed (Matt. 24:35; Heb. 1:10–12), but God’s word reflects His unchanging veracity and eternal determination to speak exactly what He wills; thus, His word is, in the words of Psalm 119:89, forever “fixed in the heavens.”

In Matthew 22:44–45 (Mark 12:36–37; Luke 20:42–44), Jesus proves that David calls the Messiah “Lord” from Psalm 110:1, “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand. . . .” Two different persons are implied by the two uses of the word *Lord*: the first is God the Father whom the Jews acknowledged; the second is the Messiah, whom David calls “my Lord” (NIV). In order for this argument to work, Jesus relies on the fact

that Psalm 110:1 has David calling the Messiah “my Lord.” Otherwise the text would not prove that the Messiah was David’s Lord.<sup>49</sup>

Now the word *my* is signified by only one letter (ʾ) in the consonantal Hebrew text: “my Lord” is ׁיְיָ. A slight lengthening of the final consonant to ׁי would make “his Lord”; a bit more lengthening to ׁיך would make “your Lord.” In either case, the argument would no longer work. Here Jesus’ argument depends on the reliability of one letter of the written Old Testament.

This is not a unique instance: many others are cited by R. Nicole, “New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in *Revelation and the Bible*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1958), p. 139.

#### MINOR DETAILS OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES ARE SEEN TO BE FULFILLED IN CHRIST’S LIFE

Also indicative of a high regard for the reliability of all of the Old Testament is the frequent reference to a seemingly obscure detail of an Old Testament prophecy that was fulfilled in Christ’s life. The following list is not exhaustive, but it does give enough examples to indicate an unwillingness to think of any detail of the Old Testament as “unreliable” because it was not crucial to the “main point” of the prophecy.

Micah 5:2	Matthew 2:5	He was born in Bethlehem.
Zech. 9:9	John 12:14–15	He rode to Jerusalem on a donkey.
Psalm 41:9	John 13:18	His betrayer ate bread with Him.
Psalm 22:18	John 19:24	Lots were cast for His garments.
Psalm 69:21	(John 19:28–30) <sup>50</sup>	He was given vinegar to drink.
Psalm 34:20	John 19:36	None of His bones were broken.
Zech. 12:10	John 19:37	He was pierced with a sword.
Isaiah 53:9	(Matt. 27:57–60) <sup>50</sup>	He was buried in a rich man’s grave.

The ways in which the New Testament “fulfills” the Old Testament, or the interpretive patterns bound up with typology (for instance), do not affect the main point. What is here at issue is not how the New Testament writers perceived that this or that Old Testament passage pointed to Christ (which is a separate issue), but that they often focused on relatively obscure Old Testament details.

#### MINOR HISTORICAL DETAILS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT ARE TREATED AS TRUSTWORTHY AND RELIABLE

While it is often argued today that the truthfulness of the Bible need not extend to every historical detail,<sup>51</sup> the New Testament authors give no indication of any unwillingness to trust even the smallest historical details of the Old Testament narrative. In the following list are some of the historical details cited by New Testament authors. If all of these are matters of “faith and practice,” then every historical detail of the Old Testament is a matter of “faith and practice.” On the other hand, if so many details can be affirmed, then it seems that all of the historical details in the Old Testament can be affirmed as true.

- Matthew 12:3-4  
(Mark 2:25-26; Luke 6:3-4) David ate the bread of the Presence.
- Matthew 12:40 Jonah was in the whale.
- Matthew 12:41 (Luke 11:30, 32) The men of Nineveh repented.<sup>52</sup>
- Matthew 12:42 (Luke 11:31) The Queen of the South came to hear Solomon.
- Matthew 23:35 (Luke 11:51) Zechariah<sup>53</sup> was murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.
- Luke 4:25-26 Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath.
- Luke 4:27 Naaman the Syrian was cleansed of leprosy.
- Luke 17:29 On the day Lot left Sodom fire and brimstone rained from heaven.
- Luke 17:32 "Remember Lot's wife" (who turned to salt for looking back at Sodom).
- John 3:14 Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness.
- John 4:5 Jacob gave a field to Joseph.
- Acts 13:17-23 Several details of the history of Israel are cited by Paul.
- Romans 4:10 Abraham believed and received the promise before he was circumcised.
- Romans 4:19 Abraham was about a hundred years old.
- Romans 9:10-12 God told Rebecca before her children were born that the elder child would serve the younger.
- Romans 11:2-4 Elijah spoke with God, as recorded in 1 Kings 19:10, 18.
- 1 Corinthians 10:11 The people of Israel passed through the sea, ate and drank spiritual food and drink, desired evil, sat down to drink, rose up to dance, indulged in immorality, grumbled, and were destroyed (vv. 1-11).  
Then Paul says that these things "happened" (*synebainen*, v. 11). The verb *synebainō* is commonly used to refer to historical events that "took place" or "happened" (Luke 24:14;

- Acts 3:10, 20:19, 21:35; 1 Peter 4:12; 2 Peter 2:22).<sup>54</sup> Paul has no hesitancy in affirming that even extremely obscure details of the Old Testament ("the people sat down to eat and rose up to dance") both *happened* and were written down for our instruction.
- Hebrews 7:2 Abraham gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek.
- Hebrews 9:1-5 Detailed descriptions of the Old Testament tabernacle are reported.
- Hebrews 9:19-21 Moses sprinkled the people and the tabernacle vessels with blood and water, using scarlet wool and hyssop.
- Hebrews 11:3 The world was created by the word of God. This is not a "minor" detail, but it is useful as an example of a "scientific" fact that is affirmed in the Old Testament. The author says that we know this scientific/historical fact "by faith." Faith here is explicitly said to involve trust in the truthfulness of a scientific and historical fact recorded in Old Testament Scripture.
- Hebrews 11, *passim* Many details of the lives of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, and others are recounted as events that actually happened.
- Hebrews 12:16-17 Esau sold his birthright for a single meal, and later sought it back with tears.
- James 2:25 Rahab received the spies and sent them out another way.
- 1 Peter 3:20; 2 Peter 2:5 Eight persons were saved in the ark.
- 2 Peter 2:6-7 God turned Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes but saved Lot.
- 2 Peter 2:16 Balaam's donkey spoke.

This list indicates a willingness on the part of the New Testament writers to rely on the truthfulness of any part of the historical narratives of the Old Testament. No detail is too insignificant to be used for the instruction of New Testament Christians. There is no indication of

any thought that there was a certain category of Old Testament statements that were unreliable and untrustworthy (such as "nonrevelational statements"<sup>55</sup> or "historical and scientific" statements, as opposed to doctrinal and moral passages).

In fact, the statement of the purpose of Scripture in 2 Timothy 3:16 certainly is not intended to limit the types of statements in the Old Testament that can be relied on; it is "all scripture" that is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." For the instruction and edification of the early Christians the New Testament authors were willing to use *any* historical (or "scientific")<sup>56</sup> statement of the Old Testament, to affirm that it happened as God said in His written words, and to draw lessons from it for contemporary hearers. "All scripture," every detail of Scripture, is useful for this purpose, says Paul.

Moreover, against the background of the idea of the permanence of Scripture (Ps. 119:89; Matt. 5:18; Luke 16:17), Paul's affirmation of the usefulness of every part of Scripture becomes even more significant. For it to be eternally useful for edification, God's word must be an abiding testimony to the veracity of God's speech: Untruthful statements would be unprofitable and bring dishonor to God by portraying Him as one who at times speaks untruthfully, and they would serve as an encouragement to people to imitate God and sometimes speak untruthfully as well. This would be morally destructive, not edifying. In order to be fully and perpetually profitable, and in order always to bring glory to God, all the statements in God's written words must be trustworthy.

#### HOW MUCH OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IS SAID TO BE WORTHY OF BELIEF BY NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANS?

The citations listed above from all parts of the Old Testament are enough to indicate inductively that all of the Old Testament was treated by the New Testament authors as (1) words that God Himself spoke and (2) reliable in whatever they represented as having happened. But there are also several passages that state this reliance on the Old Testament explicitly.

In Luke 24:25, the disciples are rebuked for not believing "all that the prophets have spoken." Then in verse 27, Luke reports Jesus as using "all the scriptures" to teach about Himself. Although it is difficult to define the limits of the Old Testament canon from data within the Old Testament itself, it is not difficult to demonstrate that for first-century Jews the canon of the Old Testament included exactly the books of the Protestant Old Testament today.<sup>57</sup> It is "all" of these that are said to speak about Christ. This categorization is made more explicit in Luke 24:44 where Jesus speaks of the necessity for the fulfillment of all that was "written" about Him "in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms."

Peter said that God foretold the sufferings of the Messiah by the mouth of "all the prophets" (Acts 3:18).

Paul, standing before Felix, said that he worshiped God while (or by) "believing *everything* [*pisteuōn pasi*] laid down by the law or written in the prophets" (Acts 24:14).

Romans 15:4 reaffirms the value of everything written in the Old Testament: "Whatever [*hosa*] was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

These statements affirm in a general way what was evident from the many specific references quoted earlier: to the New Testament authors, every part of the Old Testament was God's very word, and was worthy of absolute trust.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT AS WORDS OF GOD

At last we come to a consideration of the New Testament writings themselves. Did the New Testament writers consider their writings equal to the Old Testament Scriptures in character and truth status? There are several indications that they did.

First, it is evident that the New Testament authors thought it possible for God to speak directly to people in human language, for there are recorded instances of such direct speech from God at the baptism of Jesus (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22), the Transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35; 2 Peter 1:17-18), the voice from the Father speaking to Jesus (John 12:28), the conversion of Saul (Acts 9:4; 26:14-18, from the risen Lord), the instructions to Ananias (Acts 9:11-16), Peter's vision (Acts 10:13), events during Paul's journeys (Acts 18:9-10; 23:11), and the revelation to John (Rev. 1:11-3:22).

Furthermore, there is abundant evidence of God's speech through human lips, both in the words of Jesus (Matt. 5:22, et al.; Luke 5:1; John 3:34 ["he whom God has sent utters the words of God"]; 6:63, 68; 8:47; 12:48, 49-50 ["the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak"]; 14:10; 14:24 ["the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me"]; 15:22; 17:8, 14) and in the words of the apostles (Matt. 10:19-20; Luke 10:16; John 17:8; Acts 2:41; 4:29, 31; 2 Cor. 13:3; Gal. 1:8-9, 10-11;<sup>58</sup> 1 Thess. 2:13).

But were the New Testament writings thought to be God's words in the same sense as the Old Testament writings? Using only the data of the New Testament itself, we are in a situation analogous to that which arose with the Old Testament: It is possible to show that *some* of the New Testament writings are thought to be God's words, but one cannot prove conclusively that all of the New Testament writings were so regarded, at least not by using the data of the New Testament alone.

Nevertheless, the authors' claims that they are writing God's words are quite strong. There is a hint of that claim in John's record of

a command of the Lord. How much of the preceding discourse is comprehended by the phrase "the things I write to you" is perhaps impossible to determine with certainty, but we can note that it comes exactly at the end of the discussion of spiritual gifts (chapters 12–14) and would seem most naturally to apply to the entire section. It might be argued that this statement refers only to the preceding sentence, or to the directive about women (vv. 33–35). However, it is so general and is made so indefinite by the use of the plural that such a restriction appears highly artificial. Paul's purpose is to conclude the discussion and at the same time to bar the way for any prophet at Corinth to propound "in the Spirit" new rules that would contradict those given by Paul. Certainly this concern applies to the whole range of directives for worship, reaching back to chapters 12 and 13, and perhaps even to chapter 11.

But this means that in 1 Corinthians 14:37 there is a very strong statement of the authority of Paul's written words. For it is inconceivable that all the instructions in 1 Corinthians 12–14 are based on words of the earthly Jesus handed down to Paul through oral or written tradition (otherwise we would certainly have echoes of such a large group of "*charismata-logia*" elsewhere in the New Testament). Rather, Paul has here instituted a number of new rules for church worship at Corinth and has claimed for them the status of "commands of the Lord."<sup>67</sup>

In 1 Thessalonians 4:15 Paul says, "For this we declare to you in a word of the Lord" (trans. mine). C. Masson argues that his was not a saying of the earthly Jesus preserved in tradition, because it is unthinkable that the evangelists would have possessed such a decisive word on so burning an issue in the early church without recording it.<sup>68</sup> Additional difficulty for the view that this is an "earthly" saying is raised by use of the first person for believers remaining alive (vv. 15, 17) and the reference to the Lord in the third person (vv. 16, 17). At most it would have to be an allusion to a saying of Jesus, but this hardly seems to call for the strong introduction: "For this we declare to you in a word of the Lord" (literal translation).

Furthermore, the idea of speaking "in a word of the Lord" has an Old Testament counterpart that always suggests prophetic speech: *bidbar YHWH* ("in a word of the Lord").<sup>69</sup> Thus, the most likely solution is to understand Paul as claiming in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 that he himself<sup>70</sup> is speaking words that were also the very words of the Lord.<sup>71</sup>

In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul<sup>72</sup> writes, "For the scripture [*graphē*] says, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The laborer deserves his wages.'" The first quotation is from Deuteronomy 25:4, but the second occurs nowhere in the Old Testament. It does occur, however, in Luke 10:7, in exactly the same words cited by Paul. This means that Paul is quoting Luke's Gospel as *graphē* ("Scripture").<sup>73</sup> Since *graphē* in the New Testament always is used of the Old

Testament Scripture (fifty out of fifty times), we have here an instance of Paul's putting Luke's Gospel in the same category as Old Testament Scripture.

In brief, we have strong evidence that the early church soon began to receive some New Testament writings as "words of God" equal to the Old Testament.

Revelation 22:18–19 contains an inscriptional curse, warning of severe punishment from God for anyone who adds to or takes away from the words of "this book." In the first instance, "this book" refers to the book of Revelation itself, and the prohibition against tampering with the words implies that the writer wants his readers to think of the book as words of God (cf. Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6).

But perhaps it is possible to make one further observation about this inscriptional curse. For one who believes that God oversaw the compilation of the New Testament, the fact that these verses occur at the end of this particular book cannot be seen as a mere coincidence. Revelation is the book that primarily describes for us the distant future and it most naturally belongs at the end of the canon, just as Genesis, which describes the distant past, belongs at the beginning. Therefore, it may not be inappropriate to think of Revelation 22:18–19 as having a secondary application to the whole of the Bible that precedes it. Understood in this way, these verses both close the canon and simultaneously warn all future generations that all the words that go before are God's very words, and to add to them or take from them is to invite eternal death.

## OTHER STATEMENTS ABOUT THE CHARACTER OF SCRIPTURE

Once it is clear (1) that all of the Old Testament writings are considered God's words, (2) that the written words of God are thought by both Old Testament and New Testament authors to be equal in character and truth-status to God's words spoken directly to men, and (3) that the New Testament writings, as they became accepted as "Scripture," were thought to be just as fully God's words as the words of the Old Testament, then any New Testament passage that speaks of some characteristic of God's words can properly be applied to all of the Old Testament and to as much of the New Testament as is accepted as Scripture. For to the New Testament authors, Scripture is God's words, and to say something about the character of God's speech is to say something about the character of Scripture.

Thus it is appropriate to apply Titus 1:2 to written Scripture: It speaks of the "hope of eternal life which God, who never lies [*ho apseudēs theos*, 'the unlying God'], promised ages ago." Because God never lies, because His character is that of an "unlying God" who cannot speak a lie (*pseudēs*), therefore His promises can always be trusted. These of course were written promises in Scripture. But if all

the promise of Jesus that the Holy Spirit would bring to the remembrance of the disciples all that Jesus said to them (John 14:26).<sup>59</sup> Those who believe are to keep (or obey, *têreō*) the disciples' words just as they keep Jesus' words (John 15:20). The Spirit of truth will guide them into all the truth (John 16:13).

A related statement about the authority of apostolic writings is found in 2 Peter 3:2, where the readers are told to remember not only the Old Testament prophets,<sup>60</sup> but also "the commandment of the Lord and Savior through [their] apostles." Since this is a "reminder" to the readers (v. 1), it is probably—though not certainly—written commands that he exhorts them to remember. This would make the apostolic commands mentioned in verse 2 parallel in form to the writings of the Old Testament apostles also mentioned in that verse.

Further support for this view can be found in 2 Peter 3:16. There the author shows not only an awareness of the existence of written epistles from Paul but also a clear willingness to classify "all of his [Paul's] epistles" with "the other scriptures [*tas loipas graphas*]." Since *graphē* in the New Testament always refers to the Old Testament Scriptures, which both Jews and Christians held to be the authoritative words of God, it is noteworthy that Peter here classifies all of Paul's epistles as *graphai*. This is an indication that very early in the history of the church Paul's epistles were considered to be God's written words in the same sense as the Old Testament texts.

Paul's writings themselves show some evidence of a claim to write "words of God": "This is what we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things in spiritual words (1 Cor. 2:13)."<sup>61</sup>

The verse is occasionally taken to refer to believers generally, but the more common view is that it refers to Paul or to Paul and his companions. The latter explanation is preferable for several reasons: (1) The context is one of Paul's defense of his own ministry. (2) The subsequent rebuke of the Corinthians for being unable even to *receive* more advanced teaching (3:1–4) makes it virtually impossible that they would be included among those who could speak of it or teach it to others. (3) The *laloumen* ("we speak") in verse 13 refers to the same speaking as the speaking (*laloumen*) of wisdom in verse 6, with which Paul began the passage. This is a speaking "among those who are mature," and Paul excludes the Corinthians (who were like "infants" [3:1]) from this category.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the Corinthians themselves are not included in the "we" of verse 13.

Whether the "we" of 1 Corinthians 2:13 is a reference to Paul alone or to a wider group of mature Christian preachers cannot be conclusively determined from the context. The clear "I" sections in 1:17; 2:1; 3:1 argue in favor of restricting it to Paul alone, while the switch to the first person plural in 2:6–16 may imply that Paul is speaking of general truths applicable to more than himself alone. (However, note Paul's

changes from first person singular to plural in 2 Cor. 10:1, 11; cf. also 10:13 with 12:1).

What is clear is that at least for himself, and at most for some limited group of Christian preachers, Paul claims (1) to have received information from God by revelation (*apokalypsen*, v. 10), and (2) to speak of this revelation concerning the things given by God (v. 12) in words taught by the Spirit.<sup>63</sup>

The picture of Paul's being "taught" words by the Holy Spirit is similar to the Old Testament picture of a prophet's hearing a message from God and then speaking it to the people. Also in a manner similar to that of the Old Testament prophets, Paul singles out the words themselves, not simply the general content, as is evident from the fact that the question of eloquent speech is under consideration.

One objection to a parallel between Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles might be brought from 1 Corinthians 7:12, where Paul distinguishes his words from those of the Lord: "To the rest I say, not the Lord. . . ." It is undeniable that such a distinction is made, but it must be evaluated in the light of verses 25 and 40. In verse 25 Paul says he has no command (*epitagē*) of the Lord concerning the unmarried, but will give his own opinion. This means at least that he had possession of no earthly word of Jesus on this subject and probably also that he had received no subsequent revelation about it. In verse 12, then, the meaning must be that in this area Paul had no earthly words of Jesus that he could quote.

It is remarkable therefore that Paul can go on in 1 Corinthians 7:12–15 to give several specific ethical standards, apparently with the full expectation that he will be believed and obeyed by the Corinthians. The explanation is found in the fact that Paul has obtained mercy from the Lord to be trustworthy (v. 25), and by this statement he seemingly implies that his considered judgments were able to be placed on the same authoritative level as the words of Jesus.<sup>64</sup> Nor could the Corinthians claim that Paul was acting contrary to the Holy Spirit when he assumed such authority. In a classic example of ironic understatement, Paul says, "And I think that I have the Spirit of God" (v. 40).

There is a difference here between Paul and the Old Testament prophets, but it is not one that establishes a lesser authority for his words. Rather, 1 Corinthians 7:12 shows that Paul exceeded all of the Old Testament prophets in at least one respect: He had been given such reliable judgment and insight into God's will that at times he needed no specific revelation to speak with divine authority.

In 1 Corinthians 14:37–38, Paul writes, "If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing to you is a command of the Lord [*ha graphō hymin hoti kyriou estin entolē*]."<sup>65</sup> If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized."<sup>66</sup>

So Paul claims here that what he writes to the Corinthians is itself

of Scripture is spoken by God, as both Old Testament and New Testament authors believed, then Scripture also must be "unlying" (*ap-seudēs*). There can be no falsehood or untruthfulness in Scripture.

Hebrews 6:18 mentions two unchangeable things (God's oath and His promise) "in which it is impossible for God to lie" (NIV). Once again the total truthfulness of all that God promises is strongly affirmed; in fact, the author says not merely that God does not lie, but that it is *not possible* for him to lie. Although the immediate reference is only to oaths and promises, if it is impossible for God to lie in these utterances, that certainly must imply that it is impossible for Him ever to lie.<sup>74</sup> Once again, then, we have an affirmation that can be seen as more evidence that the New Testament authors saw all of Scripture as truthful and completely reliable.

Further evidence of a similar sort is seen in John 17:17, where Jesus says to the Father, "Thy word is truth [*alētheia*]."<sup>75</sup> It is also very plain in John 10:35, where Jesus says, "Scripture cannot be broken [*lythēnai*; here, 'annulled, made void']." Jesus is here making a statement about "Scripture" in general. It is a characteristic of Scripture that it cannot be thought untrue or wrong. Since that is true of Scripture as a whole, it is true, according to Jesus, of one particular word in Psalm 82:6: the word *gods* in reference to human judges. If Jesus would thus use the absolute reliability of Scripture as a whole to establish the correctness of one particular word chosen to apply to human judges (certainly not one of the "central doctrines" of the Bible), then should we not follow His example and affirm that the absolute reliability of Scripture establishes the correctness of every word of Scripture?

Several passages therefore indicate that God never lies and that it is appropriate to apply these descriptions of God's unlying character to the words of Scripture as well. Furthermore, the fact that God never lies and cannot lie means not merely that He always acts in a morally right way or that He never speaks falsehood for a bad purpose. "To lie" (*pseudomai*) often means to affirm in words something that is untrue, that does not correspond to reality, no matter whether the intentions are good or bad, and no matter whether one's conduct of life is morally good or bad apart from the affirmation (Matt. 5:11; Acts 5:3-4; Rom. 9:1 [good intentions were not in doubt]; 2 Cor. 11:31; Gal. 1:20; Col. 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:7; cf. *pseudos* [of speech] in Eph. 4:25 and the description of "truth" as correspondence to reality in Luke 1:4; John 8:17; 10:41; 19:35; 21:24). For the New Testament writers to say that God does not lie was to say that Scripture, which was to them God's words, never affirms anything that is contrary to fact.

The contrast between Satan, who is "father of lies" (John 8:44), and God, who "never lies," is reflected in other passages that speak of God's love for truthfulness in speech and His hatred of falsehood and of the imitation of those qualities in His children (John 8:44, 55; Col. 3:9-10; 1 Thess. 2:3; 1 Tim. 1:10; 2:7; Rev. 2:2; 21:8). God loves truthfulness and

hates falsehood in speech, and this fact seems to give even greater certainty that He will never speak something that is untrue.

### THE QUESTIONS OF IMPRECISE STATEMENTS, FREE QUOTATIONS, AND DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE

At the end of this analysis of texts that speak of the Bible's truthfulness it is important to distinguish this claim to truthfulness from three other possible claims that the Bible does not make for itself. Such a distinction must be made when considering the questions of imprecise statements, free quotations, and descriptive language about the natural world.

It must be remembered that there is a difference between precision and truthfulness. To argue for the total *truthfulness* of Scripture is certainly not to argue for technical *precision* at every point, for a statement can be imprecise and still be completely true. Consider the following statements: (1) "My home is not far from my office." (2) "My home is about one and a half miles from my office." (3) "My home is 1.6 miles from my office." All three statements are absolutely true (or "inerrant"). All three are completely free of falsehood; they contain no errors. Even though (3) is much more precise than (1), it is not more "true" than (1). Both (1) and (3) are completely true, even though they have different degrees of precision. (And a land surveyor could presumably make a statement that is even more precise than statement [3].)

Similar considerations apply to the matter of quotations. The statement "I said, 'My home is not far from my office,'" would be a verbatim quotation of statement (1) above and the quotation would be completely true. But the statement "I said that I lived near my place of work," though using several different words, would still be (in ordinary conversation at least) a perfectly acceptable and truthful report of what I had said.

In the Bible we sometimes find, for example, round numbers or approximations in measurements and in battle figures. These statements are not highly precise, but they can still be completely true. We also find in the New Testament quotations of the Old Testament or quotations of Jesus that are not verbatim quotations of the type we find in precise scholarly writing today, but that are closer to the kind of indirect quotation mentioned in the example above. Even though they do not report the exact words used, they faithfully represent the content of the person or text cited.

These instances of nontechnical reporting should not be urged as counterexamples that contradict the many texts that affirm the Bible's total truthfulness, for they are merely instances of a lack of highly technical precision, not instances of falsehood or error. The emphasis of the many texts cited above is on the *truthfulness* of God's speech in

the Bible. No texts were found to claim any particular level of precision in measurement or any adherence to one certain style of quotation.

The question then arises, How imprecise can a statement be and still be true? In the example given above, the statement "My home is four miles from my office" would be false, as would the statement "I said that my home was very far from my office." But between what would clearly be true and what would clearly be false there is a wide range of possible statements. The degree of imprecision that would be acceptable as "truthful" speech would vary according to the situation in which I was speaking, the degree of precision implied by my statements, and the degree of precision that would ordinarily be expected by my hearers in that particular context. It would be difficult to define in advance what degree of precision would be required in order for speech to be truthful, for one would need more information about each individual situation in question.

When we ask what degree of precision is necessary for biblical statements to be completely *true*, an analysis of individual texts in Scripture will be very helpful to us (see, for example, chapter 5 concerning the New Testament use of the Old Testament). We should not expect to find one particular level of precision throughout the whole Bible (such as "round off to the nearest hundred soldiers killed") but degrees of precision that will vary according to the different kinds of purpose, subject matter, historical setting, and literary type that characterize the different parts of Scripture.

What is important for our purposes in this chapter is to emphasize the differences between imprecision and untruthfulness. In contemporary discussions about biblical "inerrancy" the question is not whether the Bible contains statements that lack technical precision (all agree that it does) but whether it contains clearly false affirmations (on this there is disagreement). There may be some texts about which some will say they contain not imprecision but actual falsehood, while others will say they contain only imprecision. Those cases will have to be dealt with on an individual basis. (In most cases these are not the really crucial texts in the "inerrancy" discussion anyway.) My purpose here is only to point out the difference between precision and truthfulness and to emphasize that it is the total *truthfulness* of Scripture that is affirmed again and again in Scripture itself.

One further distinction must be made. Statements that describe the natural world can be completely truthful even though they are stated in ordinary descriptive or observational language, not in terms of twentieth-century scientific knowledge. The Bible says that the sun "rises" and "goes down" (Gen. 15:12; 19:23; Ps. 50:1; Matt. 5:45, et al.). These are descriptions of what the speaker observed, and they are accurate descriptions from the speaker's perspective. One might object that from a vantage point somewhere else in our solar system,

perhaps from the vantage point of the sun, the sun does not really "rise" or "go down," for the earth rotates. But from the same vantage point the rain does not really go "down"; rather, it is pulled by gravity toward the center of the earth, even though at any given moment it may be going "up" or "sideways" from the standpoint of a viewer out in space. But from the observational standpoint of a person here on earth, the rain does indeed "fall" and the sun does indeed "rise" and "go down." These are accurate and truthful descriptions of what he observes and, with respect to that person, they are true.

It is important to remember again at this point that the Bible emphasizes that its statements are *true*, *not* that the human authors had omniscience or that they were given special insight into future scientific knowledge. (The latter may or may not have been true at some points, but it is not our present concern and it is not taught in the passages we examined.) For their statements to be truthful, it is necessary only that the biblical authors accurately observed and recorded what they saw, and that they did not go beyond those observations to affirm speculative but false theories about what they could not themselves observe. (Thus, the Bible is remarkably free from affirmations that the sun goes around the earth, or that the earth is flat, or that the earth rests on a giant turtle or elephant, and so forth.)

In summary, it is important to note that the Bible repeatedly affirms its own *truthfulness*, but that this affirmation does not imply a claim to a very high level of *precision* or to a practice of *verbatim quotation* or to the possession of *future scientific knowledge*. These elements are not essential to complete truthfulness in speech and writing.

## THE QUESTION OF "ACCOMMODATION" TO HUMAN ERROR

Before an attempt is made to summarize and define clearly the conclusions that can be drawn from the texts examined above, it will be useful to consider one particular view of the nature of God's words in Scripture, a view that is quite widely held at the present time. This viewpoint can be called the concept of "accommodation"; that is, the view that "the God who lovingly willed to communicate revelational truth to men deliberately *accommodated* his language in nonrevelational matters to the way the original readers viewed the world about them, so as to enhance the communication of revelational truth, by which alone men could be saved."<sup>76</sup> Those who advocate such a concept also argue that this accommodation can include the statement of, and at least the incidental affirmation of, factual details in historical or scientific matters that are untrue (in the sense that they do not correspond to reality) but that are generally believed by the hearers or readers.<sup>77</sup> Although the advocates of this position may deny that such statements are "affirmed" in one sense (because they do not belong to

the main purpose of the author), for purposes of discussion it is important to recognize that such statements are "affirmed" in another sense, namely, that they are repeated by the author in such a way that no indication of disbelief in their truthfulness is communicated by the author to the original readers or hearers. In fact, that is the purpose for such "accommodation"; if any suggestion of disbelief in these supposed facts were to be communicated, it would hinder communication by causing needless distraction of attention from the author's main point (according to the advocates of accommodation). Such an affirmation, in the second sense specified above, I will call "incidental affirmation"; it refers to something incidental to the main purpose of the author.

The question is this: Did God in Scripture ever make an incidental affirmation of a "fact" that was untrue? In other words, does the Bible contain any incidental affirmations of error, particularly when dealing with subjects other than our faith and our moral standards ("faith and practice")? Specifically in the areas of minor historical details and of "scientific" facts,<sup>78</sup> did God intentionally "accommodate" His speech in Scripture to make incidental affirmations of popularly held false beliefs in order to "enhance communication"? (It should be noted that the position that is being analyzed here is formulated in terms of divine, not human, activity in the writing of Scripture. Therefore that will be the focus of the following comments as well.) The following six considerations indicate a negative answer to these questions, and suggest that this concept of "accommodation" is not consistent with the testimony of Scripture.

1. Accommodation would be contrary to the unanimous witness of the Old Testament and New Testament authors concerning the truthfulness of Scripture. As the preceding sections have indicated, whenever Old Testament and New Testament authors speak of the truthfulness of Scripture, their unanimous witness is not to the absolute veracity and reliability of Scripture only when it speaks on certain subjects; it is not to the total veracity of Scripture with regard only to its main points or major purposes; it is not to the absolute reliability of *some* of Scripture or even *most* of Scripture. Rather, the authors of both the Old Testament and the New Testament repeatedly affirm the absolute veracity, reliability, and purity of *every word* of Scripture (Ps. 12:6; 18:30; 119:96, 140; Prov. 8:8; 30:5; Matt. 22:44–45; Luke 24:25; John 10:35; Acts 24:14; Rom. 15:5, et al.). Accommodation would indicate that there are some words of Scripture that are not absolutely reliable, and would therefore be contrary to these passages.

2. Accommodation would imply a denial of God's lordship over human language. As many passages in the Old and New Testaments have indicated,<sup>79</sup> the limitation of human language does not make it impossible for God to communicate both effectively and with total truthfulness. Whether God speaks directly to people, through the lips

of His spokesmen, or through written words, He is viewed as the sovereign Lord of human language who is able to use it however He wills to accomplish His purposes.

Those who argue for the concept of accommodation do not seem to have answered satisfactorily the following question: Was it *necessary* for God to accommodate His speech to human error in order to communicate effectively? If the answer is yes, then the full implications of such a conclusion must be faced honestly: If it was necessary for God to give incidental affirmation to human error in order to communicate effectively, then *all* of Scripture where there is "effective communication" is necessarily tainted with error. The only parts free from error would then be those parts where God's communication is ineffective.

On the other hand, someone might respond that such accommodation was not *necessary* for effective communication, but that it was merely "helpful"; it "enhanced" the communication; it made it better or more effective. Yet this response is not greatly different, for it is only saying that accommodation was necessary for the most effective communication. The result then would be that all those parts of Scripture where there is the best kind of communication necessarily have incidental affirmations of error, and the only parts free from error are those where communication is not the most effective. In either case, to affirm that accommodation to historical or scientific error was necessary implies that there is error in most or all parts of Scripture.

But if an advocate of the concept of accommodation responds that accommodation was *not necessary* for effective communication, but that God did it anyway, then we would have to answer that this theory makes God out to be unwise, for He then would have chosen to affirm falsehood when He did not have to in order to accomplish His purposes. If accommodation was not necessary for effective communication, then we would be better off to abandon the concept and follow instead the repeated affirmations in Scripture about the total truthfulness of every word of God's speech. At least up to the present time, the theory of accommodation has not been established by using one or two (or more) supposedly clear examples of accommodation in Scripture, for no example has been clear enough to compel assent from those who do not accept the theory of accommodation.<sup>80</sup> For every example that has been suggested, there is at least one, and often more than one, alternative and entirely possible explanation in the commentaries.<sup>81</sup>

In order to do justice to the Old Testament and New Testament proclamation of the lordship of God over human language, it seems proper to conclude that this lordship allows God to communicate effectively without ever affirming any of the historical or scientific errors that may have been held by people during the time of the writing of Scripture. Free from the limitations of finitude and sin to

which we are subject, God can and does communicate to us without such accommodation. According to Scripture, this is precisely the difference between God's speech through human agents and all other human speech.

3. Accommodation would imply that God had acted contrary to His character as an "unlying God" (Num. 23:19; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). It is not helpful to divert attention from this difficulty by repeated emphasis on the gracious condescension of God to speak on our level. Yes, God does condescend to speak our language, the language of humans. But no passage of Scripture teaches that He "condescends" so as to act contrary to His moral character. He is never said to be able to condescend to affirm even incidentally something that is false. If God were to accommodate Himself in this way, He would cease to be the "unlying God"; He would cease to be the God the Bible represents Him to be.

4. Accommodation would make Scripture an eternal witness to the lack of perfect truthfulness in God's speech. As noted above, Scripture is said to be unchanging and eternal (Ps. 119:89, 160; cf. Matt. 5:18). As such, one of its purposes is to serve as an eternal testimony to the absolute veracity of God in all that He says. Those who understand it will give glory to God for always speaking what is true, in contrast to man (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). But if there were accommodation in Scripture to the point of incidental affirmation of factual error, then for all eternity God's veracity would be impugned by Scripture and the glory God would receive from the response of people to Scripture would be diminished.<sup>82</sup>

5. Accommodation would create a serious moral problem for us. We are to be imitators of God's moral character (Lev. 11:44; Luke 6:36; Eph. 5:1; 1 Peter 5:1, et al.). With regard to truthfulness in speech, Paul says that it is *because* in our new natures we are becoming more like God (Eph. 4:24) that we should "put away falsehood" and "speak the truth" with one another. We imitate God's truthfulness in our speech.

But if the accommodation theory is correct, then God intentionally made incidental affirmations of falsehood in order to enhance communication. Therefore, would it not also be right for us to intentionally make incidental affirmations of falsehood whenever it would "enhance communication"? Yet this would be tantamount to saying that a minor falsehood told for a good purpose (a "white lie") is not wrong. Such a position is contradicted by the Scripture passages cited on pages 49–51, yet it is a position implied by the accommodation theory.

Furthermore, accommodation creates a moral problem with the obligation people have with respect to God. The original readers or hearers of any passage in which there was accommodation to human error would have been unable to know that God was incidentally affirming falsehood that He did not intend them to believe (it was something they would have thought to be true). To them it would have

been indistinguishable from all other parts of what God said. Since these words came to the hearers as God's words, the hearers would have been under moral obligation to believe all of them. Therefore, according to the concept of accommodation, God would have been requiring His people to believe falsehood.

6. Accommodation would misuse a summary statement about the purpose of Scripture. To say that the major purpose of Scripture is to "make us wise unto salvation" or teach us in matters of "faith and practice" is to make a useful and correct summary of God's purpose in giving us the Bible. But it is only a summary and it includes only the most prominent purpose or purposes of God in giving Scripture.

Therefore it is incorrect to use that summary to deny that it is part of the purpose of Scripture to tell us about minor historical details, or about some aspects of astronomy or geography, and so forth. A summary cannot properly be used to deny one of the things it is summarizing! To use it this way would simply show that the summary is not detailed enough to specify the items in question.

It is better to say that the whole purpose of Scripture is to say everything it does say, on whatever subject. Every one of God's words in Scripture was deemed by Him to be important for us, whether or not we understand all of that importance at any one time. Thus, God issues severe warnings to anyone who would take away even one word from what He has said to us (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18–19): We cannot add to God's words or take from them, for all are part of His larger purpose in speaking to us. Accommodation would use a summary of the Bible's purpose to exclude from God's purposes some matters on which God has in fact chosen to speak to us.

For these six reasons, the concept of accommodation seems to be an unsatisfactory way to formulate a conclusion about the texts we have analyzed concerning the statements of the Old and New Testaments about the truthfulness of the Bible.

## THE POSSIBILITY OF FORMULATING A DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

The texts we have examined have indicated clearly a few themes that must contribute to what Christians today believe about the nature and character of Scripture.

1. What has traditionally been called "verbal inspiration"—namely, the view that all the words of Scripture are spoken by God—is clearly taught by many passages in both the Old Testament and New Testament. In fact, it is "plenary" verbal inspiration,<sup>83</sup> in that it includes every word of Scripture. The evidence is so great that it hits one, as Warfield said, like an avalanche, demonstrating that what Scripture says, God says.

2. The method of revelation from God to the authors of Scripture

is seldom discussed. There is historical research (Luke 1:1–4), memory (John 14:26), the use of one's own good judgment (1 Cor. 7:12), revelation in being caught up into heaven (2 Cor. 12:1–4), and dictation (Rev. 1:11–3:22). But for the most part the method of revelation is not specified. Scripture clearly was written by many different human authors, each employing his own vocabulary, style, and literary sense. Yet the emphasis of Scripture is not on the process but the result. By whatever process, every word written was exactly the word God wanted written, so that Scripture is not only the words of men but also the words of God.

3. The Old and New Testament authors clearly teach that Scripture is infallible—if that word is taken to mean that Scripture will never lead us astray in what we are to believe or obey (“matters of faith and practice”). It is as trustworthy and reliable as the God who speaks in it (Ps. 119:160; 2 Tim. 3:16).

4. Yet any attempt to find in the Bible some encouragement to restrict the areas in which Scripture is reliable and truthful will surely fail, for the implication of literally hundreds of verses is that God's word is reliable in every way: It is free from all impurities (Ps. 12:6); it is eternal and unchanging in heaven (Ps. 119:89); it has unique and unlimited perfection (Ps. 119:96); it proves true in every word (Prov. 30:5); it is not only true in each part, but it is also “truth” when the parts are added together (Ps. 119:160). It is not limited to the truthfulness of man, but is as truthful as God Himself (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam. 15:29). We are to tremble before it (Isa. 66:2). Any historical detail in the Old Testament narrative can be cited with a confidence that it both “happened” and “was written down for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11), because every word of Scripture has been spoken by God who never lies (Titus 1:2) and for whom lying is impossible (Heb. 6:18). God's word is not only “true”; it is “truth” (John 17:17). To say that Scripture is truthful in everything it says is to say that it is “inerrant”; it does not affirm anything that is contrary to fact.

Certainly, truthfulness is not the only characteristic of Scripture associated with its divine authorship. It is also powerful and beautiful and necessary for awakening and sustaining our spiritual life. We are to tremble at its warnings, rejoice in its promises, receive with faith the salvation it offers, and speak the praises it contains. Yet the focus of this particular study was the authority and truthfulness that the authors of Scripture claimed for it.

It is evident from the New Testament that one cannot legitimately separate “matters of faith and practice” or “revelatory matters” from other matters in Scripture: The New Testament authors readily quote and rely on anything written in the Old Testament text, for “*all Scripture . . . is profitable*” (2 Tim. 3:16). Perhaps it has not been stated emphatically enough that *nowhere* in the Old Testament or in the New Testament does any writer give any hint of a tendency to distrust or

consider slightly unreliable any other part of Scripture. Hundreds of texts encourage God's people to trust Scripture completely, but no text encourages any doubt or even slight mistrust of Scripture. To rely on the “inerrancy” of every historical detail affirmed in Scripture is not to adopt a “twentieth-century view” of truth or error; it is to follow the teaching and practice of the biblical authors themselves. It is to adopt a biblical view of truth and error.

5. Once we have understood what these texts say about the Bible's truthfulness, it is necessary to move from the academic exercise of examining scriptural texts to the personal question each person must ask himself: Will I believe this? Will I believe that the words of Scripture are the words of my Creator, the words of One who cannot lie, and that they are even now speaking to me?

To believe that all the words of the Bible are God's words and that God cannot speak untruthfully will significantly affect the way in which one approaches a “problem text” or an “alleged error” in Scripture. To seek for a harmonization of parallel accounts will be a worthy undertaking.<sup>84</sup> To approach a text with the confident expectation that it will, if rightly understood, be consistent with what the rest of the Bible says, will be a proper attitude. To allow less clear passages of Scripture to be interpreted with the help of passages that speak more clearly on the same subject will be a reasonable procedure. In all of this, the basis of such procedures will be the fact that one has learned something true from an inductive study of the Bible and that that truth is a conclusion drawn from careful observation of the data. But such a conclusion will now also function as a basis on which further investigation can proceed and further discoveries can be made. If we really believe what the Bible says about itself, can we do anything else?