



The Color of God: Israel's God-Talk and Life Experience

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How can we speak meaningfully and responsibly of God in an increasingly complex and secularized world? Has our everyday experience taken on such a mundane character that, for a great many people within and without the church, traditional talk about God no longer seems pertinent? Or, to put the question another way: Has much of our traditional talk about God become so unrelated to the everyday experiences of people that it is empty or stifling or obscure? If our God is not dead, has our God-talk become a dead language, or at least a foreign language?

Most people in our churches continue to use God-language. But what meaning does it have for them? Talk about God often seems to be used and heard as a formality, neither evoking much conviction nor having much impact on the way people live; it is like water off a duck's back. As a result, there seems commonly to be a lack of a sense of the reality of God among Christians, however much the work of the church or the person of Jesus remains central in their lives. God seems not to be the living, vigorous presence experienced by many of our forebears.

How is one to explain this? At the heart of the matter, it appears to be a disjunction between (traditional) language and (modern) experience. Talk about God hammered out in the light of past experience no longer seems to engage or interpret present experience as it ought. A few obvious examples would be: masculine language for God seems to exclude feminine experience; socially comfortable language for God seems to exclude those striving for liberation from oppression of one kind or another; authoritarian language for God seems to exclude those for whom an egalitarian social order is the ideal; immovable, impassible language for God seems to exclude those who have experienced great suffering; omnipotence language for God seems to exclude those who have experienced incomprehensible evil at the hands of tyrants.

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Not as often noted, but perhaps as pertinent to the American scene, is that "the 'interpersonal' seems to be the key to much of life," to use the language of the recent book by Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart*.¹ Everywhere we turn we hear about the importance of personal communication, the full exchange of feelings, the sharing of intimacy, the willingness to work through problems openly, and the striving for deeper relationships between two responsible selves. Such interpersonal dynamics have become an everyday concern for even very traditional individuals. However much one might wish to be critical of this development, traditional language about God does not connect very well with this contemporary experience. How can people relate this experience to One who is "immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes"? An amazing number of traditional words for God stress distance from the life of the world, portraying a God for whom the language of interpersonal relationship

seems quite foreign: supernatural, self-sufficient, omnipotent, omniscient, infinite, incorporeal, invisible, impassible, unchangeable, immovable, immutable, transcendent. (Interestingly, very few such technical words are available to speak of the closeness of God., e.g., immanence.)

A further point needs to be made. Not only do such words not commonly illumine or engage the actual experience of many people; they are not biblical words. Such language does reflect biblical realities in some ways, seeking to evoke and express a sense of awe and mystery in relating to God. The words used, however, are not touching people's experience of the transcendent in their daily lives as they ought. It is indisputable that the biblical language for the transcendent reality of God is much more concrete, and commonly drawn from the world of nature (e.g., light). Given the increased attention to and knowledge of cosmic realities in modern experience (e.g., space probes), a recovery of such images in our God-talk would undoubtedly touch a more responsive chord in people and evoke a livelier sense of the reality of God.

While these natural images for God continue to be very important, it is in fact the language of interpersonal relationship which is the most common biblical way of speaking of God. Given the importance of the interpersonal for many people in our culture today, such interrelational metaphors in our talk about God have considerable capacity to touch base with their experience. To cite an example: one type of biblical material and associated metaphors which have recently been emphasized, and have struck a responsive chord in many, is the lament, with its openness and forthrightness in conversation with God. One reason for this, certainly, is its capacity to relate to the above-noted character of current American experience. We need to find ways to make other biblical materials about God just as accessible. The language of interpersonal relationship seems to me to be one important key to making our God-talk live in this day and age, and the Old Testament has many such resources for the task.

¹Robert N. Bellah, *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985) 113. For the authors to speak of such a matter solely in contractual or "therapeutic" terms fails to recognize the great strength of some of these developments for more appropriate interpersonal relationships.

I. THE COLOR OF GOD

I would like to restate this issue through the use of an extended metaphor. To this end, permit me a childhood recollection. I remember it well: a dark green and orange box with 64 crayons. Crayolas, they were called—every one a different color. The hues were often only slightly varied, but each crayon was unique and colorful nonetheless. Some had unusual names such as ochre and chartreuse; others were basic colors, but with light and dark shades. Yet my parents thought that that large pack was somewhat "mature" for me, and so the 8-crayon, and then the 24-crayon box had to do for a long time. But one of my childhood goals was so to improve my skills at coloring pictures that my parents would buy me the largest collection of crayolas available: a 64-crayon box. And, then, to use every one of them in kaleidoscopic harmony! Somehow I believed that my experience of the world was at least a 64-crayon experience. The world was so full of life and color; how could one capture its various tints and hues, except with the largest quiver of crayons available?

For most of us, even that array of color cannot begin to capture the wonders of our daily experience of the world and its people. We are surrounded with rainbows, both cosmic and

personal, even in the midst of the storms of life. Why is it then that most of us seem satisfied with an 8-crayon God? We seem content with only a few strokes of color in our talk about God. In fact, oftentimes the language we use to speak of God is almost monochromatic. So familiar have a few oft-used colors become, they blend into a fixed color scheme. We have a ready-made God-canvas, which looks the same regardless of the light which may be available, or the many angles of vision provided by daily experience. Is it any wonder that many people are not attracted to the faith in God we profess? They cannot see how it is possible to fit together a 64-crayon experience of life in the world with our 8-crayon God.

We use the same crayons to color the language of our experience of life as we use in our talk about God. There is no language for God which is not language from our life experience, from Word to Father, from Light to Mother. And so, if our language for God reflects only a limited amount of life experience, we risk portraying a God who is related to only certain aspects of people's lives; we risk providing a God-picture for people that bears no special relationship to their deepest life experiences. For the deeper and broader the life experience associated with certain metaphors, the more profound the impact such language will have on people when used of God.

In fact, if we are content with a limited chromatic vocabulary for God, are we not thereby engaged in a form of idolatry? If one has a restricted, fixed palette of paints for one's talk about God, is that finally any different from the restricted, fixed forms which Israel used to construct concrete images for God, such as the golden calf? Gold it was, but only gold. And the calf—unlike its living counterpart—could only stand still and be. All the life is gone; the presence is but a faint shadow of the real thing. In such shadows the colors become monochromatic, and a certain drabness prevails. What on the surface seems bright is finally only dull.

There are those who rightly think that one can attempt to say too much about God. God does outdistance all of our language about God; all of our metaphors, even the most precious to us, speak a no as well as a yes. But at least as great a problem is to say too little about God, to minimize the metaphoric resources we have been given. Among the Israelites, certainly one fundamental problem with idols was that they said too little about God rather than too much. Certainly a fundamental problem with us is that we are content with words too few, and too drab—often we don't even get to gold! We actually limit God through our use of a limited number of metaphors, through the drabness of our language. Quite apart from issues of idolatry, this has very negative practical effects. It is certainly one of the most basic reasons for all the complaints about dull sermons; we simply do not make good use of the English language. Most particularly, we neglect the metaphoric resources available to us, especially in the Scriptures. Therein God has given us a polychromatic array of language with which to speak of God. What we have there is like those old kaleidoscopes, which with every turn provided a new configuration of blazing technicolor. And with that kind of language, we not only hear; we see and feel and believe, and it sinks deep into our bones to become a part of who we are.

From another perspective, this God of whom we speak has done so much for us, supremely and with finality in Jesus of Nazareth. Given the plenitude of God's gifts to us, should we not be concerned about a plenitude of language in our picturing of who this God is and all that God had done for us? What sort of colors can best convey the love of God? What sort of

colors can best display the care and concern God has for us? What sort of colors can best reflect the fullness of the relationship God has established with us? And what about mission? We who are the beneficiaries of God's bounty, should we not be bringing to others a most colorful picture of this God? If we are going to portray adequately all that God has done for us, our talk about God must abound in color. Our colors must certainly strive to match the harmonies of the angel chorus. Our talk about God must seek to convey in language the kind of kaleidoscopic character which Bach was able to convey in music. Given all that God has done for us, we ought to break forth, not only in singing, but in displays of color in our language.

In this day and age in American life, the colors of interpersonal relationships seem to have a special capacity to do this. The biblical resources will not disappoint us in our search for such color.

II. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Whence does Israel derive its knowledge of God? The knowledge of God is a matter of God's initiative rather than human search and discovery. Yet the way in which human beings respond to the divine initiative is significant and will have an affect on the kind of knowledge of God which people have. For example, sin can obscure what God has made clear; biases of one kind or another can occasion misunderstanding; but alertness can lead to insight.

Generally in the Old Testament, God works through means: persons, words, events in nature and history. It has been most common in recent generations to say that God reveals self in history. By history is usually meant certain

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key events, in which God has decisively acted, particularly the Exodus and accompanying historical occasions. Observing the way that God acted, Israel was able to infer certain things about God and God's ways with the world.

Whatever continuing values there may be in such a perspective, there are severe inadequacies from an Old Testament perspective.² Among these one might cite: the neglect of the non-historical material in the Old Testament (e.g., wisdom literature); the emphasis upon historical event to the virtual exclusion of both natural event and liturgical event; the stress placed on certain key events while ignoring God's more unobtrusive activity in Israel and among the nations; and a neglect of the important role of reflection upon the tradition in interpreting events. Not as often cited, but certainly as important, is that the emphasis on God's interventionist, intrusive work in history has tended to emphasize images of God of a more virile sort.

But the critique of this perspective we wish to emphasize is its rather impersonal character, which in turn affects the way in which language about God is developed. It is particularly the personal appearance in theophany which is neglected by the emphasis upon dramatic historical event as a vehicle for revelation. Theophanic appearances are the vehicle for the clearest and most decisive revelations of God, from Abraham to Moses to the calls of the prophets. In these passages there is a personal appearance of God (always in the form of a human messenger) that accompanies the giving of the Word.³ The result is that knowledge of God is conveyed personally, "face to face" (cf. Num 12:6-8).

How Israel speaks about God is closely related to this primary, theophanic vehicle for

revelation and the knowledge of God. Israel's knowledge of God is thus gained within the context of a personal encounter, rather than in some external and impersonal way. It is in the theophany that the interpersonal element in the revelation is especially prominent. Revelation-in-history notions finally do not take the individual very seriously as one who has been addressed in specific personal encounters by God. There are more decisive continuities between this Old Testament perspective and the way God takes with revelation in Jesus than is commonly recognized.

For God to reveal himself by appearing in a human form to those who are human says something very basic about the nature of the knowledge of God conveyed and the resultant relationship established. Such knowledge has a fundamental interrelational character to it, and consequently, in Israel's talk about God, the language of relationship is most prominent. It might also be noted that this perspective not only stands over against knowledge conveyed in and through dramatic historical events, but also against that notion wherein the knowledge of God is poured directly into people's minds; in either case the knowledge of God is given without significant human interaction.

From another perspective, with the holistic view of the human which the Old Testament has, the knowledge of God is not narrowly understood as a

²For a survey of the difficulties with this approach, see especially James Barr, "Revelation in History," *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976) 746-749.

³For the evidence on matters relating to theophany, see Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 79-106.

mental or intellectual activity. Knowing is an activity in which the whole person is involved, not just the mind. It includes the heart and will, life as well as thought. Knowing includes personal encounter with someone or something, even intimacy, as its use for sexual intercourse shows. One common sense of the word is to "know from experience." Thus, for example, an individual (as well as God) can know suffering or grief (cf. Isa 53:3—"a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief"; Exod 3:7—"I know their sufferings"). The force of the word includes both "knowing about" and "knowing from personal experience with."

Thus, when we speak of the knowledge of God, the relational and experiential aspects need to be emphasized. God's revelation occurs within the context of a personal relationship, indeed most clearly in connection with a personal encounter, and it is shaped in fundamental ways by the way in which the resultant relationship is understood to engage everyday experience. God does not leave a word and then go, but accompanies that word with a continuing personal presence (cf. the "I am with you" formula in the theophanies—Gen 26:24; Jer 1:8). But even more, that continuing presence is to be interpreted in terms of the theophanic appearance. That presence has essential continuities with what was inherent in the theophany; it is a personal and interpersonal encounter even though the human form is no longer evident (cf. New Testament talk about the work of the Holy Spirit in John 14-16).

Another important aspect of this topic may be stated in this way: God's desire is to reveal. Isaiah 65:1-2 captures some sense of this:

I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found

by those who did not seek me. I said, “Here am I, Here am I,” to a nation that did not call on my name. I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people.

God wishes to be in communication with the people, to reveal himself to them and for them to respond; this is an important part of realizing the relationship as fully as possible. Knowledge of the other party in a relationship is essential if the relationship is to be a genuine and full relationship. God therefore does not reveal only to show that God is alive and well or to give people information for its own sake. God’s desire is for the fullest possible relationship, and to that end God personally reveals self and all that that means for a knowledge of who God is and what God is about in the world.

It is obvious for Israel that complete knowledge of God is not possible. At the same time, it is well to be reminded that it is not possible between two human selves either, though God’s Godness makes for additional such dimensions. Sometimes, however, one hears an interpretation of this, such that God might say: Now, I don’t want to reveal too much of myself to the people; they’ve got to be kept somewhat in the dark. But God has no concern to keep people ignorant.⁴ How often it is that Israel or we ourselves don’t recognize the revelation given by God, or that God continues to give (see Pss 25:4; 27:11;

⁴The formula, “You shall not see God and live,” in passages such as Exodus 33, stems from a concern to preserve life, not to keep people ignorant.

86:11; cf. John 14:26; 16:13). Too often we give up struggling with one or another aspect of the faith, and then resort too quickly to mystery and paradox.

Amos 3:7 is perhaps the most striking of the passages to be noted here: The Lord God does not do anything (!) without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets. Genesis 18:17 is also illuminating: “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do? No, for I have chosen him.” God is amazingly open with these servants; God is not interested in surprises. God wants people to know what God is about in the world and, for the times beyond the personal appearances, chooses human instruments in and through which that word is conveyed to others. Moreover, if the prophetic mode is instructive, it indicates that revelation comes not just in the initial reception of a word from God, but in the prophetic reflection upon, and indeed embodiment of, the meaning of that word as it relates to continuing experience with the God who is encountered in that particular context. The prophet must be understood in theophanic terms.⁵

What God reveals is more deeply personal than is commonly suggested. While the language is metaphoric, as we shall see, a genuine personal knowing of God is possible. And this is not just a knowing of God’s actions; it is a knowing of God himself. One cannot separate actions from self, in any case; actions are revealing of self. Probably it is most important to say here that God does not simply reveal matters more objective, as one might describe the Torah (though observe the level of feeling on God’s part in a text such as Exod 22:21-27). In the prophets in particular we see how God conveys feelings and emotions too (cf. Jer 3:19-20; Hos 11:1-9). In passages such as these it is clear that God does reveal things about himself, even innermost thoughts. We see here statements which reveal God’s own personal response to what is happening in the world. God does not keep himself somehow removed from his word. In other words, just as it is the whole person who receives the word from God, so it is a whole God who

reveals and is revealed.

In revealing self, God opens himself up to the other in relationship and hence to the possibility that such a word might be rejected or ridiculed or, for that matter, delighted in. In giving so of self, God makes himself vulnerable. As human beings become more vulnerable the more they reveal of themselves, so God's "homing" in Israel means for God a greater vulnerability. Yet that is a risk which God is willing to take for closeness in relationship.

Moreover, God in revealing self is shown to be one who has a special interest in the response of the one who is spoken to. It is not as if God says: "Here's a word for you today,...take it or leave it." God's word does not overwhelm those to whom it comes, however much they might be awed by it. We can see in Judges 6:13, for example, that there is room for doubt in the word that comes. In the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai, the people are given space to respond, "we will be obedient" (Exod 24:7); to this might be added the adjustments in the Torah that take place in view of later human developments, e.g., the deuteronomic context. But it is particularly in the calls of Moses, the prophets, and others where we can see how God's revealing word leaves room

⁵See the chapter, "Prophet, Theophany and the Suffering of God," in *The Suffering of God*, 149-166.

for human interaction. In virtually every one of the prophetic calls there is an objection. Jeremiah: "I am but a youth." Moses: "I cannot speak very well." God's giving of a word is thus seen to have a dialogical element. This is revealing of the kind of relationship God wants, and the effect that sharing such a word has not only on the people but on God himself.

It is this understanding of revelation and the knowledge of God which leads to the development of such a wide range of interpersonal metaphors in Israel's talk about God.

III. A GOD OF RELATIONSHIPS

The Old Testament speaks always about God in relationship with the world; it says nothing about God existing in remoteness from life. Moreover, it is clear from a wide range of Old Testament materials that God is related to people in personal ways. Most basically, this is seen in God's use of speech, and this from Genesis 1 on. It can also be observed in God's use of the first person singular pronoun to refer to himself. Moreover, in God's giving of God's name (e.g., Exod 6:2-3), God thereby identifies himself as a personal, individual, distinctive member of the community of those who have names. In fact, naming entails a certain kind of relationship. Giving the name opens up the possibility for, indeed admits a desire for, a certain intimacy in relationship. A relationship without a name inevitably means some distance. Naming the name makes for a certain closeness in the relationship, enabling truer encounter and communication. God and people can now meet and address one another, and at a level that makes for intimacy and depth. It also means risk, for the giving of the name not only makes for greater closeness, but also opens God up to the misuse of the name (and hence God's concern for the proper use of the name, as seen in the second commandment).

That God is a God of relationships is seen also in the metaphors used to speak of God. We have noted the important experiential component in Israel's understanding of the knowledge of God. It is worldly experience that generates images, experience of both the world and of God in, with, and under that world. The fund of metaphors which Israel develops in its speaking of

God gives evidence of this close relationship of experience and God-language. One notes the common use of various aspects of the human personality (thinking, feeling, speaking, willing) and the human body, related closely to certain personal activities (hand, arm, eyes, feet). These anthropomorphic and anthropopathic metaphors are not to be dismissed as simply a human way of envisaging the God who is not human; they say something very explicit about the kind of God God is. All metaphors are realistic metaphors; they actually do say something about God.⁶ God is a personal God who engages in a personal encounter with the creatures. One also notes the use of metaphors from the family (husband, father, mother), from the social and political realms (friend, king, judge), and from the variety of everyday human tasks (shepherd, teacher, seamstress, midwife, physician, potter, metal worker, farmer).

⁶See the discussion of metaphor in *The Suffering of God*, 5-12.

With these metaphors, language for God is drawn quite directly from the realm of human life. Biblical metaphors arise out of the dynamic interplay of human experience and the God who is believed to be active in and through this experience. This talk about God, however, has significant ties with various situations in everyday life, rather than with dramatic events. An emphasis upon the latter tends to divorce God-talk from the primary context from which such metaphors are drawn, keeping God removed from everyday experience. Moreover, this language is drawn from quite secular experience, not religious occasions. God is revealed and experienced, not by giving access to some special religious realm, but in the world of secular life. The language of home and work, family and friends, village and city and nation, the language of personal and interpersonal experience, becomes the language used to speak of God, for therein one experiences the transcendent. The world in which we live is dynamic, alive, on-the-move; the images used of God are (and must be) consonant with this experience of the world. "To whatever heights one may be lifted by the experience of God, the elements of the daily world are never cast aside."⁷

The most pervasive metaphors which the Old Testament uses to speak of the God-human relationship are interpersonal; husband-wife, parent-child, king-subject, to name a few. Where one element of the metaphor is non-human, e.g., shepherd-sheep, vinedresser-vineyard, the interrelational aspects are still very prominent (e.g., Ps 23; Isa 5). Not every metaphor speaks of the relationship in the same way, or lifts up the same concerns with equal prominence. For example, some metaphors stress the divine initiative and authority much more than do others (cf., e.g., friend and king). Yet relatedness is basic to the use of such language. Relatedness is a root metaphor which undergirds much of this more concrete metaphoric talk about God and people.

Some metaphors are drawn from objects that people have made (e.g., fortress, shield, lamp, dwelling place, fountain). These ought not be considered impersonal, however, for such are considered to be extensions of the persons who brought them into being. Hence, they often carry a quite personal note of significance (e.g., Pss 31:2; 84:11; 90:1; 91:1-6). Even where natural metaphors are used for God, such as sun and light, they often serve to illumine quite personal matters, such as healing and guiding (e.g., Pss 27:1; 84:11). Though a metaphor such as Rock might seem to be quite impersonal to us, it takes on many personal characteristics in the Old Testament (suggesting that Israel saw much greater continuity between the human and non-human worlds than we commonly do). God the Rock gives birth (Deut 32:18), communicates to

David (2 Sam 23:3), hears the Psalmist (Ps 28:1), leads and guides (Ps 31:3), and has certain personal attributes (e.g., Ps 92:15; Deut 32:4). Such material and natural metaphors need personal qualifiers in order to make the thrust of the image clear (e.g., that the importance of the rock metaphor is not its mindlessness). At the same time, as we have seen, the use of such language, though not necessarily impersonal, does point to the limits of interpersonal language in talking about God, evoking as it does a certain cosmic breadth and depth, and a more

⁷Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity: Biblical Images of God* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University, 1984) 38.

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kinesthetic relationship to the human that is independent of thought (though not of experience).

The use of interpersonal language is also related to the prohibition of concrete images in Israel's worship. Though the Old Testament does not clearly articulate the reasons for this prohibition, it points more in the direction of a concern to protect God's relatedness than anything else. God is not present in the world in the form of an image which cannot see or speak or act. The idols "have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk" (Ps 115:5-7; cf. Ps 135:15-17; Isa 46:2, 7; 48:5; Deut 4:28). God is not a distant God, who can be represented on earth by a silent, inactive facsimile. God himself has entered into the life of the world, and has entered into a relationship with its creatures that is real. Thus Israel turns to verbal images of relationship, for they have the capacity to convey this in away that such concrete images cannot.

This interpretation is also continuous with that point where the Old Testament does talk about a legitimate concrete image. It is the human being with all of its capacities for interrelationships which is believed to be the appropriate image of God in the life of the world (Gen 1:26-27). This is almost certainly a development from God's theopanic appearances in human form so central to Israel's knowledge of God, as we have seen. This is also consonant with New Testament language with respect to Jesus Christ, who is called "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). God revealed himself most decisively and unsurpassably in a real person, Jesus of Nazareth. Only a human being was believed to be able to convey adequately to us who God is, how God relates to the world, and what God is about in that relationship. If we take our christology seriously, then we should use it more often as a lens in and through which we can begin to see the personal and interpersonal colors of God.

In view of this biblical material, it seems clear that we need to take the language of interpersonal relationships with a great deal more seriousness in our talk about God. The relationship God has with us is a real relationship, and can be characterized as a relationship of integrity lived out in the full range of life experience. As such, we are called upon to discover and uncover in our life experience the range of language possibilities that would be entailed in any talk about God, for that is where God is at work revealing himself.