

CONTENTS

ARTICLES

Introduction to the Volume	1
<i>STR Editor</i>	
What Designates a Valid Type? A Christotelic, Covenantal Proposal	3
<i>David Schrock</i>	
Provision of Food and Clothing for the Wandering People of God: A Canonical and Salvation-Historical Study.....	27
<i>David Wenkel</i>	
Vocal Exegesis: Reading Scripture Publicly without the Heresy of Boredom	47
<i>Grenville J.R. Kent</i>	
On “Seeing” what God is “Saying”: Rereading Biblical Narrative in Dialogue with Kevin Vanhoozer’s <i>Remythologizing Theology</i>	61
<i>Richard S. Briggs</i>	
Spiritual Formation and Leadership in Paul’s Address to the Ephesian Elders (Acts 20:17–35).....	83
<i>Christoph W. Stenschke</i>	
The Portrait of the Readers Prior to Their Coming to Faith According to Ephesians	97
<i>Christoph W. Stenschke</i>	
Book Reviews.....	119

BOOK REVIEWS

Patrick Gray. <i>Opening Paul’s Letters: A Reader’s Guide to Genre and Interpretation</i>	119
<i>Timothy Gombis</i>	
Khaldoun A. Sweis and Chad V. Meister. <i>Christian Apologetics: An Anthology of Primary Sources</i>	120
<i>Scott Coley</i>	
Thomas B. Dozeman, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid. <i>Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch? Identifying Literary Works in Genesis through Kings</i>	122
<i>Tracy McKenzie</i>	

I. Howard Marshall, Volker Rabens, and Cornelis Bennema, eds. <i>The Spirit and Christ in the New Testament and Christian Theology: Essays in Honor of Max Turner</i>	124
<i>Matthew Y. Emerson</i>	
Dwight J. Zscheile, ed. <i>Cultivating Sent Communities: Missional Spiritual Formation</i>	126
<i>Jim Shaddix</i>	
C. Richard Wells and Ray Van Neste, eds. <i>Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship</i>	128
<i>Daniel J. Estes</i>	
Thomas R. Schreiner, Luke Timothy Johnson, Douglas A. Campbell, and Mark D. Nanos, ed. Michael F. Bird. <i>Four Views on the Apostle Paul</i>	130
<i>Marc A. Pugliese</i>	
W. Stephen Gunter. <i>Arminius and His "Declaration of Sentiments": An Annotated Translation with Introduction and Theological Commentary</i>	132
<i>Ken Keathley</i>	
Donald A. Hagner. <i>The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction</i>	134
<i>Thomas W. Hudgins</i>	
Jerram Barrs. <i>Echoes of Eden: Reflections on Christianity, Literature, and the Arts</i>	136
<i>Michael Travers</i>	
Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larson, eds. <i>The Decalogue through the Centuries: From the Hebrew Scriptures to Benedict XVI</i>	138
<i>A.J. Culp</i>	
David Dockery, ed. <i>Faith and Learning: A Handbook for Christian Higher Education</i>	140
<i>Kenneth S. Coley</i>	
C. Marvin Pate. <i>Romans</i>	142
<i>Alan S. Bandy</i>	
James A. Patterson. <i>James Robinson Graves: Staking the Boundaries of Baptist Identity</i>	144
<i>Keith Harper</i>	
Steven Boyer and Christopher Hall, <i>The Mystery of God: Theology for Knowing the Unknowable</i>	146
<i>Jeremy Evans</i>	
Francis J. Moloney. <i>The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary</i>	148
<i>Josh Chatraw</i>	

**On “Seeing” what God is “Saying”:
Rereading Biblical Narrative in Dialogue with
Kevin Vanhoozer’s
*Remythologizing Theology*¹**

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Introduction

Large sections of the Old Testament might almost be read as a set of case studies in “How to do things with words ... if you are the God of Israel.” The first act described on the first day of creation is a divine speech-act, “Let there be light ...” (Gen 1:3), and the first argument in scripture, instigated by the serpent, focuses on the question: “Did God say ...?” (Gen 3:1). In chapter 1 alone God commands, commissions, and commends the components of creation, and then blesses its human inhabitants. In chapter 3 he calls, then critiques, and even curses the ground. Divine speech acts abound.² Indeed, so familiar an element of biblical narrative is this that remarkably little attention is given to it by biblical commentators. They generally follow the path that the biblical authors doubt-

¹ This article was first presented as a paper at the Christian Literary Studies Group (CLSG) conference in Oxford, November 2010, to which I am indebted both for conversation on that occasion, and to Roger Kojecký for agreeing to its reuse here. It subsequently appeared in two separate pieces, as Richard S. Briggs, “On ‘Seeing’ what God is ‘Saying’: Rereading Biblical Narrative in Dialogue with Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Remythologizing Theology*,” in Roger Kojecký and Andrew Tate (eds.), *Visions and Revisions: The Word and the Text* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 29–42; with substantial material extracted and published separately as a review in the CLSG journal *The Glass* 23 (2011): pp. 50–53. The present version is published with the permission of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, and is only lightly edited from its earlier form. I am grateful to Heath Thomas for facilitating presentation of the complete piece here.

² I discuss the centrality of “things done with words” in the biblical narrative in Richard S. Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” in David G. Firth & Jamie A. Grant (eds.), *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), pp. 75–110, esp. pp. 76–86.

less intended, by which the speaking God is read straightforwardly as a character in the narrative world.

In ages past, this assumption played its part in the notion of biblical narrative as, in Hans Frei's terms, realistic and ascriptive, under which rubric he subsumed without differentiation the historical and descriptive functions of such texts.³ In this model, still in play in the epistle to the Hebrews for example, there is little need to distinguish between the voice of God encountered as a speaking part in the narrative, and the voice of God heard everywhere in the sacred text.⁴ We today live, however, in the shadow of what Frei called the great modern "eclipse" of biblical narrative. What do *we* mean by talk of God's speaking, or, in particular, by reading biblical descriptions of the speaking God at face value?

How Does Scripture put God into Writing? – Some Proposals

This is mainly, although not entirely, an Old Testament issue. As often observed, God's discourse in the New Testament is so focused in and through the person of Jesus that the incarnation largely obscures the question of how God speaks face to face in the New Testament.⁵ There are exceptions, such as the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism or at the transfiguration,⁶ but these narratives depict this audible presence without a physical speaking presence in such a way that it is clearly intended to be unusual—i.e. not the usual manner in which the divine speaking voice is apprehended. My focus lies more with those kinds of narrative situation common to the Old Testament, and interestingly more common to

³ On Frei, see briefly my "Scripture in Christian Formation: Pedagogy, Reading Practice, and Scriptural Exemplars," *Theology* 114 (2011): pp. 83–90.

⁴ On the absence of such a differentiation in Hebrews' handling of the OT see Ken Schenck, "God Has Spoken: Hebrews' Theology of the Scriptures," in Richard Bauckham, Daniel R. Driver, Trevor A. Hart and Nathan MacDonald (eds.), *The Epistle to the Hebrews and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 321–36, esp. p. 322: "the author makes no distinction between scriptural and non-scriptural speakings of God," and pp. 323–24 on God's literal speaking.

⁵ As noted by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology. Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 53.

⁶ In all there are, I think, four such exceptions: the voice on the road to Damascus, and the voice from heaven in John 12:28 complete the list.

claims made in some parts of today's church, where God has a speaking part in interaction with human characters such as Moses. I shall restrict my attention to such examples in what follows.

When pressed to account for biblical texts of this kind, it is altogether less clear that today's interpreter has a coherent view of the matter which could also sit comfortably with anything like the traditional affirmations of Christian faith regarding the nature and identity of God. At which point several interpretative paths present themselves.

Some say "so much the worse for traditional affirmations"—and read God as a character in the narrative, pure and simple. W. Lee Humphreys's book *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* is a particularly clear example. As he expresses it: "we do not engage him [God] as someone in our world other than as we construct him from what we find in the story-world of the narrative."⁷ This God turns out to be "complex and at points conflicted,"⁸ but although this is a coherent (if contestable) account, it is a literary one only and can lead to no wider theological conclusions. It must be said that, freed from such wider concerns, Humphreys is at least able to take the scriptural account of God speaking as unproblematic. No metaphysical complications beset his reading, even to the point of an apparently complete lack of interest in what the phenomenon is that Genesis is describing. On a similarly literary-critical end of the spectrum, and with the same texts, Hugh White does at least address this issue head on in his *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis*:

The divine Voice is presented as the voice of a personage by the narrator, since the narrator speaks of "he" when referring to the instance of divine speech. But unlike a personage, the Voice does not speak from a recognizable position within the social structure or spatial/temporal register within which the characters exist.⁹

For White this is all part of the literary effect of the text, as characters are drawn into plot-defining dialogues with a character who, one might say, "refracts" the narratorial voice by standing (metaphorically) mid-way between the author and the human characters

⁷ W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 5.

⁸ Humphreys, *Character of God*, p. 256.

⁹ Hugh C. White, *Narration and Discourse in the Book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 101.

but playing a distinct but disembodied role.¹⁰ My own view is that White's insights could be productively harnessed to more traditional metaphysical concerns, albeit that this would doubtless cause the author of the book to turn in his grave (presuming upon, as I think we might in this case, the death of the author).

What of those for whom the wider theological issues cannot be so easily circumvented? The primary route taken here, interestingly by those right across the theological spectrum, is to reconstrue accounts of divine speech as something else. This is essentially Bultmann's path of demythologisation, which hermeneutically has much in common with the other great modern account of biblical interpretation, the essentially conservative attempt to "recontextualise" the text (or to find in it "principles" for today). In either case, it seems to me, where the text has God saying X or Y, this claim is to be understood as a way of articulating whatever conviction Moses or others had about how the divine will should be expressed. Divine speech is human projection. Demythologizers think we have grown out of such perceptions. Recontextualizers may think it goes on today, in churches where people still offer the occasional word that "The LORD is saying..." or "God spoke to me." Unlike the literary-critical approach, this one seems to be metaphysically coherent at the expense of rather deflating the dynamics of the text. All these dramatic dialogues with the divine turn out to be something more akin to the long dark night of the sensitive soul, struggling to discern God's will in a verbal vacuum. And they make relatively little sense of texts where God is engaged in telling Moses matters of a more prosaic nature such as instructions on what to do next or reminders of all that He has done before.

The middle-ground of both biblical and ontological seriousness has on the whole been inhabited only by a few systematic theologians rather than biblical scholars. One thinks of course of Karl Barth's bracing account of "the speech of God as the act of God" at the start of the *Church Dogmatics*,¹¹ which is given some further conceptual sophistication in the much-cited work of Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*. Wolterstorff notes, perceptively, that

¹⁰ Of course there are one or two interesting counter-examples in Genesis to this disembodied divine voice, such as the discussion with Abraham in Gen 18, but this need not affect the general point made by White.

¹¹ This is the title of a section of Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics 1/1: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (tr. G.T. Thomson; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936), pp. 143–62, originally written in 1932.

despite his intentions Barth effectively switches the focus away from divine *speaking* to the broader category of divine revelation, which rather blunts the progress he might make with our topic.¹² Wolterstorff himself, in turn, offers “philosophical reflections on the claim that God speaks,” by way of the speech-act conceptuality of divine illocutions being hosted by the human locutions of scripture. This however tends to result in reflection more on the ways in which today’s reader hears scripture as divine discourse, rather than offering an account of what it means in scripture itself that God has a speaking part.

Into this somewhat under-populated territory, then, comes the mighty wake-up call of Kevin Vanhoozer’s *Remythologizing Theology*.¹³ Here Vanhoozer sets out to do the conceptual theological heavy-lifting with which his own earlier hermeneutical works, by his own admission, had been insufficiently engaged. And a bold proposal it is too: that by conceptualising God as a God of communicative action, we might take seriously the biblical language of God’s speaking, without falling back into taking it on a literalistic level as if God were a speaking agent just like Moses. In a key definition: “Remythologizing means taking seriously biblical texts that ascribe communicative actions and intentions to God.” (p. 210) For Vanhoozer, Barth was right but did not go far enough: where Barth forecloses on God’s communicative intentions by reading everything through the Christological matrix of the incarnation, Vanhoozer argues that Barth did not “show sufficient awareness that without Israel’s Scripture we would lack the right interpretative framework with which to understand the event of Jesus Christ.” (p. 203) Hence, Vanhoozer’s framework is *canonical* in addition to being Christological. And with Wolterstorff, Vanhoozer also affirms what he dubs “the Rule of Saith”: “no divine illocutions apart from locutions” (p. 216), and hence the speaking God is to be found in the specific words of scripture rather than just the experiences therein reported. But the heart of the remythologising project, for which Vanhoozer applauds Barth too, is that it “proceeds from the

¹² Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), cf. esp. pp. 63–74.

¹³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology. Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Page references to this book are in the text.

biblical accounts of divine communicative action to ontology rather than vice versa.” (p. 207)

Vanhoozer rather implies that his book is exploring the “what if” possibility of Barth having read J.L. Austin. (p. 201, n. 81; p. 211) He also notes that no matter how conceptually sophisticated an account of divine action is, it “must pass muster vis-à-vis the biblical accounts of God’s activity.” (p. 236) He is well aware that Old Testament scholars have made considerable progress with reading the text within rather different ontological frameworks—he notes Brueggemann’s celebrated exercise in reading the God of the Old Testament as a figure located solely in the rhetorical enterprise of ancient Israel (p. 218)¹⁴—but boldly sets out to say that the God of the text is the God of Jewish and Christian faith, and that He speaks.

My own concerns represent an attempt to close the circle on Vanhoozer’s account, and ask what happens if one takes his theological view of divine communicative action and actually reads a biblical text—what exegetical and hermeneutical light might be shed? Vanhoozer’s own work is set in motion with an invigorating and thought-provoking review of biblical exemplars of the very phenomenon he is seeking to account for, “the passages with which theologians must come to grips when formulating a doctrine of God in order to do justice to the biblical *mythos*.” (p. 35) His “gallery of canonical exhibits” reviews a dozen examples over some 20 pages, and succeeds admirably in showing that there is indeed a question of divine verbal communication presented to us as readers of scripture. He returns to a brief biblical example at the end of the book—the account of divine action in the story of God’s response to Hezekiah’s prayer in Isa 38:1–5, although by this stage of the book (pp. 491–95) his concerns have moved on a little from the topic of communicative action *per se*. And in the midst of the proposal (found in chapter 4, from which all the above definitional quotes have been taken) there is a short, too short, but highly significant rumination on the case study of Exod 34:6–7 (p. 214), to

¹⁴ With reference to Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997). One may note that Brueggemann has subsequently allowed that this was probably a mistake, or at least that “I will concede that I might have been more careful and circumspect in my statement.” See his “*Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* Revisited,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 74.1 (2012): pp. 28–38, here p. 32, talking about both historicity and ontology in his 1997 account.

which we shall return below. So it is not that Vanhoozer is indifferent to the exegetical questions in his discussion, but it is still true that the argument of the book does not turn full circle to show what this model might contribute in matters of exegesis. But before turning to that part of my account, it seems appropriate to offer a brief review of the full structure and dynamics of *Remythologising Theology*, so that we may balance our constructive concerns to move further with due deference to what is in fact achieved in the book.

Kevin Vanhoozer’s “Remythologising Theology”: Recovering the Speaking God

Vanhoozer proceeds in 9 chapters, in three “movements”, with—let it be said immediately—an enviable ability to combine single-minded focus on the goal with comprehensive reference to all manner of competing and contrasting proposals. *Remythologizing Theology* is a tour-de-force which settles for nothing less than a “re-tooling of classical Christian orthodoxy” to meet the challenges of alternative proposals about the nature of God. At the heart of this topic lies the challenge to classical theism’s view of the impassibility of God, a challenge overwhelmingly driven by reflection on the problem of evil and the extreme forms that that problem has taken in the 20th century. In effect, Vanhoozer wants to say that we have thrown over too quickly the traditional view, under the mistaken impression that it represented a failure to reckon with evil. The simplest path taken has been to say instead that God must suffer, and be open to the awful possibility that his creation will go in evil directions, with either the inability or perhaps the unwillingness to hold it to the path of truth and goodness. In short: God must be neither omnipotent nor unchanging if evil is to be taken seriously. To which Vanhoozer’s response is: by no means! ... albeit with full awareness of the need to meet the challenge in ways which do justice to God’s light, life and love. How does the argument proceed?

An introduction frames the project in terms of the question, “What must God be like in order to do what the Bible depicts him as doing with words: creating, commanding, promising, consoling?” (p. 3) The remythologising project is set forth as an alternative to the most prominent modern options: whether they be in terms of Bultmann’s demythologising, which translates the biblical language into existential categories, or the more thorough-going “projectionism” of Feuerbach where theology is construed as anthropology. For Vanhoozer, remythologising sets out to reverse the “great reversal” to which Frei drew attention (p. 29). To remythologise is to let scripture set the terms of enquiry.

Part I of the book then explores “‘God’ in Scripture and theology.” Chapter 1, “Biblical representation,” begins with the aforementioned review of biblical passages where the speaking God is central to the text, including such expected examples as Genesis 1, Exod 3:13–15 and Exodus 33–34 (esp. 34:5–7), Hebrews 1, and John 1, as well as several others. This chapter also surveys some theological issues thereby raised: if God cannot speak then the standard Christian understanding of God must be revised (p. 59). Further, *pace* most philosophers of religion, since speech is an action, it is unclear why a God who acts could not speak. (p. 59) Vanhoozer also identifies one key issue for his account: “the ascription of feelings or emotions, a mixture of activity and passivity, to God.” (p. 77) Chapters 2 and 3 engage in hand-to-hand communicative combat with alternative theological models currently (or recently) in favor: in particular “open theism” (“God’s love necessitates self-limitation,” p. 123); panentheism (the view that the world is “in” [“-en-”] God, “affirming the interdependence of God and world,” pp. 124–25); and what Vanhoozer dubs “the new kenotic-perichoretic relational ontotheology,” which so emphasizes relationality in the godhead that it risks losing sight of the persons who are the beings in the relationships. Vanhoozer is endlessly quotable: against ontotheology Vanhoozer wants to say “God’s speech *faces* us” (after Levinas, p. 100); against some philosophers of religion he wants to say that while of course God is perfect, “everything depends on where one obtains one’s concept of perfection” (p. 96); and on the need to let scripture set the agenda he affirms “*insofar as one’s model of God fails to do justice to God as a personal divine agent, it revises what the Bible is primarily about?*” (p. 134)—a claim at the heart of the remythologising project.

Part II of the book then sets out the positive thesis, under the heading “Communicative theism and the triune God.” Chapter 4, “God’s being is in communicating,” is, as we have had cause to note, the heart of the argument. To remythologise is to rediscover the triune communicative God at the heart of the biblical narrative. Chapter 5 fills out the thesis with respect to participation in this God: Vanhoozer says that the main claim of his book is that “participating in God means participating in his triune being-in-communicative-activity.” (p. 283) In this chapter he offers a simple schema for what the triune God is in the business of communicating: light, life, and love, since God is light, God is life, and God is love. Human vocation is thus understood in terms of participation in the Word of God (light), the Spirit of God (life), and “the fellowship of Father and Son in the Spirit” (love). One senses that

throughout this exposition, persistently rooted in scripture, Vanhoozer seeks nothing less than a broad-based reimagination of “what it means to be saved” that might move us away from narrow concerns about identifying those in and out. The mixture of grace, love, divine self-communication, and human participation is woven here into a suggestive “theodramatic” proposal. The multiple aspects of union with Christ are summed up with the claim that “right relatedness with God is ultimately a matter of theodramatic participation.” (p. 293)¹⁵

Part III, “God and World: authorial action and interaction,” takes up the now-proposed model to explore various questions of divine action in the world. Here we see the programmatic proposal put to work on a range of theological topics: divine sovereignty in the face of evil (ch. 7), divine suffering, especially in the cross, which brings Vanhoozer to the direct consideration of divine impassibility in the passion (ch. 8), and the right way to describe divine compassion in general: what it means, in other words, that God is love. (ch. 9) Perhaps of most interest for our purposes in this section, however, is chapter 6, which sets up the discussions to follow by mapping a new way of conceiving of divine interaction with the world in general. This is a fascinating account which, driven by the preceding concerns with God as fundamentally communicative, is focused around the notion of God as author. But the particular kind of authorship which Vanhoozer has in view is the dialogical notion famous from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. This is a rich and challenging proposal, which will merit much further attention. In particular: “God completes or consummates the unfinished person-idea that is Abraham, Moses, David, etc., through an

¹⁵ In many ways, then, this book might be seen as the culmination of the arguments advanced in some of Vanhoozer’s earlier works, most notably in his *The Drama of Doctrine. A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005) regarding the canonical-linguistic theodramatic vision; and in some of the essays in *First Theology. God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002) which sought to articulate the appropriate priority to be given to scripture in theological formulation. This further suggests that in the chapter of *Remythologizing Theology* discussed above Vanhoozer does have in view a wide-screen effort to define “salvation” in his new terms. On p. 291 he also revisits a claim made in his *Is There a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 455–57, with the remark that the three aspects of the “economy of communication” parallel the three aspects of a speech act: Father—locution; Son—illocution; Spirit—perlocution.

active dialogical penetration into the depths of their being.” (p. 333) Divine action in and through human persons, therefore, is conceptualized subtly in terms of human freedom to participate in the divinely authored dialogue. This dialogical model circumvents most of the problems so easily found with most ways of trying to describe God’s authorship of the human life without making God accountable for every human action. In Vanhoozer’s terms: “God’s dialogical authorship, though in asymmetrical relation to its hero-interlocutors, is an entirely appropriate way of engaging human persons according to their rational, volitional, and emotional natures.” (p. 333) Self-determination is redescribed in this model as the freedom (on the part of the character) to enter the “potentially infinite dialogue with the Author God” (p. 336)—everything hangs on the point that the kind of predetermination (or classically, “predestination”) in view is dialogically constituted. “Genuine Christian freedom,” says Vanhoozer, is “the freedom to say ‘Yes’ to the divine call.” (p. 337) There is never going to be an easy way to articulate divine action alongside human action, but in Bakhtin’s ability to characterise Authorship above and beyond the realm of monological discourse Vanhoozer offers as patient and sophisticated an account as one might hope for.¹⁶ Later on, in his conclusion, Vanhoozer writes that “The one theodrama requires many canonical voices” (p. 473)—a comment which takes the Bible as Bakhtinian polyphony. Theology, in terms Vanhoozer borrows from OT scholar Dennis Olson, is then to be understood as “provisional monologization.”¹⁷

And part of the proof of the argument lies in the three chapters which follow, as Vanhoozer explores some of the ways in which Bakhtin “has a ‘good ear’ for diverse canonical perspectives.” (p. 348) These concluding chapters range far and wide over the theological landscape.¹⁸ In particular Vanhoozer is careful to define

¹⁶ Interestingly, it resonates with the observations of well-known novelist and literary theorist David Lodge, reflecting on the role of the author as creator of the dialogic and polyphonic world of a novel: he reports that in Bakhtin he found that all the questions which had occurred to him were most satisfactorily answered; David Lodge, *Consciousness and the Novel. Connected Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. x.

¹⁷ Vanhoozer takes this from Dennis T. Olson, “Biblical Theology as Provisional Monologization: A Dialogue with Childs, Brueggemann, and Bakhtin,” *Biblical Interpretation* 6 (1998): pp. 162–80.

¹⁸ Though space constraints apparently forced him to remove a section on community and mission, “the ecclesiological implications of my communicative Trinitarian theism,” (p. 386, n. 158).

what it could mean for God to have emotions, namely in terms of "concern-based construals": and hence God's experience of emotions differs from human experience "because God construes the theodrama from the perspective of eternity, as a complete and unified whole." (p. 414) Likewise, he articulates "suffering" in terms of endurance (in "the middle voice," neither active nor passive, p. 427), which brings him to address the question of Jesus' suffering. Here Heb 2:18a remains his canonical watchword, "because he himself suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted," which for Vanhoozer means that one is not at liberty to explain away Jesus' suffering as a turn of phrase, but neither may one rush to massive ontological impositions on the question of whether God suffers. The path taken leads to the conclusion that Jesus' suffering actually demonstrates his impassibility. (pp. 431–33) In summary: "Divine impassibility means not that God is unfeeling—impervious to covenantally concerned theodramatic construals of what is happening—but that God is never overcome or overwhelmed by these feelings such that he 'forgets' his covenant." (pp. 432–33) Nothing less than the trustworthiness of God hangs on such an affirmation. Impassibility, remythologised, is taken up under "covenant faithfulness" (*hesed*, p. 457). God's steadfastness is to be experienced as endurance, not immobility. In these concluding chapters one sees Vanhoozer at work beyond the level of framework building, and arriving at the heart of theological claims about the God of Christian faith to whom scripture attests.

What sort of dialogue might a reader of *Remythologizing Theology* enter into with its author? One might contest the central claim that God is a God of communicative action, but here Vanhoozer seems on solid ground. Speech *is* a form of action, and if one is to take scripture seriously it is indeed difficult to see why a God who acts should not also be a God who speaks. "Speaking" may need to be understood differently, to anticipate a key point, but this has certainly been an option available to the theologian for some time, notably in Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Divine Discourse*.¹⁹ Slightly less persuasive, at least to my mind, is Vanhoozer's claim that divine speech is the necessary clarification of what otherwise ambiguous divine action is about: "Without an event of divine speaking, we are unable to say either *who* is acting or *what* this person is up to." (p. 209) Broadly speaking that is a helpful point, but it cannot be a rule or requirement. Many kinds of actions are unambiguous (recall that it was the recognition of genuine non-verbal communication that,

¹⁹ See note 12 above.

in part, reoriented much of Wittgenstein's later work), while many kinds of speech act can be ambiguous, some even by design, possibly including divine ones (e.g. Josh 5:14?). To describe God as communicative, and to insist that this is in and through words such as we find in the canon, need not entail the further claim that this is because only so could God communicate successfully. (We shall return to this claim below regarding the exodus.)

More broadly, the substantive theological claims concerning a Jesus who endures suffering but thereby demonstrates divine impassibility seem likely to provoke considerably more discussion. Vanhoozer himself recognizes the "counter-intuitive nature of this claim" (p. 415 n. 123), and while it does indeed offer a striking set of proposals for conceptualizing divine action, my own response to this claim relates more to whether it passes Vanhoozer's own "re-mythologising" test: is this in fact the way that the biblical *mythos* intends us to take language of divine emotion and/or suffering? Maybe so, but I suspect that more would need to be done with regard to this trope to demonstrate that such a reading is in fact "with the grain," as literary theorists like to say. There is some indication of how to proceed in the final test case about God's action in and in response to Hezekiah's prayer (Isa 38:1–5). Interestingly, Vanhoozer basically follows Calvin here, in suggesting that God's real communicative intention in having Hezekiah say to Isaiah "Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover" (Isa 38:1, NRSV) is to be understood as "working a change in his [Hezekiah's] heart," (p. 495) Thus "God dialogically determines Hezekiah ... by soliciting his free consent to participate in communicative action." This is perhaps the familiar prophetic *topos* of God's seeking always a human turning (as described axiomatically in Jer 18:7–10, a passage unfortunately not noted in the book). Arguably this angle of approach to the matter of divine impassibility, via such biblical texts, might have been more appropriate to the spirit of re-mythologising theology than some of the concerns that do occupy Vanhoozer's account.

Which leads inevitably on to the question of how Vanhoozer construes particular scriptural passages. There is something of a long and dishonorable tradition in interaction with the works of theologians by biblical scholars to pick away at such matters in a rather negative tone, and it bears reflection that Vanhoozer is self-consciously attempting to go back to the point where the bifurcation between biblical studies and theology should not make sense in the first place. Only on a couple of occasions does the biblical scholar wonder if something not just more but actually different

might be said: the very first biblical exhibit is the notoriously recalcitrant case of creation from or amidst nothing (or chaos) in Gen 1:1–3 (pp. 36–37), and Vanhoozer boldly sets his own theodramatic account in some opposition to Jon Levenson's notion of the "Jewish drama of divine omnipotence."²⁰ I suspect this is because Levenson directly ties his concerns to the problematic status of divine impassibility. But in dissenting from Levenson on that point, does the dissent in fact invalidate the reading of Gen 1:1–3 as creation out of a nothing which is in some sense a substantive chaotic presence? In a later passage, Vanhoozer rehearses some aspects of Job in Bakhtinian perspective, with passing reference to Carol Newsom. In fact Newsom has developed a book-length analysis of this particular (theo-)drama,²¹ to my mind one of the best accounts of Job there is, and this might have had some impact on Vanhoozer's description of Job's friends preaching "law, not gospel." (p. 345) But overall *Remythologizing Theology* is a work which models exactly the need for theology to engage with scripture, and one should point out that there are many biblical texts in view here which are taken *more* seriously than they often are in works of biblical scholarship which operate with what Ricoeur (or at least his translators) so memorably described as a "truncated ontology," whereby the theological conceptuality needed to do justice to biblical God-talk is sadly lacking.²² In a nutshell: *Remythologizing Theology* should sound a call to biblical scholars to raise their game with respect to the categories of theological thought that they deploy in their own interpretations.

Finally, and in a related area, there is one aspect of the handling of the triune communicative action model which seems to me slightly more problematic when brought against the witness of scripture. This is related to the comments above about whether in

²⁰ The subtitle of Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994 (orig 1987)).

²¹ Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Vanhoozer draws attention to her earlier article, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth" *Journal of Religion* 76 (1996): pp. 290–306.

²² The phrase "truncated ontology" is used by Kathleen McClaughlin (Blamey) in her translation of Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," in his *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Northwestern University Press Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy; Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), pp. 3–24; cf. pp. 19, 23. The French is "ontologie brisée."

fact it is always expounded here in sufficiently remythologised terms, and it is striking that Vanhoozer's attention to the question of how divine communicative action works in terms of actual words found in scripture is somewhat abbreviated. It is surprising that more is not said here. It is this aspect of the book that I take up below.

Remythologising and Biblical Interpretation

What would it mean to bring Vanhoozer's concerns back to the practice of reading scripture for those texts where God is a speaking character? Vanhoozer offers little by way of clarification of how the manner of God's speaking is to be understood. Clearly it is relatively straightforward in the case of what Wolterstorff helpfully called "deputised discourse":²³ the prophet speaks and thereby God speaks. Some such model of divine action is clearly in view in 2 Pet 1:20–21. But how does the voice of God work in direct conversation, as it were?

Vanhoozer appears to rest content with saying that there are a variety of ways God could do it, and he is not particularly exercised to account for them. William Alston is cited approvingly for suggesting that "If God wills, and hence brings it about, that certain thoughts form in my mind together with the conviction that these thoughts constitute His message to me at this moment, that is as full-blooded a case of direct divine action in the world as the miraculous production of audible voices." (p. 210)²⁴ But it is not entirely clear how one could work with such an account in terms of discerning what is in fact the voice of God. Four pages later Vanhoozer arrives at an example: he offers one paragraph relating to how the voice of God might have been heard in the account of his communication with Moses in Exod 34:6. (p. 214) The famous verse in question describes God as "merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." Vanhoozer says, "It is difficult in the extreme to imagine Israel arriving at this idea apart from God communicating it," which is of course precisely the point at issue. Thus we come to the crux of the matter:

²³ Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, pp. 38–51; cf. also his discussion of "appropriated discourse," pp. 51–54.

²⁴ Citing William Alston, "How to Think About Divine Action," in Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (eds.), *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), pp. 51–70, here p. 57.

Vanhoozer thinks it is obvious that Israel did not learn this from anyone else (which may be granted); that they did not find it out about God with their own resources (although this would surely be the standard account offered by many biblical commentators); and that they did not infer it from events such as the Exodus, since “it would be impossible to make sense of the Exodus event as a mighty act of God apart from a divine interpretative word that explained it as such (as we have recorded in scripture).” (p. 214)

This seems far from self-evident, in part—as we discussed above—because it is not a general truth that people cannot or do not see events as furnishing them with quite specific understandings of God, and in this case one suspects that “the Exodus event” led to no little theologizing in Israel. So perhaps the final comment in brackets is intended to take the claim in a different direction, and say that scripture itself offers the divine interpretive word which is necessary. The discussion proceeds immediately on to taking Scripture as a whole as the “anchoring speech act” that allows access to YHWH’s name and identity, but it is a little hard to see how this general point is related to the specifics in question in Exod 34:6, as “YHWH passed before him [Moses] and proclaimed.” (34:6a, NRSV)

The issue may be clearer if we turn to an example which does not attain to the status of a creed regarding YHWH’s character. Consider narratives such as the following:

YHWH spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “How long shall this wicked congregation complain against me ... your dead bodies shall fall in this very wilderness ...” (Num 14:26, 29)

YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you did not trust in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the Israelites, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them.” (Num 20:12)

These two examples both relate to specific moments where the progress toward the promised land of first the Israelites in general, and then Moses and Aaron in particular, is halted in its tracks. The text is second-person direct address introduced by typical Hebrew markers of direct discourse: *le’mor*, with the verb of speaking (*dibber*) in the first instance; *amar* in the second. The self-presentation of the text is clearly that YHWH has a speaking part. Although it would take too long to prove this by way of citation, my sense from commentaries on Numbers is that (a) most commentators work within this framework as the text presents it, and (b) they do

not stop to ask how this could have been so. To that extent, then, they operate, in Vanhoozer's terms, as remythologisers. However, pressed to explain matters, I think the consensus of OT scholarship would by and large be that this kind of narrative account represents the authorial attempt (be it of J or E or whatever unknown writer) to capture the dynamic of relationship with YHWH. Thus, to take the second example, it was the case that Moses died before entering the land, and this required some explanation, hence the narrative of Numbers is constructed to include some reflection of and on this.²⁵ In particular, it is notoriously difficult to see what Moses has in fact done wrong in Numbers 20, perhaps because the text has less interest in telling us that than in underlining that he is excluded from the land for lack of trust. What form that lack of trust took has exercised commentators ever since,²⁶ but from our present perspective the point is that the text expresses the prohibition in the words of YHWH. The question for the biblical scholar should then be: how should one rightly understand those words of YHWH in connection with the later reflection of the text's theologizing writers and redactors?

The heart of the matter, I want to suggest, is that what it means for God to speak, even as a triune communicative agent, is for humans in the theodrama to "see" or construe God's will in verbal form, and that this construal is itself understood in scripture as divinely authored. There is, in short, no historical moment of audible speech behind the narrative of the text in which actual words were heard by Moses in the desert, but to suppose that there would have been is precisely to *de-mythologise* the text before us, and try to get back to some putatively more "original" form of divine communication than the text itself. Such would be the case if a reader of the book of Numbers argued that God so engineered the thoughts and perceptions of Moses that Moses could express himself in no other way than to say "YHWH said." This might be what it meant for Moses to "see" what God "said," and in turn this tradition may have been passed down to the later writers and redactors. But this is to look for an explanation of events within the biblical text on the level of how we live as readers. It is not the kind of response to

²⁵ For just one example among many see Diana Lipton, "Inevitability and Community in the Demise of Moses," *Journal of Progressive Judaism* 7 (1996): pp. 79–93.

²⁶ See the review of a dozen or so options in Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (JPS; Philadelphia & New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), pp. 448–56.

the text which helps us to read it. On the other hand, neither can the text itself be remythologised: it is instead the very myth in question, except that "myth" is such a notoriously slippery word that it is more or less useless unless carefully defined. Vanhoozer helpfully offers this: "To speak of *mythos*, then, is to call attention to the diverse ways in which dramatic forms render their dramatic matter, opening up aspects of reality—in particular, God's self-communicative activity—that would otherwise be sealed off from human inspection." (p. 12) In a wonderful aphorism, Vanhoozer continues: God is "Lord of projection." Scripture is projection, but it is divinely authored projection. (p. 27) *To see God rightly, then, is to "see" what God "says."* Let me offer briefly four points by way of an initial attempt to round out this thesis, addressing matters of canon, construal, the uniqueness of Moses, and thus in turn the relevance or otherwise of this Old Testament conceptuality for the task of hearing God's voice today.

First, the canon both is and is not a complicating mediate stage in this process. Returning to Vanhoozer's account of Exodus 34 where we left it, he is I think in part unduly conflating the processes whereby Israel's writers got from their experience of YHWH to the text of Exodus 34 with the processes whereby we as readers relate our experiences of God to the God now revealed in the canon.²⁷ Vanhoozer moves directly from Israel working out the claims of Exodus 34 to the parallel that the canon is divinely authorized communicative action. He even suggests that "the Law and Prophets present themselves" in these communicative terms, "not as some independently observed record of alleged divine activity" (pp. 214–15), but of course many texts in the Writings do exactly this, and it would be hard to read, say, Luke 1:1–4 any other way than as claiming that it is an independently researched record. But the fact that in some scriptural texts God is divinely communicating in direct form whereas in other scriptural texts the communication is indirectly mediated through independent research, as it were, is not a fact that should trouble Vanhoozer's account of divine communicative action, which is precisely fine-tuned to allow for just such authorial dialogical capacity. So in fact it is not necessary to have God speaking in character in precise words in the books of Exodus

²⁷ In honor of Vanhoozer's penchant for the well-judged aphorism let me offer: the writers of the canon construe divine illocutions in locutionary form, whereas readers of the canon are trying to construe divine locutions in illocutionary form. I am not sure, however, that this way of explicating the issues really gets to the theological heart of the matter.

and Numbers in order for these texts to serve as divine communicative acts. It is the texts as canon which do that, not the “reported speech” within them.

Secondly, this means, as should be expected, that there is no historicist short cut to unmediated access to the divine will, as if today’s interpreter were to wish for a time machine and a video camera so that, suitably equipped, the word of God to Moses could be captured for all to see. What would our time-travelling film editor see? The canonically shaped answer, I suggest, is that it depends on what sort of eyes they have to see with, and that to see rightly the exchanges in the wilderness would be “seeing” in the sense of “discerning” rather than seeing in the sense of independently observing. If to see God rightly is to see what God is saying, then much depends on learning how to see rightly, for which the classical rubric of “discernment” seems still to be the best label. As to how one does this, this too is a matter of concern in the canonical accounts. Despite frequent attempts to reduce such matters to politics and rhetoric, scripture suggests that there are theological matters more determinative of right discernment. As Walter Moberly has argued, the right discernment of the ways and will of the unseen God is rooted in living the life of holiness and moral character known in the Old Testament as “standing in the presence of the LORD,” and which may be evidenced by the visible criteria of the life lived by the person in question—the prophet being the archetypal OT example of such a person (and prophecy being in turn the OT norm for understanding divine speech), while the apostle is the corresponding NT exemplar.²⁸ I have argued elsewhere that those who read scripture in the church, which is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, should therefore pay particular attention to such scriptural exemplars of discernment as the prophets and the apostles themselves, whose ability to “see” what God “says” remains determinative for theological interpretation.²⁹ My point here is simply to draw attention to certain continuities between the “right seeing” that was relevant in the biblical account, as effected by the prophets and the apostles for instance, and the

²⁸ R.W.L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment* (CSCD 14; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

²⁹ See my “Review Article: Christian Theological Interpretation of Scripture Built on the Foundation of the Apostles and the Prophets: The Contribution of R.W.L. Moberly’s *Prophecy and Discernment*,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 4 (2010): pp. 309–18.

“right seeing” (or construal) relevant to our present reading of scripture.³⁰

Thirdly, one should perhaps ask how this account of divine speech within scripture measures up to the scriptural portrait of divine speech, not because this could prove it right or wrong, but because there is merit in letting our own understanding be shaped by the canonical picture. Here one feature really does deserve its own separate study and I can do no more than outline the issue at stake: How significant is it that our examples have gravitated towards Moses and the cases of divine speech in the Pentateuchal narratives? A potentially very significant framing device used within the canon here is Deut 34:10, part of the closing words of the Torah: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom YHWH knew face to face (*panim ‘el-panim*).”³¹ Readers of Torah cannot but think back to Num 12:6–8 where Moses was singled out by YHWH (in direct speech!) as being unique among the prophets, since in comparison to the way they are spoken to in visions and dreams, says YHWH, “with him I speak face to face (*pe ‘el-pe*)—clearly, not in riddles, and he beholds the form of YHWH.” (12:8) Although the actual wording here is literally “mouth to mouth,” the point could clearly be that this unique status as recipient of divine revelation is marked out in Deuteronomy 34 as never repeated in Israel—at least in the centuries between Moses and the closing of the Torah. Thus alerted to Moses’ unique status the reader of the Old Testament might indeed then ponder that most of the examples we have singled out, as being cases of YHWH speaking in char-

³⁰ If there were one topic on which I would have liked to see Vanhoozer’s account in *Remythologizing Theology* developed it would have been on the nature and relevance of the construal which is always perforce operative in any communicative action. I have suggested elsewhere that construal is a key component of speech act theory (*Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark & New York: Continuum, 2001], pp. 118–43), and it is often under-explored in attempts to harness its concerns to biblical and theological matters. See further Richard S. Briggs, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Scriptural Responsibility,” in Stanley E. Porter and Matthew R. Malcolm (eds.), *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), pp. 51–69.

³¹ On the canonical (rather than original) significance of this text as a marker between sections see Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets* (FAT 27; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), pp. 113–31, who concludes that its canonical significance lies in affirming that “Moses was succeeded by faithful prophets who ... *continued* his work.” (p. 131)

acter in the narrative, do in fact occur in the Torah, with Moses. In later accounts we find the more typical phrasing to capture similar emphases is something like “the word of YHWH came to ...”—Elijah, for instance (1 Ki 19:9), or Jonah (Jon 1:1). This sounds more like the kind of cognitive realization which is in view today when people say “God spoke to me ...” It is further complicated by the increasing presence after Moses of angelic mediators. The Elijah story in 1 Kings 19 in fact switches between the interjections of the angel of YHWH and the phrasing “the word of YHWH came to.” In many of the Writings even this last phrase is rare, and forms of deputized discourse predominate.

However, I would distinguish between the general drift of these observations, which seems undeniable, and any attempt to suggest that Moses is in a class of one with respect to receiving direct divine discourse. For one thing, characters in Genesis hear YHWH talk directly just as Moses does, and while there may be reasons why Genesis fits this Mosaic pattern rather than a later model, this still complicates the qualification of Moses as uniquely such a recipient. Equally, the more direct form of address does persist (e.g. Josh 1:1, 3:7, 4:1, 6:2 and many other cases). Finally, the canonical logic of Deuteronomy 34 combined with Numbers 12 seems to suggest not that no one else hears God, but rather that these Torah texts about Moses are intended in some sense to model the desired picture of reliance upon the word of YHWH of which Moses is the key exemplar.³² For all these reasons I think one cannot in the end sustain the argument that one is to conceive of direct divine address to Moses in some uniquely more literalistic face-to-face or mouth-to-mouth form. Nevertheless, a study of how the mode of divine address changes across the canon would seem to be a worthwhile adjunct both to the present argument and, more broadly, to Vanhoozer’s book.³³ For now, these observations lead to one final point.

³² Following Chapman, see previous note. I have explored this with reference to Numbers 12 in particular in *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), pp. 45–69, esp. pp. 62–63.

³³ Other worthwhile explorations which could clarify further details of the proposal might relate to how we are to interpret divine soliloquies (e.g. Gen 6:7; 8:21–22) or extreme expressions of the divine voice in the Psalms (89:35–38ff)—examples which might clarify how human projection of the divine voice actually works within the biblical *mythos*.

Thus fourthly, and in conclusion, the question of how far our proposal for construing divine discourse in scripture can aid us in understanding the triune communicative God today. Most Israelites were not Moses, or Joshua, or a prophet, or someone charged with the task of correctly construing divine action in verbal form. Even those who are part of this company presumably spent much of their lives engaging in other ways with YHWH than in reporting or writing the divine will in direct speech. And thus, in this more "normal" manner of proceeding, they are in a position more akin to that of today's reader of scripture. The Christian who prays, reflects, meditates, studies scripture, worships in communion with others, and seeks to be a disciple in the company of the church, will have a range of practices to hand for discerning the voice of God in and through all manner of situations. Clearly this will include scripture, liturgy, sermons, study, discussion, and so forth. At times, it will include direct apprehension of a form of words as coming from God in personal address. Presumably, if the scriptural portrait is to be taken as a guide, this is not to be expected frequently nor to be waited upon as the only source of divine illumination in the life of faith, since other texts and traditions continue to mediate the word of God to the believer at all times. But if we are right to suggest that to see God rightly is to see what God is saying, this is not to be understood as implying that at no point does God ever offer more direct forms of personalized divine address. There is every reason to think that God does in fact do this, even if scholars of scripture or systematic theology seem to discuss it rather rarely.³⁴ For the most part, however, readers of scripture are in the position of needing to construe the texts in front of them as bearers of divine discourse. Church history amply attests that this is not a practice that God has chosen to protect from error or misconstrual, while at the same time much scripture reading has indeed contributed to the sharing of light, life and love in God's world. It remains true, however, that the better one's grasp of who the God of scripture is, the more likely it is that one's reading of scripture will be attuned to the ways in which its divine author would have us understand it. In this respect, then, Kevin Vanhoozer's *Remythologising Theology* offers vision and energy for exactly the right task: reading

³⁴ For a lucid but rare example see chapter 14 of Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, on the entitlement to believe that God speaks: "What we really want to know is whether we—intelligent, educated, citizens of the modern West—are ever entitled to believe that God speaks?" (p. 273). His answer: yes.

the Bible to see God correctly, which is to say—reading it to see what God says.