THE RHETORIC OF REVELATION

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The concept of revelation was the currency of the realm during the era of the Biblical theology movement, but in the mid-sixties it suddenly depreciated in value and by the seventies was virtually out of circulation. Old Testament theologians lost confidence in it, and there was a scramble for alternative epistemologies. Perhaps the appeal to revelation was special pleading; perhaps the Bible should be forced to make its claims on the same basis as every other purported source of truth and wisdom.

Within the fraternity of theologically inclined Biblical scholars, there was no more trenchant critic of the concept of revelation than James Barr. In the chapter, "The Concepts of History and Revelation," in his Old and New in Interpretation, he showed that the Biblical theology movement had distorted the Biblical witness to God by putting too much stress on historical events as the means of revelation. Moreover, the concept of revelation itself was not well fitted to the way God is known in Hebrew Scripture because it suggests that humans were ignorant of the true God until God made himself known, whereas in "the Bible, . . . there is no stage at which God is not known."3

This observation is quite cogent. A simple reflection confirms it: The first chapter of Genesis introduces the God who is recognized in Scripture, and at no place in the Pentateuchal narrative do the human personae lose knowledge of this God. He does reveal his name and designs to various figures at important junctures, but there is no suggestion that these revelations re-establish a knowledge that has been interrupted.

What matters is the question of what more will be added to that which is known; or, whether that which is known has already been falsified by use and interpretation which men have made of it; or, in what ways and under what conditions this knowledge is to be spread abroad to those hitherto outside of the tradition; or, in what way elements within that which is known are now to be replaced or rejuvenated through new relations."4
Barr has returned to the question of the knowledge of God in the 1991 Gifford Lectures, this time from the angle of “natural theology.”

His object in the lectures was to show first that a number of Biblical texts clearly do appeal to a universal knowledge of God. Moreover, there are more subtle ways that the authors of the Bible assume and build upon common human experience and the principles of rational discourse.

By arguing that there is an undercurrent of natural theology in Scripture, Barr tacitly accepts its counterpart, “special revelation”—knowledge of God communicated by God, at God’s initiative and under his protection, to a restricted body of humans. How Barr would define and treat this privileged knowledge of God is uncertain, for that is not the burden of his argument nor the object of his polemic. Nevertheless, he does implicitly open the door to further discourse on revelation.

Of course, it is not necessary to rely upon Barr for a definition of revelation; there are a broad range of definitions and conceptual schemes to draw from—offered not only by theologians, but philosophers and phenomenologists of religion. One might be tempted to experiment with those to determine which would suit the Biblical evidence most handily. However, it is not in our best interest to range so broadly when what we are searching for is the way the Old Testament depicts the communication of the knowledge of God to the people of God. Our object is not to develop a rationally adequate doctrine of revelation, but to describe the transactions which take place between God and particular humans, transactions which commonly go by the name “revelation.”

The term “transaction” is deliberately chosen to focus our attention on the dynamics of communicative events. It derives from the conceptual stock of the “new rhetoric,” which understands communication to be an exchange between speaker and audience (text and audience where communication is written). The speaker (or author) initiates and seeks to manage the exchange, to move the audience to think and act in a particular way, but the audience has the power to resist the message, or to construe its relevance in various ways, to fill in the gaps, and so on.