

In the Beginning was the Davar

For some time now I've become aware...keenly so...of the way just about everyone uses the verb "talk" usually rendered as "talk to." You hear it constantly through the media as well as in regular conversations. When you talk to some one, you're engaged in a monologue, that is, you to the other person, emphasis on "to." In other words, "talk to" precludes a response by the person you're addressing. It's all one-way. Among conversations awareness of this fact seems to be missing completely. No small wonder so many people complain about being lonely. Indeed, they're doing a lot of talking to, but that's about it.

Such a manner of addressing people is symptomatic of the larger issue of a decrease in our inability to hold down a simple conversation where we can exchange ideas and learn from each other. If you're talking to people all the time, you close out the ability to listen. So this verb with its nasty little preposition pretty much has taken over the proper verb and key preposition we should use, namely, "to speak with." The preposition is significant in that it signals a mutual exchange not only of words but of ideas.

It's well worth paying attention to the distinction between the two verbs throughout a given day, how we use them or hear them on the radio. Chances are close to 100% you won't hear the latter. Should you do, it's an exception. Making the distinction between talking to and speaking with may seem small, but the more you reflect on it, the more significant it becomes. Getting into the habit of using "to speak with" might improve your relationships quicker than you think.¹

Awareness of the distinction between talking to and speaking with had a lot to do with the birth of the modest document presented here. This modern phenomenon has perked my curiosity to take a closer look at how communication is presented in a wholly different time and era, namely, the

¹Somewhat parallel to this is a phenomenon we hear constantly on the radio and TV. When a reporter or announcer finishes his or her interview with a guest, almost always that guest responds with "Thank you" instead of "You're welcome." It seems two thank yous cancel each other out making what just transpired look somewhat silly...perhaps not the content per se but the person delivering it.

Bible. Of special interest here, of course, is God's relationship with mankind. He must communicate with people which means focus will be upon two words dealing with speech to be examined in greater detail.

Before we get into that, however, some preliminary remarks are in order. Over the years I had written a number of commentaries on various books of the Bible now posted on this Lectio Divina Homepage. Most are called "expansion" texts because I elaborate or flesh out certain incidents as well as words and phrases. The sole intent is to appreciate them from the vantage point of *lectio divina*, that slow, meditative reading of scripture which leads us to rest in God's presence. Throughout all these books I was struck by a particular verb and noun derived from it which kept recurring. At first this frequency didn't capture my attention, thinking them part and parcel of the text. However, continued exposure to the Hebrew made the two words stick out as having special significance. And so my appreciation of them grew instead of glossing over their frequent appearance.

As for the word at hand, it's *davar*, the same spelling for both verb and noun whose usage offers an important insight into understanding how the Bible comes together. Certainly you can find tons of material on *davar* through books, lexicons and on the Internet. By no means does this article add to such information except that it will regard *davar* from the vantage point of *lectio divina*. This will be done by presenting some prime examples, keeping an eye out for any patterns which can dispose us more readily to be in God's presence which is the intent of this document.

Because *davar* is all over the place biblically speaking, it's hard to know where to begin. In order to get a handle on this, let's shift gears a bit and take a look at one the most familiar verses in scripture, the beginning of St John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." *Logos*, of course, is a well-known name or title for Jesus Christ. More broadly, it means speech, principle or thought and has a more cerebral ring to it which is borne out by its important role in Greek philosophy.

Vs. 1 uses *Logos* in three ways to evoke its relationship with God: *Logos* present in the beginning (place of origin but more than that), *Logos* was with

God (The preposition *pros* is indicative of direction toward-which) and *Logos* was God. It's almost as though the *pros* is the agent for bringing about the *Logos*' arrival to God. That is to say, it makes God come full circle or around to the beginning. The preposition *pros* is crucial in that the *Logos* has an active relation in the direction of God, if you will; i.e., *pros* is indicative that it never ceases.

Should we substitute *Davar* for *Logos*, we have a clearer idea of where all this is going. We can do this through a basic experiment which involves the substitution of terms: "In the beginning was the *Davar*, and the *Davar* was with God, and the *Davar* was God." Chances are this is closer to the Jewish sense of Jesus' relationship with his Father compared with the more abstract Greek. That's why I had modified this article's title. In sum, *davar* is great for offering insight into the Jewish-ness of Jesus.

Although John is chock-full of theological insights, he can remain too Greek sounding. That's fine because he is addressing a larger audience, educated Gentiles of the Mediterranean world. If John used *davar*, he'd confine his message to Jews, and news about Jesus' salvific work might not spread. As for *Logos*, the problem is you can't cozy up to it that easily. Some people would call it too Platonic.

One more point needs to be considered for good measure, the conjunctive *kai* ('and'), the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *v-* which prefaces the beginning of many verses. Sometimes it's translated and at other times not so. In John's Gospel it occurs twice to show the equivalence between *Logos* and God. I.e., being aware of the two is important because it helps make the connection between all three instances of *Logos*: "and the Word was with God"...and the Word was God."

Note that with regard to the relationship between God and *Logos*, the past tense ('was') is used three times. We could ask somewhat fancifully, is the *Logos*...the *Davar*...still in the past? It would be so if it weren't for the phrase *en arche*, "in the beginning." The *Logos* is past only with respect to *arche* which is just as difficult to translate adequately as *Logos*. *En arche* is the beginning in the sense of the first principle of something or as a sum total. If we

had to posit *Logos* somewhere, the past tense would be just fine because it has nothing to do with any past-ness relative to his divine nature. Thus *arche*, while left hanging somewhat and perhaps deliberately and mysteriously so, can be taken as the Father. As for the Son or *Logos*, he “was” in this *arche* insofar as he comes forth from him into the world, for that’s the way we would view him. Actually it’d be a bit awkward for John to say, “In the beginning is the word.” And so from the human perspective, the *Logos* as “was in the beginning” by no means precludes his presence either now or in the future.

After this somewhat circuitous but hopefully helpful introduction, we can get down to business concerning *davar*. Consider the very first occurrences in the Bible, a good a place to start as anywhere. With regard to the verb, it’s found first succinctly put in Gn 8.15: “Then God *davar* to Noah.” What follows is the command for Noah and his family to leave the ark along with “every living thing.” Note that pertains to all animals: not one pair of lions, another of giraffes and so forth. Compare this mass exit with 6.19 where Noah brings “two of every sort into the ark,” i.e., one male and one female. As a result of this first *davar* there’s a vast multiplication of other than human living beings which disembark. So between entry (pairs only) into the ark and some one-hundred and fifty days spent on it we have a wondrous, almost magical expansion of every conceivable animal exiting the ark. Yet during this period the ark didn’t burst apart but contained them all. Such is the power of the Lord *davar* to Noah.

The reason why the ark managed to hold together without bursting asunder while floating upon the water is found at the beginning of Chapter Eight. This is before the Lord *davar* to Noah who “remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark.” Note the distinction between all beasts and cattle, the latter being the most valuable by reason of what they can offer by way of food, etc. So this remembering comes first and culminates later in *davar*. The verb is *zakar* from which derives the noun meaning a male descendant. Thus remembering is far more than recalling a past event. Rather, it’s transmission of life itself extending beyond Noah and the humans on board the ark to all living beings. Within the ark *zakar* worked its divine magic, if you will, by multiplying the original pairs of all animals. The actual word in 8.19 is “families” or *mishpachah* which alternately can mean tribe, genus or

kind.

Obviously the verb *davar* has many other references, but now let's turn attention to the noun with the same spelling. The first instance is Gn 11.1, quite intriguing: "Now the whole earth had one language and few words." The noun for language is *saphah*, literally lip and the noun *davar* with an adjective meaning one in reference to earth but is in the plural (*'achadym*), literally "words one." You get the idea that the entire earth is an animate being with a single pair of lips. *'Erets* is the noun, often applicable as that which belongs to someone or a nation, the two essentially being one. Note that the presence of people isn't mentioned but implied. Thus we can say that the earth is unified on all levels of existence, not just the human one. From this unity comes "*davar (devarym, plural) one*" which reflects the composition of this *'erets*. Such a unity existed from the beginning and mirrors the Garden of Eden. Despite the quick degradation of humankind from the man's expulsion, such unity had remained, even through the devastating worldwide flood.

This worldwide unity started to disintegrate with migrations from the east, a direction signaling the place from which the man had been banished, Eden. The further away people moved from the east, the greater the chance the earth...*'erets*...had of losing its one lip or *saphah*. At one point people decided to erect a tower, symbolic of first reaching and then of claiming the heavens. As soon as the top brick had been laid on the tower, the structure did not crumble but remained or so intimates the text. In other words, there's no clear indication that the Lord destroyed it. Instead, at this point he decided to go down (cf. vs. 7), a direction opposite of the tower which had gone up. The divine going down effected confusion of the builders' lip (singular) or *saphah*, not their *davar*, for *saphah* being necessary to utter *davar*. So from this point on any human *davar* ceased to be one as according to vs. 1.

As noted above, the first instance of the verb *davar* is from the Lord to Noah after the flood. However, before this the Lord does plenty of speaking, only he employs the verb *'amar* which means to say and has a broader usage. When you *'amar* you actually utter words as well as say things non-verbally. This includes indicating, inferring, implying as well as hinting at. You don't even need to communicate to another person. Instead, you can say a thing to

yourself, for even thinking about something is included in this word. Ecclesiastes or The Preacher has a number of examples such as 3.17: “I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked.” As for the very first use of ‘*amar*, it occurs in Gen 1.3, the beginning of creation: “And God ‘*amar*, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light” [1.3].

Note that the ‘*amar* of Genesis is preceded by the Spirit or *Ruach* of God moving over the face of the waters, *rachaph* being the verb which means to brood over, as a bird over its young. We could say that from this *rachaph* emerges the first ‘*amar* and for all intensive purposes, each subsequent example of ‘*amar* right down to the present. So if you want to trace back your own ‘*amar*, consider how it relates—and it does so directly, not through a lengthy chain reaction—to the *rachaph* by the *Ruach*. As for this first ‘*amar*, the Lord is doing it by himself, pondering what form it will take. A split second exists between ‘*amar* and *yehy*, “let there be,” the result of which is light. Actually there’s no pause between the ‘*amar* of vs. 3 and the one of vs. 6, the second ‘*amar* followed by *yehy*, this with respect to the firmament. As we know so well, the divine ‘*amar* continues with the six days of creation, thinking aloud all the things associated with them into existence.

Although the creative narrative is laid out as taking place over six days, objectively they can be taken another way. That is to say, we can look at them as six thoughts, six ‘*amar*. All do not succeed each other sequentially but are given as one. The reason lays in the conjunctive *v-* translated as “and.” That means from God’s point of view...not ours...all six ‘*amar* fall into each other; i.e., they happen at once. Not only that, they continue to happen because as noted in the last paragraph, ‘*amar* is extended fresh as then down to the present. Our minds work like that as well. We can come off with a whole bunch of thoughts which are present simultaneously and free from the constraints of space and time.

At the end of this creative process in vs. 31 (actually it’s misleading because it implies distance separating all the ‘*amar*), we have God ceasing from his ‘*amar* in vs. 31 and taking stock of what flowed from it. Now ‘*amar* transitions from that which is interior to him to what’s outside him. That is, he saw (*ra’ah*) all that he had made followed by *hineh* or “behold” which expresses completion as

well as admiration and astonishment. Actually this *ra'ah* brings the inner 'amar into being, putting it out there. The transition of 'amar into *hineh* and finally into *ra'ah* results in everything being very good, the adverb *me'od* implying excessiveness, abundance. Note that the threefold action takes place on day six which is described as having both evening and morning. Evening comes first which is why the Sabbath begins on the evening.

There are many instances when *davar* comes first followed by 'amar, for both are combined and work together. One such example is Num 1.1: *davar* comes at the beginning of the verse and 'amar at the end: "The Lord *davar* to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting on the first day of the second month in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, 'amar." A couple of points worth mentioning. The conjunctive *v-* begins this book and goes untranslated. It can show two things. First, the close connection with the preceding book (Leviticus). Secondly, the Lord gets the ball rolling right away with his *davar* supplemented by 'amar. As often the case, a lot can be sandwiched in between the two verbs as we have here. The content flowing from *davar* gets out in the open after which it's communicated to whomever the Lord is addressing, that is, through 'amar. Usually 'amar in this second location is prefaced with *l-*, literally "to say of."

While the example just given may be a bit cumbersome, we find many abbreviated forms when the two verbs are used such as Num 9.9: "And the Lord *davar* to Moses 'amar (again, the preposition *l-*). Usually such manners of address are found when the Lord is dealing with people like Moses and prophets who are his mouthpieces. Such modes of expression are found throughout the Bible and make you wonder how all this comes about in real life. Humans engage in *davar* as well as 'amar. When using the former, something like a whole form or plan comes from one's mouth as directed to another person. As for the latter, it can be either making a simple statement or pondering within oneself as the Ecclesiastes quote above reveals. As just demonstrated we have the preposition *l-* (to) prefaced to 'amar but only when *davar* is used beforehand. The inner wholeness suggested by the *davar* comes out to (that is, *l-*) 'amar where it becomes manifest. All this, of course, takes a split second.

Outlining the way the two verbs function helps dispels a popular way we think God communicates, namely, that the person involved actually hears a voice. Though we may acknowledge this as a bit clumsy, admittedly the image remains difficult to shake. We imagine someone like Moses or Isaiah going about their business when interrupted suddenly by a voice emanating from above. Only they can hear it and not anyone else in the vicinity. It's perfectly normal to take this communication as an external and even dramatic fashion followed by a whole bunch of commands. Then the voice disappears for a while, returns with another command and so forth while the person involved follows through on it pretty much on his own and in hostile surroundings.

This primitive though effective image can preclude us from being more attentive to the way a prophetic type person picks up the divine *davar*->*l'**amar* or the giving of an utterance to assuming recognition of it. The whole process takes place within a nanosecond, so quickly that we're unaware of it. That's why we need to slow down the process and appreciate all the elements involved. After all, we're made in God's image and likeness. Our identity with God enables us to see how this mechanism actually operates. If he is speaking in this fashion, we can pick up within ourselves a mirror image of it. The perceived perception of distance between God and us therefore is bridged.

With this in mind, we can do a little pretending, of some acting. Let's take one of the prophets famous for the Lord speaking with him, Ezekiel for example. A quick look reveals that he has the most number of communications. That is to say, the *davar* of the Lord comes to him along with the verb *'amar* prefaced with preposition *l-*. Actually this happens right away, the first reference being in 1.3 where the divine *davar* comes on its own power to Ezekiel. It's as though this *davar* were independent from the Lord and in a sense, it is. Implied is a distance between *davar* and the Lord, meaning that this distance needs to be traversed. The distance, of course, is neither spacial nor temporal but between the divine and the human. Also implied is that the recipient (Ezekiel) isn't aware directly of the source, the Lord. He's more taken up with listening to it, for he has to receive the *davar* and decipher it. Interestingly, the instance at hand has no audible *davar*. It assumes the form of a vision which begins in vs. 4 and continues for the rest of Chapter One.

Each and everyone of us walks around with some kind of ‘*amar* going on in our heads. As noted at the beginning of this document, it goes on either verbally or non-verbally. You don’t have to be communicating with another person to do ‘*amar*. We all ruminates in silence and have the choice of either not disclosing our thoughts or letting them be known. So when the Lord wishes to communicate, an ‘*amar* within himself, he intends to have it pass over to a person or about something important. Once out there, if you will, ‘*amar* assumes the form of *davar* or a word as embodiment of what the Lord had been thinking. That’s why *davar* is also a noun whereas there’s no equivalent form for ‘*amar*. As for the communication involved, someone like Ezekiel picks up on this right away without hearing a thing, a sign that he’s a prophet. Again, being such doesn’t mean you hear an external voice from the sky above as popularly understood.

One outstanding instance of the Lord *davar* is with Moses as recounted in Ex 33.11. The Hebrew reads literally: “And the Lord used to *davar* to Moses faces to faces as which he is speaking man to his friend.” This type of *davar* is as direct as you can get or as the popular expression has it, “in your face.” Note the plural form *panym* or faces which is connected to the same word similarly in the plural by the preposition ‘*el-* (to). It’s as though multiple faces are lined up with an equal number of faces. In both instances the multiple faces belong one to individual, not to a number of them ². This seems to indicate not only the directness of *davar* but the intimacy involved with the Lord taking the initiative. Moses, in turn, responds with his multiple faces reflecting this *davar*.

There comes a point when the divine *davar* makes a transition into a relationship with Jesus Christ which we could call divine revelation. As discussed earlier, with John it assumes the more abstract *logos*, capital *L-* when referring to him. Although John’s Gospel begins with this *Logos*, the Baptist heralds his coming, historically speaking, as he claim to be a voice crying in the wilderness which is in accord with Is 40.3.

The Hebrew has *midbar* for wilderness or desert which does not have as its

² I’m reminded of Rev 4.8: “And the four living creatures...are full of eyes all round and within and day and night they never cease to sing.” i.e., faces and eyes can represent full attentiveness to what’s transpiring.

root *davar*, to speak in the sense of giving utterance. Nevertheless, it's tempting to expand *midbar* loosely as "place of speaking" or place where the divine *davar* resides and does its thing. That's precisely where we find John before embarking on his mission and where he had been crying out Isaiah's words, "Make straight the way of the Lord" [Jn 1.23]. That means while in the *midbar*, the Lord *davar* to him to consider the prophet Isaiah. For example, we can envision the Lord telling him to read Isaiah carefully, and by reason of his call, he will find the appropriate words to use. More importantly, John will be prepared to recognize the *Logos* or the *Davar* of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Bible the Lord chooses to initiate various conversations with his people, *davar* being the expression of his inner '*amar*. As has been pointed out, we can take the latter as originator of the former, thought prior to its concrete expression. There arises the question of how God can hold this *davar* within himself without obsessing over it. To put it another way, how can God keep his '*amar* prior to manifestation as *davar* from getting the better of him? Obviously this is putting it in human terms.

We have this experience frequently when we wish to say something, but the time isn't right to express it. That means we have to refrain from speaking while all sorts of thoughts are roiling and rolling around within us. Inner restraint is called for but difficult to apply, let alone conjure up. If we can tame this inner turmoil, we can do just about anything else in life. It boils down to how can we live with our thoughts while not allowing them to take us over. As for the Lord, he faces this challenge constantly as he watches his people misbehave yet doesn't step in, respecting their free choice.

Anyone capable of coming up with an answer as how to manage this restraint would be achieve world fame instantaneously and be considered a kind of savior. People desire it above all else but are afraid to admit it. More accurately, they don't know how unruly their minds can be as they obsess over such thoughts. In other words, their '*amar* turns into *davar* which then sets about ruining their lives. This is the point where you hear a lot of talk about how daily we're bombarded with all kinds of stuff that militates against maintaining inner silence. It's acknowledged but unfortunately brushed off for lack of insight and training.

John the Baptist was that voice crying in the desert here he had spent some time although we don't have details about how long. That's more or less incidental, for we can assume he received some *davar* from the Lord in order to enter the *midbar*. In other words, the two worked together in order to sustain him. That's why he could eat just locusts and honey. While there, John must have wrestled with the *davar* which taught him when to transform it into preaching. This, of course, is in light of Mt 3.1: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea." The verb is *kerusso* or more properly to announce something after the manner of a herald. Such *kerusso* was first about repentance and then someone coming after him though at this point the person of Jesus Christ isn't mentioned. It takes Jesus himself to appear after which John recognizes him.

So where is the point of this recognition? It goes all the way back before both John and Jesus were born or while they were still in the wombs of their mothers. Between then and Mary and Elizabeth meeting at the Jordan River we have no contact or better, there was no need for such contact. It had been made already as Lk 1.44 reveals: "And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb, and Elisabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit." The verb to leap is *skirtao*, also as to bound as lambs or young horses. John present as a fetus was just as attentive to the divine *davar* as he would be later in the *midbar*. It's as though never he had been born nor had died, being outside both. John received the impetus to begin filling his role upon hearing the greeting or *aspasmos* of Mary, pregnant with Jesus. Note that Jesus didn't do anything. It was John who did the leaping.

In sum, John retained memory of this *skirtao* throughout his life. Although there was some relationship between the two, chances are they did not meet. Even if it were possible, deliberately they refrained from doing so. There was no need for it, since before coming to birth the point of recognition and relationship had been established. Later in life after John had baptized Jesus, he disappeared off the scene, having been shut up in prison. There he continued to follow the activity of Jesus with both sides exchanging messengers. Jesus doesn't seem to have taken the initiative; rather, he left it up to his disciples. So despite being confined, John was fully aware of Jesus' activity yet

had some doubts as to him being “he who is to come” [Mt 11.3].

The reason for bringing up this unique relationship between John and Jesus is that it ends as it has begun. John recognizes Jesus (the *Logos*...the *Davar*) while both were in the womb, the trigger for this recognition being Mary’s greeting of Elizabeth. From that point onward both are born and then part without meeting each other. Again, there was no need for them to do so. At the Jordan River some thirty years later when both were adults they met for the first time.

Each goes his separate way. Jesus begins his ministry, and John ends up in prison before being beheaded. Thus John was able to fall silent from his preaching...his *davar*...without being consumed by the fact that no longer was it needed. This is a pattern that can be put to use when engaged in spreading the divine *davar*. You receive it in a manner not unlike the prophets noted above after which you proclaim it. A time comes on its own telling you to cease because it has fulfilled its role. Then you pass off the scene instead of trying to hog it, content as John was in prison to follow Christ’s mission.

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