

Special Revelation

1 INTRODUCTION

So far, our discussion of revelation has involved what we have termed *general revelation*—that mode of revelation that is marked by continuousness, universality, generality, and clarity. In other words, general revelation is God’s communication of himself through a means that is available to all people at all times and in all places. Through the created order and the human constitution, God has revealed a knowledge of himself that is adequate to place man under divine accountability. Based on the knowledge gained through general revelation, mankind should respond in worship and thankfulness. However, their fallen condition has led them to reject God, instead suppressing the truth revealed through unrighteousness.

The other mode of revelation identified by theologians has been termed *special revelation*, although other designations have been given. Erickson, for instance, refers to it as *particular revelation*,¹ while Warfield uses the terms *supernatural* and *soteriological*.² All four terms are appropriate and distinguish it from general revelation by identifying key characteristics of this mode of revelation.

2 DEFINITION

Special revelation has been defined in various ways, depending on what an individual identifies as the key characteristics of this mode of revelation. Lewis and Demarest define it as “God’s free and personal communication of himself that offers persons privileged communication with the Creator.”³ MacArthur and Mayhue speak of it simply as God’s revelation “when he reveals himself directly and in greater detail.”⁴ In both of these instances, the authors identify special revelation as specific in detail and direct to its recipients. That is to say, not *everyone* receives special revelation as they do general revelation, but only those to whom God chooses to reveal himself in such ways.

Some theologians, however, go beyond these details by identifying a redemptive element to special revelation. Erickson writes, “By special revelation we mean God’s manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him.”⁵ Likewise, Pettegrew defines it as “God’s personal disclosure of Himself to us through the Living and

¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 200.

² Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Louisville, KY: SBTS Press, 2014), 74.

³ Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 100.

⁴ John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, ed., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 74.

⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 201.

Written Word so that we might come to know Him in salvation and glorify Him through our lives.”⁶ Perhaps the most detailed commentary on the distinctions between general and special revelation, however, were made by Warfield, who wrote,

*These two species or stages of revelation have been commonly distinguished from one another by the distinctive names of natural and supernatural revelation, or general and special revelation, or natural and soteriological revelation. Each of these modes of discriminating them has its particular fitness and describes a real difference between the two in nature, reach and purpose. The one is communicated through the media of natural phenomena, occurring in the course of Nature or of history; the other implies an intervention in the natural course of things and is not merely in source but in mode supernatural. The one is addressed generally to all intelligent creatures, and is therefore accessible to all men; the other is addressed to a special class of sinners, to whom God would make known Him salvation. The one has in view to meet and supply the natural need of creatures for knowledge of their God; the other to rescue broken and deformed sinners from their sin and its consequences.*⁷

Thus, Warfield and others observe a redemptive purpose to special revelation that is not captured by some definitions. They suggest that God’s particular revelation is for the purpose of allowing sinners to enter into a redemptive relationship with him.

To a certain degree, this specific function of special revelation is warranted, for the majority of God’s special revelation in Scripture concerns how God has determined to bring mankind back into proper relationship with himself. This intention, however, does not seem to completely describe our observations of how God has used special revelation. As Erickson notes, special revelation *antedates* humanity’s fall into sin:

*It is commonly assumed that special revelation is a postfall phenomenon necessitated by human sinfulness. It is frequently considered remedial. Of course, it is not possible for us to know the exact status of the relationship between God and humankind before the fall. We simply are not told much about it. Adam and Eve may have had such an unclouded consciousness of God that they were constantly conscious of him everywhere, in their own internal experience and in their perception of nature. If so, this consciousness of him could be thought of as general revelation. There is no indication that such was the case, however. The account of God’s looking for Adam and Eve in the Garden subsequent to their sin (Gen. 3:8) gives the impression that this was one in a series of special encounters. Further, the instructions given to humans (Gen. 1:28) regarding their place and activity in the creation suggest a particular communication from Creator to creature; it does not seem that these instructions were merely read off from observation of the created order. If this is the case, special revelation antedated the fall.*⁸

⁶ Larry Pettegrew, cited in Andy Snider, *Theology 1* class notes (Sun Valley, CA: TMS).

⁷ Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, 74.

⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 202.

On the other hand, sin most certainly made the need for special revelation “more acute.”⁹ As Erickson explains,

*The direct presence of God, the most direct and complete form of special revelation, was lost. In addition, God now had to speak regarding matters that were previously not of concern. The problems of sin, guilt, and depravity had to be resolved; means of atonement, redemption, and reconciliation had to be provided. And now sin diminished human comprehension of general revelation, thus lessening its efficacy. Therefore, special revelation had to become remedial with respect to both knowledge of, and relationship to, God.*¹⁰

So, in summary, special revelation in a strict sense deals with God’s direct and personal address to particular individuals and certain times and places. However, a comprehensive understanding of special revelation must also incorporate its teleological purpose: the redemption of sinners.

3 CHARACTERISTICS

Just as general revelation was characterized by features such as continuity, universality, clarity, and generality, so special revelation has certain elements that differentiate it. Erickson identifies these as special revelation’s personal, anthropic, and analogical natures.

3.1 PERSONAL

There is a personal nature to special revelation. As Erickson writes, “A personal God presents himself to persons.”¹¹ This is seen first and foremost in God’s disclosure of his personal name. In the ANE, a person’s name was considered an expression of their character or conditions.¹² Thus, when Moses asked God what he should tell the Israelites regarding who had sent him, God responded by saying, “‘I AM WHO I AM’; and he, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exod 3:14). Later on, after Moses had pled for God’s mercy on the Israelites, he asked God to show him the divine glory—the true nature of God’s character. God told him that he would make his “goodness pass before you” while proclaiming “the name of Yahweh” (Exod 33:19). When the event occurred, God spoke these words to Moses:

Then Yahweh passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness, who keeps loyal love for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation” (Exod 34:6-7).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 203.

¹² Allen P. Ross, “~ve,” in *NIDOTTE*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 4:147.

Thus the significance of Yahweh's name was bound in the disclosure of his divine character. As God communicated his name to people, they were exposed to his character. The two are bound together.

Another aspect of the personal nature of special revelation is seen in God's establishment of covenant relationships with individuals—Noah (Gen 6:18), Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), Isaac (Gen 26:2-5), Jacob (Gen 28:13-15), David (2 Sam 7:8-16)—and with the nation of Israel (Exod 19:5-6; Jer 31:31-34).

However, a word of clarification is necessary when speaking about the personal nature of revelation. While God has revealed himself personally to us, this does not come through mystical or subjective means. Rather, this personal knowledge of God has come through objective, propositional truth.

3.2 ANTHROPIC

We have already explored the incomprehensibility of God as a barrier to man's autonomous knowledge of God and thus necessitating God's revelation of himself. There is simply no way for finite man to understand an infinite God. God is described in Scripture as "spirit" (John 4:24), meaning that he transcends the physical realm. We cannot investigate using scientific inquiry. This means that he is "outside our sensory experience.... Humans cannot reach up to investigate God and would not understand even if they could."¹³

God, of course, knows this, and has condescended to our limited means to understanding by revealing himself through *anthropic* communication. He has accommodated himself to our limitations by using means of communication meaningful and understandable to us.

First, God has used human language to communicate. We find Hebrew the predominant language used in the OT, as this was the language spoken by Israel throughout the majority of their history. However, their captivity in Babylon exposed them to the Aramaic language, and thus we find that portions of later books were composed in that language as well. By the time of the NT, the Hellenistic culture had adopted Greek as the *lingua franca*, a language that carried on into the Roman empire. But even in this, the Greek employed by the NT writers was not the classical Greek used by past philosophers. Instead, they wrote in Koine Greek, the vernacular language of the people. They also employed Aramaic and sometimes Hebrew expressions familiar to the predominantly Jewish audience of Jesus' time.

Second, God used human categories of thought and experience to communicate. We see this in the way the biblical writers spoke of the world around them. They spoke of the world as they it was observed. They spoke of the "sunrise," not in a technical means of scientific empiricism, but as simple observation. They also spoke using common features of human thought such as figurative language, pictures, and symbols.

He also used common experiences to communicate, such as dreams and visions. Not every dream experienced by a person was a revelation by God, but when he did use a dream to communicate to someone, he was using an experience common to all people.

¹³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 204.

Similarly, when Jesus appeared on earth as the incarnate Son of God, he was revealing God using the common experiences of everyday life as a human being.

When God appeared to humanity, he used the modality of an ordinary human being. Apparently Jesus carried no visible sign of distinctiveness. Most persons took him for an ordinary, average human being, the son of Joseph the carpenter. He came as a human, not an angel or a being clearly recognizable as a god.¹⁴

We recognize, of course, that God revealed himself at times in clearly supernatural ways. People heard God speak from directly from heaven (John 12:28). Yet even here, he spoke using recognizable human language. People witnessed God appear in theophanic glory at Sinai and in the tabernacle. Yet his essential nature was shrouded in clouds to obscure his true essence. These would be instances in which the glory of God's being was left in mystery. There is still only so much man can understand about God, and these episodes simply illustrate that fact. Nevertheless, when the biblical writers spoke of God's glory, they often employed common features of everyday life, i.e., storm clouds, lightning, etc., to convey God's glorious, sovereign nature (Hab 3:4).

3.3 ANALOGICAL

Another aspect of God's condescension to people is through the use of what Erickson terms *analogical* language. By this, he means that "God draws on those elements in the human universe of knowledge that can serve as a likeness of or partially convey the truth in the divine realm."¹⁵ He goes on to differentiate between *univocal* and *equivocal* language. In the former, a term is used that has the same meaning regardless of the subject used (the word "tall" can mean the same thing whether we speak of a person or a mountain). In the latter, a term has a different meaning depending on the subject and context of the sentence (the word "row" means something different when we speak of a line of trees versus when we speak of the action of a person propelling a boat through water).

Erickson notes, however, that "whenever God has revealed himself, he has selected elements that are univocal in his universe and ours."¹⁶ Thus, when the biblical writers refer to God's character and actions with words like love, life, power, etc., their readers and hearers would not have been confused by their meaning, as if they were being introduced to concepts wholly alien to human life. They may have to recalibrate their understanding of the degree to which these words reflect divine qualities. Nevertheless, the categories themselves form a close enough analogy to human life and experience to effectively communicate meaning. Erickson puts it this way:

This analogical knowledge is possible because God selects the components he uses. Unlike humans, God is knowledgeable of both sides of the analogy. If humans by their own natural unaided reason seek to understand God by constructing an analogy involving God and humanity, the result is always some sort of conundrum, for they are in effect working with an equation containing two unknowns..... Not knowing the relationship between God's being (or nature, or essence) and that

¹⁴ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of humanity, humans cannot construct a meaningful analogy. God, on the other hand, knowing all things completely, therefore knows which elements of human knowledge and experience are sufficiently similar to the divine truth that they can be used to help construct a meaningful analogy.¹⁷

This reinforces the fact that God's incomprehensibility requires God to initiate communication with people. God is a perfect communicator, and he reveals himself in ways that are meaningful to us. This places a responsibility of us to not go beyond what has been revealed. Whenever man has done this, the outcome has always led to obscuration of the truth, for we inevitably create a god of our own understanding.

4 MODES

We saw that God revealed himself generally to humanity through the created order and the human constitution. Similarly, God has revealed himself specially to people through several different modes. We will discuss these various modes now.

4.1 DIRECT ACTS

We learn from the biblical text that at times throughout human history, God has revealed himself directly to people. He directly addressed Adam and Eve (Gen 1:28-30; 2:16-17; 3:9, 11, 16-19). He spoke with Moses personally when he commissioned him to lead Israel out of Egypt (Exod 3:4ff), and many times after that as he led the nation through the wilderness (Deut 34:10). He addressed the nation of Israel directly when he entered into covenant with them at Sinai (Deut 5:4). He spoke audibly to the witnesses of Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:17) and transfiguration (Matt 17:5). At times, God addressed people by means of prophets, who acted as his spokesmen (Heb 1:1). And numerous times throughout redemptive history, God attested his revelation with miraculous signs. These signs were, in themselves, divine revelation, for they drew the observer's attention to the divine origin of the work. They also served to verify the authenticity of a prophet and his message (Exod 3-14; Acts 2:22)

4.2 DREAMS AND VISIONS

Scripture also reveals that God has communicated with individuals through the medium of visions. Isaiah's vision of Yahweh in the tabernacle (Isa 6:1-4) and John's vision of Christ on the throne (Rev 1:10-16) both exemplify what we might term "waking visions." In other cases, God spoke to individuals while they slept, using vivid dreams that were symbolic of what would occur in the future. Daniel's dreams concerning the coming messianic kingdom (Dan 7:1ff), as well as the dreams of Joseph (Gen 37), Pharaoh (Gen 41) and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 2; 4) typify this mode of special revelation.

4.3 INCARNATION OF CHRIST

The Bible explains that the ultimate mode of special revelation is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. This momentous event was the pinnacle event in human history, when God condescended to humanity to such

¹⁷ Ibid., 206.

a degree that he took on human form (Phil 2:6-7). The perfect son of God, who existed eternally with the Father (John 1:1-2), became flesh and dwelt among men (John 1:14). In this way, the writer to the Hebrews says that with this final revelation, God has spoken to us “in his Son” (Heb 1:2). Though God cannot be seen, in taking on human form, Jesus has explained him (John 1:18). Thus, the NT writers speak of Jesus as the true “image of God” (Col 1:15) and “the exactly representation of his nature” (Heb 1:3). To see Jesus is to see the Father (John 14:9-10). Chester explains it this way:

Jesus so perfectly reveals God that He is “the exact imprint” of the divine being (Hebrews 1 v 3, ESV). His revelation is identical to that which is revealed to such a perfect degree that He is God. Imagine a poet writing a poem. Inevitably the poet expresses something of themselves in the poem. The poem gives us a window onto their thoughts and emotions. Now imagine God as an infinite and perfect poet who speaks a word which so fully expresses Himself that it is one with Himself. Jesus is that eternal Word, revealing the Father and identical to the Father in every way except that the Son is the revelation while the Father is the one who reveals.¹⁸

Thus, in Jesus Christ, we have a full and complete revelation of “who God is and what he is like.”¹⁹

4.4 SCRIPTURE

While Jesus Christ is the final and ultimate form of special revelation, Scripture is an equally authoritative mode wherein God has spoken to mankind through written testimony. The uniqueness of Scripture as God’s special revelation is that it takes the propositional truths of God—his mind, his ways, his righteousness, his works, etc.—and preserves it as “a lasting and forever-settled witness to the unchanging God.”²⁰ The remainder of this study will explore and discuss the numerous aspects of Scripture.

5 SUMMARY

Special revelation is God’s particular disclosure of himself to specific individuals at certain times and places. It is God’s manifestation of himself to particular persons at definite times and places, enabling those persons to enter into a redemptive relationship with him. Using personal, anthropic, and analogic means, God has revealed himself by direct address, dreams and visions, the incarnate Jesus, and the written Word.

¹⁸ Tim Chester, *Delighting in the Trinity: Why Father, Son and Spirit are Good News* (Fayetteville, AR: Good Book Company, 2010), 55.

¹⁹ MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 74.

²⁰ Ibid.

MacArthur and Mayhue identify some important distinctions between the quality and function of general and special revelation that help to place all of what we've discussed in proper relation. Specifically, they identify three key distinctions between these two modes of revelation:²¹

1. The agents of general revelation in nature will perish (Isa. 40:8; Matt 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:33; 1 Pet. 1:24; 2 Pet. 3:10), but the Word of special revelation will not pass away, because it is forever (Ps. 119:89; Isa. 40:8; Matt. 24:35; Mark 13:31; Luke 21:22; 1 Pet. 1:25).
2. The means of general revelation is nature was cursed and is in bondage to corruption (Gen 3:1-24; Rom. 8:19-23). It is therefore not the perfect world God originally created (Gen 1:31). However, the Word of special revelation is inspired by God and thus always perfect and holy (Pss. 19:7-9; 119:140; 2 Tim. 3:16; Rom. 7:12).
3. The scope of general revelation in nature is severely limited compared to the multidimensional expanse of special revelation in Scripture.

To further expand on these distinctions, MacArthur and Mayhue present a helpful table comparing and contrasting the different features of special and general revelation:²²

General Revelation in Scripture	Special Revelation in Scripture
Only condemns	Condemns and redeems
Harmonizes with special revelation but provides no new material	Not only enhances and explains in detail the content of general revelation but also goes significantly beyond that explanation
In its perceived message needs to be confirmed by Scripture	Is self-authenticating and self-confirming in its claim to be God's Word
Needs to be interpreted in light of special revelation	Needs no other revelation to be interpreted since it interprets itself
Is never equated with Scripture by Scripture	Has no peer

6 EXCURSUS: UNWRITTEN REVELATION

Before moving fully to the topic of Scripture, there is one peripheral but related issue concerning revelation that deserve at least a cursory discussion. In 2011, Dr. William D. Barrick presented a paper at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in which he addressed the topic of unwritten revelation. In this paper, he asks a profound question—one which may seem odd and even unnerving to the lay believer: “Do we have within the pages of our Bibles all of the revelation that God ever spoke to mankind?”²³

²¹ Ibid., 74-75.

²² Taken from MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 75.

²³ William D. Barrick, “Conscience, Oral Tradition, Natural Religion, or Later Insertion?: Unwritten Revelation in Genesis 1-11” (unpublished research paper, 2011), 2.

He asks the question because as we read through Genesis 1-11, we are confronted with numerous instances in which the patriarchs seemed to act and speak based on knowledge which, for all intents and purposes, should not have been available to them at such an early stage in redemptive history. Barrick provides four examples that illustrate this phenomenon.

6.1 SACRIFICES (4:3-5)

Long before God gave special instructions to Israel detailing the requirements of the sacrificial system, Cain and Abel are depicted as offering sacrifices to God. The details of the account are quite vague, but what we can gather is that both presented offerings from their respective vocations, yet only Abel's offering was accepted. We are not told why Cain's was rejected, nor do we read anywhere as to how they knew to bring sacrifices in the first place. How did Cain and Abel know to bring an offering to God? Did they learn this from God's slaying of the animal in 3:21? Was it a spontaneous act of thanksgiving brought about by the impulse of their natural conscious in recognition of what God had provided for them? Was it a later insertion of the Levitical sacrificial system into the Genesis account? Or did Cain and Abel receive direct revelation from God concerning sacrifices?

6.2 THE NAME OF YAHWEH (4:26)

Exodus 6:2-5 seems to suggest that the divine name "Yahweh" had remained undisclosed to the patriarchs—I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by My name, Yahweh, I did not make Myself known to them." In Genesis 4:26, however, we read that upon the birth of Seth's son, Enosh, "people began to call upon the name of Yahweh." How would people in Seth's day know "Yahweh" as God's name? And how could the name "Yahweh" appear on the lips of individuals like Eve (4:1)? Is this a case of Pentateuchal anachronism? Did later editors simply insert the name into the text? Or did God reveal himself by this name directly to someone in those times?

6.3 COVENANT (6:18)

Before the flood, God tells Noah that "I will establish My covenant with you." This covenant is later defined in 8:20-22 and 9:8-17. How would an individual so early in human history be familiar with the concept of covenant if this concept was not developed until the time of the Hittites and the Israelite exodus? Is this simply a retrojection of the covenant concept back into patriarchal and pre-patriarchal life? Is it simply referring to the creation mandate made by God in 1:26-28? Is it a concept borrowed from the older royal grant covenants? Or is this a concept provided by God himself through direct revelation?

6.4 CLEAN AND UNCLEAR ANIMALS (7:2)

God gave explicit instructions concerning the animals that Noah was to take onto the ark. Quizzically, these instructions include differentiating clean and unclean animals. How was Noah to know which animals were clean and unclean? How would he have already recognized the concept of clean and unclean before the Mosaic law? Was this yet another editorial anachronism? Was it a common custom of the time? Or did God provide direct information as to which animals were clean and unclean?

6.5 CONCLUSION

Barrick observes that “commentators and theologians have tended to ignore the option of unwritten special revelation for these four issues in Genesis 1-11.”²⁴ He goes on to point out that the NT writers identify both Abel and Enoch as prophets (Luke 11:50-51; Jude 14), indicating that they received direct revelation from God. Thus, he concludes,

Granted, written special revelation possesses a character and role very distinct from any potential unrecorded or unwritten special revelation. However, the God Who is, is a God Who speaks. He always has—even before written revelation. God has not supplied the contents of His unwritten revelation, because we do not need that unwritten revelation to know Him, to know His will, or to be obedient to him. In the primeval period and on into the patriarchal era, God’s people depended upon His unwritten revelation for understanding his will. Clues to the existence of that revelation appear in texts like Genesis 4:3-5, 26; 6:18; and 7:2.... If we admit that God has spoken to many individuals at many times, then why would we dare to limit him to speaking only those words contained in written revelation? What theological necessity requires that we muzzle God in the primeval and patriarchal eras, reducing His revelatory speech to only that which is recorded?²⁵

Barrick’s conclusion is a helpful diagnosis of our need for continued thought on the nature of divine revelation and the role that Scripture plays in it. It also brings up a host of other questions which are not addressed in his paper but may appear as we begin to unpack the concept of Scripture’s inspiration and inerrancy.

²⁴ Ibid., 10.

²⁵ Ibid.