In the Garden of Eden, Adam’s primary hermeneutical task was to name the creatures (Gen 2:20) over which he was to also have dominion-care. This task of taxonomy involved the use of language signs to identify by naming, so that the names he assigned to them would be their markers of identification. That is, the naming-words would correspond to the reality of the creatures’ identity in a very real way. This is not to say that the sign-words themselves could involve only one corresponding sign to their referent, but rather that Adam used what language God had given him to assign names that would create a correlation for identification and differentiation. In other words, we are not supposing a necessarily ontological correlation between the names and their referents, but rather that of a personal identification. For my purpose, nevertheless, what is of hermeneutical interest here is that Adam’s role in taxonomy was something of an interpretive one, and it was really the beginning of all human knowledge in all of its many diverse branches, and especially the sciences. Therefore, it can be said that this hermeneutical task was also prophetic in that it would include the gathering and interpreting of the boundless information available to him in the unfallen universe. This interpretative role of identifying and classifying involved the need for understanding language, gathering knowledge of the created world, proper interpretation, discovery and new insights that would have presumably lead to ever increasing science, art, literature, theology, philosophy, architecture, and all avenues of human life.

The simple truth is that all of that was, and is, entirely dependent upon the greatest gift given to humankind (besides life itself) and that is language and the ability to communicate. This is the basis of all meaning, all knowledge, and all of life: that language corresponds with reality in a coherent and comprehensible way. The reason for this foundational necessity for all of life is that the One who created this universe is a Triune communicating Godhead: God the Logos spoke and created all that is by his infinite power. The Logos is the reason, the rationale, the source of all meaning for the created and named universe, which includes all that is in it. Therefore, the creating and sustaining of reality is logical and orderly, since God must be consistent with himself as the one who ordered all reality according to his reasons and purposes. His rationale is absolute and perfect since it comes from his perfect person who is true in all that he is. Since there is an absolute, and necessary (since a perfect God can have no inconsistencies or contradictions), self-consistency and coherence in the Triune God, there is also logical consistency and coherence in his creation, though it is always contingent upon God who is the Logos.

In light of these considerations, therefore, to remove the possibility of all certitude for meaning in language, communication, and interpretation would be to strike at the very foundations of all reality and human existence. In response, it is quite important to confront the “hermeneutical suspicion” that is preached from every roof-top and in every sophomoric classroom in the universities today. If language itself can be shown to represent nothing more than suspect power-plays, prejudices, and abuses of power, then all communication truly cannot be trusted to convey any certain truth. In fact, even truthful communications become unbelievable in such a “universe of discourse.” If this temptation to disbelieve all communications, resulting from such a deep “hermeneutical incredulity,” then practically anything becomes believable. When Adam and Eve were lured into the hermeneutical quandary of questioning the very words of God, what began was the suspicion that language signs and their meanings are arbitrary and altogether unreliable, while casting doubt on the Author himself.

“Society is endangered to the extent that any of us loses faith in meaning, consequence.”
Robert Adams, Beauty in Photography, p. 70.

“. . . It is worth pointing out that that one of the implications of Jesus as representative reality is that every thing or fact in reality has some point of unity with, and some point of distinction from, every other thing or fact on reality.”
Graeme Goldsworthy, Gospel Centered Hermeneutics, p. 302.
In one sense, therefore, we can say that the “Fall” of humanity in the Garden of Eden began with incredulity towards the meaning of God’s words, redefinitions of absolutes as relative, and reassigning meaning arbitrarily towards disbelief, as continued today quite precisely in the Post-modern world of the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” In that world, words are understood as arbitrary systems of conventions that are indeterminate in meaning, but more seriously they are all suspect of ulterior agendas of power and abuse, and thus logically and “morally” untrustworthy. Within this view, all language contains bias and communicates them necessarily, making it impossible to have any certitude that there is true, or truthful, meaning and communication. Indeed, the situation today is even worse than the latter, in that it is widely assumed that since words cannot correspond with true meaning, interpretations of reality do not. And further, since there can be no certain meaning communicated then it is the interpreter who determines the meaning. In that hermeneutic, there is no correct interpretation, only preferences. With such a semantical, hermeneutical shift, removing language from meaning results in the disappearance of the author. In our understanding, it removes the Author of all reason and rationality, the meaning and the giver of meaning, the Logos. If there is “no meaning in the text,” the very fabric of all reality and human life in it can have no integration point for significance, for meaning, for any “correct interpretation” of anything at all. Without any epistemological possibility, or certitude, for meaning, then there can be no metaphysical affirmation of anything that transcends human reality (as God does), nor true knowledge of anything in created reality, nor true moral knowledge, and certainly not true theological knowledge. It comes as no surprise then to find that many modern philosophers cherish this idea of total indeterminacy, since God is in conclusion no longer a necessity, nor even within the realm of possible knowledge.

For example, in the modern movement of Deconstruction there is what is called slippage between the signified and the signer that leads to total skepticism about the possibility of language to communicate. This slippage in meaning is characterized as the function of absence not presence, as in the absence of the “transcendental signified” (i.e., God). Kevin Vanhoozer notes, “Deconstruction undoes logocentrism by unraveling the texture of every logos (e.g., consciousness, authorial intention, ideas, revelation).” This is found in such famous writers like Jacques Derrida who concluded that there is no objectivity in anything. In fact, there is no object to consider, only oppositions that need to be deconstructed by the interpreter. Thus the moniker “deconstruction,” to take apart and undo traditional distinctions and definitions until there is nothing there at all to discuss, except the comments of the observer. Unsurprisingly, Derrida’s conclusion was that there is no truth available about anything in any text or event in life. Vanhoozer notes that for Derrida this also meant a repudiation of all concepts of the “Word of God” as nothing but a privileged, logocentric, hermeneutical bluff that must be deconstructed. Similarly, Frederic Nietzsche’s famous cynical contributions to this hermeneutical agnosticism and atheism included the conclusion that “god is dead,” and primarily since there can be no absolute God’s eye point-of-view, humans must impose their own meaning as a fiction on reality. Quoting Mark Taylor and Roland Barthes, Vanhoozer summarizes well this movement towards deconstruction as follows:

“The death of God was the disappearance of the Author who had ascribed absolute truth and univocal meaning in world history and human experience.” The death of God is linked to the disappearance of the human author too: Roland Barthes writes that the refusal to assign a fixed meaning either to the world or to texts ‘liberates an activity we may call countertheological, properly revolutionary, for to refuse to halt meaning is finally to refuse God.”

With great irony, often unnoted, many Postmodern Deconstructionists use biblical categories when they consider all traditionalist assertions of epistemic certitude as idolatrous. To deconstruct the text of all meaning in their view is to

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3 Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, p. 22.
tear down all traditions of authority, interpretation, and truth so that there is no constraint leftover to obstruct the individual. Honestly considered, nevertheless, this total freedom presumably would also apply to the deconstruction of the Deconstructionists. As in all systems of total relativism, it collapses by force of its own anarchism upon itself, since it is self-contradicting in its absolute claim of absolutely no determinate meaning. If all truth is relative, then so is this sentence, along with the unsound edifice of Deconstructionism.

“. . . it is in its unity in diversity and its diversity in unity—evident everywhere—that the creation points to the Trinity.”

“. . . the one God is the source not just of the unity of the world but also of all the stunning diversity in it. Since, for Christians, the one God is the Holy Trinity, God is internally differentiated. Difference is not secondary, subsequent to unity; difference is equiprimordial with unity.”

In seeking a response to these matters, I found that Graeme Goldsworthy makes a profound observation for Christian theology that may guide us towards a resolution: that is, there is unity and distinction in the universe because of the Trinity. In the biblical view of all total reality is this profoundly important, yet simple, truth that there is unity and distinction between every single created thing, since there is unity and distinction within the triune Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (unity without fusion). The fundamental and irrevocable truth this conveys is, as logicians posit it, that A is not non A. Foundational to all understanding, of anything, it is a fact that there is both unity and differentiation between everything that is. The fundamental truth underlying everything is that God cannot be non-God, and from that all other distinctions flow: male cannot be female, a horse cannot be a tree, and rock cannot be a cloud, a human is not a rhinoceros, etc. ad infinitum! This contrasts with a variety of philosophies that purport to believe that there is fluidity and that in reality, that presumes things can transmorph into other things, or transmute, even in a shape-shifting magical way to become something entirely unlike what they were previously (in both genetic and chemical composition). In the Garden of Eden, the lie of the Serpent was a deception about reality, and effort to hide the true nature of reality through distorting the meaning and words of God himself. In other words, as a denial of the law of non-contradiction it was the lie that “A can be non-A.”

As Goldsworthy states it very well: “. . . it is worth pointing out that that one of the implications of Jesus as representative reality is that every thing or fact in reality has some point of unity with, and some point of distinction from, every other thing or fact on reality. To put it another way, the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, creation and the distinction between God and creation establish the unity/distinction of all things.”

The foundation principle of reality and the ontological nature of the Trinity: the law of non-contradiction (A is not non-A) is the principle of unity and diversity (distinction)

“The ontological nature of the Trinity can be expressed by saying that if God had never created anything, and thus there never was a human race that needed to be saved and that could be indwelt, God would still be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from eternity to eternity. This ontological aspect of God is reflected in the created order and above all in the way God relates to it. The incarnation in Jesus involves the same kind of unity and distinction and reveals the perfect relationship between God and humanity. All relationships that exist are structured on this basis. Everything has some point of unity with everything else, but there will always be...

7 Miroslav Volf and Matthew Croasmun in For the Life of the World (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, Baker Publishing Group), 2019, p. 71. ("equiprimordial" is “Existing together as equally fundamental ab initio; coöriginal.”)
some kind of distinction to be preserved. The exact nature of the unity and the distinctions between any aspects of reality depends on how God made them to relate. We can see this principle at work all around us and in the various relationships described for us in the Bible. It stands in contrast to the worldviews of some non-Christian philosophies that move either to fragmentation and lack of unity, as we see in postmodernism, or to the monistic oneness of all things, as in Buddhism or Hinduism. Only the doctrine of the Trinity, and implication of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, can give us the handle on the nature of reality that enables us to understand it truly. The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which maintains the distinction between God and the creation, is totally opposed to the fusion of these realities as found in pantheism or panentheism.”

There is a unity, yet also an absolute differentiation-distinction, between God the Creator and all of his creation. As there is a unity and distinction between God and humanity, there is a unity and distinction between humans, and animals, and plants, as well as inanimate creation. Importantly, there is the unity and distinction between male and female, as God created them with unity yet with absolute differentiation. There is this law of identification and differentiation at all levels of reality, and therefore it applies to all things in reality, including space and time, signs and the signified, literal and symbolic, and it allows us to know and understand why there is something rather than nothing. In Biblical Theology, it also gives us unity and differentiation in regards to Adam and humanity, Adam and Christ, the representative one and the many, creation and redemption, promise and fulfillment, types and antitypes, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the signs of the promise and their realities, prefigurations and their antecedents, the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the transcendence and immanence of God, the human and divine authors of scripture, the unity and differentiation between the Old Testament and the New Testament, their continuities and discontinuities, the enscripturated Word and the Incarnate Word, the Word of God and the Spirit of God, as well as the relationship of the original creation to the coming new creation. This latter example would include our present earthly life with sinful bodies and souls, and our future earthly life of resurrected bodies and souls, as this is assured from the necessary resurrection and ascension and glorification of Jesus. This is expressed in our understanding that the Kingdom of God has come but is still coming, Christ is now Victor, yet someday all the kingdoms of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever... (Rev 11:15).

This truth of unity and distinction obliterates the assumptions of monism, pantheism, animism, dualism, humanism, Deconstructionism, PostModernism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen, and every other ism that blurs, negates, exaggerates, or denies the unity and distinctions created into the universal order of reality. This would also apply to those who would collapse all of reality into the fusion of yin and yang, or those who collapse male and female distinctions, or the Postmodern attempt to collapse signs and what they signify in all of human language that leads naturally from a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to “epistemological atheism.”

In conclusion, the reason that total indeterminacy in meaning is itself really quite impossible is that every effort to articulate such a philosophy itself depends at every turn upon the intrinsic fact of unity and differentiation in all of reality. And this is why it is a life and death matter, since all knowledge and interpretation and meaning in this life depend upon unity and distinction. If we can no longer name or be named, we can no longer know or be known. If there is no Logos, no possibility of identification, unity nor differentiation, nor coherence, there can be no universe in which we can find and know any meaning or significance. Most seriously, there can be no true relationship to God, his universe, and to one another. It would mean not only the “death of God,” it would necessarily mean the end of humanity and all of its endeavors, as well as the collapse of reality itself. Fortunately, we can rest assured that this cannot in fact happen, since the world was indeed created by the infinite triune God, the Logos, by his naming-creating words, who also sustains it by his infinite power, and who wove into its every atom and molecule the principles of unity and distinction, and who gave us who are made in his image the task of naming and interpreting all things to his eternal glory.

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10 “In pantheism the universe and God are the same thing; God is everything and everything is God. This is total fusion. In panentheism, while the universe is God, God is more than the universe. The fusion is not as serious as in pantheism, but the distinction between God and creation is still seriously blurred” (Goldsworthy, Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture, p. 66).
“All people in this world are made to give evidence or to signify something.”

1. Something

Why is there something rather than nothing?
Why is A not non A?
Unity and distinction,
differentiation and similarity,
freedom and responsibility,
one and the many,
promise and fulfillment,
signs and symbols,
something and nothing,
divine and human,
man and woman,
Creator and creature,
created and uncreated,
animate and inanimate,
humans and animals,
animals and plants,
comets, asteroids, planets,
names of unity
and distinction,
naming the names of all things,
animate and inanimate,
the Father, Son, Holy Spirit,
unity and differentiation,
without fusion,
distinction
without separation,
immanence and transcendence,
Name and Glory,
the Father from whom
all are named
by Adam as distinct man
from Eve,
in unity and distinction,
each one someone,
rather than no-one,
different, yet similar,
free, yet responsible,
human, not divine,
naming all, rather than nothing,
with freedom and identification,
identity, not non-identity,
persons, not non-persons?
This is unity and distinction,
the key to the universe
of all names, knowledge,
and reality, not non-reality,
stars, quarks, neutrinos
are something,
and why A is not non A,
and why something is not just anything.

This is the answer to everything.
2. All things

As trust is to construct
so sign is to consign
as signify is to entrust
so name is to design
as consider is to know
so compose is to specify
as find is to consider
so testify is to indicate
as acknowledge is to witness
so investigate is to concede
as speak is to designate
so declare is to unveil
as certitude is to signatories
so to allocate is to identify
as to regard one
as well as the other.

As to entitle is to envision
so to uname is to dismantle
as to deconstruct
is to names, signs, and symbols
metaphors, motifs, and allusions,
figures that direct and represent
as one against the other
as not the other.

As to assign is to find
so to unsignify is to disassemble
the one and the other,
as to mask is to obfuscate
so to classify is to unmask
the other
as to see is to discover
the names of all others
so to know is to love
as the apprised true beauty
of those identified
as truly signified.

Names to remember: all.

3. Precepts on the theory of everything

The definite article
definitely identifies
the thing it articulates.

The indefinite article is inarticulate,
but definitely identifies the thing as
indefinite.

There is no “thing in itself”
but the thing in relation to others,
in unity and distinction with each other.
The image is a sign
of the thing in relation,
and is not a thing in itself.

The sign is the significance
of the thing itself,
in unity and distinction from all other things.

The whole is not just One
but the unity of the many,
unique in themselves as one.

Stephen T. Hague, March 2016
The metaphysics of meaning, part II: theology, the disappearance of definitions, and Rob Bell on blasphemy

**Why Words Mean:** why ducks do not bark and dogs do not quack.

Must we mean what we say and define what we mean when we say?
Must we define what we mean when we say so that we say what we mean?

1. **Theological language means something**

   “Language determines the realities we attend to.”

Since so much of our daily language, not just that of the theologians, conveys important theological and philosophical assumptions and concepts in profoundly obvious and oftentimes not-so-obvious ways, it could be proposed that the term “theological language” could apply to much of our human language. Though that could be the subject of an entire essay, that is not my primary focus here. My concern is that if it be true that our language contains profoundly vital information for our lives at all levels, how important is it that we understand the definitions and implications of our terms used? Does it really matter in any very serious sense how we define our terms and the words we choose to communicate? More to the point, does it matter with regard to our expressions of faith and concepts about it? After all, is it not more important that people see our heart, our compassion and sincerity, not so much how we define and use our terms? After all, isn’t wrangling over words a sin? The same could be asked about historical accuracy in our discourse: is it all that important we discuss the past in terms and definitions that are in agreement with the facts, since it could be said that historical facts are rather difficult to ascertain with certainty? Isn’t it more important to just get the gist, or spirit, of the events and characters and choices, and not worry about the details? Depending on how we answer such questions, we must also consider whether legal documents like deeds and mortgages and contracts and constitutions depend on accuracy of language and historical fact? Do government, the economy, the scientific enterprise, architecture and art, medicine, and the diagnosis of illness in heart, mind, and body, depend on accuracy in definition of terms and agreement regarding the use of each distinct discipline of discourse? Does not even the weather broadcaster communicate life and death information that depends upon factuality and truthfulness?

Indeed, it could be argued that our very existence depends upon our God-given ability and task to name things, and with accurate consistency. If this task of naming (taxonomy) could be understood to relate to the biblical principle of having dominion, and that it continues in every generation, would it not therefore especially include the theological endeavor, as well? When we speak of “technical terms” in the various

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disciplines we mean that in order for communication-events to occur there must of necessity be some collocation and consistency of received, and agreed upon, terms and definitions for the purposes of achieving meaningful discourse. Particularly, therefore, we can assert that when speaking of God and the eternal concerns of theological ideas, beliefs, doctrines, and formulations for faith, the need for clarity and accuracy must be accompanied with the zeal for carefulness in definitions. Sloppiness will not work in building bridges and high rise buildings, nor in programing computers that can fly humans to the moon. It might be countered that theological language is not a scientific enterprise, and not as much depends upon it for human safety and survival as does the science of geometry and calculus in constructing the wonders of civilization upon which we have built our modern world. Yet, to counter this objection to my claim to the contrary, the world and its civilizations depend upon the ideas that define their identity, character, morals and visions for what constitutes a just and honorable society that lead to human flourishing for all, and therefore human beliefs (theological ideas) about origins, God, human nature, the relationships between all created things, people, and creatures. In sum, we can therefore conclude that all knowledge in every sphere is theologically potent, in the sense that even mathematics and quantum physics are rooted in theological and metaphysical frameworks. Yes, not just contextually, but that they originate from theological conceptions.

Despite all this, there are endless examples in our world of disregard for definitions and received terms. In fact, entire industries (as advertising and politicking) depend upon distortion, and sometimes obfuscation, of meaning in order to achieve objectives. Dictators and totalitarian regimes also depend upon their power to control the meaning, definitions, and use of terms. Empires sometimes have been able to extend their dominions through controlling the lexicon; but we can be thankful that such tyranny is always tenuous, since humans are inclined to resist in their need to communicate truthfully, in spite of all efforts to hinder and prevent it, and of course of necessity must do so for their survival. Even in our free society, there are many who would take total control to rewrite our lexicons for their political purposes, financial gain, or for ideological agendas. For example, in recent history, the Postmodern movement sought in language (theory) to unhinge (called slippage) referents (signifiers) from their objects (signified), creating widespread “hermeneutical suspicion” and epistemological atheism, rooted in a total indeterminacy of meaning in language. Nevertheless, in the nature of human language and communication, meaning and the necessity for meaning to be determinate and not indeterminate, requires that words consistently correspond sufficiently with reality to be meaningful. Engineers, scientists, architects, doctors, and astronauts have not generally followed the Postmodernists in practice, if even in theory, for which are most grateful.

In the pendulum swings (in linguistics and politics) from totalitarianism to anarchy, humans will always gravitate towards what will allow them to be free, but also necessarily towards what requires them to be responsible. A great danger with freedom is when it is not accompanied by responsibility. History has taught us this at least: freedom must be followed by responsibility to remain free. This is profoundly true especially with our language, the greatest gift of God besides life, to communicate meaningfully. Therefore, we have the supreme responsibility to employ it rightly and faithfully. Interpretation of every/any particular thing in reality requires language responsibly defined in terms and principles of interpretation, wherein each aspect of the process itself depends entirely upon language.

Identifying and classifying is the fundamental function of human language, differentiating things (so we establish in regards to everything that A is not non A in the law of non-contradiction). Language enables us to see the unity and distinctions of all things which are absolutely essential for human society to be possible. This naming, and the interpretative role of language in gathering knowledge of the created world, its proper interpretation and the discovery of new insights, is the foundation of all science, art, literature, philosophy, architecture, and theology.
Most significantly, theological language is the source and ongoing context of the meaning of all else, since it originates in revelation from God in order for us to have the interpretative matrix upon which to construct an accurate interpretive narrative for all of known reality. Therefore, as all of our language must correspond to reality in a coherent and comprehensible way, it is critical that we attend to our theological language with the utmost zeal and care. This is consistent with our belief in the triune nature of God the Creator of all reality, in which there is an absolute and necessary self-consistency and coherence (since a perfect God can have no inconsistencies or contradictions), there is also logical consistency and coherence in his creation, since it is always contingent upon God who is the Logos.

_Inconsideration of God, or misrepresentation of his nature, are as agreeable to corrupt nature, as the disowning the being of a God is contrary to common reason._

1. Rob Bell’s _Velvet Elvis_ declaration on blasphemy means something, too, but it does not ring true

“The fate of hermeneutics and humanity alike stand or fall together.”

There are a seeming infinite number of possible examples to illustrate how easy it is to mislead others through a lack of care in language use, and the confusing misuse of terms poorly defined and re-employed for some purpose. We are all daily inclined to this, our motives and reasoning being so corrupted. All-the-same, we are in Scripture held to the high standards of truth and justice, honesty and faithfulness, consistency and integrity, in all of our words and our actions. This is the moral nature of our discourse, requiring proper definitions, exposition, and interpretations of reality; this is the life and death nature of our words and our lexicons. This is why we “guard the gospel” (2 Tim 1:14) entrusted to us, the orthodox tradition of the Apostles, not to be revised, since it is the bedrock of the people of God, the foundation of Christ’s church. This is just one of many important reasons to avoid confusion in our language, especially when speaking of God and matters of the faith.

One example of confusing theological language came to my attention recently in a post from a friend on Facebook of a popular quote from Rob Bell’s _Velvet Elvis_:

“Questions, no matter how shocking or blasphemous or arrogant or ignorant or raw, are rooted in humility. A humility that understands that I am not God. And there is more to know.”

This quote at first surprised me, but then with alarm to see how many people both “liked” and “loved” the quote. The proper netiquette in this case perhaps eluded me, but I had to respond with a “Huh?” that was apparently not happily received.

It was this interchange that precipitated my reflections here, since I think it is very mistaken not to understand Bell’s total reversal of the meaning of biblical categories and terms as a good example of the all-too-common carelessness and sloppiness in theological discussions these days. Even if not intentional, it is in any case seriously problematic. Bell has done this on a number of theological issues, and has generated much controversy among Christians with his slippery use of, and misuse of, theological language.

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15 Many have written on the various theological statements and directions of Rob Bell, so this is not meant to be such an extended critique. Suffice it to say that Rob Bell has shifted from some fundamental biblical perspectives over the years, and has...
might object to my concern and say that his use of language is not so important, but rather his motives, his intentions to communicate the gospel in a refashioned way to this generation. Yet, we really have no idea what his motives were, nor whether his heart is right with God despite his poorly worded verbiage. We cannot say what Bell’s intention was, but I can say that his use of English tortures biblical categories in this statement, as he often does in his interviews and public statements flowing from the ideas in his publications. I would like to hope that he was just being careless, even if seriously, but this kind of loose theological affirmation, even if for the sake of a perceived effort to point others to a more intimate relationship with God, is deeply concerning.

It could have been intended to make the gospel message more palatable to unbelievers who find many aspects of biblical history and faith distasteful (but I wrongly digress into unknown motives). Even so, if we attempt to redefine biblical doctrine, and language, in order to make it more acceptable to people who sincerely believe they are on a higher moral plane than God, and that we must justify the God of Scripture to them, since they find many things in the Bible morally indefensible, then our motives become entirely irrelevant to the question of whether we are being faithful to the gospel of Jesus and the Scripture in our definitions and use of theological terms.

Bell does not say in this statement, as someone might suppose, that he is speaking of questions that seem to be blasphemous; he says plainly that blasphemous questions “are rooted in humility.” As an academic, I accept the criticism that I may be over analyzing and over-critical in such a case as this. Even so, biblically speaking, we are called to “bring every thought captive,” and to wisely discern all pronouncements and assertions, regardless of their source. As an academic, I also understand, and always fully support, the idea of having and allowing for others the freedom to ask questions of God, the deepest questions that concern us. But biblically, there is a universe of difference between lament, painfully crying out to God for answers to those questions, and blasphemy and arrogance. In Bell’s convoluted declaration, even arrogance is somehow equated with humility, when in any lexicon arrogance has historically been an antonym of humility. And, historically (and biblically), blasphemy meant God-hating arrogance and rebellion against God; it is not rooted in a humble heart nor in humility; it is shaking the fist at God in foolish anger and arrogant stupidity. It is the condition of our hearts when God, or the god we imagine is God, is despised and rejected.

I strongly believe that those in Christian churches who say (or have the attitude), “don’t ask questions, just believe,” have done great harm to many people. So, hopefully, I will not be misunderstood when I object to the plain meaning of Bell’s convolution of words that can lead to some rather serious conclusions and rationalizations. As stated, I zealously agree with the conviction that we must encourage questions, but it is because we know with certitude that God has given us answers, and sufficient answers, in the revelation of the canon of Scripture. These are what we must live for and work for through study, reflection, prayer, and teaching, to learn of God and his ways and to share in fellowship and rejoicing with the body of Christ in the glories of the gospel. Questions themselves are not blasphemy, but neither is blaspheming simply asking questions.

taught theological concepts at odds with traditional orthodoxy. His notoriety and influence also has increased after being endorsed by Oprah Winfrey, of whom he has reportedly said that “She has taught me more about what Jesus has for all of us, and what kind of life Jesus wants us to live, more than almost anybody in my life” (https://spectator.org/61174_defense-religious-mediocrity, American Spectator, accessed 3/7/2017). Yet, for all she expresses about “spirituality,” Oprah is not even remotely Christian in her views and convictions.
And, I would add, the gospel makes very good logical sense. Indeed, the gospel is the only theological system in the world that makes perfect logical sense, because it is entirely true. In fact, the gospel is the key to all of reality, since Jesus is the one who is the LOGOS by whom, through whom, and for whom the universe was made. This is particularly the reason we must strive to accurately define all of our terms in discussing God and matters of our faith, and to be consistent when using those terms. Our language matters immensely, because what we think we may be meaning in discourse could be a serious misconstrual and miscommunication of colossal proportions. The problem of communication and understanding derives from us (not from Scripture), because of the noetic effect of sins on our minds/hearts, when we do not understand things in Scripture. We are slow of heart/mind to believe and understand; it is not that Scripture is insufficiently perspicuous (understandable). In the Gospel of Christ, the mysteries of God are made known (Col 1:27; 1 Cor 15:51; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 6:19).

In conclusion therefore, we are responsible to properly and fully define all of the terms of that Gospel, based solely on the canon of Scripture. This does not mean we have comprehension of God and all things, since he is infinite and eternal, but we can have sufficient and reasonable faith and understanding. We can also grow daily in fuller understanding, as we will for all eternity increase in our knowledge of Him, never ceasing. In sum, ignorance of, distortion of, and unbelief in the gospel of Christ are not a result of its incomprehensibility, but rather the hardness of the human heart, and the inclination to mis-represent, mis-define, and mis-interpret. Missing the mark, we then speak past one another and reality itself, properly defined. Mis-representing the terms of the gospel is therefore to by-pass its reality for fantasies and fairy tales of our own imagining.

And, this is why ducks do not bark and dogs do not quack, and why Rob Bell’s revision on blasphemy and arrogance does not ring true.

**Some biblical texts on blasphemy**

Ex 22:28 "Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people."

Mk 7:22 Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: 23 All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

Col 3:8 But now you also put off all these; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy talk out of your mouth.

James 2:7 Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?

2 Peter 2:12 But these people blaspheme in matters they do not understand. They are like unreasoning animals, creatures of instinct, born only to be caught and destroyed, and like animals they too will perish.

Jude 1:8 Yet in like manner these people also, relying on their dreams, defile the flesh, reject authority, and blaspheme the glorious ones.

Rev 13:5 (NASB) There was given to him a mouth speaking arrogant words and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him.

**Some biblical texts on arrogance**

Lk 1:51 He has done mighty deeds with His arm; He has scattered those who were proud [arrogant] in the thoughts of their heart.

Ja 4.16(NASB) But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. 17 Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin.
1 Jn 2:16 (ISV) For everything that is in the world—the desire for fleshly gratification, the desire for possessions, and worldly arrogance—is not from the Father but is from the world.

Col 2:18 (GWT) Such a person, whose sinful mind fills him with arrogance, gives endless details of the visions he has seen.

Jude 1:16 (NASB) These are grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts; they speak arrogantly, flattering people for the sake of gaining an advantage.

Thank God that our sins of arrogance and blasphemy are also forgivable!

Stephen T. Hague, March 2017
Quotes on words and language

Words differently arranged have a different meaning, and meanings differently arranged have different effects. Blaise. Pascal (Pensées, 23)

“At the point of divergence between right and wrong, between truth and falsehood, is not a chasm but a razor’s edge.” John Murray, Principles of Conduct, p.

"Objective falsity cannot be the source of subjective truth." Phillip Hughes, The True Image, 367.


“In the matter of Christian doctrine, a great part of the nation subsists in an ignorance more barbarous than that of the dark ages, owing to a slatternly habit of illiterate reading. Words are understood in a wholly mistaken sense, statements of fact and opinion are misread and distorted in repetition, arguments founded in misapprehension are accepted without examination, expressions of individual preference are construed as ecumenical doctrine, disciplinary regulations founded on consent are confused with claims to interpret universal law, and vice versa; with the result that the logical and historical structure of Christian philosophy is transformed in the popular mind to a confused jumble of mythological and pathological absurdity.” Dorothy L. Sayers, The Mind of the Maker pp. xi-xii

Metaphors are locomotives of meaning; they bear the freight of insight from place to place. . . . The arrival of a powerful metaphor alters the geography of our thoughts and forces us to redraw our conceptual maps. Terrence W. Tilley, Story Theology, Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1985, p. 1.

“If correct behavior depends on right thinking, and right thinking on the right use of language, then we may say that, in terms of active influence, the sequence actually proceeds the other way: Language → thought → behavior.” Chilton Williamson, Jr. Chronicles, Feb 2006, p. 17.

“After the Fall, the worst violence done himself by man is to deny the Truth of the Word—and by implication and descent, all words and their inherently divine relationship with one another. This is because man cannot, through his abuse of words, distort the concept of the divine Nature without distorting his understanding of human nature along with it, as Orwell and other critics of the human language have understood.” Chilton Williamson, Jr. Chronicles, Feb 2006, p. 17.

“This is because man cannot, through his abuse of words, distort the concept of the divine Nature without distorting his understanding of human nature along with it, as Orwell and other critics of the enemies of language have understood. ‘And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness . . .’ According to the Word, man is a kind of copy, however faint and imperfect, of God. But if the Word does not exist, then God does not exist, and what, then, is man a copy of, in God’s absence? The problem is, all language is constructed according to a logic that assumes the existence of God and a divine relationship with man: God, in other words, is structured into human language, because He is encoded in the human mind and in human thought. To refuse to know Who God is, is to refuse to accept what we are and how we are meant to act in the world, how we are intended to comport ourselves, how we are expected to behave, in respect of ourselves as well as of others. In the degree that men deny the reality and integrity of language, they reject the idea of Model-Modeler and Modeled, and with it the possibility for the coherent and respectful human activity and behavior they once called decency and manners.” Chilton Williamson, Jr. Chronicles, Feb 2006, p. 18.
Blasphemy in the Bible as defined by various lexicons

Hebrew

5829 נֶאָצוֹת (Hebrew) (page 611) (Strong 5007) † נֶאָצוּת n. f. contempt (toward "), blasphemy;—pl. נֶאָצָה Ne 9:18, 9:26 c. נֶאָצָתֵי Ez 35:12 of Mt. Seir, spoken against הור יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Greek

1033 βλασφημέω

βλασφημέω, βλασφημῶ: imperfect ἐβλασφήμησα; 1 aorist ἐβλασφήμησα; passive (present βλασφημοῦμαι); 1 future βλασφημηθήσομαι; (βλάσφημος, which see); to speak reproachfully, rail at, revile, calumniate (Vulgate blasphemo); absolutely: Luke 22:65 ; Acts 13:45; 18:6; 26:11; 1 Tim. 1:20; 1 Pet. 4:4; with accusative of person or thing (as in later Greek, Joseph, Plutarch, Appian, etc.): Matt. 27:39; Mark 3:28 L T Tr WH; 15:29; Luke 23:39; Titus 3:2; James 2:7; Jude 1:10; with the cognate noun βλασφημίαν, to utter blasphemy (Plato, legg. 7, p. 800 c.; see ἀγαπάω at the end), Mark 3:28 R G (where L T Tr WH δίκα for δύσκα, see above); (followed by en, 2 Pet. 2:12; cf. Alexander Buttmann (1873) as at end, and see ἄγνως, a.). Passive βλασφημοῦμαι to be evil spoken of, reviled, railed at: Rom. 3:8; 14:16; 1 Cor. 4:13 (T WH Tr marginal reading δοσφημοῦμενοι); 1 Cor. 10:30; Titus 2:5; 2 Pet. 2:2; τὸ ὄνομα τίνος, Rom. 2:24; 1 Tim. 6:1. Specifically, of those who by contemptuous speech intentionally come short of the reverence due to God or to sacred things (for ζῆλος, 2 Kings 19:6; 22 cf. 2 Kings 19:4; cf. Grimm on 2 Macc. 10:34); absolutely: Matt. 9:3; 26:65; Mark 2:7 L T Tr WH; (John 10:36); τὸν Θεόν, Rev. 16:11; 21; τὴν θεάν, Acts 19:37 (G L T Tr WH τὴν Θεόν); τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ Θεοῦ, Rev. 13:6; 16; τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ Θεοῦ (βλασφημεῖται), 1 Pet. 4:14 Rec.; δόξας, Jude 1:8; 2 Pet. 2:10 (see δόξα, III. 3 b. γ.).; εἰς τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἄγιον, Mark 3:29; Luke 12:10 (εἰς θεόν, Plato, rep. 2, p. 381 e.). The earlier Greeks say βλασφημάν εἰς τινα, περί or κατά τίνος; (on the N. T. constructions cf. Winer's Grammar, 222 (208); 629 (584); Buttmann, 146 (128)).

1034 βλασφημία

βλασφημία, βλασφημίας, ή, railing, reviling (Vulgate blasphemia); a. universally, slander, detraction, speech injurious to another's good name: Matt. 12:31; 15:19; Mark 3:28; 7:22; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; 1 Tim. 6:4; Jude 1:9 (χρήσις βλασφημίας, equivalent to κρίσις βλάσφημος in 2 Pet. 2:11, a judgment pronounced in reproachful terms); Rev. 2:9. b. specifically, impious and reproachful speech injurious to the divine majesty: Matt. 26:65; Mark 2:7 (R G); 14:64; Luke 5:21; John 10:33; Rev. 13:5 (not Lachmann); ὄνομα or ὄνοματα βλασφημίας equivalent to βλάσφημα (cf. Winer's Grammar, sec. 34, 3 b.; (Buttmann, sec. 132, 10)): Rev. 13:1; 17:3 (R G Tr, see γέμω); τοῦ πνεύματος, genitive of the object, Matt. 12:31; πρὸς τὸν Θεόν, Rev. 13:6. (Euripides, Plato, Demosthenes, others; for נאצר Ezek. 35:12.) (BB. DD. under the word Blasphemy; Campbell, Diss. on the Gospels, diss. ix. part ii.)*

From the New Bible Dictionary

BLASPHEMY

I. In the Old Testament

Here the root meaning of the word is an act of effrontery in which the honour of God is insulted by man. The proper object of the verb is the name of God, which is cursed or reviled instead of being honoured. (Compare
the common biblical and rabbinical phrase, ‘Blessed art thou, O Lord.’) The penalty of the outrage of blasphemy is death by stoning (Lv. 24:10–23; 1 Ki. 21:9ff.; Acts 6:11; 7:58).

In the first reference it is a half-caste Israelite who sins in this way; and, generally speaking, blasphemy is committed by pagans (2 Ki. 19:6, 22 = Is. 37:6, 23; Pss. 44:16; 74:10, 18; Is. 52:5), sometimes incited to it by the bad example and moral lapses of the Lord’s people (2 Sa. 12:14). It follows also that when God’s people fall into idolatry they are regarded as committing the blasphemy of the heathen (Is. 65:7; Ezk. 20:27). The name of Yahweh which it is Israel’s peculiar destiny to hallow (see G. F. Moore, Judaism, 2, 1927–30, p. 103) is profaned by the faithless and disobedient people.

II. In the New Testament

Here there is an extension of the meaning. God is blasphemed also in his representatives. So the word is used of Moses (Acts 6:11); Paul (Rom. 3:8; 1 Cor. 4:12; 10:30); and especially the Lord Jesus, in his ministry of forgiveness (Mk. 2:7 and parallels), at his *trial (Mk. 14:61–64), and at Calvary (Mt. 27:39; Lk. 23:39). Because these representatives embody the truth of God himself (and our Lord in a unique way), an insulting word spoken against them and their teaching is really directed against the God in whose name they speak (so Mt. 10:40; Lk. 10:16). Saul of Tarsus fulminated against the early followers of Jesus and tried to compel them to blaspheme, i.e. to curse the saving name (Acts 24:11), and thereby to renounce their baptismal vow in which they confessed that ‘Jesus is Lord’ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3; Jas. 2:7). His misdirected zeal, however, was not simply against the church, but against the Lord himself (1 Tim. 1:13; cf. Acts 9:4).

The term is also used, in a weaker sense, of slanderous language addressed to men (e.g. Mk. 3:28; 7:22; Eph. 4:31; Col. 3:8; Tit. 3:2). Here the best translation is ‘slander, abuse’. These verses condemn a prevalent vice; but their warning may be grounded in a theological as well as an ethical context if we remember Jas. 3:9. Men are not to be cursed because on them, as men, the ‘formal’ image of God is stamped and the human person is, in some sense, God’s representative on earth (cf. Gn. 9:6).

There are two problem texts. 2 Pet. 2:10–11 speaks of blasphemy against ‘the glorious ones’ whom angels dare not revile. These are probably evil angelic powers against whom false teachers presumed to direct their insults (cf. Jude 8). The blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mt. 12:32; Mk. 3:29) carries with it the awful pronouncement that the sinner is ‘guilty of an eternal sin’ which cannot be forgiven. The verse is a solemn warning against persistent, deliberate rejection of the Spirit’s call to salvation in Christ. Human unresponsiveness inevitably leads to a state of moral insensitivity and to a confusion of moral issues wherein evil is embraced as though it were good (‘Evil, be thou my Good’; cf. Is. 5:18–20; Jn. 3:19). The example of this attitude is that of the Pharisees, who attributed Jesus’ works of mercy to Satan. In such a frame of mind repentance is not possible to the hardened heart because the recognition of sin is no longer possible, and God’s offer of mercy is in effect peremptorily refused. To be in this perilous condition is to cut oneself off from the source of forgiveness. Hebert adds a helpful pastoral note: ‘People who are distressed in their souls for fear that they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost should in most cases be told that their distress is proof that they have not committed that sin’ (TWBR, p. 32).

BLASPHEMY

In both the Old and New Testaments blasphemy is, at its root, a word or act detracting from the power and glory* of God*.

1. Background
2. Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit
3. Jesus Accused of Blasphemy

1. Background

The Greek noun blasphēmia may be derived from phēmē (a “saying”) and a shortened form of blaptō (“injure”) or blax (“stupid”) or ballō (“throw” or “strike”) or blabos (“harm”).

1.1. Greek Usage. In Greek literature “to blaspheme” meant to speak ill or abusively rather than to speak well of someone (euphēmeō, Philo Migr. Abr. 117; euphēmia, Josephus Ant. 16.2.1 §14; 17.8.4 §200; 2 Cor 6:8). This meaning is also found in (e.g.) 2 Maccabees (10:34; 12:14), Philo (Spec. Leg. 4.197), Josephus (Life §232) as well as in the NT (Acts 13:34; 18:6; Rom 14:16; 1 Cor 10:30; Tit 3:2; 1 Pet 4:4). Someone can be said to blaspheme against an idol or false god (Diodorus 2.21.7; Philo Spec. Leg. 1.53; Josephus Ant. 4.8.10 §207; Acts 19:37). Blasphemy is also associated with “bad language” (2 Macc 12:14) or insulting a person (Mt 12:32) as shown by the synonyms ōneidizō (“revile,” Mt 27:44 par. Mk 15:32 and Lk 23:39) and loidoreō (“to abuse,” Jn 9:28; Acts 23:4; Josephus J.W. 2.14.8 §302).

1.2. Old Testament. In the canonical OT and Apocrypha blasphemy referred to contemptuous or dishonoring speech or actions against God through denying his ability (2 Kings 19:4, 6, 22; Ps 74:18; Is 37:6), oppressing his people (Is 52:5), gloating over their downfall (Ezek 35:12), killing Israelites (Tob 1:18 [S]), speaking directly against God (Dan 3:29), paying homage to an idol (Is 66:3; contrast Bel 9) or insulting his followers (2 Macc 12:14) or the Temple (1 Macc 7:38). However, the key passage is Leviticus 24:15–16: “Whoever curses God shall bear the sin. One who blasphemes the name of the Lord shall be put to death” (NRSV, cf. Lev 24:11; Ex 20:7).

1.3. Philo and Josephus. Originally the two sentences of Leviticus 24:15–16 probably had identical meanings. But Philo, taking them separately, understood the first to be the lesser offense of cursing a false god, the penalty of death being reserved for naming the Name of the God of Israel (Vit. Mos. 2.203–5; also Josephus Ag. Ap. 2.34 §237; Ant. 4.207). On the greater offense Josephus says: “Let him that blasphemeth God be stoned, then hung for a day, and buried ignominiously and in obscurity” (Ant. 4.8.6 §202; cf. Deut 21:22–23). On the actual nature of the offense of blasphemy, Philo says that if anyone “even ventures to utter his name unreasonably, let him suffer the penalty of death” (Vit. Mos. 2.206). In turn Philo seems to

understand the unreasonable utterance of the holy name of God to be treating it as a mere expletive (Vit. Mos. 2.208).

1.4. Rabbinc Judaism. For the rabbis there were also two sins referred to in Leviticus 24:15–16. They understood the first sentence to mean that for cursing God the only sentence necessary was excommunication, for God would exact the penalty (b. Ker. 7b). From its interpretation of the second sentence the Mishnah gives us the only rabbinic definition of blasphemy, and it is similar to that of Philo’s: “The blasphemer is not culpable unless he pronounces the Name itself” (m. Sanh. 7:5).

2. Blasphemy Against the Holy Spirit

All three Synoptic Gospels record the twin sayings of Jesus that whoever blasphemes or speaks against the Son of man (Mark has “sons of men [i.e., people] will be forgiven”; see Son of Man) will be forgiven (see Forgiveness), but that the person who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit (see Holy Spirit) will never be forgiven (Mt 12:31–32 par. Mk 3:28–29 and Lk 12:10; cf. Did. 11.7; Gos. Thom. 44; Gos. Bar. 5:2). These sayings have caused much scholarly debate and anguish among Christians. The Aramaic original of the first saying was probably a broad statement saying that all sins and blasphemies on the part of or against persons (bar ‘nāšā’, a generic or collective term) will be forgiven, except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. By translating the generic singular of the Aramaic with the plurals “the sons of men,” Mark means that all people will be forgiven all sins and blasphemies—except blasphemies against the Holy Spirit (Mk 3:28–29). The Q* tradition, probably best represented by Luke 12:10, took the saying to refer to blaspheming against the Son of man, or Jesus, being forgiven. Matthew 12:31–32 is a conflation of Q* and Mark.

The origin of these sayings has been discussed at length. The “Amen, I say to you” sayings (see Amen), such as this one, have been thought to have arisen either from Hellenistic Christian prophets* within the context of worship* or from a Jewish apocalyptic* milieu. However, it is yet to be shown how this unparalleled formula came to be attributed exclusively to Jesus. Indeed, the use of amēn in the Gospels is without parallel. In Jewish literature (e.g., Num 5:22; Deut 27:15; Neh 5:13; y. Sota 18b; b. Šebu. 36a) and the remainder of the NT (Rom 1:25; 9:5; 11:36; 15:33; 16:27; 1 Cor 14:16; 16:24; Gal 1:5; Rev 5:14; 7:12; 22:20) it was a response formula assenting to someone else’s blessing,* curse, oath,* word or prayer* (though see T. Abr. 8:7). Occasionally it was added to one’s own prayer as a concluding hope (Tob 8:8; m. Ta’an. 4:8). However, in all the strata of traditions in the Gospels it is used exclusively to introduce and confirm Jesus’ own words. This factor, along with the retention of “amen” in its Semitic form, the unusual Semitism of the phrase “the sons of men,” the accompanying sayings associating Jesus’ ministry with sinners, and the unprecedented scope of forgiveness, indicates the authenticity of the saying about all sins and blasphemies being forgiven.

The second saying, that of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, appears to contradict the previous saying. However this is an established OT idiom (Gen 2:16–17; Ex 12:10) and is also found elsewhere in the NT (Mt 15:24–32; 25:29; Mk 2:17; 9:37; Jn 1:11–12; 7:16). In this way the gravity of the sin that is excepted is emphasized. In light of the harshness and severity of the saying, its authenticity can hardly be doubted.

2.1. The Unforgivable Sin. There has been a great deal of discussion regarding the nature of the unforgivable sin. For Jesus the ambiguous statement, as reconstructed above, would have meant that an attack on him was pardonable, perhaps because the public mystery of his true mission and identity could mean that it was done innocently (cf. Acts 3:17). However, an attack on the Spirit of God working in him
was beyond forgiveness. That would be detracting from the power (see Authority and Power) and majesty of God. In turn, the saying shows that Jesus was conscious of unprecedented spiritual power at work through himself, which he considered to be self-evidently of God.

For Mark the two sayings meant that all sins are forgivable except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. That is, to have seen the power of his ministry, as in his exorcisms (see Demon, Devil, Satan), and then to say that Jesus had an unclean spirit was an attack on the Holy Spirit. The Spirit’s work was thereby attributed not to God but to Satan (Mk 3:22; cf. Is 5:20). There can be no greater sin.

Matthew has a similar perspective, but by deleting the reference to Jesus’ contemporaries (Mk 3:30) he makes the sayings more obviously applicable to the early church. Thus for Matthew it may have been forgivable not to recognize the identity of Jesus (cf. 21:32), but there was no excuse for the Christian who did not recognize the work of the Spirit. That would amount to apostasy.

In Luke the saying appears in the context of teaching about the followers of Jesus being called on to defend themselves and their ministries (Lk 12:8–12). To blaspheme against the Holy Spirit would be to deny God and the work of his Spirit in their lives, especially his ability to support them in trying times. In Acts 5:1–5 Luke gives an example of an unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit.

3. Jesus Accused of Blasphemy

All the Gospels agree that Jesus claimed or admitted equality with God—or claimed to be the Son of God (see Son of God)—and that this was considered by the Jews to be blasphemous and worthy of the death penalty (Mt 26:63–66; Mk 14:61–65; Lk 22:66–71; Jn 10:31–39; 19:7).

3.1. Blasphemy and God’s Prerogative to Forgive. In Mark 2:5 Jesus is reported as saying, “My son, your sins are forgiven” (par. Mt 9:3 and Lk 5:21). This passive expression would probably have been understood as an attempt to avoid pronouncing God’s name: “God forgives you.” The ambiguity of the statement “your sins are forgiven,” which is consistent with Jesus’ self-disclosure, could mean that Jesus was merely providing the man with assurance (cf. Mt 9:2, tharsei, “take heart”), reporting to the man the forgiveness God was offering him (cf. 2 Sam 12:13). However, the Aramaic expression reflected in the present indicative passive, “they are forgiven” (aphientai) means, “your sins are at this moment forgiven.” Indeed, the scribes are said to interpret the saying as Jesus himself offering forgiveness: “Can it be that this fellow thus blasphemes? Who can forgive sins but God?” (Mk 2:7 par. Mt 9:3 and Lk 5:21). In turn Jesus affirms that he was forgiving sins; that is, he did what the scribes considered to be the prerogative of God (Mk 2:10 par. Mt 9:6 and Lk 5:24).

As was seen above, in Jesus’ time there was a wide understanding of the nature of blasphemy. On the one hand, according to the narrow rabbinic definition of blasphemy, Jesus would not be guilty before the Law. In the Qumran document known as the Prayer of Nabonidus (4QPrNab), an exorcist is said to pardon the sin of a sick person. On the other hand, a more general definition of blasphemy known to Philo (Vit. Mos. 2.206) would indicate that those who observed Jesus may have thought he had encroached on the prerogative of God. Furthermore, there is a strand of tradition in the OT (Ex 34:6–7; Ps 103:3; 130:4; Is 43:25; 44:22; Dan 9:9), as well as in the Dead Sea Scrolls (1QS 2:9; CD 3:18; 20:34), in which God is clearly the one who forgives. Not even the Messiah (see Christ) was expected to forgive sins, only to be the means whereby God would forgive in the eschaton (Is 53; Jer 31; cf. Tg. Is 53:4–6). The offense, then, was the diminishing of God’s majesty and honor by usurping a role considered to be uniquely his alone.
3.2. **Jesus Made Himself to Be Equal with God.** In John’s Gospel there are passages where statements by Jesus are said to provoke the Jews to accuse him of blasphemy or even attempt to carry out the death penalty for blasphemy.

3.2.1. John 5:16–18 provides the conclusion to the story of Jesus healing* a lame man at the Bethzatha pool and contains two accusations. The first is that “because he does these things” (*hoti tauta epoiei*) on the Sabbath* (cf. Jn 9:14; 20:30) the Jews persecute Jesus. The second accusation, of making himself equal to God, arises out of Jesus’ response to the first accusation. Jesus’ claim to be able to work on the Sabbath is based on his claiming the same right as his Father to work continually, including on the Sabbath (2 Macc 9:12; Ep. Arist. 210; Philo Leg. All. 1.5–6; Cher. 87–88; Corp. Herm. 11.5, 14; Exod. Rab. 30:6; Gen. Rab. 11:10). The Jews find fault in this not only because he claimed God to be his own Father (*patera idion*) but in claiming his capacity for common activity with God he also claimed to be equal with God. As in Mark 2:7 (see 3.1. above) the blasphemous act was in usurping the uniqueness or prerogative of God.

3.2.2. In John 8:58 Jesus says, “Before Abraham* was born (genesthai), I am (*egō eimi*).” In John’s Gospel *egō eimi* represents the name of God. So John portrays the Jews attempting to carry out the death sentence for blasphemy as set out in Leviticus 24:16. The historicity of this claim by Jesus has been brought into serious question by some NT scholars. Nevertheless, John is probably correct in indicating that, prior to trying him for blasphemy before the Sanhedrin,* the Jewish authorities perceived evidence of blasphemy in Jesus’ activity and his view of himself.

3.2.3. John 10:33 is the first time the official charge of blasphemy occurs in the Fourth Gospel. It would not be blasphemous for someone to describe Jesus as divine. According to Scripture God’s anointed would be called God’s Son (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron 17:13). What would be blasphemous, according to John, is Jesus himself claiming this divine status for himself; the blasphemy of self-deification. Jesus answers the charge by quoting from Psalm 82:6, thereby showing that it is not blasphemous to refer to people like judges as “gods” through whom the Word of God came. Jesus also says that as he has been given this status (*hagiazein*) and sent into the world by the Father, it cannot be blasphemous for him to say “I am the Son of God” (10:36). The Jews are not satisfied. Perhaps they feel his answer is beside the point since Jesus is claiming to be more than a son of God in a reduced sense, for John says that they attempted to arrest Jesus (Jn 10:39). Although they were initially unsuccessful, they eventually took him to trial (Jn 19:7).

3.3. **Jesus Tried for Blasphemy.** Matthew and Mark agree that the charge of blasphemy was involved in the trial of Jesus (Mt 26:57–75 par. Mk 14:53–72; cf. Lk 22:54–71; see Trial of Jesus). Jesus is asked if he is the Messiah (*su ei ho Christos*; Mt 26:63 par. Mk 14:61 and Lk 22:67). Jesus’ two-part answer provokes the charge of blasphemy. In Mark the first part of Jesus’ reply was probably “I am” (*egō eimi*, 14:62, cf. Codex Koridethi anus [Θ]; Mt 26:63). The fact that Jesus took on a messianic title or identity which only God could bestow and confirm by his blessing may, in itself, have been considered blasphemous (cf. Jn 19:7; Acts 5:34–39). This may have caused Matthew to place the responsibility for the direct answer back on the high priest by having Jesus say, “You have said so” (Mt 26:64), and for Luke to have Jesus evade the answer. In turn both Matthew and Luke have Jesus say, in effect, that God will confirm his messiahship. The second part of Jesus’ reply is about the Son of man being seated at the right hand of Power (Lk 22:69; cf. Ps 110:1), and is generally agreed to belong to the reliable traditions about Jesus. In its original Jewish setting this saying was probably meant to emphasize God’s approval. This would have compounded the earlier blasphemous act of taking on a messianic title. In Matthew and Mark Jesus’ answer concludes with an allusion to Daniel 7:13 which reinforces Jesus’ claims of a unique relationship with God. As related in the
Mishnah, the appropriate response for the high priest having heard blasphemy is to tear his clothes (cf. m. Sanh. 7:5).

See also Holy Spirit; “I AM” Sayings; Son of God; Son of Man; Trial of Jesus.


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From Vines Expository Dictionary

B. Verb.

BLASPHEMÔ (βλασφημέω, (987)), to blaspheme, rail at or revile, is used (a) in a general way, of any contumelious speech, reviling, calumniating, railing at etc., as of those who railed at Christ, e.g., Matt. 27:39; Mark 15:29; Luke 22:65 (R.V., “reviling”); 23:39; (b) of those who speak contemptuously of God or of sacred things, e.g., Matt. 9:3; Mark 3:28; Rom. 2:24; 1 Tim. 1:20; 6:1; Rev. 13:6; 16:9, 11, 21; “hath spoken blasphemy,” Matt. 26:65; “rail at,” 2 Pet. 2:10; Jude 8, 10; “railing,” 2 Pet. 2:12; “slanderously reported,” Rom. 3:8; “be evil spoken of,” Rom. 14:16; 1 Cor. 10:30; 2 Pet. 2:2; “speak evil of,” Tit. 3:2; 1 Pet. 4:4; “being defamed,” 1 Cor. 4:13. The verb (in the present participial form) is translated “blasphemers” in Acts 19:37; in Mark 2:7, “blasphemeth,” R.V., for A.V., “speaketh blasphemies.”

There is no noun in the original representing the English “blasphemer.” This is expressed either by the verb, or by the adjective blasphemos. See Defame, Rail, Report, Revile.

C. Adjective.


Note: As to Christ’s teaching concerning blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, e.g., Matt. 12:32, that anyone, with the evidence of the Lord’s power before His eyes, should declare it to be Satanic, exhibited a condition of heart beyond Divine illumination and therefore hopeless. Divine forgiveness would be inconsistent with the moral nature of God. As to the Son of Man, in his state of humiliation, there might be misunderstanding, but not so with the Holy Spirit’s power demonstrated.
