

# Know Your Faith: An Exposition of the Christian Worldview

*Volume 3 - Essence*

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# Introduction

## Forward to the Series Know Your Faith

The series *Know Your Faith: An Exposition of the Christian Worldview* is a detailed examination of apologetics, hermeneutics and theology reflecting an Evangelical-Pentecostal/Charismatic perspective. The present emphasis in the church on practical Christian living, which is certainly necessary, has at the same time created a void in the hearts and minds of believers for understanding the foundations of their faith, that is, what they believe and why. This lack of solid grounding in Christian truth can unfortunately lead to shallowness of commitment, lack of perseverance in trials, and vulnerability to false teachings and “every wind of doctrine” that passes through the Church. This series is intended to provide believers with a deeper understanding of the basis for their beliefs.

These volumes were first released in the Russian language under the title *Слово о Боге: Евангельское богословие для восточных христиан* (*A Word about God: Evangelical Theology for Eastern Christians*), with over 10,000 copies of the individual volumes presently in circulation, and multiple times more downloads of individual topics from the series ([www.russiantheologicalresources.com](http://www.russiantheologicalresources.com)).

Let us highlight some special features of these books that may distinguish them from other attempts to systematize Christian truth. First, this series gives special attention to the biblical teaching of the baptism in the Holy Spirit as a spiritual experience distinct from and subsequent to conversion and to the full range of spiritual gifts available to the church today.

Second, the author has attempted to avoid a confessional theology approach, but instead to employ a biblical theology one. In the former approach, biblical material is gathered to support positions already defined by a confessional or denominational group. In the latter, a theme is traced chronologically from the beginning of the Bible to the end, allowing the Bible speak for itself. This also enables the reader to see how the theme under study developed over time as God revealed more of His truth. In addition, material from the intertestamental period and the views of the Early Church are at times included in the investigation to demonstrate how post-prophetic Israel and post-apostolic Christianity understood God’s revelation in Scripture.

Third, this series describes and evaluates not only the Western (Catholic/Protestant) views on doctrinal questions, but the Eastern Orthodox understanding as well. The author of this series lived and taught for 20 years in countries of the former Soviet Union and is well versed in the special theological nuances of Eastern Christianity. Rarely do we find a resource where an objective evaluation of Eastern Orthodoxy is included in a systematic theology format.

Fourth, these books defend the Arminian view of predestination, which the author feels best represents the total biblical picture. Although this is not the only systematic theology text that holds this position, it is one of the few that does. We treat the topic with some depth, devoting three chapters of volume 3 to the issue.

Fifth, in volume 4, we utilize the theme “union with Christ” as an organizing center for discussing God’s salvation plan. We will discover that all the benefits of salvation are directly related to and entirely dependent upon the fact that God has placed us “in Christ.” One of the primary goals of this series is to reestablish the preeminence and priority of the long-neglected biblical concept of union with Christ as the all-inclusive principle for understanding and appropriating God’s grace in salvation.

Finally, in distinction from other treatments of systematic theology, we employ here an integrated approach of apologetics, hermeneutics and theology. We do this in order to present not only individual discussions of theological topics, but also a total Christian worldview, beginning with God’s existence, continuing with His revelation and nature, and concluding with an exposition of His plan expounded under the rubric: faith, hope, and love. The order and content of these five volumes progressively unfolds the Christian worldview:

- Volume 1 – Existence: Does God exist? If so, who is He?
- Volume 2 – Revelation: How does God make Himself known?
- Volume 3 – Nature: What is God like?
- Volumes 4-5 – Plan: What is God’s goal for humanity?

The material in volumes 4 and 5 is organized according to the apostle Paul’s famous maxim: “But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). The section on “faith” details God’s plan of salvation and how to obtain it. The section on “hope” describes our future after death and at the end of time. “Love” concerns questions of practical Christian living, both individually and corporately in the context of the Church.

We express our heartfelt appreciation for the following tools used extensively in this series:

- Logos Bible Software (<https://www.logos.com>)
- New American Standard Bible: 1995 update. – LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.
- Nestle-Aland: Novum Testamentum Graece. – Eds. Aland, K. Aland, Karavidopoulos J., Martini C. M., - - Metzger B. M. – 28 revidierte Auflage. – Stuttgart: Deutsche.
- Bibelgesellschaft. Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia: With Westminster Hebrew Morphology. – Stuttgart; Glenside PA: German Bible Society; Westminster Seminary, 2001.
- Wikipedia.org

A final word of thanks to the editor of the Russian version of this series, Sergey Podnyuk, for his careful review of the text and his support in general, to my wife, Nancy, for her assistance and support, and to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Truth about whom we humbly seek to write.

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## About the Author

Dr. Thomas Wespetal was born in 1957 in the city of Racine, Wisconsin (USA). He received Christ at age 17 and the following year followed Him in water baptism. In that same year, he experienced the Baptism in the Holy Spirit, after which he began attending Pentecostal and Charismatic fellowships.

Dr. Wespetal studied medicine at Oral Roberts University, earning an M.D. degree. He practiced medicine for several years before answering God's call to the full-time ministry of the Word. He subsequently studied at the Assemblies of God Seminary, receiving a Master in Biblical Languages.

Dr. Wespetal completed his theological education at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, earning a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology. His doctoral dissertation was on the topic of God's purpose in martyrdom. In 2008, in connection with his dissertation work, Dr. Wespetal participated in the Consultation of the World Evangelical Alliance in Bad Urach, Germany, on Suffering, Persecution and Martyrdom, which subsequently published a summary of his dissertation.

Dr. Wespetal is an ordained minister of the Assemblies of God and served as pastor for four years before devoting himself to teaching ministry. From 1995 to 2022, he taught theology, apologetics, hermeneutics and biblical languages in the republics of the former Soviet Union, residing in Russia and Ukraine.

## Introduction to Volume 3

What is God like? How can we describe His nature? We discovered in the last volume that the most reliable source of God's self-revelation is found in the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments. Therefore, these will be our primary resources for discovering what God is like.

We will attempt to describe God's nature from three vantage points: (1) His qualities or "attributes," (2) His triune nature, and (3) His relation to creation. The initial chapter, however, raises the crucial question as to whether one can know God at all and to what degree. We will defend the position that God's essence can be truly known, but that our knowledge of God will never be exhaustive. Along with the medieval scholar Thomas Aquinas, we affirm that our knowledge of God is *analogical*, that is, we can understand God's general characteristics, but only to the degree that the human mind can comprehend them. Consequently, we will refute the claims of apophatic theology that God's essence cannot be known in any sense.

In considering God's attributes, we will employ the following categories for classification: God's greatness, God's holiness, and God's love. In saying that God is "great," we affirm that He is living, personal, immaterial, unchanging, infinite, eternal, almighty, all-knowing, and ever-present. God's holiness includes His righteousness, justice, and faithfulness. God's love is characterized by grace, mercy, and patience. God's glory encompasses all of His perfections. Along with a biblical description of these attributes, we will examine and refute incorrect notions of God's nature.

In examining God's triune nature, we will affirm that there is only one God who, nonetheless, exists in three co-equal Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We will survey various attempts previously made to define and describe the Trinity and refute incorrect views. Discussing God's "three-in-oneness" necessarily follows our discussion of God's attributes, since all the Persons of the Trinity possess all of these qualities in full measure.

In the context of discussing the Trinity, we will defend the full deity and humanity of God the Son, Jesus Christ, attempting also to define the relationship between His two natures. We will conclude that these two natures subsist in one, divine-human Person in accordance with the Chalcedonian definition. The section on God's triune nature concludes with a defense of the full deity and personality of the Holy Spirit.

The final section covers God's relation to the created order. This section provides a contrast with the previous section in that the former investigates the relationships within the Godhead, while the latter relates to things outside of God, that is, to His creation.

In "unpacking" God's relationship with creation, we first affirm God as Creator and Sustainer. This volume will defend the position that God created the Earth in the space of six literal days about 6000 years ago. Next, we will study the first beings created by God, the angels, in the context of the biblical description of His majesty. The following chapter expounds on the themes of God's transcendence and immanence, that is, His "orientation" to the created order.

The next topic is also the most controversial – God's sovereignty. We will include discussions on God's providence in historical events and the occasional "violation" of the natural order by miraculous interventions. A troubling question is the seeming contradiction between God's sovereignty and human freedom. This volume defends the Arminian position, affirming true human freedom, contrary to the deterministic views of Calvinism.

The most problematic issue concerning God's sovereignty is the so-called "problem of evil," the topic of chapter 19. Why does a good God allow evil to exist? We conclude this volume in chapter 20 with a discussion of the biblical concept of the kingdom of God.

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## Section 1: God's Attributes

### Chapter 1 – Knowing God

The qualities that God possesses, that is, the characteristics that comprise His nature, are conventionally termed His “attributes.” Before we investigate God’s attributes, however, it is imperative to delineate the relationship between God’s “essence” and His “attributes.” This will require us to examine the contrast between the so-called apophatic and cataphatic approaches to knowing God.

#### A. Apophatism: The Unknowable God

##### 1. Survey of the Concept

The term “apophatism” refers to approaching the knowledge of God by means of negation. Let us explain. It is thought that God is so great and unfathomable that humans cannot conceive Him or describe Him in words. This is not only due merely to human weakness, but God, by nature, is beyond description, even by the angels.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, adherents to this school of thought feel that we should not attempt to describe what God is, but only what He is not. This is description by means of negation.<sup>2</sup>

Apophatism characterizes Eastern Orthodox theology, where it finds its firmest supporters. Orthodox scholar and Metropolitan Ilarion, for example, writes, “Apophatism consists in denial of all that God is not.... We cannot speak of what God is, but only of what He is not.”<sup>3</sup> Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky concurs, “We cannot comprehend what God is, but only what He is not.”<sup>4</sup> So then, the only way we can describe God is by using terms prefixed by “non,” “without,” or “beyond.” For example, God is nonvisible, without limit, beyond comprehension. We even encounter descriptions like “beyond good,” and “beyond being.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The medieval Eastern Father Gregory Palamas so taught. See Pelikan J. The Christian Tradition. Vol. 2, The Spirit of Eastern Christendom. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1974. – P. 264.

<sup>2</sup>Лосский В. Н. Богословие и Боговидение // Общ. ред. Владимир Писляков. – М.: Издательство Свято-Владимирского Братства, 2000. – P. 45; Иларион А. Таинство Веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихома, 1996. – P. 32.

<sup>3</sup>Иларион, p. 32. Author’s translation.

<sup>4</sup>Лосский, Богословие и Боговидение, p. 45. Author’s translation.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 32-33.

Apophatism contrasts with a rival approach to knowing God called “cataphatism.” Cataphatism involves describing God by means of affirmation.<sup>6</sup> In this approach, one may employ common terms to describe God’s essence or character, such as “good,” “great,” or “holy.”

Adherents of apophatism object that describing God by affirmation limits His glory. Since God is above all and beyond all comparison, one cannot make affirmations about God, but only negations.<sup>7</sup> We cannot define God, but only state how He differs from others. Here, however, Orthodoxy makes an important qualification – the titles “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” faithfully reflect the essence of the Godhead. Hopko claims that God is “beyond being,” but not “beyond hypostasis.”<sup>8</sup>

We must note that among supporters of apophatic theology, we can identify both extreme and more moderate positions. Among the latter group was John of Damascus (675-749), who ascribed to God both affirmations and negations:

Uncreate, without beginning, immortal, infinite, eternal, immaterial, good, creative, just, enlightening, immutable, passionless, uncircumscribed, immeasurable, unlimited, undefined, unseen, unthinkable, wanting in nothing, being His own rule and authority, all-ruling, life-giving, omnipotent, of infinite power, containing and maintaining the universe and making provision for all: all these and such like attributes the Deity possesses by nature (*An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.14).

Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386), while acknowledging that God is unfathomable, nonetheless urges believers to utilize the knowledge of God they possess:

But some one will say, If the Divine substance is incomprehensible, why then dost thou discourse of these things? So then, because I cannot drink up all the river, am I not even to take in moderation what is expedient for me? Because with eyes so constituted as mine I cannot take in all the sun, am I not even to look upon him enough to satisfy my wants? Or again, because I have entered into a great garden, and cannot eat all the supply of fruits, wouldst thou have me go away altogether hungry? (*Catechetical Lectures*, 6.5).

On the other hand, the fifth-sixth century thinker, Pseudo-Dionysius (the “Areopagite”), held to a more radical form of apophatism:

Unit making one every unit, and superessential essence and mind inconceivable, and Word unutterable... namelessness being after the manner of no existing being, and Cause of being to all, but Itself not being, as beyond every essence (*On the Divine Names*, 1.1).<sup>9</sup>

We especially note the extremism of Pseudo-Dionysius in speaking of God as a being beyond being. Bloesch claims that Pseudo-Dionysius even taught that God, in His essence, is beyond even the hypostatic distinctions of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Another extreme adherent of apophatism was Gregory Palamas (1296-1359):

God’s nature, which is beyond nature, can neither be expressed in words, nor captured in thought or vision, because it is distinct from all things and unknowable.... There is no name, neither in this age, nor

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<sup>6</sup>Осипов А. И. Путь богопознания. <http://predanie.ru/film/videolekcii-i-propovedi/professor-aleksei-ilich-osipov/>

<sup>7</sup>Лосский, Богословие и Боговидение, p. 45; Иларион, p. 32-33.

<sup>8</sup>Hopko T. Apophatic Theology and the Naming of God in Eastern Orthodox Tradition // Kimel A. F. Jr. Speaking the Christian God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992. – P. 160. Noted in Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 43.

<sup>9</sup>Taken from: The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite / Trans. John Parker. – London: James Parker and Co., 1897. – P. 2-3.

<sup>10</sup>Bloesch, p. 41, 175.



in the future, to assign to it. There are no words, discovered by the soul or expressed by the tongue, nothing in the feelings or beyond feelings, no image, that are able to somehow characterize it, except for complete unfathomability, which we confess.<sup>11</sup>

Pelikan notes that according to Palamas, even negation was insufficient to describe God.<sup>12</sup>

It is also interesting to note the presence and permeation of apophatism in Russian philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Its influence is especially felt in the works of Aleksei Losev (1892-1988), whose thought has affinity with Neoplatonism. Losev believed in an Absolute Unity, the nature of which is indescribable. In this “Absolute” existed a distinction between its “essence” and its “energies,” something also seen in apophatism (see below). Only by means of the latter could one gain some conception of the Absolute. We can also mention Lev Karsavin (1882-1952), who also believed in an Absolute Unity, the essence of which could not be conceived.

Western theology also flirted with apophatism, especially among liberal thinkers. Rudolph Otto (1869-1937), for example, taught that the way to know God was not through the mind, but by direct contact with the Ultimate. According to Otto, a God that one may know is not the true God.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Karl Barth (1886-1968) taught that God is so transcendent, that people cannot know Him or contact Him except when God Himself takes initiative to personally reveal Himself to an individual. Barth expresses his view in the phrase, “Through God alone may God be known.”<sup>15</sup>

A contemporary of Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, shared Barth’s view of God’s unknowability. According to Bultmann, God “stands over and against the material order.” Bultmann stressed “the great distance between God and humanity.” He stated, “God is so great that we cannot know him or speak of him sensibly at all.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, Paul Tillich, who defines God as the “Ground of Being,” believed that God goes deeper than being, and therefore cannot be described. He spoke of the “abyss of the Godhead.”<sup>17</sup>

The concept of “God’s uncreated energies” plays a key role in the system of apophatism. The terms “energies,” “powers” or “activities” are used to describe how God manifests Himself in creation. God’s “energies” are how He presents Himself to the created world. People cannot know God’s “essence.” It is unfathomable and indescribable. Yet, they can know and describe God’s “energies.” Such cataphatic depictions of God as “good,” “holy,” or “wise” relate to God’s energies, rather than to His essence. The “fullness of Deity,” spoken of in Colossians 2:9, is thought to be the sum of God’s energies along with His unknowable essence.<sup>18</sup>

Some Church Fathers speak of the supposed distinction between God’s essence and His energies. Especially notable for this is Pseudo-Dionysius, who claims that God, in His unity or essential nature, abides in absolute rest and does not reveal Himself to the external world, whereas God, in his distinctions or energies, expresses and manifests Himself to creation.<sup>19</sup>

Gregory Palamas made the most significant contribution to the development of this dual understanding of God. In his day, certain theologians objected to the pretention of monks (hesychasts) that they enjoyed direct contact with God in spirit, since God, in His essence, is unapproachable.<sup>20</sup> Palamas offered the following solution. The monks were not experiencing mystical union with God in His essence, but rather in His energies. Lossky comments, “We see that the necessity of dogmatically substantiating the possibility of union with God

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<sup>11</sup>Noted in *Слове об обожении* // Под ред. Архимандрита Никона (Иванова) и Протоиерея Николая Лихоманова. – М: Сибирская Благозвонница, 2004. – P. 58. Author’s translation.

<sup>12</sup>Pelikan, p. 265

<sup>13</sup>Material from Зеньковского В. В. История русской философии. Аудио-серия (V. Zenovsky, History of Russian Philosophy. Audio Series).

<sup>14</sup>Pessin A. The God Question. – Oxford: One World, 2009. – P. 211.

<sup>15</sup>Mueller D. L. Karl Barth // Patterson B. E. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind. – Waco, TX: Word, 1972. – P. 62.

<sup>16</sup>Hill J. The History of Christian Thought. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003. – P. 279-280.

<sup>17</sup>Bloesch, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 3.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Burgess S. M. The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1989. – P. 15.

forced the Eastern Church to formulate the teaching of a real distinction between divine essence and energies.<sup>21</sup>

Lossky, in fact, is considered the leading modern Orthodox thinker promoting the idea of God's uncreated energies. He feels that God's energies "eternally emanate from the united essence of the Most Holy Trinity."<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, "We can say that (God's) energies give us a glimpse of the Most Holy Trinity apart from Its unapproachable essence."<sup>23</sup>

Nonetheless, making a distinction between God's essence and energies is not meant to imply a bifurcation in His nature. Lossky writes, "Totally unfathomable in His essence, God fully reveals Himself in His energies, which does not lead to a division of His nature into two parts – knowable and unknowable – but indicates two various modes of the Divine being – in His essence, and apart from His essence."<sup>24</sup> Moreover, "God shows Himself as He really is. We cannot know the depths of the Divine essence, but we know the radiance of glory, that God truly is, whether we name this the Divine 'essence,' since it is inexhaustible transcendence, or whether we name this 'energy,' since it manifests itself in glory. It is always the self-same nature."<sup>25</sup> So then, God's uncreated energies are not "part" of God, but God Himself. His energies are "God Himself, yet not in His essence."<sup>26</sup>

Palamas affirms the same – energies are not emanations from God, they are "Divine life, which God imparts to His creatures. Thanks to these energies, God makes direct and immediate contact with humans.... They are essentially God Himself in His action toward and revelation to the world."<sup>27</sup> Metropolitan Kallistos (the former Timothy Ware) agrees that God's "energies" are essentially God Himself and describes them as God in action, God in self-disclosure, and God in immediate fellowship with His creatures.<sup>28</sup>

Lossky hesitates to equate God's uncreated energies with His "attributes." Following Palamas, Lossky prefers to associate God's energies with His "names," like Wisdom, Life, Power, Justice, Love, Being, God, etc. The names that describe God's energies are innumerable: "God's names, as well as His energies, are innumerable, but the nature, which they reveal, remains nameless, incomprehensible."<sup>29</sup> Yet, these names refer only to God's energies, not to His essence: "When we say that God is Wisdom, Life, Truth, Love, we speak of His energies... of His manifestations, which are external to the Triune existence itself."<sup>30</sup>

To what degree does apophatism claim that God's energies correspond to His essence? There seems to be some inconsistency in this regard. At times, adherents of apophatism deny the gaining of any insight into the nature of the essence from the energies. Lossky, for example, claims that God's names "reveal to us His energies, which descend to us, but do not provide access to His unapproachable essence," and, "we may say that energies reveal to us a certain image of the Most Holy Trinity's existence apart from Its unapproachable essence."<sup>31</sup> Basil the Great affirms likewise, "The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach" (*Letter 234*).

On the other hand, the following quotes suggest that God's essence is in some way revealed in His energies. For example, John of Damascus, who writes emphatically about God's incomprehensibility, nonetheless claims, "All that we can affirm concerning God does not shew forth God's nature, but only the

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<sup>21</sup>Лосский В. Н. Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие. – М.: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – Р. 56. Author's translation.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 58. Author's translation.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., Author's translation.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 67. Author's translation.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 221. Author's translation.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 57. Author's translation.

<sup>27</sup>Зайцев Е. Учение В. Лосского о теозисе. – М: Библейско-богословский институт св. апостола Андрея, 2007. – Р. 95. Author's translation.

<sup>28</sup>Ware T. God Hidden and Revealed // Eastern Churches Review. 7. 1975. P. 135.

<sup>29</sup>Лосский, Очерк мистического богословия, р. 62-63. Author's translation.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 63. Author's translation.

<sup>31</sup>Лосский, Очерк мистического богословия, р. 28, 58

qualities of His nature.”<sup>32</sup> Note that John claims that God’s energies show “the qualities of His nature.” Moreover, Archimandrite Nikon (Ivanov) comments on the teaching of Basil the Great, “We acknowledge the essence in virtue of the energy, which demonstrate and explain the essence.”<sup>33</sup> In addition, in his analysis of the theology of Palamas, Mantzaridis regards God’s uncreated energies as “the natural expression of the divine essence.”<sup>34</sup> Even Lossky is ready to attribute to God’s energies a certain association with His essence:

The most exalted names, even the name “love,” expresses the Divine essence, but not exhaustively. These are the attributes, the qualities, by which the Godhead communicates Himself.... His nature can never be exhausted, can never be objectified in our sight.<sup>35</sup>

The teaching of God’s uncreated energies interacts with the doctrine of the Trinity as well. In Orthodox thought, the Son is eternally begotten by the Father, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from Him. This occurs on the level of God’s essence, not His energies. However, when God creates, this occurs in connection with His energies, not His essence. So then, it is thought that distinguishing essence and energies can prevent the misunderstandings that the Father created the Son and Spirit, or that creation is some sort of emanation from His essence.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, it is thought that distinguishing God’s energies and essence corresponds to the two approaches we have discussed for knowing God. Cataphatic theology corresponds to God’s energies, while apophatic theology relates to God’s essence.<sup>37</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius distinguishes these two methods of describing God as follows:

The (Names) then, common to the whole Deity, as we have demonstrated from the Oracles, by many instances in the Theological Outlines, are the Super-Good, the Super-God, the Super-essential, the Super-Living, the Super-Wise, and whatever else belongs to the superlative abstraction; with which also, all those denoting Cause, the Good, the Beautiful, the Being, the Life-producing, the Wise, and whatever Names are given to the Cause of all Good, from His goodly gifts (*On the Divine Names*, 2.3).<sup>38</sup>

## 2. The Apophatic Method

Supporters of apophatism do not totally reject the cataphatic approach to knowing God, that is, by employing reason. For them, cataphatism may serve as a launching point for more substantial contemplation of God.<sup>39</sup> However, they deem the cataphatic approach less fruitful than the apophatic. Gregory Nazianzen states, “To speak of God is a great thing, but better yet is to purify oneself for God.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, it is not totally improper to ascribe to God such predicates as loving, wise, true, holy, or good, but in so doing practitioners of apophatism recognize that these terms do not relate to God’s essence, but to His energies or manifestations. In Lossky’s opinion, cataphatism relates to God’s *catabasis* (condescension) to people, i.e., that which He reveals about Himself. Apophatism, though, makes possible people’s *anabasis* (ascension) to God through *gnosis* (mystical knowledge).<sup>41</sup>

In order to go deeper into the knowledge of God, adherents of the apophatic method suggest embarking on the path to “ignorance.” Those who wish to embrace apophatism must “cleanse” the mind. This means that

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<sup>32</sup> *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 1.4.

<sup>33</sup> Слово об обожении, p. 59. Author’s translation.

<sup>34</sup> Mantzaridis G. I. *The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*. – Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984. – P. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Лосский, *Очерк мистического богословия*, p. 206.

<sup>36</sup> Mantzaridis, p. 107.

<sup>37</sup> Лосский, *Очерк мистического богословия*, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Taken from *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Лосский, *Очерк мистического богословия*, p. 33.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32. Author’s translation.

<sup>41</sup> Зайцев, p. 142-144.

one must cease making affirmations about God or even thinking of Him in those terms. The God-seeker must cease to think of God as loving, wise, true, holy, good, etc. The seventh century monk, Maximus the Confessor, emphasized clearing the mind – “its being bared of any thought, of all mental images in general.”<sup>42</sup>

Lossky, appealing to the fourth century Father, Gregory of Nyssa, in support, states that the purifying of the mind involves elimination of “all positive attributes of the object it wishes to attain, in order to culminate finally in a kind of apprehension by supreme ignorance of Him who cannot be an object of knowledge.”<sup>43</sup>

Lossky also appeals to the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius:

One must renounce both senses and rational effort, and from all sensory and rational objects; both from all that has existence, and from all that does not have existence; in order that in total ignorance to attain to union with the One, Who exceeds all existence and all knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

Lossky himself claims,

Only by means of ignorance can one know the One, Who is higher than all possible objects of knowledge.... By embracing negation, we ascend from a lower level of existence to its highpoint, progressively putting aside everything that can be known, so that in the darkness of total ignorance we may approach the Unknowable.<sup>45</sup>

Moreover,

Apophatism teaches us to see in the dogmas of the Church, first of all, their negative meaning, not allowing our thinking to follow its natural course and form concepts which would replace the spiritual reality. Christianity is not a philosophical school speculating about abstract concepts, but, first and foremost, fellowship with the living God.<sup>46</sup>

Even reflection on Scripture is inadequate. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) taught that in reflection on Scripture – the verbal expression of revelation – God Himself remains concealed as if behind a wall.<sup>47</sup> According to Lossky, one’s dismissal of cataphatic conceptions of God should reach the following goal: “As we attain the summit of contemplation... we say ‘God is nonexistent,’ ‘God is not good.’”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, “The most exalted attributes are excluded: goodness, love, wisdom. Finally, existence itself is excluded.... He ‘is not.’”<sup>49</sup>

The next step in the apophatic approach to knowing God is to seek mystical union with Him. The goal of this experience is for the individual to experience God’s energies within the heart. This leads to a state of ecstasy.<sup>50</sup> Florovsky describes this experience: “The way to knowledge is the path of abstraction and negation, the path of simplicity and silence.... We only know God in the rest of the spirit, in the rest of ignorance. God is not known from a distance through reflection on Him, but through an incomprehensible union with Him.”<sup>51</sup>

Furthermore, according to Pseudo-Dionysius, persons must “deprive themselves of feeling and intellectual activity... so that in ignorance to attain union (with God).” He enters into “the gloom” in order to see the

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<sup>42</sup>Florovsky G. *Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eight Centuries* / Trans. Raymond Miller, et al. – Postfach: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987 – P. 219.

<sup>43</sup>Clendenin D. B. *Eastern Orthodox Christianity: a Western Perspective*. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003. – P. 56.

<sup>44</sup>Лосский, Очерк мистического богословия, p. 23. Author’s translation.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 22. Author’s translation.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 35. Author’s translation.

<sup>47</sup>Taken from Лосский, Очерк мистического богословия, p. 34.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>50</sup>Meyendorff J. *Byzantine Theology*. – New York: Fordham University, 1974. – P. 138-140.

<sup>51</sup>Quote from Иларион, p. 33.

“Divine Rays.”<sup>52</sup> Berzonsky affirms, “We come to know the Unknowable One not by thinking or by understanding but by progressive union.”<sup>53</sup> According to Maximus the Confessor, “The knowledge of God in His higher existence is possible; yet not by rational concepts, but in a vision that exceeds thought, in *ecstasy*,” which requires “complete silence.” Moreover, our minds can “soar in the ever-peaceful darkness of Divine Mystery, where it meets God face to face and lives in him.”<sup>54</sup>

Metropolitan Ilarion also supports this idea: «...one can commune with God not as much through words and description, as through pious and fearful silence.”<sup>55</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius adds, “The most profound knowledge of God is that which is attained through ignorance, by means of a union that exceeds reason.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, Orthodox scholar Andrew Kuraev compares the cataphatic method, employed by Protestant theology, with apophatism: “Orthodoxy and Protestantism correlate as a religion of monks and a religion of professors.” Kuraev, then, feels that the former is devoted to contemplation of God, and the latter – to His study.<sup>57</sup>

As stated earlier, adherents of apophatism do not totally spurn cataphatism, since it can serve as a starting point for moving on to a deeper knowledge of God. Maximus the Confessor, in fact, counsels believers to seek union with God progressively, beginning with the cataphatic approach: “First of all, it is possible and necessary to cognize God ‘from the magnitude of his deeds.’ This is still preliminary knowledge. And the limit and goal of knowledge of God is to see God.”<sup>58</sup>

Eastern monks/mystics often employ a special method to attain mystical union with God called the “Jesus prayer,” championed by hesychastic monks and especially by Gregory Palamas. According to this method, a monk/mystic should continually repeat the prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me; Son of God, have mercy on me.”<sup>59</sup> The “Jesus prayer” arose in the Sinai monastery and was further developed by monks on Mount Athos in Greece. Palamas zealously supported and promoted the practice.

Palamas also advanced the idea that through apophatic contemplation the worshipper can see the so-called “Tabor Light,” that is, the light that surrounded the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration. To support this idea, Palamas appeals to similar occurrences in Scripture, such as Moses’ face shining, Stephen’s vision of Christ, and Paul’s experience with Christ on the Damascus road.<sup>60</sup> Mantzaridis comments, “The hesychast monks of Mount Athos, in practicing pure prayer, progressed toward the vision of divine light.”<sup>61</sup> Although in Scripture, “light” merely *represents* God, Palamas claims that the symbol (i.e., light) somehow actually *participates* in what it symbolizes (i.e., God). Therefore, the Tabor Light is not simply a manifestation of God’s glory, but an appearance of God Himself – not in His essence, but in his uncreated energies.<sup>62</sup>

The following citations from Pseudo-Dionysius summarize the apophatic approach:

But thou, O dear Timothy, by thy persistent commerce with the mystic visions, leave behind both sensible perceptions and intellectual efforts, and all objects of sense and intelligence, and all things not being and being, and be raised aloft unknowingly to the union, as far as attainable, with Him Who is above every essence and knowledge. For by the resistless and absolute ecstasy in all purity, from thyself and all, thou wilt be carried on high, to the superessential ray of the Divine darkness, when-thou hast cast away all, and become free from all (*Mystic Theology*, 1.1).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Лосский, Богословие и Боговидение, p. 55-56. Author’s translation.

<sup>53</sup>Berzonsky V. Response to George Hancock-Stefan // Gundry S., Stamoolis J. Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004. – P. 225.

<sup>54</sup>Florovsky, p. 217.

<sup>55</sup>Иларион, p. 26-27. Author’s translation.

<sup>56</sup>Taken from Лосский, Богословие и Боговидение, p. 55. Author’s translation.

<sup>57</sup>Курев А. Протестантам о православии. – 7th ed. – Ростов-на-Дону: Троицкое Слово, 2003. – P. 16. Author’s translation.

<sup>58</sup>Noted in Florovsky, p. 217.

<sup>59</sup>Иларион, p. 195-199.

<sup>60</sup>Mantzaridis, p. 98; Pelikan, p. 267.

<sup>61</sup>Mantzaridis, p. 96.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 98, 104.

<sup>63</sup>Taken from *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 130.

And there is, further, the most Divine Knowledge of Almighty God, which is known, through not knowing (agnosia) during the union above mind; when the mind, having stood apart from all existing things, then having dismissed also itself, has been made one with the super-luminous rays, thence and there being illuminated by the unsearchable depth of wisdom (*On the Divine Names*, 7.3).<sup>64</sup>

### 3. Support of and Objections to Apophatism

What evidence supports the validity of the apophatic method?<sup>65</sup> First, adherents appeal to the occasion when Moses ascended Mount Sinai in a dark cloud while the other Israelites remained at the foot of the mountain. The latter are associated with those seeking God by the cataphatic method. The follower of apophatism, however, like Moses, abandons the cataphatic way in order to know God more deeply in the “divine gloom.” In other words, one must embark on the path of ignorance.<sup>66</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius explains,

For even the divine Moses is himself strictly bidden to be first purified, and then to be separated from those who are not so, and after entire cleansing hears the many-voiced trumpets, and sees many lights, shedding pure and streaming rays; then he is separated from the multitude, and with the chosen priests goes first to the summit of the divine ascents, although even then he does not meet with Almighty God Himself, but views not Him (for He is viewless) but the place where He is (*Mystic Theology*, 1.3).<sup>67</sup>

However, one must consider that here we are not dealing with a didactic (teaching) passage of Scripture, but narrative. This passage does not *teach* apophatism, but simply *describes* Moses’ experience on Sinai. We must refrain from basing an entire doctrinal position on a creative interpretation of biblical narrative. Such commentators are employing an allegorical approach to biblical interpretation. What actual facts can substantiate that Moses’ ascent on Sinai represents the preferred method of knowing God? We must also keep in mind that such an interpretation runs contrary to clear biblical teaching on that topic in other, didactic passages (examples to follow).

In addition, advocates of apophatism fail to appreciate that when Moses ascended on Mount Sinai, supposedly to enjoy an apophatic experience in God’s presence, the Lord gave him instead the clearest cataphatic description of His nature found anywhere in Scripture. We read in Exodus 34:5-7,

Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Yahweh. Then Yahweh passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness 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 generations.”

Additionally, in support of their theory, apophatic devotees point to the fact that God did not allow Moses to look at His face, but only at His back (Ex 33:20-23). Assumedly, God’s “face” refers to His essence, while His “back” refers to His energies. However, does this view have any substantiation? We agree that no one can see God in all His glory. Yet, this passage does not teach a distinction between essence and energies in God. The passage, in fact, does not concern *knowing* God, but rather *seeing* Him. The fact that no one can see God’s face in no way forces the conclusion that no one can know God’s essence or describe Him in human words. Visual perception of God differs from mental comprehension of His attributes.

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 91-92.

<sup>65</sup>Much material here taken from Clendenin.

<sup>66</sup>Иларион, р. 33-34; Лосский, Богословие и Боговидение, р. 59.

<sup>67</sup>Taken from *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 132.

Apophatism makes a similar claim about John 1:18: “No one has seen God at any time” and 1 Timothy 6:16: “(God) dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see.” Yet again, the topic is not a verbal revelation about God, but the visual perception of His glory. The impossibility of the latter does not imply the unfeasibility of the former. In fact, in both contexts we see emphasized the necessity and importance of revelation from God. After the above quoted section of John 1:18, the verse continues, “The only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has *explained* {Him}.” Similarly, 1 Timothy 6:16 is located in a context where Paul exhorts Timothy to “keep the commandment without stain or reproach,” i.e., preserve God’s verbal revelation.

A further argument in support of apophatism is found in the words of Solomon, “Yahweh has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud” (1 Kin 8:12). Whenever God’s glory appeared in the tabernacle or the temple, it was always in the form of a cloud (Lev 16:2; 1 Kin 8:11; Ex 40:34-35). This is consistent with the idea that no one can see God in all His glory (cf. Ex 33:20). However, this in no way implies that the knowledge of God is not available in conceptual form. In fact, the “glory cloud” overshadowed the ark of the covenant, which contained the Ten Commandments, that is, a written record of God’s revelation.

Furthermore, followers of apophatism cite Deuteronomy 29:29, which allegedly speaks of God’s unknowability as His “secret things”: “The secret things belong to Yahweh our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” The term “secret,” though, is a translation of the Hebrew participle סָתַר (*satar*) in the *Niph’al* form, meaning “hidden.”<sup>68</sup> This word is not used in Scripture to describe some ineffable object, but for something that is understandable, but hidden. Therefore, this verse is simply contrasting things that God has revealed with things He has not. It does not refer to God’s essence.

Next, apophatism claims that God cannot be “contained” (see 1 Kin 8:27). This verse refers to the fact that no building can contain God, and it is further claimed that neither the human mind, nor the biblical text can contain Him either. We concur that God is bigger than any building, the human mind, and even the Bible. However, God is also bigger than the human heart and any mystical experience a person may claim. Therefore, devotees of apophatism cannot prove that they receive a fuller experience of God through a mystical experience than that which comes through Scripture.

Adherents of apophatism also appeal to Psalm 97:2, where we read, “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him.” However, the Scriptures often represent God as a phenomenon of nature, such as an earthquake (Ps 18:7; Judg 5:4) or a storm (Ps 18:11-15; 104:7; 50:3).<sup>69</sup> Both elements, in fact, are present in Psalm 97:

Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.  
Fire goes before Him and burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of Yahweh, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth (Ps 97:2-5).

Such a phenomenon was seen when God visited Mount Sinai:

So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who {were} in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai {was} all in smoke because Yahweh descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently (Ex 19:16-18).

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<sup>68</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 711.

<sup>69</sup>Tate M. E. Psalms 51–100 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 519.

In the following chapter, Moses explains why God appears in such a terrifying form. His goal is not to emphasize His unknowability, but to instill fear in His people:

All the people perceived the thunder and the lightning flashes and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw {it,} they trembled and stood at a distance. Then they said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but let not God speak to us, or we will die." Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may remain with you, so that you may not sin" (Ex 20:18-20).

Also in support of apophatism, we read that God's thoughts are greater than people's thoughts (Isa 55:8-9). Apophatists conclude that it is better to know God with the heart than with the mind. Yet again, this verse is being taken out of context. We note that Isa 55:8 begins with the conjunction "for," which connects it with the previous verse in a causal relationship. Verse 7 reads, "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to Yahweh, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon." So then, there is no need to abandon one's intellect or reason, but rather one's depraved manner of thinking and acting. Furthermore, God addresses the issue of people's wrong thinking not by urging a mystical encounter, but by sending His Word (vv. 10-11). Correspondingly, He invites His people to "incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live" (Isa 55:3).

Other arguments are advanced in support of the apophatic approach. The Old Testament records that Elijah did not find God in the strong wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire, but in a still, small voice (1 Kin 19:13). It is assumed, then, that the knowledge of God comes in the stillness of the human spirit. In response, we note the parallel between Elijah and Moses.<sup>70</sup> Both fasted forty days, both came to Sinai, and both encountered the Lord there. The signs that Elijah observed Moses saw as well, namely fire and earthquake. Finally, both Elijah and Moses were in need of a confirmation of their ministry before the people.

However, unlike Moses' experience, Elijah did not find God in the fire or the earthquake. God confirmed Moses' ministry with a demonstration of His power and might. In Elijah's case, who desired a similar divine confirmation, God revealed Himself in a quiet fashion. House proposes that in Elijah's time, God intended to reveal Himself in a more subtle manner – by a still, small voice – since God's plan at that time was to bring correction to Israel in a less dramatic way: "Hazael king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint as prophet in your place" (1 Kin 19:15-16).<sup>71</sup>

When Paul was caught up to heaven, he heard "inexpressible (ἄρρητος - *arretos*) words, which a man is not permitted (ἐξέστιν - *exestin*) to speak" (2 Cor 12:2-4). Does this imply that people are incapable of expressing God's essence? First, we must consider that the topic of these "inexpressible words" is not stated. Apophatists cannot prove that they concerned God's ineffable essence.

Second, the above translation (taken from the NASB) correctly translates the negated verb ἐξέστιν (*exestin*) in its most common sense as "not permitted."<sup>72</sup> The term as ἄρρητος (*arretos*) is commonly translated not only "inexpressible," but also "forbidden."<sup>73</sup> We would prefer the latter translation, since if words are "inexpressible," then what sense is there in "not permitting" them to be spoken? In addition, one would expect

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<sup>70</sup>Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. Commentary on the Old Testament. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002. – V. 3. – P. 482.

<sup>71</sup>House P. R. 1, 2 Kings // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, electronic edition Logos Library System, 2001. – P. 223-224.

<sup>72</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 348-349.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p. 134.



stylistic harmony between the two clauses, which is achieved if both speak of restriction.<sup>74</sup> The preferred translation, then, is “forbidden words, which a man is not permitted to speak.”<sup>75</sup>

Third, here we have another example where God does not allow certain truths, which can be understood, to be revealed at that time (as noted in Deuteronomy 29:29 and Revelation 10:4). So then, the words that Paul heard were understandable, but he was forbidden to announce them.

Some say that 1 Cor 2:12-13 teaches the mystical approach to knowing God: “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual {thoughts} with spiritual {words}.” The issue here, however, is not whether God reveals Himself in words, but *in what way* Paul received this verbal revelation. It came not through human reasoning, but by supernatural illumination. What Paul received, nonetheless, was verbal communication.

The following logical argument is advanced in support of apophatic theology – knowledge gained through personal encounter is superior to knowledge as information. In other words, it is better to become personally acquainted with someone than to simply read about that person. On the other hand, these two paths to knowledge in no way exclude one another. Studying about someone does not hinder one from knowing that person, but rather enhances personal relationship. The more we know about someone, the better we know that individual. McGrath writes, “Revelation includes knowledge of God as an ‘It’ and as a ‘You.’ We come to know things about God; yet we also come to know God.”<sup>76</sup>

This same response applies to the apophatist’s claim that worship of God is more important than studying about Him. Unlike study, worship is a matter of the heart, not the mind. Yet again, the two practices in no way conflict, but compliment one another. The study of God does not hinder worship, but enhances it and enriches the worship experience.

Finally, Maximus the Confessor makes the following claim. He feels that Scripture serves only to relay God’s salvation plan, but it does not aid in knowing God. Scripture itself, he claims, supports the apophatic approach. He writes,

Reflect on what has been assigned to you, even the terms and names that were used about God in Scripture, although true, had to be regarded as inappropriate and in this sense “unworthy” of him. But this recognition of this unworthiness was itself derived from the revelation of God in Scripture, so that the true fidelity to Scripture did not consist in claiming that its language was a disclosure of the inner being of God but in recognizing that it spoke about the saving will of God toward the world. For that very reason, the mind had the obligation to pay careful attention to the revelation of his saving will.<sup>77</sup>

In response, one only needs to observe that none of the arguments discussed above in support of the apophatic method enjoy clear biblical support. On what basis, then, can Maximus claim that Scripture itself promotes apophatism?

#### 4. Further Refutation of Apophatism

Along with our objections to apophatism raised in the previous section, we may uncover other weaknesses in this system. First, we admit, of course, that God is incomprehensible. No matter how much effort we exert, we are not able with human intellect to fully comprehend him, or with human words to express His glory. God is greater than all we can think or say. Scripture confirms this:

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<sup>74</sup>Harris M. J. *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. – Grand Rapids, MI; Milton Keynes, UK: W. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2005. – P. 843-844.

<sup>75</sup>Garland, D. E. *2 Corinthians // The New American Commentary*. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, electronic edition Logos Library System, 2001. – P. 516.

<sup>76</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 209.

<sup>77</sup>See *Commentary on Dionysius*, 9.1; 1.1. Taken from Pelikan, p. 34-35

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the lord, or who became his counselor? Or who has first given to him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him {be} the glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33-36).

However, it is misguided to conclude that God's incomprehensibility requires us to abandon the knowledge of Him available through His self-revelation, or to seek Him exclusively by means of mystical encounter. The Bible, in fact, repeatedly calls believers to seek God through study of the Word (see Josh 1:8; Ps 1:1-3; Ps 119; Prov 4:20-22; Matt 4:4; Col 3:16; Acts 20:32; 1 Pet 2:2).

Unlike the claims of apophatists, Scripture nowhere indicates that the cataphatic method is ineffective or insufficient. Russian evangelical scholar Yevgeny Zaitsev rightly comments, "It is impossible to deny that the biblical narrative in general demonstrates a cataphatic character."<sup>78</sup> He also states, "Although mystical experience is present in the Bible (Job 42:5; 2 Cor 12:2-4), it is never spoken of as a dominant practice or as the ultimate goal of a believer's spiritual walk."<sup>79</sup>

The theology of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) will greatly aid us in our understanding of how we know God. Acknowledging that our knowledge of God is partial, he nonetheless asserted that we can truly know Him. He affirms that our knowledge of God is *analogical*, that is, we can understand God's general characteristics, but only to the degree that the human mind can comprehend them. For example, we know that God is good, and that this word accurately describes His nature or essence. What we do not know is *how* good He is. His goodness is infinite and exceeds our ability to understand it fully. Yet, we do understand the sense of the word "good," and that word truly describes God.

It may prove helpful to compare the following terms used to compare items. The Latin term *univoce* refers to an exact description that perfectly corresponds to the item being described. We do not claim to have such a knowledge of God, since He is infinite and incomprehensible. The Latin term *aequivoce* is used when the description of an object does not correspond to the object at all. This term is also inappropriate in relation to our knowledge of God. Aquinas felt the most appropriate term to describe how we know God is *analogice*, i.e., by analogy.

So then, we know the Lord partially, analogically, but not fully.<sup>80</sup> Although our knowledge is partial, it is nonetheless true. Joyner writes, "Whatever knowledge we have of God is because He has chosen to disclose himself to us. But even the admittedly limited knowledge we now have is glorious to behold and is a sufficient ground for our faith."<sup>81</sup> Bloesch adds, "The God of the Bible is incomparable but not unthinkable. He is incomprehensible but not unintelligible."<sup>82</sup> Pink wisely counsels, "Because we are unable to acquire perfect knowledge, it would be folly to say we will therefore make no efforts to attain to *any* degree of it."<sup>83</sup>

Contrary to the claims of apophatism, we affirm that the descriptions of God in the Bible correspond to His essence, not to His so-called "energies." The Bible nowhere teaches or supports the distinction between essence and energies in God, except in some allegorically interpreted passages noted earlier. The Bible describes God as He truly is in Himself. Scripture says, "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16), and, "God is light" (1 Jn 1:5). It does not say that He "manifests" Himself as love and light, but that He is so in His nature. These terms, along with others, truly describe who God is. In Bloesch's words, "The essence of God is reflected in his attributes; the attributes, on the other hand, are manifestations of his essence."<sup>84</sup> Erickson concurs, "God is his essence,

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<sup>78</sup>Зайцев, p. 250.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., p. 212.

<sup>80</sup>Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 161.

<sup>81</sup>Joyner R. E. The One True God // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 137.

<sup>82</sup>Bloesch, p. 50.

<sup>83</sup>Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 88.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

he is his attributes, the predicates that attach to him. When we know the attributes of God, we are truly knowing him.”<sup>85</sup>

Distinguishing essence and energies in God creates a contradiction with John’s claims about Christ. He writes about the Lord, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained {Him}” (Jn 1:18). Jesus revealed the “invisible God,” that is, God Himself, not merely His energies. Therefore, John can write, “We saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father (Jn 1:14), and Jesus could say of Himself, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

It is curious to note that distinguishing essence and manifestations in God characterizes non-Christian mysticism as well. The well-known Jewish philosopher Maimonides, along with other Jewish and Moslem mystics, so taught.<sup>86</sup> It seems that this view is rooted in general mystical thought, rather in Holy Scripture.

Moreover, apophatism undervalues God’s ability to reveal Himself. Admittedly, human rationality cannot fully comprehend God’s glory. Yet, that does not mean that God cannot express *Himself* or describe *Himself* by means of human language. If God is indeed great, which apophatism certainly affirms, then He is more than able to reveal Himself in words. The limitations of language do not prevent Him from giving an accurate description of Himself. God created language, in fact, to facilitate communication with His creatures. If *people* attempt to describe God in words, their attempts may fall short in precision or be altogether inaccurate. However, if God describes *Himself* by means of language, we will receive an accurate and precise revelation of His nature.

Interestingly, we discover that the most ardent supporter of apophatism, Pseudo-Dionysius (Aeropagite), is unreliable as a source of true teaching. He claims to be the convert of Paul in Athens, as recorded in Acts 17:34, and for many years his followers considered the author of these mystical works to be the true Athenian. However, scholars have convincingly demonstrated that this author lived in the sixth century (see discussion in Appendix A). We hold any pseudonymic author to be, in essence, a deceiver and disqualify him as a teacher of truth.

We should also note the striking resemblance between the apophatic method and Hindu practice. In particular, the features of the “Jesus prayer” closely correspond to Hindu meditation: control of breathing, meditative contemplation, prescribed body posture, and endless repetition of a set prayer (or “mantra”).<sup>87</sup>

Finally, many parallels exist between apophatic theology and Neoplatonism. Lossky himself notes this: “This method (i.e., apophatism) is utilized by practitioners of Neoplatonism and Hinduism.”<sup>88</sup> Zaitsev concurs, “We must note that apophatic theology, although it has a long history in Christian tradition,... originated in Greek philosophy,”<sup>89</sup> and, apophatic theology “traces its roots to the mysticism of Origen and Greek philosophy, and found its classical expression in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius.”<sup>90</sup>

In addition, Meyendorff writes about Dionysius, “He, along with the Neoplatonists, follows apophatic theology: God is unknowable, incomprehensible, and cannot be defined by affirmations.”<sup>91</sup> Thus, one may consider apophatism to be an incarnation of Neoplatonism in Christian garb. To further investigate Neoplatonism and its effect on apophatic practice in the Church, refer to Appendix A.

A significant conflict arises when we view the existence of God’s “energies” in light of the doctrine of the “simplicity” of God’s nature. Traditional Christian theology considers that God is “simple” in the sense that He is not made up of parts. It is improper to divide His nature. Yet, if God exists in “modes,” i.e., His essence and

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<sup>85</sup>Erickson M. J. *God the Father Almighty*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 229.

<sup>86</sup>Hick J. A *Pluralistic View* // Gundry S. N. Okholm D. L. Phillips T. R. *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – P. 49.

<sup>87</sup>Rails K. *What’s the Difference: Comparing the beliefs of Catholics, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox*. – P. 62.

<sup>88</sup>Лосский В. Н. *Очерк мистического богословия*, р. 204-205. Author’s translation. Yet, Lossky stresses that unlike Orthodox Faith, God is impersonal in Neoplatonism and Hinduism.

<sup>89</sup>Зайцев, р. 214. Author’s translation.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, р. 18. Author’s translation.

<sup>91</sup>Мейендорф И. *Введение в святоотеческое богословие*. Минск: Лучи Софии, 2007. – P. 301. Dionysius joins the Cappadocian Fathers in affirming that God is incomprehensible by His very nature, while Neoplatonists ascribe God’s incomprehensibility to human weakness.

His energies, then His nature ceases to be “simple.” We affirm, of course, that God exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but His triuneness does not relate to His general nature, but to the intra-trinitarian relationships between the Persons.

Gregory Palamas defended apophatism against this charge by saying that since God does not obtain qualities from sources outside of Himself, His nature remains “simple.”<sup>92</sup> Yet, Palamas’ response is unconvincing, because the question at hand is not God’s independence from others, but His own intrinsic nature.

Basil the Great discusses this question in Letter 234 and concludes, “The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.” Here Basil attempts to limit God’s “simplicity” to His essence alone. However, according to apophatic theology, God’s energies are not separate from Him, but a mode of His existence. Therefore, Basil cannot limit “simplicity” to God’s essence without denying that God actually exists in His energies as well.

In conclusion, the apophatic method does not correspond to biblical truth and, consequently, is an inappropriate and unprofitable approach to the knowledge of God.

## B. Key Terms and Concepts in Knowing God

In this section, we will define terms commonly used in the study of God’s nature. At times, as we shall see, the biblical usage of these terms differs from how they are used in theological discussion.

Our first item is the term οὐσία (*ousia*). In the New Testament, the word οὐσία (*ousia*) is found only once (Lk 15:12-13) where it simply means “possessions.” In Greek philosophy, however, the word refers to an impersonal, all-encompassing, all-pervasive, all-penetrating power – Reason. As a result, in patristic theology the term became associated with God’s nature or essence.

Next, we will discuss the word ὑποστάσις (*upostasis*), which is usually employed by theologians to designate the separate Persons in the Trinity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three “hypostases” in the triune God. The basic meaning of the term, though, is that which stands under something else, that is, its foundation.<sup>93</sup> Based on that observation, then, the word has a closer association with the *essence* of something than to distinctions within it. The biblical usage reflects this feature as well. In the New Testament, it carries the meaning “realization” (Heb 11:1) or “confidence” (2 Cor 9:4; 2 Cor 11:17; Heb 3:14). It directly connotes God’s essence in Hebrews 1:3: “(Christ) is the radiance of (the Father’s) glory and the exact representation of His nature (ὑποστάσις).

Stoics, though, assigned a different definition to the word ὑποστάσις (*upostasis*) – a concrete manifestation of the all-encompassing οὐσία (*ousia*) in a certain person or thing.<sup>94</sup> Patristic theology embraced this meaning and applied it to the Persons of the Godhead.

The New Testament word “nature” is most commonly a translation of the Greek φύσις (*phusis*). In the New Testament, this word is typically associated with a natural physical condition or function, as seen in the following examples:

- Rom 1:26 – For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function (φύσις) for that which is unnatural.
- Rom 2:27 – And he who is physically (φύσις) uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter {of the Law} and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?
- Rom 11:21 – For if God did not spare the natural (φύσις) branches, He will not spare you, either.

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<sup>92</sup>Mantzaridis, p. 107.

<sup>93</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 1040–1041.

<sup>94</sup>Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995. – P. 1238–1239.

- Rom 11:24 – For if you were cut off from what is by nature (φύσις) a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these who are the natural {branches} be grafted into their own olive tree?
- 1 Cor 11:14 – Does not even nature (φύσις) itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him?
- Gal 2:15 – We {are} Jews by nature (φύσις) and not sinners from among the Gentiles.
- 2 Pet 2:12 – But these, like unreasoning animals, born as creatures of instinct (φύσις) to be captured and killed, reviling where they have no knowledge, will in the destruction of those creatures also be destroyed.

Therefore, φύσις (*phusis*) is the sum of the qualities that make up the nature or essence of something. For example, in Galatians 4:8, when Paul says, “You were slaves to those which by nature (φύσις) are no gods,” he means that idols do not have all the necessary character traits to be classified as “gods.” Similarly, in James 3:7, James describes the animal world and humanity with the word φύσις (*phusis*): “For every species (φύσις) of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race (φύσις).” Again, this word indicates classification by characteristics.

Let us define more exactly the term “attribute.” It refers to qualities or characteristics of someone or something. The entire sum of attributes makes up the nature of the entity. Attributes differ from accidents (pronounced “assendents,” which we will discuss later) in that the former are necessary for qualifying something for its proper classification according to nature. In other words, if a certain entity is missing any one of the attributes that are necessary characteristics of a species, then it cannot be considered a member of that class, since its nature differs from others in that class. In respect to God, Nash writes, “A divine attribute is an essential property of God.... A divine attribute is a property which God could not lose and continue to be God.”<sup>95</sup>

The term “accidents” refers to concrete aspects of an object as well, but unlike attributes, they are not necessary qualities of a thing or person’s nature. In other words, if a certain accident, present in all other members of a class, is missing in the object under study, that does not prevent its inclusion in the given class if all necessary attributes are present.<sup>96</sup> For example, one of the attributes of human nature is the human will. If an entity does not have this feature, it is not human. Humans, though, have various hair colors, which is an accident, since a certain hair color is not a necessary quality for humans.

Another integral part of our discussion is the difference between nominalism and realism. Nominalism means that we ascribe to God certain attributes, but God, in reality, has no specific attributes. We simply assign them to God for the sake of convenience.<sup>97</sup> The Lutheran theologian Francis Piper claims that God speaks of His attributes solely for our sake.<sup>98</sup> According to this theory, God’s nature is “simple” in the sense of “indivisible.” Therefore, it is preferable to speak of God as a whole being, not as a combination of attributes.<sup>99</sup> The theory of nominalism has some common features with apophatism since both systems hesitate to speak of attributes in God. In distinction from apophatism, though, nominalism does not divide God into separate “modes,” namely, essence and energies.

In refutation of nominalism, we can say that God’s Word itself informs us of His attributes. Contrary to Piper, the Scriptures nowhere hint that God does this purely for our benefit. Additionally, if we may not distinguish, for example, God’s power from His knowledge and establish conceptual borders between them, then they may merge to the point where power is no longer power, and knowledge is no longer knowledge. That which God knows, He knows. This is His knowledge. That which God does, He does. This is a manifestation

<sup>95</sup>Nash R. H. *The Concept of God*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983. – P. 17.

<sup>96</sup>Strong A. H. *Systematic Theology*. – 1886. – p. 246.

<sup>97</sup>Nash, p. 87-89.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 243-244.

of His power. Knowledge and power are different aspects of His nature, and we must perceive them in distinction from one another.

What about realism? Here it is claimed that God truly possesses specific attributes. Additionally, God's nature can actually be divided among His attributes. For example, we can say that God, let us say, is 10% wisdom, 30% love, 15% power, etc. The combination of all His attributes, both in quality and quantity, makes up His nature. According to realism, higher order entities are more complex than lower ones, that is, they possess more attributes. Since God possesses the most and highest attributes, He is the greatest Being of all. In realism, we may view God's attributes as various parts of His being, and it is permissible to divide His nature by His attributes.<sup>100</sup>

On the other hand, if we are able to divide God's nature by His attributes, then it follows that each of His attributes has a limit. If each attribute makes up a certain "percent" of God's nature, then they are limited, that is, finite. The Bible, though, speaks of God's attributes as infinite. If God Himself is infinite, then His attributes must be as well.

Additionally, such a view can lead to polytheism. If God's nature can be divided by His attributes, then the potential exists for the independent existence of these attributes. The result is many gods. This likely occurred among the peoples of antiquity, who acknowledged, for example, a god of love, a god of war, a god of reproduction, a god of wisdom, etc.<sup>101</sup>

The biblical position is well expressed by several evangelical theologians. Millard Erickson, for example, rightly claims, "God is an integrated person," i.e., it is improper and even impossible to divide His nature by attributes – it is "simple."<sup>102</sup> On the other hand, in order to preserve the integrity of God's revelation and prevent a confusion of His attributes with one another, we must speak of specific attributes in God. Although we cannot *divide* God's nature, we can *distinguish* definite qualities in it.

In order to avoid the errors connected with realism, one must insist that God's attributes can have no independent existence outside of Himself, but exist only within His integrated nature. His attributes do not act as an outside force to limit Him or define His behavior, but simply describe what God's character is like. Tozer writes in this regard, "All God's reasons for doing anything lie inside of God. They do not lie outside of God to be brought to bear on Him."<sup>103</sup> So then, God's nature is the sum of His attributes, yet, unlike realism, each of God's attributes is just as infinite as He is.

Other evangelical thinkers share this view.<sup>104</sup> Shedd defines divine attributes as "the Divine essence, whole and entire, contemplated in a particular mode of external operation."<sup>105</sup> Shedd also claims, "We must not conceive of the essence as existing by itself, and prior to the attributes, and of the attributes as an addition to it. God is not essence and attributes, but in attributes."<sup>106</sup> Erickson also affirms that God's nature consists in His attributes: "When we speak of the attributes of God, we are referring to those qualities of God which constitute what he is. They are the very characteristics of his nature."<sup>107</sup>

Tozer summarizes well the evangelical position: "The mercy of God is simply God being merciful. And the justice of God is simply God being just."<sup>108</sup> Within God's nature, there exists no conflict between His attributes: "God always acts in conformity with the fullness of His own wholly perfect, symmetrical nature."<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>100</sup>Ibid.

<sup>101</sup>Strong; Chemnitz M., Preus J. O. *Loci Theologici*. – Concordia Publishing House, 1989. – P. 245.

<sup>102</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 291, 213.

<sup>103</sup>Tozer A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 61-62.

<sup>104</sup>Strong, p. 246-7; Chemnitz; Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. *Dogmatic Theology*. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 274; Chafer L. S. *Systematic Theology*. Originally published: Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1. – P. 214.

<sup>105</sup>Shedd, p. 274.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid.

<sup>107</sup>Erickson M. J. *Christian Theology*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 265.

<sup>108</sup>Tozer, v. 1, p. 72.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., v. 1, p. 106.

## C. Classification of God's Attributes

It is useful to classify God's attributes in some sort of overarching structure that will provide us with clarity of thought about His nature. Might not such a structure, though, distort the biblical picture of God? Chafer emphasizes the importance of this issue when he writes, "An omission or slighting of any of these (attributes), or any disproportionate emphasis upon any one of them cannot but lead to fundamental error of immeasurable magnitude."<sup>110</sup> Therefore, this step must be taken carefully.

One method for discovering God's attributes is the "philosophical approach."<sup>111</sup> According to this method, we define God's attributes by means of the following. *Via negationis*, i.e., "the way of negation," eliminates from God's nature all the imperfections we observe in the world. For example, since death is an imperfection, God must be free of death, or immortal and eternal. Next, the *via eminentice*, i.e., "the way of culmination," elevates good qualities to the maximum and ascribes them to God. For example, love is an admirable quality. Therefore, God must be perfect love. Finally is the *via causalitatis*, i.e., "the way of causation." Here we ascribe to God those qualities that are necessary to explain the phenomena of nature. Accordingly, God must be almighty to create and sustain the universe.

A competing approach for discovering God's attributes is the "revelational approach." Here we discover who God is by examining His self-revelation in Scripture. The Bible becomes the standard for our knowledge of God and His nature.<sup>112</sup> Since God is the best source of information about Himself, we will operate on this principle.

After identifying God's attributes in Scripture, how should we classify them? Various systems are proposed: immanent vs. emanent attributes, communicable vs. incommunicable attributes, positive vs. negative attributes, natural vs. moral attributes, and essential, cognitive, and volitional attributes.<sup>113</sup>

We will begin by examining immanent vs. emanent attributes. Immanent attributes are those that are unique to God and independent in their manifestation from creation. They describe who God is in relation to Himself. If creation never existed, God would still display these qualities. Here we may list such characteristics as God's eternal nature, His omniscience, and others. Emanent attributes are those that God manifests in His relation to creation.<sup>114</sup> We assume that if creation never occurred, then God would not have opportunity to express these qualities. Here we find such items as mercy, faithfulness, and others.

Another system divides God's attributes into communicable and incommunicable. Communicable attributes are those that people can acquire (at least in part) as well. They would include such characteristics as holiness, love and similar traits. Incommunicable attributes, then, only God can manifest. We can include here omniscience, omnipotence, immutability etc.<sup>115</sup>

Others employ the categories of positive and negative attributes. In this classification system, positive attributes are traits actually existing in God. For example, God is almighty, loving, faithful, etc. Negative attributes are imperfections that God does not possess, such as His eternal nature (not subject to time), His immutability (not subject to change), and His infinite nature (not subject to any limitation).<sup>116</sup>

Another system, a tripartite one, employs the followings groups: essential, cognitive, and volitional attributes. The first group relates to God's essential being, the second – to His intellectual abilities, and the third – to actions of His will. God's eternal nature would appear in the first category, His wisdom in the second, and His omnipotence and righteousness in the third.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>110</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 223.

<sup>111</sup>Strong, p. 247.

<sup>112</sup>Ibid.

<sup>113</sup>Shedd, p. 275-276.

<sup>114</sup>Ibid.

<sup>115</sup>Grudem W. Systematic Theology. — Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. — P. 158-159.

<sup>116</sup>Ibid.

<sup>117</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 375.

A very popular approach is to divide divine attributes by the categories of natural and moral. The latter concern exemplary moral behavior, like holiness, love, righteousness and the like. Natural attributes are features that do not concern behavior such as omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, etc. Millard Erickson proposes a similar system, yet employs these categories: God's greatness and God's goodness. God's greatness corresponds to God's "natural" attributes, and God's goodness – to His moral attributes.<sup>118</sup>

Although Erickson's approach has much in its favor, a slight adjustment can improve its quality. The classification "God's goodness" does not recognize the distinction between aspects of God's character that relate to His holiness, and those that relate to His love. We would propose, then dividing this category in two parts.

Therefore, in this volume we will employ three categories for classifying God's attributes: God's greatness (i.e., His "natural" qualities), His holiness, and His love. Such a system corresponds to the three instances where the apostle John uses the formula: "God is...": "God is spirit" (Jn 4:24), "God is light" (1 Jn 1:5), and "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8, 16). "God is spirit" reminds us of His natural, non-moral traits, "God is light" – His holiness, and "God is love" – His mercy and grace.

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<sup>118</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 267.



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## Chapter 2 - God's Greatness: Living, Personal, Spirit

In Scripture, we encounter many terms describing God's qualities. As mentioned above, we will divide the attributes of God into the following categories: God's greatness, God's holiness, and God's love. The next three chapters will detail aspects of God's greatness, about which the Bible has much to say.

"Great is Yahweh," the Psalmist writes (Ps 95:4), and "greatly to be praised" (Ps 145:3; 48:1; 1 Chr 16:25). Moreover, the Psalmist claims that He is greater than all gods (Ps 95:3; 136:2-3, cf. 2 Chr 2:5) and peoples (Ps 99:2). His works are great (Ps 92:5). "Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite" (Ps 147:5). His name is great (Ps 98:3). Zophar rightly states that God's glory is "high as the heavens," "deeper than Sheol," "longer than the earth," and "broader than the sea" (Job 11:8-9). Elihu adds, "God is greater than man" (Job 33:12).

In the book of Deuteronomy, God's greatness is celebrated as well. He is "the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God" (Deut 10:17; cf. Deut 7:21). On Mount Sinai, He showed "His glory and His greatness" (Deut 5:24). He manifested "His greatness, His mighty hand and His outstretched arm" in delivering Israel from Egypt (Deut 11:2). David echoes this thought:

For this reason, You are great, O Lord Yahweh; for there is none like You, and there is no God besides You, according to all that we have heard with our ears. And what one nation on the earth is like Your people Israel, whom God went to redeem for Himself as a people and to make a name for Himself, and to do a great thing for You and awesome things for Your land, before Your people whom You have redeemed for Yourself from Egypt, {from} nations and their gods? (2 Sam 7:22-23).

David also exclaims,

Yours, O Yahweh, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Yahweh, and You exalt Yourself as head over all (1 Chr 29:11).

Jeremiah joins in this exaltation of God's greatness, proclaiming, "There is none like You, O Yahweh; You are great, and great is Your name in might" (Jer 10:6), and, "O great and mighty God. Yahweh of hosts is His name; great in counsel and mighty in deed" (Jer 32:18-19). Nehemiah also speaks of "the great, the mighty, and the awesome God" (Neh 9:32; cf. 1:5).

When God defines Himself, He goes beyond comparing Himself with others. He says to Moses, "I Am Who I Am" (Ex 3:14). He can only define Himself in relation to Himself. This also implies that He "could swear by no one greater" (Heb 6:13). Therefore, to seal a promise to Abraham, He "swore by Himself" (Heb 6:13). Finally, all of heaven joins in praise to Him who sits on the throne: "Great and marvelous are Your works, O Lord God, the Almighty" (Rev 15:3).

We will describe God's greatness in more detail. First, He is a living God (Jer 10:10). His life, in distinction from others, is self-sustaining, i.e., it does not depend on outside factors for support. In addition, God is the source of all life. Second, God is a person (Deut 5:24). He possesses all the characteristics of personhood. He speaks, thinks, feels, etc. Many ancient religions depict God as an impersonal force, but the Bible teaches that God is personal and created humans in His image – also as persons.

Furthermore, "God is spirit" (Jn 4:24). He belongs to the category of beings that are not confined to bodily existence. Unlike other spirit-beings, though, He has no limitations whatsoever, but enjoys complete freedom. These three aspects of God's greatness are discussed in this present chapter.

In chapter three, we will investigate three other aspects of God's greatness, the first being God's "immutability," which means that He does not change (Mal 3:6). All material objects develop and decay, but God always remains the same. Furthermore, God is infinite (Ps 144:3). The Bible informs us that God is infinite

in all His attributes. He is infinite not only in relation to the dimensions of space and time, but also in His love, justice, wisdom, etc. In addition, God is eternal (Ps 89:3). He has neither beginning, nor end. It is also proposed that He exists outside the dimension of time, and that the past, present, and future are always before Him.

Finally, chapter 4 discusses the final aspects of God's greatness. First, God is almighty, or "omnipotent." He is able to do all things (Jer 32:17). Nothing is impossible for Him (Lk 1:37). Furthermore, God knows all things (1 Jn 3:20). This is His omniscience. He possesses all knowledge. The final aspect is God's omnipresence – He is in every place simultaneously (Ps 138:7). It is also suggested that He exists outside of the dimension of space altogether.

## A. The Living God

"Yahweh lives" (Ps 18:46). Scripture abounds with references to this truth, as seen in the following examples:

- For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God (Deut 5:26).
- For who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God? (1 Sam 17:26).
- But Yahweh is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King (Jer 10:10).
- He is the living God and enduring forever (Dan 6:26).
- Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt 16:16).
- As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father... (Jn 6:57).
- (We) preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God (Acts 14:15).
- But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God (Heb 12:22).

Often the expression "living God" is found in contexts which emphasize God's power (Deut 5:26; 2 Cor 3:3). Other contexts connect this phrase with God's response to people. When His people are under threat, the living God comes to their defense (1 Sam 17:26; Josh 3:10). When people seek Him, the living God is ready to respond (Ps 42:2). When people put their trust in Him, the living God is ready to save them (1 Tim 4:10; Job 19:25; Dan 6:20). When people rebel against Him, the living God responds in wrath (Heb 3:12; 10:31; Matt 26:63; Jer 10:10-11).<sup>119</sup>

Let us further characterize the living God. First, He is self-sufficient. This is called His "aseity." He has life within Himself and needs no external support (Jn 5:26; 1:4). In Exodus 3:14, He speaks of Himself as the self-existing one: "I Am Who I Am." The following passages also emphasize His aseity:

- ...nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all {people} life and breath and all things (Acts 17:25).
- Who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? (Rom 11:35).
- Who has directed the Spirit of Yahweh, or as His counselor has informed Him? (Isa 40:13).
- If you are righteous, what do you give to Him, or what does He receive from your hand? (Job 35:7).
- Can a vigorous man be of use to God, or a wise man be useful to himself? (Job 22:2).
- If I were hungry, I would not tell you, for the world is Mine, and all it contains (Ps 50:12).
- Who has given to Me that I should repay {him?} {Whatever} is under the whole heaven is Mine (Job 41:11).

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<sup>119</sup>Ellis E. E. Life // Douglas J. D. New Bible Dictionary. – 2nd ed. – Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1962. – P. 697-700.

Pink devotes special attention to the idea of God's aseity: "God was alone: self-contained, self-sufficient, self-satisfied; in need of nothing... creating... added nothing to God's essentiality."<sup>120</sup> Moreover, "He sustains all, but He remains independent of all. He gives to all, but is enriched by none."<sup>121</sup> However, Bloesch cautions us about an extreme view of God's aseity that existed among the Hellenists – God is indifferent to people. Bloesch clarifies, "We can please God, but we cannot enrich God, since God is the summit of all perfections."<sup>122</sup>

God's life is also stable and indestructible. The author of Hebrews writes about the Lord Jesus, "...who has become {such} not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life" (Heb 7:16). Isaiah says, "The Everlasting God, Yahweh, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired" (Isa 40:28). God's life is so stable and steady that the formula for making an oath in Israel was, "As the Lord lives!" Thus, the one swearing the oath claims that his/her promise is as sure as God's life. It is interesting to note that God never objected to people using such a formula (see Jer 4:2; 12:16), since by it the stability and indestructibility of His life was being proclaimed. Even God occasionally used this formula (Num 14:21; Ezek 5:11).<sup>123</sup>

The Bible also teaches that God is the source of all life. Sometimes that is expressed directly (Neh 9:6), and sometimes symbolically by the metaphor "fountain of living water" (Jer 17:13; Ps 36:9). As the source of life, God gives life to all living things. Both Old and New Testaments testify to this truth. God said to Moses, "See now that I, I am He, and there is no god besides Me; it is I who put to death and give life" (Deut 32:39). Paul writes, "I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things" (1 Tim 6:13). Luke concurs, "...nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all {people} life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:25).<sup>124</sup>

In fact, the life force in humans traces back to God's breathing into Adam the "breath of life" (Gen 2:7). We see a similar event in Rev 11:11, "But after the three and a half days, the breath of life from God came into them (i.e., the two witnesses), and they stood on their feet." We can also cite Isaiah: "Thus says God Yahweh, Who created the heavens and stretched them out... Who gives breath to the people on it" (Isa 42:5). Elihu testifies of the same: "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:4; cf. Job 27:3; 34:14-15; Ecc. 12:7). So then, life is a direct gift from God.

Even after death, God is able to raise the dead and restore life (Jn 11:43-44). John also writes, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes" (Jn 5:21; cf. 6:39-40). Paul adds, "God, who gives life to the dead..." (Rom 4:17; cf. 1 Sam 2:6; 2 Cor 1:9).<sup>125</sup>

God's ability to give life sets Him apart from all others. We typically classify entities as "animate" or "inanimate." God, though, is both "animate" and "animating." Jesus is described as "a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor 15:45; cp. 1 Tim 6:13). He says about Himself, "He who eats Me, he also will live because of Me" (Jn 6:57).

The final topic for our consideration is the Old Testament use of the expressing "the living God" in contrast with the lifeless idols that the other nations (and sometimes Israel) worshipped. The Old Testament prophets often emphasized the folly of worshipping lifeless images. Isaiah wrote, "They lift it upon the shoulder {and} carry it; they set it in its place and it stands {there.} It does not move from its place. Though one may cry to it, it cannot answer; it cannot deliver him from his distress" (Isa 46:7). In Ps 115:5-7, we read,

They have mouths, but they cannot speak. They have eyes, but they cannot see. They have ears, but they cannot hear. They have noses, but they cannot smell. They have hands, but they cannot feel. They have feet, but they cannot walk. They cannot make a sound with their throat.

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<sup>120</sup>Pink A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 9.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>122</sup>Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 208, 252.

<sup>123</sup>Huey F. *Jeremiah, Lamentations // The New American Commentary*. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001. – P. 79.

<sup>124</sup>Ellis, p. 697-700; Pieper F. *Christian Dogmatics*. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953. – V. 1. – P. 447.

<sup>125</sup>Ellis, p. 697-700.

God called the Gentiles to turn from idolatry and serve the living God. Paul preached “the gospel to you (Gentiles) that you should turn from these vain things to a living God” (Acts 14:15), and praised the Thessalonians that they “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God” (1 Thes 1:9).<sup>126</sup>

If only God is the living God and idols are lifeless, then He is the only true God. Therefore, the expression “the living God” is sometimes used as a synonym for “the true God” (Jer 10:10; Dan 6:26). Peter also confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, the “Son of the Living God” (Matt 16:16), i.e., the Son of the One True God.<sup>127</sup>

## **B. God’s Personhood**

God’s personhood is most clearly demonstrated in His possession of personal quality traits, like self-consciousness and self-determination. Self-consciousness is the ability to be aware of one’s own existence, think of oneself, observe one’s own behavior and evaluate it. Shedd describes self-consciousness as follows: “In consciousness, the object is another substance than the subject; but in self-consciousness the object is the same substance as the subject.”<sup>128</sup> Strong concurs, “Man is not only conscious of his own acts and states, but by abstraction and reflection he recognizes the self which is the subject of these acts and states.”<sup>129</sup>

Self-determination is the ability to exercise free will and determine one’s course in life, that is, to decide what one will become and what one will do. Strong defines it in relation to humans as follows: “Man, by virtue of his free-will, determines his action from within. He determines self in view of motives, but his determination is not caused by motives; he himself is the cause.”<sup>130</sup> We also affirm that a person possesses other personal characteristics, such as reason and emotion.<sup>131</sup>

If all persons have the qualities of self-consciousness, self-determination, reason and emotion, then we can expect to discover the same character traits in God. Scripture testifies of God’s self-consciousness in 1 Corinthians 2:10, where we read, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God,” that is, God knows Himself and about Himself.<sup>132</sup> Concerning God’s self-determination, Scripture says, “{What} His soul desires, that He does” (Job 23:13), and, “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps 115:3). So then, God directs His own course.<sup>133</sup>

God is a rational being – “His understanding is infinite.” (Ps 147:5). He displays emotion. He rejoices, grieves, becomes angry, has compassion, etc. The Bible records both positive and “negative” emotions in God. Zephaniah 3:17 testifies, “He will exult over you with joy... He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.” Yet, in Judges 2:14 we see that “the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel.”<sup>134</sup>

As a personal being, God enters into relationship with other persons, including humans. God often speaks of Himself as a God in relationship. He revealed Himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex 3:6), i.e., as a God in relationship with these individuals.<sup>135</sup>

The most striking exhibition of God’s personhood is when He became incarnate, that is, became human. As a human, He did all the things people commonly do. God’s personhood is also confirmed by humanity’s personhood, since people were created in His image. If humans possess personhood, then the One who created them after His own image certainly does as well.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>126</sup>Ibid.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid.

<sup>128</sup>Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 169.

<sup>129</sup>Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 252.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid.

<sup>131</sup>Chafer L. S. Systematic Theology. – Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1. – P. 185; Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 167-168.

<sup>132</sup>Strong, p. 253.

<sup>133</sup>Ibid.

<sup>134</sup>Ibid.

<sup>135</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 186; Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 146.

<sup>136</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 180, 184.

Since God is a person, we often see the figure of speech “anthropomorphism” applied to Him. Anthropomorphism is when God is described as possessing exclusively human features, like hands, feet, mouth, etc. It is important to recognize anthropomorphism as a figure of speech, since God (except for the Incarnate Son) does not have a physical body. Nonetheless, the fact that anthropomorphism is used in describing God underscores His real personhood. Although God has no mouth, He does speak. Even though He has no hands, He does act.

About this phenomenon, Karl Barth taught that “biblical thinking about God would rather submit to the grossest anthropomorphism than to a confusion that would imply that God lacks life and sovereign decision.”<sup>137</sup> On the other hand, in their version of the Old Testament the Septuagint translators strove to remove all anthropomorphic allusions in the biblical text, apparently thinking them unworthy of God.<sup>138</sup>

Our final proof of God’s personhood lies in the fact that existence as a person is far superior to an impersonal existence. If God is the highest being, then it is certain that He possesses the characteristics of personhood.<sup>139</sup>

Unfortunately, some have distorted the concept of God’s personhood, both in the world of religion and the realm of philosophy. Many have proposed that God is impersonal, a cosmic power, that directs the world. We encounter such a view in Hinduism and other forms of pantheism. In the West, the philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) advanced it.<sup>140</sup>

Along with the fact that this view not only contradicts the biblical portrait of God, it leads to tragic consequences. Carl Henry comments, “Where the living God is clouded as the transcendent source of human life and dignity, respect for the meaning and worth of personal existence tends to vanish.”<sup>141</sup>

The Philosopher Georg Hegel (1770-1831) advanced another extreme view, that God is the *only* existing person. Other individuals are merely figures of His imagination.<sup>142</sup> John Robertson also erred in supposing that God is not a person, existing separately from other persons, but understood Him to be the very relationships that exist between persons.<sup>143</sup>

In antiquity, one of the basic postulates of Greek philosophy was the impersonality of the Divine. It was thought that if God possessed personhood, that would present some kind of limitation to His freedom and glory. Since the Highest Being must be free from all limitations, He could not be a person. Henry relates that the God of Aristotle is one who “does not hear prayer and who is disinterested in man and the world.”<sup>144</sup>

Even God’s Old Testament people, Israel, somewhat deemphasized God’s personhood. God identified Himself to Moses with the name “The LORD (יהוה), the God of your fathers” (Ex 3:15). The pronunciation of the name יהוה, usually translated “LORD,” was lost, or more precisely, forgotten. Ancient Hebrews used a consonantal text (without vowels), and the reader committed the pronunciation to memory. Since the Israelites considered God’s name too holy to pronounce, from the second century B.C., instead of reading the name God gave to Moses, they would read אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*), or “Lord.”<sup>145</sup>

Consequently, God’s people eventually forgot the proper pronunciation of God’s name יהוה. Scholars conclude that the name was pronounced “Yahweh,” or something similar. Nonetheless, no one really knows for sure God’s personal name. We can consider the loss of God’s name another factor in depersonalizing Him. He is a Person without a name.

In relation to God’s name, we may make further comment. As noted above, instead of pronouncing God’s name in the biblical text, the reader would say אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*), or “Lord.” Over time, later scribes, who wanted to

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<sup>137</sup>Noted in Henry, v. 5, p. 300.

<sup>138</sup>Julias S. J. Jewish Backgrounds of the NT. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1995. – P. 268.

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 150.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid. v. 5, p. 148-149.

<sup>144</sup>Ibid.

<sup>145</sup>Julias, p. 268-269.

remind the reader to read אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*), inserted the vowel points for that word above and below the consonants for יהוה. From the combination of consonants from יהוה and vowels from אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*) we get the pronunciation “Jehovah.” Therefore, the name Jehovah is a fabrication.

The last false view of God’s personhood for our consideration is the idea that God, as a person, has a need for fellowship with people. Therefore, God created humans not out of desire, but out of necessity. Yet, as we noted in our discussion of God’s aseity, the Bible teaches God’s total independence and self-sufficiency. In fact, God can satisfy His desire for fellowship within His own Being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, He created humans out of desire, not necessity. God desires fellowship with people, but has no absolute need for it.<sup>146</sup>

The doctrine of God’s personhood benefits us in practical ways. First, the fact that God is personal means that He can personally come to our aid. Second, we can fellowship with Him person to person. Third, knowing that God has personality will prevent us from approaching Him mechanically, as one whose actions and reactions we can predict with absolute precision. We affirm, of course, that God always acts consistently with His Word. At the same time, He is personal and prefers us to relate to Him as such.<sup>147</sup>

In conclusion of our study of God’s personhood, we must mention an item that we will examine more closely in our discussion of the Trinity. Is God one person, or three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? In this chapter, our goal was not to distinguish God’s nature and His three Persons. When we use the term “person” here, we are simply saying that the triune God has all the characteristics of personhood. We are attempting to contrast the biblical view with the false teaching of God as an impersonal force. We will discuss the Persons of the Trinity in a later chapter.

## C. God is Spirit

God can be classified among beings lacking a physical body. Jesus said of the Father, “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24). We recall, however, that God the Son became human through the incarnation. So then, when we speak of God being spirit, we have in mind His immaterial form, in which God the Son also existed before His incarnation.

### 1. Immaterial

As mentioned earlier, a spirit being lacks a physical body. It can exist without physical supports, such as food, water, oxygen, gravity, etc. Spirit beings also are located in a different sphere or dimension, which our physical senses cannot perceive. They enjoy greater freedom in movement from one place to another.<sup>148</sup>

Let us defend the position that God (excepting the Son) has no body, but exists in a spiritual form. This discussion is complicated by the fact that the Bible often speaks of body parts in God. In 2 Chronicles 6:20, we read, “...that Your eye may be open toward this house day and night,” and in Psalm 18:8, “Smoke went up out of His nostrils, and fire from His mouth devoured.” We also read of God’s face (Ex 33:20), nose (Deut 33:10), tongue (Isa 30:27), back (Jer 18:17), hand (Deut 11:2), finger (Ex 8:19), heart (Gen 6:6), and legs (Isa 66:1). How is this consistent with God’s immateriality?<sup>149</sup>

In light of the fact that God is spirit, we must conclude that such cases are instances of the figure of speech anthropomorphism. This is a figurative way of expressing God’s actions. First, we note that these “body parts” are always mentioned in connection with something God does. We never encounter an instance where they are mentioned as simply existing outside of that context. We never read, for example, that God has eyes except when it states that God is observing something. It is never written that God has hands except in a context

<sup>146</sup>Grudem W. *Systematic Theology*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 161; Henry, v. 5, p. 143-144.

<sup>147</sup>Erickson M. J. *Christian Theology*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 270; Duffield G. P. Van Cleave N.M. *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*. – Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 58.

<sup>148</sup>Duffield, p. 57; Henry, v. 5, p. 214-219.

<sup>149</sup>Grudem, p. 158.



where He is doing a work. Therefore, anthropomorphisms are used to dramatically display God's actions, but they are not meant to be taken literally.<sup>150</sup>

Second, there are certain body parts that are never mentioned in regard to God, such as flesh, bones, blood, or intestines. These body parts, in distinction from the ones the Bible ascribes to God, reflect no external activity. Therefore, they serve no purpose in describing God. Third, we never see mention of God's left hand, only of the right hand. This is because most people accomplish tasks of skill with the right hand. Finally, the Hebrew term for "body," that is, גִּיּוּץ (*givyā*) is never used in describing God, only certain body parts as symbols of His actions.<sup>151</sup>

In this regard, Lewis Chafer writes the following: "Where physical members are thus ascribed to God, it is not a direct assertion that God possesses these members, or a corporal body with its parts; but that He is capable of doing precisely those things which are the functions of the physical part of man."<sup>152</sup> Grudem explains why God used this poetical form to describe His actions: "If God is going to teach us about things we do not know by direct experience (such as his attributes), he has to teach us in terms of what we do know."<sup>153</sup> It is curious to note that Psalm 61:4 attributes wings to God! Does this mean that He is a bird?<sup>154</sup>

What about the claim that God has a spiritual body? Some evangelical scholars, like Bray and Bloesch, embrace this position.<sup>155</sup> Russian Orthodox theologian Sergei Bulgakov proposes a more sophisticated view of God's corporality. He feels that God's spiritual body provides Him with a defined, concrete form. He assigns a name to God's corporality – Sophia. In Bulgakov's words,

The Absolute Spirit can have an absolute corporality, which is nothing other than the Glory of God... Sophia, and is God's corporality. This does not contradict God's existence as a spirit, but absolutely actualizes it. His corporality is *just as spiritual* and His essence and is not distinct from it. Yet, it is definitely concrete.<sup>156</sup>

At first glance, it seems reasonable that God's spiritual nature would be contained in some type of concrete form. When God appeared to people, in fact, He appeared in a definite form. On the other hand, employing the words "body" or "corporality" in respect to God's makeup can easily cause confusion, since these terms are conventionally associated with physical matter. In addition, giving God's corporality a specific name, Sophia, personifies one of God's qualities and sets one on the trajectory to polytheism.

In refutation of the "spiritual body" theory, we recall the arguments advanced above that convincingly demonstrate the use of figurative speech in regards to God's "body." Additionally, confining God to a body may well complicate our understanding of His omnipresence. Finally, God's appearing in a bodily form is best explained by the phenomenon of "theophany," or God manifesting Himself in a concrete form for people's sake.

## 2. Unlimited

In distinction from other spiritual beings, God not only enjoys more freedom than physical beings, but He knows no limitations and enjoys complete independence. Physical beings are limited in many ways. Even angels can exist only in one place at one time. God, however, is everywhere at all times. In answer to the question of

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<sup>150</sup>Schart A. Die "Gestalt" YHWYs

<sup>151</sup>Ibid.

<sup>152</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 182.

<sup>153</sup>Grudem, p. 159.

<sup>154</sup>Idea from Josh McDowell

<sup>155</sup>Bray G. The Doctrine of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 96; Bloesch, p. 50.

<sup>156</sup>Булгаков С. Евхаристический догмат, часть 2-я // Журнал "Путь" №21, 1930. P. 23-24. <http://www.odinblago.ru/path/21/1>. Author's translation.

where God may be worshipped, Jesus announced, “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24), i.e., one may worship this unlimited spiritual being at any place.<sup>157</sup>

Let us clarify the meaning of the phrase “God is spirit.” In John 4:24, this refers to God’s existence as a spirit-being. A similar phrase is found in 2 Corinthians 3:17: “The Lord in the Spirit.” Yet here, we have a reference to the person of the Holy Spirit. The former expression lacks the Greek definite article, which indicates that the phrase points to a quality in God. The latter expression has the definite article, indicating a concrete object or person, namely the Holy Spirit.

### 3. Without Gender Distinction

A spiritual being has no gender distinction. Although the Scriptures employ the grammatical male gender for God, this does not mean that He is a male. God has no gender distinction. He is neither male, nor female – He is spirit.

This fact points out a contrast between Israel and other peoples of antiquity, whose pantheons contained both male and female gods, who intermarried and bore children. Such an understanding is foreign to biblical faith. The use of the grammatical masculine gender points not to a gender distinction in God, but to His personhood.<sup>158</sup>

Also interesting is that, at times, the Bible ascribes to God feminine characteristics. For example, God gives birth (Deut 32:18; Isa 42:14), cares for children (Deut 32:11; Isa 49:15; Matt 23:37), and carries and comforts them (Isa 66:12-13). In addition, scholars often associate God’s wisdom in Proverbs 8 with God Himself. Wisdom in this chapter, though, is feminine. So then, God possesses all positive character qualities, both typically masculine and typically feminine.<sup>159</sup>

Unlike the biblical presentation of God, some more extreme adherents of feminism propose removing all masculine pronouns from the Bible referring to God. Others suggest that the Holy Spirit is the feminine aspect in God. Still others claim that God is not a person at all, but an impersonal force. However, such depictions of God distort the biblical picture of the Almighty and are therefore inappropriate for Christian faith.<sup>160</sup>

Against these feminist claims, we respond that God prefers to represent Himself as masculine. First, we see that He is represented by prepositions of the masculine gender in divinely inspired Scripture. Second, the Son of God became incarnate as a man. Third, in relation to the Holy Spirit, masculine prepositions are used, even though the Greek word πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) is in the neuter gender. Finally, even the titles used of God, such as Father and King, are masculine.<sup>161</sup>

### 4. Invisible

#### a. General Considerations

Spirit beings cannot be seen by the physical eye. As a result, God forbade Israel from making any image of Him in a physical form. The second commandment reads, “You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth” (Ex 20:4). Any physical representation of the invisible God would lead to a distorted view of His divine nature.<sup>162</sup>

Something to consider in this discussion is that several biblical figures claimed to have seen God.<sup>163</sup> On the other hand, the Bible also states that no one has ever seen God or can see Him. John writes, “No one has seen

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<sup>157</sup>Duffield, p. 56.

<sup>158</sup>McGrath A. E. Christian Theology: An Introduction. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 203-204; Henry, v. 5, p. 159.

<sup>159</sup>Ibid.

<sup>160</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 159-163.

<sup>161</sup>McGrath, p. 197; Henry, v. 5, p. 159.

<sup>162</sup>Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 120.

<sup>163</sup>Isa 6:1; Dan 7:9; Ezek 1:26; Ex 33:11; Num 12:8; Ex 33:23; Deut 5:4; Rev 4:3.

God at any time” (1 Jn 4:12; Jn 1:18), and, “Not that anyone has seen the Father” (Jn 6:46). Paul confirms, “...whom no man has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16), and, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible” (1 Tim 1:17). God warned Moses, “No man can see Me and live!” (Ex 33:20).

How can we explain this apparent contradiction? We must assume that in the biblical narrative, people did not actually see God in all His glory. They only saw the manifestation of God that He permitted them to see, i.e., a partial revelation of His glory. Here is another example of the biblical concept of “theophany.” However, no one has seen God in His full glory.

## **b. The Question of Icons**

### **1) Discussion and Defense of Icons**

A hotly debated topic in the history of the Church is the use of icons in Christian worship. Does God’s command about not making images apply to making icons as well? Supporters of this practice advance arguments in its defense. First, they claim that the veneration of icons does not involve worship of an image, but veneration of the one represented by it. Russian Orthodox Metropolitan Ilarion writes, “When Christians venerate the icon, they do not venerate the wood and ink, but the one depicted on it.”<sup>164</sup>

In order to distinguish veneration and worship, adherents of icon-veneration employ different Greek words in their description. The terms *δουλεία* (*douleia*), *ὑπερδουλεία* (*hyperdouleia*), and *προσκυνήσις* (*proskunesis*) are appropriate to describe veneration of Mary and the saints, while *λατρεία* (*lateria*) describes the worship appropriate only to God. In addition, in the second commandment, God never forbade the veneration of icons, only the worship of them.<sup>165</sup>

Devotees to icons consider them windows into the spiritual world. Through contemplation of the icon, one enters the spirit world and thereby obtains grace for spiritual edification. Ilarion claims, “Through the icon a person directly contacts the spiritual world and those who dwell there.”<sup>166</sup>

How exactly do practitioners of icon-veneration receive grace through this practice? First, it is claimed that those who gaze upon the icon receive inspiration by recalling the virtuous life of the one depicted there. Second, it is thought that spiritual power is transmitted through contemplation of the icon. In the icon of the saints, some of the grace that they accumulated in their lives remains in the image. This grace is then transmitted to the believer through contemplation.<sup>167</sup>

The main argument in favor of icons is the incarnation of God’s Son. If God became visible in Christ, then how can we forbid the Church to make Christ and the saints visible in the form of icons? The incarnation is considered to be the ultimate precedent for this practice. In fact, Hebrews 1:3 speaks of Jesus as God’s image. Therefore, if we worship God through His Son, then we are worshipping Him through His icon – Christ. If is proper to worship God through His Image, then why can we not worship the Son through images that depict Him?<sup>168</sup>

Adherents of this practice comment further on the relation of icons to the incarnation.<sup>169</sup> Assumedly, if it is impossible to depict Jesus in an icon, then we are essentially denying the reality of His humanity. If we are able to depict His humanity, then we are at the same time depicting His Deity, since the divine and human natures are combined in one Person and cannot be divided.

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<sup>164</sup>Иларион А. Таинство Веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – Р. 128; also see Fairbairn D. Partakers of the Divine Nature. – 1991. – Р. 72-76.

<sup>165</sup>Кураев А. Протестантам о православии. – 7th ed. – Ростов-на-Дону: Троицкое Слово, 2003. – Р. 152.

Railes K. What’s the Difference: Comparing the beliefs of Catholics, Protestant and Eastern Orthodox. – Р. 137.

<sup>166</sup>Иларион, р. 128; Fairbairn, р. 72-76.

<sup>167</sup>Fairbairn, р. 72-76. Pelikan informs us that the idea that an icon transmitted grace appeared only the the fourth or fifth century (Pelikan J. The Christian Tradition. Vol 2: The Spirit of Eastern Christendom. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago: 1974. – Р. 104).

<sup>168</sup>Иларион, р. 126-127; Кураев, р. 116, 123, 151.

<sup>169</sup>Noted in Pelikan, р. 129-134.

Moreover, icon-devotees deny that the second commandment forbids veneration of icons. They claim that God condemned participation in the pagan cultic rites of the nations surrounding Israel, not the worship of the God of Israel through images. God commanded, in fact, to decorate the walls of the sanctuary and temple with images of cherubim, that is, icons of angels.<sup>170</sup> The sanctuary itself was a representation (icon) of the heavenly sanctuary that God showed to Moses (Heb 8:5).<sup>171</sup>

Furthermore, venerators of icons take into consideration the simplemindedness of common people. Not all people read well, and some not at all. Images aid such people in comprehending the objects of their worship. In addition, icons make the biblical narrative more real and vivid. Along with water baptism, icon veneration serves as another visual testimony of Christian faith.<sup>172</sup>

Supporters of icons appeal to the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which decreed that their veneration by believers is appropriate and anathematized those who forbade it. It is also argued that the New Testament nowhere forbids the use of images in worship, and that the New Testament's failure to mention it is not to be interpreted as a rejection of the practice.<sup>173</sup>

## 2) Refutation

Icon-veneration encounters serious problems. First, one must take seriously the absence of any New Testament approval or example of such practice. Second, in the Early Church a number of Fathers objected to the practice (see Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Heathen*, 4.51.6; Eusebius, *Letter to Constantine*; Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 27.6.10; *Fragments* 10.34; Origen, *Against Celsus*, 4.31; 3.76).<sup>174</sup> In addition, no early Father mentions icon-veneration as a well-accepted practice in the Church.<sup>175</sup>

Critics of icon-veneration heartily acknowledge that the Son of God became incarnate, and therefore it was possible to make his portrait, since He possessed a true human body. Yet, we seriously doubt that icons of Christ provide us with a true depiction of His appearance. We defend this objection as follows.

First, no one at present knows what Jesus looked like. Consequently, no one can accurately depict Him in art. Any pictorial representation of Jesus unavoidably introduces certain distortions that can affect our perception of His nature and character. All who attempt to represent Christ in any art form must heed this warning. Second, the art of icon making follows a certain set pattern for depicting its objects of interest that intentionally does not respect precision in representation, but seeks to present them in a "spiritual" (i.e., "ascetic") light. Thus, every icon presents a highly distorted image of the one represented on it.

Third, even if an artist could precisely reproduce the image of the Son of God, nonetheless, this image would have no special, spiritual qualities. The reproduction is not the incarnate Son of God, but simply His depiction. The incarnation is a unique, once-for-all-time event, not to be compared with a representation made with paint.

Defenders of icon-veneration are grossly misguided when they claim that the icon reflects both the human and divine natures of Christ. At the incarnation, the divine and human natures of our Lord were truly united in a single divine Person, Jesus Christ. An icon, though, is not this divine Person, but merely an expression of the icon-makers imagination. An icon is not another incarnation of God's Son.

Critics of icon-veneration recognize that the Bible speaks of the incarnate Son as the image of the Father. God's Son perfectly reflects the glory of the Father, but an icon, being a human creation, only partially, if at all, reflects that glory, and more than likely distorts it. In addition, unlike an icon, Jesus does not *physically* depict the Father, but His life reflects His holy character.

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<sup>170</sup>Иларион, p. 126-127; Кураев, p. 116, 123, 151.

<sup>171</sup>Школа начальной катехизации «Исследуйте Писание: Диспут Харизматы – Православные»

<sup>172</sup>Noted in Pelikan, p. 121-122, 130.

<sup>173</sup>Иларион, p. 128; Кураев, p. 133, 143.

<sup>174</sup>Иларион, p. 125-129; Fairbairn, p. 75-78; Clendenin D. *Eastern Orthodox Christianity*. – Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker, 1994. – P. 6, 16; Кураев, p. 143; Pelikan, p. 100-101.

<sup>175</sup>Pelikan, p. 99.

Furthermore, the New Testament does not teach that the Church's response to the incarnation of God's Son is to make icons. Rather, our response to this momentous event is to preach the good news that God became man in the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth (2 Cor 4:3-6; Col 1:15-23).<sup>176</sup>

Concerning God's Old Testament taboo on image making, Deuteronomy 4:15-16 clarifies the reason for banning the practice:

So watch yourselves carefully, since you did not see any form on the day Yahweh spoke to you at Horeb from the midst of the fire, so that you do not act corruptly and make a graven image for yourselves in the form of any figure, the likeness of male or female.

God did, indeed, forbid Israel to participate in pagan worship, but not in this passage. The reason He forbade image making was that Israel saw no image of Yahweh on Mount Sinai. Therefore, Israel was to refrain from making any visible representation of Him. In spite of this warning, however, icon-makers do not hesitate to attempt a depiction of the entire Trinity in art.

Moreover, experience teaches us that in practice it is very easy for *veneration* to become *worship*, which amounts to idolatry. The noted historian Jaroslav Pelikan informs us that during the iconoclastic debates in the Church, some were concerned that "more sophisticated believers might be able to make appropriate distinctions between the image and the divine, but the simple faithful could not."<sup>177</sup> Even in biblical times, those who received healing through the bronze serpent began to worship it, which led Hezekiah to destroy it (2 Kin 18:4). The same can occur with icons.

In addition, this practice can lead to a neglect or undervaluing of the preaching ministry. When people come to a worship service, it is more profitable to instruct them from the Scriptures, which come from God, than for them to contemplate an icon, made by human imagination. Bible preaching also solves the problem of uneducated congregational members. If poor reading skills hinder them from reading Scripture, they can always listen to preaching.

Furthermore, during apostolic times the apostles refused to accept worship from people (Acts 14:13-15). It is highly unlikely, then, that they would welcome people doing homage to their image. The honor paid to church leaders in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 was something they received during this life, not afterwards. We also note that although cherubim were depicted on the sanctuary and temple walls, no one revered them, or even saw them, except for the priests.<sup>178</sup>

As noted previously, to avoid a confusion of veneration with worship, supporters of icon-veneration employ different Greek words, i.e., *λατερία* (*lateria*) and *προσκυνήσις* (*proskunesis*). However, in Scripture these terms are synonymous and used interchangeably. For example, Jesus told Satan, "You shall worship (*προσκυνήσις*) the Lord your God, and serve (*λατερία*) Him only" (Matt 4:10).

All things considered, we lack convincing proofs in favor of icon-veneration. We are also concerned about the abuses connected with this practice. Therefore, we judge the use of pictorial images in Christian worship to be inappropriate.

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<sup>176</sup>Fairbain, p. 75-78; Clendenin, p. 153-154.

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## Chapter 3 - God's Greatness: Unchanging, Infinite, Eternal

In this chapter, we will continue to probe into the attributes of God's greatness, in particular, His immutability (i.e., unchangeableness), and His infinite and eternal nature. In the context of our discussion on God's immutability, we will refute false views representing two extreme positions on this issue: God's impassibility and so-called "process theology."

### A. God's Immutability

#### 1. Biblical data

God's immutability is expressed in His unchanging nature, standards, promises and plan. The following passages of Scripture underscore God's unchanging nature:<sup>179</sup>

- Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment; like clothing You will change them and they will be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end (Ps 102:25-27).
- For I, Yahweh, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed (Mal 3:6).
- Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow (Jam 1:17).
- Jesus Christ {is} the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb 13:8).

Some individuals do not agree that the above-cited passages prove God's immutability, feeling rather that they refer to God's faithfulness to His people. We respond that the latter implies the former – God's faithfulness is based on His immutability. He is faithful because He does not change. Additionally, Hebrews 13:8 speaks of Christ Himself, not of His faithfulness. In Malachi 3:6, we encounter the verb שָׁנָה (*shana*), which is best translated "change": For I, Yahweh, do not change (שָׁנָה). The idea of "faithfulness," though, is expressed by the Hebrew root אָמַן (*aman*).

In the case of Psalm 102, God's nature is being compared with the changing created order. The contrast here is not between God's faithfulness and the unfaithfulness of creation, but between God's unchanging nature and the fluidity of nature. These verses are quoted in Hebrews 1:12, where we see a comparison with the how angels may change. Again, the question is not one of faithfulness, but nature or essence.<sup>180</sup>

We may, however, speak of alterations in God's feelings or emotions. According to Scripture, God expresses various emotions, such as joy (Isa 62:5), irritation (Ps 77:40), satisfaction (Eph 5:10), dissatisfaction (Eph 4:30), compassion (Ps 102:3), anger (Ex 32:10), etc. God possesses the full spectrum of emotions, just as humans do, who were created in His image.<sup>181</sup> Some thinkers in Church history, however, rejected the idea of emotions in God, and created the theory of God's "impassibility," which we will investigate later in this chapter.

God's standards also do not change, since they are based on His unchanging nature:

- The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting (Ps 119:160);
- For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Matt 5:18).

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<sup>179</sup>Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 288; Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1953. – V. 1. – P. 440-441; Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 163-164.

<sup>180</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 288, 293-294.

<sup>181</sup>Grudem, p. 166; Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 258.



In a similar way, God's plan for His creation does not change. We cite the following passages in support:<sup>182</sup>

- The counsel of Yahweh stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation (Ps 33:11)
- The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever (Isa 40:8).
- Forever, O Yahweh, Your word is settled in heaven (Ps 119:89).
- {This was} in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph 3:11).

We can say the same for God's promises:

- "For the mountains may be removed and the hills may shake, but My lovingkindness will not be removed from you, and My covenant of peace will not be shaken," says Yahweh who has compassion on you (Isa 54:10).
- In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us (Heb 6:17-18).
- God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num 23:19).
- ... in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago (Tit 1:2).

Likewise, God's Word not infrequently speaks of God as a "fortress" or a "rock." Isaiah 26:4 states, "Trust in Yahweh forever, for in GOD Yahweh, {we have} an everlasting Rock", and Isaiah 44:8, "Is there any God besides Me, or is there any {other} Rock? I know of none."

At times it does appear that God's plan changes, or that His promises are not fulfilled. In such cases, God is altering the *application* of His plan depending on whether or not people fulfill the conditions He requires. For example, if someone rejects God, that person may forfeit the blessing that God had promised. In Jeremiah 18:10 we read, "If they do that which is evil in my sight, that they obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them (American Standard Version)."<sup>183</sup>

On the other hand, if a person turns to the Lord, that individual can escape the punishment God had intended: "He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil. Who knows whether He will {not} turn and relent and leave a blessing behind Him (Joel 2:13-14)."<sup>184</sup> A good example from the biblical narrative is when, thanks to Moses' intercession, "Yahweh changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people" (Ex. 32:14; cf. Jer 26:13; Jonah 3:10).<sup>185</sup>

Therefore, when considering God's unchanging plan, we must remember that His plan always remains in effect. However, He may apply it differently in response to how people respond to Him. Those who fulfill His conditions receive a blessing, while those who reject Him suffer the corresponding consequences.<sup>186</sup>

Additionally, one must keep in mind that an apparent change in God's plan may actually be the initiation of a new stage in the unfolding of that plan. The clearest example here is the introduction of the new covenant, which replaced the old covenant (see Jer 31:31-32).

Finally, we must examine instances in Scripture where it seems that God regretted something He did and "repented."

- Yahweh was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart (Gen 6:6).

<sup>182</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 287; Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 284.

<sup>183</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 303; Calvin J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.17.14.

<sup>184</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 303; Strong, p. 258.

<sup>185</sup>Erickson M. J. *God the Father Almighty*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 103.

<sup>186</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 303.

- Then the word of Yahweh came to Samuel, saying, “I regret that I have made Saul king” (1 Sam 15:10-11).

Does this mean that God made a mistake and regretted what He had done? How can we reconcile this with the claim of God’s perfection? In seeking a solution, we must take into consideration several factors. First, the Bible specifically states that God does not repent:

- God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent (Num 23:19).
- Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind (1 Sam 15:29).

We see further evidence of this truth in the following instances:

- For this the earth shall mourn and the heavens above be dark, because I have spoken, I have purposed, and I will not change My mind, nor will I turn from it (Jer 4:28).
- Yahweh has sworn and will not change His mind, “You are a priest forever According to the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110:4).
- I, Yahweh, have spoken; it is coming and I will act. I will not relent, and I will not pity and I will not be sorry (Ezek 24:14).<sup>187</sup>

Second, God’s “repentance” differs from human repentance. This is evident in the use of different Hebrew terms. The verb used for God’s “repentance” is נָחַם (*naham*) in the Niph’al form, which means “be comforted,” “regret,” “rethink,” or “have compassion.”<sup>188</sup> For human repentance, another verb is employed – שׁוּב (*shuv*), which means “to turn.”

The difference between these acts of “repentance” is again the use of anthropomorphism in respect to God. His “repentance” is an expression of His dissatisfaction, displeasure, and grief regarding human disobedience. So then, when it is written that God had “regret that I have made Saul king,” (1 Sam 15:10) or that He “was sorry that He had made man on the earth” (Gen 6:6), He is expressing His grief in terms familiar to His hearers.

It is interesting to note that the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, translates these “repentance” verses differently. In Genesis 6:6, instead of the literal translation that God “was sorry that He had made man on the earth,” we read, “God was angry that He made man.” In Exodus 32:12, where Moses prayed that God would change His mind about {doing} harm to His people, the Septuagint renders it, “Have mercy on the evil of Your people.”<sup>189</sup> This observation is consistent with the general trajectory of the Septuagint translations to avoid any anthropomorphic description of God.

## 2. Theological Investigation

### a. General Features

Respected theologian Wayne Grudem describes this aspect of God’s nature in the following way: “God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations.”<sup>190</sup> Grudem also states, “The definition given about

<sup>187</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 105.

<sup>188</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 637. See Gen 6:6; Ex 32:14; 1 Sam 15:10, 35; 2 Sam 24:16; Ps 106:45; Jer 26:19; Jonah 3:10, 4:2; Amos 7:3, 6.

<sup>189</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 296-297.

<sup>190</sup>Grudem, p. 163.

specifies that God is unchanging – not in every way that we might imagine, but only in ways that Scripture itself affirms.”<sup>191</sup>

Along with presenting a biblical defense for this doctrine, Nelson Pike claims that admission of God’s timeless nature forces the conclusion of His immutability as well: “If an object changes, that object is different at a given time from what it was at an earlier time. This is what it is to change. Thus, in order to change, an object must exist at two moments in time. It follows that if an object is timeless ... it does not change.”<sup>192</sup>

One may object, however, that the doctrine of God’s immutability contradicts His role as Creator. If God created the world at a moment in time, does this not imply that He Himself changed? Previously He was not the Creator, but afterward He became so.

On the other hand, if God created all things from nothing, then no change occurred in His basic nature. If He had formed the universe from His own substance, then He would have experienced change. Since, however, He created all from nothing and, in essence, is distinct from the created order, no change need occur in His basic nature. We can also add that from eternity past God intended to create. So then, in this respect one may consider Him the Creator from eternity past.<sup>193</sup>

A similar question arises in respect to the incarnation of God the Son. Did His nature change when He became man? We respond that in His incarnation, the Son did not cease being God. His divine nature experienced no alteration, was not diminished, and suffered no corruption. The incarnation involved no loss of divinity, but rather the adoption of humanity. Therefore, the incarnation did not compromise the Son’s immutability.<sup>194</sup>

## **b. Extreme Views**

Two serious aberrations of this doctrine exist that we need to address. Some claim that God’s immutability excludes that God possesses changing emotions. This is termed God’s “impassibility.” On the other extreme, proponents of “process theology” feel that God changes in His very nature, that is, He is undergoing development on the way to perfection.

### **1) God’s Impassibility**

The teaching of God’s impassibility dates back to Greek philosophical thought. In their cosmology, the Greeks focused heavily on God’s perfection. They believed that change introduced imperfection. Therefore, God cannot be subject to change in any respect. If something changes, it cannot be perfect because either it changed from being perfect to being imperfect, or it changed from being imperfect to being perfect. Aristotle, also affirmed that the slightest change indicated imperfection. Therefore, he also allowed no change in the divine.<sup>195</sup> Many Church Fathers and mediaeval theologians followed his thinking. Their influence is felt in the Church even today.

Another adherent of this teaching in antiquity was the Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, who dedicated an entire work to the question: *On the Unchangeableness of God*. Philo explained the attribution of emotions to God in Scripture by considering them figures of speech.<sup>196</sup> Another native of Alexandria, the Church Father Clement, embraced this teaching in his doctrine of the “Christian gnostic.” He taught that in their time, the apostles overcame all emotion: not only negative ones, like anger, fear, and lust, but also positive ones, like courage, zeal, and joy. They felt that this was a way to be imitators of God.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>191</sup>Ibid.

<sup>192</sup>From Henry, v. 5, p. 288.

<sup>193</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 292; Pieper, v. 1, p. 441; Shedd, p. 285.

<sup>194</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 292-293, 305; Pieper, v. 1, p. 441; Shedd, p. 285.

<sup>195</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 210.

<sup>196</sup>Ibid.

<sup>197</sup>Lane T. *A Concise History of Christian Thought*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 19.

Another proponent of this view was Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), who commented on this topic in his work *Proslogion*. Along with Philo, he considered God's emotions in Scripture to be figurative speech. He asserted that Scripture so speaks of God as a condescension to us, but God, in fact, has no feeling. Anselm explains, "You are truly compassionate in terms of our experience. Yet you are not so in terms of your own."<sup>198</sup> In his wake, Thomas Aquinas, a fervent disciple of Aristotle, affirmed, "Mercy is especially to be attributed to God, provided this is regarded as an effect, not as a feeling of suffering."<sup>199</sup>

Some proponents of this theory go to the extreme of claiming that God is impassible to the point that He is indifferent toward people, even if they are headed for eternal damnation. When we read that Jesus had compassion, it is thought that He was acting purely out of His human nature. In His divine nature, however, He felt no mercy.<sup>200</sup> Bray seeks to soften this position by saying that, even though God's nature is impassive, the Persons of the Godhead in their individuality may be moved by human need.<sup>201</sup>

Even the highly respected theologian Millard Erickson holds to the doctrine of God's impassibility, yet in a more moderate form.<sup>202</sup> On the one hand, he admits that God has certain emotions. On the other hand, he feels, being a Calvinist, that since God will unfailingly accomplish His plan regarding each human and already knows his or her outcome, there is nothing for Him to react to emotionally. Erickson is ready to ascribe to God *empathy*, in that He understands our feelings. However, God lacks *sympathy*, that is, our condition in life does not move Him to action. Finally, in Erickson's opinion, the eternal damnation of unbelievers causes God no grief.

In our refutation of this doctrine, we recall our discussion of the doctrine of God's personhood, which requires that He possess all the character qualities of a person, including emotions. In addition, the Bible teaches that God is love (1 Jn 4:8, 16). Genuine love is not merely action, but is accompanied by corresponding feeling.<sup>203</sup>

Furthermore, the biblical records shows that God's emotion do indeed move Him to action (see Matt 14:14; 15:32; Mk 6:34). This reveals that emotions are a meaningful aspect in God's nature. Contrary to Aquinas' teaching, in these examples Christ's emotional response *preceded* His actions. The incarnate Son of God, in fact, displayed the entire range of emotion. His compassion far exceeded what one would expect from a human. Thus, we conclude that Christ's compassion was an expression not only of human pity, but also divine love.

In addition, we affirm that changes in God's emotional state in no way introduces changes in His nature. After expressing emotion of any kind, God remains that same God as He was before. In order for God to act in accordance with His nature, in fact, He must express emotion. In expressing His wrath, love, or any other attribute, He will express them with the corresponding feelings. The psalmist, for example, writes, "Yahweh takes pleasure in His people."<sup>204</sup>

We also reject Bray's suggestion that God may have emotions in His *Persons*, but not in His *nature*. His theory creates an inappropriate division between God's Persons and His nature. In fact, if all the Persons of the Godhead possess the same trait, then that general characteristic is considered part of God's nature along with all His other common attributes.

Bloesch's view is more credible. He claims that although in principle nothing can cause a change in God, He nonetheless can allow Himself to react emotionally to the human condition. He enjoys total freedom both in His actions, and in His reactions to His creatures.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>198</sup>McGrath, p. 211.

<sup>199</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>200</sup>Noted in Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 209; Bray G. *The Doctrine of God*. – Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 100.

<sup>201</sup>Bray, p. 99.

<sup>202</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 161-164.

<sup>203</sup>Noted in Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 142.

<sup>204</sup>Tozer A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 8; Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 953.

<sup>205</sup>Bloesch, p. 95, 210.

The Greeks believed that God does not move, but is static. They thought that one who moves has not yet fulfilled his or her potential, since there was a place he or she had never been before. This is why Aristotle named the Highest Being the “Immovable Mover.”<sup>206</sup> Plato taught that God is in a state of “Uninterrupted tranquility.”<sup>207</sup>

Such a depiction of God, though, does not agree with the biblical portrayal. Although the omnipresent God does not need to “move” from place to place, He nonetheless acts. Erickson rightly states, “The God we find in Scripture is not a static being, as is Aristotle’s God. He is rather an active, dynamic being, at work in the world.”<sup>208</sup> At the same time, there is stability and predictability in His actions: “His actions are in keeping with the fundamental nature, with his values, plans, and decisions.”<sup>209</sup> Bloesch also affirms that God acts, but is not developing or undergoing change.<sup>210</sup>

The Greeks taught that since the world undergoes constant change, God must separate Himself from the world in order not to participate in its changing nature.<sup>211</sup> He cannot even think about the world, but only about His own perfections.<sup>212</sup> This idea actually intrigued some early Christian thinkers.<sup>213</sup> Yet, serious Bible students will quickly dismiss such thinking. God not only intervenes from heaven in the affairs of people, but came Himself to the earth in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. As David wrote, His thoughts towards us “outnumber the sand.” (Ps 139:18).

In summary, Erickson details all the possible ways in which a being may change: growth, decline, movement, relational change, aging (experience), alteration, reversal, change of mind, change of action, and obtaining knowledge.<sup>214</sup> One may add to that list change in mood (emotions). Adherents of the doctrine of God’s impassibility do not allow God to change in any respect. However, the Bible gives us a picture of an unchanging God, who nonetheless possesses emotion, acts in the world and can change His responses toward people. Therefore, Nash questions whether we may consider a God who cannot personally relate to people a truly perfect God.<sup>215</sup>

## 2) Process Theology

Process theology is a relatively new philosophical movement, which began in the 20th century and advances the claim that God is in the process of becoming perfect. This teaching is also known as “panentheism,” which means “God in all.”<sup>216</sup>

This teaching was anticipated in antiquity by the idea of a developing God advanced by Diogenes. The Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853—1900) proposed a similar theory, positing the existence of a “dipolar” Absolute, which process theology affirms as well.<sup>217</sup>

The modern development of process theology, however, traces back to Charles Hartshorne (1897-2000), who himself borrowed heavily from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947). This teaching was, in fact, a reaction against the doctrine of God’s impassibility. The starting point for Hartshorne was to demonstrate that the world actually does have an effect on God.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>206</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 99.

<sup>207</sup>Bray, p. 56.

<sup>208</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 112.

<sup>209</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup>Bloesch, p. 185.

<sup>211</sup>Lane, p. 6.

<sup>212</sup>Nash R. H. *The Concept of God*. – Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983. – P. 20-21.

<sup>213</sup>Bloesch, p. 209-210.

<sup>214</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 100-101.

<sup>215</sup>Nash, p. 101.

<sup>216</sup>Bray, p. 55.

<sup>217</sup>Зеньковский В. В. *История русской философии*. Аудио-серия.

<sup>218</sup>Geisler N. L. *Christian Apologetics*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976. – P. 194.

Process theology operates on a totally different worldview than the typical perception of reality.<sup>219</sup> According to this teaching, reality consists not of material objects, but of constantly changing events and processes. The basic units of reality are not material objects, but moments of experience, called “actual entities”. Every moment is a new reality.

God participates in the formation of these actual entities, but cannot completely control their formation. All that God can do is exert an influence on their formation. In addition, other factors, both animate and inanimate, possess a certain “freedom” to make their contribution to defining actual entities. God Himself does not know what the new actual entities will look like. After an actual entity appears, God, by observing its result, enriches His personal experience and is enabled thereby to make a better contribution to the formation of the subsequent actual entities. In such a way, God undergoes change and moves toward perfection.<sup>220</sup>

So then, God and the universe, especially humans, labor together to improve conditions in the world. God accomplishes His plan in cooperation with and in dependence upon human beings.<sup>221</sup>

As mentioned before, this teaching is also termed “panentheism.” In theism, God created all things from nothing. He is Lord of all and completely self-sufficient. He does not depend on creation for anything. He is unchanging and perfect. He cannot become better than He already is. Panentheism, which means “God in all,” holds that God created all from a preexisting “chaos.”<sup>222</sup> God permeates His creation with His presence and participates in the formation of actual entities, which, as we have mentioned, make up reality.

Process theology advances the thesis that God has two “poles”: His “abstract essence” and His “concrete actuality.” The former is stable and not subject to change, while the latter may and actually does alter. His abstract essence is transcendent and is “located” beyond the limits of creation, as the soul is in relation to the body. His concrete actuality permeates the material world.<sup>223</sup>

One of the qualities ascribed to God’s abstract essence is His ability to perceive all reality simultaneously. Another is His goodwill toward the world – He is always working toward its good.<sup>224</sup> God’s omniscience, however, does not include knowledge of the future. He does not know even His own future. He is still considered omniscient, though, in the sense that He knows all that can be known at any moment in time.<sup>225</sup>

God’s perfection is understood in a similar way. In Hartshorne’s opinion, God is as perfect as He can be at any one time. At the next actual entity, though, He can attain even higher levels of perfection. Hartshorne states, “To attribute change to God, so far from conflicting with permanence or stability in his being, means rather that nothing positive that ever belongs to God can change but only the negative aspect of the not yet being this or that.”<sup>226</sup>

Process theology rejects other fundamental biblical truths, such as the deity of Christ, His physical resurrection from the dead, and His redemptive sacrifice on the cross. In this regard, Hartshorne writes, “I have no Christology to offer, beyond the simple suggestion that Jesus appears to be the supreme symbol furnished to us by history of the notion of a God genuinely and literally ‘sympathetic’... receiving into his own experience the sufferings as well as the joys of the world.”<sup>227</sup>

In refutation of process theology, we advance the following objections. First, the Bible clearly speaks of God’s aseity, or self-sufficiency – He does not depend on creation for anything (Ps 50:12; Isa 40:13-17; Acts 17:24-25; Rom 11:34-36). Second, the Bible teaches the immutability of God’s nature (Ps 102:26-27; Mal 3:6;

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<sup>219</sup>Erickson M. J. *Christian Theology*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1 – P. 279; Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 59, 64.

<sup>220</sup>Cobb J. B., Griffen D. R. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. – Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1976. – P. 14-28.

<sup>221</sup>Geisler, p. 197ff.

<sup>222</sup>Hasker W. *An Adequate God* // Cobb J. B. Pinnock C. H. *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000. – P. 220.

<sup>223</sup>Reeves G., Brown D. *The Development of Process Theology* // Brown D., James R. E., Reeves G. *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*. – Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1971. – P. 32.

<sup>224</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 280.

<sup>225</sup>Noted in Helm P. *The Providence of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 46.

<sup>226</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 290.

<sup>227</sup>Hartshorne C. *Reality as Social Process*. – Boston, MA: Beacon, 1953. – P. 24.

Jam 1:17). Scripture also claims that God's plan does not alter. God always accomplishes what He sets out to do (Ps 33:11; Num 23:19; Eph 3:11; Heb 6:17-18; Eph 1:11).<sup>228</sup>

Third, process theology encounters a logical problem in its understanding of reality. If each actual entity is a new reality, then how can one prove that an individual remains the same individual from moment to moment? If "reality" does not subsist in concrete objects, but only in temporal processes, we have no guarantee of the preservation of the individual over time.<sup>229</sup>

It is also hard to conceive how inanimate objects, which have no volitional capacity, can contribute to the formation of new actual entities. Adherents to this system posit the existence of a power called "creativity," which is located in God and stimulates all existing things to participate in this process.<sup>230</sup> Yet, if God is the one who stimulates this process, then in what sense does the world actually make a real contribution to the formation of actual entities?

In addition, process theology is self-defeating. If the reason it was created was to bring God closer to creation, it actually has the opposite effect – it denies the worshipper personal fellowship with the Lord. As Loomer notes, the God of process theology is not one to whom a person may turn in prayer.<sup>231</sup>

We must also consider Whitehead's claim that "Neither God, nor the World, reaches static completion. Both are in the grip of the ultimate metaphysical ground, the creative advance into novelty."<sup>232</sup> However, this suggests that the power "creativity" is greater than God and therefore is the true God.<sup>233</sup> Nash aptly observes that panentheism requires the existence of a theistic God to substantiate the system.<sup>234</sup>

Finally, if God must constantly deal with the imperfections both in Himself and in the world, what guarantee is there that good will eventually triumph over evil?

### 3. Conclusions

In the light of our overview of the biblical and theological data examined above, we conclude that God is unchangeable in his nature, plans, standards, and promises. However, He actively intervenes in the affairs of people, expresses genuine emotion, and may alter how He applies His plans or promises depending on people's response to Him. Bloesch provides this helpful recap: "The God of Greek philosophy cannot change; the God of modern spirituality must change; the God of biblical religion may change, if he wills – not in the integrity of his being but in his interaction with his human creation."<sup>235</sup>

How does the doctrine of God's immutability aid the believer in practical Christian living? We may mention several items. God's immutability inspires confidence in His promises. If God has promised something, He will certainly fulfill it. Similarly, God's warnings are to be heeded as well. In addition, since God does not change, we can be assured of a stable relationship with Him and the constancy of His love for us. Finally, this doctrine shows us God's superiority over creation, giving us still another reason to praise Him.<sup>236</sup>

### B. God's Infinite Nature

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<sup>228</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 287; Shedd, p. 284.

<sup>229</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>230</sup>Lowe V. Whitehead's Metaphysical System // Brown D., James R. E., Reeves G. Process Philosophy and Christian Thought. – Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1971. – P. 3-4.

<sup>231</sup>Loomer B. M. Christian Faith and Process Philosophy // Brown D., James R. E., Reeves G. Process Philosophy and Christian Thought. – Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1971. – P. 72.

<sup>232</sup>Whitehead A. N. Process and Reality. – New York: Harper & Brothers, 1929. – P. 529.

<sup>233</sup>Geisler, p. 209.

<sup>234</sup>Nash, p. 34-35.

<sup>235</sup>Bloesch, p. 262.

<sup>236</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 288-289, 292; Pieper, v. 1, p. 441; Grudem, p. 168; Duffield G. P., Van Cleave N. M. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology. – Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 69.

God is infinite. His nature and essence exceed not only the limits of human understanding, but all limitations in any respect.<sup>237</sup> He is boundless in all His attributes. Scripture confirms this claim and expresses it in various ways. For example: “Great is Yahweh, and highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable” (Ps 145:3); “His understanding is infinite” (Ps 147:5); “My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness {and} of Your salvation all day long; for I do not know the sum {of them}” (Ps 71:15); “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Rom 11:33, also see Job 11:7-9).<sup>238</sup>

Tozer writes about this marvelous feature of God’s nature, “We mean by infinite that God knows no limits, no bounds and no end. What God is, He is without boundaries. All that God is, He is without bounds or limits.”<sup>239</sup> Charles Hodge confirms, “An infinite spirit is a spirit to whose attributes as a spirit no limits can be set.”<sup>240</sup> At the same time, we must affirm with Bloesch that God may enter into time and space for our sake.<sup>241</sup>

Infinity is typically ascribed to God in the sense of time and space – He is eternal and omnipresent. Still, we must affirm that God is infinite in all His attributes: in His power, love, holiness, wisdom, etc. None of His attributes can be exhausted.<sup>242</sup>

In relation to God’s other attributes, we make the following qualifications. We claim that God is limitless in knowledge, power, love, etc. However, God’s infinite nature does not imply that His attributes are beyond conceptual boundaries. God’s attributes do not merge with one another. His attributes are limitless in respect to that quality alone. In other words, each attribute is infinite in a “vertical relationship,” but not in a “horizontal relationship,” that is, in relation to itself, but not in relation to other qualities in God’s nature. Simply said, God possesses infinite *attributes*.<sup>243</sup>

Nonetheless, God’s attributes interact with one another and exert an influence on each other, sometimes limiting their expression. For example, in Exodus 34:6-7, God’s love is juxtaposed with His righteousness. On the one hand, His is good and full of mercy, but on the other hand, He never compromises His holiness. Therefore, in order for God to show mercy to an individual, He must receive satisfaction for His justice in punishing transgressions, which Christ did when He took upon Himself the sins of the world.

The question also arises about God’s infinite nature and the possible existence of other entities. Is God infinite in the sense that He “crowds out” other items and makes their simultaneous existence with Him impossible? If God is “all in all,” then where is the place for other entities to exist?

We respond as follows. First, God is the one who initiated the creation of all things. He created all things separate from Himself and remains distinct from them. The fact that God did create other entities proves that such an act is possible, and that there exists a “place” for other things to occupy simultaneously with an infinite God.

Second, we take into consideration the concept of God’s “self-limitation.” In order to “free up space” for the existence of other entities, God can limit Himself. Since God is limitless in power and wisdom, He is able to perform this act. Strong explains, “Infinity implies simply that God exists in no necessary relation to finite things or beings, and that whatever limitation of the divine nature results from their existence is, on the part of God, a self-limitation.”<sup>244</sup>

The theologian Carl Henry sees the incarnation of God’s Son as an excellent example of God’s self-limitation. He writes, “On the surface the doctrine of divine incarnation might seem to relativize the conception of divine infinity. Yet the doctrine affirms that the infinite Logos stepped into history in one Jesus of Nazareth

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<sup>237</sup>Strong, p. 254.

<sup>238</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 441; Strong, p. 254-256; Shedd, p. 277.

<sup>239</sup>Tozer, v. 1, p. 4.

<sup>240</sup>Hodge C. Systematic Theology. – 1872. – V. 1. – P. 383.

<sup>241</sup>Bloesch, p. 53.

<sup>242</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 221.

<sup>243</sup>Ibid., p. 232-233.

<sup>244</sup>Strong, p. 255; also see Henry, v. 5, p. 226.



who bears both divine and human natures. The infinite is no less infinite because of its distinctive infinite-finite disclosure.”<sup>245</sup>

Our final observation is that God’s infinite nature includes the idea of “inexhaustibility.” God will never exhaust Himself of any of His attributes. He always has a “reserve” of power, wisdom, etc. According to Strong, in God there is “ever more to follow.”<sup>246</sup>

Some distortions have arisen in respect to this doctrine. Pantheism teaches that God’s infinite nature extends to the point of “crowding out” all other beings and objects in reality. All that exists is God. God is all, and all is God. This view, however, clearly contradicts the biblical revelation.<sup>247</sup>

Others mistakenly think that God has limits – He is not omniscient or omnipotent. This is how they explain the presence and persistence of evil and suffering in the world. God does not eliminate evil, either because He is not able to, or He does not know how to. Again, this is not the biblical picture of God.

Still others posit that not only is God limitless, but the universe is boundless as well. It is thought that an infinite Creator must create an infinite universe. However, according to Isaiah 40:12, the universe has boundaries: “Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales?”<sup>248</sup>

The doctrine of God’s infinite nature contains many practical items of value, of which we will mention only two. Since God is infinite, He can fellowship with all people simultaneously and hear all their prayers. In addition, since God’s greatness is inexhaustible, we will continue to grow in our knowledge of Him eternally. Eternity will not be characterized by monotonous stagnation, but an ongoing experience of learning and adventure.<sup>249</sup>

## C. God’s Eternal Nature

God’s eternal nature involves His limitlessness in relation to time. His existence is not delineated by time. He is without beginning and without end.<sup>250</sup>

How can we define the concept of time? Ladd defines it as “the mental presupposition of the duration of events and of objects.”<sup>251</sup> Similarly, Strong feels it to be “duration measured by succession.” So then, time is the means by which we measure the duration of some event or the interval between events.<sup>252</sup>

### 1. Biblical Data

In the Old Testament, we observe a special Hebrew term for eternity – עולם (*olam*). This word, however, does not always refer to eternity, but may apply to a long, but limited period of time (e.g. Ex 21:6; Jer 5:15). Yet, in light of other clear references to God’s eternal nature in Scripture, it is safe to say that in relation to God the term עולם (*olam*) denotes “eternity.”<sup>253</sup>

The Greek word for eternity is αἰών (*aion*)(see Lk 1:70; 1 Tim 1:17; Eph 3:21). Like the Hebrew term עולם (*olam*), αἰών (*aion*) can also indicate a long period of time, as in Luke 1:70. When the word αἰών (*aion*) stands

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<sup>245</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 233.

<sup>246</sup>Strong, p. 255.

<sup>247</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 382ff.

<sup>248</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 222-227; Strong, p. 254.

<sup>249</sup>Strong, p. 256.

<sup>250</sup>Strong, p. 275-276; Henry, v. 5, p. 262.

<sup>251</sup>Taken from Strong, p. 275.

<sup>252</sup>Ibid., p. 276.

<sup>253</sup>Verhoef P. Time, Eternity // VanGemenen W. A. New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. – V. 4. – P. 1252-1255; Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 761.

in the plural, however, or is repeated twice, it usually refers to eternity. Unlike the noun αἰών (*aion*), its related adjective αἰώνιος (*aionios*) is always translated “eternal” (e.g. 2 Pet 1:11).<sup>254</sup>

Instead of directly speaking of God’s eternal nature, Scripture more often compares the duration of His existence with earthly events. For example, God’s existence is compared with human life expectancy: “For such is God, Our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death” (Ps 48:14). God’s existence is also compared with human history: “Your years are throughout all generations” (cf. 1 Cor 2:7; 1 Tim 1:17; Isa 41:4; 44:6).<sup>255</sup>

Expanding this comparison, Scripture contrasts God’s existence with the duration of the created order. On the one hand, God, the Creator, existed before the universe (Isa 44:24; Eph 1:4), and, on the other hand, He outlasts creation (Ps 102:26-27). Psalm 102, in fact, highlights both aspects:

Of old You founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your hands. Even they will perish, but You endure; and all of them will wear out like a garment. Like clothing You will change them and they will be changed, but You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end (Ps 102:25-27).<sup>256</sup>

Finally, the following verses speak of God being eternal in a more direct manner. On the one hand, God exists from eternity past: “Your throne is established from of old; You are from everlasting” (Ps 93:2). He is the “Ancient of Days” (Dan 7:9; also see Isa 43:13; Hab 1:12). On the other hand, He has days without end: “But You, O Yahweh, abide forever, and Your name to all generations” (Ps 102:12).<sup>257</sup> The following verses speak of eternity in both directions: “Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God” (Ps 90:2); “Who is and was and is to come” (Rev 1:4, 8); and, “To the only God our Savior... {be} glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever” (Jude 25).<sup>258</sup>

Exodus 3:14 also hints at God’s eternal nature: “I Am Who I Am.” He is limitless, measureless, and defines Himself by Himself.<sup>259</sup> In the Old Testament, God’s nature is often expressed in His names. In Gen 21:33, we encounter the name אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם (*El olam*), or “God of eternity.” In Isaiah Isa 40:28, we see a similar designation אֱלֹהֵי עוֹלָם (*Elohe olam*), also translated “God of eternity.”<sup>260</sup>

In investigating the biblical witness of God’s eternal nature, it is interesting to note the contexts in which this aspect of God’s character is found. First, in the Psalms His eternal nature is often contrasted with the temporal nature of human beings (Ps 48:14; 90:1-4, 9-10; 102:11-12, 23-27). This demonstrates God’s glory and superiority to humans. Furthermore, the fact that God is eternal means that His kingdom also has no end. He is the Eternal King (Ps 93:1-2). In the book of Isaiah, this teaching serves to confirm that God is the only true God (Isa 41:4; 44:6-7; 48:12-14). Only an eternal being can claim to be such.

In the epistles, God’s eternal nature is mentioned in contexts dealing with His will being accomplished (Eph 1:4; 3:11; 2 Pet 3:8-9). The Eternal God can complete what He has begun. Finally, in Paul’s first letter to Timothy, God’s eternal nature inspires exclamations of praise (1 Tim 1:17; 6:15-16). God’s eternal nature is also often mentioned in the book of Revelation (Rev 1:8; 4:8; 21:6), usually associated with His almighty power, enabling Him to overcome any challenge and secure victory in any situation.

Finally, the following passages speak of the eternal nature of God the Son, Jesus Christ. Thus His deity is underscored: Micah 5:2; Isaiah 9:6; Revelation 1:17; 2:8; 22:13; Hebrews 1:8,11-12; 13:8; Colossians 1:16-17.<sup>261</sup>

## 2. The Relation of God and Time

<sup>254</sup>Sasse H. *aion* // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1995. – P. 31-32.

<sup>255</sup>Strong, p. 275.

<sup>256</sup>Strong, p. 275; Henry, v. 5, p. 242.

<sup>257</sup>Also see Deut 32:40; Rev 10:6; 11:17; 15:7; Ps 9:8; Isa 26:4; 40:28; 50:17; 57:15; Jer 10:10; Heb 13:8

<sup>258</sup>Strong, p. 275; Henry, v. 5, p. 242; Hodge, v. 1, p. 385-386; Grudem, p. 169.

<sup>259</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 242.

<sup>260</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 446.

<sup>261</sup>Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 114.

In discussing God's eternal nature, the question arises as to whether God experiences time, or whether He exists in timelessness. Does God have a past, present, and future, or is it all the same to Him? Does He experience a succession of events, i.e., one event occurring after another?

Some hold that God experiences an eternal succession of events. According to this theory, God exists within time and experiences events in sequence. He has a past, a present, and a future, about which He already fully knows. Although He exists in time, He has no beginning of days or end of existence.<sup>262</sup>

Adherents support this view with various arguments.<sup>263</sup> First, the Bible appears to describe a God who experiences the passage of time and events in sequence. For example, He existed before the creation of the world and will exist after its destruction. Such words as "before" and "after" indicate passage of time. Second, the fact that God created the universe at a moment of time, and that God the Son became incarnate at a moment of time, seem to indicate God being active in time. Finally, God is a person. One characteristic of a person is the ability to think, which requires, as far as we know, sequencing. Thinking is a train of individual thoughts in an orderly sequence.

Furthermore, we often speak of God's plan for people. Yet, from a logical point of view, we know that forming a plan must precede its execution. Therefore, it seems that God made His plans at one time, then executes them at another, thus creating a sequence. Additionally, the idea that God experiences succession of events better corresponds to our experience of prayer. We pray, then God answers, creating a sequence.

The Nicene Creed also seems to support the idea of "infinite succession": "I believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds." The word "before" relates to time. Finally, some feel that the idea of a timeless God traces back not to the Bible, but to the philosophy of Plato.

What about the theory that God's exists outside of time? It is claimed that in the beginning, God created time – it did not exist before that. God does not enjoy an unending *quantity* of days, but a different *quality* of existence – one without time.<sup>264</sup> Therefore, this theory asserts that God does not experience succession or sequence of events. He perceives all things, past, present, and future, directly and immediately. The mediaeval scholastics taught that God has "a simultaneous possession of his total duration."<sup>265</sup> In Edwards' words, God possesses "the immediate and invariable possession of the whole unlimited life together and at once."<sup>266</sup>

God's existence outside of time does not disturb His ability to perceive succession. Strong writes, "God, in his totality as the Absolute Being, is conscious not, in time, but of time."<sup>267</sup> An illustration may help. A person could stand on the street watching a parade and perceive only one part of it at a time. This individual would thus perceive the parade in sequence: past, present and future. Another person could watch the entire parade simultaneously from the top of a building. Although this second individual perceives the entire parade at once, he or she can still distinguish the various parts of the parade that others are experiencing sequentially as past, present, and future, but is not limited by their perspective.<sup>268</sup> Another example would be a writer of fiction, who knows the entire novel as a whole, while the readers perceive the sequential unfolding of events.<sup>269</sup>

In response to the claim that God must first form a plan before He executes it, proponents of God's timelessness state that God's thought and actions are already accomplished in eternity, but appear in the context of time. Shedd explains, "God creates all things from eternity by one act of power, as he knows all things from eternity by one act of knowledge and as he decrees all things from eternity by one act of will," and

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<sup>262</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 243-262.

<sup>263</sup>Nash, p. 12-13, 73; Henry, v. 5, p. 243-262.; Hodge, v. 1, p. 386ff.

<sup>264</sup>Strong, p. 276-277; Henry, v. 5, p. 250; Grudem, p. 169; Chafer, p. 216; Shedd, p. 279.

<sup>265</sup>Noted in Shedd, p. 279.

<sup>266</sup>Noted in Strong, p. 275.

<sup>267</sup>Strong, p. 276.

<sup>268</sup>Grudem, p. 170-171; Henry, v. 5, p. 258.

<sup>269</sup>Nash, p. 76.

adds, "God's causative energizing in both instances was eternal and therefore simultaneous; but the effects of it were successive and temporal."<sup>270</sup>

It is misguided to think that timelessness implies the eternal existence of creation. Even if God's act of creation is accomplished in eternity, it manifests at one moment in time. Creation has a beginning. Concerning God's ability to think, it is supposed that God's thoughts have logical, but not temporal sequence. Therefore, He does not need to exist in time to think.<sup>271</sup> His manner of thinking differs from ours. His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isa 55:8-9). This may imply reasoning powers that do not depend on temporal sequence.

In the history of the Church, most Christian thinkers have held the view of God's timelessness, including Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, the Reformers, and most contemporary theologians.<sup>272</sup> Augustine claimed that God created the universe not "in" time, but "with" time.<sup>273</sup> John of Damascus wrote, "He is above the Eternal: for He, the Creator of times, is not under the dominion of time, but above time."<sup>274</sup> Aquinas felt that God perceives eternity as immediacy without succession, since the One who is not subject to change is not measured by time and does not experience succession.<sup>275</sup>

What support exists for this view?<sup>276</sup> First, one must inquire, "If God does experience succession, which would be His first action?" Succession requires an initial action, after which other events follow chronologically. Yet, God has no beginning. Therefore, how can He have an initial action? If one supposes that time has no beginning as well, then another problem arises. If time has no starting point, then how can it move forward? In order to progress forward, one must begin somewhere. In addition, the Bible reveals that God's perception of time differs from ours (see 2 Pet 3:8; Ps 90:4).

In favor of this theory, supporters cite Revelation 1:4: "...from Him who is and who was and who is to come," a sequence that does not follow a chronological order. In addition, the days of creation begin with the "first day," giving the impression that time began then. In addition, we have no indication that time existed before creation. Genesis 1:1 simply reads, "In the beginning." Furthermore, God's knowledge of the future is consistent with Him existing outside of time (see Isa 46:10; Acts 15:18).

The doctrine of God's timelessness also coincides well with the fact of His immutability. God, who does not pass through time, does not change. Change requires the passage of time. When the Bible speaks as if God passes through time, it does so for the sake of the readers, who themselves exist in time and cannot conceive of a timeless existence.

Exodus 3:15 is also a key passage. When God announces, "I Am Who I Am," He is emphasizing His self-sufficiency and independence, from time. We may add the thought that God created "all things," which would include time. In response to the objection that the doctrine of God's timelessness traces back to Plato, we note that the Early Church did not passively accept all the Plato advanced, but rejected a number of Plato's premises. A parallel also exists between God's timelessness and His omnipresence. Similar to the fact that He is not located in one single *place*, He is also not located at one certain *time*.

The final proof offered for this understanding of God is that He is capable of innumerable, simultaneous perceptions. According to the doctrine of omnipresence, God is everywhere and able to perceive all things simultaneously. In a similar way, one may posit that God can perceive all that is happening at any *time* immediately and directly.

Along with the two theories of God's endless duration in time and His timelessness, other views exist to characterize His eternal nature. Some say that God exists in an "eternal present," from which He can perceive past and future as well. This theory has common features with those already discussed. On the one hand, as in

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<sup>270</sup>Shedd, p. 281.

<sup>271</sup>Strong, p. 276; Henry, v. 5, p. 263.

<sup>272</sup>Exceptions to this rule include Duns Scotus and William of Ockham (Nash, p. 73).

<sup>273</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 239.

<sup>274</sup>*An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2.3

<sup>275</sup>Aquinas T. *Summa Theologica*, 1a, q. 10 a. 1 (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963, p. 137-138).

<sup>276</sup>Shedd, p. 278-282; Grudem, p. 169; Henry, v. 5, p. 243, 246, 256; Pieper; Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, c. 116, 119, 123; Chafer, v. 1, p. 216; Hodge, v. 1, p. 386-388; Strong, p. 275-278.

the teaching of God's timelessness, God experiences all phases of time directly. On the other hand, in common with God's "endless duration," this view locates God in a specific phase of time: the present. Bray feels that God's experience of an eternal present means that our experience of present time affords us a foretaste of eternity.<sup>277</sup>

Bloesch proposes that God has "his own ontological time and space,"<sup>278</sup> which enables Him to fellowship with people. He "is not wholly independent of time and space," but may "enter into" them.<sup>279</sup> Erickson advances the view that, possibly, in relation to His transcendence, God is timeless, while in relation to His immanence, He is in time. In Erickson's words, God is "ontologically atemporal/aspatial but actively or influentially present within the space-time universe."<sup>280</sup> A final view is the understanding that God does not exist in time, but time exists in Him. This would mean that God does indeed experience succession, but time does not exist outside of Him or independent of Him.<sup>281</sup>

### 3. Concluding Thoughts

As is the case with other of God's attributes, reflecting on His eternal nature yields practical value for the believer. While mentioning God's eternal nature in Colossians 1:16-17, the context focuses on God's excellence and supremacy. God has no equal or rival. Consequently, He is deserving of devotion and obedience. God's excellence is also highlighted in 1 Tim 6:15-16, Job 36:26, and Rev 4:8-10. The following verses, Ps 48:14, Ps 93:1-2, and Rev 1:17-18, demonstrate that the Eternal God is impossible to overcome – He never suffers defeat. Consequently, those who are in Him are also undefeatable.

In the following passages, Deuteronomy 32:40-41, 2 Peter 3:8-9, and Revelation 10:6; 15:7; 22:12-13, mention of God's eternal nature serves as a warning. The Eternal God does not immediately punish sin. He gives time for repentance, and sinners should avail themselves of that opportunity. Furthermore, according to Psalm 90:4, 10, 12, 17, and Ephesians 1:11, the Eternal God knows the end from the beginning and can lead us on the path to success. Knowing that God is eternal also strengthens our hope in eternal life, which the Eternal God provides for us (see Ps 102:11, 12, 24, 28).

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<sup>277</sup>Bray, p. 84.

<sup>278</sup>Bloesch, p. 52.

<sup>279</sup>Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>280</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 139.

<sup>281</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 240. The German author Emil Brunner thought the same (see Bloesch, p. 86).

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## Chapter 4 - God's Greatness: All-Knowing, Ever-Present, Almighty

The final chapter devoted to Yahweh's greatness concerns possibly the most remarkable, yet controversial of His attributes: His omniscience (all-knowing), omnipresence (ever-present), and omnipotence (almighty).

### A. God's Omniscience (All-Knowing)

#### 1. Biblical Data

##### a. Old Testament

Although the Torah does not specifically claim that Yahweh has all knowledge, nonetheless we see examples of His supernatural knowledge, both of future events, and of the secrets of people's hearts. For example, God knew the future of Ishmael (Gen 16:12) and the sons of Jacob (Gen 25:23). He was also aware of the intention of Abimelech's heart (Gen 20:6) and the hidden thoughts of His people Israel (Deut 31:21).

Yahweh's omniscience is especially prominent in the book of Job. There it is specifically stated that He knows all things. For example, He sees all: "He looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens" (Job 28:24); "Does He not see my ways and number all my steps?" (Job 31:4); and "His eyes are upon the ways of a man, and He sees all his steps" (Job 34:21). Yahweh not only sees all that occurs on the earth, but also knows what is happening in Sheol (Job 26:6; 28:22-23).

The book of Job also presents the Lord as the great Teacher. Job poses the question, "Can anyone teach God knowledge, in that He judges those on high?" (Job 21:22). Elihu says of Him, "Behold, God is exalted in His power; who is a teacher like Him?" (Job 36:22). God's wisdom is especially highlighted in the creation of the world (chps. 38-41).<sup>282</sup> The fact of God's omniscience underlies Elihu's rhetorical question, "Do you know about the layers of the thick clouds, the wonders of one perfect in knowledge?" (Job 37:16).

The book of Job also contains some practical applications for the doctrine of Yahweh's omniscience. Seeing that He knows all things, "there is no darkness or deep shadow where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves" (Job 34:22). In addition, Job can appeal to God with the confidence that He fully understands his situation (Job 31:5-6). Finally, in light of Yahweh's wisdom displayed in creation, people need not doubt His ability to direct their lives (Job chps. 38-41).

The Old Testament historical books also contribute to our understanding of this truth.<sup>283</sup> Hanna affirms, "Yahweh is a God of knowledge" (1 Sam 2:3). Solomon asserts that God "alone know the hearts of all the sons of men" (1 Kin 8:39, cf. 1 Chr 28:9; 2 Chr 6:30). We make special note of the Lord's knowledge of time and circumstances. He not only knows the past, present, and future, but also know what would have been under different conditions.<sup>284</sup> Observe this feature in the following texts:

- Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And Yahweh said, "They will surrender you" (1 Sam 23:12).

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<sup>282</sup>Later in the Old Testament, we again encounter mention of God's wisdom in creation: "Yahweh by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens" (Prov 3:19); and "[It is] He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens" (Jer 10:12) (see Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 120).

<sup>283</sup>Mueller J. T. *Christian Dogmatics*. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 168; Chafer L. S. *Systematic Theology*. – Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1. – P. 193; Packer J. I. *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*. – Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993. – P. 31-32; Henry C. F. H. *God, Revelation, and Authority*. – Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 268; Hodge C. *Systematic Theology*, 1897. – V. 1. – P. 396-397; Strong A. H. *Systematic Theology*. – 1886. – P. 282; Pieper F. *Christian Dogmatics*. – St. Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1953. – V. 1. – P. 447-452.

<sup>284</sup>Mueller, p. 168; Chafer, v. 1, p. 193.



- So the man of God was angry with him and said, “You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed {it}. But now you shall strike Aram {only} three times” (2 Kin 13:19).

We move on to examine the Old Testament poetical books where, as throughout the Scriptures, the practical implications of a truth is emphasized. Yahweh knows all our suffering and grief (Ps 35:22; 56:8; 69:19; 142:3) and also our sins (Ps 69:5; 90:8). In the Proverbs, Solomon draws attention to God knowing our hearts (Prov 15:11; 16:2; 21:2). He knows us better than we know ourselves.

Yahweh knows everything about His creation: “I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine” (Ps 50:11);<sup>285</sup> and “He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them” (Ps 147:4). He has done all in wisdom (Ps 104:24). At times, the psalmist simply expresses His awe at the Lord’s wisdom and understanding: “How great are Your works, O Yahweh! Your thoughts are very deep” (Ps 92:5); and “Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite” (Ps 147:5). Therefore, “There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against Yahweh” (Prov 21:30).

As noted earlier, God’s knowledge is associated with His “vision”: “Yahweh looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth,” (Ps 33:13-14); “For the ways of a man are before the eyes of Yahweh, and He watches all his paths” (Prov 5:21); “The eyes of Yahweh are in every place, watching the evil and the good” (Prov 15:3); and “The eyes of Yahweh preserve knowledge...” (Prov 22:12).

The most striking description of Yahweh’s omniscience is found in Psalm 139. God knows all our deeds and thoughts (v. 2), our ways (v. 3), and all our words before we say them (v. 4). No one can hide from Him. “Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike {to You}” (v. 12). He knows us completely, from cradle to grave (v. 15-16). In light of this testimony, it is difficult to deny that Yahweh possesses all knowledge.

The Old Testament prophetic books also testify of God’s omniscience. They emphasize that no one can hide from Him. Note these examples:

- Woe to those who deeply hide their plans from Yahweh, and whose deeds are {done} in a dark place, and they say, "Who sees us?" or "Who knows us?" (Isa 29:15).
- For My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes (Jer 16:17; cf. 23:23-24; 32:19).
- Then He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, 'Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has forsaken the land'" (Ezek 8:12; cf. 9:9).
- I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from Me; for now, O Ephraim, you have played the harlot, Israel has defiled itself (Hos 5:3).

The prophets again associate God’s knowledge with His “vision”: “The eyes of Yahweh... range to and fro throughout the earth” (Zech 4:10). This allows Him to be a “witness” of people’s sins (Mic 1:2) and to declare “to man what are His thoughts” (Amos 4:13).

We note in the prophets another example where the Lord knows not only was or will be, but also what might have been.<sup>286</sup> We cite the book of the prophet Jeremiah:

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says Yahweh God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘If you will indeed go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then you will live, this city will not be burned with fire, and you and your household will survive. But if you will not go out to the officers of the king of Babylon,

<sup>285</sup>Mueller, p. 168; Henry, v. 5, p. 268-270.

<sup>286</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 193.

then this city will be given over to the hand of the Chaldeans; and they will burn it with fire, and you yourself will not escape from their hand.” Then King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I dread the Jews who have gone over to the Chaldeans, for they may give me over into their hand and they will abuse me.” But Jeremiah said, “They will not give you over. Please obey Yahweh in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live” (Jer 38:17-20).

Jeremiah especially stresses that Yahweh knows the condition of human hearts (see 11:20; 12:3; 17:10; 20:12). The goal of his prophecy, in fact, was to expose the evil intents and hidden attitudes of God’s people. In Daniel’s prophecy, we see emphasized the omniscient God’s ability to reveal mysteries (Dan 2:20-23, 28), which coincides with the apocalyptic character of his work.

Isaiah’s prophecy presents God as the one who knows the future with absolute precision.<sup>287</sup> God not only knows His own future actions, but also what people will do or attempt to do. Yahweh says, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim {them} to you” (Isa 42:9). He also claims, “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done” (Isa 46:10). The emphasis on the Lord’s knowledge of future things serves to prove His superiority over the pagan gods worshipped in Isaiah’s time.

Finally, the prophets declare that God’s wisdom and understanding exceed that which people possess: “For among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You” (Jer 10:7). His ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa 55:8-9), and, “His understanding is inscrutable” (Isa 40:28). Since no one can “direct the Spirit of Yahweh,” or, “as His counselor ... inform Him” (Isa 40:13), it is senseless to dispute with Him (see Ezek 18:25-29; 33:17-20).

We must attempt to explain several examples where Yahweh seemingly altered His plan. This does not mean that He erred in His knowledge of the future. For example, God planned not to personally lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, lest He might destroy them on the way (Ex 33:3). Yet, after Moses’ intercession, God changed His plan and accompanied Israel in the wilderness (Ex 33:14). Yahweh also annulled a threat to destroy Israel after Moses prayed (Deut 9:13ff). We also note that after Amos’ prayer, God again spared Israel: “Yahweh changed His mind about this. ‘It shall not be,’ said Yahweh” (Amos 7:3). In a similar way, upon their repentance, God annulled his threatened judgment on Nineveh (Jonah 3:10), Ahab (1 Kin 21:29), and Judah (2 Chr 12:5-8). Finally, the Lord revoked from Eli’s family the continuation in the priesthood promised to his family (1 Sam 2:30).

Jeremiah 18:10 reveals the principle involved here: “If (they do) evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless (them).” On the other hand, “When a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life” (Ezek 18:27). These examples do not reflect God’s ignorance of the future, but His response to people’s behavior.

We also recall occasions in the Old Testament where it seems that Yahweh did not know something or regretted what He had done.<sup>288</sup> For example, it appears that God was not aware of the sinful condition of Sodom: “I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know” (Gen 18:21). In Jeremiah 3:7, God expected Israel to return to Him, but they did not. Isaiah 5:4 is similar: “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected {it} to produce {good} grapes did it produce worthless ones?”

Moreover, we get the impression that Yahweh did not know ahead of time whether Israel would believe the first sign He gave to Moses (Ex 4:8), whether the people would obey the Ezekiel’s instruction (Ezek 2:5-7; 12:3), or whether the people would repent at the preaching of Jeremiah (Jer 26:2-3). In Genesis 9:14-15, the rainbow would remind God not to forget His covenant with the earth. Genesis 22:12 seems to indicate that the

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<sup>287</sup>See Isa 37:26-28; 41:25; 42:9; 44:7, 26-27; 45:21; 46:8-10; 48:3. The abundance of fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament also testify to Yahweh’s perfect knowledge of future events.

<sup>288</sup>See Boyd G. A. *God Limits His Control* // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 3967-4164; Erickson M. J. *God the Father Almighty*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 108.

Lord did not know what was in Abraham's heart before he "sacrificed" his son. Finally, God said, "I regret that I have made Saul king" (1 Sam 15:11), and He "was sorry that He had made man on the earth" (Gen 6:6).

As far as the cases where Yahweh supposedly lacked knowledge of something, again we are encountering the literary device "anthropomorphism," where people ascribe to God (or God ascribes to Himself) purely human characteristics. God chose to thus reveal Himself to the people of antiquity, who were less "theologically developed" in their age. We must accept as conclusive the clear and repeated biblical teaching of Yahweh's omniscience.

## **b. New Testament**

The New Testament repeats much of the Old Testament teaching of Yahweh's omniscience. For example, He knows all matters concerning His creation: "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And {yet} not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt 10:29-30). With these words, God comforts His disciples, assuring them of His care for them. In addition Yahweh is aware of all our need: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matt 6:8). God takes note of our service for Him, even when others take no notice (Matt 6:4). He is also the one "who examines our hearts." (1 Thes 2:4, cf. Rev 2:23).

Yahweh knows what the future holds, even if these events depend on human choice. Jesus predicted that Peter would betray Him (Mk 14:30) and that a man carrying a jar of water would lead His disciples to the place where they would celebrate the Passover (Mk 14:12-16).

We will mention still another instance in the biblical narrative where God knew what people would do, even though the events never took place:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in {the} day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day (Matt 11:21-23).

The apostle John, along with the author of Hebrews, make direct reference to the Lord's omniscience:<sup>289</sup>

- He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man (Jn 2:25).
- Now we know that You know all things (Jn 16:30).
- God is greater than our heart and knows all things (1 Jn 3:20).
- And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Heb 4:13).

Yahweh possesses perfect knowledge of Himself, i.e., all Persons of the Trinity have perfect knowledge of one another: "No one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal {Him}" (Matt 11:27),<sup>290</sup> and, "The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:10).

Finally, all the New Testament authors are awed by God's greatness manifest in His wisdom and understanding: He is the "only wise God" (1 Tim 1:17, cf. Jude 25). Salvation demonstrates "the manifold

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<sup>289</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 268-269; Mueller, p. 168; Strong, p. 282.

<sup>290</sup>Mueller, p. 168; Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 121.

wisdom of God.”<sup>291</sup> Paul rightly exclaims, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Rom 11:33).<sup>292</sup>

Before we draw conclusions from our study, we must note several instances in the New Testament where it seems that God (in particular, the Son) did not know something. For example, Jesus “grew in wisdom” (Lk 2:52). Once, Jesus encountered a boy possessed by a demon and asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” (Mk 9:21). Does this mean that Jesus did not already know this? Moreover, Jesus prayed all night before appointing His twelve disciples (Lk 6:12). It seems that He did not already know whom to choose. Finally, Jesus openly acknowledged that He did not know the time of His Second Coming: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father {alone}” (Mk 13:32). We will investigate these troubling passages later in this chapter.

### **c. Summary**

In light of the biblical data, there can be no doubt that Yahweh knows all things – He possesses all knowledge. He not only knows the past and present, but also can unfailingly predict future events, even if those events depend on human volition. His knowledge is exhaustive.

The Lord not only has knowledge, but also knows how to apply that knowledge to accomplish His goals, that is, He has wisdom. God masterfully created the heavens, the earth, and all that is in them. In His wisdom, He formed humans, endowing them with amazing abilities. In wisdom, He accomplished His perfect plan of salvation, which to this day astounds those who study it. The Bible also testifies of instances where Yahweh knew what would have been, had conditions been different. So then, He has knowledge not only of real events, but also of all potential variations of those events.

However, we must consider that in Scripture the doctrine of God’s omniscience is stressed in a more practical than theoretical sense. The fact that the Lord knows all things gives people comfort and assurance – He fully knows our needs and nothing escapes His notice. On the other hand, Yahweh’s omniscience also serves as a warning for those who would seek to hide their ways from Him – He sees all.

Since Yahweh knows all, we can look to Him to receive the information we need. We thus understand His prohibition about turning to inappropriate sources of information, such as the practitioners of the occult (see Deut 18:10-11). It is better to appeal to the most reliable source of knowledge – to God.<sup>293</sup> For this reason, the Lord rebuked Ahaziah, because he looked to other gods for counsel, and not to the God of Israel:

So (Ahaziah) sent messengers and said to them, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I will recover from this sickness.” But the angel of Yahweh said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and say to them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel {that} you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’” (2 Kin 1:2-3).

## **2. Theological Considerations**

### **a. General Observations**

#### **1) Definitions**

Strong describes well Yahweh’s omniscience as “God’s perfect and eternal knowledge of all things which are objects of knowledge, whether they be actual or possible, past, present, or future.”<sup>294</sup> Knowledge also

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<sup>291</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 200; Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 286-287; Duffield G. P. Van Cleave N. M. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology. – Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 71.

<sup>292</sup>Ibid.

<sup>293</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 397.

<sup>294</sup>Strong, p. 282.

involves wisdom. How can they be distinguished? Typically, wisdom is defined as the ability to apply knowledge in practice to a situation. Similarly, Grudem speaks of it as the ability to reach a goal: “God’s wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals.”<sup>295</sup>

## 2) God’s “Immediate” Knowledge

We can enrich our understanding of Yahweh’s omniscience with the aid of the following concepts. First, theologians typically speak of God’s “immediate” knowledge. This means that He knows everything intuitively and directly. He does not need to employ deduction or induction to acquire knowledge.

Some leading evangelical theologians describe this phenomenon in the following ways. Pieper writes, “Man acquires his knowledge... by a process of perception, induction, deduction... God, however, knows and discerns the inner nature, the inherent essence of all objects directly and immediately.”<sup>296</sup> In Grudem’s thought, God’s knowledge is “always fully present in his consciousness. He does not have to reason to conclusions.... He never learns and never forgets anything.”<sup>297</sup> Carl Henry comments, “If God’s knowledge is temporally conditioned, he cannot then have simultaneous knowledge or complete knowledge of all objects and events as omniscience requires.”<sup>298</sup> Finally, Charles Hodge teaches that the Lord “knows all things as they are, being as being, phenomena as phenomena, the possible as possible, the actual as actual, the necessary as necessary, the free as free, the past as past, the present as present, the future as future.”<sup>299</sup>

Two theories exist to explain Yahweh’s immediate knowledge: the perceptualist model and the conceptualist model.<sup>300</sup> According to the first, God “sees” everything simultaneously and thus obtains all knowledge. Yet, some feel that this approach is too anthropomorphic. The conceptualist model posits that the Lord knows everything intuitively, that is, within Himself.

## 3) Natural, Free, and Middle Knowledge

Other terms are employed to characterize Yahweh’s knowledge. First, He perfectly knows everything pertaining to Himself. This is termed His “natural knowledge,” or, in Latin, *scientia naturalis essentialis*.<sup>301</sup> Next, God knows everything outside of Himself, that is, about His creation. This is His “free knowledge,” or *scientia libera*.<sup>302</sup>

Yahweh’s knowledge of the future interfaces with both of the above-mentioned categories. First, He knows everything that He plans to do: “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim {them} to you” (Isa 42:9). He also knows what humans will freely do: “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Yahweh, You know it all” (Ps 139:4).

Yahweh’s “middle knowledge,” or *scientia media*, refers to His knowledge of what could be or what could have been.<sup>303</sup> Not all, however, agree that God possesses such knowledge, namely, Calvinists reject it. They believe that God predestines absolutely all that occurs. Therefore, it is senseless to speak of what “could have been.” All that God has planned and predestined with unfailingly come to pass. For Calvinists, then, “middle knowledge,” then, is purely theoretical and does not constitute real knowledge.

Furthermore, Calvinists claim that the concept of “middle knowledge” violates the concept of Yahweh’s “immediate knowledge.” As we mentioned before, He knows all things intuitively and directly. He does not

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<sup>295</sup>Grudem, p. 193.

<sup>296</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 448.

<sup>297</sup>Grudem, p. 192.

<sup>298</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 270.

<sup>299</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 397.

<sup>300</sup>Craig W. L. God Directs All Things on Behalf of a Molinist View of Providence // Boyd G., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Kindle Edition, 1707-1715.

<sup>301</sup>Mueller, p. 168; Thiessen, p. 124.

<sup>302</sup>Mueller, p. 168; Henry, v. 5, p. 268-270.

<sup>303</sup>Mueller, p. 168; Chafer, v. 1, p. 193.

need to induce or deduct. Yet, in instances of “middle knowledge,” God must examine all the potential variants of what could occur given different circumstances or human choices, which allegedly requires the use of deduction.<sup>304</sup>

Additionally, opponents to the theory of middle knowledge explain passages that support this view as follows. In 1 Samuel 23:12, where David inquires of the Lord, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” and Yahweh replied, “They will surrender you,” God is simply revealing the intention of David’s enemies. In the case of Matthew 11:21-23, where Jesus predicts that Tyre and Sidon would have repented at His miracles, He is simply illustrating the point that the cities of His day were more reprobate than these ancient cities.<sup>305</sup>

However, in answer to these objections we respond, first of all, that Scripture contains other instances of middle knowledge: 2 Kings 13:19 and Jeremiah 38:17-20. Second, in most of these cases the Lord describes in detail what might have been, which gives the impression that He truly foresaw these events. Third, rejection of God’s ability to foresee potentialities not only contradicts Scripture, but also seems to diminish His glory. The Lord said through Jeremiah, “Is anything too difficult for Me?” (Jer 32:27).

#### **4) Limits to God’s Omniscience**

The question arises whether God has knowledge of logical contradictions? Can Yahweh conceive of a circular square, or make  $2 + 3$  equal 5? We respond that logical contradictions do not and cannot exist in reality, and that knowledge of that type is not genuine knowledge. So then, if God lacks such “knowledge,” it is of no detriment to His omniscience. Let us recall Strong’s definition of omniscience: “God’s perfect and eternal knowledge of all things which are objects of knowledge, whether they be actual or possible, past, present, or future.”<sup>306</sup> A logical absurdity is not a proper object of knowledge, since it is neither actual nor possible.<sup>307</sup>

What can we say about knowledge based on experience? Knowledge as experience differs from knowledge as information. If the Lord has not experienced all that one can experience, then how can He possess all knowledge? In response, we explain that the doctrine of omniscience, in a formal sense, concerns knowledge as information, not as experience. Yet, one must also keep in mind that God the Son became man and experienced on earth much that humans uniquely experience. It is written of Him, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as {we are, yet} without sin” (Heb 4:15).<sup>308</sup>

Another challenging question raised earlier in this chapter: “If Jesus is God, then why were there instances when He did not know something?” First, in line with the doctrine of Christ’s deity, one must acknowledge that Jesus is God and therefore possesses all of God’s attributes, including omniscience. Theologians, however, make a distinction between Christ having divine attributes and Him employing those attributes. Christ indeed possesses omniscience, but chooses not to enjoy that privilege. He voluntarily limits Himself in this respect.<sup>309</sup> In chapter 10, “The Humanity of Christ,” we will pick up on this topic again.

Another quandary consists of the question, “If Yahweh promises to forget our sins (see Heb 8:12), then how can we claim that He knows everything? He must know about them and remember them. Here the matter is not God’s literally forgetting our sins, but that He does not count them against us. Jeremiah 7:31 is also problematic: “They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind.” Does

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<sup>304</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 398-400.

<sup>305</sup>Ibid.

<sup>306</sup>Strong, p. 282.

<sup>307</sup>Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>308</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 272.

<sup>309</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 2. – P. 710-711.

this mean that the Lord cannot imagine such a thing? Of course, He can. This is merely an anthropomorphic expression of His disgust and disapproval.<sup>310</sup>

How does Yahweh's omniscience interact with His other attributes? His omniscience coincides with His omnipresence. An omnipresent God has access to all information. Regarding Yahweh's omniscience and His almighty power, we make the qualification that all that God knows does not necessarily come to pass. His knowledge does not always motivate Him to action. He moves in response to His will, not His knowledge.<sup>311</sup>

Concerning His eternal nature, God's timelessness corresponds to the concept of His immediate knowledge. If God exists outside of time, then time cannot hinder His direct access to any knowledge.<sup>312</sup> However, the Scriptures often refer to God's "foreknowledge." If God exists outside of time, then that term poorly describes His relation to future events, since "foreknowledge" implies that God has a future. We conclude that this term is more a condescension to people's perspective of time than describing God's relationship to it.<sup>313</sup>

## **b. The "Openness of God"**

### **1) Description and Support**

In recent years, a new movement has arisen theorizing that Yahweh does not know the future. This movement is named the "openness of God," or "openness theology." The issue is whether God's knowledge of the future contradicts human freedom. Can a person act contrary to what the Lord has foreknown about this individual's future? If we answer, "No," then it seems that a person has no true freedom of choice – everything is predetermined by God. If we reply, "Yes," then it appears that Yahweh does not know the future and that people can do things that He does not expect them to do. The first solution violates human freedom, while the second challenges God's perfection.

This dilemma does not trouble Calvinists, since they believe that Yahweh directly controls all events that occur in the universe and do not recognize true human freedom. For adherents of the Arminian view, however, who hold to freedom of will, this question can pose a dilemma. They must either admit that God does not know the future, or explain how God's knowledge of future events does not predetermine human behavior or violate people's freedom of choice.

How do proponents of openness theology defend their view? John Sanders notes that in Scripture God acts in history. He reacts to people's actions, adjusts His plan accordingly, learns new information, is sometimes uncertain about the future, and expresses emotions like surprise, displeasure, regret, and grief. For Sanders, all these phenomena indicate that God does not know the future.<sup>314</sup>

Another openness theologian, Gregory Boyd, advances the following argument.<sup>315</sup> If God foreknew that in the future most people would reject the gospel and eternally perish, then why did He create such a world? Does He not want all to be saved? He also notes instances in Scripture where, in his opinion, God unsuccessfully attempted to turn people from their wicked ways (e.g. Acts 7:51; Rom 10:21; Heb 3:7-19; Ezek 22:30). Yet, if God already foreknew that they would not turn, then why did He make the attempt?

Furthermore, Boyd objects that if God truly seeks a relationship of love with people, then there must be true mutual interaction between them. Consequently, human decisions must actually have an effect on Him. Followers of this teaching are not concerned that, without knowledge of the future, Yahweh will lose control

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<sup>310</sup>Grudem, p. 165.

<sup>311</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 277; Strong, p. 283.

<sup>312</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 276-277.

<sup>313</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 282-283; Pieper, v. 1, p. 451.

<sup>314</sup>Sanders J. The God who risks. – Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1998. – P. 39-139. Noted in Highfield R. God Controls by Liberating // Boyd G., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Kindle Edition, 2929-2934.

<sup>315</sup>Boyd, God Limits His Control, 3967-4139.

over the world. He possesses adequate intelligence to “anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility as effectively as if it was a certainty.”<sup>316</sup> Boyd is ready to concede, though, that God may on occasion predetermine some event in order to guarantee the success of His plan. However, this is not His usual approach.

In addition, Boyd assumes that if God anticipates that a certain story line would interfere with His plan, He would act to prevent that story line from being realized. In answer to the question why God tolerates people who abuse their freedom for evil purposes, Boyd claims, “God cannot revoke the capacity to choose for or against love once he has given it,”<sup>317</sup> and, “the self-determining freedom of wicked moral agents is irrevocable.”<sup>318</sup>

Boyd also appeals to the practice of prayer. If God’s plan is predetermined, what sense is there to ask Him to change something? In addition, if people’s decisions are also predetermined, then why does God test people? He already knows how they will respond. Moreover, Peter writes about the possibility of hastening the coming of the Lord (2 Pet 3:11-12). If that date is fixed, however, how can we hasten it? Finally, Boyd claims that “we do not discover what the future holds; we help decide what the future holds.”<sup>319</sup> God created us to co-reign with Him. In giving us freedom, He anticipated that we would be co-workers with Him in establishing His kingdom on earth.

Adherent of openness theology attempt to deny Yahweh’s knowing the future, yet at the same time they defend His omniscience. They claim that not knowing events that have not yet occurred does not disqualify God from being all-knowing. Future events do not yet exist in reality. Ignorance of them, therefore, does not diminish God’s omniscience.<sup>320</sup> In support, openness theologians cite Aristotle, who defined truth as a statement that corresponds to reality. However, one cannot characterize future events as “true” or “false.” Therefore, one may be ignorant of them without lacking knowledge of the truth.

Proponents also compare God’s “openness” with God’s omnipotence. In our discussion of the latter, we will make the qualification that God can only do what is logically possible. For example, He cannot make a square circle. Correspondingly, He can only know that which is possible to know.<sup>321</sup>

Others ascribe to Yahweh so-called “conditional knowledge,” which means that He knows with precision only that which He Himself will do. In relation to others, though, the Lord can only anticipate what might happen based on the conditions at hand. It is “conditional knowledge,” or knowledge based on probability.

Although Yahweh operates on the principle of probability, this does not hinder His plans since He knows all that could possibly happen. In other words, He can take into consideration all possible results from any free choice made by any person at any time. With the aid of His exhaustive understanding, He knows how to execute His plan in spite of any contrary decision people might make. Whatever people might do, Yahweh has already considered that variant and knows how to respond to attain His ultimate goal.

Some supporters of this theory posit the idea of God’s “intentional ignorance.” Yahweh could know the future, but He has decided to remain in ignorance concerning people’s decisions so that they may exercise genuine freedom. In other words, God refrains from knowing the future, although He is capable of it.

Finally, Boyd argues that God’s omniscience includes the knowledge that it is impossible to foreknow people’s future free decisions. Therefore, the Lord knows all things, including the fact that He cannot know all that the future holds.<sup>322</sup>

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<sup>316</sup>Ibid., 4127-4129.

<sup>317</sup>Ibid., 4046-4052.

<sup>318</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to Paul Kjos Helseth // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 1111-1114.

<sup>319</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to William Lane Craig // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 2563-2567.

<sup>320</sup>Noted in Jowers D. W. Conclusion // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 4995-4997.

<sup>321</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 195.

<sup>322</sup>Boyd, God Limits His Control, 3938-3939.



## 2) Refutation

All of the above-listed arguments fail to overturn the clear biblical teaching that Yahweh precisely knows future events. Through Isaiah, He says, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim {them} to you” (Isa 42:9). In his day, David acknowledged God’s foreknowledge, exclaiming, “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Yahweh, You know it all” (Ps 139:4). We could also cite such passages as Dan 2:28, Isa 46:9-10, and others previously mentioned in support of our position.

Fulfillment of prophecy also confirms Yahweh’s perfect knowledge of the future. He is able to accurately predict future events. In addition, some texts demonstrate that God knows people’s future decisions (see Mk 14:13, 72; Acts 2:23; Rev 13:8). It is undisputable that God knows all that He Himself will do. At the same time, He knows what others will do as well.<sup>323</sup> In response to those who say omniscience is merely the *ability* to know all things, we affirm that omniscience, by definition, is the *actual knowledge* of all things. The Lord is not only able to possess all knowledge, He really possesses it.<sup>324</sup>

When Scripture portrays Yahweh as one who changes His plan in response to changing situations or people’s decisions, we are dealing again with an anthropomorphic description of the Almighty. The Old Testament abounds with anthropomorphisms, including ascribing to God human body parts.

Opponents of openness theology object that if Yahweh does not know the future, then He would not act so passively toward evil in the world. According to the traditional view, God allows evil in the world because He sees the “bigger picture” and knows that there will be a good result in the end. If Yahweh does not know this for certain, however, then He should be striving at maximum capacity to eliminate evil as soon as possible in order to guarantee the success of His plan. Yet, He does not do so, but is long-suffering toward evil.<sup>325</sup>

In addition, if Boyd supposes that the Lord can “anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility as effectively as if it was a certainty” and nullify any story line that undermines His plan, then he encounters a contraction in his system. Boyd previously objected that if God foreknew that most people would reject Him, then He would not have created the world as He did. However, the fact is that few will find the path to life (Matt 7:14). This undermines Boyd’s claim that Yahweh can “anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility” and alter His plan toward a successful result, since he would not consider the result Jesus predicted a positive one. In addition, if God does not know the future, how could Jesus have predicted that in the end few would be saved?

Moreover, in response to Boyd’s statements that “God cannot revoke the capacity to choose for or against love once he has given it,” and, “the self-determining freedom of wicked moral agents is irrevocable,” we simply ask, “Why must this be so?”

Helseth, commenting on Boyd’s claim that God sometimes does predetermine human choices in order to guarantee His plan, points out that this admission by Boyd deals a devastating blow to his entire system. Even Boyd is not certain that Yahweh can reach His goals without some sort of foreknowledge or compulsion on His part.<sup>326</sup>

Erickson objects that if God does not know the future, then how can He answer prayer? If He is not in complete control, then instances may occur where all He can do is “try” to answer prayer. In addition, if He cannot foresee the end, then how does He know how best to answer prayer since He Himself does not know what will be the best result.<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>323</sup>Henry, v. 5. p. 278-279; Strong, p. 285.

<sup>324</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 195; Strong, p. 285.

<sup>325</sup>Noted in Craig W. L. Response to Gregory A. Boyd // Boyd G., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 4677-4679; Helseth P. K. God Causes All Things // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence – Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 742-745; Helm P. The Providence of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 207.

<sup>326</sup>Helseth, God Causes All Things, 714-717.

<sup>327</sup>Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 91, 284-285.

### 3) Omniscience and Human Freedom

Those who believe that God truly knows the future propose various explanations as to how to reconcile this truth with the fact of human freedom. One theory is called “compatibilistic freedom.” According to this understanding, God arranges the conditions of people’s lives in a way that they will “freely” choose the option that He desires them to choose and foreknew they would choose, since it is the only option He leaves open to them.<sup>328</sup> The problem here, however, is whether one can consider this true freedom of choice.

Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper holds to an agnostic view, which refuses to resolve the apparent conflict between the Lord’s foreknowledge and human freedom. He writes, “We must either join Cicero, the Socinians, et alii and sacrifice the infallible and absolute omniscience or become Stoics and deny the freedom of human action and man’s responsibility for his sin. But on the basis of Scripture we must maintain both, even though in this life we cannot harmonize the apparent contradictions.”<sup>329</sup> Although this position does not contradict biblical teaching, we would prefer a more substantial effort to resolve the dilemma.

Most likely, the optimal solution is to defend the thesis that God’s foreknowledge simply does not compel people to make the choices that they make. For example, the Lord knows His own future choices, but they are not forced, but free. In a similar way, the Lord’s foreknowledge of human choices does not violate their freedom.<sup>330</sup>

Nash feels that just as one person’s observation of another’s behavior does not determine that behavior, when God in eternity “looks” upon the events of history (which are past, present, and future from our perspective), His observation of them is not the reason why they took place.<sup>331</sup>

Therefore, we can confidently claim that when people make decisions, they do so by their own free volition. Their choices are not determined by the Lord, but by they themselves. The fact that God foreknew their choices in no way contradicts the idea that they were freely made.

To summarize, in response to the question, “Could someone have made a decision contrary to the one which the Lord foreknew?” we answer in the negative. However, we are not promoting determinism, but simply explain that a person cannot make a decision different from the one he or she has already made, which the Lord foreknew, but did not predetermine.<sup>332</sup>

A number of respected theologians join us in our conclusion. Francis Pieper states, “Though the omniscience of God extends over all things without exception, it is not the efficient cause of the things which it knows.”<sup>333</sup> Thiessen aptly summarizes, “Free actions do not take place because they are foreseen, but they are foreseen because they will take place.”<sup>334</sup> Hodge adds, “An act may be certain as to its occurrence, and yet free as to the mode of its occurrence.”<sup>335</sup> Shedd confirms, “It is knowledge that is confined to divine understanding and never causes an act of the will.”<sup>336</sup> Finally, Erickson writes, “The usual form of the Arminian position says that there is no inconsistency between God knowing what I am going to do and my being free in doing it, so long as it is I, not God, who determines it.”<sup>337</sup>

### B. God’s Omnipresence (Ever-Present)

#### 1. Biblical Data

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<sup>328</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 424.

<sup>329</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 450.

<sup>330</sup>Shedd, p. 287; Strong, p. 284.

<sup>331</sup>Nash R. H. The Concept of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983. – P. 52-53.

<sup>332</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 282.

<sup>333</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 450.

<sup>334</sup>Thiessen, p. 126.

<sup>335</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 401.

<sup>336</sup>Shedd, p. 287.

<sup>337</sup>Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 82.

## a. Old Testament

Another of Yahweh's amazing attributes is His omnipresence – that He is ever-present. In the early books of God's revelation, though, it seems that He is limited to occupy a specific space. He is seen, for example, walking in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:8), meeting with Abraham (Gen 18:1), and wrestling with Jacob (Gen 32:28-30). Jacob, in fact, seems to reflect the thinking of his day that God dwells in a certain location, i.e., a "holy place": "Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely Yahweh is in this place, and I did not know it.' He was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven'" (Gen 28:16-17). Consequently, Jacob built a shrine there.

In the book of Exodus, the Lord is again associated with concrete places and objects. He appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai and manifest Himself in the cloud of fire that accompanied Israel in the wilderness:

- Yahweh came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them (Deut 33:2; cf. Neh 9:13).
- They have heard that You, O Yahweh, are in the midst of this people, for You, O Yahweh, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night (Num 14:14).

In the same line, the psalmist writes that during the Exodus, the people of God as a whole were the dwelling place of God: "When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became His sanctuary, Israel, His dominion" (Ps 114:1-2).

Upon the construction of the sanctuary, it became God's dwelling place where He manifest His presence, particularly in the Holy of Holies over the ark of the covenant (Ex 40:34-35). Moses received a special experience of His presence when he was with Yahweh on Sinai and saw His "form" (Ex 33:21-23). The presence of God was so intense on Sinai that Moses did not require food or drink for forty days (Ex 34:28). Moreover, the Lord regularly descended in the cloud to converse with Moses (Ex 33:9; Num 11:25; Deut 31:15).

In spite of the focus on God's localized presence, as noted above, there are indications of Yahweh's omnipresence in the Torah. Moses acknowledged it: "Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that Yahweh, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other" (Deut 4:39). Even the Gentile Rahab spoke of it (Josh 2:11).

The Old Testament historical books continue to stress Yahweh's localized presence or His association with a certain object. Obed-edom kept the ark of the covenant and received special blessing from the Lord as a result. Those who violated the sanctity of the ark perished (2 Sam 6:6-7).

Upon construction of the temple, God promised to dwell among His people (1 Kin 6:13), and when the ark of the covenant was brought into the temple, it filled with Yahweh's glorious presence: "It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of Yahweh, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh" (1 Kin 8:10-11 cf. 2 Chr 5:13-14; 7:1-2). In response to this, Solomon exclaimed, "Yahweh has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud. I have surely built You a lofty house, a place for Your dwelling forever" (1 Kin 8:12-13). From that time, the temple became the place for God's habitation, to which people directed their prayers (1 Kin 8:28-30). The Lord was thought to act from this place: "May He send you help from the sanctuary and support you from Zion!" (Ps 20:2).

At the same time, the historical books also hint at a fuller understanding of the Ever-Present God. 1 Kings 9:3 limits God's presence in the temple only to His "name," "eyes," and "heart." Other passages in this context speak of God being in heaven. Solomon acknowledged that no earthly dwelling can contain God (1 Kin 8:27) and that He actually dwells in heaven: "Hear in heaven Your dwelling place" (1 Kin 8:30; cf. Ps 11:4; 115:3; 2

Chr 20:6). Solomon was also aware that not even heaven can fully contain Yahweh's presence: "Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You" (1 Kin 8:27). Thus, he acknowledged His omnipresence.

Of special interest is the reference to God's presence in Psalm 22:3: "Yet You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel". On this basis, many expect a special manifestation of the Lord's presence during times of praise and worship. We see confirmation of this when the glory of God filled the temple not only when the ark was brought in, but also when the priests and Levites praised Him (2 Chr 5:11-14), and when Solomon prayed (2 Chr 7:1-2).

We find the most elegant Old Testament expression of the truth of Yahweh's omnipresence in Psalm 139:7-12:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, 'Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night,' Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike {to You.}

Finally, in the historical and poetical books, we see a special application of the concept of God's presence. The expression "God was with him" (Judg 6:16; 2 Chr 1:1) does not imply that God was exclusively with one individual, but that this person enjoyed special blessing from God.

The prophets also contribute to the Old Testament witness to Yahweh's omnipresence. Many of them experienced a special visitation of God's presence in the form of visions (see Isa 6, Dan 7, Ezek 1). They most likely saw a manifestation of Yahweh in a human form. Unlike the awesome expression of God's presence on Sinai, Elijah experienced Him not in wind, fire, or earthquake, but in "a sound of a gentle blowing" (1 Kin 19:11-13).

The prophetic writings also contain direct references to Yahweh's ever-presence. In Isaiah 66:1, God speaks of Himself, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?" Through Jeremiah, He announces, "'Am I a God who is near,' declares Yahweh, 'And not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?' declares Yahweh. 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' declares Yahweh" (Jer 23:23-24).

Nevertheless, from time to time the prophets also speak of the Lord's localized presence. For example, Yahweh is in heaven (Mic 1:2-3) or in the new, eschatological (future) temple (Ezek 43:5; 44:2-4). Even the name of Ezekiel's eschatological city is "the Lord in there" (Ezek 48:35). Zechariah also prophesied of that glorious age: "'I will dwell in your midst,' declares Yahweh" (Zech 2:10).

In conclusion, the phrase "God with us" is again used to show that an individual is a special recipient of the Lord's favor (Hag 1:13; 2:4).

## **b. New Testament**

The New Testament brings us a clear revelation of the Lord's omnipresence. Paul insists, for example, that He does not dwell in earthly temples "...since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). This applies not only to the pagan temples Paul was speaking of, but to the Jerusalem temple as well (Acts 7:48-50). Moreover, Paul affirmed that God's presence encompasses all things: "In Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28). Christ is He "who fills all in all" (Eph 4:6).

The New Testament writers follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus, who explained to the Samaritan woman that God was not to be worshipped exclusively in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim, but "in Spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23). In so doing, Jesus refutes the universal misunderstanding and superstition that God dwells only in special "sacred" places.

At the same time, in discussing the Lord's presence, the New Testament assigns a special role to heaven. Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father, who is in heaven" (Matt 6:9). The heavenly temple resides there (Heb 9:23-24). From there, the Holy Spirit was sent (1 Pet 1:12).

The New Testament also teaches that a special manifestation of the Lord's presence is associated with certain concrete phenomena. The Holy Spirit is present in the Church in a special way, as well as in individual believers in Jesus – we are the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). This coincides with Jesus' teaching that "where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matt 18:20). Those who are obedient to the Lord are promised a special visitation of the Father and the Son to "make Our abode with him" (Jn 14:23). Wherever we may be, the Lord is with us (Heb 13:5).

The most remarkable manifestation of Yahweh's presence was undoubtable when God the Son became human and dwelt among people. John writes about this magnificent event, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). At the end of this present age, Jesus will return to again live among us (Zech 14:4).

We await a still greater exhibition of the Lord's presence when He descends from heaven to abide with us in the New Jerusalem: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them" (Rev 21:3).

### c. Summary

One may conclude without hesitation that the Bible teaches the Lord's omnipresence. He is simultaneously present in all places. Nevertheless, some passages seem to indicate that God is located in a certain place or associated with a certain object. In the Old Testament, His presence was associated with the cloud in the wilderness, the sanctuary, and the temple. In the New Testament, the Lord dwells in the hearts of believers and manifests Himself in the Church. Both testaments "locate" God in heaven as well and testify to His visionary appearances in bodily form.

The Lord's manifest presence also seems to correlate with acts of worship. In addition, Jesus will return in the flesh at His Second Coming to live on the earth during His millennial kingdom, after which the Father Himself will inhabit the New Jerusalem. Ezekiel speaks of God dwelling in the new, eschatological city, named *יהוה שָׁמָּה* (*Yahweh shamma*), i.e., "Yahweh is there."<sup>338</sup>

It seems that the Bible gives us conflicting accounts on the topic of the Lord's presence. On the one hand, He is present everywhere. On the other hand, He is "located" in certain places at certain times. We will seek to unravel this puzzle in the next section.

## 2. Theological Considerations

Simply speaking, omnipresence is the claim that Yahweh is present in every place.<sup>339</sup> The biblical data noted earlier supports this idea. In addition, God's perfection implies omnipresence. If some location is not accessible to Him, that would compromise His perfection.<sup>340</sup>

We can distinguish *omnipresence* from *immensity*. The former refers to the Lord's ever-presence in the universe, while the latter – to His presence both in the universe and beyond.<sup>341</sup> We must also distinguish omnipresence from *extension*. Yahweh does not simply "extend Himself" throughout the universe, so that one part of Him is at one place, and one part is in another. He is fully present in every place simultaneously. This

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<sup>338</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 219-222; Shedd, p. 278.

<sup>339</sup>Shedd, p. 278.

<sup>340</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 119-220.

<sup>341</sup>Ibid.

idea is consistent with the truth that God is indivisible.<sup>342</sup> Grudem expresses this idea thusly, “God is present *with his whole being* in every part of space.”<sup>343</sup>

Another misconception concerning the Lord’s omnipresence is the idea that omnipresence is simply God knowing what is occurring in every place and having the ability to act in every place, i.e., a manifestation of his omniscience and omnipotence. Omnipresence, though, means that God is actually present in every place.<sup>344</sup>

What is the relationship between God’s omniscience and the existence of other objects? It is improper to conclude that His presence “crowds out” the presence of other entities. He coexists with other objects in the universe.<sup>345</sup> Additionally, according to Ephesians 4:6, He is present “in” every object, including people. His presence is necessary to sustain the existence of all things, as Colossians 1:17 states, “In Him all things hold together.”<sup>346</sup>

However, the Lord’s presence “in” people does not imply that all people are born again. His presence in unbelievers does not lead to regeneration, but simply sustains their existence. If we speak from the vantage point of God’s presence for spiritual life and blessing, He is “far” from unbelievers (Isa 59:2; Prov 15:29).<sup>347</sup>

It is also misguided to presume that the Lord’s omnipresence implies that He is part of other entities in the universe or that they are parts of Him. This is the teaching of pantheism. Although God is truly “in” all things, at the same time He is ontologically separate from them. He is able to “limit” His omnipresence to “make room” for the existence of others.<sup>348</sup>

Many feel that the apparent conflict regarding an omnipresent God’s coexistence with other entities is best resolved by proposing that He does not occupy space at all, but exists in a non-spatial dimension. In this non-spatial dimension, all things are open and accessible to Him. This theory has the advantage of avoiding the theory that the Lord must somehow “limit” His omnipresence to “make room” for other entities.<sup>349</sup>

Mueller defends the doctrine of a “non-spatial” God in the following way. He writes, “We must not think of God’s omnipresence in a corporeal way, as if He, when present, occupied space or were subject to space.”<sup>350</sup> Like Mueller, Grudem writes, “We should try to avoid thinking of God in terms of size or spatial dimensions.”<sup>351</sup> Yet, Bloesch comments that God can enter into the time-space dimension in order to fellowship with people.<sup>352</sup>

The cases where the Lord is said to be located in one specific place are explained in two ways. The first is that, although the Lord is everywhere, under special circumstances He more powerfully *acts*. The second option is that under certain conditions He more powerfully *manifests His presence*.<sup>353</sup> A fair comparison is to think of a rheostat, which is able to make light progressively more or less intense when turned. In a similar way, Yahweh can make His presence felt more intensely in a certain place or under certain circumstances, or even appear in a certain form.

How about God’s omnipresence and the incarnation of the Son of God? If Jesus is fully God, then He must possess all of God’s attributes, including omnipresence. However, if Jesus is also truly human, then how can He be everywhere? First, in accordance with the doctrine of Christ’s deity, we must affirm that Jesus Christ is God and, therefore, possesses all of the attributes of Deity. Yet, if we affirm His omnipresence, do we not undermine the doctrine of His true humanity, which consists of existence in a body?

Tozer proposes the following explanation. God is not in space, but space is in God. Therefore, Jesus can be at the same time at the Father’s right hand and with us as well. Tozer defends his thesis by showing that when

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<sup>342</sup>Strong, p. 281; Shedd, p. 278.

<sup>343</sup>Grudem, p. 179.

<sup>344</sup>Shedd, p. 278.

<sup>345</sup>Ibid.

<sup>346</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 385; Pieper, v. 1, p. 442-443.

<sup>347</sup>Grudem, p. 177.

<sup>348</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 442-443.

<sup>349</sup>Shedd, p. 278; Grudem, p. 174-175.

<sup>350</sup>Mueller, p. 166.

<sup>351</sup>Grudem, p. 174.

<sup>352</sup>Bloesch, p. 53

<sup>353</sup>Duffield, p. 70.

Jesus was on the earth, He was simultaneously “in the bosom of the Father” (Jn 1:18).<sup>354</sup> However, if we assume that space is in God, we may be flirting with pantheism, which teaches that all that exists is really a part of God’s being.

Concerning the Son’s incarnation, we are most likely dealing with a mystery. On the one hand, we must affirm the full deity of Christ, which requires Him to be omnipresent. On the other hand, we confess Him to be fully human, which means He is located in a body. Possibly the preferred solution is to posit that Jesus still enjoys omnipresence, but it is mediated to Him through other members of the Trinity, with which He has immediate and constant fellowship.

What practical value does the Lord’s omnipresence afford for the believer? First, it is a source of comfort. We know that God is always with us and will never forsake us (Ps 23:4; Matt 28:20; Isa 43:2). Second, the Lord’s omnipresence guarantees that we can enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with God. Third, the biblical concept of God rescues us from the pagan idea that God dwells in a certain “sacred” place and receives worship only there. Unfortunately, such an understanding is sometimes reflected in the Church when people speak of the church building as “God’s house,” or a “holy place.” Finally, God’s omnipresence serves as a warning, so that we behave properly in every situation (Jer 23:24).<sup>355</sup>

## **C. God’s Omnipotence (Almighty)**

### **1. Biblical Data**

#### **a. Old Testament**

Throughout its entirety, the Old Testament presents Yahweh as a God of power. From the very first pages of Scripture, His power is manifest in the creation of heaven and earth (Gen 1). We see the theme of God’s power in creation often repeated in the Old Testament (e.g. Job 38-41). The Lord not only masterfully created all things, but also wisely administers them (Ps 74:15-17; 65:6-13). All creation trembles before Him (Ps 104:32). Yahweh is able not only to create the world, but also to destroy it (Gen 7).

The Torah contains still more evidence of God’s almighty power. He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19) and tore down strong cities of Canaan (Deut 3:3-5; 9:1-3). Most remarkable, however, are His dealings with Pharaoh and the deliverance of His people from Egypt:

They did not remember His power, the day when He redeemed them from the adversary, when He performed His signs in Egypt And His marvels in the field of Zoan, and turned their rivers to blood, and their streams, they could not drink. He sent among them swarms of flies which devoured them, and frogs which destroyed them. He gave also their crops to the grasshopper And the product of their labor to the locust. He destroyed their vines with hailstones and their sycamore trees with frost. He gave over their cattle also to the hailstones and their herds to bolts of lightning. He sent upon them His burning anger, fury and indignation and trouble, a band of destroying angels. He leveled a path for His anger; He did not spare their soul from death, but gave over their life to the plague, And smote all the firstborn in Egypt, The first {issue} of their virility in the tents of Ham (Ps 78:42-51; also see Ps 77:14-20; Ps 114).

The Bible focuses attention on the Exodus since Egypt at that time was the most prominent world power. Yahweh’s crushing victory over Egypt showed His dominance over the whole world. In addition, Yahweh defeated other mighty nations of that time, including Philistia (1 Sam 5:1-4), Assyria (2 Kin 18-19), and Babylon (Jer 50-51).

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<sup>354</sup>Tozer A. W. The Attributes of God. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 119-121, 153.

<sup>355</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 445; Strong, p. 282; Mueller, p. 167.

The Psalmist summarizes, “You have made known Your strength among the peoples” (Ps 77:14). Isaiah adds, “For You have made a city into a heap, a fortified city into a ruin; a palace of strangers is a city no more, it will never be rebuilt. Therefore a strong people will glorify You; cities of ruthless nations will revere You” (Isa 25:2-3). The Lord said to Moses, “Before all your people I will perform miracles which have not been produced in all the earth nor among any of the nations; and all the people among whom you live will see the working of Yahweh” (Ex 34:10).

Because Yahweh is over all, none can stand before Him or successfully resist Him. He proclaims, “I act and who can reverse it?” (Isa 43:13), “Who then is he that can stand before Me?” (Job 41:10). Other verses echo this thought: “Who can stand before His indignation?” (Nah 1:6); “Who is able to straighten what He has bent?” (Ecc 7:13); and, “Who may stand in Your presence when once You are angry?” (Ps 76:7). Therefore, when someone attempts to oppose Him, Yahweh laughs (Ps 2:4) and strikes down those who mock Him (Isa 37:22-25; 1 Kin 20:28; 1 Sam 17:45-46).

Along with direct references to God’s might, the Old Testament writers express this truth in metaphors. Yahweh is compared to a rock (Deut 32:4; 1 Sam 2:2) and a warrior (Isa 42:13). He is “Yahweh mighty in battle” (Ps 24:8). In an anthropomorphic characterization, God’s power is associated with His right hand (Ps 89:14; Isa 52:10).

Certain names of Yahweh also reflect His greatness in power. Some feel that the basic meaning of the term *אל (el)*, i.e., “God,” is “strength.”<sup>356</sup> Benner claims that if we trace the history of this word to its hieroglyphic form, the letters represent an ox and the staff of a shepherd, which carry the implications of power and authority.<sup>357</sup>

The name *אל שדי (el-shaddai)* is found 48 times in the Old Testament, but its meaning is unknown. Rabbis have divided the word *שדי (shaddai)* into two component parts: *ש*, “who/which” and *די*, “sufficient,” which would render it, “He, who is sufficient,” emphasizing His might. Modern interpreters suggest other meanings. Possibly, the word *שדי (shaddai)* derives either from the verb *שדד (shadad)*, “destroy,” with the pronominal suffix “my,” or from the word *שדד (shadu)*, or “mountain.”<sup>358</sup>

In the Bible, the designation *אל שדי (el-shaddai)* is used in contexts dealing both with Yahweh’s power to bless (Gen 48:3) and with His ability to punish (Ps 68:14).<sup>359</sup> In Genesis 17, it is used when Yahweh promises to do amazing things for Abraham. In the histories of Isaac and Jacob, this name is associated with the great works God does for the family of Abraham (see Gen 28:3; 43:14; 48:3). Invoking this name, Naomi complained to Yahweh about the sufferings she endured (Ruth 1:20-21). In the book of Job, we encounter this name 31 times, where it emphasizes God’s greatness and sovereignty over people.<sup>360</sup>

Yahweh is mighty and needs no assistance from people. What is difficult for humans is not so for Him (Zech 8:6). He even reduced the army of Gideon to 300 men to show that He does not depend on human strength to secure victory (Judg 7:2-6). Nonetheless, He routinely employs people as instruments of His power. As David said, “He trains my hands for battle, so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze” (2 Sam 22:35), and, “It lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone” (1 Chr 29:12; cf. 2 Sam 8:6, 14). With Yahweh’s support, victory is certain (Ps 16:8).

Let us examine specific Old Testament passages that testify of Yahweh’s omnipotence. He spoke to Abraham, “Is anything too difficult for Yahweh?” (Gen 18:14). Moses recognizes that Yahweh’s power exceeds all others: “What God is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Yours?” (Deut 3:24). Yahweh says through Moses, “There is no one who can deliver from My hand” (Deut 32:39).

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<sup>356</sup>Jukes A. The Names of God in Holy Scripture. – Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1967. – P. 19.

<sup>357</sup>Benner J. A. His Name Is One: An Ancient Hebrew Perspective on the Names of God. – College Station, TX: Virtualbookworm.com Publishers, 2002. – P. 34-35.

<sup>358</sup>Hamilton V. P. שדי // Harris R. L., Archer G. L., Waltke B. K. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament. – Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1980. – V. 2. – P. 906; Shedd, p. 289.

<sup>359</sup>Joyner R. E. The One True God // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 149.

<sup>360</sup>Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 166-168.



In the book of Job, we read that no one can resist the Lord (Job 11:10): “He tears down, and it cannot be rebuilt” (12:14). In addition: “Dominion and awe belong to Him” (25:2); “God is mighty” (36:5); “God is exalted in His power” (36:22); and “(He) does great and unsearchable things, wonders without number” (5:9). Job concludes, “I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted” (42:2).

The historical books add to our understanding of Yahweh’s omnipotence. A great miracle is “a slight thing in the sight of the Yahweh” (2 Kin 3:18). Jehoshaphat says to God, “Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You” (2 Chr 20:6).

God’s power is well celebrated in Old Testament poetical books as well: “But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases” (Ps 115:3); “Great is our Lord and abundant in strength” (Ps 147:5); “Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this: that power belongs to God” (Ps 62:11); “The voice of the Yahweh is powerful” (Ps 29:4); “Yahweh has clothed and girded Himself with strength” (Ps 93:1); and, “Say to God, ‘How awesome are Your works! Because of the greatness of Your power Your enemies will give feigned obedience to You’” (Ps 66:3).

The prophets also speak of God’s might and power. In Isaiah 14:24, Yahweh announces, “Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.” The Lord is not limited by anything: “Behold, Yahweh’s hand is not so short that it cannot save” (Isa 59:1). He never grows tired: “The Everlasting God, Yahweh, the Creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired” (Isa 40:28). Nahum states that God is “great in power” (Nah 1:3). Jeremiah provides us with one of the clearest statements on Yahweh’s omnipotence: “Nothing is too difficult for You” (Jer 32:17). Later in the same chapter, we read the Divine reply, “Is anything too difficult for Me?” (Jer 32:27).

The final canonical books of the Old Testament also affirm Yahweh’s omnipotence. Daniel praises Him with the words, “Let the name of God be blessed forever and ever, for wisdom and power belong to Him. It is He who changes the times and the epochs; He removes kings and establishes kings” (Dan 2:20-21), and, “He delivers and rescues and performs signs and wonders in heaven and on earth” (Dan 6:27). Nehemiah agrees, speaking of “our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God” (Neh 9:32).

## **b. New Testament**

The New Testament confirms the witness of the Old Testament about Yahweh’s almighty power. His power is manifest in creation. Not only were “the worlds... prepared by the word of God” (Heb 11:3), but also God “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb 1:3). Speaking sarcastically, Paul considers that “the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25). God can do “far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think” (Eph 3:20), and, “is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day” (2 Tim 1:12). The Lord is strong in judgment (Rev 18:8). The Father is greater than all (Jn 10:29). No one can defeat Him. Jesus “opens and no one will shut, and... shuts and no one opens” (Rev 3:7).

During the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ, God the Father performed great signs and wonders through Him by the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38). The number of Christ’s miracles cannot be counted (Jn 21:25). The most glorious miracle of God was Christ’s resurrection from the dead and His ascension into heaven. In this way, the Father exalted His Son from the lowest place to the highest place. Paul comments on this:

...and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. {These are} in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly {places,} far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church (Eph 1:19-22).

So then, the Lord displayed His power even over the potent enemy of death, and will fully defeat it on Resurrection Day (Jn 5:28-29). In Revelation 1:18, Jesus declares His victory over death, “I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.”

In the New Testament, we encounter the name παντοκράτωρ (*pantocrator*). An etymological analysis of the term yields the parts παν (*pan*), “all,” and κράτωρ (*crator*), “power,” i.e., the “Power over all.” This word first appeared in the Septuagint as a translation of the Hebrew names אֱלֹהֵי שָׁדַי (*el-shaddai*) and יהוה צְבָאוֹת (*Yahweh Tsavaoth*).<sup>361</sup> With the single exception of 2 Corinthians 6:18, παντοκράτωρ (*pantocrator*) is used of God exclusively in the book of Revelation (9 times) to stress His dominion over all history and His praiseworthiness.<sup>362</sup>

We can also note one instance when the word “power” served as a title for God. In Matthew 26:64, Jesus predicted that He would sit “at the right hand of Power.”<sup>363</sup> Finally, the Gospels directly declare that God can do all things. In answer to the disciples’ question, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus responded, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:25-26). Moreover, the angel Gabriel announced to Mary, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk 1:37).

### c. Summary

The Bible clearly claims that God can do anything. Nothing is impossible for Him. He demonstrated His power in the creation of the world. Throughout biblical history, He conquered all His enemies, and by means of the resurrection of Christ, defeated one of humanity’s greatest threats – death. No one can stand before Him or nullify what He does. He is God Almighty.

In light of this truth, it is senseless to resist the Lord. In addition, His omnipotence inspires us to trust Him. He is able to fulfill His promises and keep His Word. The prophet Joel writes, “Strong is he who carries out His word” (Joel 2:11). Knowing God is Almighty delivers us from fear of people “Yahweh is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me?” (Ps 118:6). The Psalmist exclaims:

Yahweh is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? Yahweh is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread? When evildoers came upon me to devour my flesh, my adversaries and my enemies, they stumbled and fell. Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in {spite of} this I shall be confident (Ps 27:1-3).

The Lord’s “power that works within us” (Eph 3:20) is so great that Paul prayed that the saints might be able to comprehend the significance of this truth by revelation from the Holy Spirit: “[I pray that] the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know... what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe” (Eph 1:18-19).

## 2. Theological Considerations

Our God is an Almighty God. He can do all things, and nothing is impossible for Him. Let us look at various definitions of Yahweh’s omnipotence suggested by theologians. Erickson states, “God is able to do all things which are proper objects of his power.”<sup>364</sup> In Grudem’s words, “God’s omnipotence means that God is able to do all his holy will.”<sup>365</sup> William Roy claims, “God can do anything that is an absolute possibility (i.e. is logically

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<sup>361</sup>Shedd, p. 289; Braumann G. *Kraton* // Brown C. New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – V. 3. – P. 716-718.

<sup>362</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 169.

<sup>363</sup>Benner, p. 52-53.

<sup>364</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 276.

<sup>365</sup>Grudem, p. 216.

possible) *and not inconsistent with any of his other attributes.*"<sup>366</sup> The Nicene Creed states, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth."<sup>367</sup>

It is necessary to qualify the statement that the Lord can do anything, taking into consideration His other attributes and their influence on His omnipotence. In light of God's holiness, we must affirm that He cannot sin (Jam 1:13; Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18; Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29). Furthermore, the Bible teaches that the Lord cannot deny Himself (2 Tim 2:13). At the same time, we must recognize that the inability to sin is not a sign of weakness, but of strength. A weak personality will give in to sin, while a strong one will resist it.<sup>368</sup> Nash correctly observes that a holy God will certainly avoid sinning. If He gives in to sin, He is no longer almighty.<sup>369</sup> Thomas Morris adds that the Lord has the essential volitional qualities to commit sin, but chooses not to. Therefore, strictly from the vantage point of His power, He can sin, but His holy nature does not allow it.<sup>370</sup>

Bible scholars also discuss the relationship of the Lord's power and logical possibilities. It is thought that since logical contradictions cannot exist in reality, God cannot do the logically impossible.<sup>371</sup> For example, can God make a square circle? We must affirm the negative, since this is a logical absurdity.

A similar dilemma surrounds the question, "Can God make a rock so large that He cannot lift it?" In response to that question, we ask, "How big must this rock be, so that God cannot lift it?" It must be a rock of infinite size in order for a God of infinite power not to lift it. However, this is a logical absurdity, since a rock, by definition, is a finite object. If it is of limitless dimensions, then it is no longer a rock. In reality, there are no infinite-finite objects. Therefore, the question is an inappropriate one.<sup>372</sup>

It is also thought impossible that the Lord could cause what has already happened never to have occurred. Here, we must employ specialized terms to describe God's power. His "absolute power" refers to the fact that the Lord has absolute power to accomplish all He desires. The term "ordained power" denotes what God actually does with His power. After God has exercised His "ordained power," He has thereby limited His "absolute power" and cannot, consequently, undo what He has already done.<sup>373</sup>

Nash adds the following thoughts. If the Lord changed the past, He would create a logical contraction. One could then state both that a certain thing did occur in the past, and that it did not occur. In addition, a cause always precedes its effect. Therefore, God cannot in the present cause an effect in the past. Moreover, if God changed one event in the past, then that would affect all events subsequent to it, since they are interrelated.<sup>374</sup>

Theologians often distinguish the Lord's "immediate" (or "direct") power from His "delegated" power. He exercises His immediate power when He does something without the aid of an intermediary. When God created the world, performs miracles, gives revelation, or regenerates believers, He alone accomplishes these events. However, He often uses intermediaries or instruments to delegate His power, as when He raised up the Medes and Persians to overthrow the Babylonian Empire.<sup>375</sup>

We also need mention that the Lord is always able to do more than He has already done. In other words, His power is inexhaustible. The Bible confirms this claim: "From these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham" (Matt 3:9), and God said to Moses, "I will make of you a great nation" (Ex 32:10). He could have done these things, but did not. We also read, "Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt 26:53). So then, God is not obligated to manifest His power. He does so only when it serves His purpose.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>366</sup>Rowe. *Philosophy of Religion*. – Encino, CA: Dickenson, 1978. – P. 9. Noted in Nash, p. 50.

<sup>367</sup>*Historic Creeds and Confessions*. – Oak Harbor: Lexham Press, 1997 (electronic ed.).

<sup>368</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 277-278; Henry, v. 5, p. 317; Thiessen, p. 126; Shedd, p. 289.

<sup>369</sup>Nash, p. 43.

<sup>370</sup>Note in Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 178.

<sup>371</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 217; Henry, v. 5, p. 314-319; Shedd, p. 289; Strong, p. 287.

<sup>372</sup>Geisler N. L. *Christian Apologetics*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976. – P. 229.

<sup>373</sup>McGrath, p. 218.

<sup>374</sup>Nash, p. 45-47.

<sup>375</sup>Mueller, p. 173; Thiessen, p. 127.

<sup>376</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 313-314; Shedd, p. 289; Strong, p. 288; Bloesch, p. 104-105.

We will conclude by drawing attention to some distortions of this doctrine. Some feel that God's power is limited. They consider this a solution to the question why God does not eliminate evil and suffering in the world – He is not able to do so. Another false claim is that all power is God's power. The fact is that people also possess certain powers, as do demons. This power, of course, ultimately originates in God, but He allows His creatures freedom in exercising it.<sup>377</sup>

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<sup>377</sup>Henry, v. 5. p. 313-314; Strong, p. 288.

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## Chapter 5 - God's Holiness

Having investigated the qualities that make up God's greatness, we next examine those qualities associated with His holiness. In the Lord's presence, the angels exclaim, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Yahweh of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa 6:3). The word "holiness" means "separation," and in relation to God, it typically indicates that He is separated from all that is not consistent with His holy nature. The term has another connotation as well, which we will discuss in the next section.

In connection with the Lord's holiness, the Bible teaches that God is righteous (Ps 145:17), which means that He always conducts Himself in accordance with His righteous standard. He is consistent in His behavior. In addition, He is just (Isa 30:18). He requires proper behavior from others and punishes violations to His laws. Finally, the Lord always keeps His word and fulfills His promises, i.e., He is faithful (1 Thes 5:24). So then, we devote this chapter to study the attributes of God's holiness, righteousness, justice and faithfulness.

### A. God's Holiness

#### 1. Terminology

The words translated "holiness" are *קֹדֶשׁ* (*kadesh*) and *ἁγιασμός* (*hagiasmos*). Both mean "separation." The Lord's holiness, according to Ury, "sets him apart from everything else."<sup>378</sup> The idea of "separation" has two aspects. First, God is separate from His creation. He is greater both in essence and in status. We might call this His "majesty." Second, Yahweh is separate from sin. This is His "moral excellence."<sup>379</sup>

The concept of the Lord's majesty refers to the unique place He holds in relation to creation. In every way, he excels it. He is "separate" in the sense that nothing can compare with Him or rival Him. Therefore, we can classify His majesty as one aspect of His holiness. We will study God's majesty more in chapter 13.

We devote the present chapter, however, to the second aspect of God's holiness – His moral excellence. He is without sin and separate from all that does not correspond to His holy nature. Believers are called to share in God's holiness in a moral sense. On the other hand, God in His majesty will always be "separate" from us. There is no one like the Lord's, and there never will be.

#### 2. Biblical Data

Before we undertake our investigation of the biblical data, we will say a few words about the historical and cultural milieu of the Ancient Near East.<sup>380</sup> In the ancient world, holiness was purely a device to instill fear in the worshiper. People worshiped their gods primarily to appease them and not incur their wrath. They lacked a personal relationship with their gods. Unlike pagan religion, though, as Ury notes, "Yahweh is looking for those who are willing to 'walk' with him rather than cower in fear alone."<sup>381</sup>

The following biblical passages enlighten us as to the nature of Yahweh's holiness.<sup>382</sup> In the beginning of biblical history, God's "separateness" was on display when Adam and Eve committed the first sin – they were banished from the Garden of Eden and became separated from the Lord (Gen 3:24). In addition, after Cain's transgression, he anticipated alienation from Yahweh: "From Your face I will be hidden" (Gen 4:14). Finally, in

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<sup>378</sup>Ury M. W. Holiness, Holy // Elwell W. A. Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. – P. 340.

<sup>379</sup>Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 6. – P. 325; Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. electronic ed. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1999. – V. 1. – P. 456-457.

<sup>380</sup>Ury, p. 341.

<sup>381</sup>Ibid., p. 342.

<sup>382</sup>See Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 41-43; Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 138; Henry, v. 6, p. 324-326.

the days of Noah, the Lord could no longer tolerate the sinful behavior of people on earth and destroyed them with a flood (Gen 6-8).

Moreover, in the Torah we learn of special places that were sanctified or made holy by the presence of the Lord. When Yahweh appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He commanded him, “Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). Joshua experienced the same when he encountered “the captain of Yahweh’s host” (Josh 5:15).

The Mosaic Law proscribed certain behaviors for Yahweh’s people. These also reflect God’s holiness. The sense of “separateness” was particularly expressed in a series of taboos and ordinances concerning physical distance and ceremonial purity. For example, when God was planning to “descend” on Mount Sinai, He warned Moses to prepare the people: “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments” (Ex 19:10). The men were also forbidden to “go near a woman” (Ex 19:15).

Furthermore, Moses marked off “bounds for the people all around” so that no one would touch the mountain on which the holy God was about to descend (Ex 19:12). The leaders were allowed to ascend the mountain, but Moses alone was allowed to “come near to Yahweh” (Ex 24:1-2). The Lord strictly warned, “No man is to come up with you, nor let any man be seen anywhere on the mountain; even the flocks and the herds may not graze in front of that mountain” (Ex 34:3). While in the wilderness, the people kept their distance as well from the tabernacle, which was “a good distance from the camp” (Ex 33:7).

Moses received special directions concerning how to construct the tabernacle (Ex 25-30). When all the articles for the tabernacle were constructed, they were dedicated by anointing with oil (Ex 40:9-11). Even the oil itself was considered “holy” in the sense that it was prepared from a special recipe that others were forbidden to copy for common use (Ex 30:22-33).<sup>383</sup> Additionally, the tabernacle and its articles were sanctified by special offerings (Lev 8:15; 16:32-33).

Restrictions were also in place as to who could serve in the tabernacle – only priests in the line of Aaron (Num 3:10, 38) and their assistants, the Levites (Num 8). Only the priests could actually enter the tabernacle, while the Levites disassembled, carried, and reassembled it (Num 1:51). Only the high priest could enter into the Holy of Holies, following a strict regime (Lev 16). Although the “laypeople” were excepted from the priesthood, they could nonetheless make a special vow to the Lord – the “Nazirite vow,” which would make them “holy to Yahweh” (Num 6:8).

It was even proscribed how the priests should be attired. Their special clothing was sanctified by ritual, which included sprinkling with blood and oil (see Ex 28-29; Lev 8). The high priest wore a plate of pure gold inscribed with the words “holy to Yahweh” (Ex 28:36). The priests who served in the tabernacle had to take special care to “cover {their} bare flesh” (Ex 28:42; cf. Ex 20:25-26). They had specific instructions for their personal purity as well (Ex 30:17-21; Lev 6:9-11; 10:8-10).

Offerings to God were under strict regulation. The bread for offerings must always be unleavened (Ex 23:18; Lev 6:17). All animal offerings were to be “without defect”: “You shall not sacrifice to Yahweh your God an ox or a sheep which has a blemish {or} any defect, for that is a detestable thing to Yahweh your God” (Deut 17:1).<sup>384</sup> A priest who had any physical defect could not present offerings (Lev 21:16-23).

The people were to offer their sacrifices only at the tabernacle (Lev 17:5). When bringing sacrifices, ceremonial purity was to be observed (Lev 22; 7:19-21). Violation of ceremonial purity could cost the priest his life (Lev 10:1-2). The Lord said, “By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy” (Lev 10:3). Even common objects which by accident touched holy things, became holy themselves (Num 16:36-40; Lev 6:18, 27-28).

The people of Yahweh were to revere the name of the Lord: “You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel” (Lev 22:32). Israel was forbidden to swear falsely by Yahweh’s name (Lev 19:12). In addition, “The one who blasphemes the name of Yahweh shall surely be put to death” (Lev 24:16).

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<sup>383</sup>The same order was in place for preparing the incense for offerings (Ex 30:34-38).

<sup>384</sup>Also see Lev 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3, 23, 28, 32; 6:6; 22:17-25; Num 29.

Special ordinances existed for food (Lev 11; 20:25; Ex 22:31) so that Israel would learn to “make a distinction between the unclean and the clean” (Lev 11:47). Particularly, the eating of blood and fat were strictly forbidden (Lev 3:17; 7:22-27; 19:26).

Finally, certain regulations were in place to ensure the personal purity of the people concerning such issues as excrements (Deut 23:13), childbirth (Lev 12:1-8), discharges from the body (Lev 15), eating animals torn by beasts (Lev 17:15), tattoos (Lev 19:28), cutting beards (Lev 19:27), mixing of grain, cloth, and types of animals (Lev 19:19), touching an unclean animal or a corpse (Lev 5:2-3; Num 5:2), disposing of the corpse of an executed criminal (Deut 21:23), handling the booty after a military victory (Num 31:19-25), and regulations for lepers (Num 5:2). Certain persons were excluded from the assembly: one who was “emasculated or has his male organ cut off,” and “one of illegitimate birth” (Deut 23:1-2).

So then, to be considered holy, the people of Israel were obliged to observe both the moral and ceremonial laws, because Yahweh was holy (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 21:8). Their consecration to the Lord included separation from the surrounding nations and their practices as well (Lev 20:26). Finally, Tozer reminds us of metaphor for God’s holiness – fire, which often accompanies His presence (Ex 19:18) and issues from Him in judgment (Lev 10:2).<sup>385</sup>

Engaging the Old Testament historical books, we discover more applications of the ceremonial laws. Joshua, for example, allowed only the Levites to carry the ark of the covenant (Josh 3:3). David violated that ordinance, however, and brought harm to God’s people (2 Sam 6:3ff). The inhabitants of Beth-shemesh also suffered from showing disrespect to the ark (1 Sam 6:19). In connection with the conquest of Canaan, the Lord received His portion of the booty (Josh 6:18-19), but also punished Israel for failure to respect what was His (Josh 7:11-12).

In all things, Yahweh showed Himself to be a holy God. Hannah acknowledged, “There is no one holy like the Yahweh, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God” (1 Sam 2:2). Yet, Joshua warned that it is difficult for sinful people to serve the holy Lord: “You will not be able to serve Yahweh, for He is a holy God. He is a jealous God” (Josh 24:19).

The Psalms speak of Yahweh’s holiness more in the sense of moral excellence. Ceremonial purity is actually contrasted with moral purity, with emphasis on the latter (Ps 39:7-9; cf. 1 Sam 15:22; Prov 21:3). Psalm 99 affirms that God is holy and worth of praise: “Exalt Yahweh our God and worship at His footstool; Holy is He” (v. 5); “Exalt Yahweh our God and worship at His holy hill, for holy is Yahweh our God” (v. 9). Holy is His name (Ps 111:9; 99:3; 33:21), His habitation (Ps 11:4; 93:5; 87:1-2), and His ways (Ps 77:13). The way to Him is the way of holiness (Ps 24:3-5; 4:3). He hates evil (Ps 5:4; cf. Zech 8:17; Hab 1:13).

We will conclude our survey of the Old Testament teaching by examining the prophetic books. Isaiah pays special attention to this topic. In his well-known vision of chapter 6, he saw the Lord and heard the seraphim exclaim, “Holy, holy, holy, is Yahweh of hosts” (Isa 6:3). The adjective “holy” is repeated three times to emphasize this attribute of God.

In addition, in the book of Isaiah God is called the “Holy One” or the “Holy One of Israel” (see 1:4; 5:19, 24; 31:1; 40:25; 41:14; 43:14; 55:5; 60:9). Other Old Testament books mention this name as well, but not as frequently as Isaiah.<sup>386</sup> His name is holy (Isa 57:15). His habitation is holy as well (Isa 11:9; 56:7).<sup>387</sup> The Sabbath is His holy day (Isa 58:13).

Yahweh’s holiness inspires reverence among God’s people (Isa 8:13). Yahweh “will show Himself holy in righteousness” (Isa 5:16). As in the Psalms, in Isaiah moral holiness is stressed over ceremonial purity (Isa 1:12-17; 58:1-10). Hosea affirms this as well, “For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

In conclusion, several features of Ezekiel’s prophecy interest us. Here, Yahweh again insists on holy behavior, but His holiness is also demonstrated to the Gentiles through His deliverance of His people (Ezek

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<sup>385</sup>Tozer A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 166-167.

<sup>386</sup>For example: Ps 89:18; Prov 9:10; Hos 11:9; Hab 1:12; Jer 51:5; Ezek 39:7.

<sup>387</sup>Also see Jon 2:4; Hab 2:20; Mic 1:2.



20:40-41). Ceremonial holiness is also reintroduced in connection with the order of worship in the eschatological temple (see Ezek 42:13, 20; 43:7-9; 44:23; 45:1-6).

In the Gospels and the book of Acts, the word “holy” is mainly used in reference to the Third Person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, it sometimes refers to God the Son (Lk 1:35; Jn 6:69; Acts 3:14; 4:27, 30) or God the Father (Jn 17:11). The following things are called holy: God’s name (Lk 1:49; Matt 6:9), His angels (Lk 9:26; Acts 10:22), His prophets (Lk 1:70; Acts 3:21), and His covenant (Lk 1:72). Everything having to do with the Lord is holy.<sup>388</sup> Although the noun “holiness” is not used in these books, Jesus calls His disciples to holy living in line with God’s holy nature (Matt 5-7). The Early Church held to a high ethical standard (Acts 5:1-12).

The epistles repeat many of these themes, calling God’s Spirit, God’s angels (Jude 14), and God’s people holy (1 Pet 2:5-9). God Himself is holy, as is the place where He manifests His glory (2 Pet 1:18), His Word (Rom 1:2; 7:12; 2 Pet 2:21), and those to whom He revealed it (Eph 3:5; 2 Pet 3:2). Just as the tabernacle and temple were consecrated to the Lord in the Old Testament, the Church is also consecrated to Him and considered holy (1 Cor 3:17; Eph 2:21; 5:27).

The theme of the Lord’s holiness finds even greater expression in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Here we find mention of God’s holy tabernacle (Heb 9:2-8), which was made according to the pattern of His heavenly one (Heb 9:12-25). Jesus entered that heavenly tabernacle as the holy high priest (Heb 7:26), where He accomplished propitiation with His blood. In virtue of His sacrifice, we now have boldness to enter the Holy of Holies, that is, into the Lord’s presence (Heb 10:19). In regard to God’s holiness, the author of Hebrews also writes, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29).

The New Testament book featuring God’s holiness most of all is the book of Revelation, where we learn of the culmination of His plan. We often see the Lord characterized as holy: “He who is holy” (Rev 3:7); “O Lord, holy and true” (Rev 6:10); “You alone are holy” (Rev 15:4); and, “Righteous are You... O Holy One” (Rev 16:5). Similar to Isaiah’s vision, John beholds angels surrounding the throne exclaiming, “Holy, holy, holy {is} the Lord God, the Almighty” (Rev 4:8). His holiness is manifest in His judgments (Rev 16:5) and instills fear (Rev 15:4). The Lord’s final habitation, the New Jerusalem, is also holy (Rev 21:2, 10; 22:19).

In addition, many New Testament books speak of God’s holiness under the figure of “light.” He “dwells in unapproachable light” and is Himself light – there is no darkness or sin in Him (1 Jn 1:5; 3:5). Moreover, He “cannot be tempted by evil” (Jam 1:13). James also asserts, “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (Jam 1:17).

### 3. Conclusions

God is holy, that is, distinct from all that does not correspond to His majesty or moral excellence. Bloesch considers that holiness, along with love, constitute God’s internal nature.<sup>389</sup> In the Old Testament, the Lord’s holiness was expressed not only in the ordinances determining His people’s behavior, but also in laws concerning ceremonial purity. The New Testament focuses on the moral aspect of God’s holiness.

Although no one will ever rival the Lord’s uniqueness in majesty, His people are called to be holy like Him in their behavior: “Like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all {your} behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Pet 1:15-16). So then, our response to the revelation of God’s holiness as majesty is worship. Our response to the revelation of God’s holiness as moral excellence is imitation.<sup>390</sup>

Finally, we will briefly mention Rudolph Otto’s well-known treatment of this topic, who emphasized the Lord’s transcendence in his theology, calling Him “Other.” He theorized that people react to God’s holiness in

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<sup>388</sup>Ury, p. 934-935.

<sup>389</sup>Bloesch, p. 141.

<sup>390</sup>Henry, v. 6, p. 326-327.

two ways. On the one hand, it attracts people, but on the other hand, it also frightens them. Thus, a certain tension arises between these two poles.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, we will look in detail at various aspects of the Lord's holy nature, namely righteousness, justice, and faithfulness.

## **B. God's Righteousness**

### **1. Definitions and Terminology**

The Bible reveals that the Lord is righteous. The Hebrew term to express that idea is צַדִּיק (*tsadak*), which translates, "straight." This implies that the Lord does not waver from the straight way. The word צַדִּיק (*tsadak*) makes up one part of God's name יהוה צִדְקֵנו (*Yahweh tsikenu*), which means "Yahweh, our righteousness" (Jer 23:6). The New Testament Greek term for righteousness is δίκαιος (*dikaios*), which is rendered "observing a norm."<sup>391</sup> Correspondingly, God always conducts Himself in accordance with His standards.

In light of the meaning of these terms, we can offer a definition for God's righteousness. Grudem expresses it well, "God's righteousness means that always acts in accordance with what is right and is himself the final standard of what is right."<sup>392</sup> Erickson suggests a similar definition, "The righteousness of God also means that his actions are in accord with the law which he himself has established."<sup>393</sup>

### **2. Biblical Data**

The Scriptures abound with references to the Lord's righteousness. Many Old Testament passages state this directly: "Righteous and upright is He" (Deut 32:4); "Yahweh is righteous, He loves righteousness" (Ps 11:7); "Good and upright is Yahweh" (Ps 25:8); "A righteous God and a Savior" (Isa 45:21); "O Yahweh God of Israel, You are righteous" (Ezra 9:15); and, "Your righteousness, O God, {reaches} to the heavens" (Ps 71:19). He rejoices in righteousness (Isa 64:5; Jer 9:24).

Correspondingly, there is no unrighteousness in Him: "Far be it from God to do wickedness, and from the Almighty to do wrong" (Job 34:10); "Yahweh is upright; {He is} my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him" (Ps 92:15); "Yahweh is righteous within her; He will do no injustice" (Zeph 3:5).

All His ways are righteous: "For all His ways are just" (Deut 32:4); "The ways of Yahweh are right" (Hos 14:9); "Yahweh is righteous in all His ways" (Ps 145:17); "As for God, His way is blameless" (Ps 18:31; 2 Sam 22:31); and, "...the righteous acts of Yahweh" (Mic 6:5). Even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar, after experiencing the Lord's discipline, acknowledged, "All His works are true and His ways just" (Dan 4:37).

God's laws and ordinances are also righteous: "...when I learn Your righteous judgments" (Ps 119:7); "Your judgments are righteous" (Ps 119:75); "Righteous are You, O Yahweh, and upright are Your judgments. You have commanded Your testimonies in righteousness and exceeding faithfulness" (Ps 119:137-138); "Your testimonies are righteous forever" (Ps 119:144); "All Your commandments are righteousness" (Ps 119:172); and, "All His precepts are sure.... They are performed in truth and uprightness" (Ps 111:7-8).

Yahweh is a righteous judge: "But, O Yahweh of hosts, who judges righteously..." (Jer 11:20); "Righteous are You, O Yahweh, that I would plead {my} case with You" (Jer 12:1); and, "God is a righteous judge" (Ps 7:11). He speaks of Himself, "It is I who judge with equity" (Ps 75:2). He is impartial in judgment and "does not show partiality nor take a bribe" (Deut 10:17). "Everyone who acts unjustly is an abomination to Yahweh your God" (Deut 25:16).

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<sup>391</sup>Schrenk G. Dika // Kittel G., Gerhard F. Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. - Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985. - P. 177.

<sup>392</sup>Grudem W. Systematic Theology. - Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. - P. 204.

<sup>393</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. - Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. - V. 1. - P. 286.

Therefore, He is righteous when He punishes violations of the Law: “You are just in all that has come upon us; For You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly” (Neh 9:33); “Righteousness belongs to You, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day.... You have driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against You” (Dan 9:7); and, “Yahweh is righteous; for I have rebelled against His command” (Lam 1:18).

Righteousness characterizes not only God’s judgments, but also His kingly reign. Yahweh is a righteous King. The psalmist testifies, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; lovingkindness and truth go before You” (Ps 89:14); and, “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne” (Ps 97:2). The Lord’s righteous reign is the glory of His people (Ps 89:16). Messiah’s reign is also a righteous reign:

- Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows (Ps 45:6-7; cf. Heb 1:8-9).
- But with righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; - and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist (Isa 11:4-5).

We can mention other features of Yahweh’s righteousness highlighted in the Old Testament. “And the heavens declare His righteousness, for God Himself is judge” (Ps 50:6; 96:6). His righteousness is eternal (Ps 111:3; 119:142). Only in Him is righteousness (Isa 45:24). One should not challenge His ways (Ezek 18:25, 29).

Finally, the Old Testament connects Yahweh’s righteousness with the salvation of His people. On the one hand, the psalmist appeals to the Lord when he is unfairly oppressed:

You have seen it, O Yahweh, do not keep silent; O Lord, do not be far from me. Stir up Yourself, and awake to my right and to my cause, my God and my Lord. Judge me, O Yahweh my God, according to Your righteousness, and do not let them rejoice over me (Ps 34:22-24; also see Ps 71:2-4; Ps 31:1-5).

At the same time, the psalmist recognizes that he is sinful and cannot consider himself righteous before the Lord on his own merits:

Hear my prayer, O Yahweh, Give ear to my supplications! Answer me in Your faithfulness, in Your righteousness! And do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous (Ps 143:1-2).

Nonetheless, he anticipates God’s intervention because of His mercy and because of his personal devotion to Him as well:

For the sake of Your name, O Yahweh, revive me. In Your righteousness, bring my soul out of trouble. And in Your lovingkindness, cut off my enemies and destroy all those who afflict my soul, for I am Your servant (Ps 143:11-12).

Yahweh in His righteousness delivers His chosen people, Israel. In Psalm 98:2-3, we read, “Yahweh has made known His salvation; He has revealed His righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered His lovingkindness and His faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God” (cf. Dan 9:16). In addition, in the book of Jeremiah it is written, “In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘Yahweh our righteousness.’” (Jer 23:6).

Salvation was one of the stipulations of the covenant He made with His people. Therefore, when Israel is in trouble, they had a basis for anticipating His intervention. Since God is true to His covenant, in righteousness He responds with salvation for His people.<sup>394</sup> This is the reason why, after their victory in battle, Deborah and Barak rejoice in Yahweh's righteousness (Judg 5:11). Similarly, God acted in righteousness when He exalted Cyrus to the throne for the deliverance of His people (Isa 45:13).

It is very possible that in the following passage, when the psalmist refers to the Lord's righteousness, he is referring to His faithfulness in saving Israel from their enemies according to His covenant with them:

I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; behold, I will not restrain my lips, O Yahweh, You know. I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation (Ps 39:10-11).

In addition, the Old Testament associates Yahweh's righteousness not only with His faithfulness, but also with His mercy: "Gracious is Yahweh, and righteous; Yes, our God is compassionate" (Ps 116:5); and, "O continue Your lovingkindness to those who know You, and Your righteousness to the upright in heart" (Ps 36:10). Therefore, the Lord's righteousness and His mercy do not stand in contrast, but in harmony.

Finally, God's righteousness in the sense of salvation applies not only to Israel, but also to all peoples: "By awesome {deeds} You answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation, You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest sea" (Ps 65:5). We also read of an eschatological expectation that in the future Yahweh's righteousness will bring healing: "But for you who fear My name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (Mal 4:2).

The New Testament highlights still other aspects of the Lord's righteousness. On the one hand, the teaching of God's righteous nature remains unaltered. Jesus calls the Father "O righteous Father" (Jn 17:25) and claims that "There is {only} One who is good" (Matt 19:17). All His ways are "righteous and true" (Rev 15:3). He is the "righteous judge (1 Pet 2:23), who shows no partiality (Eph 6:9). All His judgments are "true and righteous" (Rev 19:2; cf. 19:11). In a word, Yahweh is "perfect." (Matt 5:48).

Jesus speaks out against these who make themselves righteous before God. At the conclusion of His parable of the tax collector and Pharisee, He concludes, "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Lk 18:14). Additionally, He opposes those who lay a burden of legalism on the people (Mk 3:1-5).

The New Testament, in fact, reveals a way to be righteous before the Lord independent of human achievement. In the gospel, the "righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous {man} shall live by faith.'" (Rom 1:17). Righteousness before God is attained by faith: "He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy" (Tit 3:5). Paul sought to "be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from {the} Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which {comes} from God on the basis of faith" (Phil 3:9).

In the justification of the sinner, it is important to realize that Yahweh remains totally righteous because the Son of God, Jesus Christ, took upon Himself the sins of the entire world and became the propitiation for our sins. Paul taught:

But now apart from the Law {the} righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even {the} righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, {I say,} of His

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<sup>394</sup>Packer J. I. Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs. – Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993. – P. 44: Henry, v. 6, p. 410.

righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:21-26).

The apostle John echoes the thought that, thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, God is “faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). Finally, the New Testament foretells the time when the new heavens and the new earth appear, “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13).

### 3. Theological Considerations

We need to clarify the relationship between the concepts of the Lord’s righteousness and His “goodness,” or in the Greek ἀγαθωσύνη (*agathosune*). The term “goodness” has two connotations. One relates to God’s righteousness in the sense that He does not sin. For example, in Ephesians 5:8-9, the word ἀγαθωσύνη (*agathosune*) is associated with the terms “righteousness” and “truth,” indicating proper behavior. The context of 2 Thessalonians 1:11 also connects ἀγαθωσύνη (*agathosune*) with righteous behavior. The other meaning of “goodness” (ἀγαθωσύνη) relates to God’s kindness. He supports, helps, and shows mercy. Galatians 5:22 serves as an example of this usage.

A long debated question exists about the *basis* for the Lord’s righteousness. In other words, how is right and wrong defined? Some feel that God’s righteousness is based on His will or choice – He simply decides that it is so. He could have created a different standard had He so pleased. This position is called “voluntarism.” Others believe that God’s standard is based on His nature. Consequently, He Himself does what He commands others to do and what corresponds to his nature, and forbids what is contrary to it. This view is known as “essentialism.”

The following evidence is advanced in support of voluntarism. A well-accepted axiom is that God is the “First Cause.” As the First Cause, He defines the conditions under which all things exist and act. This means that He has the authority and freedom to establish any law or order He pleases. Therefore, He could have establishes a standard different than the one now existing, since the law is based on His will.

Adherents of this theory draw a parallel between the Lord establishing His law and His act of creation. It is clear that the Lord made the world through a free act of His will. Similarly, it is assumed that He established His standards by a free act of His will as well. In addition, one must agree that God has all authority, power and dominion. Consequently, no one and nothing is greater or higher than He. Yet if, as essentialism asserts, God must keep His own law, then it seems that the law is higher and has more authority than He does. Pink comments here, “God is sovereign. His will is supreme. So far from God being under any law of ‘right,’ He is a law unto Himself, so that whatever *He* does *is* right.”<sup>395</sup>

What support is offered for the theory “essentialism?” Adherents argue that the Lord’s standard is not above Him, but is an expression of His nature. God does not “submit” to some sort of external standard, but simply acts in accordance with His nature, which is expressed in His laws. The Bible states that the Lord *cannot* sin (1 Jn 1:5, Heb 6:18; Tit 1:2; Jam 1:13), which means that He cannot act contrary to the laws that He has established.

Another key passage to consider is 1 Pet 1:15-16, which states, “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all {your} behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” His standard (“You shall be holy”) is not based on an arbitrary decision, but on His holy nature (“for I am holy”). Finally, the majority of evangelical theologians hold to the theory of essentialism. Erickson states, “The law of God, being a true expression of his nature, is as perfect as he is.”<sup>396</sup> Strong concurs, “God’s being and God’s will eternally conform to each other.”<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>395</sup>Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 34.

<sup>396</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 286.

<sup>397</sup>Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – p. 273.

Scholars also probe into the question of the relationship between the Lord's righteousness and His freedom.<sup>398</sup> Can God, who possesses total freedom, use His freedom to commit sin? In addition, if God is unable to sin, then how can we consider His perfect behavior praiseworthy, since it requires no real effort on His part?

Various solutions to this quandary are suggested. Some say that God could indeed sin, but chooses not to. Others posit that He has the power or ability to sin, but His holy nature does not permit it. Others assert that the co-existence of righteousness and freedom to sin creates a logical contradiction and, therefore, righteousness, being the higher attribute, will dominate.

Millard Erickson's solution is preferred. Although God is not able to sin, He nonetheless is acting in freedom, since no one is compelling Him to do right. He makes a free decision to act righteously in accordance with His holy nature. Erickson thus posits a harmonious relationship between God's will and His nature.

God's righteousness includes the fact that He is honest. He always speaks the truth. Yahweh states, "I, Yahweh, speak righteousness, declaring things that are upright" (Isa 45:19). He hates falsehood (Prov 12:22). He is "true" (Rev 3:7), full of truth (Jn 1:14), and cannot lie (Heb 6:18; 1 Sam 15:29). All His words are righteous and true (Jn 17:17; Ps 119:142, 151).<sup>399</sup>

## **C. God's Justice**

### **1. Biblical Data**

We begin our survey of the biblical view of God's justice by examining the testimony of the earliest period of biblical history in the Torah and book of Job. In the first chapters of Genesis, Yahweh already found it necessary to render judgment on the sin of Adam and Eve. The punishment inflicted is outlined in Gen 3:16-19, the consequences of which we all now experience in our personal lives. In these chapters it is also interesting to note that Cain was not punished with death for slaying his brother (Gen 4:11-12).

Later in Genesis, we read that the Lord judged the world because of its wickedness, destroying it with a flood (Gen 6-9). Similarly, He destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by raining down on it brimstone and fire (Gen 19:24). In Genesis 20, we see where God "closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah," since he had taken her for himself, not knowing that she was Abraham's wife (Gen 20:18). Consequently, God healed them in answer to Abraham's prayer (v. 17).

In the remaining books of the Torah, we note the following features. Again, we encounter the principle of punishment for offspring of the wicked (Ex 34:7). Moreover, God can punish immediately (Num 14:36-37; 15:32-36; 16:31-35; 46-49), or may delay it for a future time (Ex 32:33-34). Yet, He does not leave the guilty unpunished (Num 14:18).

Yahweh punished not only Israel, but also the Gentile nations (Deut 9:4; Num 31:1-3) for practices he warns Israel not to imitate (Lev 18:24-29; 20:22-23). The Law of Moses proscribed the principle "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Lev 24:20). We see an interesting example of this principle where for forty days of rebellion in the wilderness, Yahweh punished Israel with forty years of wandering in it (Num 14:34). The Law also established a sacrificial system for the forgiveness of sins, which sometimes required restitution (Lev 4-6). Finally, we observe instances of Yahweh's just recompenses. For example, since Israel labored many years in Egypt without pay, God gave them plunder from Egypt (Ex 11:1-3).

The Torah also testifies of God's wrath. For example, He was angered by Israel's grumbling in the wilderness (Num 11:1, 10, 33), when Aaron and Miriam envied Moses' privileged position (Num 12:9), and when Israel turned to idols (Deut 32:21; Deut 29:22-28). Yahweh speaks of Himself as "a jealous God" (Deut

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<sup>398</sup>Erickson M. J. *God the Father Almighty*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 247-253.

<sup>399</sup>Grudem, p. 196-197; Duffield G. P. Van Cleave N. M. *Foundations of Pentecostal Theology*, Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 78.

6:15; 7:4) and “a consuming fire” (Deut 4:24). Israel could provoke Him to the point that He would “delight over you to make you perish and destroy you” (Deut 28:63).

Through Moses, Yahweh describes the frightening consequences of experiencing His wrath:

I will heap misfortunes on them; I will use My arrows on them. {They will be} wasted by famine, and consumed by plague and bitter destruction; and the teeth of beasts I will send upon them, with the venom of crawling things of the dust. Outside the sword will bereave, and inside terror – both young man and virgin, the nursing with the man of gray hair (Deut 32:23-25; cf. 32:41-42).

The book of Job reveals two aspects of God’s justice – punishment of sinners and support for the oppressed: “He does not keep the wicked alive, but gives justice to the afflicted” (Job 36:6). This book contains other references to Yahweh repaying the wicked (see Job 31:2-3). This truth served as the basis for the “friends” of Job to accuse him of sin. However, Job warned them that God’s judgment applied to them also (Job 19:28-29). The book of Job, along with other biblical books, teaches that God repays people according to their deeds (Job 34:11). Mention is also made of the principle that offspring can also suffer for the sins of their fathers (Job 27:13-14).

In the Old Testament historical books, Yahweh judged the inhabitants of Canaan by means of Israel’s conquest of the land (Lev 18:25; 2 Kin 16:3), decreeing their total annihilation. In Israel, God decreed judgment on Achan, who took some of the things dedicated to the Lord for himself (Josh 7:24-25), after which “Yahweh turned from the fierceness of His anger” (v. 26). We note also that not only Achan perished, but his family as well. The same occurred in the case of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Num 16:27). A detailed discussion of this principle of “corporate punishment” is found in book 4 of this series in chapter 8, “Union with Christ.”

Joshua predicted future judgment if God’s people turned to idols (Josh 23:16; 24:20). The entire book of Judges relates Israel’s constant straying from the Lord and the chastisement they received for it (see Judg 2:13-15). In the book of Judges we encounter an example where God repaid someone “according to their deeds.” The Gentile ruler Adoni-bezek acknowledged, “Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up {scraps} under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me” (Judg 1:6-7). Abimelech and the inhabitants of Shechem experienced a similar result (Judg 9:24-25, 56-57).

We can also cite Yahweh’s punishment of David in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba:

“Why have you despised the word of the Yahweh by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.” Thus says Yahweh, “Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives before your eyes and give {them} to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight” (2 Sam 12:9-11).

This principle of reciprocity is expressed in the following text: “With the kind You show Yourself kind, with the blameless You show Yourself blameless; with the pure You show Yourself pure, and with the perverted You show Yourself astute” (2 Sam 22:26-27).

The song of Hanna contains several references to Yahweh’s justice: “With Him actions are weighed” (1 Sam 2:3); “Those who were full hire themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry cease {to hunger}. Even the barren gives birth to seven, but she who has many children languishes” (1 Sam 2:5); and, “Yahweh will judge the ends of the earth” (1 Sam 2:10).

The books of Samuel repeat the fact that the Lord does not always judge immediately. God used Saul to execute justice on Amalek for what the latter did to the people of Israel years earlier when they came out of Egypt (1 Sam 15:2). In a similar way, God punished Israel for sins earlier committed by Saul, until they executed the sons of Saul (2 Sam 21:1-9). In this instance, we observe another example of the principle that a country or

a family can suffer for the sins of the leader or father of that group. Another example is found in 1 Chronicles 21:7, where Yahweh punished the inhabitants of Jerusalem for David's "illegal" census (1 Chr 21:7).

In the first section of the First Book of Kings, we read the history of King Solomon. Before his death, David charged the new king to punish certain parties and reward others, which David was unable to do during his life (1 Kin 2:5-9; 31ff). When Solomon became king, he prayed to Yahweh for wisdom in rendering judgments for His people (1 Kin 8:31-32). However, when Solomon turned to idols, God removed most of his kingdom from him (1 Kin 11:11ff) and warned him of more misfortunes if his sons followed idols (1 Kin 9:6-9).

Nonetheless, the northern kings of Israel immediately began worshipping false gods and were punished for it: Jeroboam (1 Kin 14:7-11), Baasha (1 Kin 16:1-4), and Ahab, who, together with his wife Jezebel, were punished for the murder of Naboth (1 Kin 21:21, 23).

In the Second Book of Kings, we discover another example both of reciprocal judgment and of corporate punishment – the leprosy of Naaman clung to Gehazi and his descendants (2 Kin 5:27). This book also records the punishment of children themselves for mocking Yahweh's prophet (2 Kin 2:23-25). A similar example of punishment for disrespect is described in 2 Chronicles 26:16-19, where Uzziah is struck with leprosy for desecration of God's temple. Later, when the Assyrian army blasphemed the God of Israel, they received retribution from Him (2 Chr 32:17-21).

The most striking example of God's judgment in the books of Kings was the exile of Israel in fulfillment of Moses' prophecy (Deut 28:48ff): first, the Northern Kingdom, then the Southern Kingdom. God progressively diminished the Northern Kingdom (2 Kin 15:29) and eventually sent the remnant in exile to Assyria (2 Kin 17). God punished not only by means of foreign armies, but also through wild animals, which afflicted the new inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom for their lack of reverence (2 Kin 17:25-26).

Concerning the Southern Kingdom, Yahweh was angered by the wickedness of Manasseh (2 Kin 21:6). Due to his sins, judgment of the Southern Kingdom became inevitable in spite of the reforms of Josiah (2 Kin 21:10-15; 23:26-27; 24:3-4). The tragic fall of the Southern Kingdom is recorded in chapter 25 of 2 Kings.

On the other hand, we note in the historical books that upon repentance Yahweh rescinds His judgments, as in the case of Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:1-6) and Ahab (1 Kin 21:29). On the other hand, some previously good kings later turned away from God, such as Joash (2 Chr 24:17-18).

The historical books contain not a few examples of God's wrath, usually toward idolatry (see Judg 2:12-14, 20; 3:8, 10; 3 Uap. 11:9; 22:53; 4 Uap. 13:3; 17:18; 22:15-17; 2 Chr 28:11-13; 29:8-10). As mentioned before, Yahweh is a "jealous God" and expects His people to be faithful to Him.

In the poetic books, God is portrayed as the righteous judge (Ps 75:7; 7:11; 51:4). He loves righteousness and justice (Ps 33:5; 37:28) and justice characterizes His ways (Ps 111:7). Injustice, however, is an abomination to him (Prov 17:15; 20:10, 23). He is the source of justice (Prov 29:26), which is the foundation of His throne (Ps 89:14; 97:2).

He punishes the wicked (Ps 64:7; 68:21; 92:9; 107:11-12; 145:20; 147:6) and removes them from the land (Ps 119:119; cf. 34:16). He rewards the righteous (Ps 75:10; 1:6; 7:10). He repays people according to their deeds (Ps 62:12). He defends the poor and oppressed (Ps 9:10-19, 10:12-14; 12:5; 76:9; 103:6; 107:41; 140:12; 144:5-8; Prov 23:10-11) and expects His judges to do likewise (Ps 82:1-4). He desires honesty (Prov 11:1; 20:20, 23). He delivers from enemies (Ps 7:7).

Yahweh judges His people (Ps 49:4; 105:40-42), and the whole earth as well (Ps 9:19; 79:6). He will judge all in its time (Ecc 3:16-17; 12:14; Ps 75:2), although the sinner may prosper at present (Ps 10:4-6), which may sometimes puzzle us (Ps 73). Yet, the wicked will fall into the pit which they have dug for themselves (Ps 57:6).

For the wicked, God's judgments are fearful, but the righteous rejoice in them (Prov 21:15). The psalmist writes, "Your righteousness is like the mountains of God; Your judgments are {like} a great deep" (Ps 36:6). Not infrequently, the psalmist appeals to the Lord in prayer to judge (Ps 5:10; 10:15; 94:1-3; 109:1ff; 119:126).

The poetical books speak of God's wrath. He has indignation each day (Ps 7:11). We also read of the cup of the Lord's wrath (Ps 75:8). No one can "stand in Your presence when once You are angry" (Ps 76:7). Yahweh's wrath is provoked by: rebellion (Ps 2:3-5), idolatry (Ps 78:58-59), unbelief (Ps 78:21-22, 31-32), love of violence (Ps 11:5). Proverbs chapter six lists seven things the Lord hates:



There are six things which Yahweh hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him: Haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run rapidly to evil, a false witness {who} utters lies, And one who spreads strife among brothers (Prov 6:16-19).

Yahweh can show wrath without mercy (Ps 78:50), as described below:

Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him and burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of Yahweh, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory (Ps 97:2-5)

The prophetic books add their witness to Yahweh's just nature. They testify that "I, Yahweh, love justice" (Isa 61:8), "I remember all their wickedness" (Hos 7:2), He "avenges" (Joel 3:19-21) and "will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished" (Nah 1:3), yet he has "no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies" (Ezek 18:32; 33:11).

The fundamental principle of God's justice revealed in the Old Testament is that He gives "to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds" (Jer 17:10).<sup>400</sup> Often this principle is expressed in so-called "reciprocal judgment," when God judges in a way corresponding to the sin committed, as we see in the following texts:<sup>401</sup>

- Woe to you, O destroyer, while you were not destroyed; and he who is treacherous, while {others} did not deal treacherously with him. As soon as you finish destroying, you will be destroyed; as soon as you cease to deal treacherously, {others} will deal treacherously with you" (Isa 33:1).
- As you have done, it will be done to you. Your dealings will return on your own head. Because just as you drank on My holy mountain, all the nations will drink continually. They will drink and swallow and become as if they had never existed (Obad 15-16).

We can cite other examples of this principle. God punishes with thirst those who love wine (Isa 5:11-13). He humbles the proud (Isa 14:14-15; 47:1-11). Those who lead into captivity are so led themselves (Isa 14:2). The prophets who do not warn of the coming sword and famine will perish by sword and famine (Jer 14:15). Those who worship foreign gods will be sent to foreign lands (Jer 5:19).

The prophets describe how Yahweh may punish. A key passage here in Ezekiel 14:21, where are listed "four severe judgments": sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague. The prophets emphasize most of all, though, military assaults. To punish sin, Yahweh raises up enemies (Jer 32:23; Hab 1:5-11), gives up sinners to defeat (Isa 3:25; 59:17-18), siege (Lam 4:1-10), and exile (Ezek 12:11-20; 22:13-16).

Yahweh judges for various reasons: injustice toward others (Jer 34:17-22), an extravagant lifestyle (Amos 6:4-7), the sins of leaders (Mic 3:12), etc. The sins most commonly mentioned, however, are pride and idolatry. Many prophets speak against idolatry: Isaiah (2:8), Jeremiah (1:13-16; 17:3-4; 32:29), Ezekiel (14:8; 15:1-8; 23:22, 45-46), Hosea (10:2-15; 11:5-6), Micah (1:6-9), and others. Against pride: Isaiah (16:7-11; 22:1-3; 23:9; 25:10-12), Ezekiel (29-32), Hosea (7:16), and others.

In the prophetic books, Yahweh's judgments are often severe. He overturns the strong and humbles the proud (Obad 2-4; Amos 5:9). No one can flee from Him (Amos 9:1-4; Mic 2:3). He sometimes shows no mercy

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<sup>400</sup>Also see Jer 25:14; 32:19; 51:56; Ezek 11:21; 18:30; 33:20; Hos 12:2.

<sup>401</sup>Also see Jer 50:15.

(Amos 7:7-9; 8:2). After punishment comes a time of mourning (Amos 5:16-17). Yahweh assures that after it has been revealed how sinners have behaved, He will be vindicated in His judgments (Ezek 14:21-23).

Here are a few texts from various prophets describing the wrath of Yahweh:

- Isaiah: "I trod down the peoples in My anger And made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth" (63:6).<sup>402</sup>
- Jeremiah: "At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation" (10:10).<sup>403</sup>
- Ezekiel: "Therefore, I indeed will deal in wrath. My eye will have no pity nor will I spare; and though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, yet I will not listen to them" (8:18).<sup>404</sup>
- Hosea: "All their evil is at Gilgal; indeed, I came to hate them there! Because of the wickedness of their deeds I will drive them out of My house! I will love them no more" (9:15; cf. 12:14).
- Joel: "The day of the LORD is indeed great and very awesome, and who can endure it?" (2:11).

God's judgment leads to liberation for the oppressed: "You have been a defense for the helpless, a defense for the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shade from the heat; for the breath of the ruthless is like a {rain} storm {against} a wall" (Isa 25:4). They receive rest (Isa 14:3, 28-32) and will triumph over their enemies (Isa 26:5-6; 33:23).

God's judgment can be upon any group of people. He punishes His people for violations of the covenant: "'Shall I not punish these {people,}' declares Yahweh, 'And on a nation such as this Shall I not avenge Myself?.... For the house of Israel and the house of Judah Have dealt very treacherously with Me,' declares Yahweh" (Jer 5:9-11). The Lord will judge the Gentiles as well, especially in regard to their treatment of Israel. In fact, all of the major prophets devote entire sections of their books to the rebuke of the nations (Isa 13-23; Jer 44-51; Ezek 25-32; Dan chps. 2 and 7). In the end, God will judge the whole world (Isa 24:1-6; Zeph 1:1-3).

Concerning the timing of Yahweh's judgments, as mentioned before, it is not always immediate, since the Lord makes room for repentance. Therefore, people sometimes wonder why God did not intervene sooner (Hab 1:1-4). God has appointed the "Day of the Lord" (see Amos 5:18-20). This term can refer to a specific time of judgment on God's people (Joel 1:15; 2:2), or to His eschatological judgment (Isa 13:9-13).

When Yahweh warns of coming judgment, He expects a response of repentance. A good example of such a response was the people of Nineveh, who repented upon Jonah's preaching (Jonah 3). Yet, the books of the prophets contain many instances where Israel did not heed Yahweh's warnings and persisted in disobedience (Isa 66:4; Jer 35:15). A very remarkable case is when the Southern Kingdom continued to rebel even after the exile to Babylon (Jer 3:6-11). The prophet Isaiah expounds on this type of disobedience:

He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.' Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed" (Isa 6:9-11).

Finally, even the innocent can suffer along with the guilty when Yahweh executes a general judgment on His people. Such was the case for Baruch, Jeremiah's assistant, although his life was nonetheless spared (Jer 45:1-5). Ezekiel also writes that God provides protection for "the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations which are being committed in its midst" (Ezek 9:4).

We conclude our survey of the Old Testament with the books of the exile. Again, we note Yahweh's displeasure with human pride, such as in the case of Edom (Mal 1:4) and Nebuchadnezzar. After experiencing

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<sup>402</sup>Also see 2:10, 19-21; 5:25; 9:12-21; 10:4-6; 42:25; 34:1-10; 51:17-20; 57:17.

<sup>403</sup>Also see 4:8, 26; 7:20; 15:14; 17:4; 21:5-7; 23:19-23; 25:15-16; 32:30-32; 36:7-8; 44:5-6; Lam 2:1-9; 1:11; 3:1-18; 4:11,16.

<sup>404</sup>Also see 5:11-13; 6:12; 7:1-9; 9:10; 13:10, 15; 17:19; 20:8; 21:17; 22:17-22; 24:3-14.

Yahweh's chastisement, Nebuchadnezzar readily acknowledged that God is "able to humble those who walk in pride" (Dan 4:37).

These books speak of God's punishment of the Gentiles (Zech 9:1-7) as well as of backslidden Israel (Ezra 8:22). Since Yahweh is slow to punish, people sometimes question His justice (Mal 2:17). Yet God assures that a day of judgment is coming (Mal 4:1). Daniel beheld in a vision the Ancient of Days, who sat in judgment (Dan 7:10).

Finally, in the book of Esther we observe several interesting examples of reciprocal judgment. First, Haman sought honor for himself, but instead received shame (Est 6:4-11). Second, he was hung on the tree which he had prepared for Mordecai's execution (Est 7:9-10). Third, on the day appointed for the annihilation of the Jews, they routed their enemies (Est 9:1).

The New Testament joins the Old Testament in declaring that the Lord is "the Judge of all" (Heb 12:23) and that there is "one Lawgiver and Judge," who is a "righteous Judge" (2 Tim 4:8) and will "judge the living and the dead" (2 Tim 4:1). He judges "without partiality" (Rom 2:11; 1 Pet 1:17).

In the Gospels, Jesus openly speaks of God's eschatological judgment and the punishment to follow. In His Sermon on the Mount, He stresses the severity of God's judgment. Even hatred and lust can lead to eternal damnation (Matt 5:21-30). Therefore, employing hyperbole, He states that it is better to lose a body part than to lose one's soul (Mk 9:43-48). Jesus taught to fear the one "who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). At the same time, He promised mercy to those who show mercy (Matt 7:1-2; Lk 6:37).

God's judgement is to be executed by the Son of Man (Matt 25:31-46; Jn 5:22; Acts 10:42; 17:31). He is qualified for the task since He is not only the Son of God, but also the Son of Man, who knows by experience the trials and temptations people face (Jn 5:27).

In one sense, God's judgment has already taken place by the coming of Christ into the world. The apostle John comments on this. Jesus' coming separates light from darkness and the children of God from the children of the devil (Jn 3:19; 9:39; 12:31). The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin and judgment (Jn 16:8). The prince of this world is already cast out (Jn 12:31; 16:11). God's judgment will depend on how people respond to Christ and His Word (Jn 12:47-48). Consequently, believers in Him do not enter into judgment (Jn 5:24).

In the initial chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans, he stresses the Lord's righteousness and demonstrates that all people are under condemnation for sin: both "sinners" from the Gentiles (chp. 1), and "legalists" from the Jews (chp. 2). Paul's conclusion: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Along with this, however, Paul reveals the great truth that through the propitiation accomplished by Christ, God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26).

To the Corinthians, Paul comments on the Lord's discipline of His Church. He chastises believers "so that we will not be condemned along with the world" (1 Cor 11:32). In addition, in his second epistle he reveals that all believers will stand before the judgment seat of Christ to receive an evaluation of their lives (2 Cor 5:10, cf. Rom 14:10-12). In this connection, Paul anticipates receiving from the Lord the "crown of righteousness" (2 Tim 4:8).

In other writings, Paul asserts that suffering for Christ will result in punishment for the persecutor, but relief for the persecuted. By this, the Lord's justice is demonstrated (2 Thes 1:4-7). Interestingly, Paul also relates in this epistle that those who reject the love of the truth will receive a "deluding influence" from the Lord, which will lead them into judgment (2 Thes 2:11-12). Finally, Paul informs Timothy that God's judgments can occur at different times: "The sins of some men are quite evident, going before them to judgment; for others, their {sins} follow after" (1 Tim 5:24).

The author of Hebrews expounds on the nature of the Lord's justice by reflecting on the Mosaic Law: "Every transgression and disobedience received a just penalty" (Heb 2:2). This concept is called God's distributive justice and is discussed below.

In Hebrews chapter 12, we read of God's eschatological judgment: "And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, 'Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.' This {expression,} 'Yet once more,' denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things,

so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain" (Heb 12:26-27). The Lord's judgment is eternal (Heb 6:2). It occurs after death (Heb 9:27).

The author of Hebrews employs the truth of God's judgment to motivate his readers to hold fast their faith: "Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 9:28-29). He cautions his readers, "Fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb 13:4).

The following warning is directly addressed to apostates:

Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on {the testimony of} two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:28-31).

Peter and Jude also warn against falling away from Christ. The contents of 2 Peter 2 and Jude are nearly identical. They both address the issue of false teachers and false brethren, who have "crept into" the Church (Jude 4). Both Peter and Jude cite Old Testament examples of the Lord's judgments and apply them to these false brethren. In particular, they remind their readers of those who rebelled against the Lord in the wilderness, of the flood in Noah's day, of fallen angels, of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, of "the way of Cain," "the error of Balaam," and "the rebellion of Korah" (Jude 11). They urge true believers not to follow the example of such persons.

In his first epistle, Peter likewise exhorts believers with the following words: "If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay {on earth}" (1 Pet 1:17), and, "For {it is} time for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Pet 4:17). Furthermore, in his second epistle, Peter warns those who mock the promise of Christ's Second Coming. He reminds his readers of God's destruction of the world by a flood, and then asserts, "But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men" (2 Pet 3:7).

James draws our attention to relationships between people (Jam 5:4) and to the Lord's judgment of believers. He warns that teachers are subject to a stricter judgment (Jam 3:1). His epistle often relates how to avoid judgement by not judging others and showing mercy instead (Jam 2:4, 12-13; 4:11-12; 5:9). John speaks of this as well, relating that love provides us "confidence in the day of judgment" (1 Jn 4:17).

The final New Testament book, the book of Revelation, is nearly completely devoted to the topic of the Lord's judgments. In chapters 2-3, Jesus evaluates the conduct of various congregations, sometimes praising them, and sometimes reproving them. Later, the book describes God's judgement on the world during the Great Tribulation, which includes the seven seals (chps. 6-8), the seven trumpets (chps. 8-11), and the seven bowls (chps. 15-16). Furthermore, "Mystery Babylon" is judged for perverting the nations of the world (chps. 17-18). Finally, before the creation of the new heavens and the new earth, the White Throne Judgment takes place. From before the Judge "earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them" (Rev 20:11). The dead are "judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds" (Rev 20:12). Only those whose names are "written in the book of life" will escape punishment in the lake of fire (Rev 20:15).

## **2. Theological Considerations**

In this section, we will repeat and highlight the key elements concerning God's justice and refute several views on this theme that vary from the biblical witness.

In His justice, the Lord rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Some texts mention both aspects, such as Romans 2:7-8: "...to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and

immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation.”<sup>405</sup>

When we speak of God rewarding the righteous, we must be careful to qualify that people in no way merit justification before the Lord on the basis of their works. Paul clearly states, “By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified” (Gal 2:16). Only if one perfectly fulfills the Law in every detail can that individual expect justification by works. Yet, all people commit sin. Therefore, when Paul speaks in Romans 2:7-8 of those who “by perseverance in doing good,” he is speaking only theoretically. In reality, no one lives that way.

We must also take into consideration that people, as the Lord’s creatures, are obligated to serve Him. No one deserves credit for serving or obeying Him, since all belongs to Him. Perfect obedience is simply a person’s due. Jesus taught that after servants perform all they were asked to do, they should say, “We are unworthy slaves; we have done {only} that which we ought to have done” (Lk 17:10). Therefore, we must consider any “reward” received from the Lord for good works a manifestation of His unmerited favor toward us.<sup>406</sup>

How can we characterize God’s justice? First, it is impartial. God treats all people the same: “For there is no partiality with God” (Rom 2:11).<sup>407</sup> An important facet of the Lord’s justice is expressed in the phrase “distributive justice.” This means that for every violation of God’s laws, a corresponding punishment must be applied in full measure (see Heb 2:2). God never forgives sin without receiving full retribution for it. As it is written, “Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Gal 6:7), the Lord “renders to every man according to what he has done” (Rev 22:12), and, “He will by no means leave {the guilty} unpunished” (Ex 34:7).<sup>408</sup>

Louis Berkhof provides a fine description of God’s distributive justice: “(God’s distributive justice) demands that the requirements of the law be met *in every particular*, and which, in the case of transgression, makes *full satisfaction* by punishment imperative.”<sup>409</sup>

The Old Testament sacrificial system corresponded to God’s distributive justice. It obliged the violator to bring a specific sacrifice to receive forgiveness from the Lord. Without this retribution there was no forgiveness. Every sin must be covered by the blood of the sacrificial animal. In this light, one can better comprehend eternal punishment. If every transgression receives a corresponding punishment, and if God is a Being of infinite quality, then a sin against an infinite Being merits an eternal punishment.

Several aberrant teachings have appeared concerning this truth. Some feel that God has no need for retribution, but that He forgives sins freely. Others feel that retribution for sin is some sort of spiritual law that automatically assigns to the sinner a corresponding punishment for his or her transgression without God’s direct involvement. Yet, these theories contradict the biblical teaching of God’s distributive justice.

In this context, we may also mention the “governmental theory” of Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), who theorized that God did not require retribution for sin, but freely forgave. Nonetheless, as Ruler of the world He punishes sin in order to maintain order in the world. Hence, the Lord does not punish in accord with His distributive justice, but only as much as needed to curb future transgressions. The goal of Christ’s crucifixion was not to redeem the world from sin, but to demonstrate the seriousness of sin. However, this theory again contradicts the biblical view of God’s distributive justice and Christ’s redemptive sacrifice on the cross.<sup>410</sup>

Another characteristic of Yahweh’s justice is His defense of the poor and oppressed. He especially protects those who cannot protect themselves: “A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows, is God in His holy habitation” (Ps 68:5).<sup>411</sup>

The good news is that God accepts a substitute for people’s sins. In other words, another individual can accept the punishment assigned to the sinner and thereby satisfy the Lord’s justice and make a way for

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<sup>405</sup>Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 130.

<sup>406</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>407</sup>Henry, v. 6, p. 405; Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 288.

<sup>408</sup>Henry, v. 6, p. 407.

<sup>409</sup>Berkhof L. The History of Christian Doctrine. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937. – P. 186.

<sup>410</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 2, p. 791-792.

<sup>411</sup>Henry, v. 6, p. 408-409.

forgiveness of sins. In virtue of Christ's death for the sins of the world, Yahweh can justify the sinner and, at the same time, remain just.

Paul writes about God's marvelous salvation plan that God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26). Shedd aptly comments, "Justice necessarily demands that sin be punished, but not necessarily in the person of the sinner."<sup>412</sup> By the death of Christ, every sin was fully paid for, and now the sinner can receive forgiveness.

Why does God punish sin? Several reasons exist. First, He thereby corrects transgressors, bringing them to repentance. Isaiah writes, "Yahweh will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to Yahweh, and He will respond to them and will heal them" (Isa 19:22). Second, God's punishment serves as a warning to others, so that they will not follow that path. After the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, "great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things" (Acts 5:11).

The final reason is that a God of justice must receive retribution for sin. As was stated in connection with the Lord's distributive justice, He cannot just forgive sin without a full recompense (Matt 16:27).<sup>413</sup> Pink writes that God is not ashamed of His wrath. Wrath is "the holiness of God stirred to activity against sin."<sup>414</sup> Without wrath, Yahweh's nature would not be complete.<sup>415</sup>

Several practical application stand out in light of the doctrine of God's justice. The first is humility. God's justice demands perfect obedience to avert punishment, but no one is able to perform it. This brings us to a place of humility before the Lord and an admission of our guilt. We cry out like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner" (Lk 18:13). Second, in anticipation of God's just judgment for sin, we flee to Christ for forgiveness and trust in His saving work. Our trust is in Jesus, the one "who rescues us from the wrath to come" (1 Thes 1:10).

Third, we hear a call to mercy. After being forgiven such a huge debt, we cannot fail to forgive others their offenses toward us, as Jesus taught in His parable in Matthew chapter 18. In James' words, "Mercy triumphs over judgment." (Jam 2:13). Fourth, this doctrine motivates us to holy living. After being forgiven of sin by God's mercy, the greatest insult to His honor would be to willfully return to a life of sin (2 Pet 2:20-22). Finally, in imitation of the Lord, we should advance the cause of justice.

## **D. God's Faithfulness**

### **1. Definitions**

Wayne Grudem provides the following definition of the Lord's faithfulness: "God's faithfulness means that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised."<sup>416</sup> It is helpful to compare the concept of faithfulness with honesty. The Lord is truthful *in* what He says, and faithful *to* what He says.

### **2. Biblical Data**

Scripture clearly testifies of the Lord's faithfulness. The Old Testament recaps God making covenants with people. In the course of human history, He never broke one of His covenants. Regarding the covenant with Noah, "Seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night" have not ceased (Gen 8:22). The descendants of Abraham still enjoy blessing (Gen 12:2-3; Rom 4:16), and a descendant of David is still enthroned (2 Sam 7:16; Acts 2:34-36).

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<sup>412</sup>Shedd, p. 297-298.

<sup>413</sup>Strong, p. 294, 299.

<sup>414</sup>Pink, p. 83.

<sup>415</sup>Ibid.

<sup>416</sup>Grudem, p. 196.

When God makes a covenant, He provides a sign of that covenant. In Noah's case, it was the rainbow, which "reminds" Him of His promise (Gen 9:13-16). For Abraham, God re-enacted a covenant ceremony that was customary for people of that time (Gen 15:9-21).

One can trace Yahweh's faithfulness to Abraham's descendants throughout the Old Testament. He abundantly blessed and protected Abraham and his offspring, the heirs of that covenant, preserving them in times of famine (Gen 47) and delivering them from slavery in Egypt (Ex 6:2-5). The Lord also blessed others who were associated with Abraham, even though they were not in the covenant: Lot (Gen 19:29), Ishmael (Gen 21:12-13), and Esau (Gen 33:9).

On Mount Sinai, God confirmed His covenant with Israel as descendants of Abraham. He promised to give them the land in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham (Ex 33:1; Deut 1:8). Moses assured God's people, "He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them" (Deut 4:31).

Yahweh faithfully fulfilled His promise to Israel and gave them the land of Canaan. As God had promised, they conquered the inhabitants of the land and took possession of it. This inspired the following classic text: "Not one of the good promises which Yahweh had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass" (Josh 21:45; 23:14).

Several times the Torah directly speaks of Yahweh's faithfulness:

- God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? (Num 23:19).
- Know therefore that Yahweh your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments (Deut 7:9).<sup>417</sup>
- A God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He (Deut 32:4).

Later Old Testament books continue to laud Yahweh's faithful nature. In prayer to God, Solomon exclaims, "Blessed be Yahweh, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant" (1 Kin 8:56). God kept His word to David by giving to him and his descendants ascendancy over the tribes of Israel (1 Chr 11:3; 1 Kin 8:20). Aware of this, Solomon again praises Yahweh: "...who has kept with Your servant David, my father, that which You have promised him; indeed You have spoken with Your mouth and have fulfilled it with Your hand, as it is this day" (2 Chr 6:15).

In the Old Testament historical books, we often encounter the phrase, "...according to the word of Yahweh, which He spoke" or something similar: when the siege of Samaria was lifted (2 Kin 7:16), when four descendants of Jehu ascended the throne of Israel (2 Kin 15:12), when Judah returned from captivity after 70 years (2 Chr 36:21-22), and when Joash defeated Syria (2 Kin 13:19, 25). In the last instance, God's faithfulness is extolled in spite of Israel's unfaithfulness: "But Yahweh was gracious to them and had compassion on them and turned to them because of His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and would not destroy them or cast them from His presence until now" (2 Kin 13:23).

Not only do the Lord's promises find fulfillment, but His warnings do as well. He performed His word of judgment in regard to the households of Jeroboam (1 Kin 15:29-30), Baasha (1 Kin 16:12), and Ahab (1 Kin 22:38), in regard to the rebuilders of Jericho (1 Kin 16:34), and in regard to Jeroboam's idolatrous altar (2 Kin 23:16).

The Psalms also praise Yahweh's faithfulness. There, we often encounter the term *אֱמֶת* (*emet*), which can be translated "truth," "faithfulness," "reliability," or "stability."<sup>418</sup> Note the following examples: "Your

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<sup>417</sup>Duffield G. P., Van Cleave N. M. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology. — Los Angeles, CA: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. — P. 79; Strong, p. 288.

<sup>418</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon. — Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. — P. 54.

faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה) {reaches} to the skies” (Ps 36:5; 57:10; 108:4); “His faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה) is a shield and bulwark” (Ps 91:4); and, “To declare Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה) by night” (Ps 92:3). No one who trust in Him will be put to shame (Ps 25:3; 22:5). Yahweh “will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Ps 55:22).

Another term that describes Yahweh’s faithfulness is אֱמוּנָה (*emuna*), which come from root אָמַן (*aman*), i.e., “faith, faithfulness.” The word occurs in Ps 100:5: “His faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה) to all generations,” in Ps 89:1-2: “To all generations I will make known Your faithfulness with my mouth.... In the heavens You will establish Your faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה),” and in Ps 33:4: “All His work is {done} in faithfulness (אֱמוּנָה).”

The Psalms proclaim that the Lord is faithful forever (Ps 119:89-90; 146:6). He remembers His covenant forever (Ps 111:5). He will never forsake His own: “Those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, O Yahweh, have not forsaken those who seek You” (Ps 9:10).

If Yahweh is faithful, it follows that His Word is as well: “The words of Yahweh are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times” (Ps 12:6), The word of Yahweh is tried (Ps 18:30; 119:140), “All His precepts are sure” (Ps 111:7).

The Psalms also recount the Lord’s faithfulness in practice – how it manifests in the life of His people. Psalm 105:8-15 speaks of His faithful deeds for His friend, Abraham, Psalm 98:3 – for Israel, and Psalm 89 – for David.

God’s faithfulness brings confidence in prayer. The psalmist often relies on the Lord’s faithfulness when expecting His intervention in difficult situations: “Where are Your former lovingkindnesses, O Lord, which You swore to David in Your faithfulness?” (Ps 89:49); and, “Do not deliver the soul of Your turtledove to the wild beast; do not forget the life of Your afflicted forever. Consider the covenant” (Ps 74:19-20).

In the prophets, we gain more insight into Yahweh’s nature of faithfulness. Isaiah writes, “Yahweh... is faithful” (49:7). According to Jeremiah, His faithfulness is “great” (Lam 3:23). He will never let His people down: “Those who hopefully wait for Me will not be put to shame” (Isa 49:23). He is “watching over (His) word to perform it” (Jer 1:12). His “covenant of peace will not be shaken” (Isa 54:10). Both His promises and His warnings “will certainly come,” and, “will not delay” (Hab 2:3; Isa 31:2).

The prophets also recount Yahweh’s faithfulness in the history of Israel. He gave the Promised Land to the patriarchs (Jer 32:22). He brought the punishments which He threatened upon Israel (Jer 40:2-3), yet He preserved a remnant (Isa 1:9) and promised it a future restoration (Isa 14:1-4), which took place in its time. God’s faithfulness is the basis for Israel’s hope: “Are You not from everlasting, O Yahweh, my God, my Holy One? We will not die. You, O Yahweh, have appointed them to judge; And You, O Rock, have established them to correct” (Hab 1:12).

The Lord assures His chosen ones that His Word will unfailingly come to pass, even when it seems impossible (Jer 37:10). Even if the fulfillment is not immediate, it will certainly come. He says to Ezekiel:

Son of man, what is this proverb you {people} have concerning the land of Israel, saying, “The days are long and every vision fails”? Therefore say to them, “Thus says the Lord Yahweh, ‘I will make this proverb cease so that they will no longer use it as a proverb in Israel.’ But tell them, “The days draw near as well as the fulfillment of every vision” (Ezek 12:22-23).

The final Old Testament books, written during and after the exile, continue to confirm the testimony of the previous books. Yahweh is the one who kept His word to Abraham about inheriting the Promised Land: “(You) made a covenant with him To give {him} the land of the Canaanite, of the Hittite and the Amorite, of the Perizzite, the Jebusite and the Girgashite – to give {it} to his descendants. And You have fulfilled Your promise, For You are righteous” (Neh 9:8).

However, if God’s promises were given conditionally, then their fulfillment would depend on people fulfilling those conditions (Zech 6:15). Yet, since His promise to the descendants of Abraham was given without condition, God, in His faithfulness, will restore Israel (Ezra 1:1; Zech 8:14-15). The fact that neither the Lord, nor His Word can change, gives God’s people hope for the future: “I, Yahweh, do not change; therefore you, O sons



of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal 3:6). On this basis, God’s people can appeal to Him for aid (Neh 9:32; Dan 9:3ff).

The New Testament, of course, affirms the truth of the Lord’s faithfulness as well. He is the “faithful Creator” (1 Pet 4:19). The One seated on the white throne is “faithful and true” (Rev 19:11). The New Testament emphasizes God’s faithfulness especially in regard to Him keeping His people faithful to Him. He is faithful to guard from sin (1 Cor 10:13), forgive sin (1 Jn 1:9), fully sanctify believers (1 Thes 5:24), confirm believers and keep them from the evil one (2 Thes 3:3; 2 Pet 2:5-9), and to preserve them until the end (1 Cor 1:8-9).<sup>419</sup>

The Lord’s always keeps His promises (2 Cor 1:18-20), namely to Simeon (Lk 2:26-29), Abraham (Acts 7:17), and many others. “He who believes in him will not be disappointed” (1 Pet 2:6). Although we do not always see an immediate fulfillment of His promises, they unfailing come to pass (2 Pet 3:8-9). Believers are called to imitate Sarah, who “considered Him faithful who had promised” (Heb 11:11). Therefore, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23).

### 3. Theological Considerations

In conclusion, we will compare the Lord’s faithfulness with several others of His attributes. In His righteousness, God always acts in accordance with His *nature*, while in His faithfulness, He always acts in accordance with His *Word*. In the light of God’s omnipotence, we can conclude that His almighty power guarantees that He can do all that He has promised.<sup>420</sup>

The final association we will make is between God’s faithfulness and His sovereignty. Here, we must emphasize a certain feature to avoid falling into error. Can God, being Lord over all, use His freedom to fail to keep His promises? We deny such a possibility. In His sovereignty, the Lord *makes* His promises, while in His faithfulness He unfailingly *keeps* them.<sup>421</sup>

Let us look at this issue in more detail. We must always keep in mind that all of the Lord’s attributes interact with one another, influence one another, and limit each other. In this instance, His sovereignty does not nullify His faithfulness. In fact, when God promises something, He makes a free and sovereign decision to do so – no one forced Him to extend that promise. After He has promised something, however, He cannot go back on what He said. So then, in His sovereignty, He makes promises, while in His faithfulness, He fulfills them.

Helm explains this well:

By his promises God binds himself and therefore (in providential terms) limits himself to the performance of certain actions in the future. Before the promises are made, there are no constraints; once they are made, God is bound by what He has said, and his providential activity has to be ordered accordingly. God is not bound by some external force, of course, but he binds himself.<sup>422</sup>

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<sup>419</sup>Duffield, p. 79; Strong, p. 288.

<sup>420</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 291.

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# Chapter 6 - God's Love

## A. God's Love

### 1. Definitions and Terminology

The Bible unwaveringly claims that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16). This oft-quoted verse from John’s first epistle highlights one of the Lord’s basic character qualities.

The following writers offer definitions of God’s love. According to Erickson, “(God) unselfishly seeks our ultimate welfare.”<sup>423</sup> He continues, “(God) is concerned with our good for our own sake, not for what he can get out of us.”<sup>424</sup> In the words of Charles Hodge, God’s love is “the disposition to promote happiness; all sensitive creatures are its objects.”<sup>425</sup> Grudem proposes the following: “God’s love means that God eternally gives of himself to others.”<sup>426</sup> Strong sees it as “that attribute of the divine nature in virtue of which God is eternally moved to self-communication.”<sup>427</sup>

The Greek language has several words to describe the concept of love. The word ἔρος (*eros*) refers to love in a sensual manner. Φιλία (*philia*) is love between friends. Στοργή (*storge*) describes familial love. The word for brotherly love is φιλαδελφία (*philadelphia*), and for kindness or generosity is φιλανθρωπία (*philanthropia*). Finally, we encounter the word ἀγάπη (*agape*). This word has an interesting history. The ancient Greeks rarely used it, and it was not clearly defined. Most likely, its original connotation was “satisfaction.”<sup>428</sup>

We will further investigate how the ancient Greeks viewed love.<sup>429</sup> Homer considered Eros, Earth, and Chaos to be the chief gods. The philosopher Empedocles taught the existence of two defining powers in the world: love (Aphrodite) and strife. According to Plato, ἔρος (*eros*) is the only type of love attributable to God. Aristotle understood God to be an impersonal force, totally self-sufficient, and independent from people. Therefore, God loves no one, since love involves weakness and dependence. For Aristotle, love is simply the force that preserves and moves the world. So then, we do not see among the Greeks any comprehension of a benevolent Divine Being.

The word for love in Hebrew is אָהַבָה (*ahav*). It has a broad meaning: God’s love, love between friends, or romantic love – only context can determine its meaning in any instance. Interestingly, the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) contains mainly the word ἀγάπη (*agape*) and occasionally φιλία (*philia*). Therefore, the term ἀγάπη (*agape*) carries a large semantic load, connoting God’s love, romantic love, or even love for evil.

Consequently, the New Testament authors, who were familiar with the Septuagint, ascribe to ἀγάπη (*agape*) a wide range of meaning as well. Although the majority of New Testament usages refer to God’s love, it can also mean love as friendship and even love for evil. An example of the latter is 1 Jn 2:15: “Do not love (ἀγάπη) the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves (ἀγάπη) the world, the love (ἀγάπη) of the Father is not in him.” The term φιλία (*philia*) is used both for love between friends and for God’s love as well.

### 2. Biblical Data

The history of God’s love predates creation. Since He has no beginning, His love has no beginning as well. Between the Persons of the Trinity, love has existed from eternity past. The Father has loved the Son “before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17:24).

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<sup>423</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 292.

<sup>424</sup>Ibid., p. 293.

<sup>425</sup>Hodge C. Systematic Theology. – 1872. – V. 1. – P. 427.

<sup>426</sup>Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 199.

<sup>427</sup>Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 263.

<sup>428</sup>Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. -- Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 6. – P. 345-346.

<sup>429</sup>Ibid., v. 6, p. 340-343.

The Lord manifested His love in creation. Hodge comments, “As the universe teems with life, it teems also with enjoyment. There are no devices in nature for the promotion of pain for its own sake; whereas the manifestations of design for the production of happiness are beyond computation.”<sup>430</sup>

The Lord not only created the world, but also cares for it. The psalmist writes, “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:16). He even feeds the birds (Matt 6:26) and notices when one of them “falls to the ground” (Matt 10:29). Even those who do not appreciate the Lord’s benevolence in nature benefit from it: “He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous” (Matt 5:45).<sup>431</sup>

Yahweh’s shows special care for His Old Testament people, Israel: “On your fathers did Yahweh set His affection to love them” (Deut 10:15).<sup>432</sup> He expressed His love for them in His election of them (Mal 1:2). In love, the Lord delivered them from Egyptian bondage: “When Israel {was} a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son.... I led them with cords of a man, with bonds of love” (Hos 11:1, 4). God desires intimate fellowship with His people and to be personally present among them. His desire is “...to be God to you and to your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7-8); “Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God” (Ex 6:7); and, “I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God” (Ex 29:45).<sup>433</sup>

Because of His love for His chosen people, the Lord remains faithful to His covenant with them: “For Yahweh your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deut 4:31). When Israel keeps its part of the covenant, they can expect to enjoy the richness of God’s blessing (Deut 7:7-8). Yahweh’s love reaches beyond the borders of Israel as well – He shows special care for foreigners (Deut 10:18).

Yahweh considered Israel His bride: “I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know Yahweh” (Hos 2:19-20). He tenderly appeals to His beloved: “Since you are precious in My sight, {since} you are honored and I love you, I will give {other} men in your place and {other} peoples in exchange for your life” (Isa 43:4), and, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness” (Jer 31:3). The Lord rejoices over His people: “Yahweh your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy” (Zeph 3:17). In spite of Israel’s unfaithfulness, He will draw her back to Himself: “I will heal their apostasy, I will love them freely” (Hos 14:4).

God protected His people from the curse of Balaam, because “Yahweh your God loves you” (Deut 23:5). Even during the frightening manifestation of Yahweh’s glory on Mount Sinai, God’s love was on display: “Yahweh came from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir. He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones. At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them. Indeed, He loves the people. All Your holy ones are in Your hand” (Deut 33:2-3).

The following passage includes mention of the two most prominent aspects of Yahweh’s nature: holiness and love:

Yahweh, Yahweh God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness 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 generations (Ex 34:6-7).

The Old Testament poetical books add their testimony to the love of the Lord. Yahweh is a father to His people: “Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him”

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<sup>430</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 427 (see also Chafer L. S. Systematic Theology. – Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1 – P. 206; Strong, p. 266).

<sup>431</sup>Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 305.

<sup>432</sup>Henry, v. 6, p.340, 344.

<sup>433</sup>Kaiser W. Toward an Old Testament Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978. – P. 33.

(Ps 103:13). As a good father, the Lord trains and disciplines His children (Prov 3:12; cf. Rev 3:19). His love is boundless: “For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him” (Ps 103:11, cf. Ps 57:10). His love is eternal: “For Yahweh is good; His lovingkindness is everlasting” (Ps 100:5; cf. Ps 52:1).

During His earthly ministry, Christ clearly demonstrated His love for the world. He taught the crowds, healed the sick, delivered the demon-possessed, fed the multitudes, and raised the dead (Matt 11:5). His gentle manner toward children revealed His fatherly care (Mk 10:16). His heart was full of compassion for people: “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd” (Matt 9:36). Even during the sufferings of His passion, He thought of others first. While He was carrying His cross to Calvary, He said to some women of Jerusalem, “Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children” (Lk 23:28). From the cross, He did not curse His enemies, but asked His Father to forgive them (Lk 23:34).

The sacrifice of Calvary was not only a manifestation of Christ’s love, but that of the Father as well: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). The Father’s love is actually defined and measured by Calvary: “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). In the light of the sacrifice made there, one cannot doubt God’s love for us and His desire to aid us. The apostle Paul assures us, “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32).

In other passages from Paul’s epistles, he continues to contemplate the love of the Lord. To the Ephesians, he wrote of the greatness of God’s love shown at the cross: “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” (Eph 2:4-5), and, “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). He expressed a similar thought in his epistle to the Thessalonians: “Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort and good hope by grace...” (2 Thes 2:16).

The apostle Paul penned what are likely the most moving words recounting Yahweh’s love for people, which highlight its boundlessness and consistency:

...may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph 3:18-19).

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:35-39).

In spite of the passages cited above, the biblical author who emphasized God’s love most of all is the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” i.e. the apostle John.

First, throughout the entire Gospel of John, he repeatedly refers to the love relationship between the Father and the Son (see 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 14:31; 15:9-10; 17:23-26). Moreover, Jesus freely shares this love with His disciples: “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love” (15:9). He showed them by example how they were to love one another (13:34). Those who keep His word would especially experience His love (14:21; 15:10).

As was mentioned above, the apostle John also speaks of the Lord’s love displayed on Calvary (Jn 3:16). He speaks of it also in his epistles: “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only

begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son {to be} the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9-10; cf. Rev 1:5). God also manifests His love in receiving us into His family: “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God” (1 Jn 3:1).

Finally, we must not fail to mention that John considers love to be the essence of the Lord’s nature. In the fourth chapter of his first epistle, he asserts twice that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8, 16). An important, but controversial question is whether God’s love is His primary attribute. In other words, does love hold primacy over all His other qualities? First, we must keep in mind that God is completely holy and completely loving. It is inappropriate, then, to divide God’s nature, as if He was 60% loving and 40% holy. At the same time, Scripture testifies that the Lord desires to manifest His love (Isa 30:18) and takes no pleasure in punishing (Ezek 18:23). In addition, in Exodus 34:6, cited earlier, we find a straightforward description of God’s character. We note that the description of His love precedes the description of His righteousness. This does not imply, however, that God takes sin lightly or would ever compromise His holiness. Nonetheless, this passage confirms that the Lord prefers showing love than exercising wrath.

### 3. Conclusions

In light of our discussion above, we affirm that, although love is not higher or greater than His other attributes and in no way displaces the others, God desires to express His love most of all. Chafer comments, “As no other attribute, love is the primary motive in God.”<sup>434</sup> Similarly, Lidgett also holds to the primacy of love in God’s nature – it is the primary motive for His actions. Lidgett adds however, that only a righteous God can display genuine love.<sup>435</sup> Bray also affirms that only when we comprehend the Lord’s wrath can we fully appreciate His gift of love granting to us salvation.<sup>436</sup>

To further clarify the concept of God’s love, Pink observes that He does not love us because we are worthy of His love, but because that is His nature. This is shown by the fact that He is a God of love from all eternity, even before He created people.<sup>437</sup> Bloesch embraces a similar view – the world does not hold for God intrinsic value, but His love for it gives it value.<sup>438</sup>

In the next section, we will investigate in more detail the main features or expressions of the Lord’s love, namely: grace, mercy, and patience. By “grace,” we refer to God’s generosity in providing His creation with every good thing. “Grace” designates an undeserved gift from the Lord. The term “mercy” relates to God’s readiness to forgive sin and assist the needy. In His “patience,” God is able to restrain His indignation for sin in anticipation of people’s repentance.

We might call these three features “love in action.” Grace is love in relation to the undeserving. Mercy is love in relation to the sinner and those in special need. Patience is love in relation to the unrepentant. At times, all three aspects of the Lord’s love are mentioned together in Holy Scripture:<sup>439</sup>

- Yahweh is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness (Ps 103:8).
- You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth (Ps 86:15).
- You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness (Neh 9:17).
- You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness (Jonah 4:2).

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<sup>434</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 205.

<sup>435</sup>Lidgett J. S. *The Fatherhood of God in Christian Truth and Life*. – Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902. – P. 299.

<sup>436</sup>Bray G. L. *The Doctrine of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 222.

<sup>437</sup>Pink A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 79-81.

<sup>438</sup>Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 151.

<sup>439</sup>Chafer, v. 1, p. 206; Grudem, p. 200.

## B. God's Grace

### 1. Terminology

The term “grace” describes the Lord’s benevolent attitude toward all His creation – how He blesses and enriches it. The Hebrew word for grace is חַן (*hain*). An example of its adjectival form is found in Exodus 34:6, where it is translated “gracious.”<sup>440</sup> We also encounter almost 200 times the word חֶסֶד (*xeceḏ*), which refers to God’s benevolent attitude toward people, especially His own. It carries the connotations “faithfulness,” “faithful love,” and “kindness.” The special feature of this word is that it accentuates the consistency of the Lord’s love, i.e., His dedication and devotion to do good for His people in line with His covenant with them.<sup>441</sup>

The New Testament term for grace is χάρις (*haris*), which has two basic meanings: grace as “unmerited favor” and “power for living.” The first definition is reflected in the following passages: Ephesians 2:8; Galatians 5:4; and Romans 4:16, where the theme is God’s gift of salvation in Christ. The second meaning, spiritual power, is found in Acts 4:33, Hebrews 4:16, Acts 14:26, and 1 Corinthians 1:4-5; 15:10. The Lord’s grace brings life transformation and success in ministry. It enriches believers’ spiritual life and makes them new people.

The concept “grace” can be conferred by various terms that can serve as synonyms. Sometimes, the Greek term ἔλεος (*eleos*), which usually translates “mercy,” can overlap in meaning with χάρις (*haris*), i.e., as “unmerited favor” or “power for living.” We encounter ἔλεος (*eleos*) with the meaning “unmerited favor,” for example, in Ephesians 2:8, where it refers to the unmerited gift of salvation. With the meaning “power for living,” we cite 1 Corinthians 7:25 and 2 Corinthians 4:1, where God’s grace, i.e., ἔλεος (*eleos*), enables Paul to accomplish his ministry.

Therefore, we can define “grace” as Yahweh’s benevolence to His creation and disposition to do good to His creatures. He expresses His benevolence to people by granting them: (1) unmerited favor, especially in regard to salvation, and (2) power for attaining success in life and ministry. We add that “power for living” is also unmerited favor from God, so the two meanings overlap.

### 2. Biblical Data

#### a. Old Testament

We will start our survey of the biblical teaching on Yahweh’s grace from the beginning – the creation of the world. The fact is that the Lord was under no obligation to create anything. Our existence itself is a display of His benevolence and should inspire gratitude on our part. His grace extends to even more “trivial” aspects of creation: “You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Ps 145:16; also see Ps 104:10-27; 36:6; Matt 6:26).<sup>442</sup>

Furthermore, the Lord not only created people, but also provided them with an amazing place to live – the Garden of Eden, which is appropriately also called “Paradise.” In this way, Yahweh showed his generosity and His desire to endow humanity with every blessing. Even after people sinned, God promised to send a Savior, the Seed of the woman (Gen 3:15). In addition, God provided Cain, even after his evil deed, protection from harm from others in his wanderings (Gen 4:14-15).

In addition, in the book of Genesis it is interesting to note that Noah obtained חַן (*hain*), i.e., “grace,” before the Lord (Gen 6:8). In spite of the fact that Noah was “a righteous man, blameless in his time” (Gen 6:9), God’s benevolence toward him was based on grace, not on Noah’s personal righteousness.

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<sup>440</sup>Fretheim T. *hnn* // VanGemen W. A. New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – V. 2. – P. 203-206.

<sup>441</sup>Baer D. A., Gordon R. P. *hsd* // VanGemen W. A. New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – V. 2. – P. 211-218; Henry, v. 6, p. 349.

<sup>442</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 295; Shedd, p. 304-305.

It is well known that Yahweh's covenant with Abraham was by grace. He chose Abraham's family and separated them for Himself not because of their worthiness, but according to His good pleasure (Neh 9:7; Isa 41:8). In spite of the many times that Israel strayed from the Lord's covenant, He remained faithful to His gracious Word and promised Israel a glorious future (Ezek 36-37).

In Israel's early years, when they were traversing the wilderness, the Lord provided them with every necessity. He gave them meat and manna (Ex 16), a pillar of cloud shaded them by day, and a pillar of fire warmed them at night (Ex 13:21-22). Over the forty years of wandering, their clothes did not wear out, and neither did their footwear (Deut 29:5). He even promised protection from disease (Ex 15:26). God abundantly demonstrated His care and kindness.

When Yahweh revealed Himself to Moses on Mount Sinai, He proclaimed "the name of Yahweh before him" (Ex 33:19), that is, He described to Moses His nature. As noted above, God ascribes to Himself such descriptive terms as רַחוּם (*rahum*), "compassionate," and חַנּוּן (*hainum*) "gracious" (Ex 34:6). In addition, just as in the case of Noah, Moses also "found favor" before Him (Ex 33:17).

God's graciousness to Israel also found expression in a special blessing, which the high priest spoke over the people. It reveals Yahweh's concern for His people's welfare and His desire to bless them:

Yahweh bless you, and keep you. Yahweh make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; Yahweh lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace (Num 6:24-26).

Finally, still another display of Yahweh's grace to wandering Israel was to grant them the Promised Land – a land "flowing with milk and honey" (Lev 20:24), i.e., a place of prosperity. When bringing in the first fruits of the harvest, Israel was to "rejoice in all the good which Yahweh your God has given you and your household" (Deut 26:11). In the book of Deuteronomy, the Lord warned Israel not to regard their inheritance as their due. It was quite the opposite: "{It is} not because of your righteousness {that} Yahweh your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stubborn people" (Deut 9:6).

Although the entire Old Testament narrative abounds with cases of God's graciousness to His people, we may devote special attention to David and Solomon in this regard. The Lord chose David and established him as king over all Israel. Along with this, He promised David an eternal reign. God Himself tells of His benevolent attitude toward David:

Now therefore, thus you shall say to My servant David, "Thus says Yahweh of hosts, 'I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, to be ruler over My people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make you a great name, like the names of the great men who are on the earth.... When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom.... I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever'" (2 Sam 7:8-16).

In response to the grace shown him, David acknowledges his unworthiness: "Who am I, O Yahweh God, and what is my house that You have brought me this far?" (1 Chr 17:16). Even when David sinned with Bathsheba, God's continued to show him grace. David's son and successor, Solomon, was also a recipient of Yahweh's benevolence. The Lord gave him the amazing invitation: "Ask what I shall give you" (2 Chr 1:7).

After the construction and dedication of Solomon's temple, we read this summary statement of all the good Yahweh had done for His people: the king "sent the people to their tents, rejoicing and happy of heart because of the goodness that Yahweh had shown to David and to Solomon and to His people Israel" (2 Chr 7:10).



God's grace is a common theme in a book that David heavily contributed to – the Psalms. There, we often encounter the term *חֶסֶד* (*hesed*). This word means “grace” or “kindness,”<sup>443</sup> and describes God's generous disposition to His creation. As noted before, the term also connotes “consistency in love” and “faithfulness.”<sup>444</sup>

It is remarkable to note the repetition of the word *חֶסֶד* (*hesed*) in every verse of Psalm 136 in the phrase “His lovingkindness is everlasting.” This psalm recounts the history of Yahweh's benevolence both to creation and to the nation of Israel. Erickson writes, “This was a very prominent, if not the most prominent, reason given when the people of Israel praised God or when they were commanded to praise him.”<sup>445</sup>

The expression “His lovingkindness is everlasting,” which emphasizes the constancy of God's grace, is found in other psalms of praise as well, namely in Ps 100:5; 106:1; 107:1. In these latter passages, we see a more elaborate celebration of the Lord's goodness, where we read: “Oh give thanks to Yahweh, for He is good (*טוֹב*); for His lovingkindness is everlasting.”

The term *טוֹב* (*tov*), “good,” frequently describes Yahweh's character, such as in the following examples:

- O taste and see that Yahweh is good (*טוֹב*) (Ps 34:8).
- Surely God is good (*טוֹב*) to Israel, to those who are pure in heart! (Ps 73:1).
- For You, Lord, are good (*טוֹב*), and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You (Ps 86:5).
- Yahweh is good (*טוֹב*) to all, and His mercies are over all His works (Ps 145:9).
- Praise Yahweh, for Yahweh is good (Ps 135:3).

Psalm 103:2-5 describes in more detail how God's manifold grace may appear in our lives:

Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and forget none of His benefits; who pardons all your iniquities, who heals all your diseases; who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with lovingkindness and compassion; who satisfies your years with good things, {so that} your youth is renewed like the eagle.

Correspondingly, the psalmist expects that “surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of Yahweh forever” (Ps 23:6). Yet, even better than enjoying the earthly benefits of God's grace is knowing the Giver of that grace, which may be implied in the words, “Your lovingkindness (*חֶסֶד* - *hesed*) is better than life” (Ps 62:4).

God's grace also inspires confidence in prayer. In other words, those who appeal to Yahweh expect an answer in light of His gracious nature: “Do return, Yahweh; how long {will it be?}, and be sorry for Your servants. O satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingkindness” (Ps 90:13-14); “Help me, O Yahweh my God; Save me according to Your lovingkindness” (Ps 109:26); “Answer me, O Yahweh, for Your lovingkindness is good; according to the greatness of Your compassion, turn to me” (Ps 69:16; also see Ps 31:16; 119:124).

Psalm 18 offers a dramatic rendition of how the Lord answers those who call on Him:

Then the earth shook and quaked; and the foundations of the mountains were trembling and were shaken, because He was angry.... He bowed the heavens also, and came down With thick darkness under His feet.... He sent out His arrows, and scattered them, and lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them.... He sent from on high, He took me; He drew me out of many waters.... He brought me forth also into a broad place; He rescued me, because He delighted in me (Ps 18:7-19).

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<sup>443</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 338.

<sup>444</sup>Baer, v. 2, p. 211-218; Henry, v. 6, p. 349.

<sup>445</sup>Erickson M. J. God the Father Almighty. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 233.

The magnitude of God's grace (חֶסֶד - *hesed*) is measured by superlatives such as: "great" (Ps 31:19; 117:2) and "above the heavens" (Ps 108:4). It is especially directed toward those who fear Him (Ps 31:19) and walk uprightly (Ps 84:11). Finally, as stated above concerning the term חֶסֶד (*hesed*), it is often employed in relation to God's faithfulness to the covenant, such as in Ps 98:3; 103:17-18.

The Old Testament prophetic books add their testimony to Yahweh's goodness and grace. Jeremiah, in appealing to the Lord, affirms that God "shows lovingkindness (חֶסֶד - *hesed*) to thousands" (Jer 32:18, cf. Jer 9:24). Nahum affirms, "Yahweh is good (טוֹב), a stronghold in the day of trouble, and He knows those who take refuge in Him" (Nah 1:7). Joel concurs, "He is gracious (חַנּוּן - *hanun*) and compassionate (רַחוּם - *rahum*), slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil" (Joel 2:13). Jonah repeats these words (see Jon 4:2).

In this well-known Scripture passage, Yahweh invites all who thirst, "Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost" (Isa 55:1). On the other hand, Isaiah recounts the situation with Ahaz, who doubted God's goodness and refused His gracious invitation: "'Ask a sign for yourself from Yahweh your God; make {it} deep as Sheol or high as heaven.' But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask, nor will I test Yahweh!'" (Isa 7:11-12).

In the books of the prophets, more attention is given to Yahweh's goodness to His people rather than in a general sense. For example, in Isaiah 63:7 we read, "I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses (חֶסֶד - *hesed*) of Yahweh, the praises of Yahweh, according to all that Yahweh has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel." A similar theme is found in Isaiah 63:11-14.

The following passages from the prophet Jeremiah focus on God's goodness yet to be manifest in Israel's future restoration:

- For I will set My eyes on them for good, and I will bring them again to this land; and I will build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up (Jer 24:6).
- For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares Yahweh, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope (Jer 29:11).
- "My people will be satisfied with My goodness," declares Yahweh (Jer 31:14).
- I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul (Jer 32:42)

In the prayer of Nehemiah, he rehearses all the goodness and grace Yahweh has shown to His chosen people, Israel:

You, in Your great compassion, did not forsake them in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud did not leave them by day, to guide them on their way, nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in which they were to go. You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, and You gave them water for their thirst. Indeed, forty years You provided for them in the wilderness {and} they were not in want; their clothes did not wear out, nor did their feet swell. You also gave them kingdoms and peoples, and allotted {them} to them as a boundary. They took possession of the land of Sihon the king of Heshbon and the land of Og the king of Bashan. You made their sons numerous as the stars of heaven, and You brought them into the land which You had told their fathers to enter and possess. So their sons entered and possessed the land. And You subdued before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and You gave them into their hand, with their kings and the peoples of the land, to do with them as they desired. They captured fortified cities and a fertile land. They took possession of houses full of every good thing, hewn cisterns, vineyards, olive groves, fruit trees in abundance. So they ate, were filled and grew fat, and reveled in Your great goodness (Neh 9:19-25).

Several of Yahweh's names reflect His benevolence.<sup>446</sup> Genesis 22:14 speaks of Him as יהוה יִרְאֶה (*Yahweh aire*), which translates, "Yahweh who sees." The sense here is that God knows people's needs and is disposed to meet them. In addition, in Psalm 22:1 God's name is יהוה רֹעִי (*Yahweh roi*), i.e., "God our shepherd." He cares for His own as a shepherd does his sheep. The expression יהוה רִפָּא (*Yahweh rophe*) derives from the Hebrew verb רָפָא (*rapha*), or "heal" (see Ex 15:26). Therefore, Yahweh is our healer. The word נֶס (*nec*), i.e., "banner," contributes to the name יהוה נָסִי (*Yahweh necci*) and connotes that Yahweh gives us victory (see Ex 17:15). The expression יהוה שָׁלוֹם (*Yahweh shalom*) means "Yahweh our peace" (see Judg 6:24). However, the word שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*) has a wide spectrum of meaning, which includes not only peace, but also health, security, prosperity and wholeness. God seeks our well-being in every sense: in spirit, soul, and body.

## **b. New Testament**

Tozer observes that although the concept of grace is certainly not absent from the Old Testament, it is a far more common theme in the New Testament.<sup>447</sup> The Gospels relate God's grace displayed in the person of Jesus Christ. The apostle John testifies that the incarnate Son of God was "full of grace" (Jn 1:14) and introduced a new era into human history – the era of grace: "For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). Through Christ, God's grace is extended to all believers in Him: "For of His fullness we have all received, and grace upon grace" (Jn 1:16).

We see in Christ's earthly ministry a display of grace: "Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people" (Matt 4:23). Even when Jesus was tired, He was nevertheless ready to help those who appealed to Him (Lk 9:11).

Jesus not only demonstrated God's grace, but also spoke about it. He recounted how the Father "causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous" (Matt 5:45). The God who feeds the birds and adorns the grass will certainly care for those who rely on Him (Matt 6:25-33). Furthermore, the Father is represented as a master of a vineyard, who graciously gives a full day's pay to those who labored only an hour (Matt 20:8-15).

Those who receive grace from the Lord often recognize it and return Him thanks. For example, Elizabeth, upon learning of her pregnancy, rejoiced and said, "This is the way the Lord has dealt with me in the days when He looked {with favor} upon {me,} to take away my disgrace among men" (Lk 1:25). The opportunity Mary received to become the mother of our Lord came to her by grace. The angel Gabriel announced, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord {is} with you.... you have found favor with God" (Lk 1:28-30). Mary eagerly acknowledged, "For He has had regard for the humble state of His bondservant.... For the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Lk 1:48-49). Finally, we reference the case of the centurion, who also acknowledged his unworthiness to receive the Lord's grace: "I am not worthy for You to come under my roof" (Lk 7:6).

The book of Acts provides us with examples of the Lord's favor as well. In fulfillment of His promise, Jesus poured the Holy Spirit out upon His disciples, and Peter offered this gift of grace to all who desired to receive it (Acts 2:1-38). Simeon, however, failed to appreciate the gracious nature of this gift and offered the apostles money to obtain the power to administer the Spirit, for which he was severely reproved (Acts 8:18-20).

Furthermore, the gospel preached by the apostolic Church announced salvation through grace. The gospel is called, in fact, the "word of grace" (Acts 14:3; 20:24, 32). Peter once reminded the church leaders that "we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 15:11, cf. 13:43). Acts 18:27 even hints that grace is needed to enable one to believe.

The Lord's grace not only provides forgiveness, but also transforms lives. When Barnabas came to Antioch, he "witnessed the grace of God" (Acts 11:23), which means a visible life change occurred among believers

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<sup>446</sup>Joyner R. E. *The One True God* // Horton C. *Systematic Theology*. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 147ff.

<sup>447</sup>Tozer A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 99.

there. Other passages record a similar experience of life-transforming grace among believers in Jesus (see Acts 4:33; 6:8; 14:26; 15:40).

Finally, God's favor extends even to unbelievers. When Paul and those travelling with him were in danger of shipwreck, God promised protection not only to Paul, but also to "all those who are sailing with you" (Acts 27:24). As a result, all parties reached shore safely (see Acts 27:44).

In the General Epistles, we see again the Lord's eagerness to pour out His grace in abundance. These epistles greet us with such salutations as: "May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure" (1 Pet 1:2; cf. 2 Pet 1:2); "May mercy and peace and love be multiplied to you" (Jude 2); and, "Grace be with you all" (Heb 13:25).

Such greetings arise from an understanding of "the kindness of the Lord" (1 Pet 2:3). He is the source of all good (Jam 1:17) and the "Spirit of grace" (Heb 10:29). He is the "God of all grace" (1 Pet 5:10) and the rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb 11:6). However, He gives grace to the humble (1 Pet 5:5; Jam 4:6), i.e., to those who recognize their need for Him. Unfortunately, as Jude observes, some people "turn the grace of our God into licentiousness" (Jude 4). It is therefore necessary to stand in the "true grace of God" (1 Pet 5:12).

A key verse in our study of Yahweh's grace is 1 Pet 1:13, where we read, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober {in spirit,} fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ." Although by grace the believer in Christ receives immediate justification before God and entrance into His kingdom, the work of grace does not finish with this. The Father's will is to conform us into the image of His Son. This is possible only by grace, not by human effort. Yet, this process is complete only at Christ's Second Coming, which requires patience on our part.

Other passages in Peter's writings also speak of grace as a future acquisition, that is, as our inheritance (1 Pet 3:7, 1:10?). At the same time, he considers grace as a power active in the lives of believers at the present time, promoting both their ministry (1 Pet 4:10) and their sanctification (2 Pet 3:18, cf. Heb 13:9). James assures us that grace is sufficiently strong to give us victory in life – "He gives a greater grace" (Jam 4:6). It is always available to us at the "throne of grace" (Heb 4:16). Although most passages in the General Epistles regard the Lord's grace as a present or future phenomenon, we also find mention of its appearance in the past – the gracious act of Christ redemptive sacrifice (Heb 2:9).

Paul's epistles overflow with references to the Lord's grace. First, his apostolic greetings express a desire for the epistles' recipients to be recipients of God's grace (2 Thes 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Col 1:2 and others). Paul also often closes his letters with a similar blessing of grace (Col 4:18; 2 Tim 4:22; Gal 6:18).

Furthermore, in Paul's epistle to the Galatians he urges believers to remain in the grace of the Lord and not seek justification before Him by works: "You have been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Gal 5:4). Salvation by works is "another gospel" (Gal 1:6). Moreover, he argues, "I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness {comes} through the Law, then Christ died needlessly" (Gal 2:21). Paul even relates that God's calling us to salvation is an action of His grace (Gal 1:15).

Paul features this topic again in his treatise to the Romans. In Romans 3:26, he defines grace as an undeserved gift: "...being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:24). Such a definition enables Paul to contrast salvation by grace with salvation by works: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Rom 11:6). If people seek to earn their salvation, they thereby nullify the grace of the Lord – one cannot earn a gift. Grace must be received by faith (Rom 4:16).

In addition, Paul also contrasts the curse received through Adam with the salvation granted in Christ (Rom 5). Although we inherit death and condemnation through Adam, we obtain life and justification through Christ by God's gracious favor toward us. In Christ, grace triumphs over sin (Rom 5:20-21). Furthermore, Paul teaches that grace is active in our sanctification as well. On the one hand, salvation by grace does not mean that believers can freely sin (Rom 6:1, 15), while on the other hand, only by God's grace can one overcome sin (Rom 6:14).

For Paul, God's grace not only brings salvation, but also equips believers to serve the Lord (Gal 2:9; Rom 1:5; 12:3, 6; 15:15; 1 Cor 3:10). In order to progress in ministry, one must cooperate with the grace of God (1 Cor 15:10).

In his second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of grace more as a source of power for Christian living (2 Cor 6:1; 8:1; 9:14. Also see 2 Tim 2:1). Nonetheless, he does not fail to ascribe salvation to God's grace as well (2 Cor 6:1; 4:15). We especially highlight 2 Corinthians 8:9: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich." Paul makes a more atypical application of grace to financial blessings from God (2 Cor 9:8). Finally, through a vision from Jesus, Paul learned that God's grace is more active when people are placed in a position of personal weakness: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9).

A classic passage for the theme of salvation by grace is Ephesians 2:4-9:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly {places} in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, {it is} the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (also see Eph 1:7).

This passage emphasizes that salvation by grace eliminates all human boasting, which is a key element in Yahweh's plan. Other passages connecting grace with salvation include the following:

- ...who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity (2 Tim 1:9).
- ...so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to {the} hope of eternal life (Tit 3:7).

Other passages in Paul's epistle to the Ephesians remind us that the grace of the Lord is "freely bestowed on us in the Beloved" (Eph 1:6) and provides power for living and ministry, both for Paul personally (Eph 3:4-8), and for the Church at large (Eph 4:7).

### 3. Conclusions

We will conclude with comments made by various Christian thinkers regarding the Lord's gracious disposition to us. Grudem stresses God's favor in the sense of an undeserved gift, or "his favor toward those who deserve no favor."<sup>448</sup> Pieper affirms the same: "The grace of God is goodness in so far as man in no wise has deserved it."<sup>449</sup>

Mueller writes about grace, "From the viewpoint of God divine grace must be viewed, not as necessary, but as free, because God was not moved by any necessity inherent in His essence to save guilty mankind, but alone by His mercy and compassion."<sup>450</sup> Pink adds that the Lord's grace is "eternal," "free," and "sovereign."<sup>451</sup> Finally, Tozer describes this aspect of Yahweh's nature with the words, "God is kindhearted, gracious, good-natured and benevolent in intention."<sup>452</sup>

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<sup>448</sup>Grudem, p. 201.

<sup>449</sup>Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, Missouri: Concordia Publishing House, 1999. – V. 1. – P. 461.

<sup>450</sup>Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 243.

<sup>451</sup>Pink, p. 67.

<sup>452</sup>Tozer, v. 1, p. 42.

## C. God's Mercy

### 1. Definitions

God is merciful toward His suffering creation. The concept "mercy" has two main components. First, mercy is compassion. Second, it includes pardon for transgressors. Tozer, highlighting these two aspects of mercy, summarizes, "Mercy is God's goodness confronting human guilt and suffering."<sup>453</sup>

The New Testament term describing the Lord's compassion is *σπλαγχνίζομαι* (*splangnidzomai*). Examples of its use are found in Matthew 15:32 and Matthew 20:34. God's mercy is also indicated by the term *ἔλεος* (*eleos*), for example, in Titus 3:5 and Hebrews 4:16.

Millard Erickson comments on the idea of compassion, "God's mercy is his tenderhearted, loving compassion for his people. It is his tenderness of heart toward the needy."<sup>454</sup> Hodge reaches a similar conclusion: "Mercy is kindness exercised towards the miserable."<sup>455</sup> The Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper writes, "The mercy of God is goodness as compassion upon man, whose sin has brought him into untold misery."<sup>456</sup> Finally, Shedd comments, "All blessings bestowed upon the natural man are mercy, insofar as they succor his distress, and grace, so far as they are bestowed upon the undeserving."<sup>457</sup>

Concerning the second feature of mercy, pardon for iniquity, we may cite New Testament passages speaking of forgiveness for sinners in Christ (see Tit 3:5; Rom 11:32; 1 Tim 1:13). Joyner writes, "To experience the mercy of God is to be preserved from punishment that one does in fact deserve."<sup>458</sup>

### 2. Biblical Data

In the Old Testament, Yahweh's mercy appeared immediately after the first transgression. After Cain killed his brother, he did not receive full punishment for his sin, but along with banishment received a promise of divine protection (Gen 4:11-15). Even after God destroyed the wicked world by a flood, He gave the gracious promise, "I will never again destroy every living thing, as I have done" (Gen 8:21). Later in the book of Genesis, the Lord promised to spare an evil city for the sake of ten righteous persons in it (Gen 18:32). When Lot fled from condemned Sodom, God spared the city Lot fled to for refuge for his sake (Gen 19:19-21).

Even though in later chapters, the Torah stresses Yahweh's holiness and righteousness, expressed in the Mosaic Law, nonetheless His mercy was not forgotten. When the Lord "heard the groaning" of Israel suffering in Egyptian bondage, He sent Moses to deliver them (Ex 2:24; cf. Isa 63:9). Additionally, God displayed His mercy toward His people, who constantly strayed from His way. There were two instances when Yahweh was ready to annihilate Israel: when they worshipped the golden calf (Ex 32:10-14), and when they refused to enter Canaan (Num 11:17-20). Yet, in both cases He pardoned the people in response to Moses' intercession for them. The psalmist also recalls God's mercy to Israel in the wilderness: "He, being compassionate, forgave {their} iniquity and did not destroy {them;} and often He restrained His anger and did not arouse all His wrath" (Ps 77:38).

We see another display of Yahweh's mercy when He allowed Moses to look upon the Promised Land as a concession when punishing his disobedience by not allowing him to enter it (Deut 3:27; 34:1-4). In addition, Deuteronomy 10:18 mentions God's special care for orphans, widows, and strangers. Finally, although the Lord anticipated Israel's future apostasy and violation of the covenant, He nonetheless promised to show mercy to His people and restore them (Deut 32:36). Yet, this display of mercy would depend on the fidelity of their future relationship with Him (see Deut 13:17).

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<sup>453</sup>Ibid., v. 1, p. 85.

<sup>454</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 295.

<sup>455</sup>Hodge, v. 1, p. 427.

<sup>456</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 461.

<sup>457</sup>Shedd, p. 307.

<sup>458</sup>Joyner, p. 144-145.

The book of Judges provides us with many examples of the Lord's mercy. Israel repeatedly turned away from Yahweh and experienced His chastisement as a result. However, mercy always followed punishment. At one point, after Israel's repentance, "He could bear the misery of Israel no longer" (Judg 10:16). Judges 2:18 gives the following summary:

When Yahweh raised up judges for them, Yahweh was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for Yahweh was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.

The psalmist comments,

Many times He would deliver them; they, however, were rebellious in their counsel, and {so} sank down in their iniquity. Nevertheless He looked upon their distress when He heard their cry; and He remembered His covenant for their sake, and relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness. He also made them {objects} of compassion in the presence of all their captors (Ps 106:43-46).

Mercy was granted to the family of Eli in spite of the fact that his sons desecrated their priesthood: "Yet I will not cut off every man of yours from My altar so that your eyes will fail {from weeping} and your soul grieve" (1 Sam 2:33).

David also experienced the Lord's mercy. When he fled from his son Absalom, he relied only on Yahweh's condescension (2 Sam 16:12). Another key moment in David's experience of God's mercy was when God gave him a choice of punishments for his "illegal" census: defeat in war, pestilence, or famine. David responded, "Let us now fall into the hand of Yahweh, for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man" (2 Sam 24:14).

We must not fail to recall David's prayer after his sin with Bathsheba: "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions" (Ps 51:1). David's son, Solomon, imitated his father's reliance on Yahweh's mercy, praying that God would hear the repentant prayer of His people, forgive, and restore them (1 Kin 8:49-53).

Yahweh's mercy was again on display during the divided kingdom of Israel, which was a time of unfaithfulness to the Lord. Several striking examples stand out. When Jeroboam's hand withered upon his ordering the arrest of God's prophet, God immediately restored his hand when the prophet prayed for him (1 Kin 13:4-6). When Ahab sinned in respect to Naboth and then subsequently humbled himself before the Lord, God had mercy on him (1 Kin 21:29). Yahweh did so also for Jehoahaz (2 Kin 13:4), for Rehoboam (2 Chr 12:7, 12), and for Israel in general (2 Kin 13:23; 14:25-27).

Possibly the most remarkable example of Yahweh's condescendence was His mercy to Manasseh, who committed more abominations in Judah than any other king of the Southern Kingdom. Yet, when he humbled himself and sought the Lord, Yahweh "was moved by his entreaty and heard his supplication, and brought him again to Jerusalem to his kingdom" (2 Chr 33:13). Such an act of kindness to an apostate demonstrates God's merciful disposition. A wise woman of Tekoa once said, "God does not take away life, but plans ways so that the banished one will not be cast out from him" (2 Sam 14:14).

Even when God's people failed to repent, God showed mercy nonetheless by sending them prophet after prophet: "Yahweh, the God of their fathers, sent {word} to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place" (2 Chr 36:15).

The psalms also speak of Yahweh's merciful nature in forgiving sin and supporting those in need. He shows special favor toward the poor and oppressed (Ps 72:12-14; 69:33; 74:21; 18:27; 113:7; cf. 1 Sam 2:5, 8), the lonely (Ps 68:6), and orphans and widows (Ps 68:5; 10:14, 18). He comforts those "crushed in spirit" (Ps 34:18) and heals them (Ps 147:3). He "supports the afflicted" (Ps 147:6). Psalms 146:7-9 summarizes:

Who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. Yahweh sets the prisoners free. Yahweh opens {the eyes of} the blind; Yahweh raises up those who are bowed down; Yahweh loves the righteous; Yahweh protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, but He thwarts the way of the wicked.

Concerning Yahweh's willingness to forgive sin, we refer to the following passages. His wrath is "for a moment," but His blessing is "for a lifetime" (Ps 30:5; cf. 135:14). Yahweh is "a forgiving God" (Ps 99:8). He forgives our transgressions (Ps 65:3; cf. 130:4) and "pardons all your iniquities" (Ps 103:3). He remembers that we are "flesh" (Ps 78:39; cf. 103:14). The reality and abundance of this forgiveness is lauded in the following passage:

He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on {his} children, so Yahweh has compassion on those who fear Him (Ps 103:10-13).

We furthermore learn that Yahweh's mercy "extends to the heavens" (Ps 36:6). His people rejoice in it: "How precious is Your lovingkindness, O God!" (Ps 36:7). God's mercy inspires confidence in prayer for His aid: (Ps 79:8; 143:8, 12; 119:76-77). One must not doubt His lovingkindness (Ps 76:7-11). Mercy is one of the most prominent of the Lord's attributes:

For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon You.... You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth (Ps 95:5, 15; cp. 145:8; 111:4).

In the Old Testament prophetic books, we see many of the same themes covered in the earlier books. First, mercy is one of Yahweh's primary characteristics. He "is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil" (Joel 2:13). The prophet Micah writes, "Who is a God like You, who pardons iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession? He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in unchanging love" (Mic 7:18). Ezekiel echoes the thought that the Lord prefers mercy to wrath (Ezek 33:11).

The theme of forgiveness is emphasized in other prophetic utterances as well. Both Isaiah (Isa 55:7) and Jeremiah (Jer 3:12; 31:33) testify of Yahweh's readiness to forgive. He not only forgives, but forgets our transgressions (Jer 50:20; Ezek 18:22). He "will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic 7:19).

We also learn that after God chastises His people, mercy will follow: "In an outburst of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, but with everlasting lovingkindness I will have compassion on you" (Isa 54:8); "Although You were angry with me, Your anger is turned away, and You comfort me" (Isa 12:1); and, "For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry" (Isa 57:16).<sup>459</sup> Correspondingly, God preserves a remnant in Israel (Ezek 6:8). However, before restoration or annulling of punishment Yahweh awaits repentance (Joel 2:13-14; Jer 26:3, 13, 19). A most elegant and moving expression of appreciation for Yahweh's mercy is found in the book of Lamentations:

Yahweh's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. {They} are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.... For the Lord will not reject forever, for if He causes grief, then He will have compassion according to His abundant lovingkindness (Lam 3:22-23; 31-32).

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<sup>459</sup>Also see Jer 29:10-14; 33:26; Hos 11:9; 14:4.



We find it also significant that Yahweh is ready to show mercy even to the enemies of His people, including Egypt (Jer 46:26), Moab (Jer 48:47), Ammon (Jer 49:6), Elam (Jer 49:39), and Sodom (Ezek 16:53-55). We also recall the famous account of God sparing Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire, upon their repentance (Jon 4:10-11).

As mentioned in our survey of the Psalms, in virtue of Yahweh's mercy, His people turn to Him in prayer. In the book of Lamentations, the prophet Jeremiah often relates to God in prayer the pitiful situation of His people, imploring Him to show mercy (see Lam 1:9, 11, 20; 2:18-22, 5:1-22). In his day, Isaiah inquired of Yahweh as to why "the stirrings of Your heart and Your compassion are restrained toward me" (Isa 63:15). Appealing to God's mercy, Habakkuk (Hab 3:2) and Amos (Amos 7:2-6) interceded for Israel, the former requesting God, "In wrath remember mercy."<sup>460</sup>

Later, both Nehemiah (Neh 1:5-6) and Daniel relied on Yahweh's mercy for answers to prayer. Daniel openly acknowledged that Israel did not deserve the Lord's favor, but were dependent on His kindness: "We are not presenting our supplications before You on account of any merits of our own, but on account of Your great compassion" (Dan 9:18).

Finally, during the Second Temple period we see examples where leaders of God's people remind Him of His mercies when appealing to Him in prayer. The clearest example is the prayer of the Levites in Nehemiah chapter 9. They recount the Lord's favor to Israel in the wilderness (v. 9-15). Yet, when Israel turned from Yahweh, He nevertheless did not abandon them, because He is "a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness" (v. 17), and continued to provide for them in the wilderness (v. 19-21).

The Levites' prayer recounts the period of the judges, when God's people were in distress because of their sins: "When they cried to You in the time of their distress, You heard from heaven, and according to Your great compassion You gave them deliverers" (v. 27). Although they were stubborn in their rebellion, "In Your great compassion You did not make an end of them or forsake them, for You are a gracious and compassionate God" (v. 31). In conclusion, based on the history of Yahweh's patience toward His people, the Levites ask that He would again turn to them in mercy (v. 32ff).

The New Testament makes a vital contribution to this teaching as well. Especially prominent is the theme of God's saving mercy expressed in Jesus Christ. Even before His redemptive work on Calvary, Jesus demonstrated God's mercy in His earthly ministry in reaching out to those in need.

When Jesus encountered people in need, He was moved with compassion for the blind (Matt 20:34; Lk 18:38), hungry (Mk 8:2), deceased (Jn 11:33-35), wanderers (Matt 18:11-14; Mk 6:34), those seeking the Lord (Mk 10:21), and the sick (Matt 14:14). When people appealed to Christ for help, mention is often made of His mercy (see Matt 9:27; 15:22; 17:15 and others).

The Gospel of Luke devotes special attention to the Lord's mercy toward the unsaved. In particular, chapter 15 relates three parables of Jesus focusing on this theme: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the Prodigal Son. In all of these parables, the main point is the same: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk 19:10).

Luke highlights the Lord's mercy in other texts as well. In the first chapter of his gospel, he records Mary's utterance of praise for God's mercy to His people "His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear him.... He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed. He has given help to Israel His servant, in remembrance of His mercy" (Lk 1:50-54). In the same context, Zechariah (Lk 1:78) and the neighbors of Elizabeth (Lk 1:58) also extol God's mercy.

Luke's gospel also highlights forgiveness from the Lord. Jesus forgave the crippled man (Lk 5:20) and commissioned His disciples to preach forgiveness to the whole world (Lk 24:47). On the cross, Jesus extended forgiveness even to those who crucified Him (Lk 23:34). In addition, only in the Gospel of Luke the story is told of the tax collector who called on Yahweh for mercy and was justified (Lk 18:13).

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<sup>460</sup>Also see the prayer of Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:5-6, and the prayer of Daniel in Daniel 9:18.

Finally, Luke tells of Jesus' mercy toward His enemies. When Peter struck the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus healed him (Lk 22:51). Additionally, when James and John wished to send down fire from heaven to consume those who would not receive Him, Jesus, full of mercy, reproved them (Lk 9:51-56). Jesus spoke of the Father's mercy toward the unrighteous as well (Matt 5:45).<sup>461</sup>

Undoubtedly, the most powerful expression of God's mercy not only to Israel, but also to the entire world, was the redemptive sacrifice of His Son on the cross of Calvary. Jesus Himself spoke of this as an expression of God's love and mercy:

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (Jn 3:16-17).

The New Testament epistles also depict a God of mercy. He is "full of compassion and {is} merciful" (Jam 5:11), the source of mercy (2 Jn 3; Jude 2; Gal 6:16; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2), and "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3).

The Lord's mercy, in fact, is the central feature of the gospel. God saves us by His mercy in Christ, not on the basis of our good works (Tit 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3). Paul writes to the church in Ephesus: "God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph 2:4-5). The new covenant with God sealed by Christ's blood holds this promise: "I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" (Heb 8:12). We have constant access to mercy before the throne of grace (Heb 4:16).

Christ is not only the propitiatory sacrifice for sins, but is the merciful high priest of that sacrifice as well (Heb 2:17). Because He became human, He can sympathize with human weakness, which confirms the Old Testament word of assurance: "He remembered that they were but flesh" (Ps 78:39).

Paul examines another facet of the Lord's mercy in Romans chapter 9. Here he contrasts Lord's mercy toward the "chosen" with the "hardening" of the non-elect:

For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it {does} not {depend} on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.... So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires (Rom 9:15-18).

We must understand this passage in light of its context, which deals with God's choice of Israel as His people. In comparing this text with Romans chapter 11, we discover that God temporarily hardened Israel so that the offer of mercy and salvation could extend to the Gentiles (Rom 11:7-11, 25; 15:9). Then, He will again show His mercies to His old covenant people (v. 26-27). In the end, "God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all" (Rom 11:32).<sup>462</sup> Comparing Romans 9 and 11, one may conclude that Pharaoh in a certain way represented Israel.<sup>463</sup> In the case of the former, the Lord hardened his heart so that His power and name would be proclaimed in all the earth (Rom 9:17). Likewise, through the hardening of Israel, the gospel would be proclaimed in all the earth (Rom 11:7-11).

In Romans 9:23, we learn of the "vessels of mercy." Commentators note how these are contrasted with the "vessels of wrath." The latter are "prepared" (κατηρτισμένα) for destruction, while the former "He prepared beforehand (προητοίμασεν) for glory». We note here different verbs: κατηρτισμένα (*katertismena*) and προητοίμασεν (*proetoimasen*). Morris points out that the former verb is in passive voice, that is, the one who prepared them for judgment is not indicated. On the other hand, the latter verb is active, indicating that

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<sup>461</sup>Pink, p. 73.

<sup>462</sup>Here the word "all" likely refers to the entire nation, not to each individual in it.

<sup>463</sup>Dunn J. D. G. Romans 9–16 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 555.

the Lord Himself prepared the vessels of mercy.<sup>464</sup> Morris feels that unbelievers themselves prepare themselves for destruction. Finally, Morris observes the absence of any concrete statement that *all* the vessels of wrath will perish.<sup>465</sup> He holds out hope that some might come to repentance and become “vessels of mercy” (see Rom 2:4).

We will conclude this topic by mentioning that the Lord is more inclined to show mercy to those with a sincere heart. We take, for example, the history of Paul, who, it appears, sincerely believed that he was serving God by persecuting believers in Jesus. He describes his experience thus: “...even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim 1:13).

#### D. God’s Patience

A final expression of God’s love is His forbearance or patience. The Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper defines patience as follows: “The terms patience and long-suffering reveal that phase of God’s goodness which prompts Him not to punish immediately, but to wait for the sinner’s repentance.”<sup>466</sup>

Let us investigate this attribute in more detail.<sup>467</sup> Scripture often ascribes this quality to the Lord (Ex 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 103:8; 145:8, Nah 1:3; Jon 4:2; and others). The Hebrew expression for patience is the phrase אָרַךְ אַפַּיִם (*ereh afaim*), which literally translates “long in regard to wrath,” or more simply, “slow to anger.”<sup>468</sup>

The Old Testament provides some amazing examples of Yahweh’s long-suffering. He tolerated sinful humanity for 1500 years from the time of Adam until the Flood. In addition, He endured Israel’s unfaithfulness to the covenant about 900 years before He exiled His people to Assyria and Babylon. God expressed His ultimate frustration with Israel with the words, “I have spread out My hands all day long to a rebellious people” (Isa 65:2).

Not all people take advantage of the Lord’s patience as an opportunity for repentance. God speaks to Israel’s leaders through Isaiah the prophet, “Was I not silent even for a long time so you do not fear Me?” (Isa 57:11). On the other hand, those faithful to Yahweh may take offense at His patience, thinking that God is failing to punish sin. Even Jeremiah inquired, “Why has the way of the wicked prospered? {Why} are all those who deal in treachery at ease? You have planted them, they have also taken root; they grow, they have even produced fruit.” However, Jeremiah answers his own question by acknowledging that the day of punishment is coming and appeals to God with the words, “Drag them off like sheep for the slaughter and set them apart for a day of carnage!” (Jer 12:1-3).

Yahweh’s patience is sometimes expressed in partial chastisement, after which He expects His people to respond to Him. He thus dealt with Israel in the time of Amos:

“I gave you also cleanness of teeth in all your cities and lack of bread in all your places, yet you have not returned to Me,” declares Yahweh. “Furthermore, I withheld the rain from you while {there were} still three months until harvest... yet you have not returned to Me,” declares Yahweh. “I smote you with scorching {wind} and mildew... yet you have not returned to Me,” declares Yahweh (Amos 4:6-9).

The Old Testament also testifies that Yahweh’s long-suffering has limits. Prior to the Judean exile to Babylon, God instructed Jeremiah, “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. When they fast, I am not going to listen to their cry; and when they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I am not going to accept them. Rather I am going to make an end of them by the sword, famine and pestilence” (Jer 14:11-12). In the following

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<sup>464</sup>Morris L. The Epistle to the Romans // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988. – P. 368.

<sup>465</sup>Morris, p. 366.

<sup>466</sup>Pieper, v. 1, p. 461-462.

<sup>467</sup>Pink, p. 61-64.

<sup>468</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 74.

chapter, we hear the woeful words, “I am tired of relenting” (Jer 15:6), and, “‘I have withdrawn My peace from this people,’ declares Yahweh, ‘{My} lovingkindness and compassion’” (Jer 16:5).

We see the same result in Nehemiah, chapter 9, where Nehemiah prays to Yahweh: “You bore with them for many years, and admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets, yet they would not give ear. Therefore You gave them into the hand of the peoples of the lands” (Neh 9:30).

The New Testament joins the Old in recounting the Lord’s patience and long-suffering. Jesus revealed the Father’s willingness to wait on repentance in the parable of the fruitless fig tree:

A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, “Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?” And he answered and said to him, “Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, {fine;} but if not, cut it down (Lk 13:6-9).

The book of Acts reveals that in earlier times, God “permitted all the nations to go their own ways”, yet “He did not leave Himself without witness” (Acts 14:16-17). Now is the time to believe the gospel! Likewise, in Romans 3:25 we learn that during the time of God’s forbearance, “He passed over the sins previously committed,” in the sense that the forgiveness which He “preliminarily” offered in the Old Testament is made real in Christ.

Furthermore, Paul writes that God “endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And {He did so} to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy” (Rom 9:22-23). He calls Him “the God who gives perseverance” (Rom 15:5). Paul himself, being a former persecutor of the saints, is now a premier example of this attribute of God. The apostle writes to Timothy, “In me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example...” (1 Tim. 1:16). Finally, Paul joins the Old Testament in warning people not to take for granted God’s long-suffering, but to take advantage of the opportunity for repentance (Rom 2:4-5).

We conclude with citations from the apostle Peter. In his first epistle, he speaks of God’s patience in Noah’s day, while he was constructing the ark (1 Pet 3:20). In his second letter, he accents the Lord’s forbearance toward people of his time: He “is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). The goal of patience is for obtaining salvation: “Regard the patience of our Lord {as} salvation” (2 Pet 3:15).

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# Chapter 7 – God’s Glory

## A. Biblical Data: Old Testament

### 1. Terminology

The Hebrew word for “glory” is כָּבוֹד (*kavod*). Its basic meaning is “heavy.” In that light, one may understand Yahweh’s glory as “weightiness,” that is, His divine qualities and abilities.<sup>469</sup> The word also carries connotations of “riches,” “honor,” “dignity,” and “strength.”<sup>470</sup> Thus, this term speaks of the “intrinsic worth of God’s being.”<sup>471</sup> It relates to the display of His “splendor, wealth, and pomp.”<sup>472</sup>

R. K. Harrison describes the term glory as “a comprehensive term applicable to both men and God, reflecting such qualities as esteem, reputation, essential worth, prestige, fame, and honor.”<sup>473</sup> Some terms serving as synonyms of כָּבוֹד (*kavod*) include אֲדָרֶת (*addereth*), “glory, covering,” צְבִי (*tsevi*), “glory, beauty,” תִּפְאָרָה (*tifarah*), “glory, beauty,” הֹד (*hod*), “glory, authority,” and הִדָּרָה (*hadarah*), “glory, adornment.” The corresponding Aramaic word is יְקָר (*yekar*).<sup>474</sup>

In order to form a clear definition of the concept, we will observe the use of כָּבוֹד (*kavod*) and its synonyms in instances not referring to Yahweh.<sup>475</sup> The word can connote wealth, as in the case with Abraham, who was “was very rich (כָּבוֹד) in livestock, in silver and in gold” (Gen 13:2). Concerning Jacob, we read, “Jacob has taken away all that was our father’s, and from what belonged to our father he has made all this wealth (הַכָּבוֹד)” (Gen 31:1). People “glory” in their riches (Ps 49:16).

This word also reflects status (see Zech 12:7). Joseph said, “Now you must tell my father of all my splendor (כָּבוֹד) in Egypt (Gen 45:13). Isaiah wrote, “The glory (כָּבוֹד) of Moab will be degraded along with all {his} great population, and {his} remnant will be very small {and} impotent” (Isa 16:14). David enjoyed a glorious status (Ps 21:5), as did Joshua (Num 27:20 - תִּד), Saul (2 Sam 1:19 - צְבִי), and Joseph (Gen 45:13). The term “glory” even characterized the graves of the kings of the earth (Isa 14:18).

Glory is displayed in a person’s physical strength: “The glory (תִּפְאָרָה) of young men is their strength” (Prov 20:29). In particular, it can refer to one skilled in war (Isa 8:7), or to a long and healthy life (Prov 16:31; Job 29:20). Human glory includes intellectual prowess (Prov 25:2).<sup>476</sup> Success is also “glory”: “In a multitude of people is a king’s glory (הִדָּרָה)” (Prov 14:28).

The concept of “glory” is associated with one’s reputation in the world. For example, Eliakim “will become a throne of glory to his father’s house” (Isa 22:23). Samuel enjoyed a good reputation (1 Sam 9:6), as did David (1 Sam 22:14), and also Zion (Ps 86:3). In a moral sense, it is one’s glory “to overlook a transgression” (Prov 19:11 - תִּפְאָרָה) and also to “keep away from strife” (Prov 20:3). God has crowned humans “with glory and majesty” (Ps 8:5) by creating them in His image. People’s souls are their “glory” (Gen 49:6; Ps 15:9).

<sup>469</sup>Von Rad shares the interesting observation that, although the basic meaning of כָּבוֹד is “heavy,” in Scripture it is rarely associated with that idea (see Ex 24:15ff; Ezek 1:1ff, Ps 29). God’s glory is usually associated with light. Von Rad notes that describing “glory” as light corresponds to the typical understanding of the term in antiquity (see Von Rad G. כָּבוֹד in the Old Testament // Kittel G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament / trans. Bromiley G. W. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964. – V. 2. – P. 240).

<sup>470</sup>Harrison R. K. Glory // Bromiley G. W. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988. – V. 2. – P. 477.

<sup>471</sup>Howe F. R. Glory // Pfeiffer C. F., Vos H. F., Rea J. The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia. – Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1975. – V. 1. – P. 687.

<sup>472</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 3. – P. 997.

<sup>473</sup>Harrison R. K., v. 2. – p. 477.

<sup>474</sup>Ibid.

<sup>475</sup>Von Rad, τ. 2, p. 238-242; Harrison R. K., v. 2, p. 477-478; Harrison E. F. Glory // Bromiley G. W. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988. – V. 2. – P. 478-482; Huttar D. K. Glory // Elwell W. A. Evangelical dictionary of biblical theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996. – P. 287.

<sup>476</sup>Huttar, p. 287.

The term כְּבוֹד (*kabod*) and its synonyms can apply to the power and beauty of nature (Isa 10:18), for example the “glory of Lebanon” (Isa 35:2; 60:13). It is associated with other objects of beauty, such as the priestly garb (Ex 28:40) and Solomon’s temple (Hag 2:3; 1 Chr 22:5 - תִּפְאָרָה).

## 2. Pentateuch

We begin our study of Yahweh’s glory by examining references from the earliest biblical books. In these writings, the Lord’s glory is usually manifest in a visual form, as a radiance or brilliance. His glory was seen in a cloud (Ex 16:10), on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:10, 15-17; Deut 5:24),<sup>477</sup> and in the tabernacle (Ex 40:34-35). It also visibly appeared to Moses (Ex 33:22).<sup>478</sup> Yahweh consecrated the tabernacle by His glory: “I will meet there with the sons of Israel, and it shall be consecrated by My glory” (Ex 29:43).

Such a visible appearance of Yahweh’s glory can have a physical effect on people. After Moses experienced God’s glory, he “made haste to bow low toward the earth and worship” (Ex 34:8, cf. Ezek 2:1) and “the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him” (Ex 34:29). The Lord warned him that no one can behold His glory in its fullness and survive (Ex 33:18-20).

Yahweh’s glory appeared in connection with important dates in the religious history of His people. For example, He manifested His glorious presence to confirm the sacrificial system, and fire came out from before Him to consume the sacrifice (Lev 9:23-24). His glory also appeared in giving the Law on Sinai (Ex 19-20) and when Moses built the tabernacle (Ex 40). Moreover, God revealed His glory to the entire congregation of Israel when they complained about the conditions in the wilderness (Ex 16:10) and when they rebelled against the leadership of Moses and Aaron (Num 14:10; 16:19, 42; 20:6). So then, a special manifestation of glory served as a visible confirmation of God’s order for His people.

The idea of “glory” also applies to the Lord’s deeds, i.e., the miracles He performs. Numbers 14:22 comments on this: “Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice...”.

Although the word “glory” does not appear in contexts dealing with praise and thanksgiving to God, nonetheless we can confidently say that people were thereby giving Him “glory.” We will cite just a few examples: Abraham “planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of Yahweh, the Everlasting God” (Gen 21:33). Abraham’s servant, who was commissioned to find a bride for Isaac, worshipped Yahweh for granting him success (Gen 24:26-27). The children of Israel triumphantly celebrated before the Lord after the fall of their Egyptian oppressors (Ex 15). God was glorified among the nations by Pharaoh’s overthrow (Ex 9:14-16). Moses twice appealed to Yahweh’s reputation among the nations to motivate Him not to destroy Israel. As a result, God forgave them for His glory’s sake (Num 14:11-20; Ex 32:11-14).

Even at the commencement of biblical history, Yahweh’s glory had an eschatological application. When God was angered by His people’s disobedience, He swore an oath, that “indeed, as I live, all the earth will be filled with the glory of Yahweh” (Num 14:21). Here, the term “glory” refers not so much to the visible appearance of the Lord, as to the establishment of His kingdom on earth.

## 3. Historical Books

In the historical Old Testament books, we witness the following description of Yahweh’s glory. As He did in the days of Moses, God occasionally revealed Himself in a visible form by manifesting His glory. So it was when the temple was completed (1 Kin 8:10-11; 2 Chr 5:13-14), and after Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the temple (2 Chr 7:1-3).

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<sup>477</sup>See Manser M. H. Dictionary of Bible Themes. – London: Martin Manser, 1999. – P. 512-514; Huttar, p. 287-288; Benson C. The Glory of God // Jarman R. C., Benson C. The Grace and the Glory of God. – Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1968. – P. 70; Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 128.

<sup>478</sup>Huttar insightfully comments that the fact that God “manifests” His glory implies that His glory exists “prior to and apart from any manifestation of it” (see Huttar, p. 288).

In addition, in the period of the historical books, Yahweh was again ready to act on behalf of His glory, that is, to protect His reputation. On this basis, David anticipated victory over Goliath (1 Sam 17:45-46), and God promised Hezekiah deliverance from the advancing Assyrians (2 Kin 20:6).

As in other biblical books, in the historical books people glorify God for His greatness and mighty works. For example, after defeating Ai, Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal in honor of Yahweh (Josh 8:30-31). Deborah and Barak, together with all Israel, rejoiced in the Lord after overthrowing the armies of Canaan (Judg 5). Hannah sang to the Lord a song of thanksgiving for the miracle birth of Samuel (1 Sam 2). The exiles who returned from captivity glorified Yahweh for restoring the temple (Ezra 3:10-13; 6:16-18).

David gave thanks to the Lord for promising Him an eternal kingdom (2 Sam 7:18-24), the fulfillment of which would bring Him glory (v. 16). Toward the end of his life, the “sweet psalmist of Israel” ascribed glory to Yahweh with the words, “Yours, O Yahweh, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth” (1 Chr 29:11).<sup>479</sup>

R. K. Harrison points out a special feature of 1 Sam 4:19-22, when the Philistines had captured the ark of the covenant. In response, the wife of Phinehas, the son of Eli the priest, named her newborn son Ichabod, meaning, “The glory has departed from Israel.” The ark of the covenant, which was the symbol of God’s presence, was so closely tied to the Lord Himself that its loss meant to them the loss of Yahweh.<sup>480</sup>

#### 4. Poetical Books

Among the Old Testament poetical books, the Psalms give the greatest attention to the theme of Yahweh’s glory. The psalmists urge all people everywhere to glorify Yahweh, “who is worthy to be praised” (Ps 18:3): “Sing the glory of His name; make His praise glorious” (Ps 66:2).<sup>481</sup> His praise is eternal: “Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 41:13; cf. 104:31). All creation joins this song of praise: “Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and everything that moves in them” (Ps 69:34), the angels as well: “Bless Yahweh, you His angels” (Ps 103:20). The Gentiles must also glorify Him: “Praise Yahweh, all nations; laud Him, all peoples!” (Ps 117:1). Believers in Him do so with a whole heart: “Bless Yahweh, O my soul, and all that is within me, {bless} His holy name” (Ps 103:1). In summary, “Let everything that has breath praise the Yahweh” (Ps 150:6).

Various reasons are given for praising God. He is good (Ps 107:1) and showers us with blessings (Ps 21:1-6). He delivers from death (Ps 30:3) and from all foes (Ps 54:5-7). He is righteous (Ps 7:17) and judges sinners (Ps 58:11). In Psalm 3, Yahweh is the “glory” of the psalmist, being the source of his well-being (Ps 3:3). The word “glory” may refer to the state of well-being itself (see Ps 84:11; 85:9).

The psalmists testify that the Lord defends His reputation and acts on behalf of His glory and His name. The psalmists often appeal to God for aid on this basis:

- How long, O God, will the adversary revile, {and} the enemy spurn Your name forever? (Ps 74:10).
- Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; and deliver us and forgive our sins for Your name's sake (Ps 79:9).
- For Your name's sake You will lead me and guide me (Ps 31:3).
- Return, O Yahweh, rescue my soul; save me because of Your lovingkindness. For there is no mention of You in death; in Sheol who will give You thanks? (Ps 6:4-5).
- Remember, O Lord, the reproach of Your servants; how I bear in my bosom {the reproach of} all the many peoples, with which Your enemies have reproached, O Yahweh, with which they have reproached the footsteps of Your anointed (Ps 89:50-51).

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<sup>479</sup>Harrison R. K., v. 1, p. 478.

<sup>480</sup>Ibid.

<sup>481</sup>Von Rad, v. 2, p. 241; Benson, p. 75; Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 478, 480-481; Manser, p. 30-31; Huttar, p. 278-288; Tozer A. W. The Attributes of God. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 186-187.



Furthermore, Yahweh is the “King of glory” (Ps 24:10), who is “clothed with splendor and majesty” (Ps 104:1), and whose glory is “great” (Ps 138:5). God’s glory is revealed in all creation: “The heavens are telling of the glory of God” (Ps 19:1), and it even extends “above the heavens” (Ps 8:1; 113:4). His glory is evident in His dominion over the earth (Ps 57:5; 108:5). In the following poetic stanzas, the psalmist mentions Yahweh’s glory and then describes its manifestation in the world (Ps 29:1-9):

Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of the mighty, ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength. Ascribe to Yahweh the glory due to His name; worship Yahweh in holy array.

- The voice of Yahweh is upon the waters.
- The God of glory thunders, Yahweh is over many waters.
- The voice of Yahweh is powerful, the voice of Yahweh is majestic.
- The voice of Yahweh breaks the cedars; yes, Yahweh breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.
- He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.
- The voice of Yahweh hews out flames of fire.
- The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness; Yahweh shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
- The voice of Yahweh makes the deer to calve and strips the forests bare; and in His temple everything says, "Glory!"
- Yahweh sat {as King} at the flood; yes, Yahweh sits as King forever.
- Yahweh will give strength to His people; Yahweh will bless His people with peace.

So then, “All the peoples have seen His glory” (Ps 97:6), and, “The nations will fear the name of Yahweh and all the kings of the earth Your glory” (Ps 102:15). Therefore, all people must acknowledge: “Not to us, O Yahweh, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth” (Ps 115:1).

Although Yahweh’s glory extends to all creation, the psalmist speaks of Jerusalem as a place of its special manifestation: “O Yahweh, I love the habitation of Your house and the place where Your glory dwells” (Ps 26:8). This is the place where one may “behold the beauty of Yahweh” (Ps 27:4): “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth” (Ps 50:2).

Finally, we observe in the poetical books a theme that first appeared in the book of Numbers: Yahweh’s glory in the sense of His glorious kingdom, which will encompass the entire earth. The psalmist prays, “O God; {let} Your glory {be} above all the earth” (Ps 57:5, 11; 108:5). We anticipate the fulfillment of the prayer, “May the whole earth be filled with His glory. Amen, and amen” (Ps 72:19). Yahweh’s kingdom, especially in its eschatological form, is a glorious kingdom:

All Your works shall give thanks to You, O Yahweh, and Your godly ones shall bless You. They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom and talk of Your power; to make known to the sons of men Your mighty acts and the glory of the majesty of Your kingdom (Ps 145:10-12).

To enter into God’s glory is not only an eschatological expectation of God’s people in general, but also the personal dream of every individual believer. In Psalm 73:24, we read, “With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory.”

## 5. Prophets

Along with all other biblical authors, the Old Testament prophets join in urging all people everywhere to glorify the Lord.<sup>482</sup> Isaiah, for example, exclaims, “Praise Yahweh in song, for He has done excellent things; let this be known throughout the earth” (Isa 12:5). Furthermore:

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<sup>482</sup>Benson, p. 69-70, 83; Manser, p. 30-31; Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 124-125; Huttar, p. 278-288.

Sing to Yahweh a new song, {sing} His praise from the end of the earth! You who go down to the sea, and all that is in it. You islands, and those who dwell on them. Let the wilderness and its cities lift up {their voices,} the settlements where Kedar inhabits. Let the inhabitants of Sela sing aloud, let them shout for joy from the tops of the mountains. Let them give glory to Yahweh and declare His praise in the coastlands (Isa 42:10-12).

Angels also loudly proclaim, “Blessed be the glory of Yahweh in His place” (Ezek 3:12). His people will join in the chorus: “The people whom I formed for Myself will declare My praise,” (Isa 43:21) because “great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (Isa 12:6).

The only proper response to this glorious and almighty Being is to worship and recognize His greatness. This will take place universally in His kingdom: “To Me every knee will bow, every tongue will swear {allegiance}” (Isa 45:23), and, “It shall be from new moon to new moon and from sabbath to sabbath, all mankind will come to bow down before Me” (Isa 66:23).

Consequently, God soundly rebukes those who refuse to give Him proper glory, as in the case of Nebuchadnezzar. While he was gloating over his power and greatness, a voice came from heaven: “You will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place {will be} with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes” (Dan 4:32). After this time, Nebuchadnezzar freely admitted, “I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom {endures} from generation to generation” (v. 34). Yet, the next king, Belshazzar, succumbed to the same temptation of pride and lost his kingdom as a result (Dan chp. 5).

A similar example is taken from the following chapter of Daniel. After Daniel’s miraculous deliverance from the lion’s den, King Darius was compelled to admit, “He is the living God and enduring forever, and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed, and His dominion {will be} forever” (Dan 6:26). At times, though, even God’s people glorified themselves instead of Him: “Have we not by our {own} strength taken Karnaim for ourselves?” (Amos 6:13). However, Yahweh will not permit such arrogance: “‘For behold, I am going to raise up a nation against you, O house of Israel,’ declares Yahweh, God of hosts, ‘And they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath to the brook of the Arabah’” (v. 14). God does not give His glory to another (Isa 42:8; 48:11).

Unlike other Old Testament writings, the reason for glorifying Yahweh in the prophetic books is more commonly His judgements. Concerning Sidon, it is written, “Behold, I am against you, O Sidon, and I will be glorified in your midst. Then they will know that I am Yahweh, when I execute judgments in her, and I will manifest My holiness in her” (Ezek 28:22).

The same judgment awaits Magog: “And I will send fire upon Magog and those who inhabit the coastlands in safety; and they will know that I am Yahweh. My holy name I will make known in the midst of My people Israel; and I will not let My holy name be profaned anymore. And the nations will know that I am Yahweh, the Holy One in Israel” (Ezek 39:6-7). In the end times, all the earth will see God glorious in judgment (Isa 66:18). In summary, Isaiah writes, “Yahweh of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness” (Isa 5:16; cf. 33:10-13). As a result of the Lord’s judgment of the earth, “they will fear the name of Yahweh from the west and His glory from the rising of the sun” (Isa 59:19; cf. Isa 2:10, 19, 21).

The prophets advance other reasons for praising Yahweh as well. His care for His people brings Him fame (Isa 41:20). By delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage, God made for Himself “a glorious name” (Isa 63:14). Israel will also glorify God for their future restoration (Isa 57:18-19; 29:22-23) and prosperity (Joel 2:23-26). The Old Testament abounds with examples of personal offerings of praise for blessings received. For example,

Jonah thanked God for deliverance from death (Jon 2:1-9), and Daniel for the revelations he received (Dan 2:20-23).<sup>483</sup>

In the prophets, God defending His honor before the nations is even more pronounced.<sup>484</sup> When threatened by the invading Assyrians, Hezekiah prays, "Now, O Yahweh our God, deliver us from his hand that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that You alone, Yahweh, are God" (Isa 37:20). God answers through Isaiah, "I will defend this city to save it for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" (Isa 37:35). Likewise, Jeremiah appeals to Yahweh on the basis of His reputation and His covenant promise to Israel: "Do not despise {us,} for Your own name's sake; do not disgrace the throne of Your glory; remember {and} do not annul Your covenant with us" (Jer 14:21).

The Lord is dishonored whenever His people suffer defeat (Isa 52:5), but receives glory when they succeed (Isa 26:15). God offers forgiveness of sins for the sake of His glory: "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isa 43:25), and, "For the sake of My name I delay My wrath, and {for} My praise I restrain {it} for you, in order not to cut you off" (Isa 48:9). In Ezekiel, this theme appears often. God revealed to him that for His glory's sake He restrained from destroying Israel in the wilderness:

- But they rebelled against Me and were not willing to listen to Me; they did not cast away the detestable things of their eyes, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they {lived,} in whose sight I made Myself known to them by bringing them out of the land of Egypt (Ezek 20:8-9).
- Then I resolved to pour out My wrath on them in the wilderness, to annihilate them. But I acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations, before whose sight I had brought them out (Ezek 20:13-14).
- So I resolved to pour out My wrath on them, to accomplish My anger against them in the wilderness. But I withdrew My hand and acted for the sake of My name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations in whose sight I had brought them out (Ezek 20:21-22).

Yahweh not only restrains His wrath, but will also restore Israel for His name's sake:

- Therefore say to the house of Israel, "Thus says the Lord Yahweh, 'It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am Yahweh'" (Ezek 36:22-23).
- "Then you will know that I am Yahweh when I have dealt with you for My name's sake, not according to your evil ways or according to your corrupt deeds, O house of Israel," declares the Lord Yahweh (Ezek 20:44)

The prophets also testify to an aspect of Yahweh's glory first mentioned in the Torah: a visible manifestation of His presence. Unlike the Torah, however, in the prophets God reveals Himself in visions rather than in a visible radiance. For example, Isaiah had his famous vision of God's glory, seated on His throne (Isa 6:1).<sup>485</sup> Ezekiel had similar experiences (Ezek 1:26-28; 8:4; 9:3; 10:3-4, 19; 43:1-5), and Daniel saw a vision of the "Ancient of Days" (Dan 7:9-10).

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<sup>483</sup>Interestingly, the Lord's glory is displayed not only in revealing mysteries, but also in concealing them (Prov 25:2). See Huttar, p. 287-288.

<sup>484</sup>Grudem proposes that the concept of God protecting His glory is connected to His jealousy, as noted in Exodus 20:5, that He is "a jealous God" (See Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 205).

<sup>485</sup>Howe feels that the main goal for God manifesting His glory to Isaiah was for the latter to experience His holiness (see Howe, v. 1, p. 687).

Finally, Yahweh's glory is connected with the people of Israel, especially in an eschatological sense. In the last days, God will glorify His people: "Behold, you will call a nation you do not know, and a nation which knows you not will run to you, because of Yahweh your God, even the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you" (Isa 55:5); and, "I bring near My righteousness, it is not far off; and My salvation will not delay. And I will grant salvation in Zion, {and} My glory for Israel" (Isa 43:7). Israel is to the Lord "The branch of My planting, the work of My hands, that I may be glorified" (Isa 61:3).

In chapter 60 of his prophecy, Isaiah speaks of the future glorification of Jerusalem: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of Yahweh has risen upon you" (Isa 60:1). The Lord promised, "I shall glorify My glorious house" (v. 7). Other nations will bring treasures to Jerusalem, because God will glorify it (v. 9, 13).

Isaiah chapter 35 deals with the glorification of Jerusalem as well: "The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of Yahweh, the majesty of our God" (Isa 35:2; cf. Isa 66:12). In addition, Yahweh will prepare favorable conditions for His chosen city, which are called "glory": "Then Yahweh will create over the whole area of Mount Zion and over her assemblies a cloud by day, even smoke, and the brightness of a flaming fire by night; for over all the glory will be a canopy" (Isa 4:5).

Along with this, Yahweh will create for Israel "glory" in the sense of a brightness: "No longer will you have the sun for light by day, nor for brightness will the moon give you light; but you will have Yahweh for an everlasting light, and your God for your glory" (Isa 60:19). Zechariah gives a similar prediction: "For I, 'declares Yahweh,' will be a wall of fire around her, and I will be the glory in her midst" (Zech 2:5). In a vision, Ezekiel saw the glory of the Lord entering the new temple (Ezek 43:2-5: 44:4).

Habakkuk reminds us that God's glory will not only visit Israel and its capital, but will spread across the world as well: "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14; cf. 3:3). Malachi echoes this thought: "For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name {will be} great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering {that is} pure; for My name {will be} great among the nations" (Mal 1:11).

Finally, the coming glorification of Israel is associated with the coming of Messiah. Isaiah writes about Him, "His resting place will be glorious" (Isa 11:10). In the person of Messiah, "the glory of Yahweh will be revealed" (Isa 40:5). Under the figure of "Israel," we also read about Messiah, "You are My Servant, Israel, in Whom I will show My glory" (Isa 49:3).

## 6. Summary

It is fair to say that the Hebrew term *כָּבוֹד* (*kavod*) captures well the concept of "glory," since it carries such meanings as "wealth," "honor," "dignity," "power," "status" and "beauty." All the praiseworthy characteristics of Yahweh are found in the concept of "glory."

In the Old Testament narrative, God's glory is sometimes a manifestation of His presence in a heavenly radiance. He revealed His visible glory at key moments in the history of His people, which underscored the importance of these events. The prophets saw this glory in visions. Yahweh's glorious presence was also identified with the ark of the covenant, which also carried the designation "glory."

The term "glory" is also associated with the mighty works the Lord does. He receives glory (in the sense of recognition) for His deeds from people. He values, in fact, His reputation among the nations. The Old Testament abounds with instances where God acts in judgment or in mercy for His name's sake. On this basis, His people often appeal to Him for help.

"Glory" also refers to the favorable conditions that await the world in the end times during the earthly reign of Messiah, when "all the earth will be filled with the glory of Yahweh." Finally, the Old Testament teaches that Yahweh is jealous of His glory. He punishes those who fail to give Him proper recognition. He will not give His glory to another.

## B. Intertestamental Period

The intertestamental writers were not strangers to the topic of God's glory.<sup>486</sup> The Greek term δόξα (*doksa*), which was employed in this literature, corresponds in meaning to the Hebrew כבוד (*kavod*). When the term is used not in reference to the Lord, it can refer to honor paid to people for their greatness, as shown below:

- These things are written in the book of the histories of the kings of Judæa, and every one of the acts that Josias did, and his glory (*1 Esdras*, 1.33).
- But when they came unto her, they all blessed her with one accord, and said unto her, thou art the exaltation of Jerusalem, thou art the great glory of Israel, thou art the great rejoicing of our race (*Judith*, 15.9).

The term "glory" describes the beauty and splendor of the Jerusalem temple (*2 Macc.*, 5.16, 20) and also the city itself: "For Jerusalem shall be builded again as his house unto all the ages. Happy shall I be if the remnant of my seed come to see thy glory" (*Tobit*, 13.16).

Sometimes the mention of "glory" recalls a famous Old Testament event, such as Yahweh's visitation on Mount Sinai (*4 Ezra*, 3.19; *Sirach*, 17.13), or the revelation of God's glory to Moses (*Sirach*, 45.3). Other passages depict God's glory as a visible entity: "I am Raphael, one of the seven angels, which stand and enter before the glory of the Lord" (*Tobit*, 12.15).

In the intertestamental period, the concept of "glory" is also applied to the summation of all God's attributes. We read in *1 Esdras*, 5.61: "His goodness and his glory are for ever in all Israel." We read about the Lord's wisdom, "She is a breath of the power of God, and a clear effluence of the glory of the Almighty" (*Wis. Sol.*, 7.25). Finally, we read in *4 Ezra*, 8.30, "Love them that have always put their trust in thy glory."

## C. Biblical Data: New Testament

### 1. Terminology

The New Testament term for "glory" is δόξα (*doksa*).<sup>487</sup> It originates from the verb δοκέω (*dokeo*), that is, "think," "seem," and has derived meanings like "opinion" and "reputation" (usually in a positive sense). Josephus and Philo employed the term in just such a way. Those authors also sometimes used the word for "majesty" or some type of "brilliance." Philo had a unique interpretation of Exodus 33:18, where Moses asked the Lord, "Show me Your glory." Philo proposed here that the word "glory" meant some type of ministering powers that surrounded God.

In their use of the term δόξα (*doksa*), the New Testament writers borrowed connotations from the Hebrew כבוד (*kavod*) and its synonyms, including: "majesty," "beauty," "greatness," and "brilliance." The meanings "honor" and "reputation" were also preserved, but are found less often.

We will first examine texts utilizing the concept of "glory" not referring to Yahweh. In 1 Corinthians 15:40-41, we encounter the ideas, "heavenly glory," "earthly glory," "glory of the sun," "glory of the moon," and "glory of the stars." Here, "glory" refers to the summation of all the qualities of an object and thus serves as a synonym for "nature."<sup>488</sup> Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 11:7 "glory" stands in parallel to "image" and has a similar meaning – "reflection." Finally, the "glory of Solomon," mentioned in Matthew 6:29, refers to the summation of his riches and royal grandeur. We can ascribe the same meaning to the phrase "glory of the kingdoms of the world" in Matthew 4:8, and "glory of men" in 1 Peter 1:24.<sup>489</sup>

<sup>486</sup>Harrison R. K., v. 2, p. 478.

<sup>487</sup>Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 478; Kittel G. δόξα // Kittel G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament / trans. Bromiley G. W. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964. – V. 2. – P. 233-244.

<sup>488</sup>Huttar understands these examples as a "light" or "brilliance," which finds confirmation in the use of δόξα (*doksa*) in Acts 22:11 (see Huttar, p. 282-288).

<sup>489</sup>Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 479-480.

## 2. Synoptic Gospels and Book of Acts

Our investigation of the idea of “glory” continues with an examination of the Synoptic Gospels and the Book of Acts.<sup>490</sup> At the time of the Savior’s birth, the “glory of the Lord shone around” the shepherds (Lk 2:9). Here we are dealing with a visible brilliance, possibly emitting from the heavenly messengers. Later in the Savior’s career, He was transfigured, clothed in heavenly glory, and conversed with Moses and Elijah, also “appearing in glory” (Lk 9:29-32). Again, we are dealing with a visible radiance. Likely, Stephen had a similar experience of beholding God’s glory in a vision before his death (Acts 7:55).

When we read of the glorious coming of Messiah (see Matt 24:30; Mk 8:38; Lk 21:27), we are dealing not with a visible brilliance, but with a demonstration of the power and might of the Son of God. At the time of His Second Coming, He will establish the kingdom of God on earth. Correspondingly, He will sit on “His glorious throne” (Matt 25:31). Similarly, when James and John ask for a place “one on Your right and one on {Your} left, in Your glory” (Mk 10:37), they also mean status in Christ’s kingdom. Finally, the saying, “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” likely refers to His inheriting the kingdom.

Nonetheless, cases exist where the term “glory” refers to the Lord in a general sense, serving like a name, such as “the God of glory” (Acts 7:2). It is curious to note that the glory of the Son differs from the glory of the Father. Jesus said, “...when He comes in His glory, and {the glory} of the Father and of the holy angels” (Lk 9:26). Most likely, the difference between them does not concern their dignity or quality, but their position or status. When the Son became incarnate, He thereby voluntarily humbled Himself.

As it was in the Old Testament, in the New Testament people also respond to the Lord’s greatness by giving Him glory. The leper healed by Jesus returned to “give God glory” (Lk 17:15, 18). In addition, the people glorified God for the miraculous healing of the lame man at the temple (Acts 4:21). The shepherds, after seeing the newborn Messiah, glorified the Lord (Lk 2:20) along with the angels (Lk 2:14). God received glory for the healing of the lame man in Luke 5:24-26, and at the Triumphal Entry of Messiah into Jerusalem (Lk 19:38).<sup>491</sup>

In general, the Father receives glory not only for specific acts of grace and power, but also for His work *in toto*: through Paul (Acts 21:19-20), through the entire Church (Matt 5:16), or through Christ (Matt 15:31). Jesus is the “glory of Your people of Israel” (Lk 2:32).

We note two final points. God not only receives glory, but also glorifies. For example, He glorified the Son through His resurrection from the dead (Acts 3:13-15). However, those who refuse to give the Lord glory suffer the consequences (Acts 12:20-23).

## 3. General Epistles and Hebrews

Next, we examine the General Epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews.<sup>492</sup> Here we often see references, as is the case throughout Scripture, to God being worthy of glory. People must praise Him, especially believers, who are “a people for {God’s} own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9).

Believers glorify the Lord not only by words, but also by their lives. When they successfully pass through trials and temptations, it results in “praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:7). They also glorify Him in their ministries (1 Pet 4:11). Not only believers glorify the Lord, but unbelievers will be compelled to do so as well for the good works done by the Church (1 Pet 2:12). In the final analysis, God is worthy of glory forever and ever (1 Pet 4:11; Jude 24-25; 2 Pet 3:18).

In addition, the concept of glory is closely associated with the person of God. Jesus is the “Lord of glory” (Jam 2:1). Here, “glory” refers to the sum total of His attributes. Jesus is also the “radiance of (the Father’s) glory” (Heb 1:3), i.e., the exact reflection of His nature. Benson makes the following comment: Jesus is “the

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<sup>490</sup>See Benson, p. 73; Manser, p. 30-31; Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 3, p. 998-999.

<sup>491</sup>Also see examples in Matt 15:31; Mk 2:12; Lk 4:15 (Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 483).

<sup>492</sup>See Benson, p. 78; Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 3, p. 998-999; Bloesch, p. 124, 128; Manser, p. 30-31; Howe, v. 1, p. 687.

living embodiment of the glory of God.”<sup>493</sup> In 2 Peter 1:17, the word “glory” becomes a name for God the Father – the “Majestic Glory.” According to Jude 24, to stand before God is to “stand before the presence of His glory.” In virtue of their association with the Lord’s glorious presence in the temple, one may call the cherubim, “cherubim of glory” (Heb 9:5).

In 1 Peter 1:21, the glorification of God’s Son applies to His exaltation after His resurrection. The Father “raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory.” The idea of glory as “status” is reflected in Hebrews 2:7-8, where the status of humanity is compared to the status of angels: “...you have crowned him with glory and honor, and have appointed him over the works of your hands; you have put all things in subjection under his feet.” The next verse speaks of Christ’s position of authority, which He attained by virtue of His redemptive work: “...because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor” (Heb 2:9). The prophets foresaw this (1 Pet 1:11).

Jesus’ redemptive work not only qualified Him to receive glory and honor, but also enabled Him to “lead many sons to glory” (Heb 2:10). Christ did not seek His own glory, but received it from the Father (Heb 5:5).

2 Peter 1:3 reveals another aspect of the concept “glory.” In this verse, God “called us by His own glory and excellence.” The context of this verse is the sanctification of the believer. Additionally, the word “glory” stands in parallel with the word ἀρετή (*arete*), which can mean “excellence of character”.<sup>494</sup> So then, the term may carry a moral connotation in the sense of “holiness.” God’s glory includes not only His power and greatness, but His moral excellence as well.

As was apparent in other parts of the Bible, “glory” also applies to the future glorious conditions the people of God will enjoy in His eternal kingdom (1 Pet 5:10), which will be revealed “at the revelation of His glory” (1 Pet 4:13). The benefits to be received at that time are summed up in the expression “crown of glory” (1 Pet 5:4). Peter serves the Lord with the confidence that he will become “a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed” (1 Pet 5:1).

Even in this life, the believer may experience a foretaste of this glorious state. God promises the believer enduring persecution a special experience of His glory: “If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (1 Pet 4:14). In light of the future salvation that is about to be revealed, believers have good reason to rejoice “with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet 1:8).

Final points to be made in this section: during Christ’s transfiguration, God’s glory took a visible form (2 Pet 1:17), and the Son’s glory far exceeds the glory of any other, particularly that of Moses (Heb 3:3).

#### 4. Epistles of Paul

The apostle Paul devotes much attention to the topic of Yahweh’s glory.<sup>495</sup> Along with other biblical authors, Paul lists many reasons to give Him glory. He is worthy of glory for the gift of salvation (Gal 1:4-5), for success in ministry (2 Cor 10:15-17), for the spiritual growth of the Church (2 Thes 1:3), for the Church’s sacrificial spirit (2 Cor 9:13), for deliverance from danger (2 Cor 1:11), for Paul’s conversion (Gal 1:24), etc.

Believers not only glorify God for blessings received, but also seek new opportunities to give Him glory. They can glorify Him in their “bodies” (1 Cor 6:20), as well as “whatever (they) do in word or deed” (Col 3:17). Paul’s desire is that “whether by life or by death” Christ would always be glorified through him (Phil 1:20).

Paul not infrequently expresses eloquent praise to the One worthy of glory:

- Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, {be} honor and glory forever and ever (1 Tim 1:17).

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<sup>493</sup>Benson C. The Glory of God // Jarman R. C., Benson C. The Grace and the Glory of God. – Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1968. – P. 78.

<sup>494</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 130.

<sup>495</sup>See Bloesch, p. 124-125, 128; Manser, p. 30-31; Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 480-482; Benson, p. 75-77; Kittel, p. 248; Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 3, p. 998-999.

- To Him {be} the glory forever and ever (2 Tim 4:18).
- To the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever (Rom 16:27).
- Now to our God and Father {be} the glory forever and ever (Phil 4:20).
- To Him {be} honor and eternal dominion! (1 Tim 6:16).
- For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him {be} the glory forever (Rom 11:36).

In Paul's writings, we again encounter the phenomenon that the word "glory" describes the Lord in a total sense to the degree that it becomes a name or title for God. For example, in 1 Corinthians 2:8, Christ is called the "Lord of glory." In addition, Paul speaks of the Father as the "Father of glory" (Eph 1:17). The term can also refer to specific attributes of the Lord, such as His incorporeality (Rom 1:23), holiness (Rom 3:23), power (Rom 6:4; Eph 3:16; Col 1:11; 2 Thes 1:9), and mercy (Rom 9:23; Eph 1:6).

A key feature of God's glory is the role it plays in His overall plan. The main Scripture passage for our consideration here is the first chapter of Ephesians. In verses 5 and 6, we read, "He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, *to the praise of the glory of His grace*, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved." Later, in verses 11-12, we read, "We have obtained an inheritance... to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be *to the praise of His glory*." Finally, in verses 13-14 it states that our redemption results in "*the praise of His glory*."

It appears, then, that bringing God glory is a primary goal in His redemptive plan. Both through the saved and through the Savior, God receives eternal glory (Eph 3:21; Phil 2:11). This theme appears in other epistles of Paul as well (see Phil 1:11; 2 Thes 1:11-12).

God's salvation plan not only brings Him glory, but also provides further insight into the concept of His glory. In 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, Paul describes the gospel as "the gospel of the glory of Christ" and "the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." In other words, the glory of the Lord is especially evident in the wisdom and mercy that He displayed in saving people through Christ. The mystery of the gospel not only brings us a revelation of God's glory, but also was "predestined before the ages to our glory" (1 Cor 2:7).

We already saw in Peter's second epistle that the idea of "glory" can apply to the Lord's moral character. Paul reflects this understanding as well. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, he teaches that believers "are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory." Clearly, Paul's meaning is the progressive transformation of the believer's character. Consequently, "glory" can connote the moral quality of believers in Jesus. This agrees with Paul's words that God calls us "into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thes 2:12). We need this spiritual renewal because we all "fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23), i.e., we do not measure up to the Lord's moral excellence.

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul compares the glory of Moses' ministry with the glory of the new covenant in Christ. Paul shows that the glory of God that transforms a person's life far exceeds in significance a visible manifestation of glory, as seen in the giving of the Law (2 Cor 3:7-11). E. F. Harrison summarizes, "The old is symbolized by the glory on the face of Moses, a glory that faded. The new is expressed in terms of a glory that is a permanent element and also permits of increasing participation by the saints."<sup>496</sup>

In Ephesians 3:16, the Lord's glory is presented in a different light – as a source of strength: "...that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man." Likewise, God's "riches in glory" is the source for meeting every human need (Phil 4:19). E. F. Harrison comments on Philippians 4:19 by saying, "The divine resources will prove ample to meet the needs of God's pilgrim people."<sup>497</sup>

Finally, along with many other biblical writers, the apostle Paul sees in the term "glory" a reference to the future inheritance by believers of God's eternal kingdom (Rom 8:30). At that time, the full glory of the Incarnate Son will be revealed (Tit 2:13). Believers who endure to the end will share that experience of

<sup>496</sup>Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 482.

<sup>497</sup>Ibid., p. 480.



glorification (Rom 8:17), which includes receiving a body that is “raised in glory” (1 Cor 15:43) and corresponds to the resurrected body of Jesus (Phil 3:21). For believers, Christ is the “hope of glory” (Col 1:27). The Christian’s hope is that “when Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory” (Col 3:4). Not only people, but also “the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:21). Christ has already entered “glory” (1 Tim 3:16).

For now, our glorious inheritance remains a future hope (Rom 5:2), and we acknowledge, “The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18; cf. 2 Cor 4:17). Such a hope motivates Paul for ministry: “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus {and} with {it} eternal glory” (2 Tim 2:10). In addition, Paul considers the congregations that he planted during his ministry his “glory and joy” (1 Thes 2:20).

## 5. Writings of John

In John’s Gospel, we read where Jesus associated God’s glory with the resurrection of Lazarus. On the one hand, the manifestation of resurrection power serves as a demonstration of God’s glory (Jn 11:40). On the other hand, the Son is also glorified thereby (Jn 11:4). John highlights Jesus’ glorification in order to inspire the readers to believe in Him (Jn 20:31). The first miracle Jesus did was a demonstration of His personal glory, not the glory of the Father (Jn 2:11). In one way or another, all the signs recorded in the Fourth Gospel give grounds for its reader to embrace faith in Jesus Christ.

Additionally, throughout the Gospel of John we observe that the relationship between the Father and the Son involves a “reciprocal glorification.” As was mentioned before, the manifestation of God’s glory in the resurrection of Lazarus also brought glory to the Son. John 8:50-54 reveals that the Son does not seek His own glory, but that of the Father: “But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges.... If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me.” Jesus seeks glory from the Father, not from people (Jn 5:41, 44; 7:18).

The Son’s glorification by the Father occurs not only in His miracle ministry, but also in His redemptive sacrifice, prior to which Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You” (Jn 17:1; cf. 12:23-24, 28; 13:31).<sup>498</sup> In addition, the Father glorifies the Son by restoring His heavenly glory, which he enjoyed from eternity past, and which Isaiah saw (see Jn 12:41). The Son prays “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (Jn 17:5; cf. 17:24). Christ is glorified by the Father in all things: “All things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them” (Jn 17:10). The giving of the Holy Spirit is also connected to the glorification of the Son (Jn 7:39).

In this reciprocal relationship, however, not only does the Father glorify the Son, but the Son glorifies the Father. John 17:4 indicates that Christ accomplished this by completing His mission: “I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.” The Father receives glory not only through the Son’s ministry, but also through His redemptive work (see Jn 13:31). In summary, the Father glorifies the Son in life, death and resurrection, and reciprocally receives glory through Him. In the words of the Savior: “Now is the Son of Man glorified, and God is glorified in Him; if God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and will glorify Him immediately.” (Jn 13:31-32). In turn, the Holy Spirit also glorifies Jesus (Jn 16:14).

However, John has more to say about “glory” than just the reciprocal glorification of the Father and Son. Christ gives the glory of God to His disciples: “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them” (Jn 17:22). We must not understand this as a communication of deity to the disciples. The context makes clear that Jesus is transmitting moral qualities, which are characteristic of the Father, to His disciples. God’s glory as “moral attributes” is highlighted in other passages in this context as well. Correspondingly, the Savior prays

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<sup>498</sup>Bloesch, p. 124.

that the Father will keep them from evil (v. 15), “keep them in Your name,” (v. 11), and, “sanctify them in the truth” (v. 17). Again, we are dealing here with the sanctification of believers. “Glory” is associated with His name (v. 6, 26) and His Word (v. 8, 14), which reflect His character as well.

God not only gives glory to the disciples, but also receives glory by the fruit His glory produces in their lives. Jesus charged His followers, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and {so} prove to be My disciples” (Jn 15:8). The Father is also glorified by answering the disciples’ prayers (Jn 14:13). The disciples can glorify God not only in life, but also in death (Jn 21:19).

John 1:14 is a key passage for our topic: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” First, we note that Jesus brings the Father glory not only through His miracles, redemptive death, etc., as mentioned above, but He Himself is the perfect reflection of the Father’s nature. The phrase “His glory” refers to all aspects of Jesus’ life and work: His behavior, relationships with people, miracle ministry, moral quality, etc.

As the “Only Begotten from the Father,” Jesus demonstrates by His life the Father’s character. This is why it says, “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained {Him}” (Jn 1:18). Howe describes the glory demonstrated by Christ as “the fullness or sum of all the perfections of the Godhead.”<sup>499</sup> At the same time, Howe makes the important qualification that in His incarnate state, it was impossible for the Son to manifest the Father’s glory in every respect.<sup>500</sup>

A highly dramatic demonstration of God’s glory is seen in the final book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Joining in the worship of Yahweh are angels, elders, and the “four beasts” (4:9-11; 7:11-12; 5:11-12), the saints (7:9-10; 15:2-4; 19:5-7), and all creation (5:13). Even unbelievers are summoned to glorify Him (14:7; 16:9) and at times do so (15:4; 11:13). All glory rightfully belongs only to Him (19:1; 1:6).

The following episode from the book of Revelation reminds us of a similar demonstration of the Lord’s glory in the Old Testament. When seven angels prepare to pour out their bowls of wrath, “the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from His power” (Rev 15:8).

Finally, the book of Revelation closes with an interesting passage where the word “glory” is used in various senses in a single context:

And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp {is} the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. In the daytime (for there will be no night there) its gates will never be closed; and they will bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it (Rev 21:23-26).

On the one hand, concerning the nations, “glory” refers to riches. On the other hand, it also describes the radiance emitting from God’s presence.<sup>501</sup> Earlier, it was said of the New Jerusalem that it has “the glory of God” (Rev 21:11), likely another reference to divine radiance. The angel of God mentioned in Revelation 18:1 glowed to such a degree that “the earth was illumined with his glory.”

## 6. Summary

The New Testament usage of δόξα (*doksa*) differs from its secular use. In particular, it lacks the meaning “opinion.” Due to the influence of the Septuagint, the term δόξα (*doksa*) began to carry the full semantic weight of the Hebrew כָּבוֹד (*kavod*) and its synonyms.

Consequently, in the New Testament the term δόξα (*doksa*) can refer both to Yahweh Himself, and to any of His attributes as well. We also observe instances where δόξα (*doksa*) describes a visible manifestation of God’s presence as a radiance. Yet, we encounter this usage less often than in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God’s glory is perfectly manifest in the person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>499</sup>Howe, v. 1, p. 687.

<sup>500</sup>Ibid.

<sup>501</sup>In Rev 1:16 we also see a visible brilliance in the face of the glorified Christ (see Bloesch, p. 124).

The concept of “glory” is closely connected with the Son’s mission and His relationship with the Father. In Christ’s miracle ministry, death, resurrection, and exaltation, the Father glorified the Son and was reciprocally glorified through Him, since God’s plan of salvation accomplished in Jesus brings the Father praise as well. The Son’s exaltation included the restoration of the heavenly glory that He enjoyed with the Father from before creation.

God’s glory serves as a source of strength and provision for the people of God. “Glory” applies not only to the Lord’s might, but also to His holy character, which believers are called to emulate. To enable followers of Jesus to attain that calling, God gives “His glory” to them in the sense of spiritual endowment and renewal.

In the New Testament, we often encounter the idea of “glory” in respect to the end times. The Second Coming of Messiah will be accompanied by great glory, as will be His earthly reign. Believers will participate in God’s kingdom in glorified bodies. Even in this life, they can taste of this future glory, and anticipating the full experience of this glory can enable them to endure trials in this life.

Finally, the word “glory” is synonymous with “praise” and describes the suitable response of people to the Lord and His great works. The book of Revelation provides us with many examples of those who glorify God, even cases where unbelievers do so.

#### D. Conclusions

In our study of the biblical idea of “glory,” we are struck by its various shades of meaning. It is difficult to summarize it in a narrow definition. R. K. Harrison correctly comments that this concept includes such various factors as “nature,” “status,” “praise,” “reward,” “recognition,” and “works.”<sup>502</sup>

All the various meanings of this term, though, relate to the person of God Himself. It denotes the sum total of all His qualities, including His visible manifestation and His external deeds. Various authors have captured this sense in the following definitions.

According to Erickson, “When used with respect to God, it (i.e., כְּבוֹד) does not point to one particular attribute, but to the greatness of his entire nature.”<sup>503</sup> Likewise, Blessitt comments, “The glory of God in essence is ‘all that God is!’ ... every quality that is desirable in God.”<sup>504</sup> E. F. Harrison speaks of it as “the totality of God’s revealed perfections,” or “the absolute uniqueness of his person in view of the completeness and perfection of his attributes.”<sup>505</sup> R. K. Harrison adds that this term also applies to “His moral uniqueness and grandeur as Lord of the universe.”<sup>506</sup> Henry contributes the thought, “When it refers to the panoply of God’s attributes, we may consider the term glory to be the preferred biblical equivalent for the term infinitude or infinity in respect to the divine nature.”<sup>507</sup>

Strong writes, “Glory is not itself a divine attribute; it is rather a result – an objective result – of the exercise of the divine attributes.... He does all for his own glory. All religion is founded on the glory of God. All worship is the result of this immanent quality of the divine nature.”<sup>508</sup>

Manser’s definition is concise, but accurate. He feels that God’s glory is “the revelation of God’s power and characteristics, sometimes accompanied by visible phenomena.”<sup>509</sup> In Benson’s view, God’s glory is “the revelation of God’s being, nature, and presence to mankind, usually with physical phenomena,” or “*a manifestation of His person or His power.*”<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>502</sup>Harrison R. K., v. 2, p. 477-478.

<sup>503</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998. – P. 1008.

<sup>504</sup>Blessitt A. Glory. – Hollywood, CA: Blessitt Publishing, 1988. – P. 7-8.

<sup>505</sup>Harrison E. F. The Use of DOXA in Greek Literature with Special Reference to the New Testament. Noted in Henry, C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority – Waco, TX: Word Books, 1976-1983; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999. – V. 5. – P. 232-233.

<sup>506</sup>Harrison R. K., v. 2, p. 477-478.

<sup>507</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 232-233.

<sup>508</sup>Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 256.

<sup>509</sup>Manser, p. 30-31.

<sup>510</sup>Benson, p. 47.

Bilaniuk makes a distinction, where "God's intrinsic glory is God Himself (attributes)," while "His extrinsic glory is expressed in creation, a manifestation of intrinsic glory."<sup>511</sup> Similarly, Kittel describes "glory" as "a term for this divine nature or essence either in its invisible or its perceptible form."<sup>512</sup>

In discussing God's glory, one must not fail to mention that its most complete manifestation is found in the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Henry emphasizes, "The glory of God is supremely revealed in the God-man Jesus Christ. Christ is the effulgence of divine glory (Heb. 1:3), that is, his life and work make known the divine perfections."<sup>513</sup>

The term "glory" can refer to the recognition of what God is worthy of in virtue of His perfections. Kittel clarifies that when people "give" the Lord glory, they not so much "give" Him something, as they simply acknowledge who He already is.<sup>514</sup> Von Rad concurs: "In relation to man, כְּבוֹד (i.e. "glory") denotes that which makes him impressive and demands recognition.... In relation to God it implies that which makes God impressive to man, the force of His self-manifestation."<sup>515</sup>

In response to the objection that it seems inappropriate for Yahweh to seek His own glory, we respond that He is worthy of it. Strong explains that when God seeks His own glory, He is not displaying an unhealthy self-absorption, but rather "self-respect, self-preservation, self-vindication." His glory "constitutes an important characteristic of holiness." The basis of His self-respect is "the purity and righteousness of the divine nature." Strong concludes, "God's self-respect implies that God respects himself for something in his own being."<sup>516</sup>

Finally, the Lord invites believers in Him to share in His glory. E. F. Harrison comments on the development of this idea in the Bible. In the Old Testament, "glory" for the most part applied to God, and the people of God merely gazed on His glory. In the New Testament, however, God's people are not simply spectators, but also participants in God's glory through Christ.<sup>517</sup> Consequently, the blessed eschatological expectation of the saints is described by the word "glory."

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<sup>511</sup>Bilaniuk P. The Holiness of God in Eastern Orthodoxy // Sontag F., Bryant M. D. God: The Contemporary Discussion. – New York: The Rose of Sharon Press, 1982. – P. 60.

<sup>512</sup>Kittel, p. 244.

<sup>513</sup>Henry, v. 5, p. 232-233.

<sup>514</sup>Kittel, p. 244.

<sup>515</sup>Von Rad, v. 2, p. 238.

<sup>516</sup>Strong, p. 270.

<sup>517</sup>Harrison E. F., v. 2, p. 482.

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## Section 2: God's Three-In-Oneness

### Chapter 8 - The Nature of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity states that there is only one God, who exists in three Persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let us investigate this important, but highly problematic teaching.

#### A. Biblical Data and the Intertestamental Period

##### 1. Testimony of the Old Testament

###### a. God's "Oneness"

One of the chief characteristics of Old Testament faith, which distinguishes it from other ancient religions, is the uncompromising conviction that there is only one God. God's Old Testament people are famous for their article of faith called the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!" (Deut 6:4), or, in Hebrew: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד. In translating this verse, it is important to note that the word אֶחָד (*ehad*) is a simple numeral, indicating the number "one."<sup>518</sup> Therefore, the sometimes-encountered idea of a "unity" implied by this term is not accurate.

Nonetheless, since the numeral אֶחָד (*ehad*) can also mean "only," several variants for translation are possible:<sup>519</sup>

Hear O Israel! Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one.  
*The "oneness" of Yahweh is stressed. He is one Being.*

<sup>518</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 25.

<sup>519</sup>Merrill E. H. Deuteronomy // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. – P. 163; Christensen D. L. Deuteronomy 1–21:9 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 2001. – P. 142. The quotation of this verse in Mark 12:29 follows the Septuagint, which is nearly identical to the Hebrew text except for the addition of a vowel at the end: κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν.

Hear O Israel! Yahweh our God is one Yahweh.<sup>520</sup>  
*The only God worthy of the name “Yahweh” is the God of Israel.*

Hear O Israel! Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh alone!  
*Israel is called to faithfulness to Yahweh their God.*

Listen to Yahweh, O Israel! Yahweh our God is Unique.  
*Yahweh’s uniqueness is emphasized.*

The fourth variant is unlikely, since the Hebrew expression, “Hear, O Israel” (or a similar expression), is usually set off separately from the main part of the sentence.<sup>521</sup> The third variant is supported by the following context, which exhorts Israel to whole-hearted dedication to Yahweh. The second option is supported by other Old Testament texts (including some in the book of Deuteronomy) that stress God’s worthiness of devotion and trust (see Deut 4:35-39; 32:39). The first option is the most straightforward translation, following the Hebrew word order. It also draws support from the Deuteronomy verses just listed.

Besides the *Shema*, we see references earlier in the Torah to Yahweh’s oneness. In the beginning, the one God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). Abraham called Him “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). The descendants of Abraham also held to the monotheistic faith of their father. Jacob, for example, commanded his household, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you” (Gen 35:2).

The Psalms join the Torah in testifying to Yahweh’s oneness:

- That they may know that You alone, whose name is Yahweh, are the Most High over all the earth (Ps 83:18).
- For who is God, but Yahweh? And who is a rock, except our God (Ps 18:31).

Others among God’s people also recognized this truth. Hannah declared, “There is no one holy like Yahweh, indeed, there is no one besides You” (1 Sam 2:2). David affirmed, “O Yahweh, there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You (1 Chr 17:20). Solomon claimed, “O Yahweh, the God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth beneath” (1 Kin 8:23). According to Hezekiah: “O Yahweh, the God of Israel, who are enthroned {above} the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth” (2 Kin 19:15). Even the Gentile Naaman acknowledged, “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (2 Kin 5:15).

In connection with the battle against polytheism in Israel, much is said in Isaiah’s prophecy about Yahweh’s oneness. Israel is God’s witness, that “before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me” (Isa 43:10). Furthermore, “I am God, and there is no other; {I am} God, and there is no one like Me” (Isa 46:9), and, “I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me.... And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any {other} Rock? I know of none” (Isa 44:6-8). Furthermore, the Lord declares through Isaiah:

For thus says Yahweh, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it {and} did not create it a waste place, {but} formed it to be inhabited), “I am Yahweh, and there is none else” (Isa 45:18; cf. Neh 9:6).

The Lord said that as a result of the restoration of Israel after the exile, all peoples would know that “there is no one besides Me. I am Yahweh, and there is no other” (Isa 45:5-6, cf. 14). Consequently, He summons all

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<sup>520</sup>Keil and Delitzsch prefer this option. See Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. Commentary on the Old Testament. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996. – V. 1. – P. 884.

<sup>521</sup>See Deut 6:3; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9; Ps 50:7; 81:8; Isa 44:1; 48:12. Yet, Deut 4:1 and 5:1 support this variant.

peoples to turn to Him: “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). Not Isaiah alone, but Jeremiah also declares that God is one: “Yahweh is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King” (Jer 10:10).

Along with direct statements about Yahweh’s oneness, the Old Testament abounds with rebukes for idolatry. It will be adequate to simply refer the reader to a small sample of such passages, which are spread throughout the Old Testament: Ps 81:9; 106:19-20; 28-29; Isa 42:17; 44:9-20; 57:3-13; Mal 2:11-12.

In light of the clear Old Testament teaching on Yahweh’s oneness, we must conclude that passages such as Deuteronomy 10:17, Psalm 77:13, and other similar text do not affirm the existence of other gods: “For Yahweh your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords” (Deut 10:17); “Your way, O God, is holy; What god is great like our God?” (Ps 77:13). These passages are written from the perspective of pagan nations who believe in other gods. These texts claim that the God of Israel is greater than the gods of other nations, although they give no recognition of their actual existence.

However, some theologians feel that ancient Israel embraced not monotheism, but so-called “henotheism.” According to this view, Israel acknowledged that there are many gods, but worshiped only their “patron god,” that is, Yahweh. Although we recognize that some Israelites, who were weak in faith, did worship idols, it is clear from the evidence presented that the official position of God’s people from the beginning was an uncompromising monotheism.

The claim that Israel was henotheistic derives from the liberal view that Israel “evolved” into a monotheistic faith, a view allegedly supported by the JEDP theory. In volume 2 of this series (chapters 1 and 13), we refute this view.

## **b. God’s “Threeness”**

The following texts speak of a plurality in Yahweh. First, some indirect allusions may be indicated in the books of Proverbs and Job, where the wisdom of God is given divine attributes (Prov 1:20-23; 8:1-9:6; Job 28). Additionally, sometimes it seems that the “power” of the Lord operates separately from Him (Ps 147:4; Isa 55:10-11). Are these possibly hints at a plurality in God?<sup>522</sup> However, many think that ascribing to God’s wisdom or Word divine attributes is simply an employment of figurative speech, namely personification.<sup>523</sup>

We do note that Messiah is assigned divine attributes. According to Isaiah 9:6, Messiah is the “Mighty God,” and the “Eternal Father.” In Ps 110:1, Messiah is David’s “Lord.” Jeremiah 23:6 speaks of Messiah as “Yahweh our righteousness.” In Psalm 2:7, Messiah is the Son of God. We can confidently conclude that such passages support the divinity of Messiah.<sup>524</sup>

The Old Testament not infrequently speaks of God’s Spirit in distinction from God Himself, creating the impression that He is a separate Person in the Godhead.<sup>525</sup> Note the following examples:

- Isa 48:16 – “And now the Lord Yahweh has sent Me, and His Spirit.”
- Gen 1:2 – “The Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.”
- Ps 103:30 – “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created.”
- Ezek 37:14 – “I will put My Spirit within you.”
- Isa 63:10 – “But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.”<sup>526</sup>

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<sup>522</sup>McGrath A. E. Christian Theology: An Introduction. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 248-249.

<sup>523</sup>Мышленик В. Дух Святой в Ветхом Завете // Студенческий реферат. – Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2005. – P. 7.

<sup>524</sup>Иларион А. Таинство Веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – P. 41; Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 159-160. Also see a more detailed treatment of the deity of the Messiah in chapter 9.

<sup>525</sup>Mueller, p. 159-160.

<sup>526</sup>Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 168



However, we must consider that people may speak of parts of their body in a way similar to how the biblical text here speaks about the Spirit. A person may say “my hand,” while God may say “My Spirit.”<sup>527</sup>

It is well known that the common Hebrew terms for God in the Old Testament, namely אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) and אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*), stand in the plural. The plural is also present in the term בּוֹרְאֵי, “Maker” in Ecclesiastes 12:1,<sup>528</sup> and in other examples.<sup>529</sup> The common assumption is that this phenomenon indicates plurality in God.

Supporting this view is the fact that in the Hebrew language, a plural is sometimes used of a singular object that consists of multiple parts or changes its physical appearance. For example, the word “sky,” which changes its appearance over time, is always in the plural in Hebrew. If this observation applies to the words אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) and אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*), we may have evidence for a plurality of Persons in the Godhead.<sup>530</sup>

At the same time, one must take into consideration another usage of the Hebrew plural – the “plural of majesty.” The Hebrew plural can express honor for a highly respected figure. For example, in Isaiah 19:4 the word אֲדֹנִים (*adonim*), “master,” stands in the plural, yet it refers to one individual since the accompanying adjective קָשָׁה (“cruel”) is in the singular. Likewise, in 1 Kings 1:43 David is called אֲדֹנָיו (“our lords”), a title given to Joseph as well in Genesis 42:30.<sup>531</sup> Finally, in 2 Chronicles 18:16 the word אֲדֹנִים (*adonim*) is translated by the singular “master.” In addition, Heidt observes, “The plural form as a designation for a single divinity had long become common in Semitic before the age of biblical literature, as witnessed by inscriptions from Boghazkoi, Tell-el-Amarna and Phoenicia.”<sup>532</sup>

The word אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) may refer to other singular people or objects as well. In Exodus chapter 32, the golden calf is designated אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*). Pagan gods mentioned individually are sometimes called אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) (see Judg 8:33; 11:24; 16:23; 2 Kin 1:2; 19:37). Sometime Messiah is אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) (Ps 45:7; Zech 14:5), yet Messiah, of course, is an individual person. One must also note that אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) is usually accompanied by an adjective in the singular, indicating that an individual may be in view. For example, in Psalm 7:9 we read, אֱלֹהִים צַדִּיק, “righteous God.”<sup>533</sup>

Among the most convincing indications of the Trinitarian doctrine in the Old Testament is the use of plural pronouns in reference to Yahweh. In Genesis 1:26, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’” Heidt expresses doubt that God is speaking here with angels, since there is no previous mention of angels in this context.<sup>534</sup> Genesis 3:22 reads, “Then Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us.’” We observe this phenomenon again in Genesis 11:6-7: “Yahweh said... Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language,” and in Isaiah 6:8, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”<sup>535</sup>

However, other examples exist of using a plural pronoun to refer to an individual. This can again be a case of the “plural of majesty,” where a respected figure is addressed in the plural or refers to himself in such a way. The following words were addressed to an individual or by an individual: “This {was} the dream; now we will tell its interpretation before the king” (Dan 2:36); “The document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me” (Ezra 4:18); and, “We (i.e., King Artaxerxes) also inform you...” (Ezra 7:24).<sup>536</sup> Others advance the less convincing argument that the use of the plural for God simply reflects His “self- deliberation.”<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>527</sup>Мышленик, p. 7.

<sup>528</sup>Blöesch, p. 168.

<sup>529</sup>Jukes points out other examples of using the plural number in relation to God: אֱלֹהֵי, “(God) my Makers” (Иов 35:10); אֱלֹהֵי “his Makers” (Ps 149:2); קְדוֹשִׁים “the Holy Ones” (Prov 9:10); אֱלֹהֵי “your Makers” (Isa 54:5) (see Jukes A. The Names of God in Holy Scripture. – Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1967. – P. 15).

<sup>530</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1 – P. 328.

<sup>531</sup>Мышленик, p. 7; Reasoning from the Scriptures. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1989. – P. 415.

<sup>532</sup>Heidt W. G. Angelology of the Old Testament. – Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1949. – P. 5.

<sup>533</sup>Ibid.

<sup>534</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>535</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 328-329; Иларион, p. 41.

<sup>536</sup>Мышленик, p. 7.

<sup>537</sup>Noted in Heidt, p. 21-22.

In defense of a plurality in God, some cite Genesis 19:24: “Then Yahweh rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Yahweh out of heaven.” God refers to Himself in a similar way in Genesis 9:16: “When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” The following text is especially striking in this regard:

“For behold, I will wave My hand over them so that they will be plunder for their slaves. Then you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me. Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,” declares Yahweh. “Many nations will join themselves to Yahweh in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me to you. Yahweh will possess Judah as His portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.”<sup>538</sup>

Furthermore, Genesis 1:27 states, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Some feel that God’s image includes plurality, since He created in His image two genders: male and female.

The “Angel of the Lord” is a curious figure in the biblical narrative. Since several divine attributes are ascribed to the Angel of the Lord, some conclude that he is not a common angel, but God Himself in the guise of an angel. We would not expect God to completely abandon heaven to come as an angel, but He could come in one of His Persons, which would indicate a plurality in the Godhead.<sup>539</sup> Others see in the thrice repeated refrain of the seraphim, “Holy, holy, holy,” a reference to God’s “threeness” (Isa 6:3). More likely, though, repetition is simply used here for emphasis.

In conclusion, we affirm that, although the Old Testament does indeed contain some shadowy hints of the Trinity’s existence, this truth is not clearly revealed in it. The reason for this is plain. At that time, God’s people were surrounded by polytheistic nations. Therefore, it was imperative for Yahweh to emphasize the truth of His oneness. Bray adds the thought that since making distinctions in the Trinity is most significant in regard to a future redemption in Christ, the Old Testament did not need to reveal the Trinity at that time.<sup>540</sup> Nonetheless, the Lord did leave some suggestions of plurality, which received greater light in the New Testament.

## **2. Testimony of the New Testament**

### **a. God’s “Oneness”**

The New Testament joins the Old Testament in affirming God’s oneness. Note the following key passages:

- Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord (Mk 12:29).
- There is no God but one (1 Cor 8:4).
- There is one God (1 Tim 2:5).
- Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God... (1 Tim 1:17).
- You believe that God is one. You do well (Jam 2:19).

As expected, the New Testament repeats the Old Testament warning about idolatry: “Do not be idolaters... flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:7, 14). When Paul observed the idols in Athens, “his spirit was being provoked within him” (Acts 17:16). He himself refused to receive worship from people (Acts 14:11-15), as did the apostle Peter (Acts 10:25-26). So then, in spite of the New Testament’s emphasis on the Trinity, it nonetheless insists on the existence of only one God.

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<sup>538</sup>Also see examples in Exodus 19:24; 23:25; Isaiah 6:12 (see Heidt, p. 73, yet Heidt feels that this is merely a literary device).

<sup>539</sup>The issue of the Angel of the Lord’s identity is discussed in more detail in chapter 13.

<sup>540</sup>Bray G. L. The Doctrine of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 141.

The New Testament Greek word referring to the Lord's oneness is the common numeral εἷς (*heis*), or "one." Therefore, the point we made earlier about not translating ἑνότης (*ehad*), as "unity," applies to εἷς (*heis*) as well. The New Testament, of course, teaches the triune God, but the word εἷς (*heis*) does not carry that connotation.

### **b. God's "Threeness"**

Along with affirming God's oneness, the New Testament writers reveal that He is "Three in One." The New Testament clearly teaches that each Person of the Trinity is God. First, God the Father is God. Jesus said, "It is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, 'He is our God'" (Jn 8:54). Paul wrote, "Yet for us there is {but} one God, the Father" (1 Cor 8:6).

Scripture speaks of the Son as God. John writes of Him, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (Jn 1:1-2). Paul affirms, "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form" (Col 2:9).

The Holy Spirit is also God. To lie to the Spirit is to lie to God (Acts 5:3-4). He is called "the Lord" (2 Cor 3:17). To be the "temple of the Holy Spirit" is to be the "temple of God" (1 Cor 3:16-17). The following Scripture texts mention the three Persons of the Trinity together in one context: Matt 3:16-17; Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13; 1 Cor 12:4-6; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 20-21; Rom 15:16.<sup>541</sup>

However, the titles "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" are not simply three names for the one God. They are distinct Persons in the Godhead, listed separately from one another. Yet, the intrinsic unity between them is shown in Matthew 28:19, where these three names are accompanied by the singular noun "name": "...in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

Maybe the most remarkable instance of the Trinity's manifestation was during Jesus' water baptism. At that time, the Holy Spirit descended on Him and the Father spoke from heaven. Thus, we see all three Persons of the Trinity at the same time acting independently of one another.

In our search for Scriptural proofs of the Trinity, we must address 1 John 5:7, which appears to state the doctrine directly. The King James Version reads, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." This verse, though, is found only a small number of very late Greek manuscripts, the earliest being from the tenth century.<sup>542</sup> Sometimes, this verse is not even found in the body of the text in these manuscripts, but added later in the margin. All early New Testament documents lack this verse.

Additionally, of all the ancient translations of the New Testament, this verse is found only in the Latin Vulgate. It is felt that it was first introduced there, then incorporated into later Greek manuscripts.<sup>543</sup> The fact that Eastern Church Fathers do not refer to it confirms that it originated in the Western, Latin Church.

Even though in Scripture the word "Trinity" is absent, it nonetheless expresses well the biblical truth that one God exists in three Persons. Alister McGrath writes, "The doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in Scripture, and continued in Christian experience.... Scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a trinitarian manner."<sup>544</sup>

## **3. Conclusions**

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<sup>541</sup>Also see: Lk 1:35; Jn 1:33-34; 14:16, 26; 16:13-15; 20:21-22; 2 Cor 2:21-22; Acts 2:33, 38; Gal 4:6; Eph 2:20-22; 3:14-19; 1 Thes 1:3-5; 2 Thes 2:13-14; Tit 3:4-6; Heb 9:14; 1 Jn 4:2, 13-14.

<sup>542</sup>Documents - 61: XVI c.; 918: XVI c.; 2318: XVIII c.; 88: XIV c. (in the margin); 221: X c. (in the margin); 429: XVI c. (in the margin); 636: XVI c. (in the margin).

<sup>543</sup>Metzger B. M. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. – 2nd ed. – London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994. – P. 648.

<sup>544</sup>McGrath, Theology, p. 249.

The Bible presents us with a picture of a triune God. It clearly teaches the existence of one God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, on the one hand, we must not reject the deity of each Member of the Trinity, but on the other hand, we must not propose three Gods. The Trinitarian formula, i.e., one God in three equal Persons, appropriately expresses the biblical teaching.

However, the Bible does not go into great depth in describing the relationship between the Persons of the Godhead. Therefore, in our next section, we will join the discussion about this question that has been ongoing throughout Church history.

## **B. Theological Analysis**

### **1. The Relationship between the Persons**

#### **a. The Relationship between the Father and the Son**

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is known as the Son of God. In some sense, God the Father is the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 1:3). At the same time, as we will demonstrate in detail in the following chapter, Jesus Christ Himself is God in the full sense of the word.

The New Testament unmistakably teaches that the Son is equal to the Father in quality and dignity. He possesses “equality with God” (Phil 2:6), and in Him “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Christ said of Himself, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30), and called Himself the “I Am” (Jn 8:58), referring to the name Yahweh, which God revealed to Moses (Ex 3:14-15).

Furthermore, in Mark 14:36 Jesus addressed God as “Abba” (Mk 14:36), an Aramaic expression of intimacy between a father and his child. We might say, “Daddy.” Jews of that time employed that expression when addressing rabbis, but not God. Jesus thereby showed that He possesses a deep and intimate relationship with the Father.

We must also note that Jesus claimed to possess what the Father possessed: “All things that the Father has are Mine” (Jn 16:15; cf. Jn 17:10). God “has given all things into His (i.e., the Son’s) hand” (Jn 3:35). Along with the Father, Christ is the source of eternal life (Jn 17:3). He also claimed to have enjoyed the glory of God before the world was created and was sent by the Father into the world (Jn 17:1, 5). He knows the Father better than anyone and imparts special revelation from Him: “No one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal {Him}” (Matt 11:27). Jesus is united with the Father to the degree that He can assert, “You, Father, {are} in Me and I in You” (Jn 17:21).

On the other hand, Scripture contains not a few indications of Jesus’ dependence on the Father.<sup>545</sup> The Father is the “God” of Christ (Jn 20:17; 1 Pet 1:3; Mk 15:34; Rev 3:12). Jesus considered Himself God the Father’s representative on earth (Jn 10:36; 5:37; 8:17-18; 14:1, 6, 9). He submits to the Father (Jn 13:16; 8:42; 5:19; Lk 22:41-42), even after His ascension and exaltation (1 Cor 11:3; 1 Cor 15:27-28). The Father prepares a kingdom for the Son (Matt 20:20-23). Jesus came to bring revelation from the Father (Jn 7:16) and to do His will (Jn 6:38). Jesus prayed to the Father (Lk 6:12). The Father exalted the Son (Phil 2:9) and gave Him authority (Matt 28:18). Jesus acknowledged that the Father was “greater than” Himself (Jn 14:28). He receives life from Him (Jn 6:57).

In light of the convincing evidence for Christ’s deity, we must rule out the idea that the Son is inferior to the Father. The most plausible explanation for the Son’s dependence on the Father is that He voluntarily submits to the Father in order to accomplish the Father’s plan (see Phil 2:6-7). We also affirm that when Jesus speaks of His dependence on the Father, He is speaking from the perspective of His humanity. He is not only fully God, but also fully human.

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<sup>545</sup>The Jehovah Witnesses pay special attention to this aspect of Christ’s work. See: Make Sure of All Things, Hold Fast to What is Fine. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, 1965. – P. 485-486; Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 410-411; Jesus Christ. Our Questions Answered // The Watchtower. 2012. April 1. P. 4-7; A Conversation with a Neighbor. Is Jesus God? // The Watchtower. 2012. April 1. P. 20-22; The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1991. – P. 11-12.

Therefore, we conclude that as a human, the Son occupies a subordinate position in respect to the Father, even to the degree that He calls Him His God. Yet, we must always interpret this feature of Christ's status in light of the biblical teaching of His full deity, considering the entire biblical portrait of Jesus Christ.

We must also examine the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, that is, what relationship existed between them before the Son's incarnation. Some theologians, beginning with Origen, appeal to the concept of an "eternal generation" of the Son. According to this view, the Son somehow is eternally generated by the Father without beginning, yet at the same time He remains fully God by nature. This concept is based, for the most part, on the title for Jesus in John's writings – "only begotten."

The expression "only begotten" translates the Greek term μονογενής (*monogenes*) and is ascribed to Jesus in Jn 1:14, 18; Jn 3:16, 18; and 1 Jn 4:9. Disagreement exists about the origin and meaning of this key term. Some consider it a derivative of the words μόνο (*mono*), or "only," and γενής (*genes*) from the verb γεννάω (*gennaō*), i.e., "give birth." Others think that it derives from μόνο (*mono*) and γένος (*genos*), which means "genus, species." Because of these variations, different translations are proposed for the term μονογενής (ΜΟΝΟΓΕΝΗΣ). First, it could mean, "only begotten" in the sense of a "birth" of the Son. Second, it could translate "special" or "unique" in the sense of "one of a kind."

The first view is embraced by Eastern Orthodoxy, the reformer John Calvin, contemporary theologian R. C. Sproul, and others. They support their opinion by noting that the formula "only begotten" implies a birth.<sup>546</sup> In addition, in John 1:18 Jesus is called "only begotten" just after believers are described as being "born of God" (1:13). They hold that this idea of "birth" carries over from verse 13 to verse 18. Therefore, both believers and Christ are born of God, yet in different senses.

The passage in 1 John 5:18 may also support this view: "We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him." It appears that Jesus is the one "born of God" who keeps the believer. The interpretation of this text, though, is complicated by the fact that some ancient manuscripts read "keeps himself," which would mean that the believer is the one born of God. The first variant is supported by several weighty manuscripts, such as Codex Vaticanus (IV c.), Codex Alexandrinus (V c., in the margin), and the Vulgate and Coptic translations. Less weighty manuscripts support the variant "keeps himself." However, the editors of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament text, who preferred the variant "keeps him" for their 27th edition, replaced it with "keeps himself" in the 28th edition.<sup>547</sup>

Finally, the Nicene Creed, which is accepted by all Christian confessions, speaks of the Son being "born": "I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made." We must underscore here that the Nicene Creed insists on the truth that the Son was not created. The Early Church categorically rejected the idea that the Father created the Son, or that the Son had a beginning. Therefore, one must interpret the Nicene Creed as defending the "eternal generation" view of Origen.

What can be said in support of the rival position, that Jesus is not the "only begotten" Son of God, but the "unique, one of a kind" Son of God? We already mentioned that the term μονογενής (*monogenes*) can be understood in this way. Most contemporary interpreters take this position, especially in the Western Church. In addition, both in the Septuagint (Judg 11:34; *Tobit*, 3.15; 6.11, 15) and in the New Testament (Lk 7:12; 8:42; 9:38) the word μονογενής (*monogenes*) translates "only child" with emphasis on the idea of "only." In Psalm 24:16 (Septuagint), no birth is in view at all, but μονογενής (*monogenes*) simply implies being alone.

We encounter an interesting example in Hebrews 11:17, where Isaac is called μονογενής (*monogenes*), even though Abraham had another son. Isaac, then, is μονογενής (*monogenes*) not in the sense of being the only son of Abraham, but in being his favorite (unique) son.

Another feature supporting the "unique son" view is the observation that the second part of the compound word μονογενής (*monogenes*) has only one letter "ν", which better corresponds to the word γένος

<sup>546</sup>Ботнари Е. Monogenes: The Only Begotten Son // Студенческий реферат. – Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2004. – Р. 4.

<sup>547</sup>Aland B., Aland K., Karavidopoulos J., Martini C. M., Metzger B. M. Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus. – 28th ed. – Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012. – P. 726.

(*genos*) than to the verb γεννάω (*gennao*). We recall that γένος (*genos*) means “genus, species,” while γεννάω (*gennao*) means “give birth.” The presence of the single consonant “v,” then, lends preference to the idea of uniqueness.<sup>548</sup>

In conclusion, it is difficult to pin down a clear denotation for the term μονογενής (*monogenes*). Both theories have substantial support. At the same time, the “eternal generation” view could potentially lead to the heretical view that the Son either had a beginning (as Arius and the Jehovah’s Witnesses teach), or that He in some way is inferior to the Father. Therefore, those who join with Origen in embracing this view must be careful not to take it to this extreme.

## **b. The Relationship between the Father and the Spirit**

How can one describe the relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit? The Old Testament often refers to the Spirit as the “Spirit of God,” the “Spirit of the Lord,” or “My Spirit.” The first designation is found equally in both Testaments, while the second is more characteristic of the Old Testament. Any of these names reveal that the Holy Spirit represents the Father and accomplishes His work on earth.

The name “Holy Spirit” is more typical in the New Testament, and the name “Spirit of God” is sometimes equated with it. For example, in Isaiah 11:2 His name is the “Spirit of God,” while a quotation of that text in Luke 3:22 and 4:18 contains the name “Holy Spirit.” We observe the same occurrence when comparing Joel 2:28 with Acts 2:33. So then, the “Spirit of God” of the Old Testament is not merely some spiritual presence of the Father, but a separate Person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament provides even more details of the relationship of the Father and the Spirit. First, there exists a close relationship between them. 1 Corinthians 2:10 reveals, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.” Second, the Spirit submits to the Father to fulfill the latter’s plan. John 14:26 records that the Father “sends” the Spirit. At the same time, in accordance with the Trinitarian doctrine, we must acknowledge that the Spirit possesses deity equal to the Father and is Himself God.

John 15:26 states that the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. A debate arose around this verse that contributed to a schism between the Western and Eastern Church that remains to this day.<sup>549</sup> Let us examine the Eastern Orthodox position. John 14:26 declares that the Father sent the Spirit. John 3:16 relates that the Father sent the Son as well. In addition, in John 15:26 the Son sends the Spirit. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the Eastern Church accepts the doctrine of the “eternal generation” of the Son. In a similar way, it is thought that the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father.

In summary, according to the Eastern Church, the Father sends the Son and the Spirit, the Son also sends the Spirit, the Son is eternally generated by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from Him. As in the case of the Son’s eternal generation, the procession of the Spirit is also eternal without beginning and in no way diminishes His divine nature or status.

In the Western Church, among the Roman Catholics, we encounter a different understanding. They acknowledge the Eastern view with one exception – the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son.<sup>550</sup> They theorize a “double procession,” involving a single act by the Father and the Son.<sup>551</sup>

The history of the Western view is as follows. At the Third Council of Toledo (589), the Western Church added to the Nicene Creed the so-called *Filioque*. This Latin word means “from the Son,” and its insertion asserts the double procession of the Spirit.<sup>552</sup> The addition was made in reaction to the threat of Arianism, which denied the full deity of the Son and made Him a creation of the Father. Therefore, in order to enhance the status of the Son, the *Filioque* was added to the Nicene Creed. The Eastern Church, however, emphatically

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<sup>548</sup>Ibid., p. 7, 10.

<sup>549</sup>Burgess S. M. *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1984. – P. 96.

<sup>550</sup>Some Western theologian embraced a single procession, such as Pope Leo I (see Burgess S. M. *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions*. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1997. – P. 51).

<sup>551</sup>Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 176.

<sup>552</sup>Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 96.

rejects the *Filioque*.<sup>553</sup> The question was debated in the West for some time as well, and was fully endorsed only in the tenth century.

A third view goes as follows. Some contemporary Western theologians teach that the actions “proceed” and “be sent” are the same. Therefore, there is no “procession” of the Spirit. The Spirit is simply sent by the Father and the Son on mission. The “procession” does not concern the Spirit’s nature or essence, only His activity.

The Eastern Church defends their view by citing the Nicene Creed, which speaks of the Spirit’s procession only in regard to the Father. In addition, the idea of a double procession violates the Eastern conception of the “sole rule” of the Father. In Eastern thought, the Father serves as the “foundation” for the Trinity, since the Son is generated from Him and the Spirit proceeds from Him.

Also in support of the Eastern view is the use of the present tense in John 15:26 – the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. In contrast, the idea of the Spirit being “sent” is in the future tense. Therefore, His procession differs from His mission.

The historian Phillip Schaff relates that the Eastern Church takes the issue of the Spirit’s procession very seriously. He writes, “The Eastern church regards the doctrine of the single procession as the corner-stone of orthodoxy, and the doctrine of the double procession as the mother of all heresies.”<sup>554</sup>

McGrath attempts to compare the Eastern teaching on the Trinity with pronouncing words. He writes, “The Father pronounces his word; at the same time as he utters this word, he breathes out in order to make this word capable of being heard and received.”<sup>555</sup> Thus McGrath associates the Son with a word, and the Spirit with breath.<sup>556</sup>

The following arguments support the Western view. First, John 15:26 does not say that the Spirit proceeds *only* from the Father. One cannot exclude that He proceeds from the Son as well. Second, both the Father and the Son *send* the Spirit. If both send Him, He may well proceed from both. Third, the Spirit is both the “Spirit of the Father” (Matt 10:20) and the “Spirit of Christ” (1 Pet 1:11). Finally, after His resurrection, Jesus “breathed” the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Jn 20:22). This act demonstrated that the Spirit proceeds from Him as well.

All things considered, the evidence in favor of including the *Filioque* do not justify its insertion. It is possible that “proceed” and “send” are merely synonyms, but the bulk of the evidence appears to support the single procession of the Spirit.

### **c. The Relationship between the Son and the Spirit**

Certain relationships exist between the Son and the Spirit as well. Several times in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is called the “Spirit of Christ” (1 Pet 1:11), the “Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7), or the “Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:19). This is not Jesus’ personal spirit, but the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. In confirmation of that claim, we note that in Romans 8:9 the name “Spirit of Christ” is equated with the name “Spirit of God.”

In the role of the “Spirit of Christ,” the Holy Spirit serves as the representative of Jesus Christ on the earth. He testifies of Christ (Jn 15:26), glorifies Him (Jn 16:14), takes of His and discloses it to us (Jn 16:14), and was sent by Him (Jn 15:26). Scripture also teaches that the Holy Spirit directs the Church. Although Jesus is the head of the Church, in practice the Holy Spirit directs its activities as Christ’s representative. We see Him in action throughout the book of Acts (see Acts 13:2; 15:28; 5:3-4).

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<sup>553</sup>In 867, Photios I, Patriarch of Constantinople, condemned the use of the *Filioque*. Nonetheless, at least one Eastern Father, namely Cyril of Jerusalem, acknowledged a double procession (Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 96).

<sup>554</sup>Schaff P., Schaff D. S. *History of the Christian Church*. – New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910. – V. 4. – P. 476. John of Damascus and Gregory of Nyssa felt that, although the Spirit proceeds from the Father, He does so through the Son (see Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 157).

<sup>555</sup>McGrath, *Theology*, p. 269.

<sup>556</sup>Gregory of Nyssa so taught (see *The Great Catechism*, 3-5; Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 146).

## 2. Terminology

Having investigated the general contours of the doctrine of the Trinity, we will attempt, as much as possible, to clarify this teaching. We must distinguish the three Persons from one another without dividing God into three “parts.” Each Member of the Trinity possesses not only “one-third” of God’s attributes, but rather all of them. Orthodox Metropolitan Illarion comments, “One Hypostasis is not one-third of the general nature, but rather contains the fullness of the Divine essence.”<sup>557</sup> Similarly, Paul wrote about the Son, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9). The Lutheran Mueller concurs, “Each Person in the Godhead is the entire God... each Person has the whole divine essence without division or multiplication.”<sup>558</sup>

Another important concept in discussing the nature of the Trinity is “perichoresis,” meaning “interpenetration.” According to this principle, the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity is such that they somehow “penetrate” one another, or, in other words, are located “in” one another. This is seen in the teaching of Christ that “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (Jn 10:38; 14:11), “All things that the Father has are Mine” (Jn 16:15), and “(the Spirit) will take of Mine and will disclose {it} to you” (Jn 16:14).<sup>559</sup>

The Trinitarian relationships are also described by the term “general energy.” This means that all the Members of the triune God participate in all His works. For example, in Acts 2:24 we read that the Father raised Jesus from the dead, while in Romans 8:11, it was the Spirit who raised him. Furthermore, in John 2:19-21 Jesus claims that He will raise Himself. Therefore, the entire Trinity took part in that action<sup>560</sup> and, presumably, in all God’s acts. According to the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa, “Divine action... always begins from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Holy Spirit... the effect is not three actions but one.”<sup>561</sup>

Related to the teaching of “general energy” is the concept of “appropriation.” According to this principle, although all Persons in the Trinity participate in all of God’s works and their combined contribution is considered a single act, nonetheless in each of God’s acts one Person is dominant. For example, the entire Trinity took part in creation (Father – Heb 1:2; Son – Jn 1:3; Spirit – Gen 1:2), yet we commonly consider the Father to be the initiator of the creative act. Additionally, in Hebrews 9:14 each Member of the triune God participated in redemption, yet the Son is the Savior of the world. Finally, the sanctification of the believer is a corporate work as well (see Gal 4:6; Tit 3:4-6; Eph 2:20-22; 2 Thes 2:13-14), but here the Spirit takes the leading role.

Finally, we encounter the concepts of the “essential” and “practical” Trinity. The first claims that all Persons in the Trinity possess the same, entire divine nature – they are equal in quality and dignity. The second concerns the function of each member – the Son and the Spirit voluntarily submit to the Father. Yet, the voluntary submission of the Son and Spirit in no way nullifies or minimizes their deity.

## 3. Various Conceptions of the Trinity

### a. Eastern View

Along with differences in view about the Spirit’s procession, Eastern and Western Christianity propose different overall understandings of the nature of the triune God. This debate dates back to the time of the Council of Nicene.<sup>562</sup>

The Council of Nicene, in refuting the Arian heresy, defined the relationship between the Father and Son with the term *homoousios*, that is, “having the same nature.” The Western Church was content with that

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<sup>557</sup>Иларион, p. 43.

<sup>558</sup>Mueller, p. 148.

<sup>559</sup>Berkhof L. The History of Christian Doctrine. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937. – P. 91; Иларион, p. 45.

<sup>560</sup>McRoberts K. D. The Holy Trinity // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 171.

<sup>561</sup>Quotation from G. L. Prestige in Meyendorff J. Byzantine Theology. – New York: Fordham University, 1974. – P. 185.

<sup>562</sup>See Lane T. A Concise History of Christian Thought. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 30-31.



definition, and some teachers in the East were as well, namely Athanasius and the Alexandrian school, since it emphasized the unity of the Godhead and the deity of Christ. However, some followers of Origen hesitated to accept it, fearing that might lead to dividing Yahweh's nature into three parts or support the Monarchial heresy (see below).

The Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa), the leading Eastern Trinitarian theologians, attempted to relieve the tensions this doctrine created by proposing the following formula. They used the term *ousia* to describe Yahweh's nature or essence, i.e., that which is common among all Persons in the Trinity. Another term, *hypostasis*, refers to the separate Persons in the Godhead: Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>563</sup> Consequently, God is one essence, i.e., *ousia*, and three Persons, that is, *hypostases*.<sup>564</sup> This formula is accepted to this day in Eastern circles.

In their theological treatment of the Trinitarian doctrine, the Cappadocians were guided by the dominant philosophical model of that day – Platonism. In this system, reality is perceived through the concepts of “universals” and “particulars.” A “particular” is a specific, physical entity. “Universals” are the representatives of each “class” of entities. For example, all books that exist in the physical world are particulars. Yet, the concept “book,” which arises in the mind, represents all actual books existing in the physical world. This “ideal book,” though, does not exist in the world, but only in the mind. It is a universal. It represents all particulars (i.e. “books”), which belong to this class.

We have claimed that universals exist only in the mind. Plato theorized, though, that they exist as real entities in another dimension, which we contact through our minds. Aristotle differed from Plato in that he postulated that universals exist within the particulars themselves.

The Cappadocians, then, worked off this Platonic conception of particulars and universals. They understood the Trinity according to this model. Just as “humans” are particulars and “humanity” or “human nature” is a universal, so it is with the Godhead. There are three hypostases (i.e., particulars), that is, Persons in the Trinity, and one *ousia* (i.e., universal), which is God's nature or essence.<sup>565</sup> John of Damascus expresses it this way:

For we are never told that the Godhead is the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Holy Spirit alone. For “Godhead” implies “nature,” while “Father” implies subsistence just as “Humanity” implies nature, and “Peter” subsistence. But “God” indicates the common element of the nature, and is applicable derivatively to each of the subsistences, just as “man” is. For He Who has divine nature is God, and he who has human nature is man.<sup>566</sup>

So then, the Hypostases in God make concrete and personal the impersonal divine nature, i.e., *ousia*.<sup>567</sup> Lossky comments, “We cannot think of God aside from the Persons... we cannot objectify the Divine essence outside of the Persons.”<sup>568</sup> In addition, according to the Cappadocian view, the Hypostases differ from one another by the following criteria: the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds.<sup>569</sup>

The final characteristic of the Eastern view is the role of the Father in the Godhead, termed the “sole rule” of the Father. Although the Father is not superior to the Others in quality, nonetheless He serves as the “basis” or “foundation” of the triune God. From Him, the Son is generated and the Spirit proceeds.<sup>570</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius

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<sup>563</sup>Use of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* with these meanings traces back to Plato (see Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 38). Conventionally, they were considered synonyms (see Лосский В. Н. Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие. – М.: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – Р. 42).

<sup>564</sup>Berkhof, p. 89-90.

<sup>565</sup>Ibid.

<sup>566</sup>John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 3.11.

<sup>567</sup>Bray agrees, “God is not an individual person, but three persons in an individual substance” (Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 238),

<sup>568</sup>Лосский, p. 218.

<sup>569</sup>Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 159.

<sup>570</sup>McGrath, *Theology*, p. 257.

makes this comment: “The Father is sole Fountain of the superessential Deity.”<sup>571</sup> Lossky concurs, “In the order of the Divine economy, in the manifestation of the Holy Trinity in the world, every energy comes from the Father and is communicated through the Son and the Holy Spirit,<sup>572</sup> and, “In the order of transmission of manifest energies, which are Divine, the Father is the possessor of the manifest quality, the Son is the manifestation of the Father, and the Spirit is the One, Who manifests it.”<sup>573</sup>

Lossky teaches that the Father is not only the source of “energy” for the Trinity, but also the source for the divine nature. The Father is “the source for all of the divine nature in the Trinity, emitting the Son and Holy Spirit, communicated to them His nature.”<sup>574</sup> He also considers the order of divine names listed in Scripture (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) to be an indication of the “sole rule” of the Father.<sup>575</sup>

Lossky claims that when we speak of God being “one,” we are speaking of the Father: “One God, because the Father is one.”<sup>576</sup> He cites Gregory Nazianzen in support:

To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons.... When then we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being from the First Cause – there are Three Whom we worship.<sup>577</sup>

He also cites John of Damascus:

When, then, we turn our eyes to the Divinity, and the first cause and the sovereignty... what is seen by us is unity. But when we look to those things in which the Divinity is, or, to put it more accurately, which are the Divinity, and those things which are in it through the first cause... the subsistences of the Son and the Spirit, it seems to us a Trinity that we adore.<sup>578</sup>

The “sole rule” of the Father and His role as “First Cause” further substantiate the Eastern rejection of the double procession of the Spirit. If the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, then the procession does not proceed from God’s essence, which is rooted in the Father, but from the Hypostases.

However, Bray exercises necessary caution concerning this view. He considers it erroneous that the Father “delegates” to the other Persons divine power. Since the Son and the Spirit are fully divine, they possess by nature all of God’s attributes. Therefore, the teaching of the Father’s “sole rule” may undermine the status of the other Members of the Trinity. In addition, this teaching may lead to the erroneous conclusion that the Son accomplished His mission under compulsion, not voluntarily, since He was from eternity past under the Father’s authority.<sup>579</sup>

Furthermore, we recall that God revealed His personal name to Moses, Yahweh, and He is repeatedly addressed by that name throughout the Old Testament, employing it as His self-designation as well. We noted earlier that Messiah is called “Yahweh our righteousness” (Jer 23:6), and Jesus Himself cited the key passage in Exodus 3:14-15, calling Himself “I Am” (Jn 8:58). The writer of Hebrews also attributes an Old Testament

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<sup>571</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius. *On the Divine Names* // *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite* / Trans. John Parker. – London: James Parker and Co., 1897.

<sup>572</sup>John Calvin describes the Trinity in a similar fashion (see Horton M. S. *Traditional Reformed Response* // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein, S. E. *Justification: Five Views*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – Kindle edition, 2700-2702).

<sup>573</sup>Лосский, p. 64-65. Author’s translation.

<sup>574</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47. (cf. p. 218). Author’s translation.

<sup>575</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 220. Author’s translation.

<sup>576</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47. Author’s translation.

<sup>577</sup>*Orations*, 31.14.

<sup>578</sup>*An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 1.8.

<sup>579</sup>Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 154, 164.

reference to Yahweh to the Son (Heb 1:10-12).<sup>580</sup> If the Son is also Yahweh, then this cannot be solely the Father's name, but applies to the entire Godhead. If the Godhead has a personal name, then we cannot reduce God to an impersonal divine nature, as is done in the East.

The doctrine of theosis exercises a substantial influence on the Eastern view of the Trinity. The goal of the theosis teaching is the deification of humans. In examining Lossky's teaching, evangelical scholar Evgeniy Zaitsev concludes, "The Eastern Orthodox Trinity lays the foundation for theosis."<sup>581</sup> Mantzaridis adds, "When the early Fathers of the Church formulated their teaching on the Trinity and Christ, their point of departure was the reality of man's deification, as experienced within the life of the Church."<sup>582</sup>

We must clarify this point. If the one God is not an impersonal essence, but a Person, then unification with the Divine, which is the goal of theosis, becomes problematic. In the process of theosis, it is necessary that the deifying influence of the *impersonal* divine nature (more precisely, the Divine "energies") penetrated into the human nature of Christ and deified it, so that it can be transmitted to humans for their deification in turn.<sup>583</sup>

In the teaching of Gregory Palamas, rejection of the double procession is imperative for the theosis doctrine. He argues that if the Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son, then the Spirit ends up with the same ontological status as creation. Consequently, He cannot communicate the "uncreated energies" necessary for theosis.<sup>584</sup>

So then, the Eastern Orthodox view stresses God's "threeness" at the expense of His personhood.<sup>585</sup> In this teaching, the idea of "one God" lacks substance, since it either refers to the Father alone, which reduces the status of the other Persons, or it refers to a Platonic "universal," which reduces God to an impersonal essence.

## **b. Western View**

The Western view of the Trinity differs from its Eastern counterpart. Tertullian is a key figure in its development. He coined the phrase that God is "Three in One."<sup>586</sup> His description of the configuration of the Trinity, though, has much in common with the Eastern view:

Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, *who are yet distinct* One from Another. These Three are, one *essence*, not one *Person*, as it is said, "I and my Father are One," in respect of unity of substance not singularity of number.<sup>587</sup>

In explaining the relationships in the Trinity, Tertullian made the following comparisons: sun/light/rays, source/stream/bed, and root/sprout/fruit.<sup>588</sup> He also termed Yahweh's essence "*substantia*," and the Members of the Trinity – "*persona*."<sup>589</sup> Inserting these terms into the Eastern Trinitarian formula, Tertullian described the triune God as one *substantia* in three *persona*.<sup>590</sup>

Some objected to Tertullian's use of the word *persona*, since its basic meaning in the Latin is "mask." This was thought inadequate for delineating the difference in Persons. Nonetheless, the Council of Chalcedon deemed *persona* and *hypostasis* synonyms.<sup>591</sup>

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<sup>580</sup>See also other such New Testament references, listed in the next chapter.

<sup>581</sup>Зайцев Е. Учение В. Лосского о Теозисе. – М.: Библийско-богословский институт св. апостола Андрея, 2007. – P. 152.

<sup>582</sup>Mantzaridis G. I. The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition. – Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984. – P. 113.

<sup>583</sup>The doctrine of theosis is discussed in detail in the fourth volume of this series.

<sup>584</sup>Mantzaridis, p. 37.

<sup>585</sup>McGrath, Theology, p. 258.

<sup>586</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>587</sup>Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 25.

<sup>588</sup>Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 130.

<sup>589</sup>Ibid., p. 38, 167.

<sup>590</sup>Ibid., p. 17, 30.

<sup>591</sup>Ibid., p. 168.

Augustine was responsible for the definitive development of the Western understanding of the Trinity. He insisted on the double procession of the Spirit.<sup>592</sup> He also employed Tertullian's term *persona*, but substituted *essentia* for *substantia*.<sup>593</sup> Since humans were created in God's image, Augustine supposed that one could find parallels between the configuration of the Trinity and the nature of people. One such parallel was comparing the Trinity to the tripartite structure of the human mind: memory, reason, and will.

Possibly the most famous analogy of Augustine is his comparison of the Trinity to human relationships. In human relationships, there is one who loves, one who is loved, and love itself. In Augustine's mind, these features parallel the Persons of the Trinity.<sup>594</sup> A final comparison: The Father is like the human mind, the Son is like the consciousness of one's mind, and the Spirit – love for one's mind.<sup>595</sup>

After Augustine, Thomas Aquinas spoke of the Persons of the Trinity as "relationships."<sup>596</sup> Instead of "Persons," the notable German theologian Karl Barth spoke of "three modes of existence" of the one God.<sup>597</sup> The contemporary theologian Donald Bloesch defines the Trinity in similar terms:

God is his essence is one, but the way he interacts within himself is threefold. In the Godhead there is one being, but three modes of existence. There is one person but three agencies of relationship. There is one overarching consciousness, but three foci of consciousness. There is one will but three acts of implementing this will. There is one intelligence but three operations of intelligence.<sup>598</sup>

Unlike the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Western mind stresses God's personhood at the expense of His threeness. This is especially evident in Augustine's analogy with the mind. All aspects of the mind – memory, reason, and will – belong to the same person. It is difficult to compare three features of the human intellect with the three Persons of the triune God.

Theodore de Régnon explains the divergence between Eastern and Western views as philosophical differences between Greeks and Latins: "Latin philosophy considers the nature in itself first and proceeds to the agent; Greek philosophy considers the agent first and passes through it to find the nature."<sup>599</sup>

Still another distinction between Eastern and Western views is that in the East, one speaks of "causality" in the Godhead, i.e., two Hypostases derive from the Third. In the West, however, one does not speak of "causality" in God, but "necessary interior relationships" between the Persons.<sup>600</sup>

All things considered, we cannot affirm that either the Eastern or Western views adequately define the inner workings of the Godhead. In the East, God's threeness is stressed at the expense of His personhood. In the West, the opposite is true. It may be advisable to content ourselves with the simple definition that there is one God who exists in three equal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## 4. False Views

### a. Tritheism

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<sup>592</sup>Anselm's understanding of the Trinity also reflects the double procession view: the Father is "God, from whom God exists," the Son is "God, from whom God exists," and "God from God," and the Spirit is only "God from God" (Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation*, p. 33).

<sup>593</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 167.

<sup>594</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>595</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 78-79. Augustine employed this conception in defense of the double procession of the Spirit. If God is love and the Spirit is that love, then He must proceed from both the Father and the Son (Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 171-173).

<sup>596</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>597</sup>Bloesch, p. 179.

<sup>598</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>599</sup>Meyendorf, p. 181.

<sup>600</sup>Bray G. L. *Trinity* // Ferguson S. B., Wright D. F., Packer J. I. *New Dictionary of Theology*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988. – P. 693.

One clearly errant view on the nature of the Godhead in tritheism. According to this teaching, the three Persons of the Trinity differ from one another not only on the level of personhood, but also in essence or nature. To refute this teaching, we refer the reader to the previously cited Scripture passages asserting the existence of one God.<sup>601</sup>

## **b. Arianism**

Arianism was a false teaching that shook the Early Church in the fourth century. Its founder, Arius, denied that Jesus Christ is God and a partaker of divine nature, but considered Him God's first created being. Chapter 9 of this volume will serve for a refutation of this teachings, as well Appendix B, "Jehovah's Witnesses on the Deity of Christ." These chapters will present convincing proofs for the deity of Jesus Christ and refute the arguments posed against it.

## **c. Subordination**

Another error introduced into Christian theology in its early years is the teaching of "subordination." According to this view, the Son is inferior to the Father in quality and does not equally share with Him the divine nature. Adherents to this theory acknowledge that the Son is indeed the eternal God, but not in the same sense as God the Father is God. Furthermore, they assign the Holy Spirit a place beneath both Father and Son. The Spirit is also God, but again, in a sense inferior to both the Father and the Son.

Bloesch notes that some early Church Fathers showed a leaning toward subordination.<sup>602</sup> We can cite Justin Martyr in this regard: "(Christ) is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third."<sup>603</sup> Burgess adds, "Here Justin is attempting to represent Christian teaching on the Trinity as in accord with best Greek philosophy with frequently presented levels of deity, resulting from the Neoplatonic belief in emanation."<sup>604</sup>

However, in light of the material we previously presented in support of the full deity of all Persons in the Trinity, we join the historical witness of the Church in rejecting the teaching of subordination. The biblical data confirm that all Members of the Trinity possess the fullness of deity, share a common divine nature, and each therefore enjoys the status of God in the full sense of the word. We do not see in Scripture "levels" of deity. If one objects that the order "Father, Son, Holy Spirit" indicates levels of deity, we respond that this order is not followed in all cases. Bray observes the following variations in Paul's writings: Father/Son/Spirit – 2 times, Father/Spirit/Son – 4 times, Son/Spirit/Father – 3 times, and Spirit/Father/Son – once.<sup>605</sup>

We must also keep in mind that Persons of the Trinity submit to one another voluntarily. In Philippians 2:6-7, we note that, although the Son enjoyed "equality" with the Father, he "humbled *Himself*."

## **d. Monarchism**

### **1) Dynamic Monarchism**

This teaching appeared at the end of the second century. It was proposed by Theodore of Mopsuestia, but popularized by Paul of Samosata. The founders of this movement hoped by it to preserve the doctrine of God's oneness. They feared that the traditional Trinitarian teaching could lead to tritheism.

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<sup>601</sup>McGrath, *Theology*, p. 255-256.

<sup>602</sup>Bloesch, p. 173ff.

<sup>603</sup>Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 13.

<sup>604</sup>Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 28. Other Church Fathers with tendencies toward the subordination view include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Novation.

<sup>605</sup>Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 146

Teachers in this movement viewed Jesus as a good person, who received the divine “Logos” from heaven. This resulted in Him receiving an elevation in status to “god,” but inferior to God the Father. He received this “promotion” either at His water baptism, or when He was raised from the dead.<sup>606</sup> In this teaching, the Holy Spirit is not a separate Person in the Trinity, but the “divine energy” of the Father.<sup>607</sup>

In refutation of this view, we can appeal to the proofs for Christ’s full deity and that of the Holy Spirit presented in subsequent chapters of this volume.

## **2) Modalistic Monarchism**

### **a) Description**

Monarchism appeared in yet another form – modalistic monarchism, or “modalism.” Modalism, in turn, comes in two forms: chronological modalism and functional modalism.

Chronological modalism appeared in the late second century in the teaching of Sabellius. As in all forms of monarchism, the goal is the preservation of God’s unity. Sabellius taught that God is one, but appears in three “manifestations.” The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separate Persons in the Godhead, existing simultaneously, but different designations for the one God. These manifestations appeared at different times. At the incarnation, the Father became the Son and thereby ceased to be the Father. At the ascension, the Son became the Spirit and thereby ceased being the Son.<sup>608</sup>

Functional modalism continues to this day in the teaching of the Oneness Pentecostals, or “Jesus Only” believers.<sup>609</sup> They also teach that God appears in three “manifestations,” but unlike chronological modalism, these manifestations exist simultaneously.<sup>610</sup> In other words, God in His transcendence, that is, when He is not in contact with others, is “one.” God in His immanence, that is, when He engages with others, manifests all three forms as Father, Son, and Spirit.

The transcendent Spirit, that is, the only God, came to earth and became incarnate as a man, Jesus Christ. When the transcendent Spirit joined with humanity, Jesus became the “Son,” and the transcendent Spirit became the “Father.” In other words, the human aspect of Jesus is the Son, and the transcendent Spirit that is incarnate in Him is the Father. Nonetheless, there remains only one God. The “Persons” of the Father and the Son are the same Person. These terms simply refer to different “parts” of the person Jesus Christ, or to two “modes” of existence of the one God.<sup>611</sup>

When God, the transcendent Spirit, engages with believers and abides in them, He is known as the “Holy Spirit.” The Spirit, then, is not a separate Member of the triune God, but simply the transcendent Spirit in fellowship with people. He is a manifestation of the one God.

Proponents of “Jesus only” theology cite Scripture for support. It is written of the Son, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9), “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19), and, “I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works” (Jn 14:10).

Finally, some in this movement feel that these “manifestations” of God are only temporary. Before creation, the transcendent Spirit had no other manifestation, and in the age to come the “manifestations” of God will be grafted into His intrinsic unity and cease to exist in distinction from Him. Such an interpretation is assigned to 1 Corinthians 15:28: “When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.” In the Early Church,

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<sup>606</sup>Ibid.

<sup>607</sup>Ibid.

<sup>608</sup>Ibid., p. 328.

<sup>609</sup>According to Bray, one of the leading modern Catholic scholars, Karl Rahner, also held to a type of functional modalism, teaching that the Members of the Trinity are “functions” of the one God (see Bray, *Doctrine of God*, p. 187).

<sup>610</sup>McGrath, p. 254.

<sup>611</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneness\\_Pentecostalism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneness_Pentecostalism)

Theophilus of Antioch advanced a similar theory that all the Persons of the Trinity were “concealed” in the Father from eternity past.

## **b) Refutation**

The following Scriptures convincingly refute modalistic monarchism. Some are more appropriate for chronological modalism, while others contradict functional modalism. Some are useful for both purposes.

First, the apostle John writes that the Word, i.e., the Son, was God and was with God (Jn 1:1). Here, we see the simultaneous existence of both Father and Son. Second, in Matthew chapter 3, when Jesus was being baptized, the Son was in the water, the Father spoke from heaven, and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Here, we observe all three Persons of the Trinity acting simultaneously and independent of one another.

Third, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Our Father who is in heaven” (Matt 6:9). Note that the Son is on earth praying to the Father in heaven. Furthermore, Jesus spoke of the Father (Jn 5:32) and of the Spirit (Jn 14:16) as “another” Person. They do not share Christ’s identity. In addition, the Father “sent” the Son. The sender certainly differs from the one sent.<sup>612</sup>

We also consider that in John 8:17-18, Jesus refers to the Father as another witness. The Mosaic Law required two witnesses to settle a matter. Jesus appeals to the Father as a second witness, other than Himself, that He is from God. Therefore, they must be different Persons.

We also recall Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not as I will, but as You will” (Matt 26:39). Jesus submitted His will to the will of the Father, indicating a difference in identity. Furthermore, in the passage John 10:30, “I and the Father are one (ἐν),” the numeral “one” stands in the neuter gender, indicating not identity in Person, but commonality in Nature. Finally, all three Members of the Trinity are often mentioned together in one Scripture text (see 1 Pet 1:2; Matt 28:19; Rev 1:4-5; Eph 4:4-6; 2 Cor 13:13).

We also note that when Yahweh is in His “transcendence,” i.e., apart from others, He still exists as Three. The Son, for example, shared heavenly glory with the Father before creation (Jn 17:5). In addition, before the creation of humans, God said to “Himself”: “Let us make man according to Our image” (Gen 1:26). Additionally, the fact that Jesus was “sent” by the Father shows that He (and the Spirit) had an independent coexistence with the Father in heaven.

Finally, concerning the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:28, the verse itself clarifies what is meant by God being “all in all”: “When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him.” Here, we read nothing of the Son being “absorbed” into the Father, but rather of the Son submitting the kingdom to Him.

## **e. The Jehovah’s Witnesses View**

Along with a denial of Christ’s deity, the Jehovah’s Witnesses also reject the doctrine of the Trinity. Let us examine their views.<sup>613</sup>

Adherents of the Watchtower movement object that the idea of a Trinity leads only to confusion, but the Scriptures teach, “God is not {a God} of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33). They feel this teaching arose from pagan sources in Egypt, Greece, China, and Babylon, not from the Bible. The Early Church permitted this doctrine in order to attract unbelievers to the Faith. Jehovah’s Witnesses especially indict Tertullian and

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<sup>612</sup>Mueller, p. 151.

<sup>613</sup>Objections taken from Let God Be True, – 2nd ed. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1952. – P. 102; Is the Trinity a Bible Teaching? // The Watchtower. 2012. March 1. P. 23; What Does the Bible Really Teach? – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2005. – P. 220-224; Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 405-426. Also noted in McKinney G. D. The Theology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962. – P. 54-57, and Martin W. R., Klann N. H. Jehovah of the Watch Tower. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953. – P. 31, 45.

Theophilus of Antioch as propagators of this “error.”<sup>614</sup> The apostolic church, they suppose, never tolerated such a doctrine. The word “Trinity” never appears in the New Testament.

When God said at the time of creation, “Let Us make man according to Our image” (Gen 1:26), He was addressing His Son, whom He earlier created, in order to involve Him in the work of creation. When the three Persons of the Trinity are listed together in Scripture, such as in 2 Corinthians 13:14 and Matthew 28:19, it never says that they are “one.” Other lists of three figures are found in Scripture that are not considered a “Trinity,” such as: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of {His} chosen angels...” (1 Tim 5:21).

Additionally, in Matthew 28:19 Jesus gave His Great Commission to Jews, who firmly believed in only one God (see Deut 6:4). The baptismal formula in the name of the Three does not confirm their deity, but is simply a recognition that the Son and the Spirit participate in the work of salvation. Moreover, Jesus Himself stated that Jehovah is the only true God (Jn 17:3), and only He is worthy of worship (Matt 4:10).

In response, we state the following. First, the difficulty in conceptualizing the Trinity in no way compromises its validity. We should expect that the nature of an infinite Being such as our Lord would be beyond human understanding. The difficulty this doctrine presents is actually a confirmation of its truth. Who would have thought up such a teaching? It is true that pagan nations sometimes recognized a triad of gods, but they had no concept of a “Trinity.” They did not believe in one God existing in three Persons, but in many gods.

In addition, the fact that in antiquity people worshipped a triad of gods does not force the conclusion that Christianity borrowed that conception from them. Tertullian, the supposed founder of the “Trinitarian heresy,” was himself vehemently opposed to compromising with pagan faiths.

The absence of the term “Trinity” in the Bible does not threaten this doctrine. This word simply expresses a concept that is clearly depicted in Scripture – that one God exists in three Persons. Concerning Genesis 1:26, God says to His “compatriot,” “Let Us create man *in Our image*.” Note that God’s compatriot not only participates in creation, but also has a common nature with the Father.

We concede that when listing the Three, the Bible never says that they are “one.” We appeal to these lists, though, not as primary evidence of this truth, but as supplementary and confirmatory. The main proof for the Trinity is the fact that deity is ascribed in Scripture to all the Members of the Trinity, yet God is one. In addition, the listing of the Three occurs in multiple places, confirming the validity of our conclusion. A single mention of a “triad” of the Father, Son, and angels does not overturn our position. In Matthew 28:19, the words Father, Son, and Spirit are joined by the singular word “name,” which reveals the intimate relationship between them. Finally, a discussion on John 17:3, where Jesus calls the Father “the only true God,” is found in Appendix B.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, some Trinitarian heresies reject God’s threeness, namely Arianism, Subordination, and Monarchism. In an effort to defend God’s unity, these teachings went to the opposite extreme of denying His triune nature. On the other hand, tritheism rejects His unity. Within orthodox Christianity, the Western Church emphasizes God’s oneness, yet does not reject His threeness, while the Eastern Church underscores His threeness without denying His oneness.

Possibly, the most appropriate formula for defining the triune God is simply to state that there is one God who exists in three equal Persons. Beyond that, we are dealing with a mystery. Cyril of Jerusalem gave us good counsel in the fourth century:

And it is enough for us to know these things; but inquire not curiously into His nature or substance: for had it been written, we would have spoken of it; what is not written, let us not venture on; it is sufficient for our salvation to know, that there is Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>614</sup>Theophilus of Antioch was the first to coin the term “Trinity” (see Burgess, *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 32).

<sup>615</sup>Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 16.24.



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## Chapter 9 - The Deity of Christ

One of the central doctrines of the Christian Faith is the claim that Jesus Christ is God. During His earthly ministry, Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do men say that I am?” (Mk 8:27). The disciples responded, “John the Baptist; and others {say} Elijah; but others, one of the prophets.” Jesus then asked, “But who do you say that I am?”

Just as the Lord asked His disciples of that time, He inquires of us as well, “Who do you say that I am?” Our goal in this chapter is to find a proper response to that question, in particular, regarding His deity. Throughout Church history, the devil has attempted to introduce false teachings about the nature of Jesus Christ. Wrong understandings of Him still find acceptance today.

### A. Biblical Analysis and the Intertestamental Period

#### 1. Old Testament

Even though the name of Jesus is not mentioned in the Old Testament, many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled by Him. The fulfillment of these prophecies confirms His deity, since the Old Testament speaks of Messiah as God. We will investigate both messianic prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, and the Old Testament testimony of Messiah’s deity.

Daniel chapter 9 gives a precise indication of when Messiah was to come. Daniel 9:24-26 relates that Messiah would die 490 years after the order to rebuild Jerusalem, issued by King Artaxerxes in 444 B.C. Taking into consideration that the Hebrew calendar contains 360 days, and not 365, the date of Messiah’s death would be in the early 30’s A.D., the time of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Isaiah predicted that Messiah would be born from a virgin (Isa 7:14), which was fulfilled in Jesus’ birth by Mary (Matt 1). The Old Testament states that Messiah would be a descendant of Abraham (Gen 12:3), Judah (Gen 49:10; Isa 65:9), and David (2 Sam 7). Jesus’ genealogy meets these criteria (Matt 1; Lk 2). In the book of Micah, we discover that Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2), which was the birthplace of our Lord (Matt 2:1).<sup>616</sup>

Furthermore, Isaiah predicted that the Holy Spirit would descend on Messiah (Isa 11:2), which occurred during Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan (Matt 3:16). It was prophesied that Messiah’s coming would be preceded by the coming of Elijah the prophet (Isa 40:3; Mal 4:5), and Elijah appeared figuratively in the person of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ (Matt 3:1-2; Jn 3:28).

The Old Testament foresaw Messiah’s miracle ministry (Isa 35:5-6), and miracles were not lacking in the ministry of Jesus (Matt 9:35). According to Psalm 78:2, Messiah would speak in parables, which abounded in Jesus’ teaching ministry (Matt 13:34). Malachi spoke of Messiah cleansing the temple (Mal 3:1), which Jesus did prior to His Passion (Matt 21:12). The Old Testament predicts Messiah’s rejection (Ps 118:22; Isa 53:3), which Jesus experienced in His earthly career (1 Pet 2:7; Jn 1:10-11).<sup>617</sup>

According to the Scriptures, Messiah would be betrayed for 30 pieces of silver (Ps 41:9; Zech 11:12), which was fulfilled when Judas Iscariot betrayed the Lord to the Jewish leaders (Matt 10:4; 26:15). Jesus experienced other features of Messiah’s sufferings, like beating (Isa 50:6), mocking (Ps 22:7-8), crucifixion (Ps 22:16), and His silence before His accusers (Isa 53:7) (see Matt 26:67-27:31; Lk 23:33). Two thieves were crucified beside Jesus (Matt 27:38) as Isaiah foretold (Isa 53:12). Jesus prayed from the cross (Lk 23:34) as Isaiah also foresaw (Isa 53:12). On the cross, He thirsted (Jn 19:28) and was pierced (Jn 19:34), then later was laid in a rich man’s tomb (Matt 27:57), just as the Old Testament had predicted (Ps 69:21; Zech 12:10; Isa 53:9). Soldiers cast lots

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<sup>616</sup>Geisler N. L. Christian Apologetics. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976. – P. 336ff.

<sup>617</sup>Ibid.

for His clothing (Jn 19:24; cf. Ps 22:19). Jesus arose, as predicted of Messiah in Psalm 16:10 under the figure of David.<sup>618</sup>

It is also significant that during Jesus' lifetime, many confessed Him to be Messiah: angels from heaven (Lk 1:32; 2:11), Simeon (Lk 2:25-30), Andrew (Jn 1:41), Phillip (Jn 1:45), Martha (Jn 11:27), Peter (Matt 16:13-17), and Jesus Himself (Mk 14:61-62; Jn 4:25-26). Even Pilate acknowledged Him to be the King of the Jews (Jn 19:19-22). In addition, others spoke of Him as the Son of God, not only in the sense of Messiah (Jn 1:49), but also in the sense of divine being (Mk 1:1; 15:39; Lk 1:35; Jn 1:34). Jesus Himself confirmed those claims (Lk 20:13; 22:70; Jn 10:36). John the Baptist also spoke of His origins in eternity (Jn 1:15).

One cannot be but impressed by the testimony of these fulfilled prophecies. Jesus rightly claimed, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me" (Jn 5:39). These events could not have occurred by chance. Jesus could not have purposely fulfilled all that was written about Messiah, since many of these predictions lay beyond a person's control, such as place of birth, genealogy, method of execution, betrayal by a friend, and others.

Even if we were able to concede that all this could have happened by chance, we must nevertheless consider that God would not allow a false Messiah to appear with such convincing credentials. Finally, we note that Jesus was an honest and upright man, who would not falsify His identity and deliberately deceive His disciples.<sup>619</sup>

Having established that Jesus is the Messiah, we can on that basis claim that He is God. The following passages demonstrate the divine status Messiah enjoys. He is the eternal priest according to the order of Melchizedek (Ps 110:4), the shepherd of God's flock and His associate (Zech 13:7), sent by God the Father (Isa 48:16), and filled with God's Spirit (Isa 42:1; 61:1). He is the Son of God (Ps 2:7; Ps 89:20-28).

The following texts speak directly of Messiah's deity:<sup>620</sup>

- For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; And the government will rest on His shoulders; And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, *Mighty God, Eternal Father*, Prince of Peace (Isa 9:6).
- Your throne, *O God*, is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of joy above Your fellows (Ps 45:6-7).
- Yahweh says to *my Lord*: "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet (Ps 110:1).
- Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift {it} up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "*Here is your God!*" (Isa 40:9).
- Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name *Immanuel* (Isa 7:14, cf. Matt 1:23).
- I kept looking in the night visions, and behold, *with the clouds of heaven One like a Son of Man* was coming, and He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him. And to Him was given dominion, glory and a kingdom, that all the peoples, nations and {men of every} language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed (Dan 7:13-14; cf. Matt 26:64).
- But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, {too} little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, *from the days of eternity* (Mic 5:2; cf. Matt 2:1).

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<sup>618</sup>Ibid.

<sup>619</sup>Ibid., p. 340, 342.

<sup>620</sup>Ibid., p. 332.

- “Behold, {the} days are coming,” declares Yahweh, “When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch; and He will reign as king and act wisely and do justice and righteousness in the land. In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘Yahweh our righteousness’” (Jer 23:5-6).<sup>621</sup>
- “Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And *the Lord*, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says Yahweh of hosts (Mal 3:1).

It is also interesting to note that in the Gospels, Jesus is compared with other Old Testament heroes and found superior to them all. He is greater than Abraham (Jn 8:56), David (Matt 22:42-45), Solomon (Matt 12:42), Isaiah (Jn 12:41), Moses and Elijah (Mk 9:4-7).

## 2. Intertestamental Period

Although the intertestamental literature does not speak of Messiah’s deity, we will nonetheless devote attention to the development of the messianic expectations of that time.<sup>622</sup>

For the most part, people of that day expected a single Messiah – a king from the house of David. Evidence also exists, though, that some expected two or even three Messiahs along with a new appearance of Moses and Elijah.<sup>623</sup> Based on Numbers 25:10-13, one Messiah was to be a priest (see *Sirach*, 45.23-26; *Testament of Reuben*, 6.7-8; *Testament of Judah*, 21.1-5). In two manuscripts from Qumran, we learn of a third Messiah – Messiah a prophet (1QS 9.11; 4QTestimonia).

The following passage from the Psalms of Solomon is of special interest, since it ascribes to Messiah certain divine qualities:

For he will smite the earth with the word of his mouth for ever. He will bless the people of the Lord with wisdom and gladness, and he himself (will be) pure from sin, so that he may rule a great people. He will rebuke rulers, and remove sinners by the might of his word (*Ps. Sol.*, 17.39-41).

Nonetheless, Julius relates, “By the time of Jesus the majority of the common people thought of the coming Messiah primarily as a political, military king who would deal with the external crises faced by the nation.”<sup>624</sup>

Concerning the “Son of Man,” he is frequently mentioned in the intertestamental literature, especially in the book of *1 Enoch*. He will be the deliverer of Israel and the eschatological judge. At times, he is identified as Yahweh’s “Suffering Servant” (see *1 Enoch*, 37-71; *Wisdom of Solomon*, 2, 5), but he is not Messiah.

Concerning Yahweh’s “Suffering Servant” (see Isa 40-53), many opinions exist for his identity. Many feel that he is Israel. Some identify him as a certain second century B.C. teacher of the Law. One of the scholars of Qumran thought himself to be that figure. Several Targums attribute some of these prophecies of the Suffering Servant to Messiah, including some concerning his sufferings. We cite the following examples.

In the Targum of Isaiah 52:13, we read: “Behold my servant, the Anointed One, shall prosper,” and in the Targum of Isaiah 53:11, “They shall look upon the kingdom of their Anointed One.”<sup>625</sup> These passages are in the classic context speaking of the Servant’s suffering (52:13-53:12). In addition, in Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, the latter does not challenge the idea that Messiah will suffer, but doubts that He will be crucified (chps. 89-

<sup>621</sup>From Morey R. A. *How to Answer a Jehovah’s Witness*. – Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1980. – P. 95.

<sup>622</sup>See Julius S. J. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995. – P. 309-318; Nickelsburg W.E. *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*. – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003. – P. 19-20, 97-116.

<sup>623</sup>See *1 Macc.*, 14.41; *Testimony of Levi*, 8.14-15; Philo, *Special Laws*, 1.11; 4QTest; 1QS 9.11; *Sirach*, 48.1-11; *Dialogue with Trypho*, 49.

<sup>624</sup>Julius, p. 311.

<sup>625</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 316.

90). Although the idea was accepted that a righteous person could suffer on behalf of another,<sup>626</sup> there is no mention of Messiah's redemptive sufferings in the intertestamental literature.

In the intertestamental period Messiah was given various names, such as "Word," "Wisdom," "Righteous One," "Branch," "Chosen One," "Son of God," "Son of David," and "The Coming One."

Another Messianic figure, who is frequently mentioned in Rabbinic literature dating back to 200 B.C. (Qumran manuscript 4Q372), is Messiah ben Joseph. He is also called a "second Joshua."<sup>627</sup> David Mitchell summarizes how he is described in this literature:

Messiah ben Joseph gathers scattered Israel. He rules over them in Jerusalem and rebuilds the temple. Then his kingdom is attacked by foreign foes who vex his people and overcome and slay him. Upon his death all Israel are exiled. But when Messiah ben David appears, Ben Joseph is raised from death to honour.<sup>628</sup>

The death and resurrection of Messiah ben Joseph recalls the history of the patriarch Joseph of Genesis 37-50. Joseph's history, in fact, includes other aspects that typify the Messiah Jesus.<sup>629</sup> Joseph was the favored son of his father, predicted his future glory, was hated by his brothers, essentially "died" and "rose again," became lord of the land, forgave the sins of his brothers, and brought salvation to "the earth" (Gen 41:57).

Joseph's story occupies a climactic position in the book of Genesis, a book that unfolds the drama of the coming "seed of the woman" (Gen 3:15) who would bring deliverance to humankind. Joseph is therefore the closest typological representation in Genesis of this coming "seed." However, his death recorded in the final verse of Genesis clues the reader that the true "seed" is yet to come.

Also of interest is that Jesus of Nazareth's stepfather was named Joseph, making Him Messiah ben Joseph in a literal sense. Also remarkable is that Jesus' stepfather, Joseph, was a son of Jacob (Matt 1:16)!

### **3. New Testament**

#### **a. Jesus' Testimony**

The New Testament records many instances when Jesus Himself, either directly or indirectly, claimed to be God.<sup>630</sup> He often claimed to do things that only God could do. For example, according to Old Testament teaching, only God could forgive sins. Yet, Jesus claimed to have that authority as well. When He healed the lame man in Mark chapter 2, He announced to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mk 2:5). The scribes, understanding the significance of what He did, objected, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:6-7). Jesus then confirmed that He had that authority by healing the lame man, "so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" (Mk 2:10).

Moreover, Jesus claimed to have authority to raise the dead, which, again, only God can do. In 1 Samuel 2:6, we read, "Yahweh kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up" (cf. Deut 32:39). Yet, Jesus asserted, "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes" (Jn 5:21), and, "Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead will hear the

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<sup>626</sup>For example, the "sacrifice" of Isaac and the martyrdom of the seven brothers in 4 Maccabees supposedly have redemptive value (noted in Moeller H. R. *The Legacy of Zion*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977. – P. 205).

<sup>627</sup>Mitchell D. C. *The Naked Bible* podcast 386 – (<https://nakedbiblepodcast.com>)

<sup>628</sup>Mitchell D. C. *A Dying and Rising Josephite Messiah in 4Q372* // *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* Vol 18.3. 2009. P. 199-200.

<sup>629</sup>Suggested by Nathal Riehl.

<sup>630</sup>Erickson M. J. *Christian Theology*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 2 – P. 684ff.

voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live” (Jn 5:25).<sup>631</sup> During His earthly ministry, Christ displayed His authority over death by raising several people from the dead (Lk 7:11-16; 8:49-55; Jn 11:1-44).

Jesus also stated that He will judge the world, which only God has the prerogative to do. God says in Psalm 75, “When I select an appointed time, it is I who judge with equity” (v. 2), and we also read, “God is the Judge; He puts down one and exalts another” (v. 7). According to 1 Chronicles 16:33, “He (i.e., Yahweh) is coming to judge the earth.” Yet, Jesus announced, “For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son... and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man” (Jn 5:22). Jesus, being Himself God, does things that only God can do: forgive sins, raise the dead, and judge the world.

Jesus indicated His deity in still other ways. He taught people to believe in Him and honor Him, just as they believe in and honor the Father: “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me” (Jn 14:1), and, “...so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:23).

The Gospels also relate that Jesus allowed people to worship Him.<sup>632</sup> The Greek verb that denotes worship is *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*). It consists of two parts: *προς* (*pros*), i.e., “to,” and *κυνέω* (*kuneo*), i.e., “to kiss.” In ancient Greece, this word depicted a person falling facedown to kiss the feet or clothing of a king or other object of worship. It was only used when reverence was paid to someone or something considered divine. Later, the word adopted a broader range of meaning and could indicate simply showing love or respect to another person.

In the Septuagint, *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*) translates a Hebrew word meaning “bow,” “kiss,” “serve,” or “worship.” It was usually employed in reference to God, but also applied to angels, righteous people, rulers, or prophets. When used as a sign of respect for people, it usually implied that that person had a special relationship with the Lord. Therefore, in the Septuagint the term *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*) applied to God either directly or indirectly.

The New Testament writers also employed *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*) for the worship of God. Satan sought this act of worship as well (Matt 4:9). *Προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*), however, could also be shown to people. For example, in Matthew 18:26 a slave fell at the feet of his master to plead for mercy. In Revelation 3:9, the enemies of the Church will bow in honor before the saints. On the other hand, in Acts 10:26 Peter refused to accept an act of worship (*προσκυνέω*): “Stand up; I too am [just] a man.” An angel also refused to allow the apostle John to worship (*προσκυνέω*) him (Rev 19:10).<sup>633</sup>

Since *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*) can mean both respect and worship, we must clarify in what sense Jesus allowed this act in reference to Himself. In some cases, it is clear that people were just showing Him respect as a man of God (Matt 8:2; 9:18; 15:25; 20:20). It is unlikely that the leper, the Gentile woman, or the mother of James and John were recognizing Him as God.

Yet, after His resurrection, people were more likely to address Jesus as divine. When the women met Him at the tomb, “they came up and took hold of His feet and worshiped Him” (Matt 28:9). Similarly, when the disciples met the risen Christ in Galilee, “they worshiped {Him}” (Matt 28:17). In Luke 24:51-52, the disciples also worshipped the risen Lord.

Nonetheless, even before His resurrection, several incidents seem to indicate that *προσκυνέω* (*proskuneo*) meant something more than just mere respect. The magi visited the boy Jesus and “worshipped Him” (Matt 2:11). After Jesus walked on the water, his disciples “worshiped Him, saying, ‘You are certainly God’s Son!’” (Matt 14:33). After receiving healing from the Lord, the blind man believed in Jesus and “worshipped Him” (Jn 9:38). It is also remarkable, that, although Peter in Acts 10, and John in Revelation 19, refused worship, Jesus never did, confirming our assertion that He considered Himself to be worthy of it.

In John’s Gospel, it is clear that Jesus was conscious of His deity. He claims that He was with the Father before the world was (Jn 17:5, 24), was sent by Him to the earth (Jn 7:28-29; 8:42), came down from heaven (Jn

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<sup>631</sup>In Acts 3:15, Christ is the “Prince of life.”

<sup>632</sup>Geisler, p. 333-334.

<sup>633</sup>McDowell J. Evidence That Demands a Verdict. — Rev. ed. — San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1979. — P. 95.



3:13; 6:50; 8:23; 13:3), personally knows the Father (Jn 8:55; 10:15; 17:25), always pleases Him (Jn 8:29, 49, 55), and has continual fellowship with Him (Jn 16:32).

John 20:28-29 is a key verse to reveal Jesus self-consciousness. Here, Thomas addressed Him with the acclamation “my Lord and my God,” and Jesus showed no hesitation in accepting it: “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed {are} they who did not see, and {yet} believed.” In addition, at the time of His Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, Jesus also welcomed praise from the people (see Lk 19:39-40; Matt 21:15-16).

Moreover, Jesus taught people to pray to the Father in His name, making Him a mediator between God and people.<sup>634</sup> In John 16:23-24, we read, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.” In John 14:14, Christ even invites His disciples to pray to Him directly and promises to answer: “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do {it}.” In the Greek text, the pronoun “I” is emphasized. We may fairly translate, “I Myself will do it.”

Furthermore, Jesus claimed to possess what only God possesses. He directs His own angels: “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness” (Matt 13:41). This verse also reveals that Christ has His own kingdom.<sup>635</sup>

Additional support for Jesus’ deity is found in His claims to say what only God can say. He dared to alter the Law God had given to Moses. Six times in His Sermon on the Mount, referring to the Law of Moses, He declared, “You have heard that it was said... but I say to you...” He considered His teaching more authoritative than that of Moses. In addition, He allowed His disciples to do work on the Sabbath. When challenged on this, Jesus replied, “The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mk 2:28). His manner of teaching also reflected divine authority: “He was teaching them as {one} having authority, and not as the scribes” (Mk 1:22; cf. Lk 4:31-32).

Christ not only introduced changes in the Law, He also required His disciples to keep His commandments: “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me” (Jn 14:21). Besides this, Jesus also considered His word eternal: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will not pass away” (Matt 24:35). They will serve as the basis for the final judgment (Matt 7:24-26; Jn 12:48). An ordinary person would not have the audacity to make such claims. Clearly, Jesus considered Himself to be God.

Along with these claims to deity, Jesus assigned to Himself divine titles. He calls Himself the Good Shepherd, a title for God in the Old Testament (cf. Jn 10:11 with Ps 23:1). He is the Light of the world (cf. Jn 8:12 with Isa 60:19 and Ps 27:1). Jesus is the bridegroom of God’s people, a role God filled in the Old Testament (cf. Matt 9:14-15; 25:1 with Isa 62:5 and Hos 2:16). He is the first and the last (Rev 1:17). In Isaiah 44:6, such words characterized Yahweh.<sup>636</sup>

The following passages contain direct claims of our Lord to be God Himself: John 5:17-18; John 8:19; John 14:8-9; Mark 14:61-64; John 10:29-30; and John 8:58.<sup>637</sup> In John 10:29-30, we read, “My Father, who has given {them} to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch {them} out of the Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.” The numeral “one” is in the Greek neuter gender, which may denote Christ and the Father sharing a common nature. At the same time, the Father and the Son remain separate individuals. They have a common nature, but each is a Divine Person in Himself.

Some may object that Jesus meant here that He and the Father merely share a common goal or will. In other words, Jesus seeks to do the Father’s will, demonstrating a unity of will, but not of nature. Yet, in verse 28, He explains: “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.” Note that in verse 29, He said, “No one is able to snatch {them} out of the Father’s hand.” Jesus thus equates His power (i.e., “hand”) with the power of the Father. They are united not only in will, but in power and nature as well.

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<sup>634</sup>Geisler, p. 334.

<sup>635</sup>Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>636</sup>Ibid.

<sup>637</sup>McDowell, p. 89-95.

When the Lord announced that He and the Father were one, His hearers understood His meaning perfectly: “The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, ‘I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?’ The Jews answered Him, ‘For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out {to be} God’” (Jn 10:31-33). In Jn 5:17-18, we see a similar reaction from some unbelieving Jews to similar words by Christ.

We note in Mark 14:61-62 that Jesus responded to the question, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed {One?}” by saying, ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*), i.e., “I am.” In Exodus 3:14-15, God revealed His name to Moses to be “I Am Who I Am.” In the same context, Christ identified Himself with the heavenly king described in Daniel chapter 7, which resulted in the high priest accusing Him of blasphemy.

John 8:19 reveals that the relationship between Christ and the Father is so close that the former could claim that anyone knows Him also knows the Father. He again claims to possess divine nature with the words: “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9; cf. 12:45), “He who receives Me receives Him who sent Me,” (Jn 13:20), and “He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me” (Jn 12:44). On the reverse side, Christ claims, “He who hates Me hates My Father also” (Jn 15:23; cf. Jn 16:3; 1 Jn 2:22-23).

Our final example is the most straightforward claim that our Lord made to His deity. In John 8:58, Jesus claimed not only that He existed before Abraham, but also that He was God. When Jesus said, “I Am,” He was quoting Exodus 3:14, where God announced His name to Moses: “God said to Moses, ‘I Am Who I Am’; and He said, ‘Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, “I Am has sent me to you.”’” After Jesus assigned the Divine Name to Himself, the Jews gathered rocks to stone Him (Jn 8:59). Clearly, they understood who He was claiming to be.

Jesus employed the formula ἐγώ εἰμι (*ego eimi*), “I Am,” in relation to Himself in other contexts as well. The first three of those listed below are invitations to believe in Him. The final instance was accompanied by a manifestation of supernatural power, which confirmed the truth of His claim.

- Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins (Jn 8:24).
- When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am (Jn 8:28).
- From now on I am telling you before {it} comes to pass, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am (Jn 13:19).
- (Jesus) said to them, “I am.” ... So when He said to them, “I am,” they drew back and fell to the ground (Jn 18:5-6).

Another seven times Jesus employed the phrase ἐγώ εἰμι, i.e., “I Am,” in reference to Himself in connection with one of His messianic or divine roles:

- I am the bread of life (Jn 6:35, 48, 51)
- I am the Light of the world (Jn 8:12; 9:5)
- I am the door of the sheep (Jn 10:7, 9)
- I am the Good Shepherd (Jn 10:11, 14)
- I am the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25)
- I am the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6)
- I am the true vine (Jn 15:1, 5)

How may we interpret Christ’s claims to deity? Several logical options exist. First, is the history of Christ a legend or exaggeration? This is unlikely due to the abundance of ancient manuscripts that testify of Jesus’ life and preserve His words.<sup>638</sup> Second, possibly Jesus Himself knew that He was not God, but deliberately deceived His disciples into thinking so. On the other hand, by every indication Jesus appeared to be a morally upright,

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<sup>638</sup>This idea is defended in chapter 13 of volume 2 in this series.

honest individual. Third, was Jesus a madman, deceived Himself by His claims? This is again unlikely, since the Gospel narrative depicts Him as not only psychologically normal, but as one possessing great wisdom. Fourth, maybe Jesus claimed to be God because, in fact, He is God. As fantastic as it may seem, this is the most reasonable variant. C. S. Lewis masterfully makes this point:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: "I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept His claim to be God." That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit on Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing non-sense about His being a great moral teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.<sup>639</sup>

## **b. The Father's Testimony**

By various means, God the Father confirmed the divine claims made by the Son. Jesus Himself appealed to the Father's testimony in defense of His claims to deity (see Jn 8:17-18; 5:31-32, 36-38). First of all, the Father confirmed the ministry of His Son with great signs, wonders, and miracles. Jesus said, "The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish – the very works that I do – testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me" (Jn 5:36).<sup>640</sup> Likewise, Peter preached, "Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22).

Although God confirmed the ministry of His prophets with signs and wonders as well, Christ's ministry differed from theirs in that He claimed to be God. The Father would certainly not have supported the work of a false claimant to deity. In addition, sometimes the ability and authority Jesus displayed are ascribed to Him, not to the Father (see Matt 8:27; 9:4; Mk 1:23-24; Jn 1:47-50; 2:11; 2:24-25).

Additionally, the Father directly affirmed His Son's special status. He spoke three times from heaven concerning Jesus, twice calling Him His Son. During Christ's Transfiguration, the Father announced: "This is My beloved Son, listen to Him!" (Mk 9:7). Also significant is that during His Transfiguration, Jesus displayed His divine glory: "His garments became radiant and exceedingly white, as no launderer on earth can whiten them" (Mk 9:3). When Jesus was being baptized, the Father's voice from heaven declared, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased" (Mk 1:11). Finally, prior to His sufferings, the Father publically assured Him, "I have both glorified it (i.e., "My name"), and will glorify it again" (Jn 12:28).

The most powerful confirming proof of Christ's deity is His resurrection from the dead. Paul writes in Romans 1:4 that Jesus "was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead." If Jesus was truly guilty of blasphemy, as the unbelieving Jews thought, God would not have raised Him from the dead and thereby confirmed His alleged false claims. The resurrection confirms that Jesus was not blaspheming when He claimed equality with the Father.

## **c. Titles of Christ**

### **1) Son of God**

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<sup>639</sup>Lewis C. S. *Mere Christianity*. – New York: MacMillan, 1952. – P. 41.

<sup>640</sup>It is significant that in the Gospel of John, Jesus miracles are often called "signs," because they served as indicators of His messianic and divine status (see Jn 2:11; 3:1-2; 10:25; 10:37-38; 14:11).

The title given to and employed by Jesus, “Son of God,” may also endorse His claim to deity. The ancient Greeks understood this title in two ways. First, they believed in many gods, that is, a pantheon. These gods could give birth to other gods. Hence, the title “Son of God” was sometimes taken in a literal sense as a descendant of a god. Second, the Greeks held to the concept of a “heavenly man.” This designation could apply to one having extraordinary abilities, such as government leaders or philosophers. Nonetheless, such individuals were considered extraordinary people, but not divine.

Such a conception of the “Son of God,” however, hardly corresponds to our Lord Jesus Christ. He is neither the physical descendant of a god, nor simply a very talented individual. For the Greek, the biblical revelation of the Son as the incarnate Absolute would have been totally incomprehensible. Consequently, Christianity did not borrow this conception from the Greeks.

In the Old Testament, the expression “Son of God” had several connotations. First, Israel itself was considered Yahweh’s “son”: “When Israel {was} a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son” (Hos 11:1). In the book of Job, angels were sons of God: “On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone, when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:6-7).

Kings of Israel enjoyed this designation as well. God thus spoke of David’s descendant, “I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me” (2 Sam 7:14). Some feel that Psalm 2 commemorates the crowning of a new king: “I will surely tell of the decree of Yahweh: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You’” (Ps 2:7). So then, the Old Testament understanding of “son of God” was an individual (angel or man) who had a special relationship with the Most High.

In Jesus’ day, the Messiah was also considered to be the Son of God. The Qumran manuscripts yield an interpretation of Psalm 2:7 ascribing the Sonship to Messiah. The Gospels also confirm this understanding among first-century Jews. Nathanael said to Jesus, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” (Jn 1:49). Mary, the sister of Lazarus, addressed Jesus likewise, “Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God” (Jn 11:27). Peter also confirms, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:16). Finally, the Jewish leaders spoke of Messiah as the son of God (see Matt 26:63).

Although Jews of Jesus’ time ascribed this title to Messiah, they certainly did not deem the Messiah to be divine, even though indications of that truth could be found in the Old Testament (see examples above). For them, Messiah was no more than a mere mortal who was in a special relationship with Yahweh.

In summary, the Greeks thought that a son of God was a literal descendant of a god or a gifted human individual. The Jews deemed him to be a person specially appointed by God, especially in the case of the Messiah. In this light, it is informative to see Pilate’s reaction and the reaction of the Jewish leaders to Jesus’ claim of Sonship.

At Jesus’ trial before Pilate, the Jews objected to Him calling Himself God’s Son (John 19:7). Along with that, in verse 12, they objected to His claim to be king. This is consistent with the Jewish understanding of Messiah as son of God and king of Israel. Pilate’s reaction, though, was totally different. Jesus’ claim frightened him. Being a Gentile, Pilate believed in sons of God as literally descendants of gods. As a result, he “made efforts to release Him” (Jn 19:8-12).

It is important to note that Jesus did not define Himself as the Son of God by either the Greek or Jewish understandings. We affirm that Jesus categorically rejected pagan pantheism. As the Old Testament taught, Jesus affirmed that God is one. Jesus’ understanding, then, was closer to, but not identical with, the Jewish view. It is true that God’s Son has a special relationship with the Yahweh, but Jesus specified, as we shall see in the following material, that He as the Son was Himself God. Thus, He introduced a new and true understanding of that title when it referred to Himself.

In Mark 14:36, Jesus called God “Abba.” This Aramaic term expresses an intimate relationship between father and child, such as “Daddy.” The Jews addressed their rabbis with this term, but never God. Therefore, in using this word Jesus revealed His intimate connection with the Father. We earlier noted as well Jesus’ claim to possess what God possesses: “All things that the Father has are Mine” (Jn 16:15; cf. Jn 17:10). The Father “loves the Son and has given all things into His hand” (Jn 3:35). Additionally, along with the Father, the Son is the source of eternal life (Jn 17:3).

Jesus also claimed to have enjoyed the glory of God before the world was made (Jn 17:1, 5). In addition, He asserts to know the Father better than anyone and to have received revelation from Him: "...nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal {Him}" (Matt 11:27). He is one with God (Jn 17:22) to the degree that He can say, "You, Father, {are} in Me and I in You" (Jn 17:21). We also recall that Jesus called Himself μονογενής (*monogenes*), i.e., "only begotten," thereby underscoring His unique relationship with the Father (Jn 3:16, 18).

Furthermore, Jesus showed that His relationship with the Father differed from that of other Jews, even claiming that the father of some of them was the devil (Jn 8:41-44). His relationship with the Father differed from that of His disciples as well. After His resurrection, He instructed Mary: "Go to My brethren and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (Jn 20:17). Note that he said, "My Father and your Father, and My God and your God," and not, "our Father and our God." The disciples also had God as their Father, but not in the same sense that Jesus did.

Christ is μονογενής (*monogenes*), i.e., the only begotten, eternal Son of God. Only He came down from heaven, where He abode with the Father in heavenly glory. Only He possesses what God possesses. He is God Himself in the flesh. Clearly, his opponents understood that Jesus' claim to sonship made Him equal with God. They understood that He did not consider Himself merely the Son of God in the sense of Messiah. They perceived His pretension of deity. Consequently, they sought to kill Him as a blasphemer (Jn 10:24-33; Jn 5:18).

## 2) Son of Man

The expression, "Son of Man," was uncommon both in the world of the Greeks, and in the Old Testament. For the Greeks, the title simply referred to a man. Similarly, in the Old Testament, "son of man" is first encountered in Numbers 23:19 in parallel with the word "man": "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent." Here, the reference is to humanity. The same can be said for Psalm 8:4: "What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?"

The book of Ezekiel yields another usage of this phrase – it becomes a personal name for Ezekiel. God typically referred to him as "son of man," underscoring the glory of God in comparison with the humble status of the prophet. Therefore, by employing the expression "son of man," Yahweh emphasizes the weakness and lowly position of humanity in comparison with His own glory.

Finally, the Old Testament testifies of a heavenly Son of Man who was to become a great king (Dan 7:13-14; Ps 80:17). In addition, the intertestamental books of *Enoch* and *4 Ezra* speak of a supernatural Son of Man, whom people in the time of Jesus expected to appear.

Let us examine how our Lord applied this title to Himself. At times, His usage seems to parallel the usage in Ezekiel as a personal name. In Matthew 5:11, we read, "Blessed are you when {people} insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me," while Luke 6:22 reads, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and insult you, and scorn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man." In Mark 8:27, Jesus asks, "Who do people say that I am?" but in Matthew 16:13, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Finally, we consider Luke 12:8: "Everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God."

This title also emphasizes Jesus' human nature, as seen in Matthew 8:20: "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air {have} nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head," and Matthew 11:19: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard.'"

Finally, Jesus showed no hesitation in identifying Himself with the heavenly Son of Man who was to become the great coming King:

Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed {One?}" And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further

need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" (Mk 14:61-64).

Liberals, holding that Jesus is not God, but a mere human, claim that He never spoke of Himself as this heavenly king, but that the Early Church invented this dialogue. However, we rarely see the title "Son of Man" outside of the Gospels: only in Acts 7:56, Rev 1:13, and Rev 14:14. In the Gospels, it appears 85 times, usually as the words of Jesus. Therefore, little evidence exists that the Early Church used this title in reference to Jesus Christ, otherwise it would have appeared in the epistles as well. This self-designation originated with the Lord Himself, who did indeed consider Himself the fulfillment of Daniel's vision.

A fourth application of the title appears when Jesus spoke of His sufferings. For example, after Peter confessed Jesus as the Messiah, our Lord referred to Himself as the Son of Man, the suffering Savior (Lk 9:22; cf. Mk 8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33-34, 45; 14:21, 41). Thus, the Lord revealed a totally new connotation for this title. Before the Son of Man would enter His glory, He must undergo suffering.

So then, the title "Son of Man" has multiple connotations and applications in regard to our Lord. It can serve as His personal name, emphasize His humanity, point to His future glorious reign, and reveal His role as the suffering Savior.

### 3) Lord

The Greeks employed the term κύριος (*kurios*), i.e., "lord," as a title of respect for the emperor. Since they considered the Roman emperor to be divine, the term began to carry a divine undertone. In addition, the word κύριος (*kurios*) applied to gods in the pagan pantheon.

The title "lord" also translates the Hebrew word אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*). It served as an expression of respect to both God and the king. An example of the latter is 1 Kings 20:9: "So he said to the messengers of Ben-hadad, 'Tell my lord (אֲדֹנָי) the king...'" In connection with this title, we need mention the personal name of God, which He made known to Moses in Exodus 3:15, i.e., יהוה (*Yahweh*), which is improperly translated in most translations as "Lord" or "LORD." A correct translation reads, "God, furthermore, said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, "Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you." This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations.'"

About the time the Second Temple was built, the Jews decided that the name יהוה, i.e., Yahweh, was too holy to pronounce. When they came across that name in the biblical text, they would read אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*) instead. In the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, κύριος (*kurios*) came to translate both אֲדֹנָי (*adonai*) and יהוה (*Yahweh*). Therefore, κύριος (*kurios*) can refer to either designation. Our English translations follow the same pattern.

When people called Jesus κύριος (*kurios*), were they just showing Him respect or acknowledging Him as God? Clearly, in many cases the first meaning was meant. For example, Matthew 8:2 recounts, "And a leper came to Him and bowed down before Him, and said, 'Lord, if You are willing, You can make me clean.'" The leper was certainly not acknowledging Jesus' deity. A better translation according to the sense would be "sir." A similar case is in Matthew 8:5-6: "A centurion came to Him, imploring Him, and saying, 'Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home.'" Another individual appealed to Jesus in a similar way, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father" (Matt 8:21).

During His earthly sojourn, the disciples often referred to Jesus as κύριος (*kurios*). It is highly unlikely that at this early stage of their discipleship they were ready to acknowledge Him as the Lord God. They used it, rather, as an expression of respect. In John 13:13, in fact, Jesus drew a parallel between the titles "Lord" and "Teacher": "You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for {so} I am."

However, after Jesus' resurrection we observe a change in the biblical text – the word κύριος (*kurios*) is preceded by the definite article, i.e., "the Lord." This may possibly indicate an escalation in the disciples view of Christ. He was no longer just "Master" or "Teacher," but the Lord God Himself. The primary passage of Scripture indicating the disciples' changing views is John 20:28, where Thomas declares, "My Lord and my

God.” This is a definite recognition of Christ’s deity, and κύριος (*kurios*) here can be equated with Yahweh of the Old Testament. In this passage, κύριος (*kurios*) is again preceded by the definite article (also see Jn 21:7; Lk 24:34).

In the Gospel of Luke, the article precedes κύριος (*kurios*) even before the resurrection. However, the most likely explanation here is that Luke wrote his narrative from the perspective that he already knows that Jesus is “Lord” in the divine sense. We support this conclusion by observing that when Luke records people in the narrative saying “Lord,” the title lacks the definite article. When Luke himself calls Him “Lord,” though, the definite article stands.

Therefore, we may conclude that before the resurrection, Jesus’ disciples called Him “Lord” in the sense of “Master” or “Teacher.” After the resurrection, though, they employed it in the divine sense, acknowledging Jesus as the Lord God.

Finally, the Early Church, in employing the word κύριος (*kurios*), was confessing Jesus as God. In Acts 2:21 and Romans 10:13, we encounter a quotation of Joel 2:32. The New Testament version reads, “Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved,” while Joel wrote, “And it will come about that whoever calls on the name of Yahweh will be delivered.” The Early Church applied κύριος (*kurios*) to Jesus in the divine sense of “Yahweh.”

#### 4) Savior

For the Greeks, the term “savior” applied to some superhuman figure who delivered others from illness or danger. It always referred to some god or a son of a god. It also designated the emperor, whom they considered divine.

The Hebrew term for “savior” is מוֹשִׁיעַ (*moshia*), which comes from the verb יָשָׁע (*yasha*), or “to save.” This term sometimes referred to people who saved Israel from its enemies. More often, though, it referred to Yahweh, the Savior of His people. In the later chapters of Isaiah, the term is so used seven times. The Old Testament, in general, speaks of God being the exclusive deliverer of Israel: “I, even I, am Yahweh, and there is no savior besides Me” (Isa 43:11), and, “Yet I {have been} Yahweh your God since the land of Egypt; and you were not to know any god except Me, for there is no savior besides Me” (Hos 13:4).

Even when a person accomplished deliverance for God’s people, it was with the Lord’s support (Judg 3:9, 15). For example, Gideon asked the Lord, “If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken...” (Judg 6:36). The typical deliverance in the Old Testament was from physical danger. Sometimes, though, a spiritual salvation is in view. For example, Yahweh saves from sin (Isa 44:22; Ezek 36:29), His salvation is accompanied by righteousness (Isa 45:8), and lasts forever (Isa 45:17).

Comparing the names “Jesus” and “Joshua” yields an interesting observation. The latter’s name in Hebrew is יְהוֹשֻׁעַ (*yehoshua*), which translates, “Yahweh saves.” During the Babylonian exile, the name Joshua was condensed to יֵשׁוּעַ (*yeshua*) as seen in Ezra 2:36, 40. The name יֵשׁוּעַ (*yeshua*) is similar in form to the verb יָשָׁע (*yasha*), “to save,” in the third person, singular number, and masculine gender. Jesus’ name would then mean, “He saves.” This corresponds to the announcement of the angel at Jesus’ birth, “She will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Therefore, in the Old Testament, God saves through a person, such as Joshua, but in the New Testament, He Himself saves in the Person of Jesus Christ.

It is interesting to note that in the early New Testament books, the title “Savior” is associated with Christ’s work of redemption. We cite the following: “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31), and, “From the descendants of this man, according to promise, God has brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus” (Acts 13:23). In later New Testament books, though, this title not only refers to the work of salvation, but also became part of an official designation for Jesus: “Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:11; 2:20; 3:18; Tit 1:4). This designation expresses well both the person and work of Jesus Christ. The title “Lord” highlights his deity and authority, while “Savior” underscores His mercy and gift of salvation.

## 5) Yahweh

Finally, a number of New Testament passages ascribe Old Testaments texts about Yahweh (יהוה) to Jesus Christ. Note the following.<sup>641</sup>

- Ps 23:1 = Jn 10:1-14; Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25
- Ps 68:18 = Eph 4:8
- Ps 102:12, 25-27 = Heb 1:10-12
- Isa 6:5 = Jn 12:41
- Isa 8:13 = 1 Pet 2:8
- Isa 40:3, 9-11 = Jn 1:23; Rev 22:12
- Isa 44:6 = Rev 1:17-18; 22:13
- Isa 45:22-23 = Rom 14:11; Phil 2:10
- Isa 62:11-12 = Rev 22:12
- Jer 17:10; 20:12 = Rev 2:23
- Joel 2:32 = Rom 10:13
- Zech 12:10 = Jn 19:37

### d. The Disciples' Testimony

The disciples of Jesus who became New Testament authors wrote often of His deity. The most well known and often provocative passage is John 1:1-3: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being."

First, we note the direct assertion, "the Word was God" (θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος). According to John 1:14, the "Word" is Jesus Christ. An important feature of our passage is that the noun θεός (*theos*), i.e., "God," has no definite article. In the Greek language, as in English, the definite article points to something concrete or definite. Consequently, those who deny Jesus' full divinity claim that the absence of the definite article forces the translation, "a God." The Word, then, is not God in the full sense of the word, but a "secondary" God. In other words, the Word is not the God of the Old Testament, but some type of other God.

However, here we must take into consideration a well-accepted principle of the Greek language called "Colwell's Rule." It states, "Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article... a predicate nominative which precedes the verb cannot be translated as an indefinite or a 'qualitative' noun solely because of the absence of the article; if the context suggests that the predicate is definite, it should be translated as a definite noun."<sup>642</sup> This is the type of construction we have in John 1:1.

If the definite article stands before both the subject and the predicate, this indicates that they are identical. Yet, John did not want to imply that the Word and God the Father are one Person. In fact, the statement, "And the Word was with God," draws a distinction between them. Therefore, John is revealing that, although the Word is God, He is nonetheless distinct from God the Father.

A more specific treatment of Colwell's Rule states, "An anarthrous pre-verbal predicate nominative is normally qualitative, sometimes definite, and only rarely indefinite."<sup>643</sup> According to this rule, it is unlikely that the Word is an indefinite, "secondary" God. Most likely, John 1:1 teaches that either the Word possesses the divine nature, or that He is specifically the God of the Old Testament. In either case, the Word is a Divine Being, possessing God's attributes. A more detailed treatment of this verse is found in Appendix B.

<sup>641</sup>From Morey R. A. How to Answer a Jehovah's Witness. – Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1980. – P.95.

<sup>642</sup>Wallace D. B. Greek Grammar beyond the Basics. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – P. 257.

<sup>643</sup>Ibid., p. 262.



Furthermore, in the phrase, “And the Word was with God,” the Greek verb ἦν (*en*), i.e., “was,” is a form of the verb “to be” in the Greek imperfect tense. This tense indicates a process that occurred in the past. By using this form, John implies that the Word existed from the beginning and had no beginning.

Additionally, the Septuagint of Genesis 1:1 is clearly reflected in John 1:1. Both verses start with the phrase ἐν ἀρχῇ (*en arche*), i.e., “In the beginning.” In this way, John associates the Son with the Creator of Genesis 1. John begins his first epistle in a similar way: “What was from the beginning... the eternal life, which was with the Father” (1 Jn 1:1-2). Later in chapter 1 of his Gospel, John directly affirms Christ’s role as Creator: “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:3).

We can draw several other parallels between John chapter 1 and Genesis chapter 1. In the account of creation, Yahweh created the light and separated it from the darkness. John makes a spiritual application of this account in relation to Christ. Jesus is the “true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man.” Later, Jesus Himself states, “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God” (Jn 3:19-21). The coming of Christ separates the children of light from the children of darkness.

John 1:18 also confirms the deity of Jesus Christ: “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained {Him}.” Some manuscripts replace “only begotten God” with “only begotten Son,” but only one early document, dating from the fifth century, has that variant (Codex Alexandrius). Superior documents support the variant “only begotten God,” including two third century papyri (P66, P75), two fourth century documents (α, B), and another from the fifth century (C). Also, it is more likely that a scribe would change the reading from “only begotten God” to “only begotten Son,” which is found other places in John’s Gospel, than doing the reverse. The idea of an “only begotten God” likely puzzled him, and he attempted to “correct” what he incorrectly perceived as an error.

Colossians 1:15-19 has several features pointing to Christ’s deity. Christ, as God, created all things: “...{both} in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him.” The fact that the Son created “all things,” rules out the idea that He Himself is a part of creation. He is not a created being, but the Creator of all created beings.

Colossians 1:15 and 2 Corinthians 4:4 state that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God.” The term “image” is from the Greek εἰκών (*eikon*), which can indicate an exact copy or representation of something. For example, in Mark 12:16 it was used to describe the image of Caesar on a coin, while in Romans 1:23 it referred to idols made in the image of various animals. In virtue of His being the image of God, Jesus could say of Himself, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

However, we must concede that the term εἰκών (*eikon*) does not necessarily always refer to an exact representation. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11:7 it describes the similarities between God and humans, and in Romans 8:29 – between Christ and believers in Him. Although an exact representation is not always implied, the term can still nonetheless carry that connotation. Therefore, even though the use of εἰκών (*eikon*) is not definitive evidence for Christ’s deity, it is certainly consistent with that claim.

Colossians 2:9 states, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” This text unmistakably affirms the full deity of the Son. First, the word “fullness,” i.e., πλήρωμα (*pleroma*), denotes “completeness.”<sup>644</sup> The apostle, though, intensifies its meaning by adding the modifier “all.” This addition is actually unnecessary, since πλήρωμα (*pleroma*) already means “completeness.”<sup>645</sup> So then, all that belongs to the θεότης (*theotes*),

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<sup>644</sup>Dunn J. D. G. The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996. – P. 99.

<sup>645</sup>Moo D. J. The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008. – P. 193.

i.e., “Godhead,” belongs to Jesus Christ without exception. The term θεότης (*theotes*) refers to the “nature and essence of deity,” or “that which constitutes deity.”<sup>646</sup>

Paul relates that this fullness dwells in Christ “bodily.” Douglas Moo sees in this an allusion to the Old Testament temple, where Yahweh “dwelt” in a physical building.<sup>647</sup> Now, He dwells in His fullness not in a structure, but in the Person of Jesus Christ.

Another text unquestionably asserting Christ’s deity is Philippians 2:6-7, where we encounter some key phrases like, “image of God,” “equality with God,” and “a thing to be grasped,” We will examine each in turn. Unlike Colossians 1:15, the term for image here is μορφή (*morphe*). Scholars differ about its meaning. One idea is that of «external similarity» as in Mark 16:12, where after His resurrection, Jesus “appeared in a different form,” i.e., μορφή (*morphe*). Yet, because of the way Greeks often understood the word, it could also mean external similarity reflecting the inner condition. Louw and Nida define μορφή (*morphe*) as “the nature or character of something, with emphasis upon both the internal and external form.”<sup>648</sup> If we apply that meaning to Philippians 2:6, we see that μορφή (*morphe*) can refer to the divine nature of the Son of God.

A key term for our study is the Greek adjective ἴσος (*isos*) in the phrase “equality (ἴσος) with God,” meaning, “being equivalent in number, size, quality.”<sup>649</sup> The meaning “equivalent in number” appears in Luke 6:34: “Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same (ἴσος).” In Philippians 2:6, we have an example of equivalence in quality. Jesus is equal to God the Father in the quality of divinity.

Jews in Jesus’ time understood the significance of such a claim. In John 5:18, the unbelieving Jews “were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal (ἴσος) with God.” They considered such a claim blasphemous, perceiving that “equal to God” meant being God Himself.

Next, we look at the phrase “a thing to be grasped.” The word here is ἄρπαγμός (*harpagmos*). The term can mean: 1) robbery, or 2) “something to which one can claim or assert title by gripping or grasping, something claimed.”<sup>650</sup> The first meaning would indicate that Jesus did not consider equality with God “robbery,” that is, something that did not already belong to Him. The second meaning would imply that He did not consider the glories connected to His divine position as something to grasp onto or retain.

Although we affirm the truth of the first option, the second option is preferred in light of the following verse, which reveals that “He emptied Himself” by becoming human, thereby relinquishing His divine glory. This option also provides a contrast with the first part of verse 6: “Although He was in the image of God, He did not consider equality with God a thing to be retained.”

It is important to qualify as well that, although the Son possesses “equality with God” in every respect, the aspect that He chose not to “retain” was the position of glory He had with the Father from eternity past (see Jn 17:5). In light of our discussion and rejection of kenotism (see below), we cannot conclude that the Son renounced His deity in any other sense.

Philippians 2:10-11 declares, “so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow... and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” Paul here quotes Isaiah 45:23, where it states that all will bow to Yahweh. In Philippians 2, however, Paul ascribes this honor to Jesus.

The first chapter of Hebrews offers more evidence of Jesus’ deity. In verse 3, He is “the radiance of (God’s) glory and the exact representation of (God’s) nature.” The term “representation” translates the Greek χαρακτήρ (*character*), which is found in the New Testament only here. In the Septuagint, we find it only in Leviticus 13:28: “But if the bright spot remains in its place and has not spread in the skin, but is dim, it is the swelling from the burn; and the priest shall pronounce him clean, for it is {only} the scar (χαρακτήρ) of the

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<sup>646</sup>Dunn, p. 151.

<sup>647</sup>Moo, p. 133.

<sup>648</sup>Louw J. P., Nida E. A. Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains. – 2nd ed. – New York: United Bible Societies, 1989. – P. 586.

<sup>649</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 480-481.

<sup>650</sup>Ibid., p. 133-134.

burn.” This word describes the “mark” left by some type of instrument or event. Correspondingly, Jesus is the “mark” of the Father.

The word “nature” is also valuable to study. Behind it stands the Greek word ὑπόστασις (*hypostasis*), which means “essence” or “basic nature.”<sup>651</sup> So then, Jesus is the “exact representation” of the “essence” of the Father. He shares with the Father not some external similarities, but the divine nature itself. At the same time, the Son differs from the Father in Person, just as a stamp differs from the mark it leaves.

In Hebrews 1:8-9, the author quotes Psalm 45:7: “You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows.” In the original context, the psalm concerns the king of Israel. It is felt that this psalm celebrated the marriage of the king. The Jews also considered this a messianic psalm. The word “God” translates the Hebrew אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*), i.e., the God of Israel, and is attributed to Messiah.

It is true that other Old Testament texts call leaders of Israel אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) (see Ex 21:6; 22:8, and Psalm 82). Nonetheless, the context of Hebrews 1 makes clear that the author of Hebrews understood the significance of this psalm. He perceived that in relation to earthly kings of Israel, אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in Psalm 45 referred to the special status of Israel’s leaders. Yet, in relation to Messiah, אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) carries a divine sense.

Note Hebrews 1:10-12, where we have a citation from Psalm 102:25-27:

You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; and they all will become old like a garment, and like a mantle you will roll them up; like a garment they will also be changed. But you are the same, and your years will not come to an end.”

In the original Old Testament context, these words described the eternal nature of Yahweh (יהוה). The author of Hebrews, though, ascribes these verses to the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The first chapter of Hebrews abounds with still more Christological references. In verse 3, Christ “upholds all things by the word of His power.” Beginning at verse 5, the author demonstrates that He is greater than the angels, and that they worship Him. Christ is also worshipped in the book of Revelation (5:8, 12-14).

The next text for our study is Titus 2:13: “...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” We have in the Greek: τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. The question arises, “Does the verse speak of two individuals – God the Father and the Savior, Christ Jesus, or only of the latter?” The deciding factor is the presence of the definite article τοῦ (*tou*) at the beginning of the verse. The definite article in this position combines the two nouns, “God” and “Savior,” indicating one Person. Therefore, in this verse the “Savior, Christ Jesus” is “our great God.”

Titus 2:13 is an example of the Granville Sharp Rule of Greek grammar. It states that when two nouns are joined by one definite article appearing before the first item, then the two nouns refer to the same object. This rule holds, however, only under the following conditions. First, both nouns must be in the singular. Second, both nouns must describe an animate object. Third, neither noun may be a personal name.<sup>652</sup> Titus 2:13 meets all these requirements. Therefore, this verse declares our Savior, Jesus Christ, to be God.

Other arguments further solidify our interpretation of this verse. In the New Testament, the word “appearing” always refers to the Lord Jesus. In addition, the following verse begins with a singular relative pronoun, ὅς (*hos*), or “who,” which can apply to only one Person.<sup>653</sup> Moreover, when Paul mentions the Father and Son together in his epistles, he always clearly distinguishes them from one another.<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>651</sup>Ibid., p. 847.

<sup>652</sup>Wallace, p. 270-273.

<sup>653</sup>Knight G. W. The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992. – P. 323.

<sup>654</sup>See Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; 1 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; Philemon 3

We include in our analysis 2 Peter 1:1, where we again encounter the phrase “God and Savior Jesus Christ” (τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν καὶ σωτῆρος Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). This is the same grammatical construction we saw in Titus 2:13, namely the definite article standing before two nouns indicating their identity. Therefore, Peter joins Paul in affirming Christ’s deity. We also observe that three times in this epistle, Peter writes “Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Πετ 1:11; 2:20; 3:18), a parallel expression to “God and Savior Jesus Christ.” If the former phrase refers to one Person, likely the latter one does as well.

In the very next verse, Peter clearly demarcates the Father and the Son: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.” Placing the title “Lord” after the name of Jesus makes clear that two separate Persons are in view. In addition, Peter even more certainly distinguishes them by placing the definite article before both nouns: “God” and “Lord.” Yet, in verse 1, Peter does not exercise such caution. Instead, he employs a construction that unquestionably affirms that Jesus is God.

In his first epistle, Peter does not neglect to speak of Christ’s deity as well: “Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts” (1 Pet 3:15). Here, Peter quotes Isaiah 8:13, which speaks of sanctifying יהוה (*Yahweh*). A textual variant of 1 Peter 3:15 – “God” instead of “Christ” – does exist, but is supported by inferior manuscripts. In changing the Isaiah quotation, Peter is adapting it to New Testament realities as well as affirming Christ’s deity.

Romans 9:5 provides us with still another indication of Jesus’ divine status: “...whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever.” The relative phrase, “who is over all, God blessed forever,” refers to Christ.

In the epistles, we frequently see instances where the Father and Son are mentioned together as sources of blessing for the believer. For example, grace and peace come from both the Father and the Son.<sup>655</sup> Both grant peace, love, and faith (Eph 6:23). Both summon us to obedience (1 Tim 1:1), and, correspondingly, Paul summons Timothy to diligence in ministry before both God the Father and Christ Jesus (2 Tim 4:1). We are called to the “knowledge” of both (2 Pet 1:2). James calls himself a “bond-servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jam 1:1). The day of wrath involves the participation of both the Father and the Lamb (Rev 6:16).

According to Scripture, Jesus occupies an exalted status. He was glorified by God the Father (Acts 7:52-56), and is above all power and authority (Eph 1:21). He has the name above all other names (Phil 2:9), and all is subject to Him (1 Pet 3:22). James speaks of Him as the “Lord of glory” (Jam 2:1).

Our final text is 1 Timothy 3:16: “He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” Here, we see described the entire career of Jesus Christ: His descent from heaven, His earthly pilgrimage, and His return to heavenly glory. Some manuscripts of later date and inferior quality of this verse begin, “God was revealed in the flesh...” This variant arose by a confusion of the relative pronoun ὃς (*hos*) with the abbreviation for θεός (*theos*), i.e., “God” (ΘΣ instead of ΟΣ).<sup>656</sup> Yet, even without the divine title in this verse, we nevertheless have a clear testimony of Christ’s preexistence and deity.

### **e. Christ’s Sinlessness**

The sinless life of Jesus also supports our claim of His divine status. As a partaker of the divine nature, He conducted His life in perfect obedience to the Father. We can demonstrate this by the following proofs.

First, Jesus Himself claimed to perfectly observe God’s commandments (see Jn 8:29; 15:10). Second, those who lived in close proximity to Him and observed His life also testify of His sinlessness. The apostle John wrote of Him, “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous” (1 Jn 2:1), and, “You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin” (1 Jn 3:5). Peter said, “...knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, {the blood} of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18-19), and, “who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth” (1 Pet 2:22).

<sup>655</sup>See 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; 2 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 2:16; 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 1:2; Philemon 3; Rom 1:7; Eph 1:2; 2 Jn 1, 3.

<sup>656</sup>Metzger B. M. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. – London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994. – P. 573-574.

Third, other New Testament writers add their inspired testimony. Paul writes of Christ, “He made Him who knew no sin {to be} sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor 5:21). The author of Hebrews echoes this thought, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as {we are, yet} without sin” (Heb 4:15), and, “For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens” (Heb 7:26).

Fourth, even unbelievers and enemies of Jesus were not able to convict Him of sin. Jesus challenged them, “Which one of you convicts Me of sin?” (Jn 8:46). During His trial before the Sanhedrin, no one succeeded in making any accusation stick: “Now the chief priests and the whole Council kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus to put Him to death, and they were not finding any. For many were giving false testimony against Him, but their testimony was not consistent” (Mk 14:55-56). Pilate issued the following verdict, “I find no guilt in this man” (Lk 23:4). Finally, during His crucifixion, one of the robbers crucified with Him asserted, “This man has done nothing wrong” (Lk 23:41). The centurion who stood near the cross also felt, “Certainly this man was innocent” (Lk 23:47).

Knowing that Jesus never sinned, the question arises whether or not He could have sinned. Disagreements exist in this regard. Since Jesus was both God and man, it seems both options are possible. As a human, sin may have been a possibility for Jesus since Adam and Eve, being originally sinless, nevertheless disobeyed. On the other hand, Jesus being God, it appears He could not sin since “God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all” (1 Jn 1:5). So then, as God, He could not sin. As man, He could sin, but not *necessarily* so. God *cannot* sin, but humans can sin or *not* sin. The logically consistent resolution to this tension is to conclude that Jesus would never sin.

Even if we hold the view that Jesus would never sin, this in no way implies that He did not experience real temptation. He had typical human needs and desires, the same as any person. When, for example, the devil tempted Him to change stones into bread (Matt 4:3), He experienced the weight of that temptation. When Jesus contemplated going to the cross, He soul was “deeply grieved, to the point of death” (Matt 26:38), so that “His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Lk 22:44). The author of Hebrews comments, “Since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Heb 2:18). Therefore, we see that Jesus did experience real temptation.

We may even assert that the Lord experienced temptation to a greater degree than anyone else ever has. Since everyone eventually gives in to one temptation or another, no one has ever experienced the full weight of pressure that temptation can bring to bear on a soul. Only the one who has never sinned has experienced this. Compare what is written about Jesus in Luke 22:44, “His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground,” with what is written about believers in Him: “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin” (Heb 12:4).

Jesus not only experienced the full weight of temptation, He also went through every type of temptation. We recall the words in Hebrews 4:15 that He was “tempted in all things as {we are, yet} without sin.” We do not interpret this verse to say that the Lord went through every *possible* temptation. For example, He was never tempted to be unfaithful to his wife, never having married. He experienced, rather, every *type* of temptation.

According to 1 John 2:16, there are three types of temptation: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. All temptations derive from these three. When Eve was tempted to eat from the forbidden tree, she saw “that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make {one} wise” (Gen 3:6). Therefore, Eve was tempted in all three areas of human weakness. The “lust of the flesh” corresponds to the tree being “good for food.” The “lust of the eyes” corresponds to the tree being “a delight to the eyes.” The “boastful pride of life” corresponds to the tree being “desirable to make {one} wise.”

Interestingly, Jesus was tempted by Satan in the very same three ways (Matt 4; Lk 4). The temptation to change stones to bread appealed to the lust of the flesh. The temptation to possess the kingdoms of the world

appealed to the lust of the eyes. The temptation to jump from the wing of the temple appealed to pride. So then, Jesus was indeed tempted “in all things as {we are}.”

## **B. Rejection of Christ’s Deity**

### **1. Arianism**

In the history of the Church, heresies have arisen and continue to appear that deny the deity of Jesus Christ. Among the most threatening has been Arianism. Arius was a well-known pastor in the city of Alexandria and nearly became bishop of that region. He accused Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria at that time, with the heresy of Sabellius. Arius himself began to teach the existence of one true God, excluding all others from that status, including the Son and the Spirit. Arius felt that God does not share His attributes with another. If the Son also possesses the divine nature, then monotheistic faith would be in jeopardy. Therefore, according to Arius, the Son must be inferior to the Father in divinity.

Arius’ teaching had affinities with the teaching of Origen, the influential second-third century Alexandrian theologian, who also taught the subordination of the Son to the Father. Arius took this idea one step farther, though, and, unlike Origen, denied that the Son was eternal, but rather was created by God. In virtue of the Son’s “creation,” God became “Father.” The Son is still considered God, but in a lesser sense than the Father.

The doctrine of Arius shook the Early Church to its foundations. Bishop Alexander summoned Arius and the other pastors in his regions for consultations. The result was to acknowledge that the Son was indeed eternal and possesses the self-same divine nature as the Father. Arius refused to recant his views and was excommunicated from the Church. Nevertheless, he continued to conduct his ministry and gathered a large following.

With the unity of the Roman Empire at risk, the Emperor Constantine ordered the first Church Council in Nicaea in 325. At the Council, Arius and his followers explained and defended their teaching, but a young minister from Alexandria, Athanasius by name, opposed Arius’ position. He defended from Scripture that the Son possessed the divine nature in equal measure to God the Father. The Council approved Athanasius’ position and rejected the teaching of Arius.

Some attendees at the Council proposed that the Son has a nature similar to the Father, but not identical. Their position is coined by the Greek term *ὁμοιούσιος* (*homoiousios*), which means “similar nature.” The Council, however, rejected this definition and approved the term *ὁμοούσιος* (*homoousios*), denoting the “self-same nature.” It is often commented that the Council of Nicaea was debated over one Greek letter: the letter *iota*. Yet, this one letter determined whether or not the Son was equal to the Father in deity.

As a result of the Council’s decision, Constantine exiled Arius from the Roman Empire. However, Constantine’s sister, a convert to Arianism, convinced her brother to restore him. Arius attempted to return to Alexandria, but the new bishop, Athanasius, prevented him. The presence of Arius’ supporters in Alexandria, however, led to an uprising in the city. As a result, Constantine expelled Athanasius from the city. The other pastors in Alexandria, however, refused to acknowledge Arius. Constantine reacted by ordering the entire Church to embrace Arianism, but the day before the order was to go into effect, Arius died. On the subsequent Church Council in Constantinople, Arius’ teaching was again condemned as heretical.

Nevertheless, Arius’ doctrine resurfaced in the 19th century in the teaching of Charles Russell. Russell also rejected the deity of Jesus Christ and taught that He was created by the one God. Russell’s teaching and his movement, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, are discussed and refuted in Appendix B.

### **2. Dynamic Incarnation**

We can group a number of similar Christological heresies under the rubric “dynamic incarnation.” According to these views, Jesus was a mere human, indwelt by the Spirit of God. Thus, God did not become incarnate, but indwelt the man Jesus of Nazareth.

### **a. Teaching of Cerinthus**

The first century figure Cerinthus taught that “Christ” abode in the man “Jesus.” According to Cerinthus, the Spirit “Christ” descended on the man Jesus during his water baptism and departed from him just before his death. Cerinthus had a highly negative view of the material world due to the influence of Plato’s philosophy, which taught the superiority of the invisible world of “forms.” Thus, he could not embrace the doctrine of God becoming flesh. Aristotle’s philosophy also had an effect on Cerinthus, which asserted that God cannot change. This also prevented Cerinthus from accepting the doctrine of God’s incarnation in Christ. Cerinthus’ views have more affinities, in fact, with Gnosticism than with orthodox Christianity.

The apostle John was familiar with Cerinthus’ teaching and may possibly have referred to it in his epistles. For example, whenever John writes that Jesus is the Son of God, he mentions only the name “Jesus” (1 Jn 4:15; 5:5). This contradicts Cerinthus’ teaching that not Jesus, but Christ is the Son of God. When John states that Jesus Christ came in the flesh, he employs the entire name, Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3; 4:2), which again contradicts Cerinthus, who would deny “Christ” coming in the flesh. In addition, twice John directly states, “Jesus is the Christ” (1 Jn 2:22; 5:1).

Another key passage in refutation of Cerinthus is 1 John 5:6. John writes that Jesus Christ came “by water and blood.” This indicates that Jesus Christ was one individual both during His water baptism and through His sacrificial death. The word “water” symbolized water baptism, while “blood” represents His crucifixion. So then, the Spirit “Christ” did not abandon Jesus at His death, since Jesus Christ is one united Person.

### **b. Adoptionism (Dynamic Monarchism)**

Adoptionism, or Dynamic Monarchism, arose in the second century. Its founder was Theodore of Mopsuestia, and its doctrines were propagated by Paul of Samosata. Theodore taught that God, being eternal, cannot be born, suffer, or die. Thus, Theodore concluded that Jesus was not God, but only a man. He taught that the two natures of Christ were actually two individuals: the man Jesus and the indwelling “Logos,” who descended on him from heaven.

According to Theodore, Jesus’ connection with the Logos was closer than that of the Old Testament prophets. The Logos manifested Himself through Jesus, and Jesus submitted himself to the Logos to such a degree that they became a unity, yet not in essence, but only in will. Jesus entered into a “moral union” with the Logos, that is, a union of wills or total surrender. This union was forged when Jesus rose from the dead. At that time, He received a promotion of his status to that of “son of God,” yet He was not divine in the sense that the Father is divine.

Paul of Samosata also taught that Jesus was not God, but became God’s son by virtue of His devotion to God. Paul of Samosata’s teaching differed from Theodore’s not so much in content, as in motive. Paul sought to defend God’s oneness, while Theodore could not acknowledge that God could be born. In addition, Paul denied the existence of the Trinity, believing that the one God was indwelling Jesus. Theodore, however, acknowledged the Trinity, but believed that the second Person of the Trinity was not Jesus, but the indwelling Logos.<sup>657</sup>

This teaching is refuted by the same arguments advanced against Nestorianism below.

### **c. Nestorianism**

Nestorius (5th century) was born in Asia Minor and studied under Theodore of Mopsuestia. He served as a monk until being appointed bishop of Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius II. After his appointment, Nestorius began spreading his Christological views. He invited a certain Anastasius to preach in Constantinople

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<sup>657</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011. – P. 287-289.

against the appellation to Mary the title *Theotokos*, which means, “bearer of God.” Nestorius considered that designation inappropriate for Mary, since it implied that God could be born. He preferred the title *Christotokos*, or “bearer of Christ.” Similar to his teacher Theodore, Nestorius also believed that the two natures of Christ, His deity and His humanity, were in reality two separate individuals.<sup>658</sup>

The main opponent to Nestorius was Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria. Embracing Alexandrian Christology, Cyril objected that Nestorius’ views distorted the unity of Christ’s person. The Roman Church supported Cyril in his objections.

After a lengthy debate between Nestorius and his opponents, the Roman Emperor summoned a Church Council, which took place in Ephesus in 431. Cyril arrived on time at the council, but the representative from Rome and Nestorius’ supporters from Syria arrived late. Nonetheless, Cyril opened the Council without them. Those in attendance condemned Nestorius’ teaching, excommunicated him from the Church, and confirmed the use of *Theotokos* for Mary. Nestorius refused to attend the Council, but after his supporters arrived, he opened his own council, which excommunicated Cyril.

The Roman delegation, however, supported Cyril’s council, and the Emperor consequently exiled Nestorius to Egypt, where he died. His teaching, however, continued to spread in the East, traveling even to China. The Assyrian Church in Syria, Iraq, and Iran continues to hold to Nestorian Christology to this day.

On the other hand, Cyril’s view did not prevail as well. Working off Athanasius’ formula, μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη (one nature of God the Word incarnate), He asserted that Christ has only one nature – a divine one. In time, Cyril did agree to a compromise with the Antiochian school, which brought his view closer to the two natures view – divine and human. The Antiochian theologians, in turn, agreed to reject Nestorianism.<sup>659</sup>

The following arguments supposedly support the position of Theodore and Nestorius. First, the Bible says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19). Here, it seems that God, i.e., the Logos, dwelt in the man Jesus. In addition, on the basis of Romans 1:3-4 and Acts 13:32-33, Nestorius taught that Christ became the Son of God at the time of his resurrection.

Romans 1:3-4 reads, “...concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord.” In Acts 13:32-33, the apostle Paul, citing the second Psalm, allegedly equates Christ’s resurrection with His adoption by God the Father: “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this {promise} to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you.’”

The following Scripture passages ascribe deity to Jesus Himself and serve as a refutation of Nestorianism. Paul charged the elders of Ephesus: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Note that God purchased the Church with *His own* blood. Additionally: “They would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). They did not crucify a mere man, but the Lord of glory. In addition: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life” (1 Jn 1:1). The apostles claimed to have touched the Logos, the Word of Life.

Furthermore, Mary bore not merely a human child, but “the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). Consequently, Mary is called “the mother of the Lord” (Lk 1:43). We do not deny that God was in Christ or that the Holy Spirit manifest Himself through Jesus. Yet, the fact that God worked through Christ does not necessarily mean that Jesus Himself did not possess divine nature. He voluntarily submitted Himself to the Father and yielded to the Spirit as an example for us.

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<sup>658</sup>Some feel that Nestorius’ opponents exaggerated His position. Nestorius once wrote, “Christ is indivisible in that he is Christ, but he is twofold in that which takes and that which is taken.... For we do not acknowledge two Christs or two sons or ‘only-begottens’ or Lords; not one son and another son, not a first ‘only-begotten’ and a new ‘only-begotten,’ not a first and second Christ, but one and the same (Noted in McGrath A. E. Historical Theology. – Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. – P. 57).

<sup>659</sup>Lane, p. 54.



Another key text is 1 Timothy 3:16: “By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” This description does not coincide with the idea that God was merely living in a human and manifesting Himself through Him. What is described here is God Himself descending to the earth, becoming human, living as a man, and returning to heaven. Jesus Christ is the unified God-man.

The same can be said about Philippians 2:6-11. There, we read that Jesus is the image of God who emptied Himself, died, and was exalted. All must now confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Again, not two individuals are in view, but one Lord Jesus Christ.

### **3. Liberal Theology**

Liberal theology also rejects the deity of Christ. According to classical liberal theology, we must view the Bible not as the inspired Word of God, but as a typical document from antiquity. Methods of interpretation are applied to the Bible that disregard its inspired status. For example, narratives about God’s supernatural acts, including the miracles of Jesus and His bodily resurrection, are regarded as myth or legend. The Early Church supposedly created these stories to glorify their Teacher, Jesus of Nazareth.

Liberals also believe that the Early Church fabricated the claims by Jesus to His deity. Having rejected the historicity of the Gospels, they embarked on a “quest for the historical Jesus,” i.e., an attempt to recover the “true” history of Jesus of Nazareth. For liberals, this became the primary aim of theological study. The typical conclusion was that Jesus was a good man and teacher who showed people how to live righteously.

Liberals make a distinction between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith.” The first is the actual man Jesus who lived in the first century. Nonetheless, His true character is shrouded in myth and legend, created by the Early Church. The “Christ of faith” is the picture of Jesus we receive in the New Testament. He is not an actual character, though, but a creation of the Early Church.

Among the initial proponents of liberal theology was Johann Selmer (1725-1791). He wrote the famous tract, *Treatise of the Free Investigation of the Canon*. He declared that the Bible is not the inspired Word of God, but a human production. Selmer is thus considered the father of the historical-critical method for the interpretation of Scripture.

Other scholars joined Selmer in his view of Scripture, namely Johann Gabler, Georg Bauer, and Ferdinand Christian Baur. They popularized his theories. Ferdinand Christian Baur was a professor at the University of Tübingen, which became known as the center for liberal theology and exercised a marked influence on theology throughout Europe.

Well-known liberal theologians in more recent times include Adolf Harnack, Albert Schweitzer, and Rudolf Bultmann. Harnack (1850-1930) believed that the Gospel version of Jesus is mythological. In particular, he rejected the supernatural acts attributed to Him. He explained these instances as follows: (1) in Jesus’ time, people were unsophisticated and could consider anything a miracle, and (2) miracles are commonly ascribed to famous historical figures after their deaths. Harnack also objected that we are able to explain phenomena in nature by the actions of natural laws. Even if something seems to defy natural explanation, we deem that an extraordinary event, but not a miracle.

Harnack’s view of Jesus was that He was a preacher: (1) of the coming kingdom of God, (2) of the fatherhood of God and the infinite value of the human soul, and (3) of righteousness and love. Jesus is not God, but a good man and able teacher, who predicted the coming of God’s kingdom. Following Jesus means keeping His commands about righteousness and love.

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) labored not only as a theologian, but also as a medical doctor, missionary, musician, and historian. He opened a hospital in Africa and served there many years. As a theologian, he was engaged in the “quest for the historical Jesus.” He was a liberal in his basic theology, but differed from other liberals in that he thought that Jesus actually believed that He was a great man of God and would introduce God’s kingdom to the world.

In Schweitzer's opinion, Jesus not only taught people how to live righteously, but also expected the end of the world to come in His lifetime. He cited the following texts in support: Matthew 10:23, Matthew 16:28, and John 22:20-22. According to Schweitzer, Jesus was mistaken, since the kingdom did not come. On the cross, Jesus realized this and cried out, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?" So then, Jesus died without seeing the fulfillment of His expectations.

Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) advanced a new understanding of the person of Jesus Christ. He was an adherent of existential philosophy, which held that truth is not discovered by rational thought (as in rationalism) or by objective observation (as in empiricism), but through personal experience. The best path to discover truth was reflection on one's personal experience. The main thing is not what occurs in history, but how one perceives those events.

Like other liberals, Bultmann rejected the supernatural in the Bible. Unlike many liberals, though, Bultmann saw little value in seeking the "historical Jesus." As an adherent of existentialism, Bultmann advanced the idea that we must study not what Jesus actually said and did, but how the disciples existentially perceived Him. The disciples expressed their impression of Jesus in the form of the "myths" that appear in the New Testament. The Bible student must study these myths to discover the inner feelings that inspired the disciples to create them. This is the true value of Bible study.

One other liberal thinker is important to mention here – Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834).<sup>660</sup> He felt that Jesus was not the incarnate Son of God, but a man with a highly developed God-consciousness. He was born without sin and lived in close fellowship with God. Sykes writes about Schleiermacher, "Schleiermacher has a conception of Christ as organically human and like all men in virtue of this humanity; yet wholly superior to humanity in possessing an unclouded awareness of God."<sup>661</sup> Christ is able to communicate His God-consciousness to us in order to enhance our relationship with God. So then, salvation is not something accomplished in history through the death and resurrection of the Savior, but an existential phenomenon which occurs in the human consciousness.

For a refutation of the liberal view in general, we refer the reader to chapter 13 of the second volume of this series. Nonetheless, we will touch on two items here: the liberal understanding of the Christological title "Lord" and the Christological title "Savior." Unlike the biblical witness, liberals teach that the first disciples never referred to Jesus as Lord in a divine sense. In their opinion, Jews, who were strict monotheists, would never ascribe deity to a human. They assert that Greek believers, especially under the apostle Paul's influence, who were accustomed also to use "lord" in relation to the emperor, attributed this title to Jesus.

We respond that, first of all, Jesus Himself considered Himself "Lord" in a divine sense. We recall His words to His disciples, "Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied {there} and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord (i.e., ὁ κύριος) has need of them'" (Matt 21:2-3). Here, Jesus calls Himself "Lord" in a divine sense. Also, in Mark 5:19 we read, "Go home to your people and report to them what great things the Lord (i.e., ὁ κύριος) has done for you."<sup>662</sup> Aside from this, Jesus said that He, as the "Lord": (1) has authority over the Sabbath (Mk 2:28), (2) will judge the world (Matt 7:22-23), (3) requires obedience (Lk 6:46), and (4) is greater than David (Mk 12:36-37).

Second, proponents of liberal theology fail to appreciate that the apostle Paul was raised as a Jew, not a Greek. In Acts 22:3, he explains, "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city (i.e., Jerusalem), educated under Gamaliel, strictly according to the law of our fathers, being zealous for God just as you all are today." Paul wrote his theology from a monotheistic Hebrew worldview, not a Greek one.

Third, evidence exists that even before Paul's ministry, the Early Church preached Jesus as Lord. At the day of Pentecost, Peter announced, "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). In addition, scholars feel that Philippians 2:6-

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<sup>660</sup>Sykes S. Friedrich Schleiermacher / Nineham D. E. Robertson E. H. Makers of Contemporary Theology. – Richmond VA: John Knox, 1965. – P. 34-41.

<sup>661</sup>Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>662</sup>We cannot rule out that in these verses, Jesus was not talking about Himself, but about the Father.

11 was an early Christian hymn that Paul incorporated into his epistle. In this text, we discover that “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Fourth, if only Greek believers regarded Jesus as divine, calling Him “Lord,” one would expect a strong negative reaction from the Jewish believers of that day. Yet, Church history does not record any objection by Jewish believers or a debate on this account with Gentile Christians.

Finally, 1 Corinthians 16:22 is very insightful in this regard: “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha.” The term “maranatha” is not Greek, but Aramaic, and means, “Our Lord comes.” Clearly, this catchword arose and was used in Aramaic-speaking congregations in Palestine. So then, not only Greek Christians called Jesus “Lord,” but Jewish ones as well.

Concerning the term “Savior,” some liberals observe that this title appears mostly in the later New Testament books, namely in 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, 2 Peter, Jude, and 1 John. These books employ this title for Jesus 17 times, while it occurs only 7 times in the remainder of the New Testament. Therefore, liberals conclude that Greek believers attributed this title to Jesus, but the earliest disciples had no such conception of Him. According to liberal thought, in the earliest Church Jesus was not “Savior.”

In defense of their view, liberals also note that in the New Testament, the title “Savior” is sometimes accompanied by the word ἐπιφάνια (*epiphania*), which translates, “appearing” (see 2 Tim 1:10; Tit 2:13). This combination, “appearing of the Savior” is often found in Greek literature. Therefore, they conclude that Christians borrowed the conception of Jesus as Savior from the Greeks and that it was never an original designation for Jesus Christ.

In response, we note that the term “Savior” has a Jewish origin as well as a Greek one (see 1 Chr 16:35; Ps 65:5; 79:9; 85:4). In addition, although the term is more common in later New Testament books, it appears in earlier ones as well (see Lk 2:11; Matt 1:21; Acts 5:31; 13:23). Already from His birth, the angels called Him “Savior.” Moreover, in the books of 1 Timothy, Titus, and Jude, we encounter the phrase, “God our Savior.” This expression comes from the Old Testament, not from Greek literature. Therefore, when the New Testament writers speak of Jesus as the Savior, they have in view the Old Testament meaning and understanding of that title.

#### 4. Kenosis

Kenosis is the teaching that the Son of God emptied Himself of His deity before He came to earth and was incarnated. The key passage for this theory is Philippians 2:6-7: “Although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men.” The Greek word translated “emptied” is κενώω (*kenoo*), which is faithfully translated in this verse.<sup>663</sup> It also appears in Romans 4:14; 1 Corinthians 1:17; 9:15; and 2 Corinthians 9:3.

According to the Kenosis doctrine, the Son laid aside such divine attributes as omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. He retained only His moral qualities, such as holiness, love, righteousness, etc.<sup>664</sup> The problem, though, is that if Jesus laid aside some of these divine attributes, then He would cease being God. Consequently, Kenosis denies the full deity of Jesus Christ.

The following arguments are used to support Kenosis.<sup>665</sup> Christ “became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). He laid aside His glory (Jn 17:5), which He received back again at His exaltation (Phil 2:9-11). During His earthly ministry, Jesus did not know everything (Mk 13:32; 9:20-21; Matt 26:39). He grew in wisdom (Lk 2:52). He endured genuine temptation (Heb 2:10; 5:8-9).

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<sup>663</sup>BDAG, p. 539-540.

<sup>664</sup>Some say that the Son did not empty Himself of His divine attributes, but simply did not employ them. This view is closer to the traditional view (see Boyd G. A., Eddy P. R. *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002. – P. 110).

<sup>665</sup>Noted in Boyd, p. 102-111.

Moreover, proponents of this teaching theorize that the Son's self-emptying was not a necessary step for Him, but done voluntarily so that He could serve as an example for us. His miracles were actually accomplished through Him by the Holy Spirit.<sup>666</sup> Since the other two Persons of the Trinity retained all their divine attributes, they could maintain order in the universe without the Son's participation during His earthly sojourn.

We object to the Kenosis teaching on the following grounds.<sup>667</sup> Even though at times it appeared that Jesus did not know something, at other times He displayed supernatural knowledge.<sup>668</sup> Boyd offers the following explanation: "The divine mind always had access to the contents of the human mind, but not vica versa."<sup>669</sup> Jesus also demonstrated supernatural power (Jn 2:11, 19).

Let us examine Philippians 2:6-7 more closely as well. The Son did not "empty Himself" in the sense of laying aside divine attributes, but in taking upon Himself a human nature while retaining at the same time His divine nature. Verse 7 states, "(He) emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant." The Greek participle often expresses "means," which would yield the translation, "He emptied Himself *by means of* taking the form of a bond-servant." Therefore, the "emptying" of the Son consisted in His accepting the limitations of humanity, not in divesting Himself of divinity.

However, Evangelical scholars differ on the question of whether Jesus was able to utilize all of His divine attributes after His incarnation. Some claim He could, while others deny that possibility. We recall that at times Jesus lacked certain knowledge and did miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is also hard to image how He could retain omnipresence while being in a body (but see discussion in chapter 4, section B). On the other hand, even though the Synoptic Gospels stress the activity of the Spirit in Jesus' ministry, the apostle John appears to ascribe supernatural powers to Christ Himself (see Jn 1:47-50; 2:11; 2:24-25; also see Matt 8:27; 9:4; Mk 1:23-24).

In considering this question, one must not surrender the position that Jesus, being God, does indeed possess all the divine qualities. If and how they were manifest remains an open question for Evangelical theology.

## 5. Teaching of the Ebionites

In conclusion, we will briefly make mention of an early Christological heresy which appeared among a group named the Ebionites. The Ebionites were so-called "Christian Jews," who attempted to retain the idea of God's oneness. They were willing to concede that Jesus was Messiah, but refused to recognize Him as God.<sup>670</sup> However, in the light of the biblical witness to Christ's deity presented above, we find this view unconvincing.

## C. Conclusions

Jesus challenged His early disciples with the question, "Who do people say that I am?" In light of our biblical survey and examination of Scriptural evidence, we are ready to respond. Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, co-equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. As the Messiah of Israel, He fulfilled all that was predicted of Him by the prophets. He redefined the Christological titles in a way to reflect His deity. His claims to deity were confirmed by works the Father gave Him to do, as well as through His resurrection from the dead. His apostles, in their epistles to the churches, did not hesitate to ascribe to Him divine status. We affirm their testimony to the full deity of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>666</sup>See Matt 12:18; Lk 4:1, 14, 17-21; Jn 5:19, 30

<sup>667</sup>Boyd, p. 103-107.

<sup>668</sup>See Jn 1:47-50; 2:24-25; 13:18-19; Matt 9:4; Lk 22:31-34.

<sup>669</sup>Boyd, p. 105.

<sup>670</sup>Jacob W. Christianity through Jewish Eyes. – Hebrew Union College Press, 1974. – P. 191-192.

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## Chapter 10 - The Humanity of Christ

For ages, the puzzle remains unresolved, how the Son of God became man. The fact of His incarnation is undeniable, and many teachers and commentators have attempted to explain the incarnation. Some, though, have introduced serious distortions. Our study will attempt to bring clarity to this question as well as to point out errors and exaggerations in this doctrine.

### A. Testimony of Moses and the Prophets

#### 1. The Seed of the Woman

The very first mention of the coming Messiah is in Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel." Here, Yahweh promises deliverance from the power of evil by the hand of the "seed of the woman."<sup>671</sup> We must understand the serpent as an instrument of Satan or, more likely, Satan himself (see 2 Cor 11:3; Rev 12:9). The word "seed" is usually taken in a collective sense meaning "descendants." Therefore, the "seed of the serpent" are Satan's followers, i.e., children of this present age (see Jn 8:44; 1 Jn 3:10). The "seed of the woman," taken in the collective sense, would be the righteous of the earth, including followers of Jesus.

However, we must also keep in mind that "seed" in the singular can still refer to one individual. The book of Genesis frequently highlights one specific descendant ("seed") as the heir of a promise (Noah, Isaac, Jacob, Judah). Therefore, the expression "seed of the woman" can refer not only to the righteous ones, but also to the Righteous One, Jesus Christ. The conflict between the "seed of the woman" and the "seed of the serpent," then, has two dimensions. First, unbelievers persecuted Christ, the "Seed of the woman." Second, they also persecute followers of Jesus, the Church, and the righteous in general (such as Cain and Abel in Gen 4:1-8).

We also note that the serpent *himself*, not his "seed," bruises the Seed of the woman on the heel. On the other hand, the Seed of the woman will bruise the serpent's head. So then, although conflict wages between the righteous (seed – plural – of the woman) and the unrighteous (seed of the serpent), the ultimate conflict is between the promised Deliverer (Seed – singular – of the woman), and Satan himself (the serpent).

So then, the following drama unfolds. Since the serpent is cursed to crawl on his belly (Gen 3:14), he can only strike the Seed of the woman on the heel. The Seed, however, may crush the serpent with the same heel. We may propose that at the same time that the serpent strikes the Seed, the Seed crushes his head with the same leg. In other words, at the time when Satan struck Jesus through the cross, Jesus accomplished victory over Satan and deliverance for all from His power through the self-same instrument – the cross.

We note that people of antiquity expected a future deliverance by the Seed of the woman. Lamech hoped that Noah was the one who would "give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands {arising} from the ground which Yahweh has cursed" (Gen 5:29). Lamech was remembering the promise made by God to Eve. Yet, not Noah, but a descendant of Noah would be the future deliverer.

This account accents not only the Lord's victory over the Devil, but also His true humanity – He is the "Seed of the woman." In the Old Testament, the term "seed" unquestionably refers to physical descendants. Also significant is that He is called the "Seed of the *woman*," which corresponds to the virgin birth by Mary. In this regard, Keil and Delitzsch comment, "As it was through the woman that the craft of the devil brought sin and death into the world, so it is also through the woman that the grace of God will give to the fallen human race the conqueror of sin, of death, and of the devil."<sup>672</sup>

#### 2. The Coming Prophet

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<sup>671</sup>See Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. Commentary on the Old Testament. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996. – V. 1. – P. 62; Mathews K. A. Genesis 1-11:26 // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996. – P. 245-248.

<sup>672</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 1, p. 62.

Later in the Torah, Yahweh spoke to Moses about a coming Prophet, whom He would “raise up... from among their countrymen” (Deut 18:18). Peter claims that this prophecy was fulfilled in the Messiah Jesus (Acts 3:22; cf. Acts 7:37). In the Old Testament, the expression “I will raise up” translates the verb קִיּוֹם (*kum*) in the *Hiph’il* form, which always refers to physical descendency.<sup>673</sup> The coming prophet is a true human.

### 3. The Son of David

Possibly, the most convincing Old Testament proof of Messiah’s humanity is that He was a physical descendant of David: “I will raise up your descendant after you, who will come forth from you, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me” (2 Sam 7:12-14).

Although this prophecy was initially fulfilled in Solomon (see Acts 7:47), it finds its final and complete fulfillment in the Messiah Jesus. The New Testament confirms this (see Acts 2:30; 13:23).<sup>674</sup> Only the Messiah Jesus will rule forever, and only He is the Son of God in the highest sense and the builder of God’s temple. After David’s and Solomon’s deaths, an expectation of a future Son of David persisted (Hos 3:5; Isa 9:7; Jer 30:9; Ezek 34:24), who was also called the “Branch” (Jer 23:5; 33:15). Isaiah announced, “Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit” (Isa 11:1). The prophet Micah even predicted the place of His birth (Mic 5:2). Messiah is a genuine human.

### 4. “A Virgin Will Conceive”

Without doubt, the most famous prediction of the supernatural birth of Messiah is in Isaiah 7:14: “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.” We find here a confirmation that Genesis 3:15 predicts the conception of the Savior without male participation. The mother of Messiah is a virgin.

The Hebrew term עַלְמָה (*alma*), that is, “virgin,” literally means “a young woman.”<sup>675</sup> The Hebrew language has a more specific word for “virgin”—בְּתוּלָה (*bithulah*). Therefore, some conclude that Isaiah was not predicting a virgin birth, but a typical birth by a young woman.

However, a more detailed study of the word עַלְמָה (*alma*) yields some helpful insights. It occurs seven times in the Old Testament, namely in Genesis 24:43; Exodus 2:8; Song of Solomon 1:2; 6:8; Psalm 68:25; Proverbs 30:19; and Isaiah 7:14. In four of these cases, עַלְמָה (*alma*) clearly indicates a virgin (Gen 24:43; Ex 2:8, SOS 1:3; 6:8). In the remaining occurrences, i.e., Psalm 68:25 and Proverbs 30:19, the word most likely refers to virgins as well. A comparison of Psalm 68:25 with Judges 21:19-21 confirms this interpretation, as does observing that Proverbs 30:19 describes a romantic relationship before marriage. So then, all the Old Testament usages of עַלְמָה (*alma*) refer to virgins.

We also observe that in two of these seven instances (including Isaiah 7:14), the Septuagint translates עַלְמָה (*alma*) with παρθένος (*pathenos*), which is specific for a virgin. In addition, when Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, he also uses παρθένος (*pathenos*) (see Matt 1:22-23).

If we conclude, though, that Isaiah had in view a virgin birth, some complications result in the fulfillment of this prophecy. Was Isaiah speaking here of Mary, the mother of Jesus, or of a woman of his time? Those who feel he meant only Mary defend their view by saying only Mary ever gave birth as a virgin. This is true. Yet, the prophecy, then, would have no meaning for Ahaz, for whom Isaiah intended it. Isaiah, in fact, added, “For before the boy will know {enough} to refuse evil and choose good, the land whose two kings you dread will be forsaken” (Isa 7:16).

<sup>673</sup>See 1 Sam 2:35; 2 Sam 7:12; 12:11; Jer 23:4-5; 30:9; Zech 11:16.

<sup>674</sup>Bergen R. D. 1, 2 Samuel // The New American Commentary. — Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996. — P. 340.

<sup>675</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). — Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. — P. 761.



Supporters of the “Mary only” view respond that the prophecy was not intended specifically for Ahaz, but rather for the household of David in general. The prophecy may find fulfillment, then, in any descendant of David, including Jesus of Nazareth. They add that the period of time Isaiah spoke of (when the boy will know enough to refuse evil and choose good) refers to first 5-6 years of Jesus’ life. Ahaz, then can expect deliverance in the same period of time, i.e., in 5-6 years.

Others feel that Isaiah is speaking about his wife. Some similarities exist between the virgin’s child of chapter 7 and Isaiah’s son described in chapter 8. Nonetheless, when Isaiah gave this prophecy, he already had a son by the name of Shear-jashub (see 7:3). Therefore, his wife was not a virgin at that time.

Another alternative is to theorize two fulfillments: one in Mary, and another in a woman of Isaiah’s time. In that case, the prophecy would have significance for both Ahaz and Mary. Possibly, for this reason a term with a more flexible meaning, i.e., עַלְמָה (*alma*), was employed, since it can refer to both a virgin and a young married woman. We would affirm, then, a dual fulfillment: one literal (possibly in Isaiah’s wife) and the other typological (in Mary).

## 5. “A Body You Have Prepared for Me”

The final Old Testament text that we will examine is Psalm 40:6-8, which is quoted in Hebrews 10:5. We will compare the Masoretic Text with the Septuagint – the latter being the source for the citation in Hebrews.

Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; *My ears You have opened* (כָּרָה); burnt offering and sin offering You have not required. Then I said, “Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart” (Masoretic Text)

Sacrifice and meal offering You have not desired; but *ears You have prepared for me...* (Septuagint).

Sacrifice and offering you have not desired, but *a body you have prepared for me...* (Heb 10:5).

The Hebrew Masoretic text contains the verb כָּרָה (*kara*), which means “to dig.”<sup>676</sup> The verse in Hebrew literally reads, “You have dug out ears for me.” The Septuagint translators chose for an equivalent to כָּרָה (*kara*) the verb κατηρτίσω (*katertiso*), meaning “prepare, set in order.”<sup>677</sup> The author of Hebrews, in turn, follows the Septuagint, but replaces “ears” with “body.”

The following explanation is proposed. The writer of Hebrews understood that the Old Testament text employed a figure of speech, that in order to “dig out” or “prepare” ears, God had to prepare a body. Therefore, he made this implication clear, offering a typological interpretation of the verse. In other words, he saw in Psalm 40 a symbolic representation of the Son’s incarnation.

However we might explain the differences between these passages, according to the doctrine of biblical inspiration, the author of Hebrews wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, we have a firm basis to accept the variant “a body you have prepared for me.” This variant also fits the context well, being consistent with the phrase, “Sacrifice and offering you have not desired.” Messiah will bring the Father a new sacrifice – His body.

## B. Testimony of the Gospels

### 1. Conception and Birth of Jesus Christ

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<sup>676</sup>Ibid., p. 500.

<sup>677</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W., Gingrich F. W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 526.

Both the Gospels of Matthew and Luke describe the birth of Jesus by the virgin Mary:

- Joseph awoke from his sleep and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took {Mary} as his wife, but kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus (Matt 1:24-25).
- She gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (Lk 2:7).

Even before His birth, the angel Gabriel announced the conception of the Savior (Lk 1:31), which Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, confirmed by her inspired testimony (Lk 1:41-43).

The Gospel of Mark gives a more indirect reference to the virgin birth. In Mark 6:3, Jesus is called the “son of Mary,” not the “son of Joseph,” as in the parallel passages in Matthew 13:55 and Luke 4:22. Possibly, Mark does this intentionally, since he did not relate a specific account of Jesus’ virgin birth as Matthew and Luke did.

The differences in Jesus’ genealogies between Matthew (Matt 1:1-16) and Luke (Lk 3:23-38) present a difficulty. In Matthew’s account, Joseph’s father is Jacob, while in Luke he is Eli. Some consider that due to the law of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-6), Eli, supposedly the stepbrother of Jacob, married the latter’s widow after his death which resulted in the birth of Joseph. Therefore, although Eli is the natural father of Joseph, he is included in the genealogy of Jacob as well. A certain Africanus (2nd - 3rd c.) advanced this theory, claiming to have received this information from descendants of Jacob, Jesus’ stepbrother (see Eusebius, *Church History*, 1:7).<sup>678</sup>

Another variant of the above theory goes as follows. Luke’s genealogy, again, follows Joseph’s natural lineage through Eli, while Matthew lists the royal line of David, ending in Jacob. Supposing that Jacob died without producing a son, his supposed nephew Joseph would then be counted as the heir to the throne and enter into the royal line of David.<sup>679</sup>

Others theorize that Matthew records Joseph’s genealogy, while Luke gives Mary’s lineage. We would paraphrase Luke 3:23, then, to read, “Jesus... was supposed (to be) the son of Joseph, *but was actually the grandson of Eli (through Mary).*”<sup>680</sup> Still others propose that Mary had no brothers and was therefore the heir of her father’s estate. However, in order to have a male be the heir, Eli adopted Joseph, and so Joseph’s name appears in the genealogy instead of Mary’s.<sup>681</sup> Interestingly, there is a similar case in the book of Nehemiah, where a man who married one of the daughters of Barzillai was apparently included in Barzillai’s genealogy (Neh 7:63).

We must consider, too, that according to Scripture, Jesus “was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3), and, to fulfill prophecy, He must “come forth from” David (2 Sam 7:12). Therefore, in order for this prophecy to be fulfilled, *Mary* must be an offspring of David. We recognize that the Evangelists emphasize Joseph’s place in the Davidic line, not Mary’s (see Lk 1:27; 2:4; Matt 1:20). Yet, this does not qualify Jesus to be a true descendent of David. If Luke’s genealogy does indeed belong to Mary, then Jesus is truly a physical descendent of David and fulfills the promise made to David.

## 2. Christ’s Human Body

The fact that Jesus was born of Mary means that He possesses a genuine human body. Several other factors confirm that conclusion. First, Luke reports that Jesus experienced typical human growth: “The Child continued to grow and become strong” (Luke 2:40), and, “Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52). Luke records Jesus’ history at age 12 (Lk 2:42). Jesus, then, grew from infancy to childhood, became a young man, and finally an adult.

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<sup>678</sup>Marshall I. H. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* // *New International Greek Testament Commentary*. – Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978. – P. 158-159.

<sup>679</sup>Ibid.

<sup>680</sup>Nolland J. *Luke 1:1–9:20* // *Word Biblical Commentary*. – Dallas: Word, 2002. – P. 169-170

<sup>681</sup>Ibid.

Second, Jesus experienced hunger, as all people do. After He completed His forty-day fast, “He then became hungry” (Matt 4:2). He also became weary: “So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well” (Jn 4:6). During the storm on the Lake of Galilee, “Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion” (Mk 4:38). Clement of Alexandria greatly erred when he claimed that, although Jesus had a genuine human body, He had no need for food or drink.<sup>682</sup>

Finally, Christ’s death is a fixed historical fact, recorded not only by the Gospel writers and other New Testament authors, but by secular historians as well. For example, Tacitus, a first-century Roman historian, writes in his *Annals*, “Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus.”<sup>683</sup> “Christus” is a Latin variant for the title “Christ.” In his work, *The Death of Pelegrine*, Lucian, a second-century critic of Christianity, wrote, “The Christians, you know, worship a man to this day – the distinguished personage who introduced their novel rites, and was crucified on that account.”<sup>684</sup> Finally, Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote of Jesus, “Pilate condemned him to be crucified and to die.”<sup>685</sup> The physical death of our Lord conclusively proves the genuineness of His physical body.

### 3. Christ’s Human Soul

The Bible reveals that Jesus has a genuine human soul. He expressed typical human emotions, such as compassion (Matt 9:36), joy (Lk 10:21), and anger (Mk 3:5). We recognize that God has such emotions as well. Jesus, however, displayed other emotions more characteristic of humans. For example, in Luke 7:9 we read the Jesus “marveled” at the answer of the centurion. God in His non-incarnate form is not surprised by anything, since, “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Yahweh, You know it all.” (Ps 139:4). Jesus also “wondered” at the unbelief of those in Nazareth (Mk 6:6). However, God “declares the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done” (Isa 46:10).

Another human quality seen in Jesus is friendship. Scripture reveals that Jesus valued the friendship of several individuals, such as the family of Lazarus and the apostle John. We read about Lazarus’ family, “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (Jn 11:5). Lazarus’ sisters once said to the Lord, “Lord, behold, he whom You love is sick” (Jn 11:3). When the Jews saw that Jesus wept for Lazarus, they said, “See how He loved him!” (Jn 11:36). As for John, he was “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (Jn 13:23; 20:2; 21:20).

Finally, Jesus responded to His impending suffering as any human would respond – He experienced anxiety and torment: “My soul has become troubled” (Jn 12:27). While He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane before His Passion, “His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (Lk 22:44). He experienced loneliness on the cross and cried out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mk 15:34). Having a genuine human soul, Jesus suffered both in body and in soul.

Since Christ possessed a human mind, He was at times limited in knowledge. The Scriptures say that Jesus “kept increasing in wisdom and stature” (Lk 2:52). We recall an incident when Jesus encountered a demon-possessed boy and asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” (Mk 9:21). It seems that Jesus did not know. In addition, once Christ prayed all night before He chose His disciples (Lk 6:12). Apparently, He did not know which ones to choose. Finally, He directly stated that He did not know the time of His Second Coming: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father {alone}” (Mk 13:32). Based on these observations we can confidently conclude that Jesus has a genuine human mind.

### 4. Christ’s Spiritual Life

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<sup>682</sup>Noted in Lane T. A Concise History of Christian Thought. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 19.

<sup>683</sup>Tacitus, *Annals*, 15.44. From Geisler N. L. Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics. – Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. – P. 381-384.

<sup>684</sup>Lucian, *Death of Pelegrine*, 11-13. From Geisler, p. 381-384.

<sup>685</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.3.3. From Geisler, p. 381-384.

As a complete human, Jesus' spiritual life was characterized by dependence on His Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit, drawing strength and direction from them. The New Testament records that He was frequently in prayer. Luke pays special attention to this feature. For example, only he records that Christ was praying at the time the Holy Spirit descended on Him (Lk 3:21-22). In addition, Luke 5:16 reads, "Jesus Himself would {often} slip away to the wilderness and pray." The use of the Greek imperfect tense in this verse underscores the continuous nature of Christ's prayer life. He prayed, "as was His custom," on the Mount of Olives (Lk 22:39; cf. Jn 8:1). Prayer was clearly an integral part of His lifestyle. His prayer life so inspired His disciples that they requested of Him, "Lord, teach us to pray (Lk 11:1).

Jesus not only regularly prayed, but devoted special times to prayer when in special need. As we mentioned before, He prayed all night before choosing the Twelve (Lk 6:12). After the miracle feeding of the five thousand, He withdrew for fellowship with His Heavenly Father (Matt 14:23). Finally, after celebrating His final Passover with His disciples (Jn 17) and just prior to His Passion (Lk 22:41-44), He again turned to His Father in prayer.

Jesus' dependence on the Father is displayed not only in His frequency in prayer, but also in the support the Father showed Him. When Christ underwent temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:11) and agony in the Garden (Lk 22:43), the Father sent angels to minister to Him. The Father was ready at any instance to send supernatural aid (Matt 26:53). The Son's reliance on the Father was dramatically displayed on the cross, where Jesus committed His spirit to the Father's care (Lk 23:46).

Moreover, Christ conducted His life in submission to the Father to accomplish His will. The apostle John gives special attention to this feature. We often encounter in the Fourth Gospel the idea that the Son was sent by the Father.<sup>686</sup> The Son did not come into the world by His own initiative: "I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me" (Jn 8:42). The Son is the one "whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world" (Jn 10:36). The Father commissioned Him to accomplish a certain work (Jn 5:36). Jesus confirmed that he came "not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (Jn 6:38).

Finally, the Gospels relate how Christ in His humanity relied on the power of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, Jesus performed no miracle until the Holy Spirit descended on Him at the time of His water baptism. Jesus, in fact, announced the commencement of His ministry with this reference to the Spirit:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord (Lk 4:18-19).

We find another reference to Christ's dependence on the supernatural work of the Spirit in Matthew 12:28: "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you." In another place, we read, "The power of the Lord was {present} for Him to perform healing" (Lk 5:17), i.e., the Spirit was manifesting through Him gifts of healing. The Holy Spirit not only empowered Christ, but also led Him (Lk 4:1).

Although the doctrine of the Trinity assures us that the Father, Son, and Spirit are all equal in nature and dignity, Jesus nonetheless demonstrated His dependence on the Father and the Spirit during His earthly ministry. In this way, He left us an example of trust in God and obedience to Him and demonstrated His genuine humanity.

## 5. Conclusions

So then, the Gospels give clear indication that Jesus Christ had a physical birth and possesses all the qualities of a genuine human nature. Therefore, Jesus is a true human being. In John 8:40, He bears witness to Himself, "You are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth" (Jn 8:40).

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<sup>686</sup>See Jn 3:17; 3:34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 38, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:42; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21.

## C. Testimony of the Apostles

### 1. Paul

The apostles in general also affirmed Christ's full humanity. Paul without apology asserts that Jesus "was born of a virgin" (Gal 4:4) and "was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh" (Rom 1:3; cf. 2 Tim 2:8). Therefore, Paul did not hesitate to speak of the "man, Jesus Christ" (1 Tim 2:5; cf. Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 15:21).

Paul's teaching on Christ's humanity finds clearest expression in two key passages, which He likely borrowed from early Christian hymns: Philippians 2:7-8 and 1 Timothy 3:16.

...who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

By common confession, great is the mystery of godliness: He who was revealed in the flesh, was vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory (1 Tim 3:16).

Philippians 2:7-8 may be somewhat problematic in this regard, since at first glance it seems to contradict the claim to Christ's humanity. We read, "...being made in the *likeness* of men," and "Being found in *appearance* as a man..." Do these phrases indicate that Jesus' humanity was only superficial and not genuine? Did He just *appear* as a man? The Greek word σχῆμα (*schema*), translated "appearance," refers to an external likeness.<sup>687</sup>

On the other hand, in verse 7, we find the term μορφή (*morphe*), i.e., "image," in the phrase "the form of a bond-servant." The same word describes the Son in verse 6 in the expression, "in the image of God." If the word μορφή (*morphe*) refers to Christ's true deity in verse 6, one may conclude that it refers to His true humanity in verse 7.

In addition, the idea "in the likeness of men" occurs in Romans 8:3: "God {did:} sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh." In this text, Christ is "in the likeness of sinful flesh." "Likeness," then, means that He was a true human, yet without sin. We assert that Paul had the same idea in mind in Philippians 2:7. Jesus is "in the likeness of men" in the sense that He has a genuine humanity, but does not share with us inherited depravity.

Finally, we note in verse 8 that Jesus was "*found* in appearance as a man." The sense here is that people who knew Christ personally "found" Him a genuine human being. The phrase "in appearance" is added because people who knew Jesus could only judge His humanity "by appearance." People cannot know the nature of something except by observation. The fact that those who surrounded Jesus could consider Him human is further evidence of the genuineness of His humanity.

In concluding Paul's teaching, we will touch on one other problematic passages – 1 Corinthians 15:47: "The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven." Does this mean that Jesus is purely a "heavenly being" with a "heavenly body?" Not so. The verse is not addressing the condition of Jesus' body, but His heavenly origin. As a divine Person, He descended from heaven. Yet, His body was material, just as ours is. In addition, Paul's goal in this context was to inspire his audience to anticipate their future physical resurrection in light of the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. If His body was different than ours, what hope does His resurrection offer us?

### 2. Epistle to the Hebrews

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<sup>687</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 797.

The epistle to the Hebrews provides strong evidence for Christ's humanity as well. The author speaks plainly of Jesus' dependence on the Father, just as our Lord Himself did. The Father anointed Messiah (Heb 1:9) and sat Him at His right hand (Heb 1:13; cf. Phil 2:9). He "crowned" Him with "glory and honor" (Heb 2:9).

A key passage for our discussion is Hebrews 5:5-10:

So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, "You are My Son, today I have begotten You"; just as He says also in another {passage,} "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety. Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation, being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus was anointed high priest. In order to be high priest, He had to become human or else He could not be the representative of humanity before God. Earlier in this epistle, the author comments on this: "Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17).

Hebrew 5 further enlightens us about Christ's reliance on the Father. He entrusted Himself "to the One able to save Him from death" by offering up "both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears" (Heb 5:7). Commentators diverge concerning what Jesus prayed about: deliverance from the sufferings of the cross (in the Garden of Gethsemane), or deliverance from death (through the resurrection).<sup>688</sup> Since the verse continues, "He was heard because of His piety," we prefer the second variant.

Jesus true humanity is also seen in His "learning obedience" (Heb 5:8). Being God, Jesus was already perfect in character. Yet He attained perfection as a human by personal obedience.

In conclusion, we cite Hebrews 2:14-18.

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

This passage in several ways convincingly confirms Jesus' true humanity. First, the Son's incarnation was necessary for the salvation of the world. Only as a true human could He become a genuine substitutionary sacrifice for people's sins. Second, Christ's human nature is compared to angelic nature, which He did not assume. Third, as mentioned before, Jesus must be a true human to serve as high priest. Finally, only a genuine human could experience real temptation.

### 3. John

The final New Testament testimony of Christ's humanity is taken from the writings of the apostle John. Although John accented the deity of Christ, he also penned a number of strong statements about His human nature. In chapter 1 of his Gospel, after affirming the deity of Jesus, John writes, "The Word became flesh, and

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<sup>688</sup>Ellingworth P. The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993. – P. 288.

dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). Similarly, the introduction to his first epistle echoes this truth:

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life – and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us – what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Clearly, the first apostles (i.e., “we”), heard, saw, observed and handled Jesus. Some people may claim that they heard God’s voice or saw some vision of Him, but John goes farther to say that the apostles actually physically touched the Word of Life. The Greek term ψηλαφάω (*pselafao*), translated “touched,” means not only “brush,” but handle or feel.<sup>689</sup> The same word occurs in Luke 24:39, where Jesus invites His disciples to touch His wounds. Jesus’ body was one that could be touched and felt.

John not only affirms the humanity of Jesus Christ, he also warns those who would dare to deny it. Those who do so are in league with Antichrist (1 Jn 4:2-3; 2 Jn 7-9).

## D. Conclusion

The testimony of God’s Word from beginning to end yields only one conclusion – Jesus Christ is a real human being who possesses all the typical human qualities except sin. His human nature includes a physical body, a human soul, and, if one may distinguish soul from spirit, a human spirit as well. His conception was supernatural – He was conceived in a virgin without the participation of a male.

## E. The Question of the Virgin Birth

Although Jesus has a genuine, physical body, its formation required a miracle. We know that a typical conception involves the contribution of an equal share of chromosomes from both parents. If Jesus, as we can safely assume, had the full compliment of 46 chromosomes, then the Holy Spirit must have created *ex nihilo* the remaining 23 not received from Mary. This assertion is confirmed by the fact that the chromosome determining the male gender of the child comes from the father, not from the mother. The mother’s contribution can only produce a female offspring. Therefore, if Jesus received all His chromosomal material from Mary alone, He would not be male. The Holy Spirit supplied the lacking material.

Why was Jesus born of a virgin? The Scriptures reveals only that it was to fulfill prophecy (i.e., Isa 7:14). This supernatural conception certainly underscores Jesus’ uniqueness among humans. Thus, the angel Gabriel could announce, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). In addition, such a conception highlights the supernatural nature of our salvation. Just as God miraculously provided for a conception without participation of a male, He miraculously provides salvation for the world. Lastly, some feel it was necessary for Christ to be so conceived to avoid inheriting a sinful nature. We will look into this question more closely.

Some believe that sin is transmitted to Adam’s offspring through the male line. They base this belief on the fact that, although Eve sinned first, the Fall resulted from Adam’s sin, not hers. Therefore, it is supposed that by Jesus’ conception without a male participant enabled Him to receive a sinless human nature. Others, however, feel that transmission of human depravity is not connected to the male lineage, but is the result of humanity’s union with Adam. According to this view, any human born under any conditions, as a member of

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<sup>689</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 892.

this fallen race, would inherit a sinful nature. Jesus escaped this curse not by being conceived by a virgin, but because the Holy Spirit “overshadowed” Mary (Lk 1:35), supernaturally removing the curse.

It is also of interest to inquire, “Did Jesus receive any consequences of Adam’s sin, such as death?” If Jesus had lived on, would He have aged or died of natural causes? The question is difficult to answer directly, since the Bible gives no specific light on the subject.

On the other hand, some passages may indicate that Christ was not subject to the curse of death. In John 10:17-18, we read, “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.” This verse may imply that Jesus could die only if He allowed it to be.

We also note the manner in which He died – He “yielded up His spirit” (Matt 27:50; Mk 15:37). John records, “Therefore when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, ‘It is finished!’ And He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (Jn 19:30). It seems that our Lord “laid down His life,” just as He said in John 10. At the same time, claiming that Jesus was not under the *curse* of decay and death does not mean that His body could not die *by any means*. His death on the cross was a real death.

Several aberrant views have been voiced regarding the virgin birth. Many liberal theologians flatly deny it and consider it a myth created by the Early Church in order to glorify Christ. Liberal theology, in fact, denies the supernatural acts of God in general.

Mormons grossly distort this teaching as well. They theorize that Jesus’ conception was the result of a sexual union between God the Father and Mary. Mormons believe that God has a physical body: “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s” (*Doctrines and Covenants*, 130:22).<sup>690</sup> They seek support for their doctrine in supposed references in Scripture to God having body parts (hands, ears, eyes, etc.). However, here we are dealing with a figure of speech, “anthropomorphism” to be exact. Scripture reveals, “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24).

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths have their own unique misunderstandings of this event as well. Two theories are advanced. The first claims that Mary remained a virgin after Jesus’s birth for the remainder of her life. Yet, the Bible speaks of other children in Joseph and Mary’s family: “Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not His sisters here with us?” (Mk 6:3). Therefore, we conclude that Mary bore children by the natural course after giving birth to Jesus as a virgin. In addition, Galatians 1:19 speaks of James as the Lord’s brother. Moreover, we read in Matthew 1:25: “(Joseph) kept her a virgin *until* she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus.” Finally, Luke 2:7 reveals, “(Mary) gave birth to her firstborn son.” The word “firstborn” implies the birth of subsequent sons.

However, defenders of Mary’s “perpetual virginity” respond that Jesus’ so-called brothers and sisters were actually cousins. Yet, the Greek language has another term specific for “cousins,” i.e., ἀνεψιός (*anepsios*), which is used in Colossians 4:10. We would expect to see the term in reference to Jesus’ “cousins” as well. Second, Mark 6:3 clearly speaks of close family relations: parents and children.

Others object that these children were Joseph’s from a first marriage. However, in Jesus birth narrative no other children are mentioned. In addition, these children remained with Mary as adults after Joseph had dropped out of the narrative, likely due to his death (see Mk 3:31 and Jn 2:12). It is a safe assumption that she was their mother. We also recall Matthew’s testimony that “he kept her a virgin *until* she gave birth to a Son” (Matt 1:25) and James being called the “brother of the Lord” (Gal 1:19). Especially problematic for this position is the fact that if Joseph had a son prior to Jesus’ birth, then this former son would be the heir to David’s throne before Jesus.<sup>691</sup>

The second theory advanced by Catholics and Eastern Orthodox is that Jesus passed through the birth canal, but left no mark of His passing. John of Damascus, in fact, asserted, “But just as He who was conceived

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<sup>690</sup>Martin W. *The Kingdom of the Cults* – London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1965. – P. 186-188.

<sup>691</sup>Geisler N. L. MacKenzie R. E. *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995. – P. 303.



kept her who conceived still virgin, in like manner also He who was born preserved her virginity intact, only passing through her and keeping her closed.... For it was not impossible for Him to have come by this gate, without injuring her seal in anyway.” He adds another fabrication: “For, as pleasure did not precede it, pain did not follow it.”<sup>692</sup>

However, we have no basis for the view of a supernatural birth. Every passage of Scripture describing this event lacks any hint of a supernatural birth process (see Lk 2:6-7; Matt 1:18: 2:2; Gal 4:4). This is merely another attempt by Catholics and Orthodox to defend the unbiblical doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary.

## **F. False Views on Christ’s Humanity**

Just as Jesus Christ shares with the Father and the Spirit divine nature, He shares with humanity human nature. He possesses all the characteristics of typical humans with the exception of sin. However, the perplexing question arises as to the relationship between His divine and human natures.

Through the course of Church history, this question became the starting point for several heretical movements concerning the person of Christ. Some teachers acknowledged His deity, but totally denied His humanity, or nearly so. Among these movements were Docetism, Apollinarianism, and Eutychianism.

### **1. Docetism**

Docetism affirms Christ’s deity, but denies that He became man. He simply appeared to be human in order to accomplish His mission on earth. Jesus is a divine spirit, without a body. The Gnostics held to this view.

One of the most well-known teachers of this view was Marcion (2nd c.). He held to the Gnostic idea that certain “emanations” issue forth from the “Ultimate God” and act as mediators between Him and the material world. Since Gnostics deem matter as evil, God must be separate from it. This is the reason why he issues forth “emanations.”

The final emanation, allegedly, created the world. Marcion equated it with God of the Old Testament, whose character differs greatly from that of the “Ultimate God.” Jesus came to earth to reveal the true nature of the Ultimate. He appeared on the earth as an adult, but only appeared to have a body. Marcion’s teaching is refuted by the proofs offered above in defense of Christ’s humanity.

### **2. Apollinarianism**

Before we enter into a discussion of Apollinarianism, it will be helpful to survey the debate in the Early Church between the Antiochian and Alexandrian theological schools. Both sides recognized Jesus Christ as both God and man. Both agreed that Jesus Christ was one divine-human person. Yet, they differed in how they understood the relationship between His two natures.

The Alexandrian school emphasized the unity of Christ’s person. They felt that the concepts of “person” and “nature” were so closely connected, that if we said that Jesus possesses two natures, it would be tantamount to claiming that He is two individuals. Consequently, in order to preserve their understanding of the unity of Christ’s person, they spoke of Him as possessing only one nature with two “aspects”: divine and human. However, some Alexandrian theologians went to the extreme of denying Jesus’ full humanity. One example of this excess was the teaching of Apollinaris.

On the other hand, the Antiochian Fathers thought it best to give equal emphasis to both the divine and human natures of Christ. Nonetheless, certain theologians in this camp also went to the extreme of dividing Jesus Christ into two persons. For them, Jesus was a man indwelt by the divine Spirit, i.e., “Christ.” Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius were among their number.

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<sup>692</sup>John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 4.14.

Apollinaris (310-390) was born in the Roman province of Syria, in the city of Laodicia. He believed in Christ's deity, but was troubled by the question of His two natures. He recognized three components to human nature: (1) the spirit, i.e., people's rational capacities, (2) the soul, i.e., animal instincts, and (3) the body. Yet, God is spirit and has rational capacities as well. If Jesus became fully human, then He would possess two rational spirits. Apollinaris felt this to be an absurdity. Therefore, he advanced the theory that Jesus' spirit was divine (the "Logos"), but His soul and body were human. Percival summarizes, "(Apollinaris) attributed to Christ a human body (σῶμα) and a human soul (the ψυχὴ ἄλογος, the *anima animans* which man has in common with the animal), but not a rational spirit."<sup>693</sup>

Apollinaris appealed to John 1:14 – "The Word became flesh." He interpreted this to mean that the invisible God took upon Himself a human body in Mary's womb and became the person, Jesus Christ. So then, Jesus lacks a rational human spirit. Apollinaris could not conceive of a person with two spirits – this would violate the unity of Christ's person. Jesus is not like the monsters of Greek mythology with two heads. He is one Person.

Apollinaris also believed that the spirit is the essence of the human being, the source of life. Therefore, the sinful nature of people must reside in their spirits. If, then, Jesus Christ had a human spirit, it would be sinful, which undermines the doctrine of Christ's sinlessness. Therefore, Jesus has to have a divine spirit to avoid inheriting the sin nature.

Apollinaris was aware that according to his teaching, Jesus was not fully human. He defended his view with an appeal to Philippians 2:7-8: "...but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man..." According to Apollinaris' interpretation, the expressions, "made in the likeness of men," and, "being found in appearance as a man," indicate the incomplete humanity of Jesus the Christ.

Similar to the Arian contention that Jesus was not *homousious* with the Father, i.e., not of the same nature with Him, Apollinaris taught that Christ was not *homousious* with humanity. Yet, the evidence presented earlier in support of Jesus' complete humanity serves to defeat this theory.

The Early Church long debated Apollinaris' teaching. His main opponents were the Cappadocians: Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa. On the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, the Church rejected Apollinaris' definition of Christ's natures. According to the definition of this Council, the Son of God possesses both a divine and a human rational spirit. The Cappadocians argued that whatever aspect of human nature the Son did not take upon Himself, He did not heal. Therefore, He must take upon Himself all of human nature to heal humanity in every respect.

Later, the Council of Chalcedon declared that the human nature of Jesus Christ was *homousious* with humanity. Thus, He has the same nature as all humans, but remains without sin. Therefore, Christ is *homousious*, i.e., of the same nature, with both God and humanity.

### 3. Eutychianism

Eutyches lived in the early fifth century in Constantinople and served as an abbot in a prominent monastery. He lived during the time of the great Church debate over the teachings of Nestorius, but embraced the Alexandrian view of the unity of Christ's person. His views were akin to those of Cyril of Alexandria, who was hesitant to ascribe two natures to Christ. Eutyches, however, took this to the extreme of basically denying His humanity.

In Eutyches' teaching, the human nature of Christ was reduced to such a degree that one could no longer consider Him a genuine human being. Before the incarnation, two natures existed: the divine nature descending from heaven, and the human nature conceived in Mary's womb. When they joined, only one nature remained – the divine. Even the physical body of Jesus was unlike ours. Eutyches compared the human

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<sup>693</sup>Percival H. R. Excursus on the Heresies Condemned in Canon I // P. Schaff P. Wace H. The Seven Ecumenical Councils. – New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1900. – V. 14. – P. 174

nature of Jesus with a drop of vinegar in the ocean – it practically ceases to exist. By minimizing Christ’s human nature, Eutyches hoped to defend the unity of His person.

A local church council in 448 condemned Eutyches’ doctrine. However, a supporter of Eutyches defended his teaching before Emperor Theodosius II, who called for a general Church Council in 449 in Ephesus to look into this question. Three groups of bishops assembled: from Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, opposed Eutyches’ teaching, as did the Roman bishop Leo I, who sent a written decree, “Leo’s Tome,” instead of coming personally.

However, Dioscorus, bishop of Alexandria, supported Eutyches and enjoyed the support of Emperor Theodosius II, who gave him civil authority to enforce this doctrine. Consequently, opponents of Eutyches were not allowed a chance to refute his views. This Council, now famous as the “Robber’s Council,” endorsed Eutyches’ teaching and excommunicated Flavian and Leo I, and condemned all teaching defending the two natures of Jesus. Flavian died after the Council, reportedly from mistreatment he received there.

In 451, after the death of Theodosius II, a new Council convened in Chalcedon, which reversed the decision of the Robber’s Council and condemned Eutyches’ views. Afterwards, Eutyches was expelled from the Empire, and his subsequent fate is unknown.

#### **4. The Chalcedonian Definition**

This landmark Council gave the Church the definitive formula for Christ’s two natures, which all orthodox Christian confessions embrace to this day, and which faithfully reflects the biblical witness. It reads as follows:

We all unanimously teach... One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He was parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ.<sup>694</sup>

Therefore, the true understanding of the Person of Jesus Christ is that He possesses two natures: divine and human. Yet, He remains only one divine-human Person. On the one hand, He is the eternal God, who is one in nature and dignity with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, He is completely human, possessing a genuine physical body and human soul/spirit. These two natures do not mix, but remain distinct. At the same time, these two natures interface with one another in the unified Person of Jesus Christ.

Both the church of Rome and the church of Constantinople embraced the Chalcedonian Definition. Nonetheless, not a few believers in the Alexandrian Church, specifically native Egyptians, remained convinced of a single nature in Christ. The Greek Christians in Alexandria, in general, accepted Chalcedon, which created a rift between the two groups. Each side set up their own leadership. This led to the establishment of rival churches in Egypt: the Greek Orthodox and Coptic (Egyptian) Orthodox.

The Coptic Church acknowledges both the deity and human of Jesus Christ, but rejects the doctrine of His two natures, fearing that this leads to Nestorianism. This movement is also known as “Monophysitism.” This word consists of two parts: “mono,” or “one,” and “physis,” from the Greek word for “nature.” In other words, Jesus has only one, divine nature. The Orthodox Church of Armenia holds to the same position.

Two attempts were made to reconcile the Monophysite and the Chalcedonian factions. The first was made by Emperor Zeno (5th c.), who produced the document the *Henotikon*, which endorsed the definitions of all the previous Church Councils with the exception of Chalcedon. Zeno allowed all believers the right to accept or reject the Chalcedonian definition at their own discretion. In spite of his efforts, though, he was unsuccessful in healing the rift in the Church.

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<sup>694</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalcedonian\\_Definition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chalcedonian_Definition).

In the seventh century, Emperor Heraclius proposed that Jesus indeed did have two natures, but united by one will and energy. Therefore, Jesus had only one will – a divine one. Some objected, however, that denying Jesus a human will made Him less than human and undermined His full humanity. They also argued that the will is a function of the nature, and not of the person. Since Jesus has two natures in one Person, He must have two wills: one divine, and one human. Finally, they recall that Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not my will, but Yours be done," demonstrated the presence in Jesus of a human will.<sup>695</sup>

Consequently, the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople rejected the "one will" teaching. The rift between Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian factions remains to this day.

## 5. Salvation through the Incarnation?

### a. Description

Our final topic is whether salvation (more precisely "deification") comes through the incarnation. The essence of this teaching is that God saves and renews humanity through the incarnation of the Son of God. Deification is transformation to the likeness of God to the degree that the "deified" person possess all the qualities inherent to the so-called Divine energies (see the discussion of "God's uncreated energies" in chapter 1 of this volume).

According to the concept *perichoresis* (i.e., "interpenetration"), the Persons of the Trinity are somehow "located" in one another. A similar relationship is proposed between the human and divine natures of Christ. His deity "penetrates" into His humanity to the degree that the latter is deified, that is, obtains all the qualities that characterize the Divine Energies.<sup>696</sup> So then, through the incarnation, Jesus' human nature is deified by the penetration of His divinity into it.<sup>697</sup>

Moreover, it is claimed that through the incarnation, Jesus took upon Himself not only His own personal human nature, but human nature in general. McGrath describes this patristic teaching, represented by the theology of Athanasius: "Athanasius concluded that the Logos did not merely assume the specific human existence of Jesus Christ, but that of human nature in general."<sup>698</sup> John of Damascus comments more on this:

God the Word Incarnate, therefore, did not assume the nature that is regarded as an abstraction in pure thought (for this is not incarnation, but only an imposture and a figment of incarnation), nor the nature viewed in species (for He did not assume all the subsistences): but the nature viewed in the individual, which is identical with that viewed in species. For He took on Himself the elements of our compound nature, and these not as having an independent existence or as being originally an individual, and in this way assumed by Him, but as existing in His own subsistence.<sup>699</sup>

This means that after Jesus deified His human nature, which He assumed at His incarnation, He deified at the same time human nature in general. Gregory Palamas taught, "In the person of Christ existed, in its entirety, human nature individually particularized, which, being hypostatically unified with the Logos of God, was deified and received the fullness of the divine energy."<sup>700</sup> Therefore, each individual has the potential to be

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<sup>695</sup>Bray G. L. *The Doctrine of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 207.

<sup>696</sup>Maximus the Confessor so taught. See Зайцев Е. Учение В. Лосского о Теозисе. – Москва: Библейско-богословский институт св. апостола Андрея, 2007. – P. 84.

<sup>697</sup>Nassif speaks of the same phenomenon, but under a different name (Nassif B. *The Evangelical Theology of the Eastern Orthodox Church* // Gundry S., Stamoolis J. *Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism*. – Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004. – P. 57).

<sup>698</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 351.

<sup>699</sup>John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 3.11.

<sup>700</sup>See Mantzaridis G. I. *The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*. – Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984. – P. 30.

deified in Christ. The Holy Spirit communicates this grace for deification, which was made available through the incarnation, to believers.<sup>701</sup>

So then, Jesus, as the God-man, becomes a “bridge” between God and humans. His “descent,” that is, His incarnation, makes possible the “ascent” of humans to God, i.e., their “deification.” The redemption of people, then, occurs not so much through the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross as through the deification of human nature by virtue in His incarnation. Berkhof summarizes this teaching: “By His incarnation and human life he thus reverses the course on which Adam by his sin started humanity and thus becomes a new leaven in the life of mankind.”<sup>702</sup>

This teaching has a long history. Several early Church Fathers embraced it, such as Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and others.<sup>703</sup> At the present time, the Eastern Orthodox Church accepts it.

Let us examine Irenaeus’ treatment of this topic:

Now this is His Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God.<sup>704</sup>

He speaks undoubtedly these words to those who have not received the gift of adoption, but who despise the incarnation of the pure generation of the Word of God, defraud human nature of promotion into God, and prove themselves ungrateful to the Word of God, who became flesh for them. For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.<sup>705</sup>

So then, although in Irenaeus’ teaching the theosis teaching is not yet fully developed, nonetheless a number of its key features are already present: union with Christ, union of God and people through the incarnation, and “promotion” into God.

Furthermore, Origen writes the following about the communication of divinity to people through the incarnation:

...they saw also that the power which had descended into human nature, and into the midst of human miseries, and which had assumed a human soul and body, contributed through faith, along with its divine elements, to the salvation of believers, when they see that from Him there began the union of the divine with the human nature, in order that the human, by communion with the divine, might rise to be divine, not in Jesus alone, but in all those who not only believe, but enter upon the life which Jesus taught, and which elevates to friendship with God and communion with Him every one who lives according to the precepts of Jesus.<sup>706</sup>

Another Alexandrian theologian, Athanasius, supports this view:

For as Christ died and was exalted as man, so, as man, is He said to take what, as God, He ever had, that even such a grant of grace might reach to us. For the Word was not impaired in receiving a body, that

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<sup>701</sup>Fairbairn D. *Partakers of the Divine Nature*, 1991. – P. 53-55. A more extensive treatment of the theosis doctrine is found in the fourth volume of this series.

<sup>702</sup>Berkhof L. *The History of Christian Doctrine*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937. – P. 165.

<sup>703</sup>*Ibid.* p. 165-167.

<sup>704</sup>Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.20.4.

<sup>705</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.19.1.

<sup>706</sup>Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.28.

He should seek to receive a grace, but rather He deified that which He put on, and more than that, “gave” it graciously to the race of man.<sup>707</sup>

The Cappadocians add their opinion. Gregory Nazianzen writes, “While His inferior Nature, the Humanity, became God, because it was united to God, and became One Person because the Higher Nature prevailed... in order that I too might be made God so far as He is made Man.”<sup>708</sup> According to Gregory of Nyssa: “The Godhead ‘empties’ Itself that It may come within the capacity of the Human Nature, and the Human Nature is renewed by becoming Divine through its commixture with the Divine.”<sup>709</sup>

In the teaching of John of Damascus, “The human nature assumed by the Logos was deified. It did not change, nor was it destroyed; it remained human nature with all of its inherent human qualities, but was enriched by divine qualities,” and, “Since the human nature of Christ was ‘saved, renewed, and strengthened,’ the nature of other people can be saved, renewed, and strengthened, in one word – deified.”<sup>710</sup> In addition, John of Damascus taught that since the human nature of God’s Son was not hypostatic, He was able to take upon Himself a “general” or “universal” human nature. Hypostatically, the Son of God is a Divine Person, who became a divine-human Person (see *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 50).<sup>711</sup>

Maximus the Confessor (7th c.) developed this theme further. According to his understanding of deification, God’s plan is that “he should make man a god through union with himself.”<sup>712</sup> To attain this goal, “The Incarnation of the Logos crowns God’s descent into the world, and creates the possibility for the opposite movement.... And man becomes God through grace.”<sup>713</sup> In addition, “To the decree that God became fully human and fully took on human nature, assuming the entire human, soul and body, to that degree the entire human, soul and body, is called to become God through grace.”<sup>714</sup>

We can also cite the celebrated 14th century mystic, Gregory Palamas, who claims that Jesus took upon Himself our nature and “cleansed it by the miraculous and unapproachable fire of His Deity from every carnal disposition, making it a participant in God (*Homilies*, 21).<sup>715</sup>

The theosis teaching can also be found in the West. In Augustine’s words, “He who was God became man to make gods those who were men” (*Sermons*, 192.7), and, “For neither should we be made participators of His divinity, unless He became a participator of our mortality” (*Commentary on Psalm 117*).<sup>716</sup>

This teaching persists in the works of contemporary Eastern Orthodox writers. Meyendorff cites Florovsky about salvation through the incarnation: “The whole history of christological dogma was determined by this basic idea: the Incarnation of the Word, as Salvation.”<sup>717</sup> Kuraev writes the following about the influence of the incarnation on humanity: “The path to healing is Christ, who introduced His Divinity into our human nature, not allowing it to sin, and thus healed it in Himself.”<sup>718</sup>

The prominent twentieth century Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky especially emphasized this teaching. He writes, “The Son becomes incarnate in order to restore the opportunity for people to unite with

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<sup>707</sup>Athanasius, *Discourse against the Arians*, 1.42.

<sup>708</sup>Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations*, 29.19.

<sup>709</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 5.5.

<sup>710</sup>Summarized by Зайцев, p. 86.

<sup>711</sup>Pelikan, p. 84-86.

<sup>712</sup>Florovsky G. *Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eight Centuries* / Trans. Raymond Miller, et al. – Postfach: Buchervertriebsanstalt, 1987. – P. 216.

<sup>713</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>714</sup>Мейендорф И. Введение в святоотеческое богословие. Минск: Лучи Софии, 2007. – P. 327. Author’s translation.

<sup>715</sup>Слово об обожении // под ред. Архимандрита Никона (Иванова) и Протоиерея Николая Лихоманова. – М.: Сибирская Благовонница, 2004. – P. 51. Author’s translation.

<sup>716</sup>Franks R. S. *The Work of Christ*. – London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962. – P. 100.

<sup>717</sup>Meyendorff J. *Byzantine Theology*. – New York: Fordham University, 1974. – P. 160.

<sup>718</sup>Куряев Андрей. Протестантам о православии. – 7-е изд. – Ростов-на-Дону: Троицкое Слово, 2003. – P. 272. Author’s translation.

God.”<sup>719</sup> Evgeniy Zaitsev summarizes Lossky’s teaching – the human nature of Christ was “penetrated with Divine energies.”<sup>720</sup> On Mount Tabor (the Mount of Transfiguration), Christ displayed His deified humanity in the so-called “Tabor Light.” This brilliance always surrounded the Lord, but in this case, He allowed His disciples to behold it. Mantzaridis comments that the teaching of deification is “the common property of the Orthodox tradition.”<sup>721</sup>

It is curious to note that the Christological debates in the early years of the Church are closely tied to the idea of salvation/deification through the incarnation. If Jesus was not either fully God or fully man, then the link between God and people would be broken and deification becomes impossible. This is one of the main reasons why the Church fought so fiercely to defend the true doctrine of Christ. Zaitsev observes,

From this, it is clear why the Orthodox Church has always viewed any deviation from the integrity of orthodox Christological doctrine as having serious soteriological and spiritual consequences, especially regarding the *theosis* teaching. This is why for Lossky and his understanding of *theosis*, a proper interpretation of the person and ministry of Christ has decisive significance.<sup>722</sup>

Lossky himself acknowledges this:

The complex battle over dogma, in which the Church has been engaged for centuries, if you view it from purely a spiritual point of view, seems to us to be, first of all, a tireless concern by the Church in every historical epoch to provide Christians with the opportunity to attain to the fullness of mystical union with God... (The Church) defends the doctrine of the equal-in-nature Trinity against the Arians, since the Word, Logos, opens to us the path to unity with the Godhead, and if the incarnate Word is not of the same nature as the Father, if (the Word) is not truly God, then our deification is not possible. The Church condemns the teachings of the Nestorians in order to break down the barrier, by which they seek to separate in Christ people from God.<sup>723</sup>

Athanasius also speaks of the relationship between Nicene Christology and deification:

...man had not been deified, unless the Word who became flesh had been by nature from the Father and true and proper to Him. For therefore the union was of this kind, that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure.<sup>724</sup>

Zaitsev confirms, “For Athanasius, *theosis* is the very essence of the Council of Nicaea, since salvation requires precisely such an understanding – that the Son possessed the entire fullness of Deity.”<sup>725</sup> Finally, Mantzaridis echoes this thought as well: “At the time of the great Fathers, the fact of man’s deification was fully lived by the Church and, on the basis of this living experience, the Church formulated Orthodox Christology and fought the great heresies.”<sup>726</sup>

## **b. Evaluation**

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<sup>719</sup>Лосский В. Н. Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие. М.: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – Р. 262. Author’s translation.

<sup>720</sup>Зайцев, р. 175-178.

<sup>721</sup>Mantzaridis, р. 29.

<sup>722</sup>Зайцев, р. 178. Author’s translation.

<sup>723</sup>Лосский, р. 10-11. Author’s translation.

<sup>724</sup>Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians*, 2.70.

<sup>725</sup>Зайцев, р. 63. Author’s translation.

<sup>726</sup>Mantzaridis, р. 127-128. Keating observes the same: Keating D. A. “You Are Gods, Sons of the Most High”: Deification and Diving Filiation in St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Early Fathers. – Letter and Spirit. 2008. № 4. P. 233.

In assessing the validity of this view, we note, first of all, that it has no biblical support. Nowhere in Scripture do we read that the incarnation itself leads to salvation. The New Testament unequivocally points to the cross as the place where God accomplished our salvation. The goal of the incarnation is clearly outlined in Hebrews chapter 2:

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the descendant of Abraham. Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted (Heb 2:14-18).

The incarnation of the Son of God was necessary not to “purify” or “deify” human nature, but so that Christ could become “a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” Having become human, Jesus Christ could take upon Himself the sins of all humanity and become a substitutionary sacrifice for people before God. Having removed people’s guilt through His death, Christ rendered “powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” and freed “those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.”

The apostle Paul also links the incarnation of God’s Son with His sacrifice on Calvary. The Son “emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:7-8).

We must also specify what “human nature” actually is. Human nature is the sum total of the qualities that make up the human race: a human body, reason, will, memory, spirit, etc. If a certain individual possesses all the qualities that characterize humanity, we can consider him or her a human being. Human nature is not some abstract conception like the Platonic forms or ideals, but simply the sum total of necessary human traits. Gross correctly comments on how adherents of theosis distort this concept, “The Platonic origin of this realism is hardly questionable.”<sup>727</sup>

Therefore, Jesus did not assume some kind of “general human nature.” When Scripture says that the Word became flesh, it simply means that He adopted all the necessary qualities possessed by humans: a human body, reason, will, memory, spirit, etc. The concept of a “general human nature” has its roots not in biblical revelation, but in the Platonic conception of “universals,” which many Church Fathers adopted.

The theory of “salvation/deification through the incarnation” is derived from the Neoplatonic conception of the “ascent to the One,” which captured the fancy of many early Fathers. In the Neoplatonic worldview, the universe consists of emanations from an impersonal force called the “One.” The goal of life is to “ascend” to this Absolute and unite with it. This requires successfully passing through several stages. One must connect with the intermediary emanations which separate the One from the world, namely the Nous and the World Soul.<sup>728</sup>

One can identify many common features between Neoplatonism and patristic theology (see Appendix A). Specifically, in both systems exist a certain “bridge” connecting God (or the “One”) with people and making ascent to Him/It possible. In Neoplatonism, the Nous and World Soul serve this purpose, while in patristic theology it is the incarnation of God’s Son. So then, this theory is derived from Greek philosophy, not biblical truth. It is a thinly veiled attempt to adapt Christian faith to a pagan worldview.

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<sup>727</sup>Gross J. *The Divination of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers* / trans. Onica P. A. – Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002. – P. 268.

<sup>728</sup>For a detailed description of Neoplatonism, see Appendix A.



We do affirm that Jesus is the mediator of salvation, but in a soteriological mediation, not an ontological one. In this errant system, Jesus is not the mediator between sinful people and a holy God, as in the Bible, but between creaturely humans and an uncreated God. According to Scripture, Jesus became the “bridge” over the chasm of sin, while in theosis, Jesus serves as a bridge over “creatureliness.”

Still another weakness in this theory is that it offers no solution to the problem of human guilt. The Bible emphatically affirms people’s guilt before God for sin and of the former’s need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. This patristic view, though, makes no provision for this. An interesting (but pathetic) paradox results – people become God, but are still guilty of sin!

Finally, this teaching violates the Chalcedonian Definition of Christ’s person. Chalcedon determined that the two natures of Christ do not mix, that is, “the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved.” This rules out the teaching that divinity was communicated to the human nature of Christ. According to the definition of Christ universally accepted by orthodox Christian confessions, the human nature of Christ contains only typical human characteristics.

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# Chapter 11 - The Person and Deity of the Holy Spirit

The Third Person of the Holy Trinity is known to us as the Holy Spirit. Along with the Father and the Son, He is worshiped as God. We devote this chapter to the study of the Person of the Holy Spirit in light of biblical revelation and reflection by Christian thinkers.

## A. Biblical Analysis and the Intertestamental Period

### 1. Old Testament

“The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Gen 1:2). With these words, the Word of God introduces the topic of the Holy Spirit. He was a full participant in the world’s creation. We get the impression that the Spirit “was moving over the surface of the waters” in anticipation of the issuing of the creative word, “Let there be...,” so that He could accomplish it. Later, the Old Testament speaks of the Spirit’s participation in creating humans (Job 33:4) and of His power in preserving the created order (Ps 104:29-30; Job 34:14-15).<sup>729</sup>

The Hebrew word translated “Spirit” is רוח (*ruach*). Its primary meaning is “air in movement” and can therefore be rendered “breath” or “wind.” Speaking of the human spirit, it can refer to “mood,” “relationship,” “disposition,” or “tendency,” or more concretely as the “seat of the Emotions, Intellect, and Will,” synonymous with the “heart.”<sup>730</sup> The concept of רוח (*ruach*) also applies to the life force of humans (Gen 7:22), without which a person is dead (Ps 104:29).<sup>731</sup>

In relation to the Holy Spirit, we encounter various designations: the Spirit of God (11 times), the Spirit of the Lord (25 times), and the Holy Spirit (3 times – Isa 63:10-11; Ps 51:11).<sup>732</sup> Yet, in the Old Testament the designation “Holy Spirit” is not so much a name as it is a description of God’s nature in contrast to sinful people. A similar expression would be “good Spirit,” found in Psalm 143:10 and Nehemiah 9:20.

We must acknowledge that the Old Testament, in general, does not distinguish the Holy Spirit as a separate Divine Person. He is usually characterized more as a manifestation of God’s presence. Horton writes that in the Old Testament the Holy Spirit “is equated with God’s power or personal presence in action.”<sup>733</sup>

Besides the creation account, God’s Spirit is mentioned in several other instances in the Torah.<sup>734</sup> In Genesis 6:3, we read, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever.” This verse is difficult to translate.<sup>735</sup> The Hebrew original reads, לֹא-יִדּוֹן רוּחִי בָאָדָם לְעֹלָם. The verb יִדּוֹן (*yadon*), “strive,” is unusual. Some feel that, since there is no Hebrew verb דּוֹן (*don*), we must emend the verse, employing the common verb דִּין (*din*), i.e., “judge.” The translation becomes, «My Spirit shall not judge man forever». Others employ the verb דּוּר (*dur*), i.e.,

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<sup>729</sup>Baumgärtel F. Spirit in the OT // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 879-880.

<sup>730</sup>Baumgärtel lists concrete characteristics of the human spirit: emotional (disquiet, unhappiness, despondency, lack of spirit, impatience, irritation, bad temper, terror, jealousy, arrogance), intellectual (cleverness, insight into divine mysteries, artistic sense, and planning; negatively to lack of perception, error, and lack of religious or moral insight), and volitional (readiness for things, attitudes of will, courage, forbearance, freedom, longing for God, renewal, and, negatively, unfaithfulness and ungodliness). See Baumgärtel, p. 879.

<sup>731</sup>Ibid.

<sup>732</sup>Van Pelt M. V., Kaiser W. C. Jr., Block D. I. *Ruach* // VanGemeren W. A. New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. – V. 3. – P. 1075.

<sup>733</sup>Horton S. What the Bible Says about the Holy Spirit. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 1976. – P. 19. Also see Ramsey M. Holy Spirit: A Biblical Study. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977. – P. 10.

<sup>734</sup>See Horton, p. 23-32.

<sup>735</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 192.

“dwell,” and translate, “My Spirit shall not dwell with man forever.” In summary, it seems that this verse is dealing either with the Spirit’s sanctifying work in the world, or His direction of it.<sup>736</sup>

In addition, God endowed the elders of Israel (Num 11:17) and Joshua (Num 27:18; Deut 34:9) with the Spirit that rested on Moses. The Spirit gave wisdom and ability to Bezalel in constructing the tabernacle (Ex 31:2-3; 35:30-31). Balaam prophesied in the power of God’s Spirit (Num 24:2).

Some see allusions to the Spirit’s activity in the following cases. God’s presence in the form of a “pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night” accompanied Israel in the wilderness (Num 9:16-23). Isaiah confirms that God’s Spirit was among God’s people when they exited Egypt (Isa 63:10-14). Additionally, all the articles used in worship were anointed with oil, symbolizing the anointing of the Spirit (e.g. Num 7:1; Lev 8:12).

In the Old Testament historical books, we read that the Holy Spirit strengthened individuals for God’s service.<sup>737</sup> When Yahweh chose deliverers (judges) for Israel, He filled them with His Spirit: Othniel (Judg 3:10); Gideon (Judg 6:34); Jephthah (Judg 11:29); and Samson (Judg 13:25; 14:6, 19; 15:14).<sup>738</sup>

Through the Holy Spirit, God gave Saul ability both to battle (1 Sam 11:6), and to prophecy (1 Sam 10:10). Before actually experiencing the Spirit’s power in his life, Saul received the symbol of His presence – the anointing with oil (1 Sam 10:1). Because of his disobedience, though, he lost this Spirit-anointing (1 Sam 16:14). David received the Spirit at the time of his anointing (1 Sam 16:13) and implored the Lord not to remove His Spirit after he sinned (Ps 51:11).

David’s experience with the Spirit extended beyond just ability in war. The Spirit, under the rubric “the hand of the Lord,” gave David instruction on how to build the temple (1 Chr 28:19). David prayed to be always led by the Spirit (Ps 143:10). Isaiah, by the way, contrasts those who are led by the Spirit with those who reject God’s instruction (Isa 30:1).<sup>739</sup> David also recognized that one cannot hide from God’s Spirit (Ps 139:7). He also functioned as a prophet – the Spirit spoke through him (2 Sam 23:2).

The Old Testament gives special attention to the Spirit’s activity in prophecy.<sup>740</sup> He inspired the prophets and spoke through them (2 Chr 15:1; 2 Chr 20:14, 20).<sup>741</sup> The Spirit would not only inspire, but also strengthen God’s prophets, both physically (Ezek 2:2) and morally (Mic 3:8). Ezekiel 3:14 records that the Spirit would sometimes create strong emotions in the prophets: “So the Spirit lifted me up and took me away; and I went embittered in the rage of my spirit, and the hand of Yahweh was strong on me.” Unlike pagan prophets, the prophets of Yahweh did not have ecstatic experiences.<sup>742</sup> Yet, by the Spirit the prophets were sometimes granted access to the heavenly realms (Ezek 8:3; 11:24; 37:1).

We encounter a remarkable phenomenon of prophetic activity in 2 Kings 2:9, where Elisha requested a “double portion” of the Spirit, as if one could “measure” the Spirit. This idea of a “measure” corresponds to the figurative “pouring out” of the Spirit, mentioned in the prophets (Joel 2:28; Isa 32:15; Ezek 39:29). The Wisdom of God, which at times symbolically represents God, also “pours out” its spirit (Prov 1:23).

Although in the Old Testament only select individuals (in general, the prophets) experienced the move of the Spirit and fellowship with Him, nevertheless, God foretold a time when all God’s people would experience the sanctifying and empowering activity of His Spirit.<sup>743</sup> According to Isaiah 4:4, this spiritual renewal is accomplished via “the spirit of judgment and the spirit of burning.” The following verses also speak of this time:

- For I will pour out water on the thirsty {land} and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring and My blessing on your descendants; and they will spring up among the grass Like poplars by streams of water (Isa 44:3-4).

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<sup>736</sup>Horton, p. 23.

<sup>737</sup>See Horton, p. 35-54; Van Pelt, v. 3, p. 1075-1076.

<sup>738</sup>A special term is used for Gideon’s experience of the Spirit’s fullness – לבש (*lavash*), that is, “embraced” or “clothed.”

<sup>739</sup>Baumgärtel, p. 880.

<sup>740</sup>See Horton, p. 51-54; Van Pelt, v. 3, p. 1076-1077; Ramsey, p. 13-14.

<sup>741</sup>Instances occurred where the Spirit spoke through those not named as prophets (1 Chr 12:18; 2 Chr 24:20).

<sup>742</sup>Horton, p. 66.

<sup>743</sup>See Horton, p. 55-76; Van Pelt, v. 3, p. 1076-1077; Ramsey, p. 13-14.

- “I will not hide My face from them any longer, for I will have poured out My Spirit on the house of Israel,” declares the Lord Yahweh (Ezek 39:29).

This future outpouring of the Spirit will result in an inner transformation of God’s people: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezek 36:27; cf. Ezek 11:19; 37:4-6). It will also bring Israel to repentance (Zech 12:10), be accompanied by signs and wonders, and spread to all people (Joel 2:28). God’s Spirit will never abandon the task of renewing the Lord’s people (Isa 59:21).

A special recipient of God’s “anointing” is the Messiah, who is anointed for ministry (Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). The Hebrew term מָשִׁיחַ (*mashiach*), i.e., “anointed,” is the source for the title “Messiah” (see Dan 9:25), or, in Greek, “Christ.” Psalm 2 celebrates the Messiah’s anointing and His appointment over the people of God.

The Old Testament records the anointing of only some prophets (e.g. 1 Kin 19:16). Yet, 1 Chronicles 16:22 calls the prophets “anointed ones.” Other individuals also received an anointing to accomplish a special commission from Yahweh. Jehu was anointed to execute judgment on the house of Ahab (2 Chr 22:7), and Cyrus for success in war (Isa 45:1).

Finally, we will highlight several other special features of the Holy Spirit touched on in the prophetic and final historical books of the Old Testament.<sup>744</sup> Isaiah 11:2 describes the Holy Spirit’s nature. He is “the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh” (Isa 40:13). He is sometimes associated with the Word of God (Isa 34:16; 40:7-8; 2 Sam 23:2). Yahweh taught His people by the Spirit (Neh 9:20), yet they did not listen to Him (Neh 9:30; Zech 7:12).

Zechariah stressed the need for the Spirit for success in any undertaking: “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says Yahweh of hosts” (Zech 4:6). God assured Israel through Haggai, “As for the promise which I made you when you came out of Egypt, My Spirit is abiding in your midst; do not fear!” (Hag 2:5).

It is curious to note that in Isaiah 48:16, the Spirit is distinguished from God: “And now the Lord Yahweh has sent Me, and His Spirit.” We also note that these words were spoken by the “Suffering Servant” of Yahweh, whom we know as the Son of God. Consequently, many see in this verse a foretaste of the New Testament doctrine of the Trinity.

The Scriptures also teach that one can reject (Isa 30:1) or grieve the Spirit (Isa 63:10), which can again imply that He is an individual Person. We also observe the Spirit’s relationship of submission to God (i.e., the Father): He is sent by God (Ps 104:30) to communicate His Word (Zech 7:12) and execute His will (Isa 34:16).

A metaphorical designation for the Spirit is the “hand of Yahweh.” This designation is more characteristic of the Old Testament than the New Testament. We may derive some truths from this depiction of the Spirit. Just as a human hand can lift things up, the Spirit can impart to people blessing and empowerment. Just as a human hand can lower things, the Spirit executes the Lord’s judgments. We can cite examples of both activities of God’s Spirit.

On the one hand, in Ezra 7:6, 28 the hand of the Yahweh “lifts up,” that is, supports Ezra and grants him favor before the Persian king. In Isaiah 25:10 and 66:14, we see that the hand of Yahweh will bless Jerusalem. Isaiah 59:1 relates that the hand of Yahweh is able to save. In the book of Ezekiel, the hand of Yahweh directs Ezekiel in his prophetic ministry (Ezek 3:22; 8:1; 33:22; 37:1; 40:1) and directs Elisha in his as well (2 Kin 3:15).

On the other hand, the hand of Yahweh can “lower” people, that is, execute the Lord’s judgments. For example, in 1 Samuel 5:9 the hand of Yahweh punishes the Philistines for capturing the ark of the covenant. In 1 Samuel 12:15, God warns that the hand of Yahweh will be against Israel because of their disobedience. Exodus 9:3 ascribes the plagues of Egypt to the hand of Yahweh. Job attributes his sufferings to the same.

The above-cited examples provide a powerful metaphorical depiction of the Spirit’s activity. The hand of Yahweh will accomplish God’s purposes. The “hand of Yahweh is mighty” (Josh 4:24).<sup>745</sup>

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<sup>744</sup>See Horton, p. 61-76; Van Pelt, v. 3, p. 1076-1077; Ramsey, p. 13-14.

<sup>745</sup>The New Testament has some examples as well of the Spirit’s depiction as the “hand of the Lord,” both for blessing (Lk 1:66; Acts 11:21), and for punishment (Acts 13:11).

## 2. Intertestamental Period

What did people living in the intertestamental period think about the Holy Spirit?<sup>746</sup> They assigned to Him the conventional Old Testament names: “the Spirit,” “the Spirit of God,” and sometimes “the Holy Spirit.” He can appear in the form of light or sound. He is especially active in the ministry of the coming Messiah. It is written of Messiah, “For God will make him mighty by means of (His) holy spirit, and wise by means of the spirit of understanding, with strength and righteousness” (*Ps. of Sol.*, 17.37), and, “The glory of the Most High shall be uttered over him, and the spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him [in the water]” (*Test. of Levi*, 18.7).

The work of the Spirit is sometime connected with wisdom and knowledge. In the book *The Wisdom of Solomon*, the Spirit is ever-present and knows all things: “The spirit of the Lord filleth the world, and that which holdeth all things together hath knowledge of every voice” (*Wis. of Sol.*, 1.7). God gives the spirit of wisdom to all who ask Him: “I called upon God, and there came to me a spirit of wisdom” (*Wis. of Sol.*, 7.7). True wisdom comes only by the Spirit: “Who ever gained knowledge of thy counsel, except thou gavest wisdom, and sentest thy holy spirit from on high?” (*Wis. of Sol.*, 9.17).

Other features of the Spirit noted during this period are as follows. In the *Book of Judith*, the Spirit participated in the world’s creation: “Let all thy creation serve thee: for thou spakest, and they were made, Thou didst send forth thy spirit, and it builded them” (*Judith*, 16.14). Furthermore, writers of that period ascribed personal qualities to the Spirit: He is active “speaking, warning, grieving, weeping, rejoicing, consoling.”<sup>747</sup> The Dead Sea Scrolls contrast the spirit of light with the spirit of darkness,

Philo has a unique understanding of πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), i.e., “spirit.” He believes that the human spirit differs from God’s Spirit, yet the former proceeds from the latter. The human spirit is part of the rational human soul and enables people to think. In addition, with the Spirit’s aid, people can rise to higher levels of insight, even to the level of the prophetic, if God so wills.

## 3. New Testament

### a. Terminology

The New Testament writers also employ the Greek term πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) to designate the Holy Spirit.<sup>748</sup> In many ways, πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) corresponds to the Hebrew רוּחַ (*ruach*). Its basic meaning is the same: “movement of air,” or, more precisely, the power that causes the motion of air. Thus, it has the corresponding meanings “wind” and “breath.” In a metaphorical sense, it can describe “movement” between people (relationship) or within a person (inspiration). It is “the cause and source of ecstatic speech... the ‘divine voice.’”<sup>749</sup>

The Greeks had no conception of a personal divine spirit. In general, πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) is an impersonal, all-encompassing power (in Greek, it is in the neuter gender). It comprises one of the four elements from which all things consist. The Greeks also consider πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) to be the great divine Reason, which interpenetrates all things and enables human thought. It directs the entire universe. Yet, due to its connection with matter, πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) cannot be the highest principle. Above πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) is the ψυχή (*psuche*),

<sup>746</sup>See Sjöberg E. Rû(a)ḥ in Palestinian Judaism // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 884; Ramsey, p. 15-17; Beider W. Spirit in Judaism // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 881-883.

<sup>747</sup>Ramsey, p. 16.

<sup>748</sup>See Schweizer E. πνεῦμα, πνευματικός // Kittel G., Bromiley G. W., Friedrich G. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament / trans. Bromiley G. W. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968. – V. 6. – P. 333-451; Kleinknecht H. *Pneúma* in the Greek World // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 876-878.

<sup>749</sup>Schweizer, v. 6, p. 345.

“soul,” which directs it. So then, πνεῦμα (*pneuma*) is the mediator between the body and soul, between the physical and non-physical worlds.

## **b. Synoptic Gospels**

We will begin our study of the New Testament teaching on the Holy Spirit with the testimony of the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>750</sup> We will discover that they contain relatively little material on this topic. Schweizer proposes that Jesus’ disciples could not “understand such things until his (i.e., Jesus’) work is complete.”<sup>751</sup> Ramsey concurs that the revelation of the Spirit’s work was consigned to the future.<sup>752</sup> On the other hand, if we include John’s narrative, we discover that Jesus spoke quite extensively of the nature and activity of the Spirit (see below). Therefore, the paucity of information on the Spirit in the Synoptics reflects that the doctrine of the Spirit was not as central to their message as it was for John.

The Synoptic Gospels give greatest attention to the manifestation of the Spirit’s power. Jesus conducted His ministry in the power of the Spirit. He began His miracle ministry only after the Holy Spirit descended on Him at the time of His water baptism (Lk 3:21-22). Jesus returned from His temptation in the wilderness “in the power of the Spirit” (Lk 4:14). He attributed His supernatural ministry to the power of God’s Spirit: “But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt 12:28).<sup>753</sup> He even “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit” (Lk 10:21).

However, commentators correctly note that the Synoptic authors did not intend to merely present Jesus as a man filled with the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in Jesus was a sign of His Messiahship. At the inauguration of His ministry, Jesus announced that He was anointed by the Spirit for ministry in fulfillment of the messianic promise of Isaiah 61 (see Lk 4:18-21). Similarly, Matthew testifies that the Spirit’s activity in the life of Christ fulfills the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 42 (see Matt 12:18).

Even before the beginning of His ministry, Jesus received from the Spirit supernatural confirmation of His messianic office. This occurred when various individuals, filled with the Spirit, declared His messianic status: Elizabeth (Lk 1:41-43), Zachariah (Lk 1:67-69), and Simeon (2:25-26). The Spirit even “overshadowed” Mary to enable her to supernaturally conceive the Messiah, the Son of God (Lk 1:35).

Jesus not only received the Spirit, but also endowed others with Him. John the Baptist declared, “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3:16). In Luke 24:49, He repeats this promise of power to His disciples.

Schweizer summarizes the goal of the Synoptic writers in their teaching on the Spirit:

The real point is that God meets his people in Jesus. The Spirit-statements stress his uniqueness, his eschatological status, the direct presence of God in him... the realization that the messianic age has dawned.<sup>754</sup>

The Spirit is God’s gift to His people, whom He gives to those who ask Him (Matt 7:11; Lk 11:9-13). He inspired the Old Testament writers (Mk 12:36). He supports those undergoing persecution, teaching them what to say during trial (Mk 13:11; Lk 12:11-12). The Spirit is mentioned along with the Father and the Son in the formula for water baptism (Matt 28:19), which confirms His full deity and at the same time distinguishes Him from the Father and the Son as a Divine Person. A person who blasphemes the Spirit is guilty of an unpardonable sin (Matt 12:31-32).

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<sup>750</sup>See Horton, p. 81-127; Schweizer, p. 886-887; Ramsey, p. 19-43.

<sup>751</sup>Schweizer, p. 886-887.

<sup>752</sup>Ramsey, p. 32.

<sup>753</sup>During the Christological debates, Nestorius held the position that the Spirit did miracles through the Son, while his opponents believed that Jesus drew on His own power (see Burgess, p. 97).

<sup>754</sup>Schweizer, p. 886-887.



Finally, we can inquire as to why the Spirit appeared “bodily” in the form of a dove. Horton associates this with the Old Testament practice where poor people brought a dove for sacrifice (Lev 5:7).<sup>755</sup> Ramsey cites a rabbinic tradition that in Genesis 1:2 the Spirit hovered over the waters as a dove.<sup>756</sup> In Schweizer’s opinion, the Spirit’s appearance as a dove “stresses the objectivity of the event.”<sup>757</sup> Another explanation is that the Spirit is gentle as a dove. He does not force people to obey, but invites and directs. He is easily grieved. When He encounters resistance or disrespect, He “flies away,” that is, will not manifest His power.

### c. Acts of the Apostles

The book of Acts is so saturated with the works of the Spirit that some entitle the book *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*. What can we learn about the Spirit from this remarkable book?<sup>758</sup>

In Acts, the work of the Spirit begins the same way that it began in the earthly career of Jesus – with a special outpouring of the Spirit (on the Day of Pentecost). Luke, who wrote both Acts and a Gospel account, describes the continuation of the Lord’s work through the Spirit in the first verse of Acts: “The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach...” (Acts 1:1).

Here, Luke implies that what Jesus began to do when He was on the earth, He continued to do by the Holy Spirit’s work through His disciples. Ramsey comments, “There is the constant belief that as Jesus did the work of God in his mission in history, so the Spirit continues the work of Jesus which is also the work of God.”<sup>759</sup> In addition, prior to His ascension, Jesus had “by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen” (Acts 1:2).

In Acts chapter 1, Jesus reiterated His promise of the Spirit’s outpouring for power in witnessing (1:5-8). Later, in Acts 1:16 Peter quoted words from the Spirit uttered by David. In chapter 2, the disciples spoke in tongues after being baptized in the Spirit, and Peter was empowered to preach (2:1ff). The prophet Joel had previously predicted this event (2:17-33). Peter went on to promise the gift of the Spirit to those turning to Christ (2:38).

Peter was again filled with the Spirit in chapter 4 and rebuked the Jewish religious leaders for their unbelief and rejection of Messiah (4:8). To these same leaders, Peter announced that God gives His Spirit to those “who obey Him” (5:32). In Acts 4:25, Peter again quoted the Spirit-inspired speech of David. In Acts 4:31, the Spirit fell on saints in prayer and they “{began} to speak the word of God with boldness” (4:31).

In chapter 5, Ananias and Sapphira dared to lie to the Spirit and received punishment (5:1-10). Chapter 6 records that the Church appointed deacons who were filled with the Spirit (6:3, 5). One of them was Stephen, who, by the Spirit, convincingly reproved his opponents (6:10) who were resisting the Spirit (7:51). Furthermore, chapter 7 relates that Stephen, being full of the Spirit before his martyrdom, saw heaven opened and a vision of Jesus (7:55). In chapter 8, the newly converted Samaritans received the baptism in the Spirit (8:15-17), and Simon Magus painfully learned that the Holy Spirit was the *free* gift of God (8:18-20).

Later, the Spirit commanded Phillip, “Go up and join this chariot (of the Ethiopian eunuch).” After this encounter, the Spirit “snatched Philip away” (8:39). In chapter 9, Paul received Spirit-baptism (9:17), and the Church grew in the comfort of the Spirit (9:31). Chapter 10 narrates how the Spirit led Peter to visit Cornelius (10:19-20), who, in turn, received the baptism in the Spirit along with his household (10:45-47). Peter later related this account in Acts 11:15-16 and 15:8. In addition, in Acts 10:38 Peter declared that God anointed Christ with the Spirit.

Chapter 11 begins the narrative of Barnabas, a man “filled with the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24), and records Agabus’ prophesy of a great coming famine, given through the Spirit (11:28). A prophetic word from the Spirit launched Barnabas and Saul on their mission (13:1-4), and the Spirit filled Paul to confront Elymas the

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<sup>755</sup>Horton, p. 90.

<sup>756</sup>Ramsey, p. 24.

<sup>757</sup>Schweizer, p. 887.

<sup>758</sup>Horton, p. 135-167; Schweizer, p. 887; Ramsey, p. 37-43.

<sup>759</sup>Ramsey, p. 117.

magician (13:9-10). Chapter 13 ends with the words, “The disciples were continually filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:52). In chapter 15, the Spirit confirmed the decision of the Jerusalem Council (15:28).

Moreover, in chapter 16, the Spirit forbade Paul and Silas from preaching in Asia Minor (16:6-7). Chapter 19 records how some disciples of John the Baptist were Spirit-baptized (19:1-6). Chapter 20 reveals that the Spirit appointed the leaders of the Ephesian Church (20:28). In addition, Paul left for Jerusalem “bound by the Spirit” (cf. 19:21), who warned Paul of his future sufferings (20:22-23). Paul received another warning from the Spirit in chapter 21 (21:4, 11). Finally, in Acts 28:25, Paul quoted Spirit-inspired words from Isaiah.

So then, in nearly every chapter of this book we read of the activity of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, this list does not include those instances where the Spirit was active, but His name was not mentioned. From beginning to end, the Acts of the Apostles in reality narrates the Acts of God’s Spirit.

In summary, we recognize that the work of the Spirit in this book is, in general, connected with the preaching of the gospel. He gives believers power for ministry especially in this context. The Spirit manifests supernatural power and performs incredible miracles. He also endues believers with courage when facing danger and opposition. He guides the Church, strengthens it, and disciplines it. He gives revelation and prophetic words. The Spirit continues the ministry Christ began. One can summarize the work of the Spirit in one word – “movement,” which corresponds to the basic meaning of the Greek term πνεῦμα (*pneuma*).

#### **d. General Epistles**

In the General Epistles, we witness a variety of descriptions of the Spirit’s work.<sup>760</sup> James comments that God “jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us” (Jam 4:5). Jude relates that unbelievers, “who cause divisions,” are void of the Spirit. Yet, true believers, praying in the Holy Spirit, can keep themselves in the love of God (19-20).

Peter teaches that the Spirit sets people apart for salvation (1 Pet 1:2) and was sent from heaven to advance the preaching of the gospel (1 Pet 1:12). Those who endure persecution can expect a special manifestation of “the Spirit of glory and of God” (1 Pet 4:14). In both of his letters, Peter speaks of the activity of God’s Spirit in the lives of Old Testament prophets. The Spirit dwelt in them (1 Pet 1:11) and inspired their prophetic utterances (2 Pet 1:21).

The book of Hebrews devotes much attention to the Spirit’s role in inspiring Old Testament Scripture and serving as its author (Heb 3:7; 9:8; 10:15). The manifestation of supernatural power for confirming the gospel is also emphasized (Heb 2:4). In Hebrews 6:4-5, we read that believers, who are partakers of the Holy Spirit, may nonetheless fall away. They thus insult the Spirit (Heb 10:29). Finally, Hebrews 9:14 relates that the Spirit of God participates in the work of redemption accomplished by Christ.

#### **e. Paul’s Epistles**

What does the apostle Paul contribute to our discussion?<sup>761</sup> He touches on nearly every aspect of the Spirit’s work. For example, he writes of His close connection with the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of God” (Rom 8:14; 1 Cor 2:14) and knows the depths of God (1 Cor 2:11). Through the Spirit, we have access to the Father (Eph 2:18). The Father sends the Spirit into our hearts (Gal 4:6). In Romans 8:9, the title “Spirit of God” is paralleled with the title “Spirit of Christ,” underscoring the intimate connection between the Son and Spirit (cf. Gal 2:20). In addition, Christ was “justified” in the Spirit (1 Tim 3:16). Finally, we observe instances where the Spirit is listed along with the Father and Son as a third Divine Person:

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<sup>760</sup>See Horton, p. 252-253; Schweizer, p. 893; Ramsey, p. 111.

<sup>761</sup>See Horton, p. 167-252; Schweizer, p. 889-893; Ramsey, p. 45-80.

- Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all {persons} (1 Cor 12:4-6).
- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all (2 Cor 13:14).

Paul speaks of the Spirit as God even in distinction from the Father and the Son. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, he assigns the Spirit the title “Lord,” affirming His divine status.<sup>762</sup> Garland notes that 2 Corinthians 3 relates Moses’ experience on Sinai. This implies that the same God, i.e., Yahweh, who was with Moses in the wilderness, is the self-same Holy Spirit.<sup>763</sup>

Paul affirms that the reception of the Spirit by believers today fulfills the Old Testament expectation of the Spirit’s future coming. The blessing of Abraham is the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:14). The Spirit introduces the life of the long-awaited Kingdom of God (Rom 14:17). The new covenant which God promised through Jeremiah (see Jer 31) is actualized through life in the Spirit (2 Cor 3).

People receive the Spirit by faith alone. He is an undeserved gift from God (Gal 3:2). All true believers in Jesus Christ, without exception, have the indwelling Spirit of God (Rom 8:9). Their bodies are His temple (1 Cor 6:19). The Spirit’s presence in the believer’s heart provides personal fellowship with God (2 Cor 13:13; Phil 2:1). When the Spirit enters a person’s heart, He gives assurance of adoption into God’s family, creating an intimate, familial relationship with the Father (Gal 4:6; Rom 8:15-16). The Holy Spirit also enables a person to confess Jesus as Lord (1 Cor 12:3). He fills the believer with joy, hope, and strength (Rom 15:13; 1 Thes 1:6; Phil 1:19). Although the Spirit already lives in every believer, Paul urges the Church to enjoy the fullness of the Spirit (Eph 5:18).

Of all the activities of the Holy Spirit, Paul devotes the most attention to His sanctifying work. He is the Spirit of holiness (Rom 1:4), who sanctifies believers (1 Cor 6:9-11; Rom 15:16) and strengthens them to battle the flesh (Gal 5:16-17; Eph 3:16-17). He performs the true circumcision, removing the sinful nature (Phil 3:3; Rom 2:26). Paul frequently contrasts life in the flesh with life in the Spirit (Gal 5:16-24; Rom 8:1-13).

Life in the Spirit is also contrasted with life under the Law (Rom 7; 2 Cor 3; Gal 5:18). Only the former can lead to success in spiritual life. The believer lives by “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:2), which is “a principle, something that guides and governs our actions.”<sup>764</sup> The Spirit renews our lives (Tit 3:5). Living in the Spirit results in bearing the fruit of the Spirit, the main component of which is love (Gal 5:22-23; Rom 5:5; 15:30; 1 Tim 1:5).

In light of the importance of the Spirit’s sanctifying work, the believer must not reject Him (1 Thes 4:7-8) or grieve Him (Eph 4:30), but rather “sow” to Him (Gal 6:8) and be led by Him (Rom 8:14). In the process of sanctification, it is vital not to rely on personal ability, but on the power of God’s Spirit (Rom 8:4-6). The Spirit empowers for obedience when the believer lives in an atmosphere of faith and expectation of victory (Eph 3:16-17). Therefore, Paul lives “by faith in the Son of God” who lives in him by the Holy Spirit (Gal 2:20).

Finally, Paul teaches that the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit begins even before a person’s conversion to the Lord – He separates a person for God: “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thes 2:13).

The Holy Spirit also fills the role of Teacher in a believer’s life. He is the Spirit of “discipline” (2 Tim 1:7). He gives spiritual insight into God’s mysteries (Eph 1:17; 1 Cor 2:12-14), reveals the secrets of hearts (1 Cor 14:24-25), and foretells the future (1 Tim 4:1). Paul was led by the Spirit in his teaching ministry (1 Cor 7:40) and urged Timothy to guard “through the Holy Spirit” sound doctrine (2 Tim 1:13-14).

<sup>762</sup>We must clarify the phrase “the Lord is the Spirit.” In John 4:24, Jesus used a similar phrase to describe God’s spiritual nature. However, in 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul is referring not to God’s spiritual nature, but to the Person of the Holy Spirit. In John 4:24, the word πνεῦμα (*πνευμα*), i.e., “spirit,” lacks the Greek article, which usually means the quality of a person or thing is in view. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, though, πνεῦμα (*πνευμα*) has the article. Therefore, a concrete entity is in view – the Holy Spirit.

<sup>763</sup>Garland D. E. 2 Corinthians //The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999. – P. 196.

<sup>764</sup>Horton, p. 185.

The Spirit of God is also active in the prayer life of God's people. Believers can pray "in the Spirit" (Eph 6:18), which may involve praying in other tongues (1 Cor 14:14). His intercession may sometimes be expressed without words, when the Spirit prays "with groanings too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

In surveying Paul's teaching on the Spirit, we must not neglect to mention the operation of spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of "power" (2 Tim 1:7). Paul Himself preached in the power of the Spirit with confirming signs and miracles (1 Thes 1:5; 1 Cor 2:4; Rom 15:17-19). He recounts similar manifestations in the Church (Gal 3:5). Paul affords us a concrete list of spiritual gifts active in the Church (Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor 12:7-11, 28-30; Eph 4:11). In 1 Corinthians 12-14, he gives specific instruction on how to properly operate in the gifts. Although the gifts may sometimes be improperly exercised, the Church must nonetheless not "quench the Spirit" (1 Thes 5:19), but rather test the spirits (1 Thes 5:20-21).

According to Paul's teaching, the Holy Spirit works not only in the lives of individual Christians, but in the Church in general. The Church is also His temple (1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21-22). He unites the Church (Eph 4:3). The operation of His gifts takes place in the context of the Church (1 Cor 12:12ff) for its edification (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Cor 14:26).

Finally, the work of the Spirit has an important future application. Through Him, we await "the hope of righteousness" (Gal 5:5), i.e., our completion in Christ. The Spirit is also the "pledge" of our future inheritance (Eph 1:13-14; Rom 8:23; 2 Cor 1:22), which includes our physical resurrection accomplished by the self-same Spirit (Rom 8:11).

#### **f. John's Writings**

Of all the New Testament writers, the apostle John presents us with the most developed picture of the Holy Spirit.<sup>765</sup> He focuses especially on the relationship between the Spirit and the Son. On the one hand, the Son of God possesses the Spirit "without measure" (Jn 3:34).<sup>766</sup> John the Baptist witnessed the Spirit's descent on Christ, which was a sign to him that Jesus is the Son of God (Jn 1:32-34). It is curious to note that, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus does not attribute His miracles to the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel.

Jesus assigns to the Spirit the role of *παράκλητος* (*parakletos*), i.e., "Helper." The Greek term consists of two parts: *παρά* (*para*), "along side," and *καλέω* (*kaleo*), "call." The combination yields, "called along side" in the sense of a Helper. During New Testament times, *παράκλητος* (*parakletos*) carried the meanings "mediator, intercessor, helper."<sup>767</sup>

The title "Helper" is limited only to the Fourth Gospel and is found four times. The Helper abides forever (Jn 14:16), teaches (Jn 14:26), convicts the world of sin (Jn 16:7-11), testifies of Jesus (Jn 15:26, cf. 1 Jn 5:6-8), and fills Jesus' place in the latter's absence (Jn 16:7). Horton writes, "As Jesus came to declare... the Father, so the Holy Spirit comes to explain, reveal, interpret, make known, and unfold the nature and will of Jesus."<sup>768</sup>

John paints the picture of a close "working relationship" between the Spirit and the Son. The Holy Spirit is "another Helper" (Jn 14:16), Christ filling the role as the "first Helper." The words that Jesus utters are "spirit and life" from the life giving Spirit (Jn 6:63). Jesus (along with the Father) "come" to the disciples in the Person of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16-31). Jesus exhaled, imparting thereby the Holy Spirit to His disciples (Jn 20:22). Finally, in the book of Revelation, the Spirit invites the Son to return (Rev 22:17).<sup>769</sup>

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<sup>765</sup>Horton, p. 92-127, 254; Schweizer, p. 892-894; Ramsey, p. 90-116.

<sup>766</sup>This interpretation fits better in the context than the other possible variant, that Christ gives the Spirit "without measure" (see Carson D. A. *The Gospel according to John // The Pillar New Testament Commentary*. – Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W. B. Eerdmans, 1991. – P. 213; Beasley-Murray G. R. *John // Word Biblical Commentary*. – Dallas, TX: Word, 2002. – P. 53).

<sup>767</sup>In early Latin translations, this word was rendered "advocate," which poorly corresponds to the first century usage (see Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 766)

<sup>768</sup>Horton, p. 120.

<sup>769</sup>Although we recognize a tight cooperation between the Spirit and the Son, we must not consider them to be the same Divine Person. They are separate and distinct from one another. Smedes approaches the errant position that the Spirit is not a Person in His

In relation to God the Father, the Spirit occupies a place of submission (Jn 14:16, 26) and in some sense “proceeds” from Him (Jn 15:26).

The Holy Spirit has a special relationship not only with the Christ, but also with His disciples. They receive the “gift” of the Spirit (Jn 4:10) through the “new birth.”<sup>770</sup> They received this experience after Jesus’ resurrection, when the Lord “breathed” on them (Jn 20:22), which reminds us of the creation of Adam in the Garden.<sup>771</sup> So begins the new creation of God in Christ.

Moreover, the Spirit dwells in believers (Jn 14:17) and will be with them forever (Jn 14:16), enabling them to live victoriously (1 Jn 4:4). His presence in their hearts serves as evidence of a genuine personal relationship with the Lord (1 Jn 3:24; 4:13). The Spirit not only dwells in believers, but also is their source of life, expressed in the figure of “living water” (Jn 4:14; 7:38). He empowers true worship of God (Jn 4:24).

The giving of the Spirit became possible only after Jesus’ departure (Jn 16:7) in connection with His glorification (Jn 7:39). This is why the Spirit was given only after Christ’s resurrection (Jn 20:22). The new birth that the apostles received at that time was their initial and “spiritual” experience of their co-resurrection with Christ (see 1 Pet 1:3; Eph 2:5-6).

We also encounter in Scripture the designation “Spirit of truth.” The Spirit of truth: comes to those who recognize truth (Jn 14:17; 1 Jn 4:6), testifies of Jesus (Jn 15:26), and teaches God’s truth (Jn 16:13). He is that “anointing” that teaches believers all things (1 Jn 2:20, 27). It is important to note that in John’s thought, the idea of “truth” concerns not only what one knows, but also how one lives. Therefore, one may expect the help of the Spirit in both respects. He directs the believer both in true doctrine and in righteous living.

Finally, what does the book of Revelation teach us about the Holy Spirit? Again, we see a close connection between Spirit and Son. Although Jesus Himself is giving instruction to the churches in Asia Minor, He calls the congregations to “hear what the *Spirit* is saying” to them (Rev 2-3). Moreover, in the book of Revelation the Spirit of God is active in the prophetic. John is “in the Spirit” when he receives his revelation (Rev 1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). In addition, the Spirit personally gives a prophetic word to John (Rev 14:13).

A very curious passage is Revelation 1:4-5, where we read of the “seven Spirits of God” (cf. 3:1; 4:5; 5:6). Some reason that seven archangels are meant here,<sup>772</sup> or the seven churches mentioned in chapters 2 and 3.<sup>773</sup> Yet, in light of the fact that Revelation 1:4-5 lists all three Persons of the Trinity, we must recognize that the Person of Holy Spirit is in view here.

The same expression is found in Revelation 3:1, where Jesus claims that He has the “seven Spirits of God.” Most likely, then, the expression “seven Spirits of God” concerns the relationship between the Son and the Spirit. Furthermore, the seven Spirits are associated with the seven lampstands, which indicate the light that the Holy Spirit gives to the world. In Revelation 5:6, we observe that the expression “seven Spirits of God” is again associated with the Son of God, and that they are sent throughout the earth. Therefore, the idea of “seven Spirits” is connected with sight or knowledge as well.

Although it is difficult to supply a precise definition for this expression, since it is associated with light and sight, we can connect it with the idea of the Holy Spirit’s omnipresence. The fact that these “seven Spirits” are frequently linked to the Son may explain how the Son preserves His omnipresence while being in a human body. Possibly, He preserves that divine quality with the aid of the Holy Spirit.

Still another explanation of this curious phrase is that it echoes Isaiah 11:2, which enumerates seven qualities of the Spirit of Yahweh: The Spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh.

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own right. Smedes also claims that the Spirit is Christ in an expanded version of His creative power. Yet, he qualifies his position by affirming that the Spirit is indeed a Person, but He is made known to us and experienced by us only as Christ (see Smedes L. B. *Union with Christ*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983. – P. 43-53).

<sup>770</sup>To see a discussion of the correct interpretation for the phrase γεννηθῆναι ἀνωθεν (*gennethe anothēn*), see the chapter on “Regeneration” in volume 4 of this series.

<sup>771</sup>Ramsey, p. 110.

<sup>772</sup>Schweizer, p. 893-894.

<sup>773</sup>Ramsey, p. 115.

## 4. Conclusions

We will attempt to summarize the biblical teaching on the Holy Spirit. First, we concede that the material presented above is not all-inclusive. All of God's acts were done with the participation of the Holy Spirit. A full listing of all His activities would be as voluminous as the Bible itself.

However, even with limitations of our research – where Scripture specifically speaks of the Spirit – we can reach some fair conclusions. First, God's Word unequivocally supports the doctrine of the Spirit's full deity. The New Testament plainly advances this teaching, and, looking back on the Old Testament, one can see hints of it there as well.

According to Scripture, the Spirit has all of God's attributes.<sup>774</sup> He exists eternally (Heb 9:14), He possesses the power of God (Lk 1:35), He knows all things (1 Cor 2:10-11), He is ever-present (Ps 139:7), He is the Spirit of truth (1 Jn 5:6; Jn 15:26). He not only possesses the divine attributes, but He also does the works of God. In particular, the Spirit participated in the world's creation (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30), inspired the writing of Scripture (2 Pet 1:21), sanctifies believers in Jesus (1 Cor 6:11), and gives them life (Tit 3:5; Rom 8:11).

We discover three Scripture passages that specifically identify the Spirit as God.<sup>775</sup> According to Acts 5:3-4, to lie to the Holy Spirit is tantamount to lying to God. According to 1 Corinthians 3:16, the Spirit of God, that is, the Holy Spirit, lives in the temple of God. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, it directly states that "the Lord is the Spirit." Moreover, we can cite passages where the Holy Spirit is listed along with the Father and the Son as equal members of the Holy Trinity: Matt 3:16-17; Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13; 1 Cor 12:4-6; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 20-21; Rom 15:16.<sup>776</sup>

Although the Bible affirms the full deity of the Holy Spirit, we also learn that He occupies a position of submission to both the Father and the Son. Both the Father and the Son send Him on mission (Jn 14:26; 16:7). The Bible also speaks of a procession of the Spirit from the Father (Jn 15:26). The Son pours out the Spirit on the Church (Lk 24:49; Acts 2:33), where He serves as Christ's representative (Jn 14:16-18). On the other hand, Christ, during His earthly ministry, submitted to the Spirit, who performed miracles and wonders through the Son (Matt 4:1). Possibly, the Spirit provides the incarnate Son with the quality of omnipresence.

Second, the Bible affirms the personality of the Spirit. He is not some impersonal force, but a Person with all the qualities of personhood.<sup>777</sup> He speaks (Acts 4:25), teaches (Jn 14:26), intercedes (Rom 8:26), and distributes spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12:11). He leads (Rom 8:14), testifies (Jn 15:26), and expresses His opinion (Acts 15:28). One can please Him (Acts 15:28), test Him (Acts 5:9), grieve Him (Eph 4:30), insult Him (Heb 10:29), or resist Him (Acts 7:51).<sup>778</sup> None of these qualities characterize an impersonal force, but only a personal Being, the Holy Spirit of God.

In addition, we can draw a distinction between the Spirit and His power. We encounter such phrases as "the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:13), "Spirit and power" (1 Cor 2:4), and "the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:38). This indicates that the Spirit is not power *itself*, but *has* power. He is a Person.<sup>779</sup>

It is also useful to contrast the two parts of the designation "Holy Spirit." The word "Spirit," as we know, comes from a term meaning "breath" or "wind." This emphasizes to the Spirit's "immanence," or nearness to us. On the other hand, the term "Holy" places stress on His transcendence, that is, He is higher and greater than we are in all respects. Such a designation as "Holy Spirit" provides us with a healthy balance in our relationship with Him. On the one hand, He is the "Spirit," closer than our breath and always with us, ready to assist and give support. He is our closest friend. On the other hand, He is "Holy," higher and greater than we

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<sup>774</sup>McRoberts K. D. The Holy Trinity // Horton S. Systematic Theology. – Rev. ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 169-170; Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 326-327.

<sup>775</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 326-327.

<sup>776</sup>Ibid., p. 329-330.

<sup>777</sup>Ibid., v. 3, p. 859-860.

<sup>778</sup>Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 140.

<sup>779</sup>Ibid.

are. He is our Lord, deserving of respect and obedience. He is the “Holy Spirit,” the immanent and transcendent God.

In the Old Testament, the main activity of the Holy Spirit was providing strength and power for ministry, victory in battle, and a revelation of God’s plan including prophetic rebukes and words of comfort for God’s people. The Holy Spirit was also active in creation and accompanied Israel in the wilderness. As the “hand of Yahweh,” he sometime blessed God’s people, and sometimes chastised them.

Not everyone could receive the Spirit in Old Testament times. In general, He was given only to prophets. Yet, God promised a future outpouring of the Spirit on all people and a future renewal of Israel that would render them obedient to the Lord. A promised “Anointed One” was also to come, who would serve in the power of God’s Spirit.

In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit continues to manifest supernatural power, not only through specially chosen vessels, but through the entire Church. He distributes to all believers in Christ gifts that enable them to serve the Lord with power. We witness clear demonstrations of the miraculous work of God’s Spirit in the book of Acts, which one may also name the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” This book also records instances of people receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit. The Spirit leads the Church and empowers it to fulfill the Great Commission.

The Holy Spirit is also the teacher of the Church. He is the “Spirit of truth” and the “Anointing.” He teaches God’s people God’s truths. He gives revelation of God’s plan and insight into it. In addition, He is the believer’s “Helper,” providing all that is needed for successful Christian living.

Moreover, the Spirit is the one who regenerates new converts and introduces them into new life in Christ. Even before conversion, He is active in drawing unbelievers to faith. The presence of the Spirit in our hearts serves to confirm our status as true Christians. He creates intimate fellowship with the Father. He sanctifies believers, providing victory over the flesh and liberation from the Law. He supports us in our prayer life. The Spirit is God’s pledge of our future inheritance in Christ.

The New Testament, in its entirety, repeatedly speaks of the Holy Spirit as the gift of God (Jn 4:10; Gal 3:2). He is the promise of the Father (Lk 24:49), given freely to those who ask (Lk 11:13). This is why Peter sternly rebuked Simon of Samaria for trying to purchase the right to impart the Spirit to others (Acts 8:18-20).

We should clarify one item from Scripture, when it says that the Spirit “descends” or “comes.” If the Spirit enjoys omnipresence, how can he “descend” or “come” to the earth. Sergey Podnyuk comments,

When Christ commanded His apostles to wait in Jerusalem the coming of the Holy Spirit, we can understand this to mean a command to await a special manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit – a manifestation that would inspire and initiate their missionary ministry.... Such an understanding of the word “come” also aids us in reconciling the passage where the disciples received the Holy Spirit in John 20:22, yet they had to still await His coming. They were to await a special manifestation of His presence, which would transform them from weak and confused disciples into brave apostles, although the Holy Spirit was already present in their lives.<sup>780</sup>

Our description of the Holy Spirit in this chapter fully coincides with the basic meanings of the terms רוח (*ruach*) and πνεῦμα (*pneuma*), both meaning “movement (of air).” The Holy Spirit is a mighty, active Person, who was totally engaged in God’s first creation and is now totally engaged in God’s new creation in Christ.

## **B. Theological Considerations**

### **1. History of the Doctrine’s Development**

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<sup>780</sup>Поднюк С. Методы изучения Библии. – Р. 47.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit experienced a long period of development in Church history before it matured into a faithful account of the revelation in Scripture. Let us investigate that process.<sup>781</sup>

First, we must affirm that in many respects the teachings of early Christian writers on the Holy Spirit concur with one another and coincide with the biblical view. For example, they taught that the Spirit is active in the Church, participated in the creation of the world and in the incarnation of God's Son, and inspired the Old Testament writers. Moreover, they taught that the Holy Spirit regenerates the new convert, supports and sanctifies believers, distributes spiritual gifts, teaches the Scriptures, motivates to evangelize, and inspires prayer.<sup>782</sup>

The first of the non-canonical Christian writers, Clement of Rome (35-99), includes the Holy Spirit in a listing with the Father and the Son, which resembles similar enumerations in the New Testament: "Have we not [all] one God and one Christ? Is there not one Spirit of grace poured out upon us?" (chp. 46).<sup>783</sup> Polycarp's (69-155) final words echoes the theme of the Triune God as well:

Wherefore also I praise Thee for all things, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, with whom, to Thee, and the Holy Ghost, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen (*Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14).

On two occasions, Ignatius (2nd c.) also lists all three Divine Persons together:

...being stones of the temple of the Father, prepared for the building of God the Father, and drawn up on high by the instrument of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, making use of the Holy Spirit as a rope (*Ephesians*, 9).

Be ye subject to the bishop, and to one another, as Jesus Christ to the Father, according to the flesh, and the apostles to Christ, and to the Father, and to the Spirit (*Magnesians*, 13).

However, in the non-canonical *Shepherd of Hermas* (2nd c.), we encounter a deviation from biblical truth – the Persons of the Son and the Spirit become confused: "I wish to explain to you what the Holy Spirit that spake with you in the form of the Church showed you, for that Spirit is the Son of God" (*Similitudes*, 9.1). In addition, the Epistle of Barnabas speaks of the physical body of Jesus as the "vessel of the Spirit" (7:3; 11:8).

It was not uncommon among the Church Fathers to subordinate the Spirit to the Father and the Son. Justin Martyr (100-165) wrote, "He is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third" (*1 Apology*, 13). He also lists the Trinity in this order in *1 Apology* 61 and 65. Burgess makes the comment, "Here Justin is attempting to represent Christian teaching on the Trinity as in accord with best Greek philosophy which frequently presented levels of deity, resulting from the Neoplatonic belief in emanation."<sup>784</sup>

Origen's (185-253) view of the Spirit presents a marked inconsistency. On the one hand, he speaks in his *Commentary on John* of the creation of the Spirit: "...all things were made by the Logos, and that the Holy Spirit is the most excellent and the first in order of all that was made by the Father through Christ" (2.6). On the other hand, in his work *De Principiis*, he rejects this position and equates all Persons of the Trinity in divine nature:

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<sup>781</sup>See Burgess S. M. *The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions*. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1984; Burgess S. M. *The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions*. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1997; Lane T. *A Concise History of Christian Thought*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 34; McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 237-240; Burgess S. M. *The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions*. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1989.

<sup>782</sup>The question of the procession of the Spirit, which has sparked much debate in Christian history, is discussed in chapter 8.

<sup>783</sup>In another letter, mistakenly attributed to Clement of Rome, the Spirit is identified with the Word of God (2 Clem 14).

<sup>784</sup>Burgess, *Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 28.



We have been able to find no statement in holy Scripture in which the Holy Spirit could be said to be made or created (1.3.3).

Moreover, nothing in the Trinity can be called greater or less, since the fountain of divinity alone contains all things... This is most clearly pointed out by the Apostle Paul, when demonstrating that the power of the Trinity is one and the same... (1 Cor 12.4-7). From which it most clearly follows that there is no difference in the Trinity" (1.3.7).

Another defender of subordination was Novation (200-258), who wrote,

Christ is greater than the Paraclete, because the Paraclete would not receive from Christ unless He were less than Christ... the Paraclete being found to be *in this economy* less than Christ (*On the Trinity*, 16).

In order to defend the doctrine of God's unity, Theodotus of Byzantium (2nd c.) and Paul of Samosata (3rd c.) went to the extreme of creating the system "dynamic monarchianism" (see chapter 8), which denies the divinity of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, Athenagoras of Athens (133-190) acknowledged the full deity of the Spirit, but minimized His personhood: "For, as we acknowledge a God, and a Son his Logos, and a Holy Spirit, united in essence, – the Father, the Son, the Spirit, because the Son is the Intelligence, Reason, Wisdom of the Father, and the Spirit an effluence, as light from fire" (*A Plea for the Christians*, 24).

Thus, we observe a tendency in the Early Church to view the Holy Spirit as some sort of emanation from the Father. Theophilus of Antioch (2nd c.), who actually coined the term "Trinity," apparently felt the same. He spoke of God, His "Word," and His "Wisdom."<sup>785</sup> The Spirit is an emanation from God the Father: "God, then, having His own Word internal within His own bowels, begat Him, emitting Him along with His own wisdom before all things" (*To Autolycus*, 2.10). On the other hand, Irenaeus (130-202), rather than speaking of "emanations" from the Father, affirmed that the Son and the Spirit are "inherent in the very life of God."<sup>786</sup>

In the fourth century, the Council of Nicaea resolved several fundamental questions of Christian teaching. Decisions from this Council are expressed in the Nicene Creed, which states about the Holy Spirit only this: "We believe in the Holy Spirit." In the course of time, though, other thinkers developed the doctrine of the Third Person of the Trinity more fully.

Athanasius (296-373) devoted special attention to the doctrine of the Spirit. In 359-360, he was forced into a debate concerning the teaching of the so-called "Pneumatomachi," who believed that the Spirit was a created being. A bishop of that region appealed to Athanasius, who, in turn, refuted this teaching in several of his letters. According to Athanasius, the Spirit is of the same divine nature as the Father and the Son. He takes from the Son in a way similar to how the Son takes from the Father. He comes in the name of the Son, just as the Son comes in the name of the Father. The Father does all things through the Son by the Spirit.

Cyril of Jerusalem (310–386) also advanced sound teaching on the Holy Spirit. He wrote, "Believe thou also in the Holy Ghost, and hold the same opinion concerning Him, which thou hast *received to hold* concerning the Father and the Son" (*Catechetical Letters*, 4:16). We may also cite Didymus the Blind (4th c.), who recognized that the Father, Son, and Spirit share the same divine nature and taught that the Spirit was a Person, possessing all the divine attributes.

Along with Tertullian and Athanasius, the fourth century "Cappadocians" (Basil the Great – named the "Doctor of the Holy Spirit" – Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa) considered the Holy Spirit to be the Third Person of the Trinity. In Basil's words, "They ought to confess that the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Ghost God" (*Letters*, 8.2). Gregory Nazianzen added, "What then? Is the Spirit God? Most certainly. Well then, is He Consubstantial? Yes, if He is God" (*Orations*, 31.10).

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<sup>785</sup>In the words of Theophilus: "In like manner also the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His wisdom" (*To Autolycus*, 2.15). Other Fathers, such Irenaeus and Origen, also spoke of the Spirit as "Wisdom."

<sup>786</sup>Burgess, *Ancient Christian Traditions*, p. 58.

In their famous definition of the Trinity, the Cappadocians spoke of three Hypostases in the Godhead, all possessing the same divine nature. In defense of their claim, they asserted: (1) The Spirit of God is given divine titles, (2) the Spirit performs all the functions of Deity, and (3) He is mentioned along with the Father and the Son in the baptismal formula.<sup>787</sup>

Why was a clearer definition of the Spirit not arrived at earlier? Gregory Nazianzen attempts to explain:

The Old Testament preached the Father openly and the Son more obscurely. The New Testament revealed the Son, and hinted at the divinity of the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit dwells in us, and is revealed more clearly to us. It was not proper to preach the Son openly, while the divinity of the Father had not yet been admitted. Nor was it proper to accept the Holy Spirit before [the divinity of] the Son had been acknowledged. [...] Instead, but gradual advances and partial ascents, we should move forward and increase in clarity, so that the light of the Trinity should shine.<sup>788</sup>

At the finish of the fourth century, the First Council of Constantinople produced a more substantial definition of the Holy Spirit: “And [we believe] in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver-of-Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.”<sup>789</sup> From that time, the entire Church in unison acknowledges the full deity of the Holy Spirit.

The Western Church boasted some champions of this doctrine as well. Hilary of Poitiers (310-367), for example, taught that the Holy Trinity, including the Holy Spirit, was one in nature and dignity. Ambrose of Milan (339-397) reasoned that the Spirit possesses the qualities of the Godhead and works in cooperation with other Persons of the Trinity. The three Hypostases have one divine nature.

Augustine (354-430) insisted on a double procession of the Spirit – from the Father and the Son. His views on the Trinity influenced the Western Church to the degree that throughout the West, the Spirit was identified with the love that exists between the Father and the Son, thereby compromising His personhood.

Some early teachers introduced distortions regarding the *activity* of the Spirit. In the second century, the Montanists, led by Montanus, claimed to having a special connection with the Spirit and to receiving special revelation from Him. These revelations, however, were not endorsed by the Church in general. However, some Fathers, Tertullian in particular, supported the movement.

Tertullian (155-220) held to another false view – water baptism was a necessary requirement to receive the new birth of the Spirit (*On Baptism*, 6). Other early thinkers claimed the same, and this became the accepted teaching in the Early Church.

Furthermore, Cyprian (210-258) limited the prophetic work of the Spirit in the Church to the office of the bishop. Similarly, Hippolytus of Rome (170-235) taught that the Roman bishop received a special endowment of the Spirit that gave him authority to forgive sins (*Apostolic Tradition*, 3.1-7). As time went on, the supernatural gifts of the Spirit waned in the Church. Instead, the Church embraced the manifestations of the Spirit listed in Isaiah 11:2: “The Spirit of Yahweh, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of Yahweh.”

Still other misguided notions about the Spirit arose, which lacked biblical sanction. Some medieval thinkers, such as Peter Abelard and Richard of Saint Victor, associated the Father with power, the Son with wisdom, and the Spirit with goodness. However, do not all the Persons of the Trinity equally possess all these qualities?

Mystics in the Church understood the Spirit as the means to obtain ecstatic experiences with the Lord. Famous mystics in the West included Ignatius Loyola, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Richard of Saint Victor. Possibly, the most celebrated mystic in the East was Simon the New Theologian, who insisted that our relationship with the Spirit should be so real that we would constantly feel His presence with us.

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<sup>787</sup>McGrath, p. 238.

<sup>788</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>789</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene\\_Creed](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed)

The Eastern Fathers also assigned a new role to the Spirit, foreign to biblical revelation – the agent of the “deification” of believers. Deification, which we discussed in detail in the third volume of this series, is the transformation of Christians into gods. The Spirit allegedly communicates to believers God’s “uncreated energies,” which enable them to attain this status. The culmination of this process is seeing the “Tabor Light” and fully participating in God’s uncreated energies.

Mantzaridis recounts the teaching of Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) on deification.<sup>790</sup> The participation of the Divine Spirit is vital because only a Divine Person can communicate the “uncreated grace” necessary for deification. Palamas opposed the Western teaching of the double procession of the Spirit for this very reason – if the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, then the Spirit’s procession occurs not on the level of God’s essence, but on the level of created beings. Thus, the Spirit would be incapable of communicating God’s energies.

Our survey of the Church’s teaching on the Spirit must include mention of Joachim of Fiore (1130-1202). He claimed to receive revelation that human history is divided into three epochs: the age of the Father, the age of the Son, and the age of the Spirit. The final age began in 1260 A.D., during which we can expect a special move of the Holy Spirit. Correspondingly, we anticipate greater manifestations of God’s kingdom, world evangelization, and advancement of the monastic lifestyle. However, it is plain that Joachim’s teaching does not correspond with historical fact. The Middle Ages were a time of great spiritual degradation.

The Reformers’ views on the Spirit differed little from the biblical teaching, except that they embraced the double procession of the Spirit, which the Eastern Church rejects. In addition, the Reformers assumed that the action of the Spirit was closely associated with the sacraments.

Finally, the 20th century witnessed a worldwide Holy Spirit revival beginning with Pentecostal Movement in the early 1900’s and continuing on with the Charismatic Movement in mid-century. The distinctive of this movement was the recovery of the experience of receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit subsequent to the new birth. Pentecostals assert that this experience is accompanied by the initial physical evidence of speaking in other tongues, while Charismatics vary on this view. Both groups, however, affirm the presence and activity of all the spiritual gifts mentioned in the New Testament in the Church today.

The Pentecostal Movement led to the formation of specific Pentecostal denominations, such as the Assemblies of God, the Church of God in Christ, the Foursquare Church, and others. The Charismatic Movement was characterized by believers in their traditional denominations embracing the experience of Spirit-baptism. It also gave birth to numerous dynamic parachurch ministries as well as independent congregations.

These movements together have revitalized the Church’s spiritual life and have grown to estimates of 500 million participants worldwide. The chapters in volume 5 of this series on the gifts of the Holy Spirit will delineate the Pentecostal-Charismatic teaching in more detail.

## **2. Jehovah’s Witnesses View on the Holy Spirit**

Another assault on the doctrine of the full deity of the Holy Spirit is waged by the Jehovah’s Witnesses. In their view, Jehovah is the only Person in the Godhead. The Son was created by Jehovah, and the Spirit is an impersonal, but active force. In Charles Russell’s words, “The Holy Spirit is not a person in the Godhead, or Trinity.”<sup>791</sup>

The Jehovah’s Witnesses support their position as follows.<sup>792</sup> First, if the Holy Spirit is God, then why is the Father the only one who knows the time of Jesus return (Matt 24:36)? Second, the fact that people can be filled with the Spirit shows that He is an impersonal force. When the Bible ascribes to the Spirit personality

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<sup>790</sup>Mantzaridis, G. I. *The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*. – Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984. – P. 34-37.

<sup>791</sup>From *Studies in the Scriptures*, v. 5, p. 139. Cited in Martin W. R., Klann N. H. *Jehovah of the Watch Tower*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953. – P. 32.

<sup>792</sup>See *Reasoning from the Scriptures*. Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1989. – P. 380-381, 406-407, 426; *What does the Bible really teach?*, p. 204

traits, it is speaking figuratively. God's Word, in fact, employs personification for other impersonal objects or concepts, like sin, death, or wisdom, which are also often personified in Scripture.

Additionally, if the Spirit is a Person, then why does He not have a personal name? Furthermore, when Stephen saw the Son standing at the Father's right hand (Acts 7:56), he did not see the Spirit with Him. In 1 John 5:8, the Holy Spirit is listed together with other inanimate objects, namely "blood" and "water." Consequently, followers of the Watchtower conclude, "It is not a person but is a powerful force that God causes to emanate from himself to accomplish his holy will."<sup>793</sup>

How do true believers respond to these claims? First, in our survey of the biblical data above, we have already compiled a great number of proofs of both the Spirit's deity and of His personhood. The Jehovah's Witnesses' objections fall far short of overthrowing the biblical testimony.

As far as the claim that the Bible uses figurative speech to describe the Spirit's personhood, we note that the personification of other impersonal items, like sin, death, and wisdom, occurs only in certain contexts.<sup>794</sup> Yet, the Spirit is depicted as a Person throughout the entire Bible, especially in the New Testament, which sheds even more light on this truth.

In 1 John 5:8, the mention of water and blood do not link the Spirit with other inanimate objects. This passage is written to refute the false teaching of the first century heretic Cerinthus, who taught that the Spirit "Christ" came upon the man Jesus at His water baptism and departed from Him at His crucifixion. In refutation, John writes that Jesus was already the Christ both at the time of His water baptism (the "testimony" of the water) and at the time of His death (the "testimony" of the blood). The Holy Spirit, then, personally bears witness to this truth to those in whom He dwells.

Concerning the name "Holy Spirit," it is not proper to compare it to titles "Son of God" or "God the Father" as if the first is simply a title, while the other two are proper names. All three are titles. God has only one proper name – יהוה (*Yahweh*), which applies to all Persons of the Holy Trinity. We recognize, of course, that when the Son became incarnate He took on the name "Jesus."

Why Stephen did not see the Spirit in His vision of Jesus is not known. Yet, it was not absolutely necessary that he should have seen Him. The Bible often speaks of the Father and the Son together in one context without mention of the Spirit,<sup>795</sup> or of the Spirit and Son together without mention of the Father.<sup>796</sup> In addition, the argument that Stephen should have seen the Spirit along with the Son and Father only has strength if one considers the Son to be God along with the Father, which the Jehovah's Witnesses deny. Additionally, it was the Holy Spirit who enabled Stephen to see the Son at the Fathers' right hand: "But being full of the Holy Spirit, he gazed intently into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55).

Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that a spiritual being could fill a material being. We know that demons can inhabit people. Finally, when interpreting Matthew 24:36, one must keep in mind that those excluded from knowing the time of Christ's Second Coming are Christ and the angels. It is not stated that the Holy Spirit is also excluded. On the other hand, it is concretely stated, "The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:10). So then, the Jehovah's Witnesses' position as a whole is unsubstantial and unconvincing.

### 3. Feminist View on the Holy Spirit

Another distorted view of the Holy Spirit is that He is the feminine aspect of the Godhead. The feminist theologian S. McFague, though, refrains from assigning to the Holy Spirit alone feminine characteristics. She feels that the Godhead as a whole exhibits both characteristically masculine and feminine qualities. Some feminist theologians speak of God as the "Sophia-Spirit," or "the source of both creative and transformative

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<sup>793</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 381.

<sup>794</sup>In general, wisdom is personified in Proverbs chp. 8, sin – in Romans chp. 7, and death in some apocalyptic passages.

<sup>795</sup>Acts 2:17; 5:32; 15:8; Rom 2:29; 5:5 and others.

<sup>796</sup>Matt 12:32; Rom 1:4; Heb 10:29 and others.

energy among all creatures, including non-human ones.” Others see the Spirit as an impersonal force or energy that interpenetrates all things.<sup>797</sup> However, except for the claim that the Godhead does indeed display all honorable qualities, both typically masculine or feminine, we see no value in or biblical support for the other feminist views.

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<sup>797</sup>See McFague S. Holy Spirit // Russell L. M., Clarkson J. S. Dictionary of Feminist Theology. – Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996. – P. 147.

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## Section 3: God's Relationship to Creation

### Chapter 12 - God as Creator and Sustainer

#### A. God Created

The very first verse of Scripture reveals that God is the maker of all things (Gen 1:1). It is interesting to note that the Father (1 Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2), Son (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16), and Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2; Ps 103:30) were all active in this creative work.<sup>798</sup>

The Christian view on creation differs from the materialistic worldview that denies God's existence and claims that all that exists is the physical world. For the thinking person, though, the improbability of this view is plain. It is difficult to disagree with microbiologist Michael Behe, who asserts that the invisible world of molecular systems abounds with examples of insurmountable complexity, that is, some systems have many complex parts, and all the parts must be present and active simultaneously for each part to function properly.<sup>799</sup> This observation, along with other factors, strongly suggests the activity of divine design. For a more complete response to the atheistic worldview in general, see the first volume in this series.

Scripture employs various terms to describe Yahweh's acts of creation. In Genesis 1:1, we encounter the Hebrew verb בָּרָא (*bara*), translated "to create." A synonym of בָּרָא (*bara*), also used of God creating, is עָשָׂה (*asa*), which is usually rendered "to make." In Nehemiah 9:6, it refers to creation: "You alone are Yahweh. You have made (עָשָׂה) the heavens." A final key term is יָצַר (*yatsar*), meaning "to form," but it is also used in reference to creation. The following verses employ these terms as synonyms in parallel:<sup>800</sup>

- For thus says Yahweh, who created (בָּרָא) the heavens [He is the God who formed (יָצַר) the earth and made (עָשָׂה) it] (Isa 45:18).
- Everyone who is called by My name, and whom I have created (בָּרָא) for My glory, whom I have formed (יָצַר), even whom I have made (עָשָׂה) (Isa 43:7).

<sup>798</sup>Munyon T. The Creation of the Universe and Humankind // Horton S. M. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 247.

<sup>799</sup>Noted in Johnson P. E. Reflection 2 // Moreland J. P., Reymond J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 273.

<sup>800</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 368.

The New Testament has two terms for God's act of creation. The first, found in Colossians 1:16, is κτίζειν (*ktizein*). The other is ποίεν (*poien*), which is usually translated "to make," but also can mean "to create" (Acts 7:50; 14:15; 17:24; Heb 1:2).<sup>801</sup>

Some distorted views of creation are worth noting. According to the biblical narrative, God Himself created the world.<sup>802</sup> However, in the second century the Gnostic Marcion proposed that God had a series of "emanations" issuing out of Him, the last one of which created the world. Marcion equated this distant emanation as the God of the Old Testament, whose nature and character differs greatly from the "Ultimate God." According to Marcion, the Ultimate God sent Jesus to reveal to the world the true nature of Deity.<sup>803</sup>

Gnosticism in general works off a Neoplatonist worldview, which posits that a series of mediating powers, i.e., "emanations," stand between God and the material world. The further an emanation is from the center, that is, from the "One," the more it is subject to degradation and division. This distortion is the source of evil and disorder in the world.<sup>804</sup> The Neoplatonic worldview is described in detail in Appendix A of this volume.

Another errant view is that God felt an obligation to create the world and humanity for the sake of fellowship. The truth is that God was under no obligation to create. He already enjoyed eternal fellowship within the Godhead as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is self-sustaining and is in need of nothing. He created out of His freedom.<sup>805</sup> The section on "The Living God" in chapter 2 of this volume deals in more detail with God's self-sufficiency.

God's act of creation brings into focus several other aspects of His character. First, His creative act underscores His uniqueness (2 Kin 19:15). The Creator God is the true God (2 Chr 2:12). Second, Yahweh expresses His love thorough creation (Ps 136:5-9; 119:64). His faithfulness is also on display in the orderliness of creation (1 Pet 4:19; Ps 119:90-91). Furthermore, the Lord's power displayed in the act of creation confirms that His is able to accomplish His plan and perform His will. Isaiah speaks often of this (Isa 42:5; 43:1; 44:24; 45:12; 51:13). God's power, seen in creation, also inspires the fear of the Lord (Amos 5:8; Ps 75:3; 33:6-8; 1 Chr 16:26). Finally, God's creative genius features the divine wisdom that inspired it (Job 26:7-14; 28:24-27).

## B. God Created All Things

Next, the Bible teaches that God created *all* things. Both the Old and New Testaments testify of this fact. Isaiah wrote, "It is I who made the earth, and created man upon it. I stretched out the heavens with My hands and I ordained all their host" (Isa 45:12). Paul is even more definite, "For by Him all things were created, {both} in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him" (Col 1:16). We can also cite: Isaiah 66:1-2; Acts 17:24; Romans 11:36; John 1:3; Ephesians 3:9; and Revelation 4:11. Certain biblical terms and phrases express the all-encompassing nature of God's creative act: (1) τὰ πάντα (*ta panta*), i.e., "all things," (2) "heaven and earth," and (3) κόσμος (*cosmos*), i.e., "the world."<sup>806</sup>

Yahweh did not create the world in chaos, but established order in it (Jer 5:22; 31:35-37). The psalmist exclaims, "Indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved" (Ps 93:1; cf. 1 Chr 16:30). Isaiah adds, "He established it {and} did not create it a waste place, {but} formed it to be inhabited" (Isa 45:18).

The earth was made to provide humanity with every good thing. The Lord created it for human habitation: "The heavens are the heavens of Yahweh, but the earth He has given to the sons of men" (Ps 115:16). The Lord gave food "to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth" (1 Tim 4:3). All that He created

<sup>801</sup>Thiessen H. C. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 162-163.

<sup>802</sup>Taking into consideration, of course, the participation of all Persons of the Trinity.

<sup>803</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 225.

<sup>804</sup>Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 110.

<sup>805</sup>Иларион, А. *Таинство Веры*. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – P. 50.

<sup>806</sup>Munyon T. *The Creation of the Universe and Humankind* // Horton S. M. *Systematic Theology*. – Rev. Ed. – BookMasters. Kindle Edition. – P. 246; Thiessen, p. 166.



was “very good” (Gen 1:31) and “nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude” (1 Tim 4:4), since “the earth is Yahweh’s, and all it contains” (Ps 24:1).

### **C. God Created All Things from Nothing**

The Lord not only created all things, He created all *from nothing*. He created by His Word: “By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible” (Heb 11:3); “By the word of God {the} heavens existed long ago and {the} earth was formed out of water and by water” (2 Pet 3:5); “By the word of Yahweh the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host” (Ps 33:6). Romans 4:17 hints at this truth: “(He) calls into being that which does not exist.”

The fact of creation from nothing rules out two false worldviews: dualism and pantheism. Dualism, a characteristic of Greek philosophy, teaches that matter exists eternally. It derives from an exaggerated view of God’s immutability (unchangeableness). Greek philosophers felt that since God was a perfect being, He could not change. If something changes, then it cannot be perfect, because either it changed from being imperfect to being perfect, or vice versa. God becoming “creator” indicts Him of change. This argument, though, is refuted in section A of chapter three above.

Nonetheless, some Church Fathers were heavily influence by Greek philosophy. Origen, for example, proposed that God could not become something He was not previously, such as Creator. The universe, then, must have existed from eternity past without beginning. Athanasius, however, explained that the act of creation created no change in God, since it involved no alteration of His nature, but was simply an expression of His will. After the Lord created the universe, He remained the same in nature as He was prior to this act.<sup>807</sup>

Pantheism holds that the universe is an expression of God’s being. In other words, He created all things from Himself. God and creation, in essence, are not distinct from one another. Yet, the Bible categorically rejects the pantheistic position. For a rebuttal of this view, see the discussion on Hinduism in volume 1 of this series.

When we state that Yahweh created all things from nothing, we must qualify that there are two types of creative acts: unmediated and mediated creation. Unmediated creation involved creation from nothing. For example, God created the earth from nothing. On the other hand, according to Genesis 1, the Lord created certain things from the pre-existing matter He already had created. This is “mediated creation.” Animals, for example, came from the dust of the earth (Gen 2:19).<sup>808</sup>

### **D. God Created All Things from Nothing in Six Days?**

The most debated point in the doctrine of creation is whether God created the universe in six literal days about 6000 years ago. Many are more convinced by the scientific data advanced to support a much older earth and universe. It is claimed that astronomical, geological, and paleontological findings show that the universe is billions of years old, and humanity – millions of years.

The goal of this section is not to examine and evaluate the scientific data raised in this debate. At times, we will touch on some of these features to shed light on certain biblical passages. For a detailed discussion of the scientific side of the question, though, we recommend appealing to resources more specific to that area.<sup>809</sup> Our goal is to evaluate the various theories to see which of them fits better with the biblical picture of creation. We will not attempt to reconcile our findings with possible contradictory claims from science.

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<sup>807</sup>Meyendorff J. Byzantine Theology. – New York: Fordham University, 1974. – P. 128.

<sup>808</sup>Thiessen, p. 162-163.

<sup>809</sup>We can appeal to the Institute for Creation Research’s RATE Project: Radioisotopes and the Age of the Earth: <http://www.icr.org/rate/>.

We may enumerate the following general views on creation. Fiat Creationism states that Yahweh created the world in six 24-hour days. Adherents of this view interpret the biblical dates in a literal sense, understanding the word “day” in its conventional meaning of 24 hours.

Progressive creationism holds that the Lord created progressively. Billions of years ago, He created the heavens and the earth. After a long period of inactivity, He created the atmosphere and simple plants. After another period of inactivity, He continued His work and so on, until all was finished. Therefore, we date the beginning of the universe in the billions of years.

Theistic evolution asserts that God employed the process of evolution to create the world. This theory differs from progressive creationism in that the latter posits long periods of inactivity between creative acts. Theistic evolution, though, proposes a continuous progression of creation. Finally, atheistic evolution claims that evolution took place spontaneously without divine aid, since there is no God.

Believers in God differ in their opinions. Some hold to Fiat Creationism, others prefer Progressive Creationism, and still others – Theistic Evolution. All these groups seek to interpret Genesis 1 in a way that corresponds to their theory. To reconcile Progressive Creationism and Theistic Evolution with Genesis 1, adherents of these views employ the “Literary Theory,” the “Theory of Days of Revelation,” or the “Theory of Days as Epochs.”

Those who accept Fiat Creationism, but nonetheless believe that the earth is billions of years old, operate off the so-called “Gap Theory.” Those who believe in a young earth may employ the “Theory of Literal Days” or the “Theory of Ideal Time.” Before our examination of these interpretive approaches, we will make some general comments of the relationship of faith and science and some important exegetical observations on Genesis 1 and 2.

## 1. Relationship of Faith and Science

In answer to the question of the relationship of faith and science, Collins feels that we may consider the knowledge gained from scientific research as divine revelation.<sup>810</sup> He cites Paul’s words in Romans 1:20 in support: “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made.” Therefore, observation of creation can reveal truths about God.

Bube takes this idea a bit farther.<sup>811</sup> Along with Collins, he affirms that biblical truth and scientific truth should harmonize. He adds the thought, though, that both religion and science have their own domain to function in and their own expertise. They should not “intrude” on each other’s turf, but rather compliment one other.<sup>812</sup>

Correspondingly, many feel that science should provide us with descriptions of natural phenomena, while religion should limit itself to ascertain the meaning and goals God is pursuing in creation.<sup>813</sup> Van Till states it this way: the Bible is not designed for conducting scientific research, but for “training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). He also fears that the Church discredits itself when it rejects scientific discoveries and thereby weakens its witness to the world.<sup>814</sup>

It is also commonly felt that, although the Bible does at times describe natural phenomena, we should accept these ideas as true only when the biblical text concretely *claims* that they are true.<sup>815</sup> Therefore, if the

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<sup>810</sup>Collins C. J. *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* – Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003. – Kindle edition, 4545-4549.

<sup>811</sup>Bube R. H. *Reflection 1* // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 256-265.

<sup>812</sup>Newman R. C. *Progressive Creationism* // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 131.

<sup>813</sup>Davis J. J. *Response to Robert C. Newman* // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 82, 137.

<sup>814</sup>Van Till H. J. *The Fully Gifted Creation* // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. *Three Views on Creation and Evolution*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 217, 181.

<sup>815</sup>Ross H. *A Matter of Days*. – Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2004. – P. 37.

Scriptures do not make straightforward claims about the mechanism of creation, then we are not obliged to take the biblical narrative authoritatively. Furthermore, Collins rejects the thesis that a symbolic interpretation of the Bible undermines the truthfulness or authority of God's Word. A "literal" interpretation can include symbolism if the author intended to express his meaning in that way.<sup>816</sup>

We may make several comments on these suggestions. Collins is correct about the use of symbolism in Scripture. The task of an interpreter is to faithfully distinguish when a biblical author is speaking literally, and when he is intending to use figurative speech. If the author is found to be speaking figuratively, then the interpreter must uncover what meaning he is trying to convey thereby.

Concerning the claim that the Bible is true only when it *claims* to be communicating truth, we advise caution. First, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish between a *claim* and a mere *description*. Second, it is problematic to say that the Bible can make true claims based on untrue descriptions. For example, if we assume that the Bible *claims* that God created the world, but inaccurately *describes* how He did it, how much confidence can we have in the claim that the God of Israel indeed performed the creative act? Does not the entire creation account becomes suspect?

We can further illustrate this point. Van Till and Poythress emphasize the thought that the goal of Genesis chapter 1 is to refute polytheism, which was prevalent in the ancient world and presented a real threat to the faith of God's people.<sup>817</sup> We heartily agree. Yet, how can we establish with confidence that refuting polytheism was the *only* goal or even the *major* goal of that chapter? Can we not assume that God also sought to communicate through Moses how He created the world?

Therefore, since the Bible does indeed make clear statements (or even claims) about natural phenomena, especially in regard to creation, we cannot content ourselves with dividing truth in half, assigning to science and Scripture each their own unassailable domain. One must take the Biblical descriptions of natural phenomena seriously and seek the author's intention for including them. Collins correctly comments, "Did the author mean us to take Genesis 1:1–2:3 as history? The answer is certainly yes... the book of Genesis, a book that is concerned with historical matters."<sup>818</sup>

We readily acknowledge that God reveals Himself through nature. Still, we give pride of place to God's special revelation given in Holy Scripture.

## 2. Exegetical Features of Genesis Chapters 1-2.

Before we begin our survey of different interpretations of Genesis 1, it will be important to clarify some exegetical question concerning its interpretation in general.

First, misunderstanding exists concerning the definition of the Hebrew verb בָּרָא (*bara*). Some assert that it is used only in contexts where Yahweh creates from nothing. This term, though, appears with a wide spectrum of meaning.<sup>819</sup> It may indeed indicate creation from nothing, as in Genesis 1:1, or may refer to creation out of already pre-existing material, as in the creation of humans (Gen 1:27, cf. 2:7). It is used as well for the creation of special circumstances or a new state of affair (Isa 45:7-8; 65:18; Ps 51:10).

We must also recall that בָּרָא (*bara*) stands in parallel with עָשָׂה (*asa*) and יָצַר (*yetsar*). The fact that בָּרָא (*bara*) and עָשָׂה (*asa*) appear as synonyms prevents us from concluding that the former is always used of creation from nothing and that the latter – of creation from pre-existing matter. The verb בָּרָא (*bara*) appears in Genesis 1:1 (the creation of the heavens and the earth, cf. 2:4), verse 21 (creation of fish and birds),<sup>820</sup> and

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<sup>816</sup>Collins, 1408-1409.

<sup>817</sup>Poythress V. Response to Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 91; Van Till, p. 210.

<sup>818</sup>Collins, 1140-1141.

<sup>819</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 135.

<sup>820</sup>In Genesis 2:19, we read that God formed (יָצַר) birds from the ground as well. We will discuss the interpretation of Genesis chapter 2 later.

verse 27 (creation of humans). Yet, according to Genesis 2:7, God created humans in a mediated fashion from the “dust of the ground.” It is also written that God both “created” (בָּרָא) humans (v. 27) and “made” (עָשָׂה) them (v. 26).

We also note in Genesis 1 instances when creation from nothing is denoted by the verb עָשָׂה (*asa*), namely when the “expanse of the heavens” was created (v. 7)<sup>821</sup> and the heavenly bodies (v. 16). On the other hand, the creation of beasts of the earth from pre-existing material (v. 25, cf. 2:19) is also described as עָשָׂה (*asa*). Therefore, there is significant overlap in how these verbs are used, as noted below.

- Introduction (v. 1-2) - בָּרָא (*bara*)
- Day 1 - יְהִי, i.e., “let there be”
- Day 2 - עָשָׂה (*aca*)
- Day 3 - יְהִי, i.e., “let there be”
- Day 4 - עָשָׂה (*aca*)
- Day 5 - בָּרָא (*bara*)
- Day 6 - (creation of animals) - עָשָׂה (*aca*)
- Day 6 - (creation of humans) - עָשָׂה (*aca*) and בָּרָא (*bara*)

Interestingly, in the creation of light and plants, neither בָּרָא (*bara*), nor עָשָׂה (*asa*) appears, but rather the verb יְהִי - *yih*i), i.e., “let there be.” It seems, then, that יְהִי (*yih*i) can serve as a synonym for עָשָׂה (*asa*) and בָּרָא (*bara*) as well. This command is God’s creative word (cf. Heb 11:3; Ps 148:5).

Finally, עָשָׂה (*aca*) and בָּרָא (*bara*) appear in combination in Genesis 2:3: “Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created (בָּרָא) and made (עָשָׂה).” Here, these terms serve more to compliment one another than as synonyms. A more precise translation would include recognizing the preposition ל (*lamed*) before the second verb: בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים לַעֲשׂוֹת. Since ל (*lamed*) usually indicates “goal,” we may translate: “God created, in order to make.”

Another point to note is that the first day of creation differs from the rest. It is introduced not by the ordinal number ראשון (*rishon*), “first,” but by the cardinal numeral אֶחָד (*ehad*), “one.” Consequently, many translators prefer to render it “day one.” Scholars interpret this divergence in various ways. Some say that using the cardinal numeral indicates that this is a 24-hour day. Therefore, all the subsequent days should be so understood. Others assert the opposite – the indefinite nature of the word אֶחָד (*ehad*) shows that a longer period of time is in view and that this is true for all subsequent days as well.

We must also note, however, that אֶחָד (*ehad*) sometimes serves as an ordinal number,<sup>822</sup> as in the listing of the rivers in Eden (Gen 2:11), the precious stones in the breastplate of the high priest (Ex 39:10), and the sons of Job (Job 42:14). Finally, it can denote the first day of the month (Gen 8:5) or the first year (2 Chr 36:22). When used in an enumeration of concrete entities, אֶחָד (*ehad*) (if it serves as an ordinal number) takes the definite article. Yet, the absence of the article in Genesis 1:5 is likely due to the poetic style of the material. The article, in fact, is omitted before other ordinal numbers in this chapter, except for the number “sixth.”

Collins introduces several other points of discussion.<sup>823</sup> He feels that the first day of creation does not include Genesis 1:1-2 – this is the introduction to the chapter. The first day begins in verse 3. His point is worth considering if we assume that every new day must begin with the phrase “and God said...” and must conclude with “the first day,” etc. Mathews comes to the same conclusion: “...vv. 1–2 describe the absolute beginnings, the initial stage in the creation of the ‘earth’ that is brought to completion during the six days (vv. 3–31).”<sup>824</sup>

<sup>821</sup>Yet, if the “expanse of the heavens” is simply “space,” we can hardly speak of it as being “created” from nothing, since it has no substance.

<sup>822</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 25.

<sup>823</sup>Collins, 1033-1175, 1574.

<sup>824</sup>Mathews K. A. Genesis 1-11:26 // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996. – P. 143.

So then, the words “heavens and earth” in verse 1 idiomatically refer to the entire universe. As the chapter progresses, however, they take on a more narrow meaning of the planet Earth and the space around it. This interpretation corresponds to the author’s goal in the chapter – to show how God prepared a place for human habitation.

Another debated question is what Genesis is referring to in saying: “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day that Yahweh God made earth and heaven.” The entire book of Genesis is divided into sections by the phrase *אֵלֶּה תּוֹלְדוֹת*, “this is the account” (see 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2). Collins thinks that this verse introduces what is to follow. He adds that it is improper to divide the verse, as if the first part applied to what precedes, and the second part – to what follows. The verse is structured in the form of a chiasm, which is improper to rupture into parts, but must be taken as a whole:

This is the account of the heavens  
and the earth  
when they were created  
in the day that Yahweh God made  
earth  
and heaven

In light of what has been said, we can conclude that the second creation account begins with verse 4 of chapter 2, where we encounter the formula “this is the account...”. The passage Genesis 2:4-25 details God’s creative work on day 6. Nonetheless, why is plant life absent on the sixth day (2:5), and why are birds created on that day (2:19)?

We assert that Genesis 2:5 does not recount the creation of plant life in general, as in Genesis 1:11-12, but of the initiation of agricultural activity, which did not exist until God created humans “to cultivate the ground.” Keil and Delitzsch argue that phrases “shrub of the field (*שִׁדְּה*)” and “plant of the field (*שִׁדְּה*)” differ from the plants in general coming from the earth (Gen 1:11-12). The word *שִׁדְּה* (*sade*) refers to a certain plot of land, namely the Garden of Eden.<sup>825</sup> They write,

The “shrub of the field” consists of such shrubs and tree-like productions of the cultivated land as man raises for the sake of their fruit, and the “herb of the field,” all seed-producing plants, both corn and vegetables, which serve as food for man and beast.<sup>826</sup>

Mathews agrees:

Thus 2:5–6 does not speak to the creation of overall vegetation but to specific sorts of herbage in the world to follow. The language of cultivation, “work the ground” (2:5), anticipates the labor of Adam.<sup>827</sup>

Mathews adds the thought that “plants yielding seed” in Genesis 1:11 differ from “plants of the field” in that the former grow by themselves, while the latter require human care.<sup>828</sup> Other commentators note that Genesis 2:5-6 contrasts with Genesis 3:17-18, 23, where again humans are needed to work the soil, only now with the earth under a curse.<sup>829</sup>

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<sup>825</sup>Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. Commentary on the Old Testament. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996. – V. 1. – P. 48.

<sup>826</sup>Ibid.

<sup>827</sup>Mathews, p. 193.

<sup>828</sup>Ibid.

<sup>829</sup>Wenham G. J. Genesis 1–15 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 57-58.

What about animals and birds made from the ground in Genesis 2:19 after Adam's creation? Keil and Delitzsch propose that the author is looking back on what God had already done in 1:24:25.<sup>830</sup> In support, we note that the Hebrew verb in 2:19, וַיַּצֵּר (*wayitser*), "formed," stands in the grammatical tense "waw-imperfect." This tense can have the function of the pluperfect tense in referring to a event in the distant past before the other events in the context took place. For example, in Numbers 1:47-48, we read: "The Levites, however, were not numbered among them by their fathers' tribe. For Yahweh had (already) spoken (וַיִּדְבֹּר) to Moses, saying..."<sup>831</sup> In this light, we may translate Genesis 2:19: "Out of the ground Yahweh God (had already) formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought {them} to the man."

According to Mathews, the author intentionally makes mention of animal creation after human creation for the sake of literary style. His goal is to contrast animals, who were unfit partners for Adam, with woman.<sup>832</sup> Other commentators suggest that Genesis 2:19 speaks not of all animals created in 1:24-25, but only of those in a closer relation to humans.<sup>833</sup> Hugh Ross holds to the opinion that God specially created these types of animals and birds after Adam.<sup>834</sup>

A final point of interest: it is well known that in Genesis 1:1-2:4, God is אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*), while in Genesis 2:5 and following, He is יְהוָה (*Yahweh*). Based on this, some wrongfully conclude that these chapters were written at different times by different authors (i.e., the "documentary hypothesis"). We refute this suggestion in chapter 13 of volume 2 in this series. As Collins argues, אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) is God in "in his role as Creator and Ruler of the world", but יְהוָה (*Yahweh*) is God's personal name, "the one that he uses in entering into a relationship with humans."<sup>835</sup>

Finally, the meaning of the Hebrew word יוֹם (*yom*), "day," in Genesis 1 is much discussed. We will address this issue later in this chapter.

### 3. Old Earth Theories

As mentioned above, commentators vary in opinion about the age of the earth. Those who posit an old earth draw on certain scientific observations supporting their view. In this chapter, however, we will examine the biblical data cited in support of this position. We recommend appealing to material specializing in a scientific treatment of creation for an investigation of that side of the question.

Before examining the specific theological views defending an old earth, we can list general arguments for an old earth that support any of these views. Newman, who embraces progressive creationism, makes the following observations.<sup>836</sup> In 1 John 2:18, it is written that the "end times" have already come. If the "end times" can extend for more than 2000 years, then the years preceding the end times must be much longer. Moreover, in Revelation 16:18, we read of "a great earthquake, such as there had not been since man came to be upon the earth." Could the expression "since man came to be upon the earth" refer to a time when there were no people on the still evolving planet?

Romans 5:12 is of special interest: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." If progressive creationism or theistic evolution is correct, then the death of plants and animals occurred before Adam's sin. Yet, adherents of this view respond that Romans 5:12 speaks only of the death of *people*. The same is seen in 1 Corinthians 15:22: "In

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<sup>830</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 1, p. 54-55.

<sup>831</sup>Still, the example in Numbers 1:47-48 is not the same as our text in question. That passage begins with a verb in the Hebrew perfect tense, after which the waw-imperfect is used. In our text, the waw-imperfect, "formed," stands in a chain of other waw-imperfects, which usually indicates chronological sequence.

<sup>832</sup>Mathews, p. 215.

<sup>833</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 1, p. 54-55; Wenham, p. 68-69.

<sup>834</sup>Ross, p. 234.

<sup>835</sup>Collins, 1058-1060.

<sup>836</sup>Newman, p. 108-114.

Adam all (implying “people”) die.”<sup>837</sup> So then, the death of animals does not result from the Fall. Predators, in fact, whom God Himself feeds (see Job 38:39-41; Ps 104:21), existed from the beginning.<sup>838</sup>

Boyd cites several passages of Scripture that could be interpreted to support an old earth:<sup>839</sup>

- He stood and surveyed the earth; He looked and startled the nations. Yes, the perpetual mountains were shattered, the ancient hills collapsed. His ways are everlasting (Hab 3:6).
- Listen, you mountains, to the indictment of Yahweh, and you enduring foundations of the earth, Because Yahweh has a case against His people; even with Israel He will dispute (Mic 6:2).
- Of wisdom it says, “Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth” (Prov 8:22-23).

Another participant in this debate is Hugh Ross.<sup>840</sup> In his opinion, God created the world “good,” but not “perfect.” He introduced decay into the universe from the beginning, since it is necessary for the operation of many natural processes. He reasons that in Jeremiah 33:25, “the fixed patterns of heaven and earth” that God established include the principle of decay (entropy). He assumes the same in Romans 8:21, where we read about the “slavery to corruption.” The goal of creation was not the establishment of perfect conditions for human habitation, but conditions that would lead to victory over evil. A perfect world will come only after the Day of Judgment, when the old world order is done away with.<sup>841</sup>

Ross, then, considers that the presence of the principle of entropy is part of God’s original plan for this creation and supports the thesis of an old earth. God used this process to bring order to the universe after the “Big Bang.” The process of cooling and condensing the atomic elements took billions of years. Ross sees in biblical references to God “spreading out” the heavens indications of the Big Bang.<sup>842</sup> Furthermore, he interprets the words “in his (Peleg’s) days the earth was divided” (Gen 10:25) as describing the separation of Asia and North America at the Bering Strait about 9000 B.C., which means that the earth is older than 6000 years old.

Ross also notes that the genealogy of Genesis 11:12 omits the name Cainan, which Luke includes (Lk 3:36). He suggests that many other names are also omitted in Genesis. Therefore, the enumerations in Genesis chapters 5 and 11 are not reliable to determine the times of Adam and Eve. Other biblical genealogies show the same tendency for omission. So then, he concludes that people have been on the planet more than 6000 years.

We will critique several of these points. First, one must consider that the phrase “end times” is a technical expression for the time leading up to Christ’s coming, which is intended not for measuring the age of the earth, but for urging people to be ready for that great event. In addition, Revelation 16:14 does not speak of a time when there were no people on the earth, but only when there *were* people on the planet.

Second, the words “perpetual (Hab 3:6),” “enduring (Mic 6:2),” and “old” (Prov 8:22-23) have relative meaning. They describe a condition that is older than something else, in this case, than the people who lived when these verses were written. There is no indication of how long the “mountains” or “wisdom” existed before that time.

Third, certain factors require us to take the genealogies in Genesis seriously. First, between Luke’s genealogy and the lists in Genesis, only one omission is noted. It is difficult to posit thousands of lost years on the basis on one missing name. Second, unlike other biblical genealogies, in Genesis chapters 5 and 11, it is specifically stated at what age the descendants were born and how long their father lived after that, which

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<sup>837</sup>Hugh Ross comments that, although the word “death” is never used in relation to plants and lower animals, it is used in relation to higher animals: Ex 7:18,21; 8:13; 10:17; Ps 105:29; Ecc 10:1; Isa 50:2 (see Ross p. 99-100).

<sup>838</sup>Ross, p. 102.

<sup>839</sup>Boyd G. A., Eddy P. R. Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002. – P. 59.

<sup>840</sup>Ross, p. 98-144, 220-224.

<sup>841</sup>See Job 14:12; Ps 102:25-26; Ecc 12:2; Isa 34:4; 51:6; 65:17; 2 Pet 3:5-13; Matt 24:35; Rev 20:11; 21:1-5.

<sup>842</sup>See Isa 40:22; 44:24; 45:12; 48:13; 51:13; Job 9:8; Jer 10:12; 51:15; Zech 12:1.

fixes the precision of this dating. This means that whether Shelah was the son of Arphaxad or his grandson makes no difference, since we know that Arphaxad lived 403 years after his birth.

### a. Literary Theory

One of the theories offered in defense of an old earth in the literary theory. It is proposed that the description of creation in Genesis 1 is not so much historical as poetic. The author's goal was not to lay out the event in chronological order, but to give it a literary style according to the following structure:<sup>843</sup>

<u>Place</u>	<u>Contents</u>
Day 1 = light	Day 4 = sun, moon, stars
Day 2 = heaven and seas	Day 5 = birds, fish
Day 3 = earth	Day 6 = land animals

In other words, the first three days describe the general structure of the universe, while the final three indicate what fills that space. Therefore, Genesis 1 does not provide a historical or chronological account, but a schematic representation of God's creative act. In addition, the Bible gives no indication as to how long this process required.

Boyd and Eddy mention a different approach used by some for analyzing the structure of Genesis 1.<sup>844</sup> Genesis presents a dilemma that the subsequent texts resolves: "The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep." The problem of "darkness" was solved by the creation of light. The problem of the "deep" – by the separation of sea from heaven. The problem of "formless" – by the creation of dry land. The problem of "void" – by the creation of birds, fish, and animals. Yet, the time factor is missing. The "days" are symbolic.

The literary theory is defended as follows.<sup>845</sup> First, the Gospels employ a similar approach. The Gospel writers do not always lay out their material chronologically, but often group events by topic. Second, the order of events in Genesis 2 differs from that of Genesis 1, which may indicate that the latter is not chronological. Third, the Ancient Near Eastern literature shows a similar structure. It is thought that the author of Genesis 1 used a conventional literary approach from antiquity to express how the true God made the universe.<sup>846</sup>

In evaluation of the approach, we must acknowledge the striking correspondence between days 1-4, 2-5, and 3-6. Other considerations, though, weigh against this theory. First, Genesis chapter 1 reads like a historical account, and the enumeration of the days strongly suggests sequence. Second, in Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 we receive confirmation of a literal six-day creation period: "In six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth." This literal six day period, in fact, serves as the basis for establishing the Sabbath as a day of rest. We also note that the New Testament refers about 60 times to the first part of the book of Genesis as literal history. This leads one to believe that chapter 1 is meant to be taken as true history as well.

Finally, any resemblance between Ancient Near Eastern literary conventions and Genesis 1 does not force the conclusion that the latter borrowed from the former. If the Genesis 1 account is truly historical, then one would expect to see a resemblance in the tradition preserved in the Ancient Near East, with varying degrees of precision. Why must we assume that pagan nations are the source for the creation narrative? It is very likely that the Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts simply reflect a tradition passed down from the beginning, while the biblical account contains a more precise description of the event given by divine revelation.

### b. Theory of "Days of Revelation"

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<sup>843</sup>Suggested by Meredith Kline, noted in Collins, 1703-1705.

<sup>844</sup>Boyd and Eddy, p. 68-69.

<sup>845</sup>Ibid., p. 69-73.

<sup>846</sup>Ancient Near Eastern literature structures the days of creation in three groups of two elements each.



According to this theory, God did not create the world in six days, but rather revealed His creative work to Moses over that period of time. That is, on the first day God revealed to Moses that He created light. The next day, He revealed His creation of the expanse of the heavens, etc. Yet, we see no evidence of this in the Genesis text. We also recall that Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 also speak of a six-day creative act.<sup>847</sup>

### c. Gap Theory

The Gap Theory is another attempt to reconcile the biblical data with the old-earth claim. Adherents propose that a pre-Adamic civilization existed, which perished due to rebellion against God. Genesis 1:1, then, describes this original creation, while Genesis 1:2 records God's judgment of the pre-Adamic world: "The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep." Proponents of the Gap Theory, however, translate: "The earth *became* formless and void."

Therefore, God created the universe billions of years ago, but our civilization, which is the second made by Yahweh, has not long inhabited the planet.<sup>848</sup> A "gap," therefore, exists between the events described in Genesis 1:1 and those in Genesis 1:2.<sup>849</sup>

To support this theory, proponents note the use of the Hebrew terms תהו (*tohu*) and בְּהוּ (*bohu*), i.e., "formless and void," in Isaiah 34:11, 45:18, and Jeremiah 4:23-26 to describe the Lord's judgment. Isaiah 45:18 renders the word בְּהוּ (*bohu*) "a waste place." Applying this to Genesis 1:1-2 supposedly reveals that God did not originally create the world in the condition described in verse 2, but it became that way after Yahweh judged the pre-Adamic civilization. In Isaiah 34:11, the word בְּהוּ (*bohu*) is translated "emptiness" and again is found in a context of the judgment of God. Both terms are used in Jeremiah 4:23-26 in the same sense.

This theory also cites an expression used by Christ in Matthew 13:35: "...since the foundation of the world." The Greek term here, καταβολή (*kataboles*), consists of two parts: κατα (*kata*), meaning "down," and βολή (*boles*) from the verb βάλλω (*ballo*), meaning "throw." So then, Jesus allegedly spoke of a time when God "threw down" the world, that is, judged the pre-Adamic civilization.<sup>850</sup>

Genesis 9:15 is also viewed as indicating a pre-Adamic civilization: "...never again shall the water become a flood to destroy all flesh." Peter's words are interpreted the same way: "...through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water" (2 Pet 3:6). Moreover, the rabbis inserted into the Hebrew text a disjunctive accent between the first two verses of Genesis, which could indicate a contrast intended between them. So then, Genesis 1:1 is the creation of heaven and earth, while Genesis 1:2 describes God's judgment.<sup>851</sup>

Boyd and Eddy note other arguments used in support of the Gap Theory.<sup>852</sup> In the religions of Mesopotamia, the "deep" was an anti-God power, which may indicate a conflict occurring in this text between God and His first created beings. It is thought that when the Spirit "hovered over the waters," He was opposing that force. In addition, the literature of the Ancient Near East records a conflict supposedly taking place before the creation of the world.

Additionally, humans received the commission from the Lord: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it" (Gen 1:28), which may imply that certain rebellious forces were still at work in the earth. The term "subdue", i.e., כַּבַּשׁ (*kavash*), can describe a violent subjection of something.<sup>853</sup> Moreover, Adam needed to "keep" (שָׁמַר - *shamar*) the Garden (Gen 2:15). Boyd and Eddy describe the Gap Theory's position: "One of

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<sup>847</sup>Thiessen, p. 165.

<sup>848</sup>Yet, Boyd and Eddy comment that the Gap Theory can correlate with Day-EPOCH Theory, since the six days of creation could represent long periods of time in both theories (see Boyd and Eddy, p. 65).

<sup>849</sup>Munyon, p. 252ff; Thiessen, p. 164, 169.

<sup>850</sup>Ibid.

<sup>851</sup>Munyon, p. 252ff.

<sup>852</sup>Boyd and Eddy, p. 63-67.

<sup>853</sup>See Num 32:22, 29; Josh 18:1; Neh 5:5; Jer 34:16; Mic 7:19; Zech 9:15.

the tasks God gave humanity, it seems, was the task of keeping the earth from falling back into the satanic bondage that led to its initial destruction.”<sup>854</sup>

The following passages of Scripture also speak of conflict between God and nature in connection with creation: Psalm 74:12-17; 89:8-12. It is thought that these passages symbolically represent the overthrow of the pre-Adamic civilization. Predators on the earth today are remnants of this earlier world that somehow survived its annihilation.

Numerous factors, however, stand in opposition to this teaching. First, it boasts little Scriptural support. The Bible nowhere mentions the existence of a pre-Adamic civilization. Second, the best translation of Genesis 1:2 is not, “the earth *became* formless and void,” but “the earth *was* formless and void” (see below). Third, Genesis 9:15 and 2 Peter 3:6-7 are referring to the flood in Noah’s time. Furthermore, the term καταβολής (*καταβολῆς*) never means “thrown down,” but is always used in the sense of “create.”<sup>855</sup>

Let us discuss further verse 2 of Genesis 1. Adherents of the Gap Theory translate the Hebrew verb הָיָה (*haya*), i.e., “to be,” as “to become.” Thus, the earth “became” formless and void. However, the verb הָיָה (*haya*) is translated “become” only when the next word in the sentence begins with the preposition ל (*lamed*), as in Genesis 2:7: וַיְהִי הָאָדָם לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה, which translates, “...man became a living being.”

There are exceptions to this rule, however. Sometimes הָיָה (*haya*) can be translated “to become” without the accompanying preposition ל (*lamed*), but such examples are few. One such example is in Genesis 3:20: “...Eve, because she was (or “became”) the mother of all {the} living.” Yet, as a rule, הָיָה (*haya*) without the preposition ל (*lamed*) means “to be.” Therefore, the preferred translation is “...the earth *was* formless and void.” Consequently, this verse does not describe a pre-Adamic catastrophe, but the condition of creation before God gave order to it.

The fact that the Ancient Near Eastern literature describes a conflict before creation carries no weight, since it finds no confirmation in the Old Testament.<sup>856</sup> As discussed above, any resemblance between the Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts and Genesis is due to the preservation of the creation story among pagan nations, but not with the precision found in God’s revealed Word. Whenever the two sources conflict, we always give preference to God’s Word.

It is also not convincing to assert that the use of the terms תְּהוֹ (tohu) and בְּהוֹ (bohu) in contexts speaking of God’s judgment supports the Gap Theory. Any word can be used with different senses in different contexts. The fact that תְּהוֹ (tohu) and בְּהוֹ (bohu) can refer to destruction by God’s hand of judgment in no way forces the conclusion that they always carry that connotation. We can say the same for the word כָּבַשׁ (*kabash*), “subdue,” in Genesis 1:28 and שָׁמַר (*shamar*), “keep,” in Genesis 2:15. In particular, the word שָׁמַר (*shamar*) can mean “to care for.”<sup>857</sup>

Finally, Psalm 74:12-17 and Psalm 89:8-12 were not written to unveil God’s judgment of the pre-Adamic world, but to show Yahweh’s power and authority over nature. It is difficult to see in “Leviathan” and “Rahab” symbols of a pre-Adamic world.

In light of our discussion above, we conclude that Genesis 1:1 relates the account of God’s creative act, and that Genesis 1:2 and following describe the development that subsequently took place, that is, how the Lord formed concrete entities in the heavens and on earth.<sup>858</sup>

#### **d. Theory of “Days as Epochs”**

Among those who believe in an old earth, the most popular explanation of Genesis 1 is the theory “Days as Epochs.” Here, it is asserted that the word “day” in Genesis 1 indicates a long period of time. The Bible

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<sup>854</sup>Boyd and Eddy, p. 67.

<sup>855</sup>Munyon, p. 252ff.

<sup>856</sup>Possibly, in the literature of the Ancient Near East, these legends depict the fall of Satan and his angels.

<sup>857</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 1036.

<sup>858</sup>Munyon, p. 252ff.

elsewhere states, “With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day” (2 Pet 3:8; cf. Ps 90:4). Consequently, “six days” may be millions or billions of years.

Although all advocates of this teaching agree that a Genesis “day” is more than 24 hours, they vary among themselves as to its meaning. Those who hold to Theistic Evolution claim that God used the process of evolution to create the world. This means that the six days of creation represent an uninterrupted process of the progressive development of all things.

For proponents of Progressive Creationism, though, these days represent specific times when God launched a new initiative in the progressive creation of the universe. Between these “days,” God was inactive and undertook no new initiatives. No one knows exactly how much time transpired during these creative periods. It is possible, however, that they consisted of a literal 24 hours.<sup>859</sup>

In support of Progressive Creationism, Newman calls the six days of creation “insertions,” which means that God acted only in six concrete periods to make something new.<sup>860</sup> He proposes that these “days” symbolize the moments when the Lord gave the commands, “Let there be...” According to Newman, the sixth day extends to the present time, and the seventh day has not yet come. Newman argues that fossil record does not yield sufficient transitional forms to justify the claims of Theistic Evolution. He also appeals to the so-called “Cambrian explosion,” when supposedly nearly all types of animals appeared in the fossil record over a relatively short period of time.<sup>861</sup> This seems to correspond to a special creative act.

Van Til proposed a radical variant of Theistic Evolution.<sup>862</sup> He believed that God created the world with inherent capacities to develop and evolve. Even living creatures spontaneously evolved. His view is that besides the initial creative act and endowing creation with these inherent powers, God did not supernaturally intervene in creation from that point on. On the other hand, the conventional understanding of theistic evolution is that God actively directed the process of evolution.

Finally, the evolution of apes into humans contradicts Genesis 2:7, which records that Adam was made “from the dust of the ground.” The use of the word “dust” in relation to death confirms that we must take that term literally in relation to Adam’s creation.<sup>863</sup>

Along with arguments in support of an old earth, all advocates of the “Days as Epochs” theory hold to a non-literal interpretation of the word “day” in Genesis chapter 1.<sup>864</sup> In some cases, in fact, the Hebrew word for “day,” i.e., *yom* (דִּי), does refer to a longer period of time: “day of calamity” (Deut 32:35; Job 21:30), “day of the Lord” (Amos 5:18; Zech 14:1), “day of harvest” (Prov 25:13).

Especially significant for our discussion is Genesis 2:4. The word *yom* (דִּי) there covers the entire period of Genesis chapter 1: “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day (דִּי) that Yahweh God made earth and heaven.” We also consider Psalm 90:4: “For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or {as} a watch in the night.” In Hosea 6:2, a “day” represents a period of time in the history of Israel: “He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day, that we may live before Him.” Although the Hebrew language has a specific word for “period of time,” namely *olam* (עוֹלָם), it more commonly denotes eternity and therefore would be less appropriate to describe the days of creation.

Supporters of this theory insist on their position for logical reasons as well. For example, they doubt that Adam could have named all the animals in one 24-hour period, since there exist thousands of species. In addition, since the sun did not appear until day 4, there was no way to measure 24-hour days.<sup>865</sup>

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<sup>859</sup>Collins, 1689-1693.

<sup>860</sup>Newman, p. 105-116.

<sup>861</sup>More precisely, 5 million years (see Bradley W. L. Response to Howard J. Van Till // Moreland J. P., Reymond J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 220).

<sup>862</sup>Van Till H. J. The Fully Gifted Creation // Moreland J. P., Reymond J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 162-203.

<sup>863</sup>Munyon, p. 264; Thiessen, p. 218

<sup>864</sup>Munyon, p. 258; Thiessen, p. 164-165; Boyd and Eddy, p. 58-62; Poythress, Response to Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds, p. 92-93.

<sup>865</sup>However, on the first day there already existed a source of light and light was already separated from darkness, which makes the measurement of time possible (Gen 1:3-5).

In addition, the seventh day does not end with the conventional formula, "...there was evening and there was morning." In the light of Hebrews 4:1-11, some suggest that the seventh day is not yet complete. The idea of "Sabbath," in fact, can apply to an entire year (Ex 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7) or a period of 50 years (Lev 25:8-17). So then, if the seventh day can extend so long, then the other days of creation may as well.

Hugh Ross points out other inconsistencies in the literal day theory.<sup>866</sup> First, if God created the stars only 6000 years ago, how would the light that they emit from many light years away reach the earth by now? Second, plants created on day 3 could not survive without the sun, created on day 4. Third, if God placed the sun in the solar system after making the earth, the gravitation force thus introduced would have destroyed all climatic conditions necessary on earth for life.

Ross proposes that God had already made the heavenly bodies at the beginning of creation in accordance with the Big Bang Theory. Yet, the dense atmosphere of that time did not allow the sunlight to penetrate (see Job 38:8-9). On day 1, the atmosphere cleared sufficiently for sunlight to appear. By the fourth day, the sun itself became visible. In Genesis 1:16, where we read that on the fourth day "God made the two great lights," this occurred beforehand, but was inserted at this point in the narrative.

Collins advances a similar theory of how the heavenly bodies appeared.<sup>867</sup> When it says, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens" (Gen 1:14), the phrase "let there be" does not necessarily mean that something new appeared. It could imply that the item already existed. For example, in 1 Sam 20:13 we read, "May Yahweh be with you." This does not mean the Yahweh only began to be with David. Furthermore, when Genesis 1:16 claims, "God made the two great lights," it could be implying that at that time God merely appointed the heavenly bodies to serve "for signs and for seasons and for days and years."

Our evaluation of the Days as Epochs approach is as follows. Concerning the claim that God created the heavenly bodies before day 4, it does seem necessary from a scientific point of view for the sun to appear before life is created on earth. Yet, this interpretation is problematic from an exegetical point of view. It does not say that on day 4 the heavenly bodies "appeared" or "became visible," but that God created them by His Word. As we noted earlier, in Genesis 1 the verb יְהִי (*yehi*), "let there be," serves as a synonym for the verb בָּרָא (*bara*) and is, in fact, God's creative Word. The example from 1 Sam 20:13, "May Yahweh *be with you*," does not compare with the issuing of God's creative Word. In addition, in Genesis 1:16, the verb אָסָה (*asa*) does not mean to begin to serve in some capacity. As noted earlier, this word also serves as a synonym for בָּרָא (*bara*) and means "to create."

It is also highly improbable that Genesis 1:16 describes something that occurred before day 1. Genesis chapter 1 observes a strict ordering of events: first day, second day, third day, fourth day, etc. Moreover, we do not observe any other deviation of this type in the other creation days. Finally, it is written that the heavenly bodies were placed "in the expanse of the heavens," which was not created before day 1, but only on day 2.

This theory hangs upon the claim that יוֹם (*yom*) indicates a long period of time. In our discussion of Fiat Creationism, we will return to this question.

## 4. Young Earth Theories

### a. Theory of "Ideal Time"

The Theory of Ideal Time claims that God created universe about 6000 years ago, but He made it in such away that it appears to be billions of years old. In support, proponents of this view appeal to Jesus changing water into wine. Since the process of fermentation takes a long period of time, Jesus "accelerated" this process to make something new appear old.<sup>868</sup> Morland also argues that God had to originally create some things in their already adult form, such as trees, people, light from the stars, etc.

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<sup>866</sup>Ross, p. 36, 77-94, 231-232.

<sup>867</sup>Collins, 1637-1652.

<sup>868</sup>Noted in Collins, 4525-4530.

On the other hand, we must ask what goal God was pursuing in creating the appearance of a billions-year-old universe? Moreover, astronomers observe various changes in the condition of stars.<sup>869</sup> If the light to reach the earth was created along with the stars, then God created a false history of these star formations/degradations. Those celestial events never really occurred.<sup>870</sup> In addition, can we justify God creating the false appearance of age in general, thereby employing deception?

### **b. Theory of “Literal Days” (Fiat Creationism)**

The most well-accepted view among young-earth adherents is the Theory of Literal Days. According to this view, God created all things in six 24-hour days, and the biblical account is taken as literal history. Many supports of this view date God’s creative act at about 4000 B.C., while others are willing to assign to the earth 10,000 – 50,000 years.<sup>871</sup> All adherents, though, assign the features apparently pointing to an old earth to the effects of the flood of Noah.

The Theory of Literal Days accepts the occurrence of microevolution, but not macroevolution.<sup>872</sup> Microevolution is the process by which organisms may change within their genus or species, but not beyond them. Macroevolution, however, involves alteration of an organism to the point that it creates a new genus or species. Genesis 1 informs us that God made all things “according to their kind.” Therefore, we do not expect organisms to exceed those limitations. Indeed, in nature we do not observe such changes, and the fossil record can boast few if any such examples.<sup>873</sup>

In order to defend the Theory of Literal Days, one must demonstrate the literal used of the word *יוֹם* (*yom*), i.e., “day,” in Genesis 1. In the biblical text, when the word *יוֹם* (*yom*) is accompanied by a numeral, it always indicates a 24-hour day. Only one exception exists. In Hosea 6:2, we read, “He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day.” Here, it is clear from context that the time of Israel’s restitution is in view.<sup>874</sup> However, some see in this saying an allusion to Christ’s resurrection as well, which did occur on the literal third day.<sup>875</sup>

Moreover, in Genesis 1:16 the sun was made “to govern the day.” The sun, of course, does not govern ages, but literal days. At the same time, we acknowledge, as was noted before, that in Genesis 2:4 the word *יוֹם* (*yom*) does cover the entire period described in Genesis chapter 1: “This is the account of the heavens and the earth when they were created, in the day (*יוֹם*) that Yahweh God made earth and heaven.” We also recognize that *יוֹם* (*yom*) applies to longer periods of time in the expressions: “day of calamity” (Deut 32:35; Job 21:30), “day of the Lord” (Amos 5:18; Zech 14:1), “day of harvest” (Prov 25:13). At the same time, these examples are all qualified by expressions like “calamity,” “harvest,” etc. This makes it evident that a longer period of time is meant. Such qualifications are absent in Genesis 1.<sup>876</sup>

When the Scripture says that with the Lord “a thousand years... are like yesterday” (Ps 90:4), the text itself demonstrates that a non-literal meaning is meant. In addition, it does not state that “one day is 1000 years,” but that to the Lord one *literal day*, *יוֹם* (*yom*), is like a thousand years. Furthermore, in Zechariah 14:7 we encounter the same grammatical construction translated “one day” in Genesis 1:5: “For it will be a unique day (*יִחְדָּו יוֹם*) which is known to Yahweh.” The text of Zechariah speaks of one literal, 24-hour day.<sup>877</sup>

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<sup>869</sup>For example, “In 1572 Tycho Brahe observed a supernova ... and in 1604 Galileo observed another one” (Collins, 4554-4559).

<sup>870</sup>Moreland J. P. Response to Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 86-87. In order to avoid this difficulty, advocates of a young earth either claim that the speed of light has changed over time, or challenge the true distance between earth and the stars (see Newman, p. 108-109).

<sup>871</sup>Ross, p. 21.

<sup>872</sup>Munyon, p. 256-257.

<sup>873</sup>Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 383-384.

<sup>874</sup>Ross, p. 75.

<sup>875</sup>Noted in Boyd and Eddy, p. 52-53.

<sup>876</sup>Collins, 1684-1686.

<sup>877</sup>Boyd and Eddy, p. 52.

Also in support of the literal day theory are references to the Sabbath. We read later in the Torah, “For in six days Yahweh made the heavens and the earth” (Ex 20:11; 31:17). The people of God were to work six literal days and rest one day in imitation of what God did in Genesis 1.<sup>878</sup>

The phrase “and there was evening and there was morning” is also highly significant for defining the word *yoim* (yom). This formula is very atypical. A similar one, though, is found in 1 Samuel 17:16, where it refers to a 24-hour day: “The Philistine came forward morning and evening for forty days and took his stand.”

Collins makes an interesting comment on this phenomenon.<sup>879</sup> In 1 Samuel 17:16, emphasis is on the light of day, when men go to war. Therefore, we see the order “morning and evening.” Genesis 1, however, has the reverse order, “evening and morning,” implying not a time of activity, but a time of rest. Collins suggests that after each creative day, God “rested” before the commencement of the subsequent day. Of course, God does not actually rest. This is a poetic, anthropomorphic expression. So then, Genesis chapter 1 describes God’s “work week” (cf. Ps 104:22-23).

However, Collins sees Israel’s “work week” and the corresponding command to observe the Sabbath as *analogous* to God’s “work week” (see Ex 20:11; 31:17). He describes them as analogous since there are certain points of correspondence between them, but differences as well. For example, God does not really have to literally rest. Correspondingly, we do not have to take the “days” of Genesis in the same sense of the days leading up to the Sabbath.

In response to Collins, we acknowledge that the expression “evening and morning” may carry the connotation of a rest between days. However, the phrase can also serve as a confirmation that 24-hour days are in view. In analogies, it is often hard to determine with certainty which elements literally correspond, and which ones do not. We admit that God’s “rest” is different than ours. Yet, that does not force the conclusion that His “days” differ from ours. Boyd and Eddy aptly comment, “God is not drawing an *analogy* between God and the Israelites; rather, he is expressing a *precedent* set by God for the Israelites.”<sup>880</sup>

We noted earlier the claim that the absence of the phrase “there was evening and there was morning” for day 7 could mean that the seventh day continues on (see Heb 4). Yet, we can respond that Hebrews 4 is not speaking of God’s day of rest from creation extending on, but rather typologically applying the Sabbath rest to our redemption.<sup>881</sup> In addition, Genesis 2:2-3 is written in past tense, not future tense:<sup>882</sup>

By the seventh day God *completed* His work which He had done, and He *rested* on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God *blessed* the seventh day and *sanctified* it, because in it He *rested* from all His work which God had created and made.

Boyd and Eddy observe that in the biblical narrative, God’s supernatural acts typically occur suddenly, not gradually. They also comment that after a long drawn-out, messy evolutionary process, it would be difficult for the Lord to state at the end of it all that it was “very good.”<sup>883</sup>

Concerning the time of human appearance on earth, some commentators theorize that, according to the theory of evolution, before rational humans (*Homo sapiens*) appeared, cave people walked the planet. Yet, God had no dealings with them, but only with fully developed people.<sup>884</sup>

However, this theory creates some serious theological dilemmas. First, it is written that God made Adam from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7), not from an ape. Additionally, according to Romans 5:12-14, death was

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<sup>878</sup>Thiessen, p. 165.

<sup>879</sup>Collins, 1481-1507, 1623.

<sup>880</sup>Boyd and Eddy, p. 53.

<sup>881</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>882</sup>Noted in Poythress, Response to Robert C. Newman // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 149;

<sup>883</sup>Boyd and Eddy, p. 54-55.

<sup>884</sup>Carnell E. J. The Case for Orthodox Theology. – Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1959. – C. 95.

introduced into the world through Adam's sin. This would seem to exclude the development of *Homo sapiens* from countless mutations in ancestors who died previously.

In addition, in Mark 10:6 Jesus taught, "From the beginning of creation, {God} made them male and female," which shows that the creation of humans dates back to the beginning of God's creative work, as recorded in Genesis 1-2. Scripture categorically asserts that all humans descended from Adam and Eve. In Acts 17:26, Paul confirmed, "He made from one {man} every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth." Moreover, Eve was "the mother of all {the} living" (Gen 3:20).<sup>885</sup>

The genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 record the period from Adam to Abraham. All acknowledge that at times biblical genealogies omit names. However, when we compare Genesis' genealogy with Luke's, we note only one omission in Genesis (Cainan, the son of Arphaxad – Lk 3:36).<sup>886</sup> It is difficult to assume on the basis of one omission that thousands of years were omitted in the Genesis genealogies. Furthermore, the Genesis genealogies specifically indicate how many years a father lived after the birth of his son, which makes precise dating possible. Even if Shelah was not the son, but the grandson of Arphaxad, the result is the same – Arphaxad died 403 years after his birth.

Opponents of this view assert that, for example, when we read "Seth lived one hundred and five years, and became the father of Enosh" (Gen 5:6), this means that when Seth was 105 years old, one of the ancestors of Enosh was born to him.<sup>887</sup> Yet, the text does not support this proposal and it goes against the plain intention of the author to indicate the exact time of Enosh's birth. Beegle, an opponent of biblical inerrancy, nonetheless admits, "When the writer claims that Adam lived 130 years and then begat Seth, and that he lived 800 years afterward, making his total age 930 years, it is apparent that the writer intended the figures literally."<sup>888</sup>

We also encounter objections to the longevity of our earliest ancestors (up to 969 years). Yet, we also consider that after the flood human longevity progressively decreased, which corresponds to Yahweh's announcement: "Nevertheless his days shall be one hundred and twenty years" (Gen 6:3). Most likely, the flood brought about some climactic changes that led to accelerating the aging process.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, it is understandable why sincere believers differ in their views on this topic. We also recognize that scientific claims can affect the results of our exegesis. Therefore, in our conclusions we will not attempt to reconcile the biblical teaching on creation with scientific claims. Such a discussion requires participation from both theology and science.

All things considered, the best exegetical evidence points to a literal reading of Genesis chapter 1. Therefore, we give preference to the theory of Fiat Creationism. Nonetheless, we make the following qualifications. As Collins observed, Genesis 1:1-2 formally is not included in the first day of creation. So then, the time of the initial creation of the heavens and the earth is not indicated. The passage of some period of time is possible after God made the universe and before the events of day 1 transpired.

However, one must inquire why God would create the heavens and the earth and then do nothing for millions or billions of years. Ross suggests that such a period of time was necessary for matter to cool after the Big Bang. Although such a suggestion is attractive, one has to somehow reconcile it with the fact that light did not come into being until day 1. The Big Bang would have produced light before that time.

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<sup>885</sup>Collins C. J. *Science and faith: Friends or foes?* – Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003. – Kindle ed., 2486-2489.

<sup>886</sup>The genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 precisely correspond to the genealogy in 1 Chronicles 1. Harrison shares that in the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch, some names are added and some different dates are suggested. Yet, the differences between those genealogies are not great (Harrison R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004. – P. 149-150).

<sup>887</sup>Wright G. F. *Ant. and origin of human race*, lect. II (Taken from Strong A. H. *Systematic Theology*. – Philadelphia, PA: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907. – P. 225).

<sup>888</sup>Beegle D. *Scripture, tradition, and infallibility*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973. – P. 187.

A variant of progressive creationism also has merit if we postulate that the days of creation are literal 24-hour days, but between them long periods of time passed. Yet again, we are left wondering why God waited so long to commence the subsequent days.

Although we do see some flexibility in establishing the time of the initial creation, Scripture allows little flexibility in fixing the time Adam and Eve appeared on the planet. The Bible dates their appearance at about 4000 B.C.

## **E. God as Sustainer**

God is not only creator of all, but also sustains all that He created. He maintains creation's existence and empowers its activities. In Colossians 1:17, after speaking of Christ's role in creation, Paul writes, "In Him all things hold together." Other passages as well confirm this thought:

- In Him we live and move and exist (Acts 17:28).
- (He) upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb 1:3).
- Yahweh, You preserve man and beast (Ps 36:6).
- (You made) the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to all of them (Neh 9:6).

This truth is expressed in a poetic manner as well. Yahweh "gives rain on the earth and sends water on the fields" (Job 5:10), "command(s) the morning" (Job 38:12), "has cleft a channel for the flood... a way for the thunderbolt" (Job 38:25), and "prepares for the raven its nourishment" (Job 38:41). He "leads forth (stars) by number" (Isa 40:26), "stirs up the sea so that its waves roar" (Jer 31: 35), and "causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, and brings out the wind from His storehouses" (Jer 10:13). God "established the earth, and it stands. They stand this day according to Your ordinances, for all things are Your servants" (Ps 119:90-91).<sup>889</sup>

We make special mention of Psalm 65:9-11:

You visit the earth and cause it to overflow; You greatly enrich it; the stream of God is full of water; You prepare their grain, for thus You prepare the earth. You water its furrows abundantly, You settle its ridges, You soften it with showers, You bless its growth. You have crowned the year with Your bounty, and Your paths drip {with} fatness.

Psalm 104:10-16 provides another striking description of the Lord's sustaining work:

He sends forth springs in the valleys; they flow between the mountains; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they lift up {their} voices among the branches. He waters the mountains from His upper chambers; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of His works. He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, so that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine which makes man's heart glad, so that he may make {his} face glisten with oil, and food which sustains man's heart. The trees of Yahweh drink their fill, the cedars of Lebanon which He planted.

The question of how exactly Yahweh sustains His creation is debated. In the Middle Ages, people believed that God used angels to carry out this work. They explained all natural processes as the activity of these

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<sup>889</sup>Also see Ps 104:13-14; 147:8-9; 104:20; 148:5-6; Prov 21:1 (Poythress V. Response to Howard J. Van Till // Moreland J. P., Reynolds J. M. Three Views on Creation and Evolution. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 237).



heavenly messengers. From the time of the Enlightenment, though, thinkers recognize that God has established natural laws by which the operations of the natural world are ordered.

However, due to the discovery of natural laws, some went to the extreme of teaching that God, having established the world, has abandoned it to self-regulation and no longer intervenes in the world. This is the teaching of Deism. However, Deistic faith is not consistent with the biblical teaching of God as sustainer. See volume 1 of this series for more discussion on Deism.

We acknowledge that the world indeed is governed by natural laws, which God installed in nature. Yet, these processes operate by the power that God continually supplies. We call this “God’s concurrence.” God actively supplies creation with the power and energy for the operation of all natural processes.<sup>890</sup>

We may compare God’s concurrence with the operation of an electric drill. When one presses and holds the button in place, the drill works. When one releases the button, the drill stops. Another example would be when a driver presses the gas pedal. When the driver releases the pedal, the car stops. Similarly, God provides power for nature to function, without which both the activity of nature and its very existence would cease.<sup>891</sup>

Helseth expresses well the concept of God’s concurrence, “The created order is utterly dependent on the providential activity of the Creator for its moment-to-moment existence, because it does not have the power of existence in itself. It has, in other words, ‘no independent existence,’ for from one moment to the next it exists ‘only in and through and unto God.’”<sup>892</sup>

One might wonder, though, whether God empowers sinful activity as well. If all action depends on His concurrent activity, then we must answer in the affirmative. At the same time, we assert that the power to act does not include the impulse to act. God grants people the power to act, but also the freedom of self-determination in their actions. Therefore, God is not to blame for human sin.<sup>893</sup>

Finally, Yahweh’s concurrence in creation does not contradict Genesis 2:3, which states that God “rested from all His work.” His concurrence is not an act of creating, but of sustaining the world.<sup>894</sup>

## **F. Is Creation in Movement toward God?**

### **1. Description of the View**

In Eastern patristic theology, we encounter the idea that all of creation is in movement toward God and, in the end, will unite with Him. Filaret of Moscow comments,

His glory is a heavenly force, reflected in humanity and clothed in the grandeur of the visible world. It issues from Him, is received by participants, returns to Him, and, one might say, the blessed life and well-being of the creature consists in this revolving movement of God’s glory.”<sup>895</sup>

Here, we see that the Lord endowed creation with some sort of divine power, which is identified as God’s glory, and which accomplishes this “revolving movement” of the creature back to Him. We also read, “In the created world, called forth from nothing,... infinite and eternal energies are present.”<sup>896</sup> So then, all of creation is “interpenetrated” with God’s energies, which lead it back to the source of that energy – to God. Lossky writes,

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<sup>890</sup>Mueller J. T. *Christian Dogmatics*. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 189.

<sup>891</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 392-393.

<sup>892</sup>Helseth P. K. *God Causes All Things* // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, Kindle ed., 526-528.

<sup>893</sup>Mueller, p. 191-192.

<sup>894</sup>Helm, P. *The Providence of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 88.

<sup>895</sup>Taken from Лосский В. Н. *Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие*. – Москва: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – P. 59. Author’s translation.

<sup>896</sup>*Ibid.* Author’s translation.

- This will created all things by its energies, in order that all created things might enter into union with God through those same energies.<sup>897</sup>
- The creature 'participates' in creative energies.<sup>898</sup>
- (Creation) is streaming toward something... it is in eternal motion. Everything in the created world is in motion, things both mental and sensible.<sup>899</sup>
- All creation is called to complete union with God.<sup>900</sup>

Maximus the Confessor held a similar view. In his opinion, there exist three stages in creation's development: *genesis*, i.e., "the beginning of created world's existence," *kinetics*, or "movement toward God," and *stasis*, which is "rest in God." Furthermore, he taught, "This movement culminates in an eternal rest in God."<sup>901</sup>

God's "energies," which supposedly interpenetrate all creation, issue from the Divine Logos: "All things consist together in the Logos, the second Person of the Most Holy Trinity."<sup>902</sup> The Logos and the creaturely world are interconnected in the following way.

According to Platonic philosophy, for every entity in the created world exists a corresponding "form" in the so-called "ideal world." In the Neoplatonic worldview, the "ideal world" corresponds to the "Nous," or "Mind," one of the mediators between the "One" and the material world. In Eastern patristic thought, the Platonic "ideal world" is located in the Logos. Maximus the Confessor taught that creation is "the realization of all the divine ideals."<sup>903</sup> In Maximus' thought, the Logos is "the divine principle of the world Reason"<sup>904</sup> and penetrates all things.<sup>905</sup> The Logos "has contained from eternity the life-giving foundations of all kinds of existence."<sup>906</sup>

Correspondingly, the "divine ideals," which include all created things, are the expression of the Logos or "logoi": "Every created thing has a point of contact in the Godhead. This is their ideal, their reason for being, their 'logos,' which is at the same time the goal to which they stream."<sup>907</sup> The world is held together by these "logoi." They are the Lord's thoughts and intentions.

Therefore, through contemplation on the created order, a person can come to know the Logos.<sup>908</sup> Creation, then, serves as an image of this invisible spiritual world: "The perceptible world is immaterial in its qualitative foundations. It is a kind of mysterious 'compression' – or even 'condensation' – of the spiritual world. Everything in the world is spiritual in its depths."<sup>909</sup> In other words, "Things are the impression of another world."<sup>910</sup>

So then, due to the penetration of the divine Logos in creation and the presence of God's "energies" in the form of "logoi," God unites all things to Himself. He "includes, embraces, encompasses and intentionally connects by an internal connection all existing things to Himself."<sup>911</sup> Nonetheless, the qualification is made that

<sup>897</sup>Ibid., p. 70. Author's translation.

<sup>898</sup>Ibid., p. 73. Author's translation.

<sup>899</sup>Ibid., p. 75. Author's translation.

<sup>900</sup>Ibid. Author's translation.

<sup>901</sup>Noted in Мейендорф И. Введение в святоотеческое богословие. Минск: Лучи Софии, 2007. – Р. 321. Author's translation.

<sup>902</sup>Лосский, p. 76.

<sup>903</sup>Noted in Мейендорф, Введение в святоотеческое богословие, p. 321.

<sup>904</sup>Ibid., p. 322. Author's translation.

<sup>905</sup>Florovsky G. Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eight Centuries / Trans. Raymond Miller, et al. – Postfach: Buchvertriesanstalt, 1987 – P. 223.

<sup>906</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>907</sup>Лосский, p. 76. Author's translation.

<sup>908</sup>Noted in Florovsky, p. 220-224. Also see Слово об обожении // Под ред. Архимандрита Никона (Иванова) и Протоиерея Николая Лихоманова. – М.: Сибирская Благовонница, 2004. – Р. 8.

<sup>909</sup>The teaching of Maximus the Confessor, according to Florovsky, p. 223.

<sup>910</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 10. Author's translation.

<sup>911</sup>Ibid., p. 12. Author's translation.

the presence and interpenetration of God's energies do not result in a merging of God and the world in essence.

These "logoi" not only connect those contemplating them to the Logos and unite them to Him, but also enable the "revolving movement" of all creation to God. "Like some creative rays, the 'logoi' radiate from the Divine center and again gather in it."<sup>912</sup>

Finally, people play a key role in this circular return to God. God's plan consists of concentrating the divine energies of creation in humans and through their deification to deify all creation. Archmandrite Nikon expresses it in this way: "Humans head up within themselves the entire world. Human destiny, therefore, is the destiny of the entire world. The sanctification of people is the sanctification of the whole world."<sup>913</sup>

We also read, "Humans, abiding in God, must elevate all creation to deification, for which all creation received its existence from God."<sup>914</sup> Florovsky cites the teaching of Maximus the Confessor in this regard: "Man must unite everything in himself and through himself unite with God."<sup>915</sup> In addition, "the various features of creation merge around the united human nature."<sup>916</sup> Nikon claims, "The lives of the holy fathers testifies that humans, attaining to a high level of deification, experience deeply their unity with the surrounding world, which is anticipating the revelation of the glory of the children of God (Rom 8:18-22)."<sup>917</sup> In summary, "Everything will manifest God alone. Nothing will remain outside of God.... Everything will be deified – God will be everything, and in everything."<sup>918</sup>

## 2. Evaluation of the View

In evaluation of this teaching, we immediately note its variance from biblical revelation. The Bible nowhere speaks of a "circular movement," returning creation to God, of an interpenetration of God's energies (logoi), of creation's union with the Lord, or of its deification. As we shall see, such an idea came not from biblical teaching, but from a Neoplatonic worldview.

Nevertheless, we will examine biblical texts that appear to support this view. In Romans 8:20-21, we read, "For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God." At the same time, we must define when that change will occur. According to verse 23, this liberation happens when the bodies of the saints are redeemed, that is, before the beginning of Christ's millennial reign.

However, according to other passages of Scripture that refer to the condition of creation during the Millennium, this liberation will be only partial. Death will not be totally eliminated until the end of Christ's earthly reign (see 1 Cor 15:24-26). During the Millennium, nature will enjoy great freedom from corruption and mortals will live long on the earth, but they will eventually die (Isa 65:20).

One must also consider that these texts do not speak of creation returning to God, but rather of God preparing a place for humans to enjoy. This is why the Scripture states that the creation is now in a condition of "futility," since in its fallen state it cannot fulfill its appointed function to provide humans with only blessing.<sup>919</sup> Consequently, Romans 8:20-21 lends no support to the "movement toward God" doctrine.

We also note Paul's words in Ephesians 1:9-10: "He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him with a view to an administration suitable to the fullness of the times, {that is,} the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." Scholars differ as to the meaning of the verb ἀνακεφαλαιόω (*anakephalaioo*), i.e., "sum up all things." Some think it

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<sup>912</sup>The teaching of Maximus the Confessor, according to Florovsky, p. 223.

<sup>913</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 68. Author's translation.

<sup>914</sup>Ibid., p. 69. Author's translation.

<sup>915</sup>Florovsky, p. 225.

<sup>916</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 69.

<sup>917</sup>Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>918</sup>The teaching of Maximus the Confessor, according to Florovsky, p. 244-245.

<sup>919</sup>Dunn J. D. G. Romans 1–8 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 471.

refers to all creation submitting to Jesus Christ, which differs from the Eastern patristic view of uniting God's energies in the created world in Christ.

It is imperative to interpret the Ephesian's passage in light of its parallel verse in Colossians 1:20: "...through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, {I say,} whether things on earth or things in heaven." Here, "unification" of all things is expressed in terms of reconciliation. There is no hint of a unification of God's energies in creation and their reunion with Him, but establishing peace between God and creation, i.e. the removal of all enmity. Lincoln comments, "Both passages (i.e., Eph 1:10 and Col 1:20) appear to presuppose that the cosmos had been plunged into disintegration on account of sin and that it is God's purpose to restore its original harmony in Christ."<sup>920</sup>

In addition, the Bible predicts the total destruction of the old creation order and the making of all things new – a new heaven and a new earth (see Mk 13:31; Ps 101:26-27; Isa 34:4; 51:6; Rev 20:11; 2 Pet 3:12-13).<sup>921</sup> Let us cite the last two reference in full:

- Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them (Rev 20:11).
- ... looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be destroyed by burning, and the elements will melt with intense heat! But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells (2 Pet 3:12-13).

Therefore, the Bible does not give a picture of the return of the present creation to the Lord, but of its total destruction. So then, we must assign the conditions described in Ephesians 1:10 to the future new heavens and new earth.

Although few points of correspondence exist between the biblical view of creation and Eastern patristic theology, nevertheless a striking similarity exists between the latter and the philosophy of the third-century Greek philosopher Plotinus, founder of the philosophy "Neoplatonism."<sup>922</sup> According to his teaching, there exists an ultimate reality called the "One," from which various "emanations" issue forth. The emanations are the Nous (or, "Mind"), in which the Platonic ideals reside, and, after it, the World Soul.

The World Soul has two parts: a higher and lower part. The higher part interfaces with the Nous, while the lower part interacts with the material world. The Platonic ideals, which are located in the Nous, find expression in the world through the World Soul, where they are known as "logoi." The logoi provide a point of contact between the Nous and the material world. The ultimate destiny of the material world is return to the One and unification with It.

Pseudo-Dionysius, who widely disseminated Neoplatonistic thinking among Christians in the sixth century, blatantly expresses his understanding of God's creation in Neoplatonistic terms: "And there is no single thing which does not participate in some way in the one, which uniformly pre-held in the uniqueness throughout all, all and whole, all, even the things opposed."<sup>923</sup>

Therefore, due to the spurious origin of this theory and its lack of biblical support, the Eastern patristic view of creation is unacceptable for Evangelical Christianity.

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<sup>920</sup>Lincoln A. T. *Ephesians* // *Word Biblical Commentary*. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1990. – P. 33.

<sup>921</sup>Mueller J. T. *Christian Dogmatics*. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 632.

<sup>922</sup>More on Neoplatonism and its effect on patristic thought can be found in Appendix A.

<sup>923</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius. *On the Divine Names*, 13.2. *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite* / Trans. John Parker. – London: James Parker and Co., 1897. – P. 123.

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## Chapter 13 - God's Majesty and the Ministry of Angels

### A. God's Majesty

God's majesty involves the unique status He enjoys in regard to His creation. In every way, He is higher, greater and more glorious than all created things. His divine excellence distinguishes Him from all others, and nothing can truly compare with Him.

God's majesty is especially reflected the name אֱלֹהֵי עֶלְיוֹן (*El elyon*). It consists of two parts: אֱלֹ (*El*), i.e., "God," and עֶלְיוֹן (*elyon*), a superlative adjective from the verb אָלָה (*ala*), which means, "to go up," resulting in the translation "Most High God."<sup>924</sup>

Jukes expounds further on the significance of this name.<sup>925</sup> The word עֶלְיוֹן (*elyon*) refers to the very highest position (see Deut 26:19; Ps 89:27; Ezek 41:7; 42:5). Consequently, אֱלֹהֵי עֶלְיוֹן (*El elyon*) is the very highest God. We first encounter this designation when Abraham meets Melchizedek, who served as a priest of the Most High God (Gen 14:18). He blessed Abraham with the words, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (Gen 14:19-20). Abraham later echoed this phrase, "I have sworn to Yahweh God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth." In this way, both Melchizedek and Abraham acknowledged that the Most High God is the source of victory.

Curiously, another Gentile, Balaam also called Yahweh אֱלֹהֵי עֶלְיוֹן (*El elyon*) (Num 24:16). Moses used this name only once, when he was speaking of God's relationship with the Gentiles (Deut 32:8). Nebuchadnezzar used it (Dan 3:26; 4:2, 34), as well as those addressing Him (Dan 4:17, 24-25, 32). We see the same in the account of Belshazzar (Dan 5:18, 21). Consequently, Jukes concludes that the name אֱלֹהֵי עֶלְיוֹן (*El elyon*) had a Gentile origin and was particularly used when they addressed God.<sup>926</sup>

This thesis finds confirmation in the Psalter, where "Most High God" is used in relation to the Lord's rule over Gentiles (Ps 47:2; 83:18; 87:4-5). On the other hand, some passages concern Israel alone with no reference to Gentiles (Ps 82:6-8; 57:2; 7:17; 9:2; 18:13; 21:7). In addition, in the New Testament the Greek equivalent, ὑψιστος (*hupsistos*), is used without reference to Gentiles (see Lk 1:32, 35, 76; 6:35; Acts 7:48). Also interesting is that ὑψιστος (*hupsistos*) is one of the designations for God used by demons (see Mk 5:7; Acts 16:17).

We will examine several key passages, especially in the Old Testament, which accent Yahweh's majesty. First, when Job is searching for meaning in his sufferings, his friends often refer to God in these terms, especially in His role as creator. Eliphaz the Temanite speaks of God, "Is not God {in} the height of heaven? Look also at the distant stars, how high they are!" (Job 22:12). Bildad the Shuhite echoes this thought, "Dominion and awe belong to Him who establishes peace in His heights" (Job 25:2). Elihu adds, "Behold, God is exalted, and we do not know {Him}" (Job 36:26).

Later, Elihu compares God's majesty with thunder:

At this also my heart trembles, and leaps from its place. Listen closely to the thunder of His voice, and the rumbling that goes out from His mouth. Under the whole heaven He lets it loose, and His lightning to the ends of the earth. After it, a voice roars; He thunders with His majestic voice, and He does not restrain the lightnings when His voice is heard. God thunders with His voice wondrously, doing great things which we cannot comprehend (Job 37:1-5).

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<sup>924</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 748; Joyner R. E. The One True God // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 170.

<sup>925</sup>Jukes A. The Names of God in Holy Scripture. – Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1967. – P. 83-104.

<sup>926</sup>Jukes, p. 91.



At the culmination of his oration, Elihu exclaims, “Out of the north comes golden {splendor;} around God is awesome majesty. The Almighty – we cannot find Him; He is exalted in power and He will not do violence to justice and abundant righteousness” (Job 37:22-23).

In the book of Exodus, we note that the tabernacle was constructed from gold, silver, copper, and precious stones. Only the very best materials were fitting for Yahweh’s dwelling place. In addition, the priestly garments were specially prepared “for glory and for beauty” (Ex 28:40). Solomon’s temple was also constructed from the finest materials so as to reflect God’s majesty. Later in the Torah, Yahweh is pictured as majestically riding on the clouds (Deut 33:26; cf. 2 Sam 22:10-13).

In the Old Testament historical books, we encounter more indications of God’s majesty. When celebrating their victory over Sisera, Deborah and Barak pictorially describe how the earth responds to God’s awesomeness: “Yahweh, when You went out from Seir, when You marched from the field of Edom, the earth quaked, the heavens also dripped, even the clouds dripped water. The mountains quaked at the presence of Yahweh, this Sinai, at the presence of Yahweh, the God of Israel” (Judg 5:4-5).

Moreover, Hanna recognizes that no one compares with the Lord: “There is no one holy like Yahweh, indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God” (1 Sam 2:2). Asaph declares, “Splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and joy are in His place” (1 Chr 16:27). David exclaims, “Yours, O Yahweh, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty” (1 Chr 29:11).

The most eloquent expressions of the Lord’s majesty, naturally, come to us from the book of Psalms. In these songs, God is often displayed as “exalted,” i.e., He is “higher” than all creation. Thus, He occupies an exalted status in relation to the things He has made. Yahweh is “God Most High” (Ps 57:2), whose throne is in heaven (Ps 103:19). He is “enthroned on high” (Ps 113:5) and “rides upon the highest heavens” (Ps 68:33). He is “exalted above the heavens” (Ps 57:5, 11; Ps 108:5). Psalm 92:8 declares, “You, O Yahweh, are on high forever.” The Lord is “exalted above all the peoples” (Ps 99:2), He is “Most High over all the earth,” and “exalted far above all gods” (Ps 97:9). He “look(s) down from His holy height” (Ps 102:19). All the inhabitants of the earth will someday acknowledge His majesty (Ps 46:10). The psalmist reflects upon it (Ps 145:5).

The prophetic books of the Old Testament also abundantly testify that God occupies an exalted position. Isaiah wrote, “Yahweh is exalted, for He dwells on high” (Isa 33:5). Yahweh Himself speaks through Isaiah, “Thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, ‘I dwell {on} a high and holy place’” (Isa 57:15; cf. Isa 63:15). In comparison with the Lord, the inhabitants of the earth are “like grasshoppers” (Isa 40:22).

The prophetic books also record visions of God’s glory granted to the prophets:

Isaiah: In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is Yahweh of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke (6:1-4).

Ezekiel: Now above the expanse that was over their heads there was something resembling a throne, like lapis lazuli in appearance; and on that which resembled a throne, high up, {was} a figure with the appearance of a man. Then I noticed from the appearance of His loins and upward something like glowing metal that looked like fire all around within it, and from the appearance of His loins and downward I saw something like fire; and {there was} a radiance around Him. As the appearance of the rainbow in the clouds on a rainy day, so {was} the appearance of the surrounding radiance (1:26-28)

Daniel: I kept looking Until thrones were set up, And the Ancient of Days took {His} seat; His vesture {was} like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne {was} ablaze with flames, its

wheels {were} a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing And coming out from before Him; thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing before Him (7:9-10).

Micah adds his testimony:

Therefore, hear the word of Yahweh. I saw Yahweh sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing on His right and on His left (2 Chr 18:18).

The exilic and post-exilic testimony to God's majesty is the same. Nehemiah appealed to God, "I beseech You, O Yahweh God of heaven, the great and awesome God" (Neh 1:5). His name is even "exalted above all blessing and praise" (Neh 9:5). Consequently, the Lord rebuked the returning remnant because they brought "a blemished animal to the Lord," not recognizing that "I am a great King... and My name is feared among the nations" (Mal 1:14).

We conclude our survey with a graphic vision of God's majesty from the book of Revelation, where we get a glimpse of the heavenly court and God's glorious presence:

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting {was} like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and {there was} a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. Around the throne {were} twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones {I saw} twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads. The Throne and Worship of the Creator Out from the throne come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And {there were} seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God (Rev 4:2-5).

## **B. The Ministry of Angels**

One of the distinguishing marks of God's majesty is His glorious heavenly court, attended by angelic beings. Their presence, worship, and service before the throne amplifies His exalted status. The Scriptures record their presence in God's heavenly court (Isa 6:1-4; Ezek 1:5ff; Rev 4:1-8). Heidt comments, "They come into this world of men but their natural habitat is in God's heaven. There they form his heavenly court."<sup>927</sup>

Angels are even included in earthly depictions of God's heavenly court. Cherubim, who accompany God's manifest presence (see Deut 33:2), were drawn on the curtains of the tabernacle and the walls of the temple (Ex 26:1). Carved cherubim stood over the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant.<sup>928</sup> In the Psalms, Yahweh figuratively "rides" on the cherubim (Ps 18:10).

Because of their association with God's heavenly court, we will pursue a study of the biblical teaching on angels in connection with God's majesty. We will discuss their nature, activity, and relationship with God's people as well.

How is a study of angels useful to us? First, God gave us revelation of their existence and activities. Since all that God reveals is valuable for us to know, we will benefit from their study. Second, angelic beings are part of the reality in which we exist, and so understanding them and their nature enhances our worldview. Third, angels provide an excellent example of the worship and service of God. Their study can inspire us to better obey and glorify our Creator. Fourth, knowing about angels gives comfort. They surround us and protect us. We can recall the instance when Elisha and his servant obtained comfort when they saw angels defending their besieged city (2 Kin 6). In addition, the better we understand the biblical revelation about angels, the better we can judge angelic appearances in our day – whether they are from God or not. Many cults and heresies have

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<sup>927</sup>Heidt W. G. *Angelology of the Old Testament*. – Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1949. – P. 1.

<sup>928</sup>See Ex 25:17-22; 2 Kin 19:15; Ps 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16

arisen from claims to having received visitations from “angels.” Finally, whenever we study any aspect of God’s creation, we come to know the Creator that much better.

Most descriptions of angels in Scripture occur in the book of Revelation. Next in order of frequency is Luke’s Gospel, then Matthew’s Gospel, then the prophecy of Zechariah. Angels are also present to a lesser degree in the books of Judges, Genesis, Hebrews, and other biblical books.

## 1. Designations for Angels

The biblical designations for angels correspond to several categories. Some of them reflect their work, while others describe their nature. Still others concern their relationship to God or their number. We will investigate each in turn.<sup>929</sup>

### a. Designations Concerning an Angel’s Work

The most basic designations for angels are the Hebrew term מַלְאָךְ (*malach*) and the corresponding Greek term ἄγγελος (*angelos*), which both mean “messenger.” God sends angels on mission. Often their mission consists of announcing to people messages from the Lord. Angels also participate in spiritual warfare. The corresponding designation is תְּשֻׁבָּוֹת (*tsevaot*), which means “army.” The term עִירִין (*irin*), translated “watchers,” describes the role of angels in observing or testifying to God’s works or the deeds of people. Let us investigate these various names for angels in more detail.

The basic Old Testament term for angels is מַלְאָךְ (*malach*). The Bible uses this term in various ways. In relation to people, מַלְאָךְ (*malach*) can refer to: (1) those who deliver messages (Gen 32:1), (2) those who carry out a commission (Josh 6:24), or (3) those who represent another (Judg 11:12-14). All these meanings have the common feature of representing the interests of or accomplishing a mission for another party.

The designation מַלְאָךְ (*malach*) had a special application to prophets. Old Testament prophets both communicated announcements from the Lord and represented Him before the people (2 Chr 36:15-16; Hag 1:13). It is interesting to note that the name Malachi consist of the word מַלְאָךְ (*malach*), i.e., “messenger,” and the pronominal suffix “my.” Therefore, his name literally translates, “My messenger.”

Angels fulfill all the functions indicated by the word מַלְאָךְ (*malach*). They communicate messages from God, carry out commissions from Him, and represent Him before people. The term מַלְאָךְ (*malach*) also refers to the perplexing figure the “Angel of the Lord,” who is commonly thought to be the Son of God prior to His incarnation. In summary, Heidt correctly notes that the word מַלְאָךְ (*malach*) extends beyond its conventional meaning of “messenger” to become the standard designation for angels in general.<sup>930</sup>

From the Greek term ἄγγελος (*angelos*) we get our word “angel.” The Greeks employed this word for common messengers, but also for superhuman messengers in Greek mythology. The following Scripture reference are of human messengers in the common sense: the messengers sent by Joshua (Jam 2:25); disciples sent by Jesus (Lk 9:52); John the Baptist, as a representative of Jesus Christ (Matt 11:10); and individuals sent by John to Jesus (Lk 7:24). However, this word most commonly refers to angelic beings and is their usual designation.

Another term describing angels is תְּשֻׁבָּוֹת (*tsevaot*), which translates “army,” but in general can denote a large number of entities. In the Old Testament, it describes the various elements that make up heaven and earth (Gen 2:1), the number of soldiers in an army, (Ps 27:3) and a group of women announcing good news (Ps 68:11). The word תְּשֻׁבָּוֹת (*tsevaot*) applies also to the heavenly hosts, which people sometimes worship (Isa 40:26). It also applies to the congregation of Israel (Ex 6:26).

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<sup>929</sup>See Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000; Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000.

<sup>930</sup>Heidt, p. 8-9.

The term צְבָאוֹת (*tsevaot*) is used for angels in many instances, for example in 1 Kings 22:19, Psalm 103:21, and Psalm 148:2. The Lord's hosts have a captain, who appeared to Joshua (Josh 5:14). The expression יהוה צְבָאוֹת (*Yahweh tsevaot*), i.e., "Yahweh of hosts," identifies the angels as the army of the Lord. They are always ready to respond to His commands and carry out His will.<sup>931</sup> However, together with McClellan, we note that in many cases the term צְבָאוֹת (*tsevaot*) does not refer to a military contingent, but simply some group with a coordinated activity.<sup>932</sup>

The word עִירִין (*irin*) is used for angels in only one instance in Daniel chapter 4. Its translation, "watchers," comes from the corresponding Aramaic term עִיר (*ur*). One of the "watchers" descended from heaven (Dan 4:13) and announced the verdict of the "watchers" concerning Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:14). Does this mean that angels have authority from God to judge people? Jerome considered that the term "signifies angels, because they are ever vigilant and prepared to do the commands of God."<sup>933</sup>

## **b. Designations Concerning an Angel's Nature**

Some designations reflect the nature of angels. For example, they are holy. The Hebrew word for this is קְדוּשִׁים (*kidoshim*), and the Greek – οἱ ἅγιοι (*hoi hagioi*), both translated "holy ones." Angels are strong. This is reflected in the titles בְּנֵי אֱלִים (*benei elim*), i.e., "sons of strength," and אַבִּירִים (*abirim*), that is "strong ones." Let us examine these designations further.

The basic definition for קְדוּשִׁים (*kidoshim*) is "separation." In relation to angels, this term likely has two applications. First, angels are holy in their behavior, that is, are "separate" from sin. Second, they are specially separated unto God to serve Him. The term קְדוּשִׁים (*kidoshim*) is used of angels in the following passages: Job 5:1; 15:15; Ps 89:7; Dan 4:13, 17. This term also applies to God's people Israel (Deut 33:3; Dan 7:21-27).

The corresponding Greek phrase is οἱ ἅγιοι (*hoi hagioi*). The first word, οἱ (*hoi*) is Greek (definite) article, while ἅγιοι (*hagioi*) is the adjective "holy." In the New Testament, οἱ ἅγιοι (*hoi hagioi*) are believers in Jesus, i.e., the Church (1 Cor 6:2; Phil 4:22; Col 3:12). Angels also carry this designation (Mk 8:38). In Jude 14 and 1 Thessalonians 3:13, it is not clear whether angels or believers are in view.

The term אַבִּירִים (*abirim*) denotes "strength." It is widely used in the Old Testament. It applies to: (1) strong animals, like the ox or horse (Jer 8:16; Ps 50:13), (2) strong men (Jer 46:15; Isa 10:13), and (3) strong in heart, that is, bravery (Ps 76:5) or stubbornness (Isa 46:12). Yahweh is also אַבִּירִים, i.e., strong (Gen 49:24; Isa 1:24). The term refers to angels only in one instance – Ps 78:25.

Several times in the Old Testament, we encounter the phrase בְּנֵי אֱלִים (*benei elim*). The word בְּנֵי (*benei*) means "sons of," while אֱלִים (*elim*) has several meanings: (1) strength; (2) God (in the singular), or (3) gods (in the plural). The phrase refers to angels in Psalm 29:1 and Psalm 89:6. It is possible that the word אֱלִים (*elim*) here could be an abbreviation for אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*). Yet, if "strength" is the best translation, then it describes the nature of angels, that is, their ability to do mighty works.

Angels are metaphorically describes as "stars," which likely emphasizes their heavenly origin and heavenly glory (see Job 38:7; Rev 9:1; Judg 5:20?; Rev 1:20?).

## **c. Designations Concerning an Angel's Relationship to God**

The next designations highlight the angels' relationship to God. Angels are בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (*benei ha elohim*), or "sons of God." God's people Israel are also God's sons (Hos 11:1), as are kings in the Davidic dynasty (2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7). This designation for angels, though, is found only in the book of Job, when they stand before Yahweh (Job 1:6; 2:1), and when they were witnesses of God creating the world (Job 38:7).

<sup>931</sup>Joyner, p. 151-152.

<sup>932</sup>McClellan, W. H. Dominus Deus Sabaoth // The Catholic Biblical Quarterly. 1940. № 2. P. 305-306, отмечено в Heidt, p. 11-12.

<sup>933</sup>Ibid., p. 10-11.

Heidt believes that the “son of God” that appeared in the fiery furnace with Daniel’s three companions was an angel (see Dan 3).<sup>934</sup> He writes about this term in general, “To this transcendent God angels bear a relationship analogous to sonship because of having their origin from him and because of their particular propinquity, enjoying his most special friendship and love.”<sup>935</sup>

Does the term אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) itself ever apply to angels?<sup>936</sup> In the Septuagint, this word is translated “angels” in Ps 8:6 (Heb = 8:5); 96:7 (Heb = 97:7) and 137:1 (Heb = 138:1). The Aramaic Targum and the author of Hebrews follow the Septuagint translation of Psalm 8:6 (Heb = 8:5). Other ancient translators, though, render it “God,” namely Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and the Latin Vulgate.

Concerning Ps 96:7 (Heb = 97:7), we affirm with Heidt that the context supports the rendering “gods,” that is, “idols”: “Let all those be ashamed who serve graven images, who boast themselves of idols; worship Him, all you gods.” In Ps 137:1 (Heb = 138:1), only the Septuagint gives the translation “angels.” Aquila, Symmachus, Jerome (the Vulgate), and Origen translate “gods,” the Syriac translation – “kings,” and the Targums – “judges.” Therefore, we lack convincing evidence for the rendering “angels” in these passages of Scripture.

We must also take into consideration that the Septuagint has a tendency to insert the word “angels” where it is absent in the Hebrew text.<sup>937</sup> For example, in Deuteronomy 32:8, instead of the phrase “according to the number of the sons of Israel,” it reads, “according to the number of the angels of God.”<sup>938</sup> Moreover, in Deuteronomy 33:2, in place of the words “at His right hand there was flashing lightning for them,” we read, “at His right hand there were His angels with Him.”

So then, when the Septuagint differs with the Masoretic (Hebrew) text by reading “angels,” we suspect a corruption in the text. Therefore, we conclude that when אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) is used without the qualifying בְּנֵי (*binei*), i.e., “sons of”, it never refers to angels.

#### **d. Designations Concerning the Number of Angels**

Some designations for angels reflect their great number. The Greek term in question is μυριάς (*urias*), often translated “myriad.” It can indicate a group of 10,000, or a large group of unspecified number.<sup>939</sup> It appears in relation to angels in Revelation 5:11 and Hebrews 12:22. The corresponding Hebrew term אֶלֶף (*elep*) encompasses 1,000.<sup>940</sup> It is used of the angelic hosts in Daniel 7:10 and Psalm 68:17. Often these terms are repeated to accentuate the near innumerable quantity of angels, for example, “myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands” (Rev. 5:11). The Hebrew term צְבָאוֹת (*tsevaot*), i.e., “army,” also indicates a large number of angels.

## **2. Nature of Angels**

Scripture outlines a number of features inherent to the nature of angels. First, they are immortal (Lk 20:36). Their existence has no end. Yet, unlike the Lord, who has no beginning, angels are created beings (Col 1:16; Ps 148:2, 5; Neh 9:6),<sup>941</sup> formed before the creation of the world (see Job 38:4-7). Therefore, God is greater than angels and “awesome above all those who are around Him” (Ps 89:7). Angels are lower than the Son of God and worship Him (Heb 1:5-14; Rev 5:8, 12-13).

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<sup>934</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>935</sup>Ibid.

<sup>936</sup>Ibid., p. 2-3.

<sup>937</sup>See Longenecker R. N. *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI; Vancouver: W. B. Eerdmans; Regent College Pub, 1999. – P. 7.

<sup>938</sup>From this comes the claim that each nation has its own angel (see Page S. H. T. *Powers of Evil: A Biblical Study on Satan and Demons*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995. – P. 56).

<sup>939</sup>Arndt, p. 661.

<sup>940</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 48.

<sup>941</sup>Heidt, p. 24.

Angels are non-material, spiritual beings (Heb 1:1-4). In their spiritual mode, they cannot be seen (2 Kin 6:16-17; Num 22:31). They often accompany us, but we do not perceive it. Since they do not possess a physical body, they do not marry (Matt 22:30).<sup>942</sup> The number of angels remains the same from the beginning of creation. We do not anticipate the appearance of new angels.

Surprisingly, it appears that angels can eat (Gen 19:3) and may take on a physical appearance as men (Mk 16:5). Heidt comments on this, “When dealing with men, angels acted and appeared in human fashion.”<sup>943</sup> Although they are spiritual beings, they do not inhabit or indwell humans.<sup>944</sup> At times angels appear as giants (1 Chr 21:16; Rev 10:1). When they are sent to punish, they bear a sword (Num 22; 1 Chr 21:16). Often they are accompanied by a visible brilliance (Lk 24:4; 2:9; Dan 10:5-6). The awesomeness of their appearance may drain a person’s physical strength (Dan 10:5-10). Even people who do not actually see them may sense the power of their presence (Dan 10:7).

Unlike the many artistic portrayals of angels, they never appear in female form. Some see an exception to this rule in Zechariah 5:9, yet it is not stated that these women were angels. Many feel that artists depicted angels in the likeness of the Greek goddess Nike.<sup>945</sup> Also unlike artistic portrayals, angels do not appear with wings, except for cherubim and seraphim. It is said that angels “obtained” wings (in art) only after the time of Constantine.<sup>946</sup> One feature that both the biblical account and Christian art have in common is portraying angels in white garments.<sup>947</sup>

Terry Law advances the interesting thought that when angels appear as men, they appear as men of the given culture. That is, to Jews, they appear as Jews, to Greeks – as Greeks, etc. This would explain why angels in the biblical narrative are often mistakenly taken for typical men of the time.<sup>948</sup>

A curious feature of angels is that they can apparently take the form of wind or fire. Hebrews 1:7 reports, “Of the angels He says, ‘Who makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.’” The verse is taken from Psalm 104:4 in the Septuagint (LXX = 103:4). The Hebrew text could read as above, or as follows: “Who makes the winds His messengers, flaming fire His ministers.” This latter rendering simply claims that God’s uses natural elements in His service. The previous version, though, may imply that angels can take the form of natural elements.

The versions in Hebrew 1:7 and the Septuagint of Ps 104:4 are nearly identical:

Heb 1:7: ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πυρὸς φλόγα

Ps 104:4: ὁ ποιῶν τοὺς ἀγγέλους αὐτοῦ πνεύματα καὶ τοὺς λειτουργοὺς αὐτοῦ πῦρ φλέγον (LXX = 103:4).

The question here is which words in the Greek accusative tense are the direct objects of the participle ποιῶν (*poion*), “makes,” and which describe what is made from them. As a rule, the accusative term standing closest to the verbal form serves as its direct object, while the other accusative describes what the direct object becomes. Thus, unlike the Hebrew text that has two possible translations, the Greek must read, “Who makes his angels winds, and his ministers a flame of fire.”

Interpretation of this passage, therefore, becomes problematic. One option is that angels could indeed appear in these forms. The Bible confirms this: (1) an angel appeared to Moses as fire in the burning bush (Acts 7:30), (2) an angel in the form of a cloud accompanied Israel in the wilderness (Ex 14:19), and (3) Elijah was carried away to heaven in “a chariot of fire and horses of fire” (2 Kin 2:11). Rabbis also affirm this

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<sup>942</sup>Some teach that in Genesis 6:1-4, a sexual union took place between angels (demons) and women. Chapter 3 of the next volume in this series deals with that question.

<sup>943</sup>Heidt, p. 27.

<sup>944</sup>Law T. The Truth about Angels. – Orlando, FL: Creation House, 1994. – P. 119.

<sup>945</sup>Law, p. 106.

<sup>946</sup>Keck D. Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages. – New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. – P. 31.

<sup>947</sup>Capps C. Angels. – Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1984. – P. 49.

<sup>948</sup>Law, p. 106.

interpretation. In an ancient commentary on Exodus, we read, “You find them sitting, and you find them walking too. You conclude, in one instance, that they appear in the figure of a woman, but they are men, and they are also wind and fire” (*Shemot-Rabbah*, 25.86a).

Other interpretations are offered. Some feel the author of Hebrews introduced this passage for the sake of the Jews who believed that angels could take this form as an apologetic measure, but that he himself did not really believe this. Others suggest that in order to show the superiority of the Son to angels, the author of Hebrews merely means to say that God uses angels like wind and fire, in distinction from His Son. An Aramaic Targum supports this latter view (see Targum to Psalm 103). Nonetheless, a literal understanding of this verse seems to have adequate support, as noted above.

Even though angels are non-material beings, they remain genuine persons, having all the characteristics of personhood. For example, they display emotion. They rejoiced at the world’s creation (Job 38:7) and rejoice when a sinner repents (Lk 15:10). They possess mental capabilities. In fact, their intelligence exceeds those of people. They can also increase in knowledge (see 1 Pet 1:12).<sup>949</sup> They speak, sing (Job 38:7) and even have their own language (1 Cor 13:1). Angels have free will, that is, the ability to make decisions. They are holy and therefore do not sin, and are set apart for God’s service.

Let us delve deeper into some of these features. Angels are strong. As mentioned above, they are called “strong ones” or “sons of the mighty.” Psalm 103:20 describe them as “mighty in strength.” 2 Thessalonians 1:7 reveals that Christ will come “with His mighty angels.” The angels’ power is clearly demonstrated in Scripture. An angel, for example, opened the doors of the prison for Peter (Acts 5:19), called forth fire from a rock (Judg 6:21), performed miracles for Samson’s parents (Judg 13:19), and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:13). Angels afflicted with sickness those under the Lord’s chastisement (Acts 12:23; 2 Sam 24:15-17). An angel rolled away the stone sealing the tomb of Jesus (Matt 28:2). Finally, one angel is able to strike down an entire army, as when the Assyrians were besieging Jerusalem (2 Kin 19:35).

Nonetheless, the Bible teaches that angels differ in power (Rev 5:2; 10:1; 18:21). They are more powerful than people (2 Pet 2:11), but less, of course, than the Lord (Rom 8:38). Sometimes one angel must assist another when the opposing powers are too strong (Dan 10:21). It seems that fallen angels can resist God’s angels, but only for a time. In the end, angels will succeed in fulfilling their mission of carrying out the will of God (Dan 10:12-13, 21).

Angels possess powerful intellectual abilities. They know much, but are not omniscient. For example, they do not know the time of Christ’s Second Coming (Matt 24:36). We see in Scripture instances where angels inform one another about something (Dan 12: 6ff; Zech 2:3-4). They are actually curious about certain matters (1 Cor 4:9; 1 Pet 1:12). They desire to deepen their knowledge of God’s plan.<sup>950</sup>

Angels are free creatures. This is plain from the fact that many angels rebelled against the Lord (Isa 14:12-15; Ezek 28:12-19; Matt 25:41; 2 Pet 2:4; Rev 12:9).

Angels are holy. In Scripture, they are called “holy ones,” and “sons of God.” Revelation 14:10 speaks of them as “holy angels.” Psalm 89:7 relates that they fear God. They do God’s will (Ps 103:20-21; Lk 1:26). They show respect for others – both people (2 Pet 2:11), and even the devil (Jude 9).<sup>951</sup> At the same time, the angels never call God “Father” and are not destined to be conformed to the image of Christ. They are servants, while believers are sons and daughters.<sup>952</sup>

Heidt summarizes the holy nature of angels: “Never, moreover, do we find the slightest moral stain blotting the perfection of an angel; never does an angel show himself hesitant or perfunctory in performing the obligation divinely imposed.”<sup>953</sup> He explains that Job 4:18 does not teach moral defects in angels: “He puts no

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<sup>949</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>950</sup>Terry Law feels that in accord with Ephesians 3:10, angels learn from the Church (see Law, p. 186). However, this context mentions “rulers and the authorities in the heavenly {places}.” In Paul’s theology, “rulers and authorities” are typically demonic forces.

<sup>951</sup>Terry Law asserts that Michael did not bring a railing judgment against Satan because Satan once occupied a superior position to Michael, which he had to respect (see Law, p. 179).

<sup>952</sup>Ibid., p. 109, 119.

<sup>953</sup>Heidt, p. 32.

trust even in His servants; and against His angels He charges error.” The author’s goal here is simply to contrast the angels’ character with God’s perfections.<sup>954</sup>

### 3. Types of Angels

There exist different type of angels. They differ from one another in glory and strength. Revelation 18:1 reveals that certain angels have “great authority” and “illuminate” the earth with their glory.

Occupying the pinnacle of the angelic hierarchy is the archangel (ἀρχάγγελος). The prefix ἀρχ (*apx*), means “first” or “main.” Scripture speaks of only one such angel by name – Michael (Jude 9).<sup>955</sup> Michael wages war against the forces of evil (Rev 12:7). He is called a “prince” (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1), which indicates his position of authority among the angels. Michael has a special relationship with Israel – he guards and protects it (Dan 10:13, 21; 12:1). An archangel will participate in Christ’s Second Coming, when the Lord comes to smite His enemies and establish His kingdom (1 Thes 4:16). Thus, the archangel is again involved in conflict against God’s enemies.

Next are the cherubim, in Hebrew: כְּרֻבִים (*keruvim*). Ezekiel describes their appearance in chapters 1 and 10 of his prophecy. The meaning of this word is unknown – it is used only in relation to angels of this type. A related word in Akkadian means “bless, praise, adore,” which may reveal that their primary function is in worship. In spite of these possible meanings, it seems that cherubim’s main work is that of guarding. They guarded the way to the tree of life after Adam and Eve sinned (Gen 3:24), and also surround the throne of God (Ezek. chps. 1 and 10).

The tabernacle was decorated with images of cherubim (Ex 26:1) and two cherubim stood over the cover of the ark of the covenant, the place where God manifested His presence (Ex 25:18). In the same way, they were depicted on the walls of the temple (1 Kin 6:29,35; 2 Chr 3:14; Ezek 41:18ff), the stands of bronze (1 Kin 7:29), and over the ark of the covenant (1 Kin 6:27). This leaves the impression that the cherubim “guard” the presence of God.

Cherubim not only appear to guard God’s throne, at times they are depicted as the throne itself (Ezek chps. 1 and 10; 1 Sam 4:4; 2 Sam 6:2; Ps 80:1; 99:1; Isa 37:16) or as God’s chariot (2 Sam 22:11; Ps 18:10; 1 Chr 28:18). God speaks “from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony” (Ex 25:22; Num 7:89).

The designation “seraphim” comes from the Hebrew שֶׁרָפִים (*seraphim*). In Isaiah chapter 6, they proclaim God’s holiness. Apparently, they are active in the worship of God. The root of the word itself, שָׂרַף (*seraph*), has two meanings: “to burn” (Judg 12:1; 1 Kin 16:18) and “serpent” (Num 21:8; Isa 14:29; 30:6). Numbers 21:6 and Deuteronomy 8:15 offer a combination of these two meanings – poisonous snakes whose bite “burns.” The first definition is likely more closely associated to angels.<sup>956</sup> Harris concurs, “Rather than the noun being interpreted from the word *śārāp* I ‘serpent’ it should be related to the parent root of both words ‘fire.’ These angelic beings were brilliant as flaming fire, symbolic of the purity and power of the heavenly court.”<sup>957</sup>

A very curious figure in Scripture is the so-called “angel of the Lord.” The Hebrew text employs both the terms מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה (*malach Yahweh*), i.e., “the angel of Yahweh,” and מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים (*malach ha Elohim*), i.e., “the angel of God.” We distinguish this second designation from a common angel by noting the definite article before *Elohim*.

Upon examining Scriptural passages containing reference to the angel of the Lord, we discover the following. Sometimes he acts like a common angel. He prays to God (Zech 1:12), executes God’s judgments (2

<sup>954</sup>Ibid., p. 35. Also see Job 15:15.

<sup>955</sup>Law correctly observes that since Michael is called “one of the chief princes” in Daniel 10:13, there may exist other archangels (Law, p. 114).

<sup>956</sup>Other suggestions for defining שָׂרַף (*saraph*) are “a cleansing fire, symbol of redemption,” “a bright, brilliant being,” “a prince of the heavenly court,” or “a passionate love for God” (see Heidt, p. 15-17).

<sup>957</sup>Harris R. L. שָׂרַף // Harris R. L., Archer G. L. Jr., Waltke B. K. Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (electronic ed.) – Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999. – P. 884.



Kin 19:35; Isa 37:36; 2 Sam 24:16-17; 1 Chr 21:12-30; Ps 35:5-6), brings food to the prophet Elijah (1 Kin 19:5-7), and delivers a command from the Lord (2 Kin 1:3, 15).

At other times, the angel of the Lord appears as God Himself. In some passages his name stands in parallel with Yahweh's (Gen 48:15-16; Zech 12:8; Hos 12:3-4). He can speak as God (Gen 31:11-13; Ex 3:2-6; Josh 5:14-6:1; Judg 2:1; Num 22:31-35; Zech 3:1-2). He possesses great wisdom (2 Sam 14:17, 20, 2 Sam 19:27). People in the Old Testament perceived him as God (see Gen 16:13; 32:30; Judg 6:22; 13:22). It is also written, "The angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them" (Ps 34:7). The pronoun "Him" could refer to God, or could refer to the angel of the Lord himself.<sup>958</sup> The question becomes more difficult when we encounter passages of Scripture where in the same context the angel of the Lord speaks as God, yet at the same time distinguishes Himself from God.<sup>959</sup>

Heidt makes the following observation.<sup>960</sup> In the Septuagint and the Targums, it is not Yahweh that meets Moses on the way to Egypt to slay him, but rather the angel of the Lord (Ex 4:24). Exodus 13:21 records, "Yahweh was going before them in a pillar of cloud...," while Exodus 14:19 claims that the angel of the Lord was in the cloud. Additionally, in the same chapter we read, "Yahweh looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud" (v. 24). We see the same overlap when comparing Exodus 23:20-23; 33:1-3; 32:34, which speak of the angel of the Lord, with Exodus 33:14-17, which speaks of the Lord Himself. In addition, in the presence of the "Captain of Yahweh's host," Joshua removed his sandals (Josh 5:15), just as Moses did before the Lord in Exodus 3:5. Finally, in Malachi 3:1, Yahweh is associated with the "angel of the covenant."

Three theories exist to explain this phenomenon.<sup>961</sup> First is the "theory of representation," which asserts that the angel of the Lord is a common angel who is authorized to represent Yahweh to the degree that he can speak for Him in the first person and receive worship that is intended for the Lord. Yet, this theory does not adequately explain the many parallels in the biblical narrative between Yahweh and the angel of the Lord where the narrator is speaking, not the angel himself.

The second approach is the "theory of interpolation." Here, the expression "angel of the Lord" is an anthropomorphic representation of God's actions. In other words, what the angel of the Lord is described as doing, the Lord Himself did. God is simply represented in the biblical text in the form of the "angel of the Lord." The weakness of this argument is that the angel of the Lord performed specific acts that people witnessed.

Not a few biblical scholars and teachers conclude that the angel of the Lord was the Son of God before His incarnation. Several proofs support this claim. First, as one of the Persons in the Trinity, the Son can both speak as God, and speak from God. Second, the word "angel" means "messenger," which reminds us of Jesus' mission, especially as recorded in John's Gospel, as the "Logos," that is, the "Word." Christ is the Word, God's messenger.

Third, we note the use of the article with the title "angel of the Lord." It is present in the expression מַלְאָךְ הָאֱלֹהִים (*malach ha Elohim*), i.e., "angel of God." In Hebrew grammar, this construction is called the "construct state," where the article is placed before the second member of the group, but its presence is implied before the first member as well (in our case, before the word "angel"). In the phrase מַלְאָךְ יְהוָה (*malach Yahweh*), i.e., "angel of Yahweh," the article is absent, but is nonetheless implied due to the combination of "angel" with a proper name "Yahweh."

Unlike the Old Testament, in the New Testament the titles "angel of the Lord" and "angel of God" lack the article.<sup>962</sup> In Greek, the absence of the article indicates that an indefinite object or person is in view. If one

<sup>958</sup> Астафиев И. Ангел Господень / Студенческий реферат. – Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2004.

<sup>959</sup> See Gen 22:11-18; 16:10-13; 21:17-18; Zech 3:1-7; Judg 6:12-23; 5:23. Heidt, however, suggests that here we are dealing with a literary device, when at the same time a person speaks from himself and about himself (see Heidt, p. 73).

<sup>960</sup> Heidt, p. 74-95.

<sup>961</sup> See Heidt, p. 97-100.

<sup>962</sup> Matthew 1:24 is an exception, where we read ὁ ἄγγελος κυρίου. Here, however, we are dealing with an anaphoric use of the article, where it is placed before an object or person mentioned earlier in the context. In this text, the angel in question was already mentioned in Matthew 1:20.

certain angel was meant, the article would stand. This is because the angel of the Lord, appearing in the Old Testament, does not appear in the New Testament, since He has already become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ.

Other arguments can be added.<sup>963</sup> The title “angel of the Lord” is associated with the phrase “I Am” (see Ex 3:2, 14). Jesus called Himself the “I Am” as well (Jn 8:58). Moreover, God’s “name” was in the angel of the Lord (Ex 23:21), and John 5:43 records that Jesus came “in My Father’s name.” The name of the angel of the Lord is “wonderful” (Judg 13:18), which also applies to the Son (Isa 9:6). Finally, the angel of the Lord led Israel through the wilderness, an act which is ascribed to Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:4.

The most well known of the angels in Scripture is Gabriel. Along with Michael, he is the only other angel named in the Bible.<sup>964</sup> Gabriel claimed that he stood before God (Lk 1:19), which likely means that he held a high position among the angels. He appears to be God’s special messenger. He brought words from the Lord to Daniel (Dan 8:16; 9:21), Zechariah (Lk 1:11-20), and Mary (Lk 1:26-37). In all these instances, his message concerned the coming of Messiah or his forerunner, John the Baptist.

In Revelation chapter 4, we get a glimpse of the four “living creatures” that surround the throne of God. It is difficult to classify this type of angelic being. On the one hand, their appearance is like that of the cherubim. On the other hand, they resemble the seraphim in that they have six wings and proclaim God’s holiness. We also note that they are positioned “around the throne,” which distinguishes them from the cherubim, who are under the throne, and the seraphim, who are above the throne. We appear to have here a mixed picture consisting of features of both cherubim and seraphim.

The book of Revelation also relates the activity of the four living creatures. They surround the throne of God (Rev 5:6) and worship Him who is seated upon it (Rev 5:8, 9, 14; 7:11; 19:4). They communicated with the apostle John (Rev 6) and distribute the bowls of God’s wrath (Rev 15:7).

Zechariah writes of certain spirits that he saw in a vision: “The four spirits of heaven, going forth after standing before the Lord of all the earth” (Zech 6:5). These spirits also have the privilege of standing before the Lord. They are described as “strong ones” (v. 7). They patrol the earth and, in at least one instance, execute God’s judgment: “See, those who are going to the land of the north have appeased My wrath in the land of the north” (Zech 6:8). Zechariah also saw “two anointed ones who are standing by the Lord of the whole earth” (Zech 4:14). We are given no more information about these individuals.

Sometimes we encounter the pronoun “My” in connection with a certain angel. Twice, the angel who accompanied Israel in the wilderness is called “My angel” (Ex 23:23; 32:34). God said of him, “My name is in him” (Ex 23:21). Other mentions of “My angel” are found at the beginning and end of the book of Revelation. This is the angel that gave John his revelation (Rev 1:1; 22:6, 16). Is he simply a common angel, or does he have a special status, such as the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament?

The book of Revelation also portrays seven other angels that stand before God (Rev 8:2). They seem to have a special status as well. First, the article stands before the word “angels,” indicating specified individuals. Second, the verb “stand” is in the Greek perfect tense, which indicates an action accomplished in the past that has ongoing significance in the present. In other words, these angels constantly stand before the Lord’s throne.

In Revelation 4:4, we learn of the twenty-four “elders.” They are dressed in white, wear golden crowns, and sit on golden thrones. Many think that they figuratively represent the Church. Others feel that they are the 12 apostles and the 12 sons of Jacob.<sup>965</sup> Yet, they refer to God’s people as “they,” and not “we” (Rev 5:9-10; 11:17-18). They participate in the worship of God (Rev 5:8-9, 14; 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). They also explain to John the contents of his vision (Rev 7:13ff).

Some people are of the opinion that Melchizedek was an angel. The author of Hebrews claims that he lives on without end of days, suggesting that he never died (Heb 7:3, 8). In addition, there is no mention of his genealogy in Genesis. A Qumran manuscript ascribes to him angelic status (see 11QMel.). On the other hand,

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<sup>963</sup>Астафиев.

<sup>964</sup>Capps relates that angels typically do not reveal their names (Capps, p. 48).

<sup>965</sup>Law, p. 118.

Melchizedek was king of Salem. Angels do not reign as kings. Moreover, why did Abraham offer tithes to him. It would be atypical for angels to receive offerings from people.

#### 4. Activity of Angels

What do angels do? First, we know that they worship the Lord. Both Old and New Testaments testify to this fact (Ps 103:20-21; 148:2; Lk 2:13-14; Rev 5:11-12; 7:11-12). Heidt considers this “the first and most important duty of the angels.”<sup>966</sup>

Moreover, angels serve God in various ways. They announce messages from God to people, battle evil spirits, and defend God’s people. Cases exist where they provided spiritual or physical support for God’s servants. They accompany believers after death, and at the rapture of the Church, gather believers to Jesus. Once, we see them interceding for God’s mercy on Jerusalem. Some wonder whether angels oversee order in the local church (the “angels of the churches” in Revelation 2-3). We will describe these activities in more detail.

Angels communicate messages from God in various ways. Messages may come by a voice from heaven (Gen 21:17; 22:11) or in a vision (Gen 31:10-11) or dream (Matt 1:20-24; 2:13,19). An angel spoke to Moses from a burning bush (Ex 3:2), although here we have a visitation from the “angel of the Lord.” Angels may appear to people (Judg 6:11ff).

What kind of messages to angels deliver? They may bring promises from God.<sup>967</sup> They may also rebuke or announce judgment (Judg 2:1-4). Angels also proclaim the inauguration of a new phase in God’s plan, such as the birth of Christ (Lk 2:9-14), or His resurrection (Matt 28:2). They inform of Christ’s Second Coming (Acts 1:10) and of the last things (Rev 10:1). Angels often appear in prophetic visions, explaining to the prophet the contents of his vision, such as for Jacob (Gen 31:12), Ezekiel (Ezek 40:1ff), Daniel (Dan 7:16; 8:15; 9:21; 10:5; 12:8-13), Zechariah (Zech 1-6), and John (Rev 1:1; 7:13-17; 17:1; 21:9; 22:6, 8, 16). Often angels give direction from the Lord as to what people should do.<sup>968</sup>

Of special interest is the participation of angels in giving the Law. It is often stated that God gave the Mosaic Law through the agency of angels (Acts 7:38, 53; Deut 33:2; Heb 2:2; Gal 3:19). At the same time, Psalm 68:17 speaks of God Himself being at Mount Sinai.

Although angels are active in communicating messages from heaven, Capps correctly clarifies that they do not teach the Word or preach the gospel.<sup>969</sup> This was evident in the case of Cornelius, whom an angel commanded to send for Peter to preach Christ to him (Acts 10:5-6). Terry Law notes that the Holy Spirit sometime confirms the messages given by angels (Acts 8:26-29; 10:3-5, 19-20).<sup>970</sup>

Angels bring people support and blessing from God. These could be spiritual blessings (Gen 32:24ff; Hos 12:4) or physical blessings (Gen 24:7; 1 Kin 19:5-7). Jacob received support from angels (Gen 28:12; 32:1), and in a vision, a seraphim cleaned Isaiah’s lips (Isa 6:6-7).<sup>971</sup> Even Jesus received angelic support (Matt 4:11; Mk 1:13; Lk 22:43).

Angels are also famous for defending and delivering God’s people in general and individuals in particular. God promises in Psalm 34:7, “The angel of Yahweh encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them.”

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<sup>966</sup>Heidt, p. 18.

<sup>967</sup>For example, Hagar (Gen 16:7-13; 21:7), Abraham (Gen 22:15-18), Moses (Ex 3:2ff), Gideon (Judg 6:12ff), Samson’s parents (Judg 13:3), Joshua the priest (Zech 3:7), and Paul (Acts 27:23).

<sup>968</sup>For example, Hagar (Gen 16:9; 21:17), Abraham (Gen 22:11-12), Jacob (Gen 31:13), Moses (Ex 3:2ff), Israel in the wilderness (Ex 14:19; Ex 23:21-22), Balaam (Num 22:22ff), Deborah? (Judg 5:23), Gideon (Judg 6:12ff), Samson’s parents (Judg 13:3ff), David through the prophet Gad (1 Chr 21:18), Elijah (2 Kin 1:3, 15), Zechariah (Zech 1:14ff), Joseph (Matt 1:20-24; 2:13,19), the apostles (Acts 5:19), Phillip (Acts 8:26), and Cornelius (Acts 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13).

<sup>969</sup>Capps, p. 45.

<sup>970</sup>Law, p. 189.

<sup>971</sup>Heidt, p. 43, 68.

We also learn from Psalm 91:11-12, “He will give His angels charge concerning you, to guard you in all your ways. They will bear you up in their hands, that you do not strike your foot against a stone.”<sup>972</sup>

We may detail specific instances where angels provided protection or deliverance. They accompanied Israel in the wilderness (Ex 23:20), protected Jacob in his meeting with Esau (Gen 32:1), and defended Lot from the people of Sodom (Gen 19). Angels participated in Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (Isa 63:9; Acts 7:35-36; Num 20:16). They defended Israel from the armies of Pharaoh (Ex 14:19) and from other hostile forces (2 Kin 19:35; 2 Chr 32:21; Isa 37:36; 2 Kin 6:16-17). An angel delivered Daniel’s friends in the fiery furnace (Dan 3:28), and Daniel from the lion’s mouth (Dan 6:22). Angels led the apostles out of prison (Acts 5:19; Acts 12:7-11). They stood guard at the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:24) and will stand at the gates of New Jerusalem (Rev 21:12).

A much-discussed topic is the “guardian angel.” It is often believed that every believer in Christ has a personal guardian angel that continuously accompanies and protects him/her.<sup>973</sup> Matthew 18:10 is cited in support: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.” Others note that after Rhoda saw Peter following his miraculous release from prison, some thought that she saw “his angel” (Acts 12:15).

Gordon Lindsay, founder of “Christ for the Nations” ministries, delves more into this question.<sup>974</sup> He teaches that at birth, all persons are given a guardian angel, who accompanies them for the duration of their lives (Ps 34:7) and protects them from danger. If their parents are Christians and pray for their child, the angel’s actions are intensified (1 Cor 7:14). At the same time, personal disobedience can hinder the work of the guardian angel. Some also feel that the guardian angel provides protection not only from physical ills, but from spiritual ones as well. Nonetheless, physical protection is not always guaranteed. Lindsay feels that, according to 1 Kin 14:11-13, God may allow someone to die in childhood to prevent some future calamity.

Along with Matthew 18:10, Lindsay sees references to the guardian angel in 1 Corinthians 4:9 and Ecclesiastics 5:6. He also believes that the Bible refers to personal angelic watchers in the lives of Ishmael (Gen 21:16-19), Jacob (Gen 32:28; 48:16), Daniel (Dan 6:22), Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego (Dan 3:28), Peter (Acts 12:15), Paul (Acts 27:21-25), and Lazarus (Lk 16:22). On resurrection day, every guardian angel will gather the ones under his charge.

However, most of the passages of Scripture cited above speak of angelic ministry in general without specific mention of personal guardian angels. Moreover, some of the opinions voiced above are based on speculation rather than Scripture. Matthew 18:10 and Acts 12:15, however, do support this theory. Nonetheless, we must also take the following into consideration. First, Jesus said that the angels of the “little ones” are in heaven, not on earth. In addition, the rabbis of that time believed in guardian angels. It is possible that the disciples were speaking from that perspective when then spoke of Peter’s angel in Acts 12:15.

All things considered, the biblical evidence is insufficient to assume the existence of guardian angels. In light of the great number of angels and the active service they do, one doubts that a personal angelic guardian is really necessary.

As already noted, angels are warriors. In Scripture, we see them active in the battle of Jericho (Josh 5:13), against the Canaanites (Ex 23:23; 33:2), against Sisera (Judg 5:20), and in spiritual conflict against satanic powers (Dan 10:13, 20).<sup>975</sup> Angels will participate in the battle of Armageddon as well.<sup>976</sup>

Angels at times transport people from one place to another. When Lazarus died, angels carried him to Abraham’s bosom (Lk 16:22). At the rapture of the Church, angels will gather believers to meet the Lord in the air (Matt 24:31; Mk 13:27). Revelation 8:3-5 mentions angels lifting up prayers of the saints to the Lord.

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<sup>972</sup>Lindsay believes that God’s promise of protection in Psalms 91 is only for consecrated believers in Christ (see Lindsay G. All About the Ministry of Angels. – Dallas, TX: Winning of the Nations Crusade. – P. 13).

<sup>973</sup>Adherents of this view include: Origen, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Basil the Great, Cyril of Alexandria, Ambrose and others (see Law, p. 66).

<sup>974</sup>Lindsay, p. 8-21.

<sup>975</sup>Heidt holds to the opinion that we must emend the word שַׂר (*sar*), “prince,” to שַׁדַּי (*shad*), “demon” (see Heidt, p. 56-57). However, Michael is also called a “prince” in this context.

<sup>976</sup>See Matt 16:27; 25:31; Mk 8:38; Lk 9:26; 2 Thes 1:7; Jude 14; Rev 19:14.

Scripture also records an instance where an angel was involved in intercession. Zechariah 1:12 records the prayer, “O Yahweh of hosts, how long will You have no compassion for Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, with which You have been indignant these seventy years?” Yet, we note that this was done by the “angel of the Lord.”

In the book of Revelation, we encounter a curious phrase occurring in Jesus’ instructions to the churches of Asia Minor – the “angel of the church.” Some think that a literal angel is meant here. All other uses of the word ἄγγελος (*angelos*) in Revelation are literal. On the other hand, angels are not accountable for the behavior of the churches, and in these letters, Jesus addresses His rebukes to the “angel of the church.”

Another unlikely option is that the “angel” is the messenger delivering the letter to the congregation. It is true that ἄγγελος (*angelos*) means “messenger.” However, why would the letter be addressed to him? A third approach is to ascribe this title to the bishop of the church. He is responsible for the well-being of the saints and rebukes to the church would include him as well. Yet, in New Testament times there were no “bishops” in the sense of a higher level in the church hierarchy.

Some propose that this “angel” is the pastor of the church. The pastor does answer to God for his church. This, however, would be an unusual designation for the pastor. One may also question the claim that a sole pastor administrated over congregations in the first-century. A plural pastorate was the usual observance. The word “angel,” however, is in the singular.

A final option is that the phrase “angel of the church” is symbolic, that is, a personification of the church itself. In support, we note that in these communications Jesus addressed the entire church, not a single individual. The entire book of Revelation, in fact, is full of symbolism. Yet, we again come across an atypical use of the word ἄγγελος (*angelos*), which is never used elsewhere for a congregation of believers.

In conclusion, none of these options seems to offer a clear interpretation. Yet, the final two, the “angel” as the pastor or as a personification of the church itself, appear to be the most convincing.

Angels can participate in God’s judgment on people. On the one hand, they can deliver warnings of impending punishment from the Lord. We can highlight two such examples. The angel flying in midheaven in the book of Revelation warns the people of earth of coming calamities (Rev 14:6). In the Old Testament, an angel warned Balaam to obey the Lord (Num 22:33).

On the other hand, angels may execute the judgment themselves. Scripture contains not a few examples. By the hand of angels, God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:13), struck Egypt with plagues (Ps 78:49), and afflicted the inhabitants of Jerusalem with a plague (2 Sam 24:15-17) and with destruction (Ezek 9:1-6). They also can bring judgment to the earth as a whole (Zech 6:5-8). According to the Lord’s word, they struck Herod with illness (Acts 12:23).

In the future, angels will cast the ungodly into fire (Matt 13:39-41, 49), bring disasters on the earth (Rev 7:1), pour out God’s wrath (Rev 8:3-5), and slay a third of the earth’s population (Rev 9:14-15). We also see mention of angels blowing trumpets of wrath (Rev 8:6ff), binding Satan (Rev 20:1ff), having seven plagues to deliver (Rev 15:1ff), and harvesting the “grapes” (i.e., the ungodly) of the earth (Rev 14:19).

According to Scripture, angels also fill the role of witnesses. They witnessed the creation of the world (Job 38:7) and the incarnation of the Son (1 Tim 3:16). Jesus will confess those acknowledging Him before the angels (Lk 12:8-9; Rev 3:5). Paul summons Timothy to faithfulness in ministry before the angels (1 Tim 5:21). Lindsay sees angels filling this role in Malachi 3:16, where before the Lord “a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear Yahweh and who esteem His name”<sup>977</sup> Finally, angels observe the torment of the condemned (Rev 14:10).

It seems that angels are also active in directing nature and history. People of the Middle Ages thought that angels directed all natural processes as God’s instruments. Although we now understand that the natural laws that God installed in nature govern natural processes, verses in Revelation do relegate to certain angels authority over fire (Rev 14:18) and water (Rev 16:5). One must consider, though, the symbolic nature of this writing.

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<sup>977</sup>Lindsay, p. 12.

Scripture also suggests that angels play a part in directing historical events. Daniel records that certain angels support world leaders. Michael fills that role for Israel (Dan 12:1). Others supported Darius the Mede (Dan 11:1). Finally, as noted earlier, certain angelic “watchers” apparently executed judgement on Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 4:10-14).

In the future, angels will certainly continue their activity of worshiping the Lord, carrying out His commissions, and serving the saints. We have no record in Scripture of any future inheritance for the angels beyond the glory they presently enjoy (Heb 2:5).

## 5. Our Relationship with Angels

The last, but not least important aspect of our study is our relationship with angels. It is true that people rarely see angels. Yet, such appearances do occur, both in the biblical narrative and in our day as well.

The first thing to remember is that God’s angels are worthy of respect. Paul illustrates this in his correspondence with the church in Galatia when he writes, “You received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus {Himself}” (Gal 4:14). Respect for angels may involve obedience to their directives. Israel was obliged to obey the angel that accompanied them in the wilderness (Ex 23:21). Joseph heeded the angel who appeared to him in a dream (Matt 1:20-24; 2:13, 19). On the other hand, Zechariah was punished for rejecting the angel’s message (Lk 1:20). Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt because of her insubordination (Gen 19:26).<sup>978</sup> In addition, Peter instructs us to speak of angels with respect (2 Pet 2:10).

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 11:10 perplex us. He commands that women must cover their heads during the worship service “because of the angels.” It is unlikely that angels are attracted to human females, as some erroneously suppose from Genesis 6:1-4. They have no physical bodies with male reproductive capabilities. Possibly, the meaning here is not “angels” in a superhuman sense, but human messengers sent to the Corinthian church, since the word ἄγγελος (*angelos*) can denote human messengers. Women covering their heads would demonstrate to these messengers good order in that church, with women exhibiting the appropriate cultural expression of respect for their husbands. Another suggestion is that ἄγγελος (*angelos*) could connote “spies” who sneaked in to find fault with the Corinthian congregation.<sup>979</sup>

Although angels are deserving of respect, worship belongs only to God. The Word of God forbids the worship of angels (Col 2:18; Rev 19:10; 22:8). Moreover, in the future kingdom of God believers in Christ will occupy a higher place than angels and will direct them (1 Cor 6:2-3).

Angels may bring us revelations from the Lord. However, one must certify that the revelation agrees with the written Word of God. Paul warns us, “But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed!” (Gal 1:8). In another text, Paul cautions about basing doctrine on an angelic visitation: “Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on {visions} he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind” (Col 2:18).<sup>980</sup>

Amazingly, believers at times have entertained angels unawares, offering them hospitality (Heb 13:2). This should inspire believers to show hospitality. Nevertheless, Lindsay wisely counsels that the Bible never records that angels befriend believers. They appear only in order to carry out their commission, and then depart. Furthermore, Lindsay suggests that God limits contact between people and angels to reduce the temptation to worship them.<sup>981</sup> Terry Law states in this regard, “Angelic intervention always has a purpose. Angels don’t come to build relationships with humans or just socialize.”<sup>982</sup>

In recent times, a new teaching about our relationship with angels has arisen. According to some, God has given believers the right to order angels and direct their activities. They base their view on Psalm 103:20: “Bless

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<sup>978</sup>Capps, p. 104ff.

<sup>979</sup>Suggested by Sergey Podnyuk.

<sup>980</sup>Capps, p. 56.

<sup>981</sup>Lindsay, p. 14-15.

<sup>982</sup>Law, p. 89.

Yahweh, you His angels, mighty in strength, who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word.” This verse is interpreted to say that believers can quote Scripture to angels, and the latter must “obey the voice of His word.” Whatever that biblical text dictates, angels must perform.

A proponent of this theory, Charles Capps, describes his view:<sup>983</sup> “We have the ability as people born of God to summon the aid of angels. This is part of our salvation.”<sup>984</sup> Furthermore: “I know my angels are out there working for me as I confess the Word. They harken to the Word as it comes out of my mouth.”<sup>985</sup> Capps asserts that we must address angels directly. We must say, “Ministering spirits, go and cause God’s Word to be performed in my behalf.”<sup>986</sup> He clarifies, “You may not say *exactly* what God said, but let your words agree with His.”<sup>987</sup>

Capps claims that God gave him the following revelation: “People think I tell the angels what to do; but most of the time you are the one who gives them their assignment.... If your words are in line with My Word, then the angels go to work immediately, causing the things you speak to come to pass.... Words spoken contrary to My Word will bind the angels.”<sup>988</sup> However, Capps warns that we may not direct angels to fulfill our personal desires. In addition, we may not pray to angels. Someday, Capps claims, we will judge our guardian angel based on how well he carried out our directives from the Word of God (1 Cor 6:3).

Capps states that in order for our confession of the Word to be effective, it must be accompanied by faith: “As you speak God’s Word in faith with your mouth, you commission the angels to move according to that Word.”<sup>989</sup> Capps feels that the confession of faith made by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego compelled the angel to rescue them (Dan 3), as did Daniel’s confession from the lions’ den (Dan 6). Angels were also called into action on behalf of Abraham (Gen 24:7), Peter (Acts 12), and Elisha (2 Kin 6). In Daniel 10:12, an angel said to the prophet, “I have come in response to your words.” The opposite is also true – unbelief will hinder the activity of God’s heavenly messengers.

In support of his theory, Capps appeals to the following. Psalm 103:20 relates that angels respond to the “voice of His Word.” Therefore, one must speak the Word aloud in order to activate an angel. Since angels do not have a physical body, they cannot give voice to the Word themselves. Capps also associates this teaching with the biblical principle of “binding and loosing” (Matt 18:18). That is, our faith-filled words “loose” angels, while our unbelief will “bind” them. Moreover, Capps appeals to the words of Christ in Luke 12:8: “I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God.” This is interpreted to mean that we must confess the Word so that Jesus will dispatch the angels to fulfill it.

Terry Law also comments on this topic.<sup>990</sup> In many respects, he agrees with Capps, especially in his conviction that the faith-confession of God’s Word releases angels on their mission: “I have found that something special happens in the angelic kingdom when Christians speak God’s Word in the midst of contrary circumstances. It somehow releases the angelic world to work alongside us.... God’s Word activates angels.”<sup>991</sup>

However, unlike Capps, Law believes that one can also release angels through: praise and worship of God, sacrificial acts, prayer to God, and submission to authorities. In support, he cites: (1) 2 Chronicles 20:1-29, where victory was secured by praise and worship, (2) the offering of sacrifices by Gideon (Judg 6:21), the father of Samson (Judg 13:20), and Zechariah (Lk 1:8-11), (3) Abraham’s intercession for Lot (Gen 18:17-33), and (4) prayer for Peter’s release from prison (Acts 12:5). Law writes, “Sacrificial worship provides a legal right for the

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<sup>983</sup>Capps, p. 54-171.

<sup>984</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>985</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>986</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>987</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>988</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>989</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>990</sup>Law, p. 183-207.

<sup>991</sup>Ibid., p. 205.

angels to ascend and descend to and from God's throne bringing help to the saints, like Gideon and Manoah."<sup>992</sup>

In response to this teaching, we acknowledge, first of all, that God does indeed commission angels to serve the saints (Heb 1:14). However, do believers have the right to direct their activities? All the examples cited above in defense of this position fail to show a cause-effect relationship between the actions of the believer and the response by the angels. A person's prayer, confession of faith, or offering of a sacrifice does not necessarily trigger the release of angelic powers. The Bible makes no direct connection between those events.

Concerning the Scripture in Psalm 103:20, that angels respond to the "voice of His Word," the passage is not teaching the necessity of verbally confessing the Word in order to enable angelic intervention. The verse is written in typical Hebrew poetic parallelism, where two lines repeat the same thought. The two lines in question read as follows:

Bless Yahweh, you His angels, mighty in strength, *who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word!*  
Bless Yahweh, all you His hosts, you who serve Him, *doing His will.*

The phrase "who perform His word, obeying the voice of His word" is equivalent to the phrase "doing His will." It is therefore an exaggeration to insist that a verbal confession of a Bible verse is called for here. Angels simply obey the commissions they receive from God to perform His will.

In Daniel 10:12, when the angel announced that he came in response to Daniel's words, we must recall that Daniel never summoned an angel, but prayed to God. The angel, commissioned by God, came as an answer to his prayer. The words of Jesus, "Everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God," were said in a context of mission and persecution. Jesus meant that believers should not fear to testify of Christ in the face of persecution. The question of "binding and loosing" relates to church discipline (Matt 18:18) or the preaching of the gospel (Matt 16:19).

Finally, what did Paul have in mind when he wrote, "We will judge angels"? The previous verse states, "The saints will judge the world." It is very unlikely that the saints will judge and condemn unbelievers. This role is allotted exclusively to the Son of Man (Jn 5:22). We are dealing here with the time of Christ's millennial reign, and the term "judge" has the sense "administrate." So then, at that time the saints will indeed direct the activity of angels, but that time has not yet arrived.

We recognize, of course, the importance of prayer in a believer's life, and that the Lord uses our prayers to accomplish His purpose. Yet, we lack biblical proof that our words release angels on their commissions. God alone directs the activity of angels and defines what their ministries will be. Terry Law quotes Norvel Hayes as saying that the best way to "put angels to work (ministering) for you is to obey God."<sup>993</sup>

Terry Law sums up the work of angels by stating, "Angels minister to believers by revealing, guiding, providing, protecting, delivering, strengthening, encouraging, assisting in answering prayer and attending the righteous dead."<sup>994</sup>

A very intriguing account on angels was given by Ronald Buck, who claimed that he was visited 16 times by angels, who would interact with him for 2-3 hours at a time.<sup>995</sup> He asserted that he became acquainted with the archangel Michael, with Gabriel, with the angel who appeared to Joshua, and with others. Buck also reports that he was taken up to God's throne in heaven, likely in the Spirit, and spoke with the Lord. The angels who visited him gave him sermons to preach and insisted that he preach them. The contents of these sermons focused on God's love for the world, His desire to save entire families, our redemption in Christ, warnings about falling away, and concern for others. Buck claims to have received 120 confirming signs that were either

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<sup>992</sup>Ibid., p. 204. Lindsay feels that Jacob's example in Genesis 32 demonstrates that "if we wish the angels to bless us, we must learn to wrestle with God in prayer" (see Lindsay, p. 16).

<sup>993</sup>Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>994</sup>Ibid., p. 118-119.

<sup>995</sup>See Buck R. H. Angels on Assignment. – Houston, TX: Hunter Books, 1979. – 197 p.



fulfilled or being fulfilled at that time. However, Scripture nowhere records such lengthy encounters with angels or their engagement with sermonizing, which make Buck's fantastic claims suspect.

The famous twentieth century evangelist William Branham claimed that during his evangelistic meetings, when he was praying for the sick, an angel stood alongside, giving him information on the people for whom he was praying.<sup>996</sup>

## 6. Theological Reflections on Angels

We will conclude our study of angels by surveying views on angels voiced by thinkers before and after the New Testament revelation. We will discover that, along with a sound understanding of angelic beings, several very fanciful doctrines developed concerning their nature and activities.

### a. Among the Greeks

For Greeks in general, angels were uncreated, impassionate creatures. Socrates claimed that a certain spirit (*daimon*) accompanied him and warned him of danger. Aristotle, and after him Thomas Aquinas, felt that angels were the force behind celestial movement. In Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, angels were emanations from the "One."<sup>997</sup>

### b. In the Intertestamental Period

What did intertestamental writers think about angels?<sup>998</sup> We will start with those ideas that resonate with the biblical revelation.

First, angels guard God's people. For example, Tobit, referring to his son Tobias, states, "...a good angel shall go with him, and his journey shall be prospered, and he shall return in peace" (*Tobit*, 5.22). They also look after the things of God. Angels prevented Heliodorus from sacking the treasury (*2 Macc.*, 3.25-26). They support the army of the Lord. *2 Maccabees* 10.29-30 and 11.8 record that they entered the battle on the side of the Maccabees.<sup>999</sup>

Second, angels execute God's judgments. They tore down the walls of Jerusalem (*2 Baruch*, 6-8), smote the Assyrian army (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 5.388) and execute judgment on the whole world (*1 Enoch*, 1.9). Third, they bring messages from God to people (see *1 Enoch*, 21-32). Finally, as noted in the book of Revelation, angels direct various natural processes (see *1 Enoch*, 21-32, 72-82). Additionally, another common feature with Revelation is that angels bring the prayer requests of God's people before His presence (*Tobit*, 12.12-15; cf. *Rev* 8:3-4).

Next, we examine some discrepancies between intertestamental thought and the biblical testimony of angels. The book of Tobit records a long interchange between Tobias and the angel Raphael. The latter disguises himself as a human, Azarias, who travels with Tobias and shares meals with him. Later, Raphael claims that he did not actually eat food, but simply pretended to do so (*Tobit*, 12.19). We object that dishonest behavior does not befit an angel. In addition, in the Bible we do not encounter any other named angels except for Michael and Gabriel.

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<sup>996</sup>Law, p. 35-37.

<sup>997</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17, 22.

<sup>998</sup>See Heidt, p. 11-63, 102-108; Nickelsburg W.E. *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*. – Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. – P. 98-103; Moeller H. R. *The Legacy of Zion*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977. – P. 50-68; Sullivan K. P. *Wrestling with Angels: A Study on the Relationship between Angels and Humans in Ancient Jewish Literature and the New Testament*. – Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004.

<sup>999</sup>Also see *1QM* 9:15-16; 17:6-8.

Furthermore, Raphael considers himself to be “one of the seven angels, which stand and enter before the glory of the Lord” (*Tobit*, 12:15), about whom the Old Testament is silent.<sup>1000</sup> It is curious, though, that the New Testament confirms the existence of “seven angels who stand before God” (Rev 8:2). Unlike angels in the Bible, Raphael heals the sick and delivers from demons by preparing special concoctions (*Tobit*, 8.2-3; 11.6-7; 12.14).

We will look more closely at the idea of “seven angels.” 1 Enoch 20.1-8 lists seven select angels and their responsibilities (also see *Testament of Levi*, 8.1-10).

And these are the names of the holy angels who watch. Uriel, one of the holy angels, who is over the world and over Tartarus. Raphael, one of the holy angels, who is over the spirits of men. Raguel, one of the holy angels who takes vengeance on the world of the luminaries. Michael, one of the holy angels, to wit, he that is set over the best part of mankind «and» over chaos. Saraqâêl, one of the holy angels, who is set over the spirits, who sin in the spirit. Gabriel, one of the holy angels, who is over Paradise and the serpents and the Cherubim. Remiel, one of the holy angels, whom God set over those who rise.

1 Enoch 40.9 highlights four angels designated as angels “of the Lord of the Spirits.” A new name is introduced among them – Phanuel.<sup>1001</sup>

This first is Michael, the merciful and long-suffering: and the second, who is set over all the diseases and all the wounds of the children of men, is Raphael: and the third, who is set over all the powers, is Gabriel: and the fourth, who is set over the repentance unto hope of those who inherit eternal life, is named Phanuel.

In the literature of this period, we see mention of angels that record the good and bad deeds of people (1 *Enoch*, 89.61-64, 76-77; *Testimony of Abraham*, 10-12). However, we find no biblical confirmation of this idea, except possibly for the “book of remembrance... for those who fear Yahweh and who esteem His name” in Malachi 3:16. Nonetheless, even here angels are not specifically mentioned. We read a quite fantastic account in Daniel 14:22-42, where an angel transports the prophet Habakkuk, dangling him by the hair of his head, to Babylon, where the prophet feeds Daniel during his stay in the lions’ den.

The second temple literature frequently advances the assertion that angels (called “watchers”) had sexual relations with women (see Gen 6:1-4). We will discuss this claim in chapter 3 of the next volume in this series. The Qumran community believed that angels dwelt among them because of this group’s high decree of consecration to the Lord.

In second temple writings, we find the claim that people can become angels.<sup>1002</sup> Some hint that Adam was an angel before the Fall (2 *Enoch*, 30.11) or that he became an angel after he died. The same was claimed for Seth. In the *Testimony of Abraham*, they sit on glorious thrones (11.4; 13.2). We also read of Enoch becoming an angel. According to the *Testimony of Job*, his daughters experienced an “angelic transformation” whenever they adorned certain garments. In the *Apocalypse of Isaiah*, the prophet experienced a similar transformation when he beheld his vision. Jacob’s name change to Israel marked the point where he became an angel. When Noah was born, he had a glorious appearance, which inspired his father Lamech to exclaim, “It seems to me that he is not sprung from me but from the angels” (1 *Enoch*, 106.6). Pseudo-Philo stated that David was an angel when he defeated Goliath.

In spite of these exaggerated claims, Sullivan clarifies, “Although there are texts in which human beings are described in angelomorphic terms, a distinction appears to be maintained between humans and angels,”<sup>1003</sup>

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<sup>1000</sup>Heidt comments that the idea of “seven angels” comes from the Persians and consists of Ahura Mazda and the six “immortal holy ones” (see Heidt, p. 107-108).

<sup>1001</sup>The same personalities are encountered in 1 *Enoch* 54:6; 71:8-9. In 1 *Enoch* 9:1 and 10:1-16 we meet Michael, Uriel, Raphael, and Gabriel. Also see 1QM 9:14-16 and the *Apocalypse of Moses*, 40:2.

<sup>1002</sup>See Sullivan, p. 139-141.

<sup>1003</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 141.

and, “Only humans of exceptional righteousness and who had a special relationship with God appear to have had the opportunity to become angels; no other humans enjoyed such a special status.”<sup>1004</sup>

### c. In Church History

Angels were a hot topic of discussion among churchmen of the Early Church and Middle Ages. They introduced many speculative claims that lack biblical support. The Middle Ages were actually called “the golden age of angels.”<sup>1005</sup>

One of the most outspoken figures on the theme of angels was Pseudo-Dionysius (6th c.). He saw great practical value in the study of angels since it inspired Christians to think on heavenly things.<sup>1006</sup> His main work on this topic was *On the Celestial Hierarchy*. Pseudo-Dionysius, along with John of Damascus, proposed the existence of nine ranks of angels divided into three classes: seraphim, cherubim, thrones; dominions, powers, authorities; rulers, archangels and angels. The higher the rank, the more divine characteristics the angel possessed. John of Damascus writes of the highest group that they “are in God’s presence and are said to be directly and immediately one with Him.”<sup>1007</sup>

Furthermore, according to the Damascene, the lower classes depend upon the higher ones: “But they differ from each other in brightness and position, whether it is that their position is dependent on their brightness, or their brightness on their position: and they impart brightness to one another, because they excel one another in rank and nature. And clearly the higher share their brightness and knowledge with the lower.”<sup>1008</sup> Keck comments on this system, “Each higher order of angels transmits knowledge and instruction through the next lower angels, and only the lowest rank of angels, the angels, interacts with the mundane world directly.”<sup>1009</sup>

Each rank of angels supposedly fulfills its proper function.<sup>1010</sup> The first rank worship God. The second rank support the universe. The third carry out the Lord’s commissions. All the angelic ranks are necessary to fill the “ontological gap” between God and humanity. The Neoplatonic worldview, which Pseudo-Dionysius embraced and aggressively promoted, necessitated an uninterrupted ontological chain between the “Ultimate God” and the material world. Pseudo-Dionysius’ hierarchical system of angels filled that need. The angelic hierarchy also made possible the “ascension to God” of humans, i.e., their “deification.”<sup>1011</sup>

Among the Church Fathers, we observe different orderings of the angelic hierarchy:<sup>1012</sup>

- Gregory the Great: seraphim, cherubim, thrones; dominions, rulers, authorities; powers, archangels, angels
- Cyril of Jerusalem: seraphim, cherubim, thrones; authorities, rulers, dominions; powers, archangels, angels
- Basil the Great: dominions, thrones, powers, authorities, rulers
- Jerome: dominions, authorities, rulers, archangels, angels
- Augustine: thrones, dominions, rulers, authorities

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<sup>1004</sup>Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>1005</sup>Law, p. 32.

<sup>1006</sup>Keck, p. 49.

<sup>1007</sup>*An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2.3.

<sup>1008</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1009</sup>Keck, p. 58.

<sup>1010</sup>Law, p. 32-33.

<sup>1011</sup>Мейендорф И. Введение в святоотеческое богословие. Минск: Лучи Софии, 2007. – P. 304; Lowe C. Territorial Spirits and World Evangelization. – Geanies House, Great Britain: OMF, 1998. – P. 90. The view of Thomas Aquinas differs slightly. In his opinion, it was necessary for God to create angels in order to complete the creation of the world. Since there existed an ontological “free space” between God and humanity, and since a perfect God cannot fail to create what is good, God was obliged to create angels in order to “fill up” this gap (see Law, p. 103).

<sup>1012</sup>Lowe, p. 90. Nonetheless, the order prescribed by Pseudo-Dionysius prevailed in the Church (Keck, p. 56).

Meyendorff criticizes Pseudo-Dionysius' system since Michael is no longer the leading angel. Moreover, since Gabriel is an angel of the lowest order, he cannot be sent from God's direct presence, as recorded in Scripture.<sup>1013</sup> In addition, the cherubim of Isaiah 6:6 could not have touched the Isaiah's lips since many "intermediate" ranks of angels stand between cherubim and humanity.<sup>1014</sup> John Calvin joins the critique, "None can deny that Dionysus (whoever he may have been) has many shrewd and subtle disquisitions in his Celestial Hierarchy, but on looking at them more closely, every one must see that they are merely idle talk."<sup>1015</sup>

Meyendorff informs us of still other aspects of angelology in patristic theology. The teaching circulated that angels have some type of physicality. In addition, each angel has its own nature. For this reason, the sin of Satan was not transmitted to other angels in the way Adam's sin was transmitted to his descendants.<sup>1016</sup>

According to patristic theology, good angels are confirmed in righteousness, which means that they cannot sin. John of Damascus claimed, "The angels also, when they had made free choice of virtue became through grace immovably rooted in goodness."<sup>1017</sup>

The Damascene further describes the nature and activity of angels: "...their lightness and the ardor, and heat, and keenness and sharpness with which they hunger for God and serve Him, and how they are borne to the regions above and are quite delivered from all material thought." Again:

The angel's nature then is rational, and intelligent, and endowed with free-will, changeable in will, or fickle... having power either to abide or progress in goodness, or to turn towards evil... It is not susceptible of repentance because it is incorporeal.... It is immortal, not by nature but by grace. For all that has had beginning comes also to its natural end.<sup>1018</sup>

Two highly devoted students to the study of angels were Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), called the "Angelic Doctor" and Bonaventure (1218-1274), named the "Seraphic Doctor."<sup>1019</sup> They debated between themselves whether angels had both form and spiritual "matter" (Bonaventure), or just form (Aquinas). Bonaventure argued that angels must have matter in order to distinguish one angel from another. He felt that every creature must consist of something concrete. Aquinas, however, objected that this position led to the false conclusion that angels possessed bodies.

Aquinas and Bonaventure agreed, however, that angels do not actually occupy a physical space. Nevertheless, for the sake of order in the universe, they will be found only in one place at one time, and only one angel will be in one place at one time. In this, they opposed the opinion of John Duns Scotus, who felt that multiple angels can be found at the same point in space.<sup>1020</sup>

Bonaventure taught that God created angels at the first moment of creation. Aquinas added that the Bible speaks little of the angels' creation since people of that time were not so intellectually sophisticated and not able to grasp such truths.<sup>1021</sup> Bonaventure asserted that the two "princes" of Daniel 10 were evil angels opposing the good angels, while Aquinas considered them to be good angels who simply argued among themselves because they did not know what the Lord wanted in that situation.

Christians of the Middle Ages thought that angels accompanied departed believers to heaven and also comforted those suffering in purgatory.<sup>1022</sup> Bonaventure and Aquinas taught that angels possess constant joy,

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<sup>1013</sup>Мейендорф, p. 305.

<sup>1014</sup>Such was the opinion of Pseudo-Dionysius, as noted by Keck, p. 60.

<sup>1015</sup>Calvin J. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.14.4.

<sup>1016</sup>Мейендорф, p. 251-252. Thiessen holds to a similar view (see Law, p. 101).

<sup>1017</sup>*An Exact Exposition of the Christian Faith*, 2.30. This was the accepted understanding among Christians theologians of that time (see Keck, p. 14).

<sup>1018</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1019</sup>Keck, p. 22-33, 94-112, 210.

<sup>1020</sup>Lowe, p. 91; Keck, p. 110-111.

<sup>1021</sup>Keck. p. 20-23.

<sup>1022</sup>Ibid, p. 21-22, 107, 170-171, 192, 206.

which may increase at times, but they never grieve. They have continual love for God. Some even felt that angels could create from pre-existing matter, but not from nothing. They submit to Mary and aid her. Aquinas believed that since angels are greater in dignity than people, they must outnumber people as well. Pseudo-Dionysius and Hugo of Saint Victor considered them innumerable. Some figures in church history claimed visitation by angels, including Gregory the Great, Bonaventure, Francis of Assisi, and Joan of Arc.

This fascination with angels enraptured not only theologians, but churchmen as well.<sup>1023</sup> Church buildings were decorated with figures of angels. The Middle Ages saw Michael the archangel come to center stage in the Church's veneration, but he subsequently gave way to Gabriel.<sup>1024</sup> Questions concerning angels were raised on three Church Councils (in 343, 747, and 1277), and limits were placed on how much reverence should be paid to them and how much speculation should be entertained about them. Nevertheless, the Seventh Ecumenical Council (747) endorsed prayer to Michael, Gabriel and Raphael. The Second Council of Nicaea (787) sanctioned artistic representations of angels. In addition, one could now pray to one's guardian angel. Angels were considered worthy of "reverence," but not "worship."

At the entrance of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, cherubim were stationed to guard it. Bonaventure taught that angels participate in congregational worship, especially when the *Sanctus* is sung. They also participate in the celebration of the mass and transport prayers to God's throne. Michael was considered the guardian of the Church. The hypothesis of an angelic hierarchy was employed to justify the authority of the church hierarchy. Monks were considered imitators of the angels in virtue of their devotion to poverty, chastity, and obedience. It was thought that angels and monks lived together. Bonaventure viewed seraphim as fine examples of devotion to prayer and contemplation of God. In order to check the appeal of magic at that time, the Church allowed believers to appeal to angels for help. During the Crusades, soldiers relied on angels for victory in battle. After the Reformation, however, such intense interest in angels faded.

Angelology exercised influence over interpretation of Scripture as well.<sup>1025</sup> Commentators began associating certain angels with various figures appearing in church history. For example, Bonaventure connected the sixth angel of the Apocalypse with Francis of Assisi. Other associations were made as well. With the aid of allegorical interpretation of Scripture, various objects in the Bible were made to symbolize angels: sisters, kings, trees, wind, stars. Angels, in turn, could symbolize other things. Origen taught that the two seraphim in Isaiah chapter 6 were God the Son and Holy Spirit, while Jerome insisted that they represented the Old and New Testaments.

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<sup>1023</sup>Law, p. 31-37, 52; Keck, p. 6, 28-30, 37-38, 42, 53, 68, 112, 117-128, 163, 172-176, 201-202, 211.

<sup>1024</sup>Keck, p. 180.

<sup>1025</sup>Ibid, p. 41, 49, 59, 63, 152-153.

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## Chapter 14 - God's Transcendence and Immanence

God's transcendence means that He is distinct from His creation. Unlike the pantheistic worldview, God is not identical with the universe, but He exists independent of it. On the other hand, God's immanence is His nearness to the created order. He intervenes in the affairs of the world, and people can have a personal relationship with Him.

The ideas of "transcendence" and "immanence," though, are not exactly opposite conceptions. The question of God's transcendence concerns His essential being – that He is not a constituent part of His creation. The question of "immanence," however, deals with His "distance" from us. He does not isolate Himself from creation, but is very near to us.

Classic Scripture passages that express both God's transcendence and His immanence are Ephesians 4:6: "One God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all," and Isaiah 57:15: "For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, 'I dwell {on} a high and holy place, and {also} with the contrite and lowly of spirit.'"<sup>1026</sup>

### A. God's Transcendence

#### 1. Definition and Biblical Testimony

As stated above, the doctrine of God's transcendence states that He differs from His creation. We can further define it as "the attribute of being above and independent of the universe."<sup>1027</sup>

We list here several specific Bible passages that confirm God's transcendent nature.<sup>1028</sup> In all these references, God is shown as distinct from the material world. This is especially highlighted in the book of the prophet Isaiah:

- Thus says Yahweh, "Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest? (Isa 66:1).
- In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple (Isa 6:1).
- It is He who sits above the circle of the earth (Isa 40:22).

In addition, Isaiah chapter 40, verses 19-22, stresses that God differs from idols. Since idols are a part of creation, a transcendent God must differ from them.

Other biblical books testify of God's transcendence as well:

- But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You (1 Kin 8:27).
- Yahweh is high above all nations; His glory is above the heavens. Who is like Yahweh our God, who is enthroned on high (Ps 113:4-5).
- To You I lift up my eyes, O You who are enthroned in the heavens! (Ps 123:1).

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<sup>1026</sup>Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 267. Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 312-313, 316.

<sup>1027</sup>From the Oxford Dictionary, cited in Cairns D. God Up There? A Study in Divine Transcendence. – Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1967. – P. 25.

<sup>1028</sup>Packer J. I. Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993. – P. 28-30; Henry, C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, TX: Word Books, c1976-c1983. – V. 6. – P. 45; Erickson M. J. God the Father Almighty. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 267-268; Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 312-313.

- And He was saying to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (Jn 8:23).

Cairns makes several comments on transcendence.<sup>1029</sup> God's personal name Yahweh, for example, indicates His distinct personhood. In addition, several of His attributes, such as love, holiness, and authority, require the quality of transcendence. Moreover, only a transcendent God can create.

Erickson investigates the question of God's transcendence from the perspective of His "distance" from the world.<sup>1030</sup> He feels that we should not take descriptions of the Lord being "over" or "above" the earth literally. Since the earth is round, such descriptions are archaic. Additionally, since God is an infinite, eternal spirit, He has no specific "location" in the time-space dimension.

Erickson concurs with Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth that the difference between God and humans is not quantitative, but qualitative.<sup>1031</sup> God exists in a different dimension. Yet, He is not distant from us, but very near. His "closeness" to us is to be understood as nearness in another mode of existence. In Erickson's words, "While God is ontologically distinct from the universe and the human race, he is influentially present," i.e., He exerts His influence on the world.<sup>1032</sup>

Other writers attempt to describe God's transcendence in non-spatial categories as well. Tozer speaks of the "distance" between God and creation not as physical separation, but as spiritual condition. In other words, separation from God is the result of sin. However, it seems that Tozer is confusing the categories of God's holiness and His transcendence.<sup>1033</sup>

Helm claims that God's transcendence implies dependence of the creature on God. The universe is "distinct" from the Lord not only in essence, but also in the sense of being dependent on the One, on whom it depends for its existence.<sup>1034</sup> Yet again, we see a confusion of categories. God's transcendence concerns distinction in essence, while dependence on God involves His role as Sustainer (see chapter 12).

## 2. Extreme Positions on Transcendence

Some thinkers emphasize God's transcendence to the point of compromising His immanence. For example, Deism proposes that God created the world and then abandoned it and no longer has any dealings with it. People need no special revelation from God. It is thought below His dignity to communicate directly with His creatures.<sup>1035</sup> The Deist Edward Herbert of Cerbury (1583-1648) claimed that general revelation provides all that we need to know about God, namely: (1) there is a God, (2) people must worship Him, (3) good works please Him, (4) people must repent of sin, and (5) God will reward or punish our behavior, either in this life through the action of natural laws, or in the afterlife.<sup>1036</sup>

Deism gathers support from scientific discoveries. In the Middle Ages, people believed that angels directed the course of nature. With the dawn of the Enlightenment, though, convictions changed – natural processes are ruled by natural laws. So then, Deism considers divine intervention in the natural world unnecessary. Consequently, God's interventions in human affairs are no longer anticipated.

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<sup>1029</sup>Cairns, p. 26-36.

<sup>1030</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 268-274; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 313.

<sup>1031</sup>Unlike Kierkegaard and Barth, though, Erickson does not feel that this difference is "infinite," or else fellowship between God and people would not be possible.

<sup>1032</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 271.

<sup>1033</sup>Tozer A. W. *The Attributes of God*. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 121-123.

<sup>1034</sup>Helm P. *The Providence of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 81.

<sup>1035</sup>Warfield B. B. *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield, Volume 1: Revelation and Inspiration*. – Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008. – P. 38.

<sup>1036</sup>Helm P. *The Divine Revelation*. – Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1982. – P. 8.



Another worldview that stresses God's transcendence at the expense of His immanence is apophatic theology.<sup>1037</sup> We describe and evaluate this school of thought in detail in chapter one of this volume. According to this teaching, God is unfathomable and is beyond all verbal description or mental conception. God's essence cannot be expressed in human words. Therefore, advocates of apophatism insist that one must not speak of what God *is*, but of what He *is not*. They describe God not by affirmation, but by negation.

Pelikan notes that for Gregory Palamas, even description by negation is not adequate.<sup>1038</sup> In the same spirit, Pseudo-Dionysius writes,

But when making the predication and abstractions of things after It, we neither predicate, nor abstract from It ; since the all-perfect and uniform Cause of all is both above every definition and the pre-eminence of Him, Who is absolutely freed from all and beyond the whole, is also above every abstraction.<sup>1039</sup>

However, defenders of apophatic theology do not totally reject God's immanence, but insist that He must be approached not in a rational fashion, but a mystical one. He maintains His ontological "distance" from humans, yet at the same time makes Himself available for fellowship through His so-called "uncreated energies." Although God's essence is totally transcendent and unapproachable, He connects with people through His self-manifestation in the form of His "uncreated energies."

Bloesch adds that some mystics emphasize God's transcendence to the point of encroaching on His triune nature. This means that God manifests Himself as a "Trinity" only in His "immanent form." Pseudo-Dionysius represents this view in the East, and Meister Eckhart in the West.<sup>1040</sup>

Bloesch properly assesses that such thinking derives from Neoplatonism. He comments on the mystical approach to knowing God:

The Christian mystic sought to maintain the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, but by envisaging God in Neoplatonic terms as a motionless, undifferentiated unity they were not able to preserve the biblical conception of a God who actively works in history and identifies with our pain and sorrow. To find the pure god, they said, we need to rise above words and images, time and materiality, to the realm of pure spirit.<sup>1041</sup>

Another adherent of "hyper-transcendence" in the West was Rudolph Otto (1869-1937).<sup>1042</sup> Although he did not reject God's immanence, he nonetheless laid great stress on God's uniqueness. He felt that the knowledge of God is better attained not through reason, but with a direct, inner experience with the "numinous" – Otto's designation for Deity. In his view, "A God who is understood is no God."<sup>1043</sup>

The concept of the "numinous" corresponds to the idea of "holiness" and is defined as "that which is wholly *other* from the mundane, separate, set apart, unapproachable."<sup>1044</sup> For Otto, experience with the numinous is foundational for the religious life. The numinous is also called the *mysterium tremendum*, or "the tremendous or mighty, but mysterious and indescribable power – which we can experience but cannot

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<sup>1037</sup> Лосский В. Н. Богословие и Боговидение // Общ. ред. Владимир Писляков. – М.: Издательство Свято-Владимирского Братства, 2000. – Р. 45; Иларион, А. Таинство Веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – Р. 32.

<sup>1038</sup> Pelikan J. The Christian Tradition. Vol. 2 The Spirit of Eastern Christendom. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1974. – P. 265.

<sup>1039</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius. On Mystic Theology // The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite / Trans. John Parker. – London: James Parker and Co., 1897. – chp. 5.

<sup>1040</sup> Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – p. 81, 175-178.

<sup>1041</sup> Bloesch, p. 176.

<sup>1042</sup> See Pessin A. The God Question. – Oxford: One World, 2009. – P. 210-211.

<sup>1043</sup> Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>1044</sup> Ibid.

articulate or analyze.”<sup>1045</sup> An experience with the numinous, on the one hand, terrifies the worshipper, but on the other hand, strangely attracts and fascinates him/her, producing a paradoxical reaction.<sup>1046</sup>

Karl Barth offers another extreme perspective on God’s transcendence. He felt that God was so “other” that a person cannot know Him or relate to Him unless God first of all takes the initiative to reveal Himself to that individual.<sup>1047</sup> In Barth’s opinion, “Through God alone may God be known.”<sup>1048</sup> Mueller expounds Barth’s thought, “Only God can reveal himself. He alone determines when, where, and how he will manifest himself; moreover, he defines the conditions under which he may be known by man.”<sup>1049</sup> Consequently, God is “Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness.”<sup>1050</sup>

In Barth’s thought, people have no idea at all how God might reveal Himself until that moment of revelation occurs. As fallen creatures, our reason is not in proper condition to know God truly. Nonetheless, through incarnation of the Son and the work of the Holy Spirit, God has transcended that barrier to make Himself known.

Barth is ready to admit that God does reveal Himself through the Bible, preaching and the sacraments. However, that revelation comes only when the Spirit “quickens” or “makes alive” those words or that experience in the hearts of the recipients. As far as general revelation goes, Barth ardently insists that people cannot accurately perceive God in nature or by unenlightened human reason alone. In Barth’s thought, “What is important is not what man thinks about God, but what God thinks about man.”<sup>1051</sup>

Therefore, Barth held to a “limited immanence.” Knowledge of God is available only when God is pleased to bestow it. Outside of these special, personal encounters, people cannot know the transcendent God.

Next, we can examine the views of a contemporary of Karl Barth – Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>1052</sup> His understanding of God’s transcendence approximates Barth’s. Yet, they differ in that Bultmann felt that people’s inability to properly perceive God was not so much because of human depravity, but from God’s transcended excellence. He “stands over and against the material order.” Bultmann “stresses the great distance between God and humanity.” He adds, “God is so great that we cannot know him or speak of him sensibly at all.”<sup>1053</sup>

Therefore, the knowledge of God again is attained not through written revelation, but only by means of a personal encounter with Him. Bultmann asserts that this is how the biblical writers knew the Lord. They expressed their existential experience with Him in the form of myths about the Lord Jesus, which do not necessarily correspond to historical events. Consequently, when we study Scripture we must “demythologize” the story to find its true inspirational value.

Although we will offer refutation of all these theories in our conclusion, it is worth raising an immediate objection to Bultmann’s views. It is clear that Bultmann seeks to emphasize God’s transcendence over creation. Yet, at the same time, He rejects the supernatural features of Scripture, assigning them to myth. He feels the miracle stories of the Bible are imports from ancient, magical worldviews. What better way, though, to accent the Lord’s transcendence than to acknowledge that He works in supernatural ways? Bultmann limits God’s actions to the natural plane, which actually undermines His transcendence.

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<sup>1045</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1046</sup>Harrisville R. A., Sundberg, W. The Bible in Modern Culture. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995. – P. 208.

<sup>1047</sup>See Mueller D. L. Karl Barth // Patterson B. E. Makers of the Modern Theological Mind. – Waco, TX: Word, 1972. – P. 62-91; Webster J. Karl Barth. – 2nd ed. – London: Continuum, 2004. – P. 76-86; Henry, v. 6, p. 36-41.

<sup>1048</sup>Mueller, p. 62.

<sup>1049</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1050</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>1051</sup>Torrance T. F. Karl Barth // Hunt G. L. Ten Makers of Modern Protestant Thought. – New York, NY: Association Press, 1958. – P. 60-62.

<sup>1052</sup>See Hill J. The History of Christian Thought. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2003. – P. 278-281; McClendon J. W. Pacemakers of Christian Thought. – Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1962. – P. 47-52; Michalson C. Rudolph Bultmann // Hunt G. L. Ten Makers of Modern Protestant Thought. – New York, NY: Association Press, 1958. – P. 104-112; Jacobsen H. Rudolf Bultmann // Douglas J., Comfort P. W. Who's Who in Christian History. – Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992. – P. 116-117.

<sup>1053</sup>Hill, p. 279-280.

## B. God's Immanence

### 1. Definition and Biblical Testimony

In the wake of the Enlightenment and as a reaction to the emergence of Deism, theologians and philosophers swung into the opposite extreme and embraced liberalism, which focused on God's immanence. McConnell observes, "It was inevitable that, after the old deism had swung to one extreme, the new immanence would swing to the other."<sup>1054</sup> He also comments that promoters of God's transcendence lived by a heavenly hope, while defenders of immanence focused on earthly life. The former "acted as if they could not find God here," while the latter "act as if we could find him nowhere else."<sup>1055</sup>

Millard Erickson provides the following definition of immanence: "By this we mean God's presence and activity within nature, human nature, and history."<sup>1056</sup> Bloesch shares the insight that God's immanence is not a necessary feature of His nature, but rather is an act of His will. Just as He was under no compulsion to create the world, but did so according to His good pleasure, He draws near to creation to fellowship with it not because He has to, but because He wants to.<sup>1057</sup>

Many Scripture passages relate that the Lord is near to His creatures and is actively participating in the affairs of this world.<sup>1058</sup>

- Yahweh is near to all who call upon Him (Ps 145:18).
- You are near, O Yahweh (Ps 119:151).
- In whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind? (Job 12:10).
- "Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?" declares Yahweh. "Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" declares Yahweh (Jer 23:24).
- (He) upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb 1:3)
- ...that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us; for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, "For we also are His children" (Acts 17:27-28).

Other passages speak of people's dependence on God for their very existence (Job 34:14-15; Ps 104:29-30). The Bible also relates that God is among His people (Isa 63:11; Hag 2:5) and that He personally cares for His creation (Matt 5:45; 6:25-30; 10:29-30).

McConnell clarifies that immanence can be understood in various senses.<sup>1059</sup> One can be "close" to another in different ways: emotionally, physically, or socially. In addition, people can experience intimacy with the Lord at various times and in various ways. One often experiences His nearness especially during prayer, worship, or the study of His Word. Moreover, God is especially "close" to those who keep His commandments (Jn 14:21-23). In addition, McConnell comments that the Lord's presence seems especially near when He manifests His power in blessing or chastisement. Finally, he makes the interesting observation that when Jesus healed the woman with a hemorrhage (Mk 5:25ff), many people were physically near Him, brushing by Him, but only her touch of faith released His power on her behalf.

### 2. Extreme Positions on Immanence

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<sup>1054</sup>McConnell F. J. *The Diviner Immanence*. – New York, NY: The Methodist Book Concern, 1906. – P. 60.

<sup>1055</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>1056</sup>Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 302.

<sup>1057</sup>Bloesch, p. 24, 44-46, 99.

<sup>1058</sup>Grudem, p. 267; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 302-303.

<sup>1059</sup>See McConnell.

As we witnessed in the case of God's transcendence, His immanence is also at times taken to an extreme. The classic example is pantheism, which totally rejects the idea of a transcendent Supreme Being. Pantheism teaches that God is one with the universe. The universe is simply a manifestation of His being. God, in essence, is not distinct from the universe.

Another example is the theological movement oddly called "the death of God."<sup>1060</sup> According to this view, God was once transcendent, but consciously chose to enter into His creation, become "absorbed" in it, and ceased to exist apart from it. In other words, God committed "transcendental suicide" and now only exists immanently in creation. He did not cease to exist, of course, but just forfeited His transcendent nature. Borden Brown describes this idea in the following way: "Then we come to a natural which roots in the supernatural, and a supernatural whose methods are natural."<sup>1061</sup>

Some advocates of this view theorize that God abandoned His transcendence when He became incarnate in Jesus Christ. From that time on, He now only exists in His immanent form as part of the world. Expressions of religious devotion to a transcendent God, like worship, prayer, ceremony, and the like, are thought meaningless. A more appropriate form of "worship" is to take part in the improvement of the world and human society.

This system requires a total reworking of Christian faith.<sup>1062</sup> The kingdom of God is understood as "merely the realization of man's latent possibilities," unbelief is the "inability to believe in our own opportunities," and sin is refusal "to follow our own hopes." Salvation is "not from God, but through pulling our boots on."

A well-known but poorly understood figure in the history of Christianity is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom Hitler executed near the end of World War II.<sup>1063</sup> Bonhoeffer's passion was to apply Christian faith to practical, everyday life. He strove to tear down the division between religious and secular aspects of life. He was disturbed that the Church gave such little attention to world affairs. He feared that society saw the Church as irrelevant.

Working off the model of Christ's incarnation, Bonhoeffer taught that the Church should exist for the world, to serve it. The Church is a point of contact between Christ and human society. Robertson describes Bonhoeffer's views, "The church is only a section of humanity, in which Christ has taken form... the church is humanity in Christ, incarnate, sentenced and awakened to new life."<sup>1064</sup> Furthermore, "The supernatural must be found in the natural and the holy must be found in the secular."<sup>1065</sup> Finally, "Christianity is not interested specially in religion, but in the whole of human life. Christ calls men, not to be religious, but to be men."<sup>1066</sup>

Cairns feels that Bonhoeffer lost the conception of God's transcendence. Bonhoeffer himself states,

This concern of Jesus for others (is) the experience of transcendence... Our relation to God (is) not a religious relationship to a supreme Being, absolute in power and goodness, which is a spurious conception of transcendence but a new life for others, through participation in the Being of God.<sup>1067</sup>

Another erroneous view that rejects God's transcendence is the philosophy of Georg Hegel, who taught that nothing exists except God.<sup>1068</sup> God is an absolute spirit, and the world is a manifestation of His being. More precisely, all objects in the universe are figments of His imagination.

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<sup>1060</sup>Henry, v. 6, p. 38; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, v. 1, p. 309-310; Cairns, p. 13, 69-70, 89-103.

<sup>1061</sup>Brown B. P. *The Immanence of God*. – Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1905. – P. 17; quotation from Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 265.

<sup>1062</sup>Noted in Cairns, p. 69-70.

<sup>1063</sup>See Hill, p. 288; Cairns, p. 79-93; Robertson E. H. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* // Nineham D. E. *Robertson E. H. Makers of Contemporary Theology*. – Richmond VA: John Knox, 1966. – P. 14-51.

<sup>1064</sup>Robertson, p. 42.

<sup>1065</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>1066</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>1067</sup>Bonhoeffer D. *Letters and Papers from Prison* / Ed. E. Bethge // New York: MacMillan, 1953. – P. 381. Parentheses added. Also see Cairns, p. 93.

<sup>1068</sup>See Henry, v. 6, p. 36-38; Pessin, p. 180.

According to Hegel, God is aware of Himself only in virtue of the fact that through human beings, who are, in essence, manifestations of God's imagination, He is able to think about Himself. Pessin describes it this way, "Our knowledge of God just is His way of knowing Himself and thus being Himself. God could not fully manifest Himself unless human beings had the proper awareness of God."<sup>1069</sup> So then, even the idea of God's transcendence is a figment of His imagination created through human imagination.

Erickson makes the following comment on Hegel:

Hegel understood the fundamental character of reality as being mental or ideational in nature. Reality is one great thinking mind, the absolute. In a very real sense, everything that happens within this world is merely a thought in the mind of God.<sup>1070</sup>

Also worth mention is the teaching of the so-called "father of liberal theology," Friedrich Schleiermacher, who laid great stress on God's nearness to us. He emphasized God's immanence to the point that Carl Henry considers him a pantheist.<sup>1071</sup>

Schleiermacher did acknowledge God's transcendence, but his stress of His immanence eclipsed it.<sup>1072</sup> According to Schleiermacher, a miracle "is simply the religious name for an event. Every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle as soon as the religious view of it can be the dominant. To me all is miracle.... The more religious you are, the more miracle you will see everywhere."<sup>1073</sup>

Concerning God's revelation, Schleiermacher felt that what was written is not as important as why it was written, that is, what inspired the biblical writers to compose their books. Truth is found in the religious experience of the writers.

Schleiermacher claimed that the confirming sign that a person really knows God is the presence of a deep sense of dependence on Him. Another identifying mark is a feeling of compassion in fellowship with others. Schleiermacher expounds his thought:

The usual conception of God as one single being outside the world and behind the world is not the beginning and the end of religion... but immediate consciousness of the Deity as He is found in ourselves and in the world.<sup>1074</sup>

So then, the basis for one's knowledge of God is not a written record of divine revelation or church tradition, but personal experience with the Divine. Sykes comments,

For a liberal theology which acknowledges that it is possible to disbelieve what both the Bible and Church teach, the question of why one should believe in God becomes inescapable in its own terms. Something has to be pointed to as evidence; and Schleiermacher begins a whole tradition of theology by pointing to human religious experience.<sup>1075</sup>

For Schleiermacher, our goal is seeking God should not be to grasp His nature, but to be grasped by Him. Truth is discovered not by studying theology, but when a person is personally moved by God. However,

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<sup>1069</sup>Pessin, p. 180.

<sup>1070</sup>Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 264.

<sup>1071</sup>Henry, v. 4, p. 154.

<sup>1072</sup>Sykes S. Friedrich Schleiermacher // Nineham D. E. Robertson E. H. *Makers of Contemporary Theology*. – Richmond VA: John Knox, 1965. – P. 25-47.

<sup>1073</sup>Schleiermacher F. *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*. – London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1893. – P. 88.

<sup>1074</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>1075</sup>Sykes, p. 47.

Schleiermacher taught that one's personal experience with the Lord is not unique – all people have access to the same experience. This common encounter with God serves as the basis for unity among people.<sup>1076</sup>

Paul Tillich is the author of yet another aberrant view of God immanence.<sup>1077</sup> His theological method, the “principle of correlation,” proposes that theological investigation should begin with topics that interest people. By Tillich's observation, the greatest concern people have is anxiety about death and the corresponding loss of significance. Therefore, Christian faith should respond to this and other needs pressing on the human soul.

Tillich suggests that the answer to the problem of death and insignificance is “being.” A person must learn to “be.” For Tillich, God is “being” itself, that is, the “ground of all being.” Since God is the “ground of all being,” He has the power to counteract “non-being,” which is the root problem of humanity. Therefore, the key to authentic living is to battle “non-being” and attain to authentic living, or “being.”

Tillich understands God in an impersonal sense. He would not use terms like “person,” “living” or “existing” to describe Him.<sup>1078</sup> God even surpasses the attribute of “being” – He is deeper still. In Tillich's opinion, “To say that God exists is to make him one entity among others, an object, of however exalted a kind, within his own universe.”<sup>1079</sup>

Whenever someone experiences a deep connection with another person or object – animate or inanimate – he or she is drawing near to God, the “ground of all being.” This individual is discovering the underlining unity between all things, finding a connection with the “ground of all being,” that is, God.

Although Tillich's system is rightly classed with those that over-emphasize God's immanence, we can detect an aspect of transcendence in it as well. Since God is the “ground of all being,” He is beyond being. In a way, He exists beyond existence – in His uniqueness. He is a “God above God, the abyss of the Godhead.”<sup>1080</sup>

### C. Conclusions

A true understanding of God's nature includes both aspects – His transcendence and His immanence. As noted above, adequate biblical evidence exists to support this conviction. We may summarize the biblical teaching by stating that the transcendent God is present and active in His creation. Tozer contrasts these two features in the following way: “God is above all things presiding, beneath all things sustaining, outside of all things embracing, inside of all things filling.”<sup>1081</sup> Erickson cautions,

The Bible teaches that God is both immanent and transcendent. God is present and active within his creation, but superior to and independent of anything that he has created. These biblical ideas must be kept in balance. The tendency to emphasize one or the other will lead to a faulty conception of God.<sup>1082</sup>

Unfortunately, both these concepts have been abused. One form of “hyper-transcendence” is Deism. The personal testimony, however, of millions of individuals contradicts Deism's claims that God is not active in human affairs. Countless individuals have experienced specific answers to prayer. It also seems fantastic to assume that God would create such a glorious world for His creatures to inhabit, then abandon them and refuse to fellowship with them or take part in their lives. In addition, if God is a personal God, then one would expect that He would desire and seek personal interaction with people and not isolate Himself from them. Moreover, how can a loving God forsake His creation when so many insurmountable challenges prevent it from

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<sup>1076</sup>Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>1077</sup>See Bloesch, p. 178; Thomas J. H. Paul Tillich // Nineham D. E. Robertson E. H. Makers of Contemporary Theology. – Richmond VA: John Knox, 1965. – P. 11-15; Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 306-309; McClendon, p. 41-44.

<sup>1078</sup>Nonetheless, Tillich believes that God became personal in Jesus Christ.

<sup>1079</sup>Cairns, p. 60.

<sup>1080</sup>Bloesch, p. 178.

<sup>1081</sup>Tozer, v. 1, p. 22.

<sup>1082</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1998. – P. 327.

enjoying the life He certainly intended it to enjoy. A more thorough treatment of Deism is found in volume 1 of this series.

The views of apophatism, Otto, Barth, and Bultmann have common features. They exaggerate the idea of God's transcendence to the degree that they deny to believers the use of reason in obtaining knowledge of God. They "conceal" God's nature in a mystery and thereby undermine the authority of His written revelation in Holy Scripture. They replace the intelligent study of God's Word with a mystical or existential approach to knowing the Lord.

However, mysticism presents multiple difficulties. Most notable is that it results in subjectivism since it is impossible to verify its claims by any objective standards. Every mystic will have his/her own "indisputable" theory about God. If believers do not test the spirits by the Word of God, how can they be sure that they are really contacting God's Spirit? Furthermore, both Old and New Testaments urge God's people to seek Him through the Word (see Josh 1:8; Ps 1:1-3; Ps 118; Prov 4:20-22; Matt 4:4; Col 3:16; Acts 20:32; 1 Pet 2:2). God does not "conceal" His nature in a mystery; He "reveals" it in His Word. Apophatism is more fully discussed and refuted in chapter 1 of this volume.

To further refute "hyper-immanence," we can note several weaknesses in this approach. First, it clearly contradicts the biblical testimony that declares that God acts and speaks independent of His creation. Second, this theory rejects the supernatural and undermines the practice of prayer. Third, God is basically presented as an impersonal force, with whom it is impossible to fellowship.<sup>1083</sup> Fellowship with a transcendent God who is able to interact with us is certainly superior to contact with an immanent, impersonal force.<sup>1084</sup>

Furthermore, if God was "absorbed" into the universe and is now one with it, how can we explain the presence of evil in a world in which God is enmeshed and supposedly directs?<sup>1085</sup> If God directs all the events in the world, then He is responsible for all the evil we encounter in life.

Some have posited that an over-emphasis on God's immanence enabled Hitler to come to power in Germany. People took him to be God's special instrument.<sup>1086</sup> Acknowledging God's transcendence, though, affords us an external, objective basis for judging what is happening in the world.<sup>1087</sup>

McConnell claims that "hyper-immanence" robs Christian faith of its uniqueness. If God works exclusively through natural means and processes, what place is there for the redemptive work of Christ?<sup>1088</sup>

In the following chapter, we will discuss God's providence and miracles. This will be, in fact, a continuation of our discussion of immanence and transcendence. The former finds expression in God's work of providence, while the latter is demonstrated in His supernatural acts of power.

## Resources Used

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<sup>1083</sup>Cairns, p. 20, 65-66.

<sup>1084</sup>McConnell, p. 61.

<sup>1085</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 23-24.

<sup>1086</sup>Some German Christians signed a document which stated, "We are full of thanks to God that He, as Lord of history, has given us Adolf Hitler, our leader and savior from our difficult lot" (see Berkouwer G. C. *The Providence of God*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952. – P. 176-177; Erickson, *God the Father Almighty*, p. 267).

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# Chapter 15 - God's Sovereignty: Divine Providence and Miracles

## A. God's Providence

### 1. Definition

As Lord of heaven and earth, God has all authority to direct events in the universe, including the forces of nature and the course of human history. The question is how much God actually intervenes in earthly affairs. Is He the cause of all that occurs? Here, we enter a discussion of God's providence.

We will contrast here God's providence with His working of miracles – the subject of our next section. Providence is a manifestation of His immanence. It is His subtle, inconspicuous work. When working miracles, though, God is in His "transcendent mode." He intrudes upon the normal course of affairs in a dramatic, supernatural fashion.

The question of God's providence involves the issue of human freedom. Does God in His work of providence also exercise control over human decisions? Subsequent chapters will delve into that topic.

John of Damascus writes about providence:

Providence, then, is the care that God takes over existing things. And again: Providence is the will of God through which all existing things receive their fitting issue. But if Providence is God's will, according to true reasoning all things that come into being through Providence must necessarily be both most fair and most excellent, and such that they cannot be surpassed.<sup>1089</sup>

However, contrary to the Damascene's claim that providence leads to things that are "most excellent, and such that they cannot be surpassed," in our experience we observe many events in nature and history that are truly harmful and not helpful. This leads us into a discussion of the so-called "problem of evil" – why God allows evil in His world. We raise this question in chapter 19.

### 2. Biblical Data

#### a. Old Testament

The books recording the earliest history of God's dealings with people are the Torah and the book of Job. In Job, Elihu claims that God can control the powers of nature and employ them for His own purposes: "For He draws up the drops of water, they distill rain from the mist.... Behold, He spreads His lightning about Him, and He covers the depths of the sea. For by these He judges peoples; He gives food in abundance" (Job 36:27-31).

Elihu continues his comments on God's providence:

For to the snow He says, "Fall on the earth," And to the downpour and the rain, "Be strong." He seals the hand of every man, that all men may know His work. Then the beast goes into its lair and remains in its den. Out of the south comes the storm, and out of the north the cold. From the breath of God ice is made, and the expanse of the waters is frozen. Also with moisture He loads the thick cloud; He disperses the cloud of His lightning. It changes direction, turning around by His guidance, that it may do whatever He commands it on the face of the inhabited earth. Whether for correction, or for His world, or for lovingkindness, He causes it to happen (Job 37:6-13).

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<sup>1089</sup>John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2.29

In the Torah, defeat in battle is often attributed to God's intervention.<sup>1090</sup> Other passages also demonstrate God's control over both events in nature and happenings in history. Punishment by means of natural catastrophe and military action are described together in Deuteronomy 28:15-68 and Leviticus 26:14-33. These punishments are inflicted due to violation of the covenant. Another example is when God closed all the wombs in the house of Abimelech until Abraham prayed for him (Gen 20:17-18).

On the other hand, God can direct nature and history to bring blessing to His people. The same chapters cited above reveal this to be true (Deut 28:1-14; Lev 26:3-13). Other examples also exist where divine providence resulted in blessing, such as when Abimelech took Sarah for a wife, but God did not allow him to touch her (Gen 20:1-6), and when God led the servant of Abraham to find a wife for Isaac through a "chance" meeting at a well (Gen 24). God was also credited for Leah's fertility in childbearing (Gen 29:31). Moreover, God granted success to Joseph in whatever he did: whether in the home of Potiphar, in prison, or in Pharaoh's house (Gen chps. 39ff).

The Old Testament historical books are rich with examples of God's governance of nature and history, both for blessing and for chastisement. Because they seized the ark of the covenant, "the hand of Yahweh was heavy on the Ashdodites, and He ravaged them and smote them with tumors" (1 Sam 5:6). God struck Nabal for refusing to help David (1 Sam 25:38). In another instance, the Lord used illness to punish Israel for David's transgression (2 Sam 24:15). We also recall the time when Israel suffered famine due to Saul's sin (2 Sam 21:1). Drought can also be a means of divine punishment (1 Kin 8:35-36; 17:1; 2 Chr 7:13). On two occasions, God used lions to fulfill His purpose (1 Kin 13:24-28; 2 Kin 17:25-26).

God is not limited to use natural phenomena for chastisement, but can direct historical events toward that end as well. In most cases, this involves military action. He raised up various Gentile oppressors to do His will: Mesopotamia (Judg 3:7-8), Moab (Judg 3:12-14), Egypt (1 Kin 14:25-26; 2 Chr 12:2), Assyria (2 Kin 15:29-30), Babylon (1 Chr 6:15; Ezra 5:12), and others (2 Sam 7:14; 1 Kin 11:14-15; 2 Kin 24:2; 2 Chr 28:5). Through Naaman, the captain of the Syrian army, God gave victory to the Syrians in war (2 Kin 5:1). A striking example was when Israel outnumbered their enemies, but nonetheless suffered a humiliating defeat because of the Lord's intervention (2 Chr 24:23-24).

Aside from punishing His people in general, the Lord used various means to punish individuals. Ahab was fatally struck by a "random" arrow from a Syrian soldier (1 Kin 22:34). The Bible records that the Lord "killed" Saul by the hand of the Philistines (1 Chr 10:14). Ahaziah's visit to Joram was not accidental, because by it God planned the former's "destruction" (2 Chr 22:7).

On the other hand, the Lord can turn situations in someone's favor. He send rain to ease a drought (1 Kin 18:1). He gave the ability to conceive children (Ruth 4:13; cf. 1 Chr 26:5). In relieving a famine, God "visited His people in giving them food" (Ruth 1:6).

Historical events can also result in blessings from the Lord. Sometimes it manifests in victory in battle (Judg 4:14-15; 20:35; 1 Chr 5:21). Seemingly "coincidental" occurrences can be designed by the Lord. Ruth "happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz" (Ruth 2:1-3). No matter how hard Saul pursued David, he could never corner him, because "God did not deliver him into his hand" (1 Sam 23:14; cf. 23:27-28; 26:12).

Moreover, when the Amalekites plundered David's camp, God intervened so that David and his men received everything back without any loss (1 Sam 30:1-2, 19). God gave David success in all his endeavors (1 Chr 11:9) and orchestrated events that led to him becoming king (2 Sam 3:9-10). When David's dynasty apostatized, the Lord nevertheless gave David's descendants favor before the king of Babylon and thereby preserved his royal line (2 Kin 25:27-30).

Through divine providence, people often received guidance from the Lord. When Saul sought his lost donkeys, God led him to Samuel. From this meeting, Saul not only received assurance concerning his animals, but his appointment as the future king of Israel (1 Sam 9:16). Furthermore, Yahweh publically confirmed his appointment as king through the casting of lots (1 Sam 10:20-21). Casting lots was an instrument of guidance in

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<sup>1090</sup>Num 14:9; 21:29; Deut 2:21-22, 31-32; 3:1-4; 7:1-2, 20, 23-24; 9:1-3.

other instances as well (see 1 Sam 14:41). Jonathan was guided by signs when deciding to launch an attack on the Philistines (1 Sam 14:8-12). Even the Philistine priests discerned by signs that Yahweh sent distress on them (1 Sam 6:9-10).

However, it is important to note that the Old Testament abounds with examples when people thought that God was leading through circumstances where that was not the case. It is probable that, superstition guided their interpretation of these events. Note the following cases:

- Judg 18:10 – the spies from the tribe of Dan suppose that God gave a certain defenseless city into their hands.
- Judg 21:3, 15 – God is blamed for the annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin.
- Ruth 1:13, 19-21 – God is blamed for deaths in Naomi's family.
- Ruth 4:12 – It is felt that God must give children.
- 1 Sam 23:7 – Saul mistakenly thinks that God has given David into his hand.
- 1 Sam 24:4 – Certain men wrongly suppose that God has delivered Saul into David's hand (see 1 Sam 26:8).
- 2 Sam 4:5-8 – Assassins of Ish-bosheth think that they are doing God's will.
- 2 Sam 16:10f – David assumes that the Lord commanded Shimei to curse him.
- 1 Kin 17:18-20 – Elijah and the widow of Zarephath suppose that God took the life of her son.

We continue with the study of the Old Testament poetical books. Psalm 44 attributes Israel's victory over the Canaanites, not to Israel's army, but rather to the Lord: "For by their own sword they did not possess the land, and their own arm did not save them, but Your right hand and Your arm and the light of Your presence, for You favored them" (Ps 44:3). Sometimes, however, God was with the enemy's army instead (Ps 89:38-45).

Much is said about the Lord directing the forces of nature:

- You shed abroad a plentiful rain, O God (Ps 68:10).
- You rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, You still them (Ps 89:9).
- For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind, Which lifted up the waves of the sea.... He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed (Ps 107:25-29).
- He causes the vapors to ascend from the ends of the earth; who makes lightnings for the rain, who brings forth the wind from His treasures (Ps 135:7).

The Psalmist views God's intervention in nature as a means of showing care for His creation: "Who covers the heavens with clouds, who provides rain for the earth, who makes grass to grow on the mountains" (Ps 147:8); "He gives to the beast its food, {and} to the young ravens which cry" (Ps 147:9); "The eyes of all look to You, and You give them their food in due time. You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing" (Ps 145:15-16; cf. Ps 136:25).

The prophetic books focus on Yahweh employing foreign military might to punish both His wayward people and other nations as well. Isaiah writes, "He will also lift up a standard to the distant nation, and will whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and behold, it will come with speed swiftly" (Isa 5:26). God speaks of Babylon's coming attack against Judah: "I Myself will war against you with an outstretched hand and a mighty arm, even in anger and wrath and great indignation" (Jer 21:5). Ezekiel prophesies the same:

Therefore, O Oholibah, thus says the Lord Yahweh, "Behold I will arouse your lovers against you, from whom you were alienated, and I will bring them against you from every side: the Babylonians and all the Chaldeans, Pekod and Shoa and Koa, {and} all the Assyrians with them" (Ezek 23:22-23).

In the prophets Joel's words, "Yahweh utters His voice before His army; surely His camp is very great, for strong is he who carries out His word. The day of Yahweh is indeed great and very awesome, and who can

endure it?" (Joel 2:11). Micah prophesies against the Northern Kingdom: "For I will make Samaria a heap of ruins in the open country" (Mic 1:6). We can also cite Zephaniah: "So I will stretch out My hand against Judah And against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Zeph 1:4), Habakkuk: "For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans" (Hab 1:6), and Obadiah: "'Though you build high like the eagle, though you set your nest among the stars, From there I will bring you down,' declares Yahweh" (Obad 4).

In execution of His judgments, the Lord may choose any means He pleases: Assyria (Isa 37:26-27), Philistia and Syria (Isa 9:11-12), Babylon (Ezek 29:19; Lam 1:14), etc. He may even arouse civil war among God's people, Israel: "Manasseh {devours} Ephraim, and Ephraim Manasseh, {and} together they are against Judah. In {spite of} all this, His anger does not turn away and His hand is still stretched out" (Isa 9:21; cf. Isa 19:2).

Although in the above citations, God claims an active participation in the overthrow of the disobedient, in Lamentations 2:3 He appears to simply withdraw His protection instead: "He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy." Nevertheless, in the preceding verse Yahweh again takes an active posture: "The Lord has swallowed up; He has not spared all the habitations of Jacob. In His wrath He has thrown down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah."

The Lord not only punishes Israel by the hand of Gentiles, He also punishes other Gentiles in the same fashion. His hand was stretched out against Egypt (Jer 46:8-10), Philistia (Jer 47:4), Babylon (Jer 50:18), Assyria (Nah 2:13), Tyre (Ezek 26:3), Edom (Ezek 25:14), Elam (Jer 49:35), and others. Many of these nations were once God's instruments of chastisement for Israel, but they were actually seeking their own gain, as Isaiah writes,

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hands is My indignation, I send it against a godless nation and commission it against the people of My fury to capture booty and to seize plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. Yet it does not so intend, nor does it plan so in its heart, but rather it is its purpose to destroy and to cut off many nations (Isa 10:5-7).

Therefore, the time will come when the Lord's instruments of punishment will themselves be punished:

Therefore thus says the Lord Yahweh of hosts, "O My people who dwell in Zion, do not fear the Assyrian who strikes you with the rod and lifts up his staff against you, the way Egypt {did}. For in a very little while My indignation {against you} will be spent and My anger {will be directed} to their destruction" (Isa 10:24-25).

The prophets also speak of God's providential guidance of nature for judgment. First, we note a statement concerning God's absolute control over natural forces: "When He utters His voice, {there is} a tumult of waters in the heavens, and He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain and brings forth the wind from His storehouses" (Jer 51:16). God can accomplish His purpose of correction through drought (Isa 19:5-10; Jer 14:1-6), famine and illness (Jer 27:8; 29:18), wild animals (Ezek 5:17), fire and brimstone (Amos 7:1-4), earthquakes (Ezek 38:19), or storms (Jon 1:4). In the book of Jonah, God commanded a fish (2:10) and a worm (4:5-8) to perform His will. Even casting lots brought an answer from the Lord (1:7).

On the other hand, the prophets record how God used historical events to favor His own. For example, Yahweh raised up Cyrus to release His people from captivity (Isa 44:28ff; cf. Ezra 1:1). He granted favor before the king of Babylon so that the latter was kindly disposed to the remnant of Judah remaining in Palestine (Jer 42:12).

We conclude our Old Testament study with the exilic and post-exilic literature. God again employs nature (Zech 10:1) and human effort (Zech 9:13-15), yet in the latter example, God is now punishing the Gentiles through Israel. Three writings of this era focus heavily on God's providence: Daniel, Esther, and Haggai. The latter book relates how the Lord withheld rain in Judah because God's people were negligent in constructing the temple:

“You have sown much, but harvest little; {you} eat, but {there is} not {enough} to be satisfied; {you} drink, but {there is} not {enough} to become drunk; {you} put on clothing, but no one is warm {enough}; and he who earns, earns wages {to put} into a purse with holes.... Why?” declares Yahweh of hosts, “Because of My house which {lies} desolate, while each of you runs to his own house” (Hag 1:6-9; cf. 2:14-19).

The book of Daniel demonstrates God’s lordship over world leaders. First, He gave Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 1:2) along with other kingdoms: “You, O king, are the king of kings, to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the strength and the glory” (Dan 2:37; cf. 5:18). God gives that authority to whom He pleases (Dan 4:17, 27, 32; 5:21). He gave authority to four successive kingdoms, but at the same time set limits to their reigns (Dan 7; cf. 11:27).

Amazingly, throughout the entire book of Esther, we see no direct mention of God. However, He is unquestionably active in every chapter. Esther gains favor before the king and as a result becomes queen. God’s intention is to save Israel from annihilation through her (Est 4:14). Other “coincidental” occurrences happen in Israel’s favor. Yahweh robs King Ahasuerus of sleep so that he orders the chronicles be read to him. There he discovers the heroism of Mordecai (Est 6:1). Furthermore, Haman appears in the king’s court at the exact moment when the king was seeking a way to honor Mordecai (Est 6:4).

In summary, we will consider Boyd’s view concerning the nature of Old Testament narrative. He feels that the Old Testament record does not always distinguish what God personally did from that which He simply allowed. Nearly everything that occurs is attributed to Him. This underscores the existence of only one God at a time when polytheism was prevalent. In Boyd’s words, “The one and only Creator takes responsibility (though never the moral culpability) for all that comes to pass in his creation.”<sup>1091</sup>

Langford agrees. He observes that in the Old Testament, people tended to see God’s hand in everything. Referring to Amos 3:6, he writes, “It would never have occurred to the Jewish writers to contrast events in which God was active with those in which he was not.”<sup>1092</sup>

## **b. New Testament**

The New Testament appeals to God’s providence with less frequency than the Old Testament does, but focuses more on God’s miraculous deeds. Nonetheless, we can highlight cases of His immanent work.

God’s providence was in force at birth of Messiah. For example, John the Baptist’s father, Zechariah, was chosen by lot to enter the temple to burn incense (Lk 1:9). There, he saw a vision in which he learned of his son’s birth. In addition, Augustus’ census brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, where the Messiah was prophesied to be born (Lk 2:1-4). Moreover, the prophetess Anna “by chance” happened upon Joseph and Mary when Simeon was blessing the infant Messiah (Lk 2:38).

Curiously, most of the other examples of God’s providence occur in Luke’s other volume – the book of Acts. Matthias was chosen by lot as the twelfth apostle (Acts 1:24-26). Luke records Stephen’s speech, which included a reference to God’s favor shown to Joseph by Pharaoh (Acts 7:10), and of God’s providential care for baby Moses (Acts 7:21). Luke also relates Paul’s sermon where he announced, “He made from one {man} every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined {their} appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17:26). Not by accident, the apostle Paul, who had long intended to preach in Rome, ended up there at the expense of the Roman Empire (Acts 23:11). Finally, Paul met up with Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus in jail, whom he led to Christ (Philemon 10).

## **3. Theological Reflections**

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<sup>1091</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to William Lane Craig // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. – Kindle Edition, 2406-2411.

<sup>1092</sup>Langford M. J. Providence. – London: SCM Press, 1981. – P. 39.

God's works covers a spectrum of divine acts, which must be distinguished from one another.<sup>1093</sup> First, we heed the caution of scholars not to confuse God's work of creation with His providence. His work of creation is complete, crowned by the celebration of the Sabbath. God creates nothing new through providence. Creating something new would imply that He left some deficiency in the original created order.<sup>1094</sup> Nonetheless, He does continue to interact with the world He made. In chapter 12, we discussed God's continuing work under the rubric of "concurrence." He supplies the power that maintains creation's existence and enables it to function.

Beyond "concurrence," God can employ the natural processes that He designed to automatically function in creation to accomplish His aims. We call this "general providence." In addition, He may at times exercise more direct control over natural forces or historical events to execute His will. This is termed "special providence." Finally, the Lord can supersede natural law to perform a miracle, the topic of our next section.

Let us discuss this spectrum of divine activity in more detail.<sup>1095</sup> First, when God made the universe, He installed in creation certain powers of self-governance. By virtue of the operation of natural laws, the universe, in a certain sense, can operate autonomously, independent of God's direct control. However, we acknowledge that God's operation by the principle of "concurrence" will always come into play (see chapter 12).<sup>1096</sup>

This view differs from the theory prevalent in the Middle Ages, that God continually controls and directs all processes in the universe. It also differs from the Calvinistic view of "universal providence," by which God directly controls all that occurs without exception. Another errant view is process theology, which claims that God is not in control of natural processes, but can only exert a positive influence over them.

Although natural laws can operate, in a certain sense, independent of God, we still call this "general providence." It is "providence" in the sense that through the regular activity of the natural world, God accomplishes an aspect of His overall plan. Regularity in the universe creates the conditions under which free creatures, i.e., humans, can make decisions and predict to some degree their results. Without this stable factor, which God has instilled in creation, it would be impossible for people to exercise true freedom of will. Therefore, God established the principle of "general providence" for the sake of human freedom.

Along with support for human freedom, general providence, expressed in the operation of natural laws, provides the world with the necessary elements for survival. Jesus speaks of this in Matthew 5:45: "He causes His sun to rise on {the} evil and {the} good, and sends rain on {the} righteous and {the} unrighteous." The Old Testament affirms the same: "He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, and vegetation for the labor of man, so that he may bring forth food from the earth" (Ps. 104:14).

"Special providence" involves God's active direction of natural forces or historical events for His divine purposes. Unlike general providence, this does not involve the regular operation of natural processes, but occurs only in special circumstances. Often they are considered coincidences, yet the timely manner of their happening suggests a divine origin. They are assessed by the eyes of faith that see in them the Lord's hand and providential work.

Most of the examples we presented in the previous section are cases of special providence, for example, when Artaxerxes "by accident" learned of Mordecai's heroism at the exact moment when Haman entered the kings' court to ask for Mordecai's demise (Est 6:1-4).

Difficult questions arise, however, regarding this spectrum of God's activity – from creation to special providence.<sup>1097</sup> According to the views defended above, there exists a place for random, chance occurrences. If natural processes do possess a certain autonomy, then events can occur as a result of those processes for which God is not "to blame." Langford defines chance, or "coincidence," as an "unexpected event that is not

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<sup>1093</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>1094</sup>Sonderregger K. The Doctrine of Providence // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. The Providence of God. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – P. 145-148.

<sup>1095</sup>See Langford, p. 7-53, 125, 163-164.

<sup>1096</sup>Thomas Aquinas so reasoned.

<sup>1097</sup>Langford, p. 78-90.

deliberately planned by man or God, but just allowed to happen under the ordinary laws of nature.”<sup>1098</sup> So then, calamities may occur “from the autonomy of nature.”<sup>1099</sup>

On the other hand, the Calvinistic school categorically rejects the suggestion of chance occurrences. For example, Helseth denies that God endows creation with inherent powers that enable it to operate independent of His direct control. For him, general providence is eclipsed by special providence. In other words, God absolutely directs all natural happenings and historical events to accomplish His desired goals.<sup>1100</sup>

Claiming that all providence is “special,” Bowne makes the following generalization: “If there be purpose in anything, there is purpose in everything.”<sup>1101</sup> In Calvin’s words, “Single events are so regulated by God, and all events so proceed from his determinate counsel, that nothing happens fortuitously.”<sup>1102</sup> Quoting Turretin, Helseth writes:

God providence “consists not only in the conservation of things, but also in the concourse of God; not indifferent and general (in the sense that it passively allows second causes to determine themselves), but particular and specific.”<sup>1103</sup>

In the following chapters, we will address the claims of Calvinism. In addition, in our conclusions to this chapter we will further clarify the idea of chance occurrences.

Another question is phrased “the God of the gaps.” According to this hypothesis, God is needed only in those cases where a certain phenomenon does not correspond to the operation of natural laws. Atheists often work off the idea that God is needed only to close the “gaps” in our knowledge. The time will come, they suggest, when our understanding of the natural world will allow us to close these gaps without resorting to God. Then, faith in God will be totally irrelevant.

We respond, however, that according to the principle of “concurrence,” discussed previously, God is constantly active in providing support for the existence and actions of the universe (see chapter 12). God is the Sustainer of His creation. He is active not only in areas that natural law cannot explain (the “gaps”), but in all that occurs in nature. Therefore, in reality, there are no “gaps.”

Furthermore, scholars openly admit that they cannot close all the “gaps” in explaining natural phenomena. On the atomic level, much is puzzling and unpredictable, which we will explore later in this chapter. The proposition that natural laws will someday explain all happenings in the universe is overly optimistic.

Still another issue arises regarding the relationship between God’s providence in history and human free will. If God indeed respects human freedom, does that not limit what God can do in His special providence to direct history according to His will? Do not human choices, rather than God’s will, determine what history will record? Langford responds that even if a certain individual does not act in line with God’s intention, the Lord is more than sufficiently wise able to work around such barriers so that the end result is in accordance with His plan.<sup>1104</sup>

Finally, it is vital to distinguish God’s providence from the pagan conception of “fate.” Webster notes that God’s providence is guided by His benevolent nature and leads toward a specific goal. Fate, though, according to Webster, is unreliable, capricious, and lacks good intention.<sup>1105</sup> Moreover, unlike God our Father, fate is impersonal.<sup>1106</sup>

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<sup>1098</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>1099</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>1100</sup>Helseth P. J. *God Causes All Things* // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. – Kindle edition, 479-538.

<sup>1101</sup>Bowne B. P. *The Immanence of God*. – Boston, MA; New York, NY: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1905. – P. 58.

<sup>1102</sup>*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.16.4.

<sup>1103</sup>Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:502, noted in Helseth, Kindle edition, 479-484.

<sup>1104</sup>Langford, p. 124-126.

<sup>1105</sup>Webster J. *On the Theology of Providence* // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. *The Providence of God*. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – P. 169.

<sup>1106</sup>Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 113, 212.



## B. Miracles

### 1. Definition

From beginning to end, the Bible repeatedly testifies of the miracle-working power of Yahweh. This distinguishes the Bible from other literature. Except for myths and legends, no other publication contains such a quantity and quality of supernatural manifestations. Unlike myths and legends, the Scriptures present us with genuine history, written in a serious historical style.

A well-accepted definition of a miracle is a violation of natural law or an exception from it. Thomas Aquinas states, "Things that are at times accomplished, apart from the generally established order of things, are commonly called miracles."<sup>1107</sup> C. S. Lewis states that a miracle is "an interference with Nature by a supernatural power."<sup>1108</sup> Purtill provides a similar definition: "I propose to define a miracle as an event in which God temporarily makes an exception to the natural order of things, to show that God is acting."<sup>1109</sup> That is, a miracle must serve as a testimony of God's special intervention.

Helm deems it necessary to qualify this definition.<sup>1110</sup> In his opinion, one should not sharply contrast miracles with natural laws, since they all issue from the same Source. For Helm, a miracle is simply another means by which God operates in the universe.

Aquinas feels the same, that aside from the regular natural processes established by God, He may exert a direct influence on nature in order to produce an unexpected result, i.e., a "miracle."<sup>1111</sup> Augustine thought along these lines as well to the degree that he rejected the idea that miracles contradicted natural law, since both fulfill the will of God, which cannot contradict itself.

In light of the above considerations, we affirm with Langford a more precise definition of the miraculous. A miracle is the employment of natural processes in such a way as to produce a result that does not correspond to what one might predict from natural laws alone.<sup>1112</sup> Of course, we include in this definition that God authors the miracle to accomplish a certain aim. We also acknowledge that not all supernatural happenings are from God – false miracles of demonic origin also occur (see Ex 7:11; Deut 13:1-3).<sup>1113</sup>

### 2. Biblical Data

The Bible begins with the greatest miracle recorded in history – the creation of the heavens and the earth from nothing. Since that time, this miracle of God's creative genius does not cease to amaze all who study it.

The Torah also records how God performed miracles. Every time that Laban said to Jacob "'The speckled shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth speckled; and if he spoke thus, 'The striped shall be your wages,' then all the flock brought forth striped" (Gen 31:8). Moreover, God gave Abraham and Sarah a child in spite of "the deadness of Sarah's womb" (Rom 4:19).

It is nearly impossible to list all the miracles that God did through Moses on Israel's behalf. God's wondrous works in connection with the exodus from Egypt hold special significance. First, they were powerful enough to eventually convince Pharaoh to release God's people. Second, they served as a witness to surrounding nations that the God of Israel was God Almighty: "The peoples have heard, they tremble" (Ex 15:14). Third, in this way Yahweh demonstrated His superiority over all the "gods" of Egypt, whose power could not compare to His: "Against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments – I am Yahweh" (Ex 12:12). In fact, when the magicians

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<sup>1107</sup>Aquinas T. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.101.

<sup>1108</sup>Lewis C. S. *Miracles*. – London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947. – P. 15.

<sup>1109</sup>Purtill R. L. *Defining Miracles* // Geivett R. D., Habermas G. R. In *Defense of Miracles*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997. – P. 62-63.

<sup>1110</sup>Helm P. *The Providence of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 82.

<sup>1111</sup>Aquinas T. *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.99.

<sup>1112</sup>Langford, p. 23.

<sup>1113</sup>Bowne, p. 136.

of Egypt were unable to match the miracles done through Moses, they acknowledged, “This is the finger of God” (Ex 8:19).

It is interesting that when Moses performed miracles, He often employed his staff, which was, in fact, called the “staff of God” (Ex 4:20; 17:9). With his staff, he summoned the plaques of Egypt (Ex chps. 7-10), parted the Red Sea (Ex 14:16), and secured victory over the Amalekites (Ex 17:9).

However, Moses’ use of the staff was likely a condescension from the Lord. Only after Moses showed hesitation to accept his commission from Yahweh did the latter command him, “Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs” (Ex 4:4, 17). Moses’ staff, which he had already carried with him many years, was a familiar source of comfort to him. However, God needs no physical instrument to manifest His power.

Furthermore, we read much about the miracles that Yahweh did in the wilderness for Israel: manna, water from the rock, quail, the pillar of cloud, etc. Israel was witness to God’s mighty deeds for 40 years. Another remarkable event occurred at this time as well – a donkey spoke in human language (Num 22:28).

After Moses’ death, the operation of miracles did not cease. God gave a special sign to indicate that Joshua was the new recipient of this grace – He parted the waters of the Jordan at Joshua’s command (Josh 3:14-17). God also gave a miraculous victory over the Canaanites, during which He even stopped the sun in the sky and hurled large hailstones from heaven on Israel’s enemies (Josh 10:11-14).

After the conquest of Canaan, Israel wandered from the Lord. During this time, it is not surprising that few miracles occurred. The situation even came to the point that Gideon said to the angel visiting him, “Where are all His miracles which our fathers told us about, saying, ‘Did not Yahweh bring us up from Egypt?’” (Judg 6:13).

When Israel repented and returned to the Lord, though, God raised up deliverer-judges, through whom He accomplished supernatural deliverances. For example, Deborah and Barak struck down Sisera and his 900 iron chariots (Judg 4:13). Gideon defeated the host of Midian with 300 men (Judg 7).

Samson’s story and his legendary display of strength is likely the most noteworthy among the accounts of the judges. As was the case with Moses and his staff, God’s power was again connected with a physical item – Samson’s hair. Only when his hair was cut did his strength leave him (Judg 16:19). The next time, in fact, when Samson’s might is mentioned is when “the hair of his head began to grow again” (Judg 16:22).

The text plainly associates Samson’s supernatural strength with his hair. We dare not, however, conclude from this that his hair contained magical powers. God has full right and freedom to connect His power with a material object. Unlike magic, though, Yahweh is not bound to manifest His power in response to this object’s use so that people can thereby manipulate Him. We note later in the Old Testament narrative that God’s people tried to force the Lord to act in their defense by bringing the ark of the covenant to the battle (1 Kin 4:3). Yet, their strategy failed.

Toward the conclusion of the period of the judges, God raised up for Israel the prophet Samuel, who not only possessed an amazing prophetic gift, but also was God’s instrument to bring victory in war (1 Sam 7). Once, God granted him a supernatural confirmation from heaven (1 Sam 12:16-18).

We also marvel at the ministries of the dynamic duo – Elijah and Elisha. Yahweh did powerful works through them: multiplication of food (1 Kin 17:14-16; 2 Kin 4:4-7; 4:42-44), supernatural conception of a child (2 Kin 4:15-17), resurrection of the dead (1 Kin 17:19-24; 2 Kin 4:32-37), withholding and granting rain (1 Kin 17-18), parting of waters (2 Kin 2:8-14), detoxification of food (2 Kin 4:38-41), blinding and opening eyes (2 Kin 6:17-18), recovery of an axe head (2 Kin 6:3-7), and provision of water in the wilderness (2 Kin 3:16-20).

Several aspects of these prophets’ ministries deserve special attention. First, Elijah considered supernatural signs a divine confirmation of his prophetic ministry. Therefore, he challenged the prophets of Baal to show their power on Mount Carmel (1 Sam 18:19ff). Second, Yahweh not only did miracles through the prophets, He also performed wonders for them, supernaturally providing food for Elijah (1 Kin 17:6; 19:8).

In Elisha’s case, the prophet once anticipated that Yahweh would operate through his staff (2 Kin 4:29ff). In this instance, however, God worked in a different way. On the other hand, God did perform an object-mediated miracle when He raised someone from the dead through contact with the departed Elisha’s bones (2 Kin 13:20-21). We also observe that the degree of success that Joash would experience in battle depended on

how many times he struck the ground with his arrows (2 Kin 13:18-19). Yet again, this is not magic. Most likely, this test showed Joash's lack of zeal for victory, which was the real cause of his limited success.

A final noteworthy miracle in the Old Testament historical material concerns the time that through Isaiah, God caused the shadow on Hezekiah's stairway to move backwards (2 Kin 20:11). This reminds us of the similar "sun miracle" of Joshua.

In the poetic books, no miracles are recorded due to the lack of historical material in them. Nevertheless, the psalmists rehearse miracles that Yahweh performed previously among His people. Yahweh "sat {as King} at the flood" (Ps 29:10) and miraculously provided Israel with food in the wilderness (Ps 105:40-41; cf. Neh 9:11-15; Isa 48:21). The Lord's miracles inspire the psalmist to worship Him:

One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of Your majesty and on Your wonderful works, I will meditate. Men shall speak of the power of Your awesome acts, and I will tell of Your greatness (Ps 145:4-6).

The Psalms pay special attention to what the Lord did through Moses and Aaron against the Egyptians (Ps 105:26-36; 135:8-11; 136:10-15). For the remainder of Israeli history, the account of the miraculous exodus from Egypt was the foundation for Israel's faith in Yahweh their God. This is evident by the manifold repetition of the saying, "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery"<sup>1114</sup> God reminds Israel of this history especially to emphasize His covenant with them. Through this event, the Lord "made a name for (Himself) as {it is} this day" (Neh 9:10).

In the prophetic literature, besides retelling God's deeds of the past and prophesying of future events (see Ezek 25:5-17), the more concrete miracles are reserved for the book of Daniel. First, Daniel and his comrades are endowed with supernatural wisdom – ten times better than their contemporaries (Dan 1). Second, Yahweh supernaturally rescues Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego from the fiery furnace (Dan 3). Third, the Lord closes the lions' mouths so as to preserve Daniel's life (Dan 6). Finally, the book of Daniel contains incredibly precise futuristic prophecies, even predicting the time of Messiah's coming (Dan 9:24-25).

God's display of miracles continues in the New Testament, and even increases. Jesus' miracle ministry begins from the time the Spirit descends on Him at His water baptism. The quantity of His miracles is nearly innumerable. The apostle John could not record them all in his Gospel, and even remarks, "And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25).

Christ's miracles were not only many in number, but also various in type. Although much attention is paid to His works of healing and casting out demons (Matt 8:16; Mk 1:34; Lk 7:21), He also raised people from the dead (Lk 8:49-56; Jn 11:41-44) and directed His power toward nature. He was able to multiply food (Matt 14:15-21), walk on water (Matt 14:22ff), still a storm (Lk 8:24), and command a miraculous catch of fish (Lk 5:6-7; Jn 21:5-6). The Lord also possessed supernatural knowledge (Lk 22:7-13) and predicted future events (Matt 16:21). The people of His day rightly remarked about Him, "He has done all things well" (Mk 7:37). Even the Savior's birth was supernatural – He was born of a virgin (Matt 1:23-25). Signs accompanied His birth (Lk 2; Matt 2), along with the birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:36-37; 63-66).

Jesus did not do miracles to impress the masses. They served as an indication of His divine nature and mission. The apostle John makes special note of this: "But the testimony which I have is greater than {the testimony of} John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish – the very works that I do – testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me" (Jn 5:36).

After Jesus' ascension to heaven, His ministry continued through the Church. Acts 1:1 testifies of this: "The first account I composed, Theophilus, about all that Jesus began to do and teach." In other words, all that Jesus *began* to do, He continues to do through His Church.

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<sup>1114</sup>See Ex 20:2; 29:46; Lev 25:38; Deut 16:3; Josh 24:17; Judg 2:12; 1 Kin 9:9; Jer 11:4; Ezek 20:9; Dan 9:15 and others.

Correspondingly, in the ministry of the apostolic church we see the same types of miracles that Jesus performed. Thus, the Savior's words were fulfilled, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater {works} than these he will do; because I go to the Father" (Jn 14:12). When the Son returned to the Father, He poured out the same Spirit of power that He received before embarking on His own ministry.

So then, just as their Lord did, the disciples healed the sick and drove out demons (Acts 8:7), raised the dead (Acts 9:36-42), had supernatural knowledge (Acts 5:1-10), and predicted the future (Acts 11:28). Even by means of Peter's shadow and clothing from Paul, God healed the sick (Acts 5:15; 19:12). This was not the disciples' first experience of supernatural power. Jesus had given them authority and power to heal the sick and cast out devils while He was still with them (Matt 10:1). The signs performed by the apostolic church served the same purpose miracles did in Jesus' ministry – to testify of Him (Acts 4:29-30).

In the New Testament period, one sign appeared that had never been granted before – speaking in other tongues, which was associated with receiving the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 10:45-46; 19:5-6).

Finally, the epistles testify that God's miraculous deeds were not limited to apostles and evangelists. They were manifest in local congregation, as noted in the following passages:

- ...so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:7)
- So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:5)
- ...and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up (Jam 5:15)

### 3. Theological Reflections

Scholars reflect on the mechanism by which God does miracles. Some posit that a miracle in nothing other than the display of unusual natural laws. According to this understanding, a miracle is not, in fact, a supernatural event. Certain natural laws simply appear rarely, and when they do, they are taken for miracles. A second view is that when God does a miracle, He interrupts the operation of natural laws. The most likely variant is that God supersedes the forces of nature to perform a supernatural act.<sup>1115</sup>

We must also distinguish miracles from anomalies. Genuine miracles have a specific purpose to create a certain effect. God does not do supernatural works for their own sake. He is pursuing an aim. An anomaly is a rarely occurring phenomenon that has no real purpose or aim.<sup>1116</sup>

Miracles can also be categorized as "first class" or "second class" phenomena.<sup>1117</sup> Wonders of the "first class" are works that, from a human perspective, are impossibilities. Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead is an example, since humanly speaking people do not rise from the dead after several days in the tomb.

A "second class" miracle is an event that can occur in nature, yet it occurs in such an unusual manner to warrant classifying it as a miracle. The Red Sea parting could be classed here, since a strong wind could theoretically cause this effect. Yet, the fact that such an event is unprecedented and occurred precisely when Moses extended his staff confirms that this was no coincidence, but an act of God.<sup>1118</sup>

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<sup>1115</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1 – P. 408.

<sup>1116</sup>Geisler N. L. Christian Apologetics. - Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976. – P. 281. Basinger makes an important qualification that we may not be able to recognize a true miracle initially, until we better understand God's plan and what purpose He is pursuing in it (see Basinger D., Basinger R. Philosophy and Miracle: The Contemporary Debate. – Lewiston; Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986. – P. 22).

<sup>1117</sup>Thomas Aquinas created similar categories. First class miracles are natural impossibilities, such as stopping the motion of the sun. Second class miracles are theoretically possible in nature, but not in the fashion that the miracle event occurred, like raising the dead. Third class miracles are typical natural events, but take place at God's command, such as Elijah's prayer for rain (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, 3.101).

<sup>1118</sup>Geisler, p. 277-279.

Basinger suggests similar classifications. A miracle is either: (1) an unexplainable event directly caused by God, or (2) an impressive, yet explainable event directly caused by God.<sup>1119</sup>

The distinction between miracles of the “second class” and “special providence” can be blurry. We might clarify the question by calling “special providence” a typical natural event occurring in an atypical fashion, i.e. in a time and manner directed by God. A “second class miracle,” however, could theoretically occur spontaneously in nature, but is without precedent. Nevertheless, drawing a distinction between these items is not critical as long as we acknowledge them to be acts of God.<sup>1120</sup>

Werner Schaaffs introduces an intriguing observation into this discussion.<sup>1121</sup> Schaaffs draws attention to the fact that science recognizes certain unpredictable outcomes, especially on the atomic level. Although the mass effect of atoms is predictable, no one can predict how a particular atom may perform at any specific time. This uncertainty in atomic and molecular action is known in the world of science as Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle. Therefore, as Pollard notes, all “laws” of nature are based on probability.<sup>1122</sup>

In light of this observation, Schaaffs proposes that when a miracle takes place, God is acting on the atomic level and directing these unpredictable elements in such a way as to produce an unusual outcome, i.e., a “miracle.” For Schaaffs, then, God is not violating natural laws in performing miracles, but rather manipulating these unpredictable elements to produce His desired effect. Schaaffs writes,

Physics cannot rule out, and must in fact accept, the possibility that a good force (God) or an evil force (the Devil) intervenes to provoke an atomic reaction without in any sense doing violence to natural law.<sup>1123</sup>

In our definition of miracles above, we stated that in them the Lord is seeking to accomplish a certain goal. This may consist of bringing Himself glory, meeting human need, or confirming a certain truth.<sup>1124</sup> Augustine added the thought that all phenomena in nature should direct our minds to the Lord. At the same time, miracles are especially effective toward that end. Augustine believed that miracles have a “resultant power to direct the mind and allegiance of otherwise indifferent or unconvinced people to God.”<sup>1125</sup> John Hick agrees that a miracle should lead us “to become vividly and immediately conscious of God as acting toward us.”<sup>1126</sup> Wittgenstein spoke of miracles as “God’s gesture.”<sup>1127</sup>

Miracles demonstrate the supernatural character of salvation.<sup>1128</sup> Helm considers miracles to be a sign of grace, which appear in special periods in the history of redemption. An extreme view in this regard is the rejection of the existence of miracles today, a view held by some believers in God.

On the one hand, we concur that miracles happen more frequently in certain periods in the history of redemption. The Bible confirms this claim. However, if God ceased His supernatural work altogether, then the regeneration of the repentant sinner would be impossible as well, since that is God’s greatest miracle in the personal life of an individual. In addition, even the more “ordinary” gifts in the Church, like the pastor, teacher, or deacon, require God’s supernatural enablement.

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<sup>1119</sup>Basinger, p. 23

<sup>1120</sup>A certain danger exists in calling an event an act of special providence or a second class miracle, since one may exaggerate the event, which may have simply been an coincidental occurrence (see Basinger, p. 20).

<sup>1121</sup>Schaaffs W. *Theology, Physics and Miracles* / trans. Renfield R. L. – Washington: Canon Press, 1973.

<sup>1122</sup>Pollard W. G. *Chance and Providence*. – New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958. – P. 38, 53.

<sup>1123</sup>Schaaffs, p. 66.

<sup>1124</sup>We reject the so-called “non-teleological conception of miracles,” where it is claimed that miracles need not always serve a concrete purpose. All miracles in the Bible contradict this view. We embrace, rather, the “teleological conception of miracles” (see Corner D. *The Philosophy of Miracles*. – London; New York: Continuum, 2007. – P. 10).

<sup>1125</sup>Taken from Houston J. *Reported Miracles: A Critique of Hume*. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. – P. 11.

<sup>1126</sup>Hick J. *God and the Universe of Faiths*. – New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973. – P. 51.

<sup>1127</sup>Corner, p. 12.

<sup>1128</sup>Helm, p. 107.

Nevertheless, some contemporary theologians insist that certain spiritual gifts, for instance, speaking in tongues, healing the sick and other more “dramatic” gifts, ceased to operate after the apostolic age. This position is discussed and refuted in the fifth volume of this series in our discussion on spiritual gifts.

Atheists categorically rule out the existence of miracles, operating on the worldview “ontological naturalism.”<sup>1129</sup> According to this perspective, only the material world exists, and all events coincide with natural laws and processes. This is contrasted with “methodological naturalism,” which also acknowledges the laws of nature, but does not rule out the existence of God or His activity in the world.

We will examine arguments from well-known thinkers who completely reject the supernatural. We can begin with the 18th century English philosopher David Hume. His primary argument proceeds as follows. First, a miracle by definition is a violation of a natural law or an exception from it. Second, natural laws are based on probability. In other words, if something regularly occurs, then we speak of it as a natural law. Third, if natural laws are based on *high* probability, this makes the occurrence of a miracle *improbable*. Furthermore, in Hume’s opinion, a wise individual always anticipates the result that has the highest probability. Therefore, he concludes that a wise person will not expect or believe in miracles.<sup>1130</sup>

Hume approaches his conclusion from a different point of view as well. Claims to miracles are based on personal testimony, that is, on human experience. Natural laws are also based on experience, namely scientific research and observation. Miracles are usually witnessed by a small number of people – possibly only one individual. On the other hand, natural laws enjoy confirmation by many witnesses. Therefore, whom should we believe: the many or the few? Hume states, “It is experience only, which gives authority to human testimony; and it is the same experience, which assures us of the laws of nature.”<sup>1131</sup> Additionally, one can always verify the testimony to natural laws, but verifying a miracle that reportedly happened in the past is not possible.<sup>1132</sup>

Our response to Hume is as follows. First, if we view the world from a theistic perspective, then the occurrence of miracles cannot be ruled out. God is not limited by natural processes. Almighty God can do as He pleases, including displaying supernatural power. Purtill concurs that natural laws can “be suspended, temporarily, for a particular purpose, by the creator of nature.”<sup>1133</sup>

Second, we define a miracle as a rarely occurring event. Consequently, Hume’s claim that the occurrence of a miracle is improbable fully agrees with what one would expect from a miracle. If miracles happened often, they would not be miracles, but typical natural processes. Therefore, we must investigate each miracle claim individually based on its merits. Even a miracle disproved in one instance gives no grounds for rejecting all subsequent miracle claims. The Lord can perform a miracle at any time.<sup>1134</sup>

In addition, the fact that a certain event is unprecedented in history does not force the conclusion that it could not have occurred. The fact that no one has ever walked on Mars does not mean that such a thing could never occur.<sup>1135</sup> Those who follow Hume’s thinking here must deny that any new discovery, scientific or otherwise, could ever take place.<sup>1136</sup>

Another argument of Hume’s consists of the observation that various religions appeal to miracles to support their doctrines. Yet, these doctrines differ from one another. Therefore, miracles cannot substantiate any one of them. The weakness in Hume’s argument here, however, is that he grossly generalizes his observations. It is certainly defensible that various religions can claim supernatural phenomena. Yet, one must take into consideration the quantity and quality of these acts of power. If one religion can substantiate more

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<sup>1129</sup>Moreland J. P. *Science, Miracles, Agency Theory and God-of-the-Gaps* // Geivett R. D., Habermas G. R. *In Defense of Miracles*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997. – P. 132-133; Corner, p. 7.

<sup>1130</sup>Geisler, p. 232.

<sup>1131</sup>Hume D. *The Philosophy of Miracles* // Geivett R. D., Habermas G. R. *In Defense of Miracles*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997. – P. 41.

<sup>1132</sup>Noted in Basinger, p. 36.

<sup>1133</sup>Purtill, p. 68.

<sup>1134</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>1135</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65-66.

<sup>1136</sup>Basinger, p. 38.

frequent and more powerful miracles in comparison to others, then that religion deserves more serious consideration.<sup>1137</sup>

Finally, here is another attempt by Hume:

There is not to be found, in all history, any miracle attested by a sufficient number of men, of such unquestioned good sense, education, and learning, as to secure us against all delusions in themselves; of such undoubted integrity, as to place them beyond all suspicion of any design to deceive others; of such credit and reputation in the eyes of mankind, as to have a great deal to lose in case of their being detected in any falsehood; and at the same time, attesting facts performed in such a public manner and is so celebrated a part of the world, as to render the detection unavoidable.<sup>1138</sup>

Yet, can Hume dictate to the Lord when, where, and among whom He must perform a wonder? By these criteria, we must also disallow the great majority of historical data as well. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that miracles actually meet these criteria better than Hume thinks. Biblical authors and heroes were people of the highest moral quality. Their teachings and examples are foundational for ethical systems worldwide. Hume, however, accuses them of either intentional deception or psychological instability.

Hume also undervalues the price that the disciples of Jesus paid for their testimony of the life, death, and resurrection of their Lord. According to church tradition, most of the twelve apostles met with horrific martyrdoms. Who would endure such torture to maintain claims that one knows full well to be fabricated?

Anthony Flew advanced the assertion that history must be interpreted in the light of typical human experience, that is, what people experience today. We are able to verify only those events that we can observe, not those of the past.<sup>1139</sup> However, Flew's argument is unsubstantial. Many events of the past do not repeat in the present. Every competent historian operates on the testimony of those who lived at that time, working with whatever evidences are available.

Moreover, Flew asserts that believers in miracles interpret unique happenings in support of the religious systems they represent. Therefore, their conclusions are invalid. On the other hand, it is natural to expect that believers in the miraculous would use such testimony in their favor. Would not those who dispute the reality of miracles also interpret the same data in such a way as to refute the existence of the supernatural? Does this not invalidate their conclusions? Believers in God are not the only ones to employ historical data to their advantage.

Flew, together with Alastair McKinnon, advanced still another objection to miracles. They argued that natural laws do not proscribe, but instead describe happenings in nature. Therefore, it is impossible to "violate" natural laws since they are only descriptive of what actually happens in nature. If one encounters a "miracle," one must simply adapt one's description of natural laws to accommodate it.<sup>1140</sup>

However, as Purtill notes, this is merely an attempt to deny miracles by employing a more "flexible" definition of natural law.<sup>1141</sup> If we can include in our definition of natural laws things that clearly contradict those laws, such as a resurrection from the dead, then what value is there in acknowledging natural laws? Even in his "unenlightened" era, Augustine was able to distinguish natural from supernatural processes.<sup>1142</sup>

Furthermore, Basinger correctly states that natural laws are established to describe not all natural phenomena, but those that occur regularly and predictably.<sup>1143</sup> Moreover, he argues that natural laws "only state what will occur under certain natural conditions," and, "They cannot be used to predict or explain what

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<sup>1137</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1138</sup>Hume, p. 34.

<sup>1139</sup>Flew A. Neo-Human Arguments about the Miraculous // Geivett R. D., Habermas G. R. In Defense of Miracles. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997. – P. 49-53.

<sup>1140</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1141</sup>Purtill, p. 65-67.

<sup>1142</sup>Houston, p. 12.

<sup>1143</sup>Basinger, p. 9.

will happen when nonnatural forces are present.”<sup>1144</sup> In other words, if God acts in a supernatural way, then such an event defies description by natural laws, since they can only predict what will happen under normal circumstances. Yet, a miracle by definition occurs under atypical circumstances.

McKinnon and Flew also fail to notice that when an unusual event occurs in nature, we are obliged to seek out an explanation for it. Whether we call that a “miracle” or not is irrelevant. If the most plausible explanation for that outcome is a supernatural intervention by a supernatural power, then it serves as evidence for the existence of such a power, whatever we choose to name it. By their reasoning, McKinnon and Flew do not exclude the existence of miracles at all, but merely designate them by different terms.<sup>1145</sup>

The theory of McKinnon and Flew also encounters a problem in trying to “adjust” nature laws in a way to include supernatural acts.<sup>1146</sup> Under what conditions might one predict that the Red Sea is going to part again? A more reasonable approach is to affirm that natural laws predict only regular, repeatable events. Miracles, however, are unpredictable, and are therefore exceptions to natural law.<sup>1147</sup>

Flew responds to this objection by saying that we can “adjust” natural laws only if the event in question can potentially repeat. He completely rejects the idea of a non-repeatable outcome.<sup>1148</sup> In so doing, though, he undermines his own theory, which claims that we can “adjust” natural laws to accommodate *all* unusual activity in nature.

Flew also challenges the claim that God is behind miraculous events. He believes that we can verify a claim only based on what we have on hand to work with, that is, natural laws and processes. If an atypical event occurs, how can we verify that its origin was in God? He concludes that one must *assume* that existence of God and *assume* that one knows His will before a miracle can be ascribed to Him.<sup>1149</sup>

The weakness in Flew’s thinking here is his faulty epistemology, i.e., theory of knowledge.” He reasons that if we cannot discern what natural processes caused an event, then we cannot determine its cause at all. However, in a healthy epistemology, we take into consideration not only empirical evidence, but logical evidences and other proofs. Basinger adds that personal testimony is also acceptable as proof, as well as the physical alteration caused by the miracle.<sup>1150</sup>

For example, even if we are not able to explain in scientific terms how Peter and John healed a crippled man (Acts chp. 3), the fact that they predicted this unpredictable feat, which was impossible for humans alone to achieve, and performed it in the name of Jesus Christ, leads to only one logical conclusion – the God of Christianity performed a miracle.

A final objection to miracles concerns the “problem of evil.” If God indeed does do the supernatural, then why does He not supernaturally intervene more often? This will be the topic of chapter 19.

## C. Conclusions

If we accept that in His general providence, God allows natural processes to freely operate, then a place exists for random, chance occurrences in the universe. This would mean that not all natural phenomena are under God’s direct control. Another factor to consider here is that through Adam’s disobedience, God cursed the planet (Gen 3:17) and death entered the world (Rom 5:12). The powers of nature, which God established for people’s benefit, may now lead to death and destruction. Romans 8:20-21 teaches that creation was subject to futility and to slavery to corruption. Therefore, the Fall released destructive elements into nature that bring harm to people and the world in general.

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<sup>1144</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>1145</sup>Ibid., p. 39-40.

<sup>1146</sup>Advanced by Ninian Smart and Richard Swinburne, noted in Corner, p. 23.

<sup>1147</sup>Corner, p. 22-24.

<sup>1148</sup>Basinger, p. 41.

<sup>1149</sup>Noted in Basinger, p. 86-87.

<sup>1150</sup>Ibid., p. 46.



We also take into consideration that God allows Satan and demons a certain degree of freedom to utilize these destructive forces. The classic example is Satan's attack on Job and his family through sickness and storm (Job chaps. 1-2).

Therefore, in regard to natural phenomena, three causes can be highlighted. First, in line with His special providence, God can directly control events in the natural world. Second, according to the principle of general providence, natural processes can operate with a certain autonomy and, due to the presence and effect of sin and death in creation, can lead to destructive acts. Third, the Devil can at times utilize the forces of nature against humanity.

Regarding the cause of historical events, we must factor human free will into the equation. Out of respect for human freedom, God may allow actions that are not according to His will. Complicating this factor is the influence of Satan on human choices.

Consequently, we may again highlight three reasons events in history occur. First, God may direct the course of history directly. Second, Satan can intervene and provoke wrong choices. Third, people exercise their personal freedom, which at times may bring negative results.

Therefore, when some disaster occurs in nature or misfortune in history, the question arises: is this from God, from chance (i.e., autonomous natural forces), from Satan, or from wrong human choices? The solution to this dilemma requires wisdom from God, which He promises to give generously to all who ask (Jam 1:5). Interestingly, this passage promising God's wisdom is located in a context dealing with trials. So then, whenever we are passing through trials, the Lord is ready to reveal its cause.

Drawing from examples from Scripture, a storm can arise for various reasons. In Jonah chapter 1, the Lord aroused the storm. In Matthew chapter 8, when Jesus and His disciples were in route by sea to deliver a demon-possessed man, Satan interfered with the forces of nature. We would also posit that in most cases, such a disturbance results from autonomous natural forces under the influence of the Curse. How is one to distinguish these? It is possible only by wisdom from the Lord.

Blindness is another example. In Acts chapter 13, Paul struck the false prophet Bar-Jesus with blindness by the power of the Holy Spirit. In John chapter 9, a man was blind so that God would be glorified by his healing. Again, wisdom is needed to know how to respond to each situation.

Our final example, taken from 2 Kings 3:4-11, illustrates well our point here. When the king of Moab rebelled against Israel, King Jehoram, judging by circumstances, concluded that God was intending to give him and his allies over to defeat. Jehoram exclaimed, "Yahweh has called these three kings to give them into the hand of Moab."

Jehoshaphat, however, understood the situation better. He inquired, "Is there not a prophet of Yahweh here, that we may inquire of Yahweh by him?" Instead of passively accepting defeat, Jehoshaphat sought God's wisdom. When he received the Lord's answer, he was ready to enter the battle with assurance of victory. Similarly, whenever life throws us a challenge, we can appeal to God for wisdom to know the cause of the trouble and how to respond appropriately.

Concerning the miraculous, two sources are possible. If it is truly a supernatural phenomenon, then it must originate from a supernatural source – either God or the Devil. Consequently, we must test miracles to see if they are from God. The Bible testifies that Satan can perform false signs and wonders:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, "Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them," you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for Yahweh your God is testing you to find out if you love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut 13:1-3).

Finally, we observe two extremes in the approach to the miraculous. On the one side, liberal theologians feel that God works exclusively through natural processes and human effort. On the other side, some more "charismatic" figures may rely on God exclusively for miracles instead of employing natural means.

Carl Henry proposes a healthy balance between these extremes. He writes, "God's transcendence means that nature is always and everywhere open to his purpose, a purpose that he expresses freely either in repetitive cosmic processes and events, or in once-for-all acts. Hence God discloses his purposive presence equally in both the regularities of nature and in what is exceptional or miraculous."<sup>1151</sup> Bowne concurs that we can "find God as present in the ordinary movements of life and society as in the strange and uninterpretable things."<sup>1152</sup>

Bowne also makes an important point concerning the operation of general providence, that is, the regular operation of natural laws.<sup>1153</sup> If God continually acted in supernatural ways, then life would lose in predictability and stability. We would not know what to expect from moment to moment. Under such conditions, it would be impossible to live a normal life and make decisions with confidence. Too many miracles "paralyzes intelligence and makes men afraid to move because of some threatening superstition."<sup>1154</sup>

On the other hand, McConnell affirms that miracles are also necessary, because through them our attention is especially drawn to God and we find solutions to difficult problems. In addition, miracles accentuate special happenings in the Lord's overall plan.<sup>1155</sup>

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<sup>1151</sup>Henry C. F. H. *God, Revelation, and Authority*. – Waco, TX: Word Books, c1976-c1983; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999. – V. 6. – P. 50.

<sup>1152</sup>Bowne, p. 47.

<sup>1153</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 41-42.

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## Chapter 16 - God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom: Old Testament

One of the most intensely discussed questions among believers and Bible teachers concerns human free will. If God is sovereign over heaven and earth, does that mean that He directly controls all that takes place, or does He grant people genuine freedom to make their own choices? One's conviction in this regard has an enormous effect on one's general understanding of God's nature and His plan. Therefore, it is imperative to do a careful study of the question of predestination. We will pursue this study sequentially through the Old and New Testaments.

### A. Predestination and Free Will in the Torah

The Bible begins with the account of God creating the world and the human race upon it. People were created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27), which, in the opinion of many, includes the ability to make free choices. The Genesis narrative appears to confirm this. God gave Adam and Eve a specific command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Yet, they yielded to temptation and transgressed God's command. It appears that the first humans were acting freely in their choice to disobey. God intended for people to use their freedom to choose obedience, but Satan knew that they could use their freedom improperly as well and therefore tempted them.

In the very next chapter, God warns Cain to be on guard against sin: "Sin is crouching at the door; and its desire is for you, but you must master it." (Gen 4:7). Cain needed to exercise his will in order to "master" sin, but failed to do so. The fact that God subsequently punished Cain demonstrates that Cain was culpable for the sin he committed. The same can be said for people in Noah's day, who also received just recompense for their iniquity. It would be unjust for God to punish those whom He predestined to sin.

We see in Genesis, however, that individuals not only sinned against the Lord, but at times showed great faithfulness to Him. Noah obeyed God to construct the ark (Gen 6). Abraham forsook his homeland and followed the Lord to a land unknown to him (Gen 12). He was also ready to sacrifice his son at the command of the Lord (Gen 22). Joseph stayed true to Yahweh in spite of all the trials he endured. Nowhere in the narratives of these heroes of faith is any compulsion by God to obey mentioned or implied.

Among those who served God in their time was Moses. Through Him, Yahweh gave His people the Law, which defined for them proper behavior. The giving of the Law implies an expectation to keep it. A promise of life was given to those who would: "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them" (Lev 18:5). Moses urges Israel to keep God's commandments with these words:

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?" But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it (Deut 30:11-14).

In his final appeal to Israel, Moses summons God's people to choose life through obedience: "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live" (Deut 30:19).

Based on what we have said so far, it appears that the Torah affirms human free will, which people can employ to make right decisions and for which they are held responsible. At the same time, the following factors qualify our understanding of human free will.

First, some passages of Scripture indicate that human nature has a bent toward sinning. For example, when the people of Israel, in one of their rarer moments, actually responded appropriately to God, He responded, "Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always" (Deut 5:29). So then, in the hearts of God's people (and, presumably, in all human hearts) some factor

hinders people from consistently obeying the Lord. Furthermore, Moses predicted that Israel would break the covenant: “For I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you” (Deut 31:29). This is the case, as Moses explains, because “to this day Yahweh has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear” (Deut 29:4). Therefore, God will need to “circumcise” the hearts of His people to make them obedient (Deut 30:6).

Second, we encounter instances when God apparently exerted a direct influence on someone’s will, thereby directing their behavior. For example, God “did not let” Abimelech touch Abraham’s wife Sarah (Gen 20:6).<sup>1156</sup> The following example may demonstrate that God might not only prevent wrong behavior, but actually promote it: “Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the sons of Israel go” (Ex 10:20, cf. Ex 4:21; 11:10). Exodus 9:16 reveals God’s aim in this act: “For this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.” At the same time, we learn that Pharaoh first hardened his own heart (Ex 8:15, 32; 9:34). Deuteronomy 2:30 records a similar occurrence: “Sihon king of Heshbon was not willing for us to pass through his land; for Yahweh your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hand.”

Other cases exist where God used people’s wrong choices to accomplish His purposes: Sarah’s jealousy of Hagar (Gen 21), Rebecca’s and Jacob’s deception of Isaac (Gen 27), Laban’s abuse of Jacob (Gen 31), Joseph’s trials (Gen 45:5-8), etc. Nevertheless, in none of these cases is it stated that God caused these actions. One may suggest that God simply took advantage of situations where people freely chose the wrong course in order to accomplish His plan.

The following passages record the role of human choice in turning to the Lord. Jacob was a sly, ambitious individual, until his personal encounter with the Lord, which brought about reorientation in his life. The Lord even gave him a new name – Israel (Gen 32:28). We see no indication in the biblical text that his conversion was anything but freely embraced. Other biblical characters repented of sin, such as the brothers of Joseph and Judah in particular (Gen 44:18-34). These acts of repentance appear to arise from their own volition and in response to their situation.

An interesting fact to note is the mention of a book, in which apparently God has already recorded the names of the saved (Ex 32:32-33). This recalls the “Lamb’s book of life” from Revelation 21:27. We observe that inclusion or exclusion from this book depends on person choice, not God’s election: “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book” (Ex 32:33).

Divine election is nonetheless a prominent theme in the Torah, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. Yahweh chose Israel (Deut 4:37; 7:6-7; 10:15; 14:2) and its future place of worship (Deut 12:5, 11). He chose Israel not because it was a great nation, but just the opposite: “...for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7). His election of the nation was based the election of their patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, whom He loved (Deut 4:37; 10:15). The honor of the priesthood was also determined by divine election – the tribe of Levi was chosen. The following passages speak of Yahweh’s election of Abraham:

For I have chosen him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of Yahweh by doing righteousness and justice, so that Yahweh may bring upon Abraham what He has spoken about him (Gen 18:19).

In summary, we discover from the Torah several features of God’s election. People were created in God’s image, which likely implies the power of self-determination. God gave the first humans the opportunity to use their freedom for obedience, but instead they rebelled. From that time, the Lord continually appealed for obedience, yet the majority of people refused. Consequently, God punished their disobedience. Some, however, served God faithfully in their time, although they also fell short of perfection. This history of God’s

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<sup>1156</sup>The word “let” is a translation of the Hebrew נָתַן (*natan*), which has the basic meaning “give,” but can also be rendered “let” (Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 679). Here we must also consider, though, that God may have prevented Abimelech from touching Sarah not directly, but indirectly through mitigating circumstances.

call to obedience and of people's response to it – sometimes positive and other times negative – supports the idea that humans possess true freedom of choice.

Although people possess free will, they have an inborn tendency toward sin. Their freedom of choice is therefore limited by a sinful nature. God's intervention is needed to correct the situation – a circumcision of the heart, that is, a removal of the sinful impulse. The Torah does record instances when people turned to the Lord and demonstrated a subsequent change in behavior.

On the other hand, it seems that divine influence may have determined behavior in selected cases, either for good (Abimelech) or evil (Pharaoh, Sihon). However, in Pharaoh's case it is written that he first hardened his own heart. One may theorize that God simply (as Paul put it) "gave him over" to the intention of his own heart (see Rom 1:24-28). In Abimelech's case, God may have prevented him from touching Sarah by mitigating circumstances.

Finally, God chose Abraham and his descendants to be His people, Levi to be His priests, and the future Jerusalem to be his capital. Yet, this type of election in no way impinges on free will, but simply demonstrates the Lord's authority to appoint whomever He pleases to whatever position He pleases.

## **B. Predestination and Free Will in the Historical Books**

The next stop in our Old Testament survey is the historical books, where we discover many points already noted in the Torah. In particular, God continues to call His people to obedience. Joshua challenged the people, "...choose for yourselves today whom you will serve" (Josh 24:15). In addition, Yahweh punishes transgressions of the covenant, which indicates that people are responsible for their wrong choices. As before, most people are in disobedience, but occasional "bright lights" appear on the scene, who walk before the Lord in faithfulness.

Instances where Israel turns to the Lord when chastised by Him are a prominent feature of this literature. The book of Judges records the repeating cycle of apostasy – punishment – restoration during this period. Clearly, the Lord's discipline is able to motivate people to repent, even if just for a time. Turning to the Lord in trouble is characteristic of human free will responding to God's discipline. We may add other examples, such as Manasseh's repentance (2 Chr 33:12) and the conversion of Naaman after his supernatural healing (2 Kin 5). Again, there is no indication of God's direct influence on people's will. Their conversions occur by purely natural means – a human response to divine discipline or divine mercy.

A more unique feature of the historical literature is that it recalls times when people once faithful to the Lord turn away from Him. In Solomon's case, for example, "his wives turned his heart away after other gods; and his heart was not wholly devoted to Yahweh his God" (1 Kin 11:4). Saul displayed an initial devotion to God early in his reign, but also turned back from following Him. In both cases, we can detect a perfectly natural reason for their unfaithfulness – the desire to please people.

As was the case in the Torah, we learn that God can and does use people's wrong choices to further His plan. He used Samson's anger to strike the Philistines (Judg 15:1-8), the assassinations of Abner and Ish-bosheth to deliver the kingdom over to David (2 Sam 3-4), and the Gentile military assault against Judah to punish the Southern Kingdom (2 Kin 15:37). The immaturity and foolishness of Rehoboam led to the fulfillment of the prophecy against Solomon (1 Kin 12:12-24). Nevertheless, we see no indication in the biblical text that such choices were made under divine compulsion. God simply took advantage of the situation to further His plan.

However, certain passages may demonstrate God's direct action on a person's will. It was prophesied of Saul, "Then the Spirit of Yahweh will come upon you mightily, and you shall prophesy with them and be changed (הִפָּחַ) into another man" (1 Sam 10:6). The verb הִפָּחַ (*haphah*) in the *Niphal* form ("be changed") is used to describe a fundamental change in something, like water to blood (Ex 7:17,20), sling stones to stubble (Job 41:28), or sadness to joy (Est 9:22).<sup>1157</sup> It seems that the Spirit of God moved on Saul so strongly that he no

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<sup>1157</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 246.

longer resembled the person he was before. A similar event occurred when Saul and his servants pursued David. The Spirit came upon them and, as a result, they ceased chasing David and began to prophecy (1 Sam 19:20-23). In these examples, the Spirit supernaturally altered Saul and his servants' intention.

Similarly, in Joshua 22:31 the obedience of the Gileadites was a sign that "Yahweh is in our midst." This shows that the Israelites saw the intervention of God's Spirit in that act of obedience. In 2 Chronicles 30:12, we read of Hezekiah's reform, "The hand of God was also on Judah to give them one heart to do what the king and the princes commanded by the word of Yahweh." The Spirit's effect on the people of Judah created a willingness to support the king's program. When Solomon prayed to Yahweh at the temple dedication, he acknowledged Israel's dependence on Him for grace to obey: "...that He may incline our hearts to Himself, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances" (1 Kin 8:58).<sup>1158</sup>

In other cases, it seems that the Lord hindered people from making right choices. In these instances we encounter the formulas מִיְהוָה ("from Yahweh") or מִהָאֱלֹהִים ("from God"), followed by a conditional clause introduced by the conjunctions כִּי, לְמַעַן or לְ ( "in order that"), which indicate that this event was part of God's plan. Judges 14:4 reveals that Samson's marriage to a Gentile was מִיְהוָה ("from Yahweh") for "He was seeking an occasion against the Philistines." The preposition מִ before the name Yahweh indicates that the marriage was from God, but does not detail how exactly God arranged it. It is reasonable to suppose that God did not predestine Samson's decision, but just foreknew his future free choice and worked it into His plan.

Moreover, it was מִהָאֱלֹהִים ("from God") that Amaziah did not listen to the counsel of Joash, and as a result he was defeated in war. This was God's punishment because he "sought the gods of Edom" (2 Chr 25:20). Here, the biblical text closely ties Amaziah's actions with the Spirit's influence on him – the reason he did not listen was כִּי מִהָאֱלֹהִים הָיָא ("because it was from God"). Thompson comments, "God guided even Amaziah's own pride in such a way that it brought about his downfall. In judgment for his apostasy God made Amaziah blind to the truth and deaf to wisdom."<sup>1159</sup>

We discover in 1 Kings 12:15 a similar explanation as to why Rehoboam rejected the counsel of the people: "So the king did not listen to the people; for it was a turn {of events} from Yahweh, that He might establish His word, which Yahweh spoke through Ahijah."<sup>1160</sup> The same occurred in 1 Samuel 2:25, where the sons of Eli failed to heed their father's warning, "for Yahweh desired to put them to death."<sup>1161</sup> Finally, we read in Joshua 11:20 about the inhabitants of Canaan something similar to what God did to Pharaoh and Sihon:

For it was of Yahweh to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as Yahweh had commanded Moses.

In 2 Kings 24:18-20, Zedekiah rejects God's plan for the following reason: כִּי עַל־אַף יְהוָה הָיְתָה בִּירוּשָׁלַם, i.e., "through the anger of Yahweh {this} came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence."

We will look more closely at another passage in this regard, 2 Samuel 24:1, which reads, "Now again the anger of Yahweh burned against Israel, and it incited David against them to say, 'Go, number Israel and Judah.'" It appears that God again caused a person's behavior. On the other hand, a comparison with the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles 21:1 will prove insightful: "Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to

<sup>1158</sup>Carson D. A. How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 183-184.

<sup>1159</sup>Thompson J. A. 1, 2 Chronicles // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. – P. 324. Dillard agrees (Dillard R. B. 2 Chronicles // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 201).

<sup>1160</sup>Dillard R. B. 2 Chronicles // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 201. Dillard also cites 2 Chr 22:7: "Now the destruction of Ahaziah was from God, in that he went to Joram." Yet the text does not say that God compelled Ahaziah's decision, but only that He purposed his destruction. God could well have simply foreknown Ahaziah's plan to visit Joram.

<sup>1161</sup>Blocher H. Evil and the Cross. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994. – P. 94

number Israel.” It appears that God’s effect on David was not direct, but mediated through an enemy attack (“Satan stood up”), which moved David to perform a military census.

All the other instances listed above, though, can be explained. Either God simply took advantage of the situation people themselves created, or He merely intensified the original intent of the person making the wrong decision.

We will highlight several instances where the Lord stirred up Gentile nations to attack Israel.<sup>1162</sup> In 1 Chronicles 5:26, we learn that God “stirred up the spirit of Pul, king of Assyria, even the spirit of Tilgath-pilneser king of Assyria, and he carried them away into exile, namely the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh.” Similarly, in 2 Chronicles 21:16 “Yahweh stirred up against Jehoram the spirit of the Philistines and the Arabs who bordered the Ethiopians; and they came against Judah and invaded it.” Finally, “Yahweh brought the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria against them, and they captured Manasseh” (2 Chr 33:11).

The cases examined above give the strong impression that the Lord actually acted on certain individuals in a way that affected their actions. We must also keep in mind, though, that this divine influence likely did not differ from the personal intention of these parties, but rather intensified it.

In addition, the following text appears to contradict the claim of constant divine control over human volition: “Even {in the matter of} the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to (Hezekiah) to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him {alone only} to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart” (2 Chr 32:31). Here it is evident that Hezekiah exercised free choice in deciding to show the envoys from Babylon his treasures.

God’s election of David as king was not unconditional, but based on his inner character. God explained to Samuel His reason for choosing David: “God {sees} not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). David truly was “a man after His own heart” (1 Sam 13:14).

Another key passage showing God’s election based on foreknowledge of a person’s character is found in the case of Abijah, the son of Jeroboam. Of him it is written, “He alone of Jeroboam’s {family} will come to the grave, because in him something good was found toward Yahweh God of Israel in the house of Jeroboam” (1 Kin 14:13). We are not specifically told how old Abijah was at this time, but the Hebrew terms נָעַר (*naar*) and יָלֵד (*eled*), which describe him in verses 3, 12, and 17, can indicate that he was a young boy, maybe even an infant.<sup>1163</sup> This means that God foreknew His character before he was actually old enough to fully display it and on that basis granted him special favor.

In summary, we conclude that the Old Testament historical books repeat some of the features seen in the Torah, namely that Yahweh expected obedience from His people and on occasion intervened in a more direct fashion to ensure His desired outcome, even to the degree of influencing someone’s will and consequent decision, such as the case with Saul and his servants. Nevertheless, God never acted on people’s hearts to incite an evil intent, but did at times intensify people’s personal evil intent by “giving them over” to it. These writings also support the idea of election/blessing based on foreknowledge, as when David was chosen king and Abijah was shown favor. Finally, these writings record people turning to the Lord, or turning away from Him. These life changes are explainable not by supernatural, but natural causes.

### C. Predestination and Free Will in the Poetical Books

In the poetical books, the key passages concerning human free will are located in the Psalms and Proverbs. The following texts seem to support the doctrine of divine determinism:

- Ps 37:23 – The steps of a man are established by Yahweh, and He delights in his way.
- Prov 16:1 – The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from Yahweh.
- Prov 16:9 – The mind of man plans his way, but Yahweh directs his steps.

<sup>1162</sup>Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. Commentary on the Old Testament. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996. – V. 10. – P. 479.

<sup>1163</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 409, 654-655.



- Prov 19:21 – Many plans are in a man's heart, but the counsel of Yahweh will stand.
- Prov 20:24 – Man's steps are {ordained} by Yahweh, how then can man understand his way?

Let us begin with Proverbs 16:9: “The mind of man plans his way, but Yahweh directs his steps.” Here, a person’s intentions is compared with what the outcome actually is. At first glance, it seems that no matter what a person plans, God will determine the outcome. Garrett feels that this verse shows “divine providence over human affairs.... events and circumstances are all in God’s control.”<sup>1164</sup> Murphy agrees, “The final result is the Lord’s doing, over which humans have no real control.”<sup>1165</sup> Yet, these comments do not ascribe to God control over a person’s will, but simply over the resulting circumstances.

One must also consider the meaning of the verb כּוּן (*kun*), i.e., “directs,” in the *Polel* form. In this form, the basic meaning is “make firm,” with the following connotations: “direct,” “establish,” “make,” or “prepare.”<sup>1166</sup> Employing the definition “establish” yields a different sense. The verse would mean, then, that persons can plan their way, but only God has the power to establish it or make it succeed. This would then be a call to depend on God’s strength, not one’s own.

The same idea is echoed by the psalmist, who desires that Yahweh would “direct” (כּוּן, i.e., “establish”) his way “to keep Your statutes” (Ps 119:5). The psalmist wants to keep God’s Law, but realizes that only God can enable him to do so. In Proverbs 16:3, we see the same: “Commit your works to Yahweh, and your plans will be established (כּוּן).” Again, we perceive that only by God’s strength can we accomplish our good intentions. Therefore, it is necessary to “commit our works to Yahweh.” In another place, the psalmist expresses his confidence that God is ready and able to do this: “Yahweh will accomplish what concerns me” (Ps 138:8).

In the light of our interpretation of Proverbs 16:9, we can reasonably attribute the same sense to Psalm 37:23: “The steps of a man are established by Yahweh, and He delights in his way.” The same Hebrew verb, כּוּן (*kun*), is employed. Again, the issue is not God determining a person’s intent, but His actualizing it. Keil and Delitzsch confirm this view, “By Jahve... are a man’s steps made firm, established; not: ordered or directed.”<sup>1167</sup>

Concerning Proverbs 16:1, “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from Yahweh,” this verse is in the same context as Proverbs 16:3 and 16:9, and likely carries the same nuance. Three interpretations, however, are advanced. Keil and Delitzsch feel that we are dealing here with needing God’s wisdom and guidance when a person needs to respond to someone, but does not know how.<sup>1168</sup> Murphy suggests that God not only helps a person know how to respond, but actually determines what he/she will say: “The response of human beings cannot escape divine dominion.”<sup>1169</sup> Others think that the genitive מַעֲבֶה לְשׁוֹן (“the answer of the tongue”) refers not to what a person says, but what God has to say about that individual’s plans.<sup>1170</sup> This would correspond to Proverbs 16:3 and 9, where God has the final word about the accomplishment of what someone desires to do.

Next, we consider Proverbs 19:21: “Many plans are in a man's heart, but the counsel of Yahweh will stand.” The teaching of determinism is absent here as well. The sense again is human intention and divine intervention. People may plan the direction of their lives, but they lack power to carry it out. Success comes to those who submit their plans to the Lord. We encounter the same teaching in a passage well known to many: “Trust in Yahweh with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight” (Prov 3:5-6).

The text that supports the idea of divine determination more than the others is Proverbs 20:24: “Man's steps are {ordained} by Yahweh, how then can man understand his way?” Here, we read not only that people’s

<sup>1164</sup>Garrett D. A. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993. – P. 155.

<sup>1165</sup>Murphy R. E. Proverbs // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 121.

<sup>1166</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 466-467.

<sup>1167</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 5, p. 285.

<sup>1168</sup>Ibid., v. 6, p. 241.

<sup>1169</sup>Murphy, p. 119.

<sup>1170</sup>Noted in Keil and Delitzsch, v. 6, p. 241.

behavior comes from the Lord, but also that they cannot even understand why they do what they do. Several commentators seek to interpret this verse without disallowing free will.

Keil and Delitzsch feel that God merely coordinates people's free actions to coincide with His plan: "Man is indeed free to turn himself hither or thither, to decide on this course of conduct or on that, and is therefore responsible for it; but the relations co-operating in all his steps as the possible and defining conditions are God's contrivance and guidance."<sup>1171</sup>

Murphy objects to a Calvinistic interpretation of Proverbs 20:24 because of the strong emphasis on human responsibility seen throughout the book of Proverbs. This verse draws our attention, then, to the mystery of the relationship between divine determination and human freedom. In fact, another book in the "wisdom literature," Ecclesiastics, speaks often of God's mysterious ways (3:11; 7:13; 8:17; 11:5).<sup>1172</sup> Garrett is of the opinion that this verse refers to God directing human behavior not by controlling people's wills, but by manipulating their circumstances. Therefore, the Lord directs human behavior indirectly by orchestrating conditions that can promote or prevent certain actions.<sup>1173</sup>

The Old Testament poetical books continue several themes introduced in earlier books. Humans usually abuse their God-given freedom to sin. The psalmists speak of the universality of human sinfulness. In Psalms 14:3 and 53:3, we learn, "They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one." Does God predetermine such behavior? Psalm 92:6-7 might be taken this way: "A senseless man has no knowledge, nor does a stupid man understand this: that when the wicked sprouted up like grass and all who did iniquity flourished, it {was only} that they might be destroyed forevermore." On the other hand, the likely sense here is that God did not raise up doers of iniquity in order to destroy them, but rather that their own willful disobedience leads to their ruin.

A more problematic text for defenders of human free will is Proverbs 16:4: "Yahweh has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of evil." Did God create wicked people for the purpose of condemning them? Both Keil/Delitzsch and Murphy hesitate to affirm this interpretation. They feel that God in His overall plan has merely appointed a determined *outcome* for the wicked – they will perish.<sup>1174</sup> Therefore, all is under God's control in the sense that "nothing, and especially not the wicked, escapes God's domination."<sup>1175</sup>

The poetic books also echo the thought that Yahweh can harden the heart of His enemies. Psalm 105:25 ascribes the Egyptian's hatred of Israel to God: "He turned their heart to hate His people, to deal craftily with His servants." Earlier, we explained similar cases by stating that God simply gives people over to their natural inclinations and can even intensify their evil intents (cf. Rom 1:24-28). Psalm 81:11-12 may prove insightful here: "But My people did not listen to My voice, and Israel did not obey Me. So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices." This verse may enlighten us as to how God "hardens hearts."

God's work of election for blessing is highlighted in the poetic books as well, both in a general sense: "How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near {to You} to dwell in Your courts" (Ps 65:4), and concerning specific individuals: "Yahweh has chosen Jacob for Himself, Israel for His own possession" (Ps 135:4, cf. Ps 77:68-72). God elected David as well: "Yet You are He who brought me forth from the womb; You made me trust {when} upon my mother's breasts" (Ps 22:9). The verb בָּטַח (*batath*), "made me trust," in the *Hiphil* form indicates causation – God *granted* David to trust in Him.

The final texts to examine are Psalm 119:67, 71 and Psalm 107:10-22, where we learn that in troubled times people turn to the Lord. This shows that circumstances may influence a person and lead to a response of repentance coming from a free and willful choice of that individual.

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<sup>1171</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 6, p. 303.

<sup>1172</sup>Murphy, p. 153.

<sup>1173</sup>Garrett, p. 178.

<sup>1174</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 6, p. 243; Murphy, p. 120.

<sup>1175</sup>Murphy, p. 120.

So then, in the poetic books we witness a development of our theme of divine determination and human free will. All people are sinful, implying an inherent moral defect that, while not eradicating the human will, hinders the ability to do good. We also learn that without God's help, a person is unable to accomplish the intentions of his or her heart. We see earlier themes repeated, such as people choosing to turn to the Lord, and God's hardening of hearts. Concerning the latter, Psalm 81:11-12 may be key to understanding this thorny question, since God may simply be "giving them over to the stubbornness of their heart."

#### **D. Predestination and Free Will in the Prophetic Books**

What do the Old Testament prophetic books contribute to our study? God declares through Isaiah that He has chosen Israel and will never forsake them: "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, descendant of Abraham My friend, You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, and called from its remotest parts and said to you, 'You are My servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you.'" (Isa 41:8-9). Therefore, as stated before, Israel obtained its special status before Yahweh not due to its own merits, but by God's sovereign choice. By virtue of God's election, Israel had the confidence to appeal to Him for restoration, even after turning away from Him: "For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not recognize us. You, O Yahweh, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name" (Isa 63:16; cf. Isa 63:7-19).

In relation to God's election of Israel, the passage in Isaiah 45:9-10 is of special interest:

Woe to {the one} who quarrels with his Maker – an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, "What are you doing?" or the thing you are making {say}, "He has no hands?" Woe to him who says to a father, "What are you begetting?" or to a woman, "To what are you giving birth?"

The apostle Paul quotes these words to justify God's judgment of sinners, supposedly predestined by Him for condemnation (Rom 9:20-21). It is curious to note, however, that in the Old Testament context, these words have a positive connotation – God has elected Israel (see Isa 45:11) and will deliver him through King Cyrus (see Isa 45:1, 13). In any case, the main point is the same: Yahweh has the full right to do with His creation whatever He pleases. However God may act in relation to His creatures, they can make no legitimate objection.

At the same time, Isaiah does not hesitate to claim that God directly acts on a person's will. In not a few passages, Isaiah points to God's work of hardening the hearts of the disobedient. Concerning worshipers of idols, he writes,

They do not know, nor do they understand, for He has smeared over their eyes so that they cannot see and their hearts so that they cannot comprehend... a deceived heart has turned him aside. And he cannot deliver himself, nor say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Isa 44:18-20).

The word translated "smeared over" is נָחַ (tath). Scholars debate as to whether this verb should be rendered in the active or passive voice.<sup>1176</sup> However, since the verb is in the singular, not the plural, God must be its subject. Keil and Delitzsch equate this verse with Paul's commentary on idol worshippers in Romans 1:28: "God gave them over to a depraved mind."<sup>1177</sup> The sad consequence of this condition is that those so hardened cannot escape from their deception (see v. 20).

Isaiah provides another concrete example of God hardening hearts, this time in regard to Egypt:

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<sup>1176</sup>See Keil and Delitzsch, v. 7, p. 438; Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 377.

<sup>1177</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 7, p. 438

So I will incite Egyptians against Egyptians; and they will each fight against his brother and each against his neighbor, city against city {and} kingdom against kingdom. Then the spirit of the Egyptians will be demoralized within them; and I will confound their strategy, so that they will resort to idols and ghosts of the dead and to mediums and spiritists.... Yahweh has mixed within her a spirit of distortion; they have led Egypt astray in all that it does, as a drunken man staggers in his vomit (Isa 19:2-3, 14).

Several divine acts result in Egypt's downfall. First, God incites the Egyptians to war among themselves. The word "incite" is שָׁחַח (*sahah*), "to prick or spur on."<sup>1178</sup> Second, He "confounds their strategy." Finally, He "mixes within her a spirit of distortion." The result is Egypt's defeat in battle. Yet, we note that God is not inciting an immoral decision, but confusing their judgment for the purpose of leading them into judgment.

God hardens not only Gentiles, but at times His own people. During a time when Israel was experiencing the Lord's discipline, Isaiah marvels that "There is no one who calls on Your name, who arouses himself to take hold of You" (Isa 64:7). Then he reveals the cause of their apathy: "For You have hidden Your face from us and have delivered us into the power of our iniquities." In other words, the Lord "gave them over" to their own waywardness.

The most oft-quoted passage on this theme is Isaiah 6:9-10:

וַיֹּאמֶר לָךְ וְאָמַרְתָּ לָעָם הַזֶּה שְׁמָעוּ וְאַל־תִּבְיִנוּ וּרְאוּ וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ:  
הַשְׁמֵן לִבֵּיהֶם הַזֶּה וְאָזְנוֹ הַכֶּבֶד וְעֵינָיו הִשָּׁע וְאַל־תִּדְעוּ:  
פֶּן־יִרְאֶה בְּעֵינָיו וּבְאָזְנוֹ יִשְׁמָע וּלְבָבוֹ יִבִּין וְנָשָׁב וִרְפָּא לוֹ:

*He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on listening, but do not perceive; keep on looking, but do not understand.' Render the hearts of this people insensitive, their ears dull, and their eyes dim, otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed."*

The Septuagint renders an entirely different version, in which Israel's unresponsiveness does not result from God hardening them, but due to their own poor spiritual condition.

καὶ εἶπεν Πορεύθητι καὶ εἰπὸν τῷ λαῷ τούτῳ Ἀκοῇ ἀκούσετε καὶ οὐ μὴ συνῆτε καὶ βλέποντες βλέψετε καὶ οὐ μὴ ἴδωτε, ἐπαχύνθη γὰρ ἡ καρδία τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου, καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν αὐτῶν βαρέως ἤκουσαν καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτῶν ἐκάμυσαν, μήποτε ἴδωσιν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς καὶ τοῖς ὠσὶν ἀκούσωσιν καὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ συνῶσιν καὶ ἐπιστρέψωσιν καὶ ἰάσονται αὐτούς.

*He said, "Go, and tell this people: 'You will keep on listening intently, but you will not perceive at all; you will keep on looking closely with your eyes, but you will not see at all.' For the heart of this people is insensitive, with their ears they have hardly heard, and they have shut their eyes, lest they should see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return, and I should heal them."*

Two theories exist to explain the Hebrew text, where God commands Isaiah to "render the hearts of this people insensitive." First, through Isaiah's preaching of the Word and the subsequent rejection of it by God's people, the latter would harden their own hearts to the Lord. Thus, Isaiah would "render their hearts insensitive" indirectly through his preaching. If he has not preached to them, then they would not have hardened their hearts.<sup>1179</sup>

<sup>1178</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 968.

<sup>1179</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 7, p. 129.

Others posit a more direct action of God in this affair. When Isaiah would pronounce God's judgment on His people, the Lord would respond by activity hardening their hearts. In this way, He would prevent them from repenting and prepare them for judgment. God does this in response to their stubborn disobedience.

Isaiah 29:9-10 may shed light on this question: "Be delayed and wait, blind yourselves and be blind.... For Yahweh has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, He has shut your eyes." God is warning His people of coming chastisement, but the prophet reveals that Israel is not in condition spiritually to take the Lord's warning seriously – they have "blinded themselves." It seems that Yahweh has actively prevented His people from understanding and receiving this prophetic warning. Yet, this occurs only after Israel has already blinded themselves. According to Keil and Delitzsch, "This self-induced condition would become to them a God-appointed punishment."<sup>1180</sup>

We have already touched on Isaiah 63 in connection with God's election of the sons of Jacob. We will revisit verse 17: "Why, O Yahweh, do You cause us to stray from Your ways and harden our heart from fearing You? Return for the sake of Your servants, the tribes of Your heritage." Twice in this verse, the author employs the Hebrew causative verb form *Hiphil* to describe God's actions. The Lord *תִּתְּעֶנּוּ* ("caused us to stray") and *תִּקְשִׁיחַ* ("hardened our heart"). Keil and Delitzsch comment here, "When men have scornfully and obstinately rejected the grace of God, God withdraws it from them judicially, gives them up to their wanderings, and makes their heart incapable of faith."<sup>1181</sup> In response, Isaiah prays that God would "return." Here, the text implies that only with God's help and intervention can Israel correct its errors.

Not only Isaiah, but all the Old Testament prophets stress personal responsibility before God for our actions, which coincides with belief in free will. Ezekiel chapter 18 is possibly the most straightforward text in this regard. Verse 20, for example, reads, "The righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself."

Accordingly, the Lord appeals to people to "repent and live" (Ezek 18:32). Such calls to repentance characterize all the prophetic books. Isaiah writes, "Return to Him from whom you have deeply defected, O sons of Israel" (Isa 31:6), "Return to Me, for I have redeemed you" (Isa 44:22), and, "Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to Yahweh" (Isa 55:7). Jeremiah declares, "'Return, O faithless sons,' declares Yahweh.... Return, O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness" (Jer 3:14, 22). A call to repentance is an appeal to a free moral agent.

At the same time, Jeremiah also speaks of God's intervention in people's decisions. God promises those Judeans in exile, "I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am Yahweh; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart" (Jer 24:7). The Hebrew reads:

וְנָתַתִּי לָהֶם לֵב לְדַעַת אֶתִּי כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה וְהֵיוּ לִי לְעָם  
וְאֲנֹכִי אֶהְיֶה לָהֶם לֵאלֹהִים כִּי־יָשׁוּבוּ אֵלַי בְּכָל־לֵבָם

Discussion arises about the conjunction *כִּי* (*ki*) in the second half of the verse. Typically, it denotes causation, i.e. "for they will return to Me." According to this rendering, Yahweh is making an unconditional promise to bring His people to Himself. Another possible variant, though, is to render *כִּי* (*ki*) "if." Now, Israel's restoration is conditional: "if they will return to Me." This translation corresponds to the general tone of Jeremiah's prophecy, where blessings come through obedience.<sup>1182</sup> On the other hand, Keil and Delitzsch defend the option of an unconditional promise from the Lord: "The turning to the Lord cannot be regarded as the condition of their receiving favour, because God will give them a heart to know Him; it is the working of the knowledge of the Lord put in their hearts."<sup>1183</sup>

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<sup>1180</sup>Ibid., v. 8, p. 313.

<sup>1181</sup>Ibid, v. 7, p. 604.

<sup>1182</sup>Craigie P. C. Jeremiah 1–25 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – C. 360. Craigie also notes the disjunctive accent in the Hebrew text, which better corresponds to the translation "if."

<sup>1183</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 8, p. 228.

Key to the spiritual transformation of God's people is their receiving a new heart. Jeremiah 32:38-39 teaches the same: "They shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for {the good of} their children after them." Israel's turning to the Lord results from receiving a new heart from the Lord. Furthermore, this inner transformation is part of God's new covenant with His people: "'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares Yahweh, 'I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it'" (Jer 31:33). God declares the same through Ezekiel, implying that the new heart will result in obedient lives:

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances (Ezek 36:26-27).

On the other hand, Jeremiah seems to imply of evil resulting from "the anger of Yahweh." It is written about Zedekiah, "He did evil in the sight of Yahweh like all that Jehoiakim had done. For through the anger of Yahweh {this} came about in Jerusalem and Judah until He cast them out from His presence" (Jer 52:2; cf. 2 Kin 25:18-20).

Jeremiah 10:23 reminds us of similar verses in the poetic books of the Old Testament: "I know, O Yahweh, that a man's way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct (or "establish") his steps." It is remarkable that the terms כוּן (*kun*), דֶּרֶךְ (*dereh*), and צֶעַד (*tsaad*), found in similar citations from the poetic books, are found in this verse as well. This leads us to conclude that the same idea is in view – a person can plan his way, but only the Lord can realize his intentions.

The context of this verse speaks of God punishing Judah by sending them into exile. Therefore, Jeremiah is acknowledging here that people cannot stay loyal to God without His assistance. Keil and Delitzsch confirm, "It is not within man's power to arrange the course of his life, nor in the power of the man who walks to fix his step."<sup>1184</sup> Huey agrees, "We know that we are unable to direct our steps aright apart from God."<sup>1185</sup> Accordingly, in the next verse Jeremiah, speaking on behalf of all Judah, appeals to Yahweh, "Correct me, O Yahweh, but with justice; not with Your anger, or You will bring me to nothing" (Jer 10:24).

Finally, the prophetic books affirm that God can use the evil and destructive acts of people to accomplish His purpose in the end. The book of Joel supports this idea. Yahweh uses locust (chp. 1) and enemy armies (chp. 2) to chastise His people. Yet, it is nowhere stated that God causes an immoral decision. He merely takes advantage of already existing human ill intent to accomplish His goal of punishing His people.

In summary, the prophetic books continue themes highlighted in earlier books. On the one hand, human free will is evident in that: (1) people are responsible for their sins, and (2) God repeatedly summons sinners to repentance. On the other hand, we see instances where the Lord directly influences human choice: (1) people need His assistance to turn to Him, and (2) the Lord on occasion hardens people's hearts. Concerning the last point, though, God never initiates an evil act, but may intensify a person's own evil intention.

## E. Predestination and Free Will in the Exilic/Post-Exilic Books

In this literature, God's effect on human intention and choice tends in a more positive direction. In other words, instead of hearts being hardened, hearts are being moved to do good. For example, Ezra 1:1 relates, "Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" to permit Judah to return to their homeland.<sup>1186</sup> The term used for the influence God exerts is עוּר (*ur*), which in the *Hiphil* form means "rouse, stir up, to activity" (see Ezra 1:1, 5 and Hag 1:14).<sup>1187</sup>

<sup>1184</sup>Ibid., v. 8, p. 129.

<sup>1185</sup>Huey F. B. Jeremiah, Lamentations // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993. – P. 129.

<sup>1186</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 10, p. 479.

<sup>1187</sup>Brown, Driver, Briggs, p. 735.

In the same chapter, we discover, “Then the heads of fathers’ {households} of Judah and Benjamin and the priests and the Levites arose, even everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of Yahweh which is in Jerusalem” (Ezra 1:5). In Williamson’s words, “The response, as much as the issuing of the decree itself... resulted from God’s prompting rather than human opportunism.”<sup>1188</sup> Furthermore, the Levites joined the company returning to Judah because of “the good hand of our God upon us” (Ezra 8:18-19).

In the same way that the Lord prompted people to return to Judah, he also impelled them to rebuild the temple. After Haggai’s prophecy, the leaders among the remnant, together with the remnant itself, answered the summons to rebuild the temple (Hag 1:12). In verse 14, however, we learn what was behind their positive response: “So Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and the spirit of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest, and the spirit of all the remnant of the people; and they came and worked on the house of Yahweh.”

Keil and Delitzsch assert that God made people “willing and glad to carry out His resolutions.”<sup>1189</sup> Mason compares this with what took place during the construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness (see Ex 35:20–36:3). Unlike the incident in Exodus, however, “There it is the people’s hearts that stirs them to action. Here it is Yahweh.”<sup>1190</sup>

Moreover, God conditioned the heart of Artaxerxes to support Nehemiah’s initiative to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah, chps. 1-2). Nehemiah summarizes the event: “And the king granted {them} to me because the good hand of my God {was} on me” (Neh 2:8). The book of Nehemiah also reveals why God chose Abraham: “...who chose Abram and brought him out from Ur of the Chaldees.... You found his heart faithful before You” (Neh 9:7-8).

The book of Zechariah, however, affirms that God can motivate negative actions as well. Before the Judeans rebuilt the temple, God “set all men one against another” (Zech 8:10). Looking into the future, Zechariah predicts that the Lord will “cause the men to fall, each into another’s power and into the power of his king” (Zech 11:6). In addition, rejection of Messiah will be the Lord’s doing: “Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man, My Associate.... Strike the Shepherd that the sheep may be scattered” (Zech 13:7).

Daniel 12:1 speaks of a book recording the names of the saved ones in Israel. This recalls Moses’ words: “But now, if You will, forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!” (Ex 32:32). It is fair to identify this book with the Lamb’s book of life (Rev 21:27). Yet, as we noted earlier, the inclusion (more precisely, the “exclusion”) of people from that book depends on their free choice: “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book” (Ex 32:33).

Finally, Malachi wrote the following provocative words about God electing Israel: “‘I have loved you,’ says Yahweh. But you say, ‘How have You loved us?’ ‘{Was} not Esau Jacob’s brother?’ declares Yahweh. ‘Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and {appointed} his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness’” (Mal 1:2-3). Smith explains this by referring to Yahweh’s covenant with Israel. By “loved” and “hated” the Lord means that He has “chosen” Israel and “not chosen” Esau.<sup>1191</sup> Yet, Keil and Delitzsch insist that God truly hated Esau, expressed in that He “made his mountains a desolation and {appointed} his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.”

Here, one must consider that according to the biblical principle of “corporate personality,” God can deal with an entire people group as with one individual. That individual’s destiny becomes the destiny of the entire group. Thus, Esau’s attitude toward his inheritance: “who sold his own birthright for a {single} meal” (Heb 12:16), would give God grounds to “hate” Esau. In line with the principle of “corporate personality,” those consequences could extend to all his descendants.

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<sup>1188</sup>Williamson H. G. M. Ezra, Nehemiah // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 15-16.

<sup>1189</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 10, p. 497.

<sup>1190</sup>Noted in Smith R. L. Micah–Malachi // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 155.

<sup>1191</sup>Smith, p. 305.

## F. Predestination and Free Will in the Intertestamental Literature

We will highlight several passages from the intertestamental period that address our question about human free will.<sup>1192</sup> On the one hand, writers of that time echo Malachi's words about God's relationship with Esau. In *4 Ezra*, we read, "And thou gavest him Isaac, and to Isaac thou gavest Jacob and Esau. And thou didst set apart Jacob for thyself, but Esau thou didst hate; and Jacob became a great host" (*4 Ezra*, 3.16). Similarly, the author of *Jubilees* writes, "For Ishmael and his sons and his brothers and Esau, the Lord did not cause to approach Him, and he chose them not because they are the children of Abraham, because He knew them, but He chose Israel to be His people" (*Jubilees*, 15.30).

On the other hand, Philo sees in this story God's predestination based on His foreknowledge:

Again, they say that Jacob and Esau, the former being the ruler, and governor, and master, and Esau being the subject and the slave, had their several estates appointed to them while they were still in the world. For God, the creator of all living things, is thoroughly acquainted with all his works, and before he has completely finished them he comprehends the faculties with which they will hereafter be endowed, and altogether he foreknows all their actions and passions (*Allegorical Interpretation*, 3.88).

The classic passage on human free will of this period is found in *Sirach*, 15.11-20:

Say not: "From God is my transgression," for that which He hateth made He not. Say not: "(It is) He that made me to stumble," for there is no need of gevil meng. Evil and abomination doth the Lord hate, and He doth not let it come nigh to them that fear Him. God created man from the beginning, and placed him in the hand of his Yeşer. If thou (so) desirest, thou canst keep the commandment, and (it is) wisdomk to do His good pleasurej. Poured out before thee (are) fire and water, stretch forth thine hand unto that which thou desirest.

## G. Summary

Let us attempt a summary of the Old Testament teaching regarding divine determinism and human free will. First, God sovereignly chose certain individuals and locations to play key roles in His overall plan, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Levi, David, Jerusalem, etc. Yet, we cannot agree that their election was unconditional. In two clear examples, Scripture connects God's election to specific qualities these individuals had. For example, God "found (Abraham's) heart faithful before (Him), and made a covenant with him" (Neh 9:7-8), and David was "a man after His own heart" (1 Sam 13:14; cf. 1 Sam 16:7).

Second, the stress in the Old Testament on human responsibility for sin and frequent calls to repentance, testify to human freedom. A just God would not condemn someone for sinful acts He Himself compelled them to do, or to require repentance of those who had no ability to freely respond. The biblical text also records many instances where people appeared to turn to God, or turn away from Him, of their own volition.

Nonetheless, the Old Testament testifies of universal human sinfulness to the point that Moses could even predict Israel's future apostasy. The psalmist confirms, "There is no one who does good, not even one" (Ps 13:3). Nevertheless, some Old Testament figures served the Lord faithfully (though not perfectly) in their time. Thus, the Old Testament supports the idea of universal human sinfulness (everyone sins), but not total human depravity (not everyone sins all the time).

In the light of the fact of universal human sinfulness, it does not surprise us that the Old Testament teaches that people need the Lord's help to be obedient. The new covenant will introduce a "new heart" (Ezek 36:26-27), the "law written on the heart" (Jer 31:33), and a "circumcision of the heart" (Deut 30:6), which will cause God's people to become an obedient people. Ezekiel even prophesied that this inner renewal will

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<sup>1192</sup>Noted in Murphy, p. 153, Dunn J. D. G. Romans 9–16 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas: Word, 1998. – P. 544.



guarantee obedience (Ezek 36:27). While still in the context of the old covenant, God sometimes moved on individual's hearts to prompt a decision and produce a response in line with His plan.

On the other hand, the Bible records not a few instances where God hardened people's hearts in disobedience. Yet, as noted in our discussion above, He simply intensified their own personal evil intention by "giving them over to it." So then, the Lord did not motivate people to do evil, but rather enforced their own hostile intentions toward Him or His people in order to prepare them for judgment. In many cases, God used the evil acts of people to advance His plan. Nevertheless, we see no indication in the biblical text that such choices were made under divine compulsion. God simply took advantage of the situation to further His good will.

In surveying divine determination in the Old Testament, one should keep in mind Boyd's suggestion that in the polytheistic milieu of the Ancient Near East, it was necessary to present Yahweh as "*bringing about* events he *merely allows* with a divine purpose."<sup>1193</sup> Boyd continues his thought:

This way of speaking was in keeping with their conception of Yahweh as an ancient Near Eastern monarch and served to emphasize, over and against the polytheism of surrounding cultures, that the one and only Creator takes responsibility (though never the moral culpability) for all that come to pass in His creation.<sup>1194</sup>

In summary, we come to the following conclusions. God created humans with free will, from whom He expected obedience, and whom He justly punished for disobedience. However, people have an inherent tendency to sin, which limits their ability to do good. If people stubbornly persist in rebellion, God may harden that intention of their hearts with the result that they become fixed in their pursuit. Yet, for His faithful ones, the Lord has prepared a new covenant providing a new heart, in virtue of which obedience becomes possible and even guaranteed. Even in Old Testament times, God occasionally moved in such a way on human hearts to secure their cooperation. In addition, God exercises His sovereignty in choosing certain people to play key roles in His plan. However, He does not do this unconditionally, but based on His knowing their character beforehand.

In closing, two clarifications are in order. The bondage to sin in which all people are trapped does not eliminate the freedom of their will. Sin is not some outside force coercing the will of individuals to impel them to make wrong decisions. Sin is incorporated into the very fiber of human nature, so that people, being evil by nature, choose to sin of their own volition. Thus, God is perfectly just in punishing humans, sinful by nature, for doing sinful acts. In the same way, the guarantee of obedience provided in the new covenant does not rob humans of freedom either. As in the case of sin, the "new heart" is not an outside force impinging on the human will, but rather the essential person himself/herself. The obedience such a person renders is truly genuine and free.

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<sup>1194</sup>*Ibid.*

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## Chapter 17 - God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom: New Testament

### A. Predestination and Free Will in the Synoptic Gospels

In this section, we will discover our Lord Jesus' teaching concerning divine determinism and human freedom contained in the Synoptic Gospels. As in the Old Testament, the Gospels echo a call to follow God. Along with a call to discipleship is a summons to repentance. Both Jesus and John the Baptism began their ministries with the announcement: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt 3:2; 4:17). A call or summons is an appeal to the will and implies a free response to it. Correspondingly, some responded to the call (see Mk 1:17), while others did not (see Mk 10:21).

Nonetheless, the Synoptic Gospels contain references to God's election. Although "many are called," "few are chosen" (Matt 22:14). The days of the Great Tribulation are shortened "for the sake of the elect" (Matt 24:22), whom the Antichrist could not mislead (Matt 24:24), and whom the angels will gather at the return of Christ (Matt 24:31).

How do God's elect differ from other people? Matthew 11:25-26 (parallel Lk 10:21-24) will prove insightful here: "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from {the} wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight." Before saying this, Jesus reproved the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum for rejecting Him. Jesus explained that not all are able to receive His revelation, since the Father grants this understanding to those whom He wills. He has "hidden these things from {the} wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants."<sup>1195</sup> Most likely, "these things" refers to the understanding of who Christ is and what He came to do.

So then, the inhabitants of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum were unable to appreciate the person and mission of Christ because the Father had not granted them that revelation. This presents the difficulty of why God withheld this understanding from them. Two answers are proposed. First, Jesus began His prayer to the Father with the words, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth," which emphasize His sovereignty. Jesus follows with the words, "You have hidden these things from {the} wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants... for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight." The sovereign God has the full right and privilege to reveal truth to those to whom He is pleased to do so.<sup>1196</sup>

On the other hand, God's election here is not unconditional. The Father hides these things "from {the} wise and intelligent" and reveals them "to infants." Receiving His revelation depends on the spiritual condition of its recipients. The word "infants" is clearly a metaphor for simple, humble people. The words "wise and intelligent" contrast with "infants" and refer to proud and self-reliant persons. Jesus is not condemning wisdom and knowledge, since the Bible speaks positively of them (see Proverbs). The Bible does condemn, however, pride and conceit, which often accompany the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>1197</sup>

Therefore, this passage touches on two aspects of God's providence. On the one hand, He reveals truth to those He pleases. On the other hand, He pleases to reveal it to those who are simple and humble as infants. Such individuals are more likely to possess an inner predisposition to truth. So then, an inner predisposition to truth exists among those characterized as infants – the humble and lowly. This is the primary prerequisite for receiving revelation from the Lord. Jesus alluded to this dynamic in His Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3).

Next, Matthew 15:13 hints at predestination for salvation. Commenting on the spiritual condition of the Pharisees, Jesus said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be uprooted." Predestination based on foreknowledge, though, is not ruled out here. The "plants, planted by the Father" could be those He foreknew would respond to Jesus.

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<sup>1195</sup>Hagner D. A. Matthew 1-13 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 2002. – P. 318.

<sup>1196</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1197</sup>Blomberg C. Matthew // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, electronic edition Logos Library System, 2001. – P. 193.

Morris suggests that the word “plants” refers not to the false teachers (i.e., the Pharisees), but to their false teaching. In this case, the Father uproots the teaching that He did not establish.<sup>1198</sup> Blomberg, however, reminds us that the image of a “plant” is likely taken from Matthew 13:29 or Isaiah 60:21.<sup>1199</sup> In these texts, “plants” refers to people.

The Synoptics also affirm universal human sinfulness. Jesus declared to a certain ruler, “No one is good except God alone” (Lk 18:19). Jesus also called all peoples “evil” (Matt 7:11) and claimed that all need repentance (Lk 13:3). Yet, we marvel that the Synoptics offer little promise of God’s help for living a moral life, except for the promise of the Spirit to those who ask for Him (Lk 11:13).

In summary, the Synoptic Gospels stress Jesus’ call to repentance and discipleship. Little is said about how one attains these goals. It seems that, even though people are by nature evil, their response to the Lord depends on themselves. We also encounter in the Synoptics brief mentions of God election. According to Matthew 11:25-26, though, His election is not unconditional, but based on the humility and openness of His chosen ones.

## **B. Predestination and Free Will in Acts**

The main theme of the Book of Acts is preaching the gospel to the whole world, beginning in Jerusalem (Acts 1:8). In light of the Great Commission of our Lord Jesus Christ, it seems that He desires salvation for all. Paul, standing before King Agrippa, expresses the desire “that whether in a short or long time, not only you, but also all who hear me this day, might become such as I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26:29).

However, in Acts we encounter references to predestination for salvation as well. It sometimes seems that, although the gospel is preached to all, God determines who will respond to the call for salvation. Concerning the ministry in Antioch, we read, “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a large number who believed turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21). On the other hand, the expression “the hand of the Lord was with them” may refer not to God’s predestining some for salvation, but the working of signs and miracles to confirm the good news, leading to mass conversions. According to Polhill, this expression means that “‘the hand’ of the Lord, that is, his power and Spirit, was with them.”<sup>1200</sup> Peterson connects this verse with the prayer of the disciples in Acts 4:30: “...while You extend Your hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Your holy servant Jesus.”<sup>1201</sup>

Acts 13:48 presents us with a more direct reference to predestination. In Pisidian Antioch, Paul’s preaching prompted the following reaction: “When the Gentiles heard this, they {began} rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” The word “appointed” is *τεταγμένοι* (*tetagmenoi*). This verb is in the passive, Greek “perfect” tense, which describes an action in the past that has continuing effect in the present. The verb’s root is *τάσσω* (*tasso*), meaning “arrange.”<sup>1202</sup> Accordingly, God “arranged” in the past that when these individuals heard the gospel, they would believe.

Polhill sees in this instance a synergy between God’s Spirit and the new converts. The Spirit of God “was moving in them, convicting them, appointing them for life,” but the people themselves responded.<sup>1203</sup> Peterson also stresses God’s contribution:

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<sup>1198</sup>Morris L. The Gospel According to Matthew // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1992. – P. 396.

<sup>1199</sup>Blomberg, p. 240.

<sup>1200</sup>Polhill J. B. Acts // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995. – P. 271.

<sup>1201</sup>Peterson D. G. The Acts of the Apostles // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans, 2009. – P. 353.

<sup>1202</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 991.

<sup>1203</sup>Polhill, p. 308.

Luke draws attention to the way in which God uses the gospel to call out his elect and to save them.... Not everyone is affected in the same way by the preaching of the gospel. God must open hearts, to enable people to listen and respond with faith.<sup>1204</sup>

Curiously, in the immediate context, divine determination did not determine the response of the hearers in Iconium, but rather the quality of preaching: “In Iconium they entered the synagogue of the Jews together, and spoke in such a manner that a large number of people believed, both of Jews and of Greeks” (Acts 14:1). Here, it seems that people believed not because God predestined them for salvation, but because Paul and Barnabas preached well, that is, they persuaded them.

We might compare this instance with the narrative of Matthew 11:21, where it is claimed that if the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon had seen the miracles Jesus performed, they would have repented. So then, under different circumstances the outcome might have been different.<sup>1205</sup> It seems that, just in Acts 14:1, their response to the Word depended on the quality of the ministry they received.

Acts 9:32-42 records a similar case, where God, through Peter, does two great miracles: a healing of a cripple and a resurrection from the dead. In connection with these works of power, “many believed in the Lord.” We may assume that without these miracles, people would not have turned to the Lord, at least not at that time. Again, the quality of the ministry has an effect on the response to the gospel.

We also note that in the same context, we learn that those in Pisidian Antioch who rejected the Word did so by their own volition. Therefore, Paul announces the following verdict: “...you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life” (Acts 13:46).<sup>1206</sup>

In Acts 16, we discover an example of God’s direct influence on an individual leading to conversion. In Philippi, during Paul’s preaching, “a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). The word “opened,” *διανοίγω* (*dianoigo*), was used previously by Luke in his Gospel (Lk 24:31), when Jesus opened the physical eyes of those accompanying Him on the road to Emmaus so that they recognized Him, and in Luke 24:45, when He opened the minds of the disciples to understand the Scriptures.<sup>1207</sup> Therefore, in Acts 16:14, Luke again employs this term in relation to aiding someone’s spiritual perception.

Lydia’s reaction to the Spirit’s work in her heart is described by the verb *προσέχω* (*proseho*), i.e., “to respond.” The basic meanings of this word are: (1) to be concerned about, (2) to pay attention to, and (3) to devote oneself to.<sup>1208</sup> Peterson observes that Lydia heard Paul’s preaching before God opened her heart, but she responded in faith only after the Spirit’s move.

Looking at this situation from a different perspective, we may posit that God opened Lydia’s heart not “while” she was listening to Paul, but “because” she was listening to him. It is significant that the word “listening” (*ἤκουσεν* - *eikousen*) is in the Greek imperfect tense, which indicates continual action in the past. This means that she was listening to Paul for some time before God opened her heart. We also read that she was “a worshiper of God” and was at a “place of prayer.” Therefore, she was already positively disposed to the Lord.

Can we conclude that the Spirit’s action on her heart was not the result of God’s unconditional election, but due to her devotion to the Lord? Polhill notes a commonality between what occurred here and the case with Cornelius (see Acts 10). He writes, “As he had with Cornelius, God responded to her faith and ‘opened her heart’ to receive the gospel of Jesus Christ which Paul proclaimed.”<sup>1209</sup>

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<sup>1204</sup>Peterson, p. 399–400.

<sup>1205</sup>Pekota D. B. The Saving Work of Christ // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 371.

<sup>1206</sup>Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 349.

<sup>1207</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 234.

<sup>1208</sup>Ibid., p. 879.

<sup>1209</sup>Polhill, p. 349.

We will next examine Acts 18:10. During a time when Paul was especially stressed in his ministry, God assured him about his future success in Corinth with the words “I have many people in this city.” This statement could indicate that God had predestined many in Corinth for salvation, or that according to His foreknowledge, He knew that many would receive the gospel.

Aside from passages indicating God’s involvement in people’s conversion, Acts 4:27-28 relates God’s “participation” in an evil deed – the crucifixion of His Son: “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.”<sup>1210</sup> A comparison to Acts 2:23 will prove helpful here: “This {Man,} delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put {Him} to death.” Here we see that God’s “predetermined plan” was associated with His foreknowledge. This means that God did not incite Herod and Pilate to crucify Jesus, but merely foreknew their actions and included them in His plan.

In summary, although the book of Acts advances the idea that the gospel should go to the entire world, in certain cases we discover that God predestined those who respond to it. Most of these cases, though, can be explained by appealing to predestination based on foreknowledge, with the notable exception of Acts 13:48, where it is written, “As many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.” However, if the example with Lydia illustrates God’s work of election, it is possible to suggest that He chooses those who have an inner disposition to embracing the truth.

### C. Predestination and Free Will in the General Epistles

The following biblical passage is key for understanding divine determination and human free will in receiving salvation – 1 Pet 1:1-2.

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

The key elements of the passage are as follows. First, God chooses His elect “according to His foreknowledge.” Second, the means by which God brings them to Christ is by “the sanctifying work of the Spirit.” Third, the goal of election is “to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood.”

According to Peter, the Holy Spirit draws people to Christ. The term “sanctification” is *ἁγιασμός* (*hagiasmos*), having a basic meaning “separation.” Thus, the Spirit “separates” people unto God, that is, draws them to salvation. Yet, God’s election for salvation is not unconditional, but derives from His foreknowledge (*πρόγνωσις* - *prognosis*).

It will interest us to learn how the term *πρόγνωσις* (*prognosis*) and its related verb form *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*) are used in the New Testament. In Acts 26:5, *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*) means “known for a long time,” and refers to the Jews’ knowing Paul’s former way of life. In 2 Peter 3:17, the word refers to simply knowing the future and refers to the anticipation of a coming apostasy.

At the same time, the word can suggest “appointment” or “predestination.” In 1 Peter 1:20, for example, Jesus was “was foreknown (*προγινώσκω*) before the foundation of the world.” In addition, Romans 11:2 states, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (*προγινώσκω*).” Some feel that the words *πρόγνωσις* (*prognosis*) and *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*) are synonyms for “predestination.” They affirm that “foreknowledge” and “predestination” are the same divine actions.

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<sup>1210</sup>Noted in Carson D. A. How long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil. – 2nd ed. –Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 188.

Dunn, for example, employs several Old Testament texts to show that “knowledge” (in Hebrew *יָדָע*, *yadah*) can connote the sense “appointment.”<sup>1211</sup>

- For I have chosen (*יָדָע* = “knew”) him, so that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of Yahweh (Gen 18:19)
- Before I formed you in the womb I knew (*יָדָע*) you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations (Jer 1:5)
- I cared (*יָדָע*) for you in the wilderness, in the land of drought (Hos 13:5)
- You only have I chosen (*יָדָע*) among all the families of the earth (Amos 3:2)

On the other hand, in other places *πρόγνωσις* (*prognosis*) and *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*) cannot mean “election.” In Romans 8:29 and Acts 2:23, another term clearly denoting election stands alongside *πρόγνωσις* (*prognosis*) or *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*):

- For those whom He foreknew (*προγινώσκω*), He also predestined {to become} conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren (Rom 8:29).
- This {Man,} delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge (*πρόγνωσις*) of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put {Him} to death (Acts 2:23)

In these texts, we cannot ascribe the meaning “election” to *πρόγνωσις* (*prognosis*) or *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*), since that idea is already expressed by another term. It is vital to note that Romans 8:29 specifically indicates that in relation to salvation, God’s foreknowledge differs from His work of predestination. They are separate works. 1 Peter 1:1-2 teaches the same.

Thus, the New Testament usage of “foreknow” does not confirm Dunn’s assumption that the New Testament writers borrowed Old Testament terminology for “know” including its connotation of “election.” We must conclude, rather, that the Old Testament expresses both concepts of “foreknowledge” and “predestination” in one term, *יָדָע* (*yada*). In other words, the Old Testament examples cited above refer both to election and to the foreknowledge on which it is based.

We can assert the same regarding 1 Peter 1:20 and Romans 11:2, where the single term *προγινώσκω* (*proginosko*) combines both concepts: predestination and the foreknowledge from which it is derived. Most likely, these verses are following the Old Testament precedence of combining both concepts into one. In distinction from this, however, Romans 8:29, 1 Peter 1:1-2, and Acts 2:23 make clear that predestination and foreknowledge fundamentally differ from one another. The first indicates God’s action, while the second reveals the basis for that action.

Another key verse appears later in Peter’s first epistle:

For {this} is contained in Scripture: “Behold, I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner {stone,} and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed.” This precious value, then, is for you who believe; but for those who disbelieve, “The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner {stone,}” and, “a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense”; for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this {doom} they were also appointed. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for {God's} own possession (1 Pet 2:6-9).

Here, believers are called “the chosen.” Yet, we object to assigning to this term the full weight of “predestination to salvation.” Peter’s goal here was not to teach God’s predestination of believers, but to compare God’s Old Testament people with believers in Christ. The Church now enjoys the status that Israel did and possesses the same titles that they did, including the “chosen people.”

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<sup>1211</sup>Dunn, p. 482.

What does Peter mean, though, when he writes that unbelievers were “appointed” to disbelief? The Greek here reads, οἱ προσκόπτουσιν τῷ λόγῳ ἀπειθοῦντες εἰς ὃ καὶ ἐτέθησαν. The word “appointed” translates τίθημι (*titheimi*), which literally denotes “put, set, lay” or in a derived sense, “appoint.” The same word appears in the beginning of verse six, where it is translated “lay.”

It is worth noting that the conditional clause, “to this {doom} they were also appointed,” is introduced by a relative pronoun of the neuter gender and singular number: εἰς ὃ (“to this”). Thus, its antecedent is not a single word in the previous clause, but the clause in its entirety. The main verb in that previous clause is προσκόπτουσιν (*proskoptousin*), “stumble.” The word ἀπειθοῦντες (*apeithountes*), “disobedient,” is a participle modifying the main verb. Consequently, the words “to this” refers not to “disobedience,” but to “stumble.” So then, unbelievers are not appointed to “disobedience,” but are appointed to suffer the consequences of that disobedience, that is, “to stumble” over the “rock of offense.” The New American Standard translation, employed above, reflects these considerations in its translation, “to this {doom} they were also appointed.”

Michaels adds the observation that the word “stumble” refers not to the unbelievers’ rejection of the gospel, but to the consequence of doing so. Therefore, the “stumbling” that the unbelievers are appointed for is not rejecting the gospel, but incurring the consequence of doing so. In other words, God has not appointed certain people to reject the gospel, but has determined the consequences that will ensue if they do. This produces a parallel between the believers’ and unbelievers’ experience – the former “will not be disappointed” (v. 6), while the latter “stumble” (v. 8).<sup>1212</sup>

Several features of Peter’s second epistle favors the doctrine of genuine human free will. In 2 Peter 2:1, we learn that Jesus died for false teachers as well: “There will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them.” If Jesus died for all people, then it logically follows that His will is for all to be saved. Peter directly states, in fact, the Lord is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9).

So then, salvation is sincerely offered to all people. If some do not receive it, logic compels us to attribute that to human freedom of choice. If only the elect can receive salvation, then God, who offers eternal life to all, enables only some to receive it. The inconsistency is blatant.

Finally, in 2 Peter 2:20-22, Peter reveals that believers can abandon their faith:

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, {returns} to wallowing in the mire.”

The former condition of the backslider is described as having “escaped the defilements of the world,” having “known the way of righteousness,” and having “washed.” These items can only refer to a true convert to Christ. According to the doctrine of predestination, God will keep the elect faithful to the end. Backsliding, however, is an indication of free will in operation.

On the other hand, Jude promises that God will keep His own from backsliding:

- “Jude, a bond-servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to those who are the called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ” (v. 1).
- “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy...” (v. 24-25)

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<sup>1212</sup>Michaels J. R. 1 Peter // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 107.



- We can add Peter's inspired testimony: "...to {obtain} an inheritance {which is} imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet 1:4-5).

At the same time, it would be incorrect to assume that Jude denied the possibility of a believer's backsliding. The main thrust of his epistle is to warn the church about the influence of false brethren, who might mislead true Christians. Jude is not trying to exclude the possibility of apostasy, but rather to assure believers that in the face of pressures to compromise, God is able to keep them. Yet, the human factor also plays a role: "Keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 21).

Jude also reveals that these false brethren "were long ago marked out for this condemnation" (v. 4). The Greek word for "marked out" is *προγράφω* (*prographo*). This term could have three possible meanings in this context.<sup>1213</sup> First, it could indicate that the condemnation of these false brethren was marked down in heaven from before creation. Yet, the recording of their future condemnation does not force the conclusion that God predestined them for it – it could simply be a foreknown fact. Second, Jude may mean that previous Christian writers have already predicted their judgment.

Third, the meaning could be that Old Testament prophets foresaw their intrusion into the people of God. Davids and Bauckham prefer this option for the following reasons. The adverb *πάλαι* (*palai*), "long ago," does not align with the proposal that earlier Christian writers are in view.<sup>1214</sup> In addition, in his epistle, Jude frequently cites Old Testament and intertestamental sources to confirm his teachings.<sup>1215</sup>

The epistle of James is remarkable for the following features. On the one hand, he writes, "Did not God choose the poor of this world {to be} rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom" (Jam 2:5). Here, it seems God is inclined to predestine the poor for salvation. On the other hand, James did not state that God chose the poor *exclusively*, but rather that they are not *excepted* from the kingdom. James is seeking to correct any tendency in the Church to discriminate against the poor (see chp. 2). If God has chosen the poor, then the Church must not exclude them.

Moreover, many proponents of unconditional predestination insist that the Lord determines all human choices, even evil ones. Yet, James directly contradicts this claim: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone" (Jam 1:13). Later, he explains, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jam 1:17). Therefore, sin originates in the human free will.

Moving on to the epistle to the Hebrews, verse 15 of chapter 9 stands out: "For this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that, since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were {committed} under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance."

Who are the "called?" Hebrews 3:1 answers our inquiry: "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling..."<sup>1216</sup> From this verse, one may conclude that God has called people to salvation, and that believers in this congregation have become partakers of that calling. How they entered into that status, though, is not detailed. Was it by God's work of unconditional predestination, or the result of their free choice? Therefore, the expression "those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance" does not enlighten us as to the role of divine determination or human choice in attaining salvation.

In Hebrews 12:2, Jesus is called the "author and finisher of our faith," thus stressing the role of the Son of God in preserving the believer in faith. Nonetheless, we do not want to exclude the human factor here. The

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<sup>1213</sup>Davids P. H. The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2006. – P. 43-44.

<sup>1214</sup>Bauckham R. J. 2 Peter, Jude // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 35-36.

<sup>1215</sup>Davids, p. 43-44.

<sup>1216</sup>Carson D. A. Editor's Preface in The Letter to the Hebrews // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, England: William B. Eerdmans, 2010. – P. 328.

entire epistle is devoted to the theme of preventing apostasy, more specifically, to prevent Jewish Christians from returning to Judaism. This reveals that the epistle's author recognizes the human element in preserving faith, otherwise there would be no sense in imploring believers to remain true to Christ.

The epistle to the Hebrews contains specific warnings about backsliding. In Hebrews 10:26-27, we read that those who "received the knowledge of the truth" can subsequently fall into willful sin. The most well known of such warnings is Hebrews 6:4-6:

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and {then} have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame.

We can confirm that the term "who have once been enlightened," i.e., (φωτισθέντας – *photithentas*) applies to believers in Christ. The same word is found in Hebrews 10:32 where it unquestionably refers to Christians. In addition, the word "partakers" (μετόχους – *metohous*) here also refers to believers, as in Hebrews 3:1 (believers are "partakers of a heavenly calling") and in Hebrews 3:14 (they are "partakers of Christ"). The reference in Hebrews 6:5 to those who have "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come" is again of true believers who might still "fall away." The same verb, γεύομαι (*geuomai* – "tasted") is used to describe the reality of Christ's "tasting" death (Heb 2:9).

We can summarize the contribution of the General Epistles as follows. This literature acknowledges God's work of predestination to salvation, but bases that work on God's foreknowledge, apparently of people's openness to Him. False brethren will arise, but not by God's direction. Unbelievers are appointed not to reject the gospel, but to suffer the consequences of such a rejection. God's will is to save all persons – Jesus died for all, even false teachers. Although the Lord is able to keep believers faithful to the end, the apostles nonetheless warn of the dangers of backsliding. Finally, it is misguided to assert that God causes people to commit sins: "For God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone."

#### **D. Predestination and Free Will in Paul's Writings**

What does the apostle Paul have to say about divine determinism and free human choice? We can start with the general observation that Paul, even more than other Scripture writers, employs argumentation to convince his readers of the truth of his positions. Such an appeal to reason corresponds to the claim that people have free will to respond to logic and evidence. In addition, Paul allows that believers might indeed fall from faith and so painstakingly exhorts and encourages them.

Characteristic of Paul's teaching is that humans are by nature sinners (Rom 3:9-23; Eph 2:1-3). Although the Old Testament does not specifically teach inherited depravity from Adam, Paul insists on this truth (Rom 5:12-19). Consequently, sinful humans will use their freedom to make sinful choices. It becomes plain, then, that if people are slaves to sin (Rom 6:6-22), God's grace must be an element in their conversion.

We will turn our attention to those passages that seem to indict Paul in teaching determinism. In Paul's first epistle, addressed to the churches in Galatia, he claims that God's plan for his life began even before his physical birth – God set him apart from his "mother's womb" (Gal 1:15). This statement, however, could support either unconditional election, or election based on foreknowledge.

A more substantial saying is found in Galatians 4:9, where Paul claims that the saints know God in virtue of the fact that they are "known by God." We encounter a similar thought in 1 Corinthians 8:3: "If anyone loves God, he is known by Him." Many regard that Galatians 4:9 speaks of God taking the initiative in bringing people

to Himself.<sup>1217</sup> Yet, we cannot rule out God's foreknowledge underlying His election here, especially when the word "know" is employed.

Paul's next letters were written to the church of the Thessalonians. When Paul reflects on the success of His ministry among them, he attributes the power that accompanied his ministry to the fact that these individuals were the elect of God.<sup>1218</sup> We read, "...knowing, brethren beloved by God, {His} choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction" (1 Thes 1:4-5).<sup>1219</sup> Yet again, the basis for God's choice is not detailed.

Paul also penned the words, "God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thes 5:9). Green, citing BAGD, comments that the verb τίθημι (*titheimi*, "destined") means "to destine or appoint someone to or for something," as in Romans 4:17; 9:33; 1 Corinthians 12:18, 28; and 1 Timothy 1:12.<sup>1220</sup> Wanamaker takes these verses as support not only for predestination to salvation, but to condemnation as well.<sup>1221</sup> Contrary to Wanamaker, though, only predestination to salvation is asserted. The fact that God has not "destined us for wrath" does not imply that He does so toward unbelievers.

Paul's goal here is to assure the believers of their glorious inheritance. In contrasting the saved with the lost, Paul is not teaching that the Lord appointed only certain people to become believers in Christ, but that believers *as such* are not appointed to wrath, but to salvation. Paul does not comment, though, on *how* a person becomes a believer – by God's predestination or by free choice.

Our final passage for discussion in this epistle is 1 Thessalonians 5:24. Here, the Lord promises to complete the work of sanctification in the believer. Paul raises this topic in other passages as well (see Phil 1:6; 2 Tim 1:12; Rom 14:24). Yet, God's faithfulness in accomplishing the Christian's sanctification does not necessarily guarantee that the believer, from their side, will continue in the faith. In spite of the Spirit's sanctifying influence, a person may still resist Him (see 1 Thes 5:19; Eph 4:30). Therefore, Paul exhorts believers to remain in the faith (Col 1:22-23; 1 Cor 10:12).

In Paul's Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, we turn our attention to 2 Thessalonians 2:10-13:

...and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved. For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false, in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness. But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth.

Here, those who reject the gospel are contrasted with those who accept it.<sup>1222</sup> Correspondingly, Green counsels us to understand Paul's "thanksgiving for those who responded to the gospel... in light of the rejection of the call to salvation by others."<sup>1223</sup> The latter "did not receive the love of the truth." For this reason, "God

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<sup>1217</sup>George T. Galatians // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. – P. 314; Longenecker R. N. Galatians // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 180; Bruce F. F. The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982. – P. 202.

<sup>1218</sup>The conjunction ὅτι (*hoti*) is most likely used here not for clarification, i.e., to show by what means God chose the Thessalonians, but rather to indicate cause, i.e., how Paul knew that God elected them (Wanamaker C. A. The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990. – P. 78).

<sup>1219</sup>Green thinks that the Thessalonians reception of the Good News (v. 6) also resulted from God choosing them. Yet, the conjunction καί (*kai*) that introduces this verse does not necessarily continue the sense of causation from verse 5 (Green G. L. The Letters to the Thessalonians // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2002. – P. 97).

<sup>1220</sup>Green, p. 242.

<sup>1221</sup>Wanamaker, p. 187.

<sup>1222</sup>Green comments that this contrast is shown in the text by the conjunction δε (*de*), which introduces verse 13 (Green, p. 325)

<sup>1223</sup>Green, p. 325

will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false” and subsequently go on to judgment. We have already discovered from previously studied passages, though, that God may hardened the hearts of those stubbornly resisting Him. Again, the unbeliever is initiating the rejection, and the Lord is merely intensifying their own personal intention.

Therefore, it would be misguided to see in the passage a claim to predestination to condemnation. Martin correctly states, “There is no direct statement in the New Testament to the effect that the option of salvation is unavailable to certain persons or that God has chosen some for damnation.”<sup>1224</sup>

In verse 13, however, Paul does claim that God takes the initiative to save people: “God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation.” Yet, God’s election does not violate human free will. On the one hand, the Spirit “sanctifies” (i.e., “separates”) a person to God, while on the other hand, the person exercises “faith in the truth.” Therefore, God’s work of election includes both a divine and a human factor.

We must also consider that Paul uses an atypical term here for “chosen.” Instead of the usual word for election, i.e., ἐκλέγομαι (*eklegomai*), we encounter the word αἰρέω (*aireo*), which in other contexts reflects not God’s election of people, but human choice between alternatives (see Phil 1:22; Heb 11:25).<sup>1225</sup> Consequently, this term has a connotation of “preference”<sup>1226</sup>, which weakens the claim that God’s election is unconditional. Reasons exist as to why God’s chooses His own.

The final passage for our consideration in the Thessalonian correspondence is 2 Thessalonians 3:3-5, where Paul is assuring the church of God’s protection and support:

But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil {one.} We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will {continue to} do what we command. May the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the steadfastness of Christ.

Does Paul promise here that all believers in Jesus will successfully complete their spiritual pilgrimage? On the one hand, God is truly faithful to strengthen and protect His own. If someone, however, steps away from Him, the Lord is not to blame. Commentators note that not all members of that congregation were leading a conscientious Christian lifestyle (see v. 6-12).<sup>1227</sup> Possibly, Paul is speaking more generally of God’s action in the church than of each separate individual.<sup>1228</sup>

Therefore, when Paul writes, “We have confidence in the Lord concerning you, that you are doing and will {continue to} do what we command,” he is pursuing two goals. First, he is emphasizing that success in Christian living depends not on human striving, but on the grace of Christ.<sup>1229</sup> Second, Paul uses the expression “we have confidence in the Lord concerning you” not so much as a guarantee of spiritual success, as much as a means to stir up the church to obedience. Such a motivation technique was employed in the literature of that time (also see Gal 5:10; Philemon 21; 2 Cor 2:3).<sup>1230</sup> In addition, Wanamaker notes a parallel with 2 Thessalonians 2:13-15, where Paul begins the passage with mention of God’s election of the Church, then concludes it with a call to corresponding obedience.<sup>1231</sup> Therefore, success in Christian living is not only in God’s hands, but involves human volition as well.

Next in chronological order of Paul’s epistles in his Corinthian correspondence. We quote 1 Corinthians 1:28-31:

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<sup>1224</sup>Martin D. M. 1, 2 Thessalonians // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995. – P. 251-252.

<sup>1225</sup>Green, p. 325-326.

<sup>1226</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 28.

<sup>1227</sup>Martin, p. 267; Green, p. 339.

<sup>1228</sup>Martin, p. 267.

<sup>1229</sup>Martin, p. 267; Green, p. 338.

<sup>1230</sup>Green, p. 338; Wanamaker, p. 277.

<sup>1231</sup>Wanamaker, p. 277.

God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Immediately, we note the similarity with Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:25-27, which we discussed earlier. In both passages, the Lord chooses simple people to receive special blessing. Paul expounds on Jesus’ teaching here. God’s goal in election is to humble human pride, so that “him who boasts, boasts in the Lord.” Again, God’s election is not unconditional. He seeks out humble hearts and finds them mainly among the poor and despised of the world.

Carson comments that this has been God’s agenda from the beginning. God chose Israel not “because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7). Genesis enlightens us that God “consistently bypasses the firstborn,” and throughout the Bible, we see that “God chooses the most unlikely figures.”<sup>1232</sup>

God desires that people would live in dependence on Him. This is why “by His doing you are in Christ Jesus.” The phrase “by His doing” does not have to point toward predestination of just certain individuals to be in Christ, but rather implies that God took the initiative to include all of humanity in a relationship of “corporate solidarity” with Christ, from which believers now benefit. Since the Lord is not obliged to offer grace to anyone, only “by His doing,” that is, only by His gracious disposition toward us, do we have access to blessing in Christ.

Without doubt, the most hotly debated passage on the doctrine of predestination is found in Romans 9:10-24). In this context, Paul’s aim is to explain why God’s elect, Old Testament people failed to inherit the promise of salvation given to them. In discussing this question, Paul touches on the issue of God’s election and predestination.

Israel at that time relied on their physical descent from Abraham and their personal adherence to the Law for receiving salvation. Appealing to the Old Testament, though, Paul shows that not all descendants of Abraham are included in God’s people (e.g., Ishmael), and that good works do not determine inclusion in the inheritance (e.g., Jacob and Esau).<sup>1233</sup> All is determined by ἡ κατ’ ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ, i.e., “God’s purpose according to {His} choice.” Thus, it appears that God’s election is unconditional, i.e., not dependent on any human factors.

Nonetheless, we can still defend here the doctrine of predestination based on foreknowledge without any compromise to God’s absolute sovereignty. Although God foresaw and foreknew the character of Esau and Jacob, their future character and behavior *in no way* compelled Him to choose one and not the other. God’s election is based solely on His sovereign choice. Our assertion that He will choose those whose character pleases Him does not mean that He *must* so choose. God remains sovereign in His election, although He does take into consideration His foreknowledge.

Further on, Paul introduces the instance with Moses and Pharaoh. He quotes God saying, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,” to demonstrate that God’s basic aim is to show mercy (see 11:32), even if it involves hardening someone.<sup>1234</sup> Pharaoh here represents Israel, whom God temporarily hardened so that the gospel would go to the Gentiles (Rom 11:7-11, 25).<sup>1235</sup> Through Pharaoh’s hardening, Yahweh’s power and name

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<sup>1232</sup>Carson D. A. Editor’s Preface in The First Letter to the Corinthians // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2010. – P. 106.

<sup>1233</sup>Dunn, p. 548.

<sup>1234</sup>Morris L. The Epistle to the Romans // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988. – P. 359, 364; Dunn, p. 546, 562.

<sup>1235</sup>Dunn, p. 555.

would be known worldwide (Rom 9:17), while through Israel's hardening, the whole world would have access to the gospel (Rom 11:7-11).

Later in this same epistle, Paul argues that Israel itself is to blame for their unbelief – they rejected the righteousness of God (Rom 10:3).<sup>1236</sup> The same can be said for Pharaoh, who hardened his heart before God did. In summary, Morris writes, “Neither here nor anywhere else is God said to harden anyone who had not first hardened himself.”<sup>1237</sup> In chapter 1 of Romans, Paul already declared that God “gives over” the disobedient to their own desires (Rom 1:24-28).

Although Paul's main goal in this passage is to explain Israel's failure, he nonetheless expands his discussion in verses 22-24, where he compares believers and unbelievers under the figures of “vessels of mercy” and “vessels of wrath.” Commentators point out a difference between how these groups are described. The “vessels of wrath” are “prepared (κατηρτισμένα – *kateirtismena*) for destruction,” while God prepared (προητοίμασεν – *proeitoimasen*) the “vessels of mercy” for glory.

Here, we note the use of different verbs: κατηρτισμένα (*kateirtismena*) and προητοίμασεν (*proeitoimasen*). Because of this, Dunn feels that God's “preparatory” work is different for the two groups.<sup>1238</sup> Morris notes that the first verb is in the passive tense. Thus, we are not told who prepared these vessels for destruction. The second verb is in the active tense, the subject of which is God, who prepared the vessels of mercy.<sup>1239</sup> Dunn concludes that both God and the unbeliever participate in this process of preparation for destruction, while Morris feels that the unbeliever alone is responsible for their pitiful condition.

Finally, Morris also comments that Paul does not say that the vessels prepared for wrath actually perish.<sup>1240</sup> Might we propose that through personal repentance they might become “vessels of mercy” as well? (see Rom 2:4).

We will turn our attention next to Romans 8:29-30: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined {to become} conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Immediately we note the combination “foreknew” (προγινώσκω – *proginosko*) and “predestined” (προορίζω – *prooridzo*). We recall our previous discussion of the term προγινώσκω (*proginosko*), that it refers not to predestination, but to knowledge of the future. This conclusion finds confirmation in that a separate word is used for predestination – προορίζω (*prooridzo*), which means “decide upon beforehand, predetermine.”<sup>1241</sup> Morris, who adopts a Calvinistic view of this verse, nonetheless admits, “We must be on our guard against making the two say the same thing.”<sup>1242</sup>

Unlike Morris, the Calvinist Dunn insists that the two terms repeat the same idea: “Since προέγνω has such a full sense, the προώρισεν adds little to the meaning.”<sup>1243</sup> For Dunn, both terms denote predetermination. Contrary to Dunn, however, we point out that in the enumeration of God's salvation plan provided by Paul here (i.e., foreknown, predestined, called, justified, glorified), each term designates a concrete step in this process. So then, “foreknown” must differ from “predestined” in meaning as well as indicate the basis for which God chooses His elect.

Mounce expresses concern that if God predestines on the basis of foreknowledge, “this would mean that in election God would not be sovereign; he would be dependent upon what he would see happening in the future.”<sup>1244</sup> Mounce fails to consider, though, that God's knowledge of the future does not oblige Him to make

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<sup>1236</sup>Mounce R. H. Romans // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998. – P. 200.

<sup>1237</sup>Morris, p. 361.

<sup>1238</sup>Dunn, p. 567.

<sup>1239</sup>Morris, p. 368.

<sup>1240</sup>Ibid., p. 366.

<sup>1241</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 873.

<sup>1242</sup>Morris, p. 332.

<sup>1243</sup>Dunn, p. 482.

<sup>1244</sup>Mounce, p. 188.

any certain choice. The fact that He knows ahead of time who will be open to Him and who will not, does not require Him to choose the former and not the latter. In spite of the fact that His election is indeed conditional, it remains nonetheless sovereign and free.

We move on to Paul's epistle to the Ephesians. In chapter 1, he speaks in general terms about God's redemptive plan. In verses 3-12, he speaks several times about God's "kind intention" (πρόθεσιν - *prothesin*) or "will" (θέλημα - *theleima*). Verse 10 details God's plan: "...the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth." Correspondingly, all of the Lord's blessings come through Christ and in Him, including election: "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4).

It is important to note that verse 4 is connected to the previous verse by the word καθώς (*kathos*), which means "just as."<sup>1245</sup> Therefore, just as "every spiritual blessing" is "in Christ," believers are elected in the same way, i.e. "in Him." This leaves the impression that God does not choose individuals, but Christ. He is God's Chosen together with those who are in Him by faith.

Verse 5 further clarifies this point. God "predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself." God's predestination, then, is to adopt as sons those who are in Christ. The same thought is repeated in verses 10-11: "In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose..." that is, God predestined that those who are in Christ would receive the inheritance.

On the other hand, Lincoln proposes that the phrase "before the foundation of the world" (v. 4) indicates that God's election "was provoked not by historical contingency or human merit, but solely by God's sovereign grace."<sup>1246</sup> Yet, contrary to Lincoln, the text here does not indicate the reason for God's election. Paul does not comment on this. One of Paul's goals in this passage was to highlight the abundance of God's grace in Christ. Therefore, Paul emphasizes God's sovereignty in election, that is, what He did from His side to save people. God had no obligation to choose anyone at all. His election is a pure expression of His gracious disposition. Yet, this does not exclude the possibility that in His freedom and sovereignty, God chose those whom He foreknew would be open to Him. Again, Paul's use of the term προορίζω (*prooridzo*) reminds us of Rom 8:29-30, where God's predestination derives from His foreknowledge.<sup>1247</sup>

The last feature to investigate in this passage is the description of God as the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11). The participle "works" is ἐνεργοῦντος (*energountos*) from the verb ἐνεργέω (*energeo*). It is not stated that God "controls" all things, but that He "works" all things according to His plan. The implication here is that God must apply some energy in order to bring all things in line with His purpose. This is so because He allows people to make their own choices. Yet, human freedom does not hinder the all-wise and almighty God from accomplishing His plan. In order to accomplish it, however, He must work, i.e., apply "energy." This interpretation of Ephesians 1:11 coincides with Paul's words in Rom 8:28: "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to {His} purpose." Here, the text again teaches that God transforms into blessing not only the good that He does, but also the evil that comes from Satan and wrong human choices (see v. 35).

Another key passage is Philippians 2:12-13: "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for {His} good pleasure." Here we must recognize both the divine and human factors. God is at work "to will and to work for His good pleasure," yet the Philippians must "work out your salvation." There is no compulsion by God, but a cooperation between God and His people. God supplies the grace to obey, and we respond to that grace.

Paul's final writings are his Pastoral Epistles. In them, he makes the straightforward claim that God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). This teaching directly contradicts the Calvinist claim that God appoints only certain individuals for salvation.

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<sup>1245</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 493.

<sup>1246</sup>Lincoln A. T. Ephesians // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1990. – P. 23.

<sup>1247</sup>It is notable that except for Ephesians 1:5 and Romans 8:29-30, Paul used the word προορίζω (*prooridzo*) only one more time, in 1 Corinthians 2:7.

On the other hand, in 2 Timothy 1:9 Paul describes God as the one “who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity.” Do the terms “calling” and “purpose” imply predestination?

First of all, we must define when God “saved” and “called” believers. If God’s “calling” should be equated with His predestining for salvation, then we would expect it to precede the word “saved,” as in Romans 8:29: “...these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified.” Since God “saved” before He “called,” however, we assert that Paul is referring to the subjective experience of salvation followed by His “calling” believers to sanctification. To confirm this view, we note that the “calling” is modified by the adjective “holy.”

How are we to understand Paul’s reference to God’s “own purpose?” How is salvation and the call to holiness related to God’s purpose? The word translated “purpose” is *πρόθεσις* (*prothesis*). It is used in Scripture with various shades of meaning. Sometimes it refers to a decision someone makes and therefore indicates volition or choice (see Eph 1:9, 11; Acts 11:23; Rom 9:11). More frequently, though, it refers to a goal someone has set before themselves (see Rom 1:13; 8:28; 2 Tim 3:10; Acts 27:13; Eph 3:11). Commentators often attribute to the word *πρόθεσις* (*prothesis*) the sense “choice” and see it as referring to God’s unconditional election of the saved.<sup>1248</sup> Yet, the second option coincides better with the context of the passage. In other words, God saved and called us not because of our works, but in accordance with His eternal *plan* of saving people through Christ.

Also notable is that after the word *πρόθεσις* (*prothesis*), Paul speaks not of predestination, but of “grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus.” The conjunction *καὶ* (*kai*) between the words *πρόθεσιν* (*prothesis*), “purpose,” and *χάριν* (*harin*), “grace,” may explicate the former. We would then paraphrase the verse: He saved us and called us not according to our works (i.e., not as people usually understand the way to salvation), but according to His eternal plan, i.e., by the grace granted to us in Christ from all eternity.

Other passages in the Pastoral Epistles are important to investigate. In 2 Timothy 2:10, Paul writes, “For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus {and} with {it} eternal glory.” Thus, Paul’s goal in ministry was to reach God’s elect (cf. Tit 1:1). This resonates with Jesus’ words to him in Corinth, “I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:10). Knowing that some will accept the gospel encourages the apostle that his evangelistic work will enjoy success. Nevertheless, Paul does not comment on how these individuals became God’s elect, i.e., on what basis – unconditional election or foreknowledge.

Finally, we turn to 2 Timothy 2:19-25. Verse 19 reveals, “The Lord knows those who are His,” which echoes the same thought in Galatians 4:9.<sup>1249</sup> In light of our discussion of foreknowledge in Romans 8:29, we can conclude that Paul here employs an Old Testament formula, where the concepts of foreknowledge and predestination are combined. In the Old Testament usage of “to know,” no distinction is made between election and the foreknowledge on which it is based.

Verses 20 and 21, where Paul speaks of vessels for honorable or common use, recalls his word in Romans 9:21 (the same adjectives are used: *τιμῇ* - *timei*, and *ἀτιμῇ* - *atimei*). Significant here is that Paul urges the vessels of dishonor to become vessels of honor: “If anyone cleanses himself from these {things,} he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.” Morris proposed the same in his interpretation of Romans 9:22-23 above – possibly, God endures “vessels of wrath” with the goal that some of them might become “vessels of mercy.”

In verse 25, Paul counsels Timothy, “...with gentleness correct those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.” Here again, God is taking the initiative in bringing people to repentance. Yet, as we saw before, the basis on which God acts is not mentioned – unconditional election or foreknowledge. Also notable is that a positive response by the opposition depends on

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<sup>1248</sup>Mounce W. D. Pastoral Epistles // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 2000. – P. 481-482.

<sup>1249</sup>Possibly, this contrasts with Jesus’ words in Matthew 7:23: “I never knew you.”



how Timothy relates to them as well. Timothy must “with gentleness correct those who are in opposition” so that “God may grant them repentance.” So then, repentance depends on both divine and human factors.

In summary, like all authors of Sacred Scripture, Paul appeals to reason and the free will of his audience by offering arguments, exhortations, commands, and the like, expecting an obedient response. He regards only believers as capable of such obedience – unbelievers are still in bondage to sin.

At the same time, Paul stresses God’s work of predestination in regard to the elect. In addition, he assures believers that the Lord will preserve them in faith to the end. Nonetheless, receiving salvation requires human participation as well – one must exercise personal faith in the gospel and remain in Christ. Additionally, election is not unconditional, but derives from God’s foreknowledge, which essentially differs from predestination. The key term, *πρόγνωσις* (*prognosis*), means knowledge of the future without any nuance of compulsion. In 1 Corinthians 1:28-31, Paul hints at what exactly God foreknew in His elect – humility and openness to Him (cf. Matt 11:25-27).

Although Paul teaches that God does indeed harden the disobedient, he never specifically refers to predestination to condemnation. He desires to save all. He hardens hearts only after the disobedient persist in their rebellion. Yet, even His work of hardening some leads to blessing for others.

## E. Predestination and Free Will in John’s Writings

John devotes much attention to God’s intervention in the conversion and preservation of the believer. In particular, the Father gave certain ones to the Son (Jn 6:37; 10:29; 17:2, 6, 9, 24), draws them to Him (Jn 6:44-45, 65), and keeps them in Him to the end (Jn 6:39; 10:28-29; 17:12; 1 Jn 5:18). If people turn away from the Lord, it was because they were never true believers (1 Jn 2:19). Jesus’ sheep know His voice and follow Him (Jn 10:3-5, 8, 14-16, 27). Unbelievers do not know His voice (Jn 10:26). Jesus does not pray for them (Jn 17:9). They do not believe because God has hardened their hearts (Jn 12:37-41).<sup>1250</sup>

If we read John’s writing from a different point of view, though, we uncover an entirely different description of God’s relationship with the world. He loves the world and does not judge it, but saves it (Jn 3:16-17). The Son died for all people (1 Jn 2:2; Jn 1:29; 6:51), giving life to the world through His flesh (Jn 6:33). He draws all people to Himself (Jn 12:32) and enlightens every person coming into the world (Jn 1:9). His desire is for the whole world to hear of and believe in Him (Jn 14:31; 17:18, 21, 23). If a person does not remain in Christ, he or she will be rejected (Jn 15:6).<sup>1251</sup> Finally, the Gospel of John abounds with invitations to believe in Jesus on the basis of evidences advanced in support (e.g. Jn 5:34-47), which implies that people can be convinced by these proofs and, as a result, believe in Jesus.

How can we reconcile these apparent contradictions in John’s presentation of salvation? We must take into consideration the location of the passages in question in the overall thematic flow of John’s writings. John’s Gospel highlights God’s kind intentions toward the world in general. He enlightens every person coming into the world (Jn 1:9), takes upon Himself the sins of the world (Jn 1:29, cf. 1 Jn 2:2), and was sent not to judge the world, but to save it (Jn 3:16-17). Hence, we discover God’s general disposition to the world – He desires the salvation of all and strives to accomplish it (see Jn 17:18, 21, 23).

However, in chapters 6, 10, and 12, when the Lord encounters opposition and rejection, He explains it by appealing to God’s election. In light of what we said above, it is misguided to think that God’s work of predestination implies that He is indifferent to people’s salvation or reserves salvation only for a select number.

Although the Father did not “give” everyone to the Son and does not draw all people to Him in no way means that He does not desire everyone’s salvation or does not offer it to everyone. Borchert correctly

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<sup>1250</sup>The Greek text of verse 40 reads, τετύφλωκεν αὐτῶν τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς καὶ ἐπώρωσεν αὐτῶν τὴν καρδίαν, i.e., “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts.” Carson correctly claims that the conjunction *ἵνα* (*hina*), introducing the following phrase, “so that they will not see with their eyes,” reflects result, not goal. He supports his interpretation, appealing to the phrase in verse 39: “For this reason they could not believe” (Carson, p. 447).

<sup>1251</sup>Borchert G. L. John 1–11 // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996. – P. 268.

observes that Jesus seeks to convince even those who are not of His sheep that He is Messiah (see Jn 10:38).<sup>1252</sup> Unfortunately, John does not inform us why the Father does not draw all to the Son. Even though in John 6:37, Jesus promised that “all that the Father gives me will come to Me,” we must also note that verse 40 creates the impression that anyone may come to Him: “For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”<sup>1253</sup>

John 12:32 seems to indicate that Jesus does in fact draw all people to Himself: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself.” Yet, one must consider the context here. Some Greeks just came on the scene, wanting to see the Lord. Therefore, it is quite possible that Jesus meant not that He would draw all people to Himself *without exception*, but that He would draw all *without discrimination*, i.e., not only Jews, but also Gentiles.<sup>1254</sup>

An unlikely explanation of this seeming contradiction in John’s view is that Jesus’ appeal to predestination applies only to the people to whom He was speaking, that is, to the first-century Jews. This proposal contradicts several passages that show that God’s election extends beyond the limits of first-century Palestine. Jesus said, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me” (Jn 6:37), “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (Jn 6:44), and “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear My voice” (Jn 10:16).<sup>1255</sup>

Most commentators regard this issue as one of God’s mysteries. Somehow, on the one hand, God predestines people for salvation, but on the other hand, people are responsible before God to come to Christ and believe in Him.<sup>1256</sup> Although John does not specifically speak of God’s foreknowledge, factoring in this feature eases the tension considerably.

If we assume that John’s readers were already acquainted with the Synoptic Gospels, then the contents of those Gospels may enlighten them as to why God draws only some, but not all, to Christ. As noted earlier, the Father has “hidden these things from {the} wise and intelligent” and has “revealed them to infants” (Matt 11:25). God does not randomly elect those who receive insight into His revelation, but gives it to those humble and open to Him. Possibly, John does not explain this because he was aware that his readers already understood this from reading the Synoptics.

A final passage of interest is Revelation 17:8, where all whose names are not written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will follow Antichrist. It seems that their destiny was already decided before the world was made. Yet, it does not follow that God predestined them to that behavior. Inclusion in God’s book may reflect His foreknowledge. It is important to note that the phrase in Revelation 13:8, “from the foundation of the world,” can apply also to the sacrifice of the Lamb, which God *foreknew* from eternity past (see 1 Pet 1:20). Also important to note is that God can erase a name from the book of life (Rev 3:5), which contradicts the Calvinistic doctrine of divine preservation of the saints.<sup>1257</sup>

In summary, John’s writings present a picture of God’s election, of His desire to save all, and of people’s participation in conversion to and preservation in Christ. A reasonable conclusion would be that God’s work of predestination does not operate contrary to human volition, but by means of His foreknowledge of its free operation. The fact that God loves the world and works toward its salvation excludes the possibility that He is indifferent to people’s redemption.

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<sup>1252</sup>Borchert, p. 340–341. Beasley-Murray also notes this (Beasley-Murray G. R. John // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas: Word, 2002. – P. 174).

<sup>1253</sup>Зубков О. Студенческий реферат. Евангельская теологическая семинария. – Киев, 2005.

<sup>1254</sup>Carson D. A. The Gospel according to John // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W. B. Eerdmans, 1991. – P. 293.

<sup>1255</sup>Borchert also mentions this (Borchert, p. 268).

<sup>1256</sup>Borchert, p. 268; Carson, p. 447.

<sup>1257</sup>Ярмолик А. Предопределение: Арминианский взгляд на некоторые ключевые стихи // Студенческий реферат. Евангельская теологическая семинария. – Киев, 2005

## **F. Summary**

The New Testament makes a significant contribution to our understanding of God's sovereignty and human free will. The New Testament abounds with exhortations to respond to God's Word, which strongly implies freedom of human choice. However, human depravity has corrupted the human will, so that divine intervention is needed to free us from bondage to sin. Numerous Scriptural passages indicate that God takes the initiative in bringing people to Himself.

These observations create an apparent inconsistency between God's stated will to save all and His predestining some for salvation. The key to resolving this conflict is to factor in the element of God's foreknowledge, as stated in Romans 8:29 and 1 Peter 1:2. Foreknowledge provides the basis for God's election. The New Testament also hints at what qualities the Lord seeks: humility and openness.

Such a view in no way contradicts God's sovereignty. The fact that God's choice derives from foreknowledge of His elect does not mean that God is obligated to choose these, or anyone else. His election is totally sovereign and free.

On the other hand, the Lord not only draws His elect to Himself, but also hardens those who persist in disobedience. Even in this, though, He is often pursuing a redemptive end. The New Testament never teaches predestination to condemnation.

Finally, the New Testament abounds with God's promises to sanctify believers and keep them in faith until the end. This truth inspires disciples to hold fast to the Lord and rely on His keeping power, and not on their own strength. On the other hand, the New Testament also contains many warnings about backsliding, which remind us that sanctification and preservation require our cooperation as well.

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# Chapter 18 - God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom: Theological Considerations

In previous chapters, we studied the question of divine determination and human freedom in the light of key biblical passages. In this chapter, we will compare our findings in Scripture with various theological views on the topic that have been voiced in the history of the Church.

Four major views exist: Calvinism, Arminianism, Monism, and the so-called "Openness of God." The final theory holds that God does not know the future and therefore cannot control or precisely predict what people will do with their freedom – He simply reacts to what they do. We already discussed and refuted this theory in the chapter on God's omniscience. Therefore, we will investigate only the first three views.

## A. Survey of Views

### 1. Calvinism

According to classic Calvinism, God directly controls all things, including human choices, to accomplish His plan. God predestines who will be saved. He even causes sinful acts to be performed. Humans have no freedom of choice. The following five points, represented by the device TULIP, characterize Calvinism.

*Total depravity* means that people are completely sinful. Every thought, desire, intention and choice people make are evil. We can do nothing right in God's sight, and are not even able to repent without divine aid. In order for someone to come to Christ, God must draw that individual to Himself. Only in the strength of God's grace can conversion take place.

*Unconditional election* claims that God chose His elect for salvation independent of any condition, that is, free from all consideration of what this person might become. Election happens purely by God's good favor. People have no inherent qualities that would prompt God to choose them. This view contrasts with predestination based on foreknowledge, which affirms that God chooses those whom He foresees that they will be open to Him. In Calvinism, however, God's election is unconditional.

*Limited atonement* claims that Jesus died only for the elect, not for the entire world. His blood was not shed in vain, that is, for those whom God has not chosen to accept the gospel. Calvinists ask, "If a person will in no case be saved, then why would Jesus' blood be shed for that individual?" However, not all Calvinists accept this point.

*Irresistible grace* proposes that when the Spirit draws a person to Christ by His grace, that individual cannot resist Him. All whom the Father calls will unfailingly come to Him. His grace is too compelling to resist. A sinner's conversion, then, is entirely the work of God, not the result of human choice.

*Preservation* relates to God's keeping His elect faithful to Him until the end. A true believer will never forsake his or her faith. Curiously, many Baptists accept only this point of Calvinism.

Discussion on the "degree" of predestination also arouses interest. Two options are proposed. *Single predestination* says that God destines some for salvation, but allows the rest to go on to damnation of their own accord. God is active in relation to the saved, but passive toward the lost. Since the latter are in slavery to sin, they will never turn to Him, and God does not interfere with this outcome. *Double predestination* claims that the Lord both elects for salvation, and predestines for damnation. Here, God is active in both directions: He draws the elect to Himself, enabling their conversion, and actively repels the lost, hardening their hearts against Him.

Scholars sometimes discuss the "order" of predestination, which involves discerning the order in which God decreed to accomplish His plan. Three views exist: supralapsarianism, infralapsarianism, and sublapsarianism. A famous proponent of supralapsarianism was Theodore Beza (1519-1605). He believed that

God's order was: (1) save the elect, (2) create the world, (3) allow the Fall, (4) provide salvation. In this scheme, God's first priority was to form a people for Himself.<sup>1258</sup>

The founder of infralapsarianism, Francis Turretin (1623-1687), suggested the following order: (1) create the world, (2) allow the Fall, (3) save the elect, (4) provide salvation. In this scheme, God's first priority was to create the world.<sup>1259</sup>

Finally, sublapsarianism consists of the following order of divine decrees: (1) create the world, (2) allow the Fall, (3) provide salvation, (4) save the elect. This is a "softer" form of Calvinism, since God's act of predestination occupies the last position.

According to Calvinists, why does God predestine (or allow) people to be lost? The answer is connected to the "theological center" of Calvinistic thought. In this school, the central feature of the Lord's plan is to bring Himself glory. So then, in order to display His mercy and grace, He predestines some to be saved. For the demonstration of His righteousness and wrath, however, He appoints others for condemnation. Therefore, through the redemption of some and damnation of others, God manifests all of His qualities and receives greater glory.<sup>1260</sup>

## 2. Molinism

Molinism operates off the principle of God's so-called "middle knowledge." His middle knowledge is the knowledge of those things which would have occurred under different circumstances.<sup>1261</sup> In light of His middle knowledge, God can precisely predict what would happen under all possible conditions. Thus, He can accurately foresee what decisions any individual would make under certain conditions. In order for God to attain His desired results, then, He simply needs to arrange the conditions in which persons find themselves. In this way, He can secure the decisions from them that fit into His plan.

In discussion of this view, the idea of "all possible worlds" arises. In His middle knowledge, God foreknew all possible worlds that could exist. He chose to actualize one of these orders – the world in which we live. He chose this arrangement since He considered it the most favorable among all possible worlds for realizing His purpose. One of the features that God desired in this "best of possible worlds" was the quality of human freedom of choice.

The advantage of the molinism theory is that God can guarantee the success of His plan without compromising human free will. God simply arranges the conditions under which people act, knowing how they will respond in any circumstance. Craig characterizes this view as follows: "He (God) is thus like a Grand Master who is playing an opponent whom he knows so well that he knows every move his opponent would make in response to his own moves."<sup>1262</sup>

Regarding God's election to salvation, Craig comments, "Given his middle knowledge, God can providentially order the world so the everyone who would freely respond to the gospel if he heard it is born at a time and place in history where he will hear it."<sup>1263</sup> As far as God's "predestination" of evil deeds (for example, the crucifixion of Jesus), God merely places a person at a time and location where conditions will lead him or her to make the free decision to do the wrong that He foreknew.

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<sup>1258</sup>McGrath A. E. *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – P. 383.

<sup>1259</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>1260</sup>Hart makes an interesting comment here that God already manifest His righteousness and wrath on the cross of Calvary. Therefore, there was no need to do so by punishing the non-elect (Hart D. B. *Providence and Causality: The Divine Innocence* // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. *The Providence of God*. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – P. 48-49).

<sup>1261</sup>Craig W. L. *God Directs All Things on Behalf of a Molinist View of Providence* // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition. Many of the following points come from this article.

<sup>1262</sup>Craig W. L. *God Directs All Things*, 1759-1761.

<sup>1263</sup>Craig W. L. *Response to Gregory A. Boyd* // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 4677-4679.

### 3. Arminianism

Arminianism is the antagonist to Calvinism. According to this teaching, people have genuine freedom of self-determination to accept or reject the Lord. God's will is to save all people, but not all turn to Him for salvation.

Since the concept of predestination is present in Scripture, exponents of Arminianism acknowledge this teaching. Yet, they qualify this doctrine by saying that God does not randomly or unconditionally choose His elect. Instead, they advance the following explanations. First, some feel that Jesus is God's only "chosen one," and that all who are in Christ are chosen "in Him." The second and more widely accepted view is that God's election is based on His knowledge of the future, i.e., His foreknowledge. From eternity past, God foreknew who would be open to Him and predestined those individuals for salvation. Unlike Calvinism, Arminianism does not teach unconditional election, but election based on God's foreknowledge of people's hearts.

Arminianism's explanation of the Spirit's drawing people to Christ differs from Calvinism as well. Most Arminians agree with Calvinists that people are totally sinful and unable to come to God without Him drawing them to Himself. Calvinists feel that God draws only His elect, while Arminians teach that the Spirit draws all people to Christ, providing them with the grace that will enable them to repent and believe. Calvinists call God's grace leading to salvation "irresistible grace," while Arminians call it "prevenient grace." Prevenient grace will prepare sinners for repentance, but not compel them. Moreover, Arminians teach that true believers can turn away from God.

Arminianism also has a "theological center" that guides their perception of God and His plan. For Arminians, the focus is on God's love. God's primary goal is to establish a relationship of love with His creation. Consequently, He made people free, so that they could respond to Him freely in love without compulsion.

#### B. Historical Survey

The Early Church, in general, held to a free will view and believed that God's election was based on His foreknowledge.<sup>1264</sup> Although the Western Church, under Augustine's influence, departed from that trajectory, the Eastern Church continued to defend that position and does so to this day.<sup>1265</sup> John of Damascus, in his *Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, wrote:

We ought to understand that while God knows all things beforehand, yet He does not predetermine all things. For He knows beforehand those things that are in our power, but He does not predetermine them. For it is not His will that there should be wickedness nor does He choose to compel virtue (2.30).

But of actions that are in our hands the good ones depend on His antecedent goodwill and pleasure, while the wicked ones depend neither on His antecedent nor on His consequent will, but are a concession to free-will. For that which is the result of compulsion has neither reason nor virtue in it (2.29).

The first early thinker who deviated from the accepted Church teaching was Augustine. Initially, Augustine felt that God elected based on His foreknowledge. Later on, though, Augustine changed in view in light of His understanding of God's grace. He reasoned that if predestination was based on foreknowledge of the condition of people's hearts, then people would, in a sense, merit their salvation, which would violate the principle of

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<sup>1264</sup>Eddy P. R., Beilby J. K., Enderlein, S. E. Justification in Historical Perspective // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein, S. E. Justification: Five Views. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – Kindle Edition, 114-116.

<sup>1265</sup>Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Introduction // Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 179-180, 190-192.



salvation by grace alone. Therefore, Augustine abandoned his previous position and embraced the doctrine of unconditional election.<sup>1266</sup>

Augustine's understanding of human freedom coincided with his deterministic views. He theorized that if persons do what they want to do, then they are acting freely, even if that decision was divinely determined. Therefore, God acts not directly on human will, but on human desires, creating the readiness to do His will. Moreover, since these decisions are thus "free," people are responsible for their choices.

Augustine also taught that people are unable to do good without God's enabling grace. He posited three operations of God's grace on the elect. "Operating grace" inclines the will to the Lord. Also necessary are "cooperating grace" and the "grace of perseverance," so that an individual stays true to the Lord to the end.<sup>1267</sup> Furthermore, God regenerates people before they believe in Christ. The new birth enables their conversion.<sup>1268</sup>

However, Augustine made the qualification that God predestines individuals only to salvation, but not to condemnation. The Father simply allows unbelievers to remain in their unbelief and does not draw them to Jesus. Berkhoff summarizes Augustine's view: "Reprobation differs from election in this that it is not accompanied with any direct divine efficiency to secure the result intended."<sup>1269</sup>

During the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas proposed that God acts on people's wills in such a way that they unfailingly perform God's will, but do so "willingly." In other words, God predetermines what "free" choices people will make. Thus, people enjoy self-determination, yet God's will still prevails. The 16th-century Jesuit, Luis de Molina, advanced another view.<sup>1270</sup> His teaching, now known as Molinism (see above), ran contrary to the teaching of Aquinas. The Roman Church endorsed both views. Later on, Molina's teaching found acceptance among some Protestants as well.

As time went on, however, the Western Church moved closer and closer to a position of genuine, unconstrained human freedom. The Roman Church teaches human freedom to the present day.<sup>1271</sup> Only during the Reformation was Augustine's doctrine recovered, especially in the teaching of John Calvin. Calvin's followers even intensified his teaching, insisting that God predestines not only to salvation, but to condemnation as well. Luther also held to a form of determinism,<sup>1272</sup> yet his compatriot Melancthon tended toward respecting human free will.<sup>1273</sup>

At the end of the 16th century, Jacobus Arminius opposed Calvin's position, insisting that people possessed genuine freedom of choice. His followers released a definition of their views, the *Five Articles of Remonstrance*. It advances the following points. First, God's predestination is His determination to save all who believe in Christ and remain in Him, and to condemn those who reject Him. Second, Jesus died for all people, yet only those who receive Him benefit from His redemptive sacrifice. Third, a fallen individual can do no good apart from the help of the Holy Spirit. Fourth, God's grace is necessary for doing good, yet a person may resist His grace. Fifth, God's grace is able to keep the Christian faithful to the end, but one can still fall away from the Lord. In response to the *Five Articles of Remonstrance*, the followers of Calvin assembled at the Synod of Dort (1618-1619) and worked out the five points of Calvinism listed earlier (TULIP).<sup>1274</sup>

Another ardent defender of free will was John Wesley. Although Arminius and Wesley were united in this basic tenet, they differed in details. Wesley taught that humanity receives from Adam both inherited guilt and inherited depravity, while Arminius accepted only inherited depravity. Wesley thought that God gives all people the ability to believe in the gospel because of His great love, while Arminius held that God did this out of His sense of justice.

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<sup>1266</sup>Berkhof L. *The History of Christian Doctrine*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937. – P. 136.

<sup>1267</sup>Lane T. *A Concise History of Christian Thought*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 51.

<sup>1268</sup>Boyd, Craig, Helseth, Highfield, Jowers. Introduction, Kindle Edition, 163-165, 175-176.

<sup>1269</sup>Berkhof, p. 136. Also see McGrath, p. 380-381.

<sup>1270</sup>Vos A. Molina, Luis de. // Douglas J., Comfort P. W. *Who's Who in Christian History*. – Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1992. – P. 480.

<sup>1271</sup>Boyd, Craig, Helseth, Highfield, Jowers. Introduction, Kindle Edition, 200-201; Rafferty O. P. *Roman Catholic Response* // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein, S. E. *Justification: Five Views*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. Kindle edition, 2890-2893.

<sup>1272</sup>Rafferty, Kindle edition, 2890-2893.

<sup>1273</sup>Boyd, Craig, Helseth, Highfield, Jowers. Introduction, Kindle Edition, 202-203.

<sup>1274</sup>Lane, p. 183-185.

## C. Evaluation of Views

When evaluating the question of divine determinism and human freedom, one must consider several key aspects of the issue. We will investigate each in order from the perspective of Calvinism, Arminianism, and Molinism.

### 1. God's Sovereignty

Our first investigation concerns the question of God's sovereignty. Supporters of the Calvinistic position fear that if we admit true human freedom, God is robbed of His sovereign rule over creation. They believe that creatures depend on the Lord not only for their existence, but also for their actions. If someone or something can act independent from God, then He is no longer the ultimate source of all things.

Calvinists speak of primary and secondary causes in the universe. God is the primary source and cause of all things. He permits creatures the autonomy to act only in a secondary sense. He causes secondary causes to always act in line with His sovereign will. Therefore, people can make their own decisions, but their actions are nonetheless overshadowed and determined by the One who is the source of all occasions.<sup>1275</sup>

We can illustrate this point as follows. A billiard player strikes a ball with the cue stick, thus driving a ball into the pocket. The billiard player is the primary cause, while the cue stick is the secondary cause. In one sense, the cue stick caused the ball to enter the pocket. However, the cue's action was determined by the billiard player. Therefore, the cue stick is only a secondary cause. In a similar manner, God, the primary cause, acts on the human will in a way that causes the individual to carry out a certain action in accordance with His will.

Let us further comment on primary and secondary causes. Augustine attempted to show how God conditions the human will.<sup>1276</sup> As described above, Augustine argued that persons are acting freely when they do what they want to do. Therefore, God's acts not directly on the human will, but on human desires, so that persons, following after their desires, will freely choose the option God decreed. In such a way, God prompts a "free" choice by the person, yet retains His sovereignty and secures His desired result.

Augustine supported his position by asserting that such an understanding is consistent with God's freedom. God must always act in accordance with His nature. Yet, this does impinge on His freedom. If we define freedom as doing that which one wants to do, then God, whose actions are determined by His nature, is still acting freely. God always acts in accordance with His good pleasure, that is, He does what He wants to do. Although He is not able to do otherwise, He is nonetheless free.

Aquinas taught the following. On the one hand, God gives creatures (in their capacity as secondary causes) "intrinsic power to act." At the same time, Aquinas advanced the concept of the "extrinsic premotion of God." This means that God's action precedes human action and determines it.<sup>1277</sup>

Helseth claims that these "secondary" actions of humans are real actions. Yet, they never occur divorced from God's superintendence. If people can act independent from God, then the Lord has a rival for control in the universe. How can people, whom God created, have the ability to create something independent from their Creator?<sup>1278</sup> In this case, "this intrinsic something creates a reality that does not ultimately originate in

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<sup>1275</sup>Some Calvinists, called "occasionalists," express the relationship between the primary cause (God) and the secondary causes differently. God remains the primary cause, but the secondary causes are "occasions," in which God acts (noted in Craig, *God Directs All Things*, p. 83-84).

<sup>1276</sup>Boyd, Craig, Helseth, Highfield, Jowers. Introduction, Kindle Edition, 169-173; Helm P. *The Providence of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 22.

<sup>1277</sup>Webster J. On the Theology of Providence // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. *The Providence of God*. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – P. 171.

<sup>1278</sup>Helseth P. K. *God Causes All Things* // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 453-454, 542-545, 638-669.

God.”<sup>1279</sup> Highfield adds that such attributes as “self-possession, sovereign control over their being, and exclusive self-control over their actions” belong only to the Lord. Otherwise, along with God humans could be considered, in relation to their own actions, “Prime Movers.”<sup>1280</sup>

So then, Calvinists teach that the sovereign God must always remain the First Cause and Source of all, including every event. Although Calvinists attempt to describe just how God predestines the free choices people make, they themselves admit that they cannot fully explain it.<sup>1281</sup> Either God has not given us revelation of this mystery, or our minds are too weak to comprehend it.

Exponents of Calvin’s doctrine, however, need to take into consideration the following points that stand in contradiction to their theory.<sup>1282</sup> First, the Bible frequently speaks not only of God’s sovereignty, but also of human freedom and responsibility. Carson summarizes: (1) Scripture is full of commands and exhortations, (2) in Scripture, people choose, obey, and follow God, (3) people sin against God, (4) God judges people for their sins, (5) God tests people, (6) people receive rewards from the Lord, (7) people are responsible for their response to God, (8) people pray to God, and (9) God implores people to repent and receive salvation.<sup>1283</sup> All these observations are consistent with the position that humans possess genuine freedom of choice.

In regard to the claim that if people can perform an action from their own initiative, then that creates a reality outside of God and independent of Him, Craig properly responds that the nature of the human soul is exactly that – the ability of self-determination. This is a reflection of God’s creative genius, who created us in His image. God endowed humans with both a free will and the freedom to use it. We affirm with Moreland, “A free acts is one in which the agent is the ultimate originating source of the act.”<sup>1284</sup>

Strictly speaking, an act of the human will does occur independent of God. In our chapter on creation, we discussed “divine concurrence,” according to which God provides the power for any action to occur, including acts of human volition. At the same time, He allows people to determine what those actions will be.<sup>1285</sup> God can allow things to happen that He would not actually endorse.

In summary, Craig writes,

Universal, divine determinism makes reality into a farce. The whole world becomes a vain and empty spectacle. There are no free agents in rebellion against God, whom God seeks to win through his love, and no one who freely responds to that love and freely gives his love and praise to God in return. The whole spectacle is a charade whose only real actor is God Himself.<sup>1286</sup>

Furthermore,

God would be like a child who sets up his toy soldiers and moves them about his play world, pretending that they are real persons whose every motion is not in fact of his own doing and pretending that they merit praise or blame.<sup>1287</sup>

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<sup>1279</sup>Noted in Jowers D. W. Conclusion // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 4928-4933

<sup>1280</sup>Highfield R. God Controls by Liberating // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 3043-3044, 1024-1025.

<sup>1281</sup>Helseth. God Causes All Things, Kindle Edition, 638-669.

<sup>1282</sup>Craig W. L. Response to Paul Kjoss Helseth // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 832-987.

<sup>1283</sup>Ibid., 844-845.

<sup>1284</sup>Moreland J. P. Science, Miracles, Agency Theory and God-of-the-Gaps // Geivett R. D., Habermas G. R. In Defense of Miracles. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997. – P. 138.

<sup>1285</sup>Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – p. 191-192.

<sup>1286</sup>Craig W. L. Response to Paul Kjoss Helseth, 980-983.

<sup>1287</sup>Ibid., 985-987.

Craig challenges us with the pertinent question, “Why should we think that our experience of indeterministic freedom is illusory?”<sup>1288</sup>

Boyd sees a connection between the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and pantheism: “If the world is 100 percent determined by God, its ‘primary cause,’ then, so far as I can see, the distinction between God and the world is merely verbal.”<sup>1289</sup> Boyd also raises the important question of the love relationship between God and people.<sup>1290</sup> In the Calvinistic system, God is merely loving Himself.

We also consider that human freedom does not undermine God’s sovereignty, but is in total harmony with it. When God created humans, He made the sovereign choice to endow them with free will. No one forced the Lord to create us that way. Therefore, whenever persons make a free decision (even a sinful one), God’s will is done in the sense that they are using the volitional ability that God intended them to have and utilize. God’s sovereignty is manifest whenever humans exercise their power of self-determination. To claim that free will robs God of His sovereignty is actually to undermine His sovereignty by annulling God’s sovereign choice to give humans free will.

We must also comment on a misguided idea advanced by Webster that human self-determination is a harmful thing and that people need deliverance from it.<sup>1291</sup> Did not human self-determination lead to the Fall and bring upon the human race all the consequences thereof? Here, however, Webster confuses self-determination with its abuse. God gave humans free will with good intentions, and people do at times use it for good, and in the future it will always be so. We ask, “Would God have created humans with an ability that was intrinsically harmful to them?”

Finally, we remember the prayer Jesus taught His disciples, “Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” This prayer clearly shows that God’s perfect will is not always done on earth, which contradicts the basic tenets of Calvinism.

## 2. Nature of Human Freedom

What exactly is freedom? Two theories are voiced: “compatibilistic” and “non-compatibilistic” freedom. The first theory states that human choices are always consistent with people’s desires and motives. People make the choice that is supported by their strongest desire. A person may have mixed desires, but the strongest one will prevail. Desires and motives, in turn, arise from a person’s character. They reflect who people truly are in their intrinsic personality.

Furthermore, people’s character is formed by the circumstances that influence them, such as their genetic makeup, upbringing, environment, culture, and, behind all that, God’s intervention. God orchestrates all the conditions surrounding people’s lives in a way to form the type of character that fits into His plan. So then, if behavior depends on motives and desires, motive and desires depend on character, character depends on circumstances, and circumstances depend on God, then persons are not genuinely free. Their freedom is externally conditioned, or “compatibilistic.”

The theory of compatibilistic freedom resonates with Augustine’s conception of human freedom discussed earlier – decisions based on desire. If persons do what they want to do, they are acting freely.<sup>1292</sup> Nash gives the example of a person sitting in a closed room with no exit. If that individual wants to be there, then he or she is in fact free.<sup>1293</sup>

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<sup>1288</sup>Ibid., 832-833.

<sup>1289</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to Paul Kjos Helseth // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 1204-1205.

<sup>1290</sup>Boyd G. A. God Limits His Control // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 3805-3806, 3835-3836.

<sup>1291</sup>Webster, p. 172.

<sup>1292</sup>In technical terminology, this is called “liberty of spontaneity” (Nash R. H. The Concept of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983. – P. 54).

<sup>1293</sup>Nash, p. 55.

Calvinists who believe that compatibilistic freedom was the way humans were originally created encounter several difficulties. If God controls people's behavior by orchestrating their circumstances, then people are not truly free. Thus, the term "*compatibilistic freedom*" is a misnomer. Such persons cannot express genuine love for God and thereby fulfill His Great Commandment. In addition, if the Lord predetermines sinful actions by this mechanism, then He is responsible for those sins. Moreover, Boyd inquires, "If God could have created men with compatibilistic freedom that always did right, why didn't He?"<sup>1294</sup>

Let us contrast this with "non-compatibilistic" freedom. Here, it is claimed that people can make decisions independent of their desires and even contrary to them. Desires do not determine decisions. People themselves, as self-conscious beings, determine their behavior independent of external factors. In this system, persons have genuine, non-predetermined freedom.

This view runs contrary to Augustine's in that people are free not only to make a choice, but at any time to refrain from making that choice.<sup>1295</sup> Augustine (and his followers) would say that a people cannot refrain from doing what they want most of all to do. Recalling Nash's example of someone in a closed room, supporters of non-compatibilistic freedom would say that such a person is not free even if he or she wants to be there, since there is no possibility to choose another option.

The theory of non-compatibilistic freedom better explains what happened in the Garden of Eden. Before being tempted, Eve apparently showed no interest in the forbidden fruit. Only when tempted did she begin to consider it. Moreover, we must acknowledge that God allowed Satan to tempt Eve. Therefore, God is the ultimate cause for Eve desiring the forbidden fruit. According to the compatibilistic freedom, then, this desire led to Eve's sin, and then Adam's. Yet, God judged this couple because they did not resist this desire. Non-compatibilistic freedom would have provided them a possible escape from this temptation. God judged Adam and Eve because they did not display this kind of freedom. Therefore, they must have possessed it, or else God would have no basis to find guilt in them.

Boyd attempts to combine the theories of compatibilistic and non-compatibilistic freedom. He reasons that people begin life with non-compatibilistic freedom. In the course of time, their character is formed by the many decisions they make and, consequently, they lose their non-compatibilistic freedom. Their decisions henceforth will arise from their character. As a result, God is able to "manipulate" their behavior by orchestrating the circumstances He knows will produce the decision He desires. God has in mind His ultimate plan in the decisions He thus determines. Yet, He is not guilty of causing sinful choices that people make, since they themselves, during the initial stage of non-compatibilistic freedom, formed their own corrupt character, out of which these wrong decisions arose.<sup>1296</sup> In Boyd's words,

We begin by making our choices, but in the end, our choices make us. We are gradually but inevitably becoming the decisions we make. In this light, it seems evident that while love must be *freely* chosen, it does not have to be *eternally* chosen in a libertarian (i.e. non-compatibilistic) sense. Rather, the purpose of libertarian freedom is provisional, intended eventually to lead us to a much greater, eternally solidified form of compatibilistic freedom.<sup>1297</sup>

Boyd's system does have the advantage of assuring that no one will sin in heaven, since people's character is fixed. On the other hand, when God first created humans, they were "very good," which contradicts Boyd's assertion that they possessed freedom of an inferior quality, i.e., non-compatibilistic.

Since Boyd is a defender of the "Openness of God" theory, possibly his goal here is to allow God to predict human behavior on the basis of compatibilistic freedom and therefore better secure the accomplishment of His plan. However, as we will demonstrate later, there is no need to rely on compatibilistic freedom to guarantee

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<sup>1294</sup>Boyd, *God Limits His Freedom*, p. 197.

<sup>1295</sup>In technical terminology, this is called the "liberty of indifference" (Nash, p. 54).

<sup>1296</sup>Helseth P. K. Response to Gregory A. Boyd // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 4395-4413.

<sup>1297</sup>Boyd, *God Limits His Control*, Kindle Edition, 3915-3918.

the success of God's plan. Craig insightfully notes that if human perfection requires deliverance from non-compatibilistic freedom, then "perfect love" casts out not "fear" (1 Jn 4:18), but "freedom."<sup>1298</sup>

Ron Highfield proposes still another approach.<sup>1299</sup> He teaches that freedom is not the ability to make decisions, but the capacity to do the will of God. He cites many New Testament texts on liberation from sin in Christ, which enables us to obey God. He writes, "In the New Testament, freedom is defined not as the power to choose between good and evil but as the power of a new life, in which sin no longer controls us and we love God with all our heart, mind, and strength."<sup>1300</sup> Therefore, God's aim is to liberate people from everything that limits their "freedom," that is, their ability to serve Him. Being a Calvinist, Highfield asserts that to accomplish this aim, God controls people's choices (determinism).

Boyd subjects Highfield's position to the following criticisms.<sup>1301</sup> If God controls this process, by which a person is "liberated" to love God, can we call this genuine love? It is not arising from the free choice of the worshiper. In fact, the Bible urges us to love the Lord, which implies a free response of the will. Additionally, if God determines this process of liberation, then why does He not do it for everyone?

We encounter in this theory another logical inconsistency. If God controls all things (determinism), including the process by which a person is liberated from sin, it follows that He is also responsible for the process that brought humans into sin. God, then, is the source of the problem from which He seeks now to liberate humanity. God delivers people from the situation He Himself created.

Moreover, in his theological system, Highfield does not adequately distinguish "freedom" from that to which freedom leads. In other words, "freedom" is simply liberation from limitation. Slavery to sin is merely one of a multitude of things that a person can be limited by, and obedience to God is only one of the many goals to which freedom can be applied. According to the Bible, Christian freedom can be abused, that is, directed toward an unholy end. This is why Paul warns the church in Galatia: "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only {do} not {turn} your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

So then, Highfield is totally correct when he says that the New Testament calls us to freedom to serve God. Nonetheless, he generalizes the concept of freedom to include not only volitional ability itself, but also the goal to which it is directed. Our goal should be not to attain freedom *per se*, but to attain the ability to direct it to serving God.

Of all the systems proposed above, non-compatibilistic freedom boasts the greatest logical consistency and biblical support. Nonetheless, we must make an important qualification. If our freedom is non-compatibilistic, then it differs from God's freedom. God always acts in accordance with His nature, which more resembles compatibilistic freedom.

We might explain this as follows. On the one hand, God must possess compatibilistic freedom, since He cannot behave in contradiction to His nature. If this was not so, then God's faithfulness would be in question and all His promises, including those of our salvation, would be unsure. We would never know exactly what to expect from Him.

On the other hand, humans need non-compatibilistic freedom, otherwise we could never freely respond to the Lord's love, rejecting other alternatives and temptations (as should have been in the Garden of Eden). If our actions were determined by our character, we would resemble robots, controlled by our most dominant desires. Yet, God seeks a love that is expressed freely without compulsion.

We recognize that the system "non-compatibilistic freedom" is not free from flaws, yet it excels the other options. The nature and operation of human freedom does, in the long run, remain to some degree a mystery.

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<sup>1298</sup>Craig, Response to Gregory A. Boyd, Kindle Edition, 4585-4586.

<sup>1299</sup>Highfield, God Controls by Liberating, Kindle Edition, 3072-3082

<sup>1300</sup>Highfield R. Response to Gregory A. Boyd // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 4872-4874.

<sup>1301</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to Ron Highfield // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 3454-3492.

### 3. Unconditional Election

Calvinism holds to the position that God unconditionally chooses those whom He intends to save. That is, God's election does not depend on any quality in the people He chooses, but solely on His sovereign (random) selection. Several proofs are offered in support. The term "election" itself implies a free, unconditional choice. Furthermore, according to 2 Timothy 1:9 God "has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity." Paul plainly states that the Lord saves not by human works, but by His own purpose.

The Old Testament contains many examples of God's election. He chose: (1) Isaac and Jacob, along with their descendants, as the heirs of Abraham's promise, (2) Jerusalem as His capital city, (3) Canaan as the Promised Land, (4) the priesthood of Aaron, and (5) the Davidic dynasty. God Himself determined all these elections. The New Testament speaks of election as well. About 24 times, the idea is applied to believers in Jesus. All the major New Testament figures refer to it, including Paul, Peter, John, and our Lord Jesus Himself.

Furthermore, support is gleaned from Romans chapter 9, where we read, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion" (v. 15). Thus, God determines who will be saved.

Calvinists also draw our attention to the word "know," which can refer to the intimate relationship between husband and wife (Gen 4:1; cf. Lk 1:34), and between persons and God (1 Sam 2:12-13; Phil 3:10; 1 Jn 2:3, 13-14).<sup>1302</sup> Therefore, if God "foreknew" someone, this implies that He did not merely know "about" that individual or knew him or her personally, but that this one was chosen for salvation. We already showed examples of Old Testament passages where the Hebrew word "know" (יָדָע - *yadah*) can refer to election (Gen 18:19; Jer 1:5; Hos 13:5; Amos 3:2). In addition, Galatians 4:9 and 1 Corinthians 8:3 reveal that God "knew" us, believers in Christ.<sup>1303</sup>

However, in our survey of these biblical passages we demonstrated the flaws of these interpretations and do not need to repeat our arguments here. According to the Arminian understanding, God's election is derived from His foreknowledge, which consists of knowing beforehand the character of those whom He will choose for salvation (see Rom 8:29-30; 1 Pet 1:1-2).

Craig criticizes the Arminian position. He questions why God would predestine those He foreknew? If God knows from eternity past that a certain one already possessed the disposition needed to come to faith, then why would God need to predestine such an individual to come to Him?<sup>1304</sup> Arminians may respond that it is important in the conversion process that God takes the initiative, not people, in order to remove a motive for human boasting. In addition, God's act of predestination with its accompanying manifestation of divine power may assist the sinner to repent and believe and aid in preserving that individual in faith.

What exactly did God foresee in people to incline Him to elect them? The Bible does not specifically say, but, judging from the biblical witness as a whole, we may nonetheless offer some insight. Knowing that one of the main features of God's plan is to eliminate human boasting (see the discussion in chapter 19, section C), it is highly likely that the desired quality He foresaw was humility. We recall Peter's words, "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Pet 5:5). Thus, God may not only prevent people from boasting in their conversion, but also from taking pride in the basis for their election. How can people be proud of their humility? This coincides with Paul's exposition to the Corinthians about the humble state of God's chosen:

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of

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<sup>1302</sup>Pekota, p. 358.

<sup>1303</sup>Mueller, p. 600.

<sup>1304</sup>Craig. God Directs All Things, Kindle Edition, 1887-1891.

the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God (1 Cor 1:26-29).

In addition, a heart of humility predisposes one to faith. When the Lord predestines His chosen, He does not coerce them into believing, but removes the obstacles that would prevent the display of personal faith. Lydia is a good example, whose heart the Lord “opened... to respond to the things spoken by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Notice that God did not compel her to believe, but enabled her belief. This understanding of conversion harmonizes with the words of our Lord about the character of those who turn to Him: “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it {at} {all}” (Mk 10:15). Just as the simple hearts of children are disposed to trust their parents, the meek hearts of God’s elect dispose them to trust the Lord.

In defense of the Arminian position, it is vital to stress the unviable claim of Calvinists that Arminianism robs God of His sovereignty. God’s knowledge of the future condition of persons may serve as the basis for His election, but in no way *requires* Him to choose them. The fact that He knows ahead of time who will humbly be open to His call, does not *force* Him to choose them. In spite of whatever prompts God to choose one person or another, His choice remains free and sovereign.

Moreover, unconditional election contradicts the clear biblical teaching that God desires to save everyone. God shows no partiality and has the same attitude toward all people (Rom 2:11). Paul teaches that the Lord “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Peter concurs, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Also see Ezekiel 18:32 and 1 Timothy 4:10.

Calvinists respond by drawing a distinction between God’s so-called “moral (open) will” and His “operative (hidden) will.” According to the former, God wants to save all. According to the latter, though, He provides salvation only for the chosen. However, this claim makes God out to be a hypocrite – He says one thing, but does another. Such a description is unworthy of the God of the Bible. Hart affirms, “If God were really to supply saving grace sufficient for all, but to refuse to supply most persons with the necessary natural means of attaining that grace, it would mean that God does not will the salvation of all.”<sup>1305</sup>

In reality, God’s “moral” will turns out to be an illusion. Hart shares the insight that the Calvinist theory of unconditional election corresponds with the theological concept of “voluntarism,” according to which God has total freedom to make any decision at any time independent of all factors, even His nature.<sup>1306</sup> Whatever decision He makes is the correct one. Voluntarism contrasts with “essentialism,” according to which God’s freedom is “limited” by His nature. In other words, He always acts in conformity with His character. So then, if God’s sovereignty means that He can go against His natural disposition to save all and save only some, then God is acting inconsistently with His character, and we fall into the unhealthy snare of voluntarism.

However, Calvinists dispute this by saying that Arminians, too, believe that God has two wills. If He wants to save all people, then why does He not do so? Highfield shares this challenging thought:

Why shouldn’t God be infinitely better at persuasion than Satan, so that God wins every time?... It violates no law of logic to say that God is able to persuade all free agents to choose the good freely on every occasion. And if it is not logically impossible, there must be another reason why God does not do this.<sup>1307</sup>

Arminians conventionally term God’s “two wills” His “perfect will” and His “permissive will.” His perfect will is to save all people. In His permissive will, not all will be saved. The difference with the Calvinistic view is the factor of human freedom, which can prevent God’s perfect will from happening. God wills to save all, but

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<sup>1305</sup>Hart, p. 46.

<sup>1306</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>1307</sup>Highfield. Response to Gregory A. Boyd, Kindle Edition, 4770, 4781-4785.



will not violate free choice, but respects it. In the Calvinistic view, however, the only factor that prevents God's desire to save all from being fulfilled is God Himself. God's "perfect will" according to the Calvinist is that not all should attain eternal life. Boyd comments,

Only the Calvinist is able to ascribe to God an undefeatable will, though the bitter pill they must swallow for these bragging rights is the horrific belief that it was not God's will for all to be saved in the first place.<sup>1308</sup>

Craig comments that the system Molinism meets up with the same difficulties that Arminianism does. God would have liked to have chosen from all logically possible worlds that order of things that would ensure that all people would be saved. Yet, the factor of human free will prevents all logically possible worlds from becoming actualized worlds. Therefore, God had to be content with choosing an order of things that respected free will, but forfeited universal salvation.<sup>1309</sup>

It will be helpful to clarify the concept of God's "permissive will." If God's main priority truly was the salvation of all people, then He would have made humans without free will. Yet, He created them free. Therefore, Arminians must acknowledge that something is more important to God than the salvation of souls. This "something" is generally thought to be a relationship of love. God desired a people with whom He could share such a relationship, which requires humans to possess free will. He was not willing to jeopardize human freedom for the sake of universal salvation by forcing all to convert. So then, in order for their system to have consistency Arminians must acknowledge that people's salvation is not God's top priority.

Arminians attempt to soften that position, however, in the following manner. First, God employs every possible means aside from coercion to draw people to Himself. He fervently attempts to convince sinners to repent and believe. If someone objects that if God did more miracles, more people would convert, we would recall the words of Christ concerning the rich man and Lazarus: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead" (Lk 16:31).

We also note that God's passionate desire that people would be saved was expressed in the Father sending His Son to die a horrific death for their redemption. In this vein, Paul writes, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). No logical contradiction exists between the statements "there is something more important to God than people's salvation" and "God desires to save all." God can value something more than an individual's salvation, yet at the same time desire the salvation of all who meet His requirements.

Finally, along with the biblical testimony of God's desire to save all persons, we also encounter in Scripture an invitation to all to receive Christ. Paul preached to the people of Athens, "Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all {people} everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). Additionally, in Isaiah 55:1, the Lord invites all who are thirsty to come and drink. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus invites all who labor and are heavy burdened to take His yoke upon themselves. Lastly, the call to the Church to evangelize the whole world implies an invitation for all to receive eternal life.

Concerning the call to evangelize, Calvinists hold to the opinion that we must preach the gospel to all people since we do not know who are God's chosen. In fact, the predestination doctrine is thought not to hinder evangelization, but promote it, since the preacher has the assurance that at least some will respond to the message – God's elect. Therefore, a degree of success is guaranteed. Paul seems to reflect this attitude in his words, "For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus {and} with {it} eternal glory" (2 Tim 2:10).

Also of interest are Christ's words in Matthew 22:14: "Many are called, but few are chosen." There can be some who are called, but not chosen. Calvinists distinguish God's "general call" from His "effective call." The

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<sup>1308</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to William Lane Craig // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 2625-2627.

<sup>1309</sup>Craig W. L. Response to Ron Highfield // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 3359-3363.

first is directed to all people, while the second is only for the elect. The latter call is “effective” in that the elect will invariably respond to it. Yet, the non-elect will not respond to God’s “general call” and are not able to do so. Arminians object to this teaching, noting that to invite someone who has no ability to respond is deception. Yet, God is not a deceiver. He is just and faithful. Additionally, the Bible records instances where God’s Spirit was active drawing souls to Him, but they resisted (Matt 23:37-38; Acts 7:51).<sup>1310</sup>

#### 4. God’s Responsibility for Sin

The Calvinistic teaching that God directly controls all that occurs naturally leads to the conclusion that He is responsible for all the evil deeds that have been done and is Himself the source of evil. In order to escape these consequences of their theory, Calvinists offer various explanations. Millard Erickson suggests that God arranges all the circumstances in a person’s life in a way that only one viable option remains, even if that involves a sinful choice by that individual. Nonetheless, Erickson considers such a decision to be a voluntary one. Thus, God is supposedly absolved of responsibility for that misdeed.<sup>1311</sup>

Erickson, though, fails to appreciate that God neither causes sinful acts, nor tempts people to sin. If God arranged conditions so that the only real choice someone has is a sinful one, then that is tantamount to God tempting one to sin. Yet, James offers this sharp rebuttal, “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (Jam 1:13). Just the opposite is true – He always makes a way of escape, so that one might not sin (1 Cor 10:13).

Another common explanation is that God prompts every good deed that is done, but simply allows sinful acts to occur by a person’s free choice. Therefore, He is behind every good thing, but is innocent of evil. Pink writes, “While God is the Orderer and Controller of sin, He is *not* the Author of it in the same way that He is the Author of good... (he permits sin) only by decretive permission and negative action.”<sup>1312</sup> According to Pink, God’s dealings with the elect are unconditional, while His dealings with the non-elect are conditional. So then, the latter are guilty for their own sins.<sup>1313</sup>

However, this approach contradicts the essential features of Calvinism – God controls *everything*, and people lack free will. We might call this “semi-Calvinism.” The 17th-century Calvinist Francis Turretin added a nuance to this approach, where God “permitting” people to sin consists in His lack of intervention to prevent a person from sinning.<sup>1314</sup> His involvement, then is considered more active than passive. Still, there is an inconsistency here. It turns out that before people convert to Christ, they possess free will (albeit in a sinful condition). Yet, after conversion, God begins to control their all their activities. So then, people obtain salvation at the expense of their personal freedom. What kind of salvation is that?

Another variant is that God indeed does cause evil.<sup>1315</sup> Here Calvinists appeals to God’s “two wills”: His moral will and His operative will. God’s moral will is expressed in Scripture, while His operative will is seen in what He actually does. In His moral will, God does not sin, yet in His operative will, He may prompt sinful acts.

Exponents of this variant appeal to Scripture for support. Joseph stated that *God* sent him to Egypt (by way of the hatred of his brothers) (Gen 50:20; Ps 105:17). The Bible records that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart to resist Him (Ex 4:21; 7:3; Rom 9:16-18, Ps 105:25). God stirred the enemies of Israel to war against them (Josh 11:20; Judg 3:12; 9:23; 1 Kin 11:14, 23). Judges 14:4 reveals that Samson’s marriage to a Gentile, which was forbidden by Mosaic Law, was from God.

Furthermore, the sons of Eli did not heed their father’s counsel because the Lord has already determined to slay them (1 Sam 2:25). An evil spirit from the Lord tormented Saul (1 Sam 16:14) and deceived Ahab (1 Kin 22:19-23). In addition, God raised up evil against David and his family (2 Sam 12:11-12). He also incited David to

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<sup>1310</sup>Mueller, p. 607-608

<sup>1311</sup>Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1. – P. 358.

<sup>1312</sup>Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 14 (parentheses not in original).

<sup>1313</sup>Ibid. p. 34-35.

<sup>1314</sup>Noted in Boyd, Craig, Helseth, Highfield, Jowers. Introduction, Kindle Edition, 1308-1317.

<sup>1315</sup>Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 322ff.

conduct an illegal census of the people (2 Sam 24:1; 1 Chr 27:23-24). God predestined Christ's crucifixion by evil men (Acts 2:23; 4:27). In the last days, God will send a deluding spirit among unbelievers (2 Thes 2:11-12). Through Isaiah, God proclaimed, "The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am Yahweh who does all these" (Isa 45:7).

Calvin describes His position concerning God relation to evil with these words:

The sum of the whole is this, – since the will of God is said to be the cause of all things, all the counsels and actions of men must be held to be governed by his providence; so that he not only exerts his power in the elect, who are guided by the Holy Spirit, but also forces the reprobate to do him service.<sup>1316</sup>

Regarding God's two wills, Calvin writes,

Still, however, the will of God is not at variance with itself. It undergoes no change. He makes no pretense of not willing what he wills, but while in himself the will is one and undivided, to us it appears manifold, because, from the feebleness of our intellect, we cannot comprehend how, though after a different manner, he wills and wills not the very same thing.<sup>1317</sup>

Some go to the extreme of supposing that God, being the Most High, is above morality. Since He is God, all that He does is right, even if it does not appear to be so to us.

On the other hand, we recall that in every instance where God sent evil on someone, it is recorded that this individual was already in rebellion against Him. For example, in Genesis 37:3-4, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery with ill intent. According to Exodus 8:32, Pharaoh had already hardened his own heart. In Judges 14:1-3, Samson chose his own wife. Before God sent an evil spirit on Saul and Ahab, they had already rejected Him. According to 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12, those on whom God sends a deluding spirit already rejected the love of the truth. So then, when it seems that God is prompting an evil deed, in reality He is giving people over to their own stubborn persistence, as Paul describes in Romans 1:24-28.

Additionally, the following Scripture passages confirm that God, in His holy nature, does not participate in sinful acts: "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5); with God "there is no variation or shifting shadow" (Jam 1:17); "There is no unrighteousness in Him" (Ps 92:15).

Moreover, if God is the source of evil, prompting sinful acts, then how can we imitate Him? He would not be for us the model of proper behavior, and therefore we could not follow His example. Even if He does evil for a good end, He would be still be guilty of operating by the principle "the end justifies the means" and the faulty ethical system of utilitarianism.

Concerning the claim that God is above morals, we respond that God's will does not operate independent of His nature. In other words, He can make no decision that runs contrary to His holy character. He is not "above" morals, but is the embodiment of morality itself.<sup>1318</sup>

In their quest to explain God's relationship with evil, many adherents of divine determinism appeal to the concept of "primary" and "secondary" causes, which we discussed earlier. Although God is the primary cause of people's sins, He is not considered culpable for them since the person was also involved in the act as a secondary cause. Helm asserts that human deterministic freedom is responsible for evil.<sup>1319</sup>

Moreover, defenders of this position appeal to God's omnipotence. They believe that God is able to do all things, even predetermine a free act of the human will.<sup>1320</sup> They also point to God's transcendence, which

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<sup>1316</sup>*Institutes of the Christian religion*, 1.18.2.

<sup>1317</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.18.3.

<sup>1318</sup>Helm, p. 167, 184.

<sup>1319</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>1320</sup>Noted in Hart, p. 38.

somehow “protects” Him from responsibility for the sinful acts He brings about. People themselves, since they stand “closer” to the event itself, are guilty for the transgression.<sup>1321</sup>

However, the thinking person views the claim that God, who is supposedly the primary and ultimate cause of every event, can escape responsibility for a sinful act as an absurdity. If we return to our example with the billiard cue, if the player misses a shot, the cue is not to blame, but the one handling it. Craig agrees that if “God causes the agent to sin by moving his will to choose evil,” then it “makes the allegation that God is the author of sin difficult to deny.”<sup>1322</sup> In addition, Hart correctly comments that if a person is dependent on God’s grace to do good, and God does not provide that grace, the problem lies not with the person, but with God’s refusal to provide the grace.<sup>1323</sup>

Concerning the claim that God, in His omnipotence, can cause a free effect, we earlier denied the possibility that God can do what constitutes a logical absurdity or contradiction (for example, create a round square). Determining the free effect of another fits into that same class. The argument from God’s transcendence is also unconvincing. Hart writes that if God can exert an influence on people to the degree that He affects their behavior, then that shows that He is “close enough” to the situation to at least share in the blame for the sinful act. Finally, if God’s transcendence “protects” Him from culpability, it would also deny Him credit for the good works that He causes. The person doing the good, then, deserves the praise for it.

Of note is that even defenders of divine determinism are not entirely happy with their system. Helm, for example, admits that he cannot completely explain the “mutual-causation” between God and people.<sup>1324</sup> He also acknowledges that both God and persons share responsibility for sins committed.<sup>1325</sup> Pink writes, “There is a real difficulty in defining where one (i.e., human responsibility) ends and the other (i.e., divine responsibility) begins.”<sup>1326</sup>

Ron Highfield introduces yet another approach. He admits that God indeed causes evil, but He does so with a good intention in mind. Therefore, His participation is not considered evil. He writes, “God does not do evil when he works in and through and after stupid, ignorant, and evil human acts. God overcomes the stupidity, ignorance, and evil to accomplish his good will perfectly.”<sup>1327</sup> And again, “In evil acts, God’s concurrence overcomes the evil in the act, not allowing it to be truly and lastingly realized but instead bringing good out of evil.”<sup>1328</sup> Helm echoes this thought, affirming that God can motivate an act of disobedience to accomplish a good end: “The breaking of his will became part of the fulfilling of his will.”<sup>1329</sup>

On the other hand, Craig offers the following rebuttal to this position. Highfield wants to prove that since God’s will is accomplished in the end, His participation in the sinful act is not evil. Highfield also believes, however, that all that takes place is God’s will. This introduces a confusion. Was not God’s will being performed when the evil act was initially done? Yet, Highfield delays God’s will being done until later, when He turns the evil into good. If both the initial act and the end result reflect God’s will, then the distinction between evil and good breaks down.<sup>1330</sup> In addition, as we said before, God is operating here by the principle “the end justifies the means,” that is, the faulty ethical system of utilitarianism.

In summary, we affirm with Boyd that the Bible clearly instructs us that God and evil are direct antagonists. God attitude toward evil is to oppose it and eliminate it. In fact, the very concept of evil is defined as that which is contrary to God.<sup>1331</sup> The explanations offered above by Calvinists are unconvincing. As we demonstrated in

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<sup>1321</sup>Ibid., p. 50.

<sup>1322</sup>Craig, Response to Paul Kjos Helseth, Kindle Edition, 900-901.

<sup>1323</sup>Noted in Hart, p. 42.

<sup>1324</sup>Helm, p. 181.

<sup>1325</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

<sup>1326</sup>Pink, p. 16 (parentheses not in original).

<sup>1327</sup>Highfield, God Controls by Liberating, Kindle Edition, 3210-3214.

<sup>1328</sup>Ibid., Kindle Edition, 3696-3699.

<sup>1329</sup>Helm, c. 48.

<sup>1330</sup>Craig, Response to Ron Highfield, Kindle Edition, 3402-3405

<sup>1331</sup>Boyd, God Limits His Control, Kindle Edition, 3770-3775, 4043-4044.

our biblical survey, God may use people's sinful acts to accomplish His purpose or harden the already stubborn, rebellious heart, but He never takes initiative to prompt or cause an evil act.

## 5. Success of God's Plan

If people truly possess free will, does that threaten the success of God's plan being fulfilled? Can humans with their freedom of choice prevent God from achieving His aims? Highfield fears that "denying God's comprehensive control requires placing creation's destiny partly in the hands of chance, or necessity, or the Devil, or humanity."<sup>1332</sup>

However, in the light of God's foreknowledge, wisdom, and power, we can confidently assert that the almighty and all-knowing God is able to accomplish His plan in spite of people's free participation in it.<sup>1333</sup> Boyd concurs, "There is simply no reason to assume that God must control *everything* in the world for him to remain in *overall* control of the world."<sup>1334</sup>

In addition, Calvinists object that if people have free will, then they will retain that freedom of choice after death and could potentially commit sin in God's eternal kingdom. Arminians reject the idea that the saints will sin in the kingdom. The Bible assures us that on the new earth, righteousness will reign (2 Pet 3:13) and that the saints will remain faithful to the Lord (Jn 10:28).

On the other hand, although believers will someday be perfect in character, according to the theory of non-compatibilistic freedom one can behave contrary to one's character. Consequently, proponents of non-compatibilistic freedom must admit that, theoretically, the *potential* to sin will still exist. Yet, in light of God's promises of eternal life, the saints *will never* sin. We will not only be perfect in character, but also have painful life experience to warn us of the dangers of further rebellion. It is highly unlikely that those who have passed through life in a fallen world would want to repeat that experience.

Molinism (see above) offers a system that allows human freedom with a guarantee of God's success. In this system, God foresaw all the future decisions each individual could make under all possible circumstances and chose that order of things that would accomplish His plan without compromising people's freedom.

One objection to Molinism arises in connection with the nature of "middle knowledge." Some say that all knowledge must exist in God. Yet, "middle knowledge" depends on human choices and is therefore "outside of" or independent of the Lord. Since all things must depend on God, we must not speak of a type of knowledge that depends not on Him, but on the variations of human volition operating outside of Him.<sup>1335</sup>

This objection, though, is unsubstantial. How can the "middle knowledge" that God possesses somehow exist "outside" of Him? If God knows something (even if that is only theoretical knowledge), then that knowledge is contained in His divine reason. If God's omniscience is limited to only that over which He has direct control, then His scope knowledge is limited and He is not omniscient. God's amazing ability to know is on even more dramatic display when He is able to predict with precise accuracy each free decision every individual could make in any given situation.

In addition, Highfield argues that in Molinism, knowledge seems to control the Lord. It defines "what sort of world God can create."<sup>1336</sup> The weakness in Highfield's argument is that middle knowledge does not "dictate" to God how He must act. Additionally, if God delights to use this type of approach to shape human history, He has full right to do so. He is not forced to employ middle knowledge.

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<sup>1332</sup>Highfield, *God Controls by Liberating*, Kindle Edition, 2950-2951.

<sup>1333</sup>Thiessen H. C. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 386-387; Boyd, *God Limits His Control*, Kindle Edition, 3785-3786.

<sup>1334</sup>Boyd, *Response to Paul Kjos Helseth*, Kindle Edition, 1146-1147.

<sup>1335</sup>Helseth P. K. *Response to William Lane Craig // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 2708-2717; Highfield R. *Response to William Lane Craig // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 2220-2225. Также отмечено в Jowers D. W. *Conclusion // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence*. – Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 5015-5022.

<sup>1336</sup>Highfield, *Response to William Lane Craig*, 2231-2233.

Finally, Body wonders whether the world order we live in is really the best of all possible worlds that God could have actualized. He refers to the sufferings people experience in this life as well as the eternal suffering of the lost.<sup>1337</sup> Not only Molinism, but every worldview, in fact, struggles with the same question – how to explain the presence and effect of evil in the world. We will return to this question in the next chapter.

Although Molinism boasts some advantages over Calvinism, the issue of God deliberately arranging the unhappy destiny of lost souls remains problematic. It is true that they chose their outcome freely. Yet, the fact remains that God arranged their life situations to bring about this result. He “tempted” them to sin.

The traditional Arminian position that God’s foreknowledge, wisdom, and power guarantee the success of His plan regardless of human free choice is more than adequate to convince us that in the end, God will triumph!

## 6. Human Depravity

The Bible teaches that humanity is in a condition of depravity and, therefore, is unable to do good without God’s assistance. Numerous biblical passages bring out this truth. Paul wrote to the Romans, “There is none righteous, not even one” (Rom 3:10), and, “The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able {to do so}” (Rom 8:7). He reminds the Ephesians that they were “dead in... trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1).<sup>1338</sup>

Some Arminians believe that people are not totally depraved, but are able to make some right choices, including the ability to freely receive Christ as Savior. Calvinists insist that in light of the biblical portrait of human sinfulness, we must embrace the doctrine of total human depravity. The teaching of partial depravity (called Semi-Pelagianism), was not well received in Church history, resulting in its rejection at a fifth-century Church council in Orange.

Most defenders of Arminian faith, however, believe that sinful humans can come to Christ only by virtue of so-called “prevenient grace.” This means that the Lord bestows on all people a general grace, which liberates their wills from the bondage to sin to the degree that they can understand the gospel and come to Jesus to receive forgiveness and eternal life. Although this grace is granted to all, not everyone responds to it since that depends on their personal choice.

The following passages are cited in support the existence and action of “prevenient grace”: Proverbs 1:20; John 1:9; Romans 2:4; Titus 2:11; John 12:32; Matthew 13:12; Acts 7:51. At the same time, exponents of Arminianism must admit that the biblical evidence is rather sparse. The verses listed above do not specifically identify the type of grace they are claiming.

Other students of Scripture appeal to the power of the gospel as the source of power that enables sinners to convert. When people hear the gospel, power is released to soften their hearts toward the Lord. Yet, this does not force their conversion. The power of the gospel merely makes their faith possible.<sup>1339</sup> Some biblical texts seem to confirm this claim. Paul wrote that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom 10:17). James taught that God “brought us forth by the word of truth” (Jam 1:18). In 1 Thessalonians 1:5, we read, “Our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.” Hebrew 4:12 contributes the following, “The word of God is living and active.” Finally, we note: “The word of God... performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thes 2:13), and, “He called you through our gospel” (2 Thes 2:14).

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<sup>1337</sup>Boyd, Response to William Lane Craig, Kindle Edition, 2639-2641.

<sup>1338</sup>The following passages support the idea of total depravity: Jn 6:44; Acts 16:14; Rom 7:18; 2 Cor 4:3-6; 1 Cor 2:14; Rom 1:21; Tit 1:15; Jer 17:9; Eph 4:18-19; Jn 15:5; Isa 64:6; Jn 3:20 (Ботнари Е. Рецензия на книгу «Regeneration and Conversion», автором В. Э. Бест. – Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2005; Mueller, p. 343).

<sup>1339</sup>Mueller, p. 346-347.

On the other hand, we must keep in mind that not everyone who hears the gospel receives it. Where is the power of the gospel to convert sinners in that case? Jesus taught that not only does conversion depend on hearing the Word, but also upon the condition of the hearer's heart (Matt 13:3-8).<sup>1340</sup>

Arminians struggle with how to explain a sinner's conversion. If people in their sinful condition will not turn to the Lord, where does the desire to do so come from? The preaching of the gospel or "prevenient grace" may "soften" or "open" hearts to receive, but if one "softens" or "opens" a totally depraved heart, all one finds is more depravity. Additionally, "prevenient grace" has weak biblical attestation. Those Arminians who hold to Semi-Pelagianism face resistance both from the weight of Church history and Scriptural passages supporting total depravity. Describing the mechanism of a sinner's conversion remains the weak link in Arminian theology.

The doctrine of total depravity also has problems. Adherents of this view must explain why people of this world often appear to do good. The conventional response is to assume the existence of so-called "general grace," which enables fallen humans to sometimes practice virtues and resist vices.<sup>1341</sup> McGowan describes it thus, "On the negative side, God restrains sin and, on the positive side, God enables human society and grants ability in the arts and sciences."<sup>1342</sup> Whenever sinful people use their natural talents for the benefit of others, this is regarded as an operation of God's "general grace." However, general grace is not adequate to bring a soul to Christ. In support of "general grace," adherents appeal to Matthew 5:43-46. However, nothing in this passage refers to God influence on a person's will, but only of His benevolence to the natural world.

We must concede that the exact mechanism of a sinner's conversion remains a mystery.

## 7. Salvation by Grace

Calvinists object that human free will is inconsistent with salvation by grace. If someone participates in some way in attaining salvation, then it is not by grace alone. Calvinists prefer the variant "monergism," which denotes that there is only one "energy" (mono-ergism) or one active party in salvation's plan – God alone. The Arminian view is "synergism," claiming that there are two "energies" or two active parties – God and the human individual.

Calvinists object that synergism contradicts Romans 11:5-6, which claims that election is essential so that salvation would be by grace.<sup>1343</sup> They also fear that if people take any part in the work of salvation, it gives them a reason to boast.<sup>1344</sup> Helseth, quoting Richard Muller, argues that in a synergistic system, the person becomes "the first and effective agent(s) in salvation."<sup>1345</sup>

However, Arminians consider it improper to call receiving a gift a "work." If persons receive the gift of eternal life, it still remains a gift. They are undeserving of it and therefore have nothing about which to brag. God always remains "the first and effective agent in salvation," since He is its initiator and the one who accomplished it. The individual is simply the recipient of what the Lord has done.

## 8. Limited Atonement

From the Calvinist perspective, Jesus died only for those who would believe in Him. This doctrine is called "limited atonement." Several passages of Scripture state that Jesus died for His people (Matt 1:21; Jn 10:11, 15; 15:13; Acts 20:28; Eph 5:25; Rom 8:32). In His highpriestly prayer, Jesus does "not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours" (Jn 17:9). In Mark 10:45, Jesus gives His life as a ransom "for many."

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<sup>1340</sup>Ботнари.

<sup>1341</sup>McGowan A. Providence and Common Grace // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. The Providence of God. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – P. 110-118.

<sup>1342</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>1343</sup>Mueller, p. 596.

<sup>1344</sup>Pink, p. 26.

<sup>1345</sup>Muller R. Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice, p. 266. Noted in Helseth, God Causes All Things, Kindle Edition, 664-669.

Arminians do not challenge the claim that the Lord died for His people. This does not exclude, though, that He died for others as well. His death, however, is effective only for those who believe. The high-priestly prayer of Jesus does not identify for whom Jesus will die, just for whom He is praying. This verse, in fact, is found in the context of world evangelization (see Jn 17:21). It is unlikely that Jesus would speak at the same time about limited atonement and of His desire that the whole world would believe.

When Jesus speaks of giving His life as a ransom for “many,” He is not teaching limited atonement, but citing Isaiah 53:12, which He is about to fulfill by His sacrifice on Calvary. It is interesting to compare Isaiah 53:12 with Mark 10:45 and 1 Timothy 2:6, where Paul states that Jesus “gave Himself as a ransom for all.” Additionally, the word “many” is not necessarily exclusive of “all.” “Many” simply means a great number.

Calvinists also object that if Jesus died for all, does that not imply that all are already forgiven? God cannot punish someone twice for the same sin. This objection is refuted by Romans 5:17, where the effect of Adam’s sin is contrasted with that of Christ’s death. The sin of Adam automatically applies to all his natural descendants, but only “those who *receive* the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” In addition, Calvinists do not claim that the elect are “automatically” forgiven by Jesus’ death either. They must personally receive forgiveness through repentance and faith.

Even more convincing for the refutation of limited atonement are concrete biblical texts that state that Jesus died for the whole world, for example: 1 John 2:2; 4:14. Some passages reveal that the Lord died even for those who reject Him (Heb 10:29; 2 Pet 2:1; Rom 14:15; 1 Cor 8:11). We can also cite the following in support of the Arminian position: 1 Timothy 4:10; 1 Timothy 2:6; 2 Corinthians 5:14; John 1:29; Titus 2:11; Isaiah 53:6; Revelation 22:17; John 3:16; Hebrews 2:9; John 6:51; 2 Corinthians 5:19.

## 9. Irresistible Grace

Irresistible grace means that when God draws a person to faith in Christ, that individual cannot resist His grace. The New Testament abounds in examples of the Lord calling people to Himself. Only several, though, seem to indicate an irresistible calling. In John 6:37, Jesus says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me,” and in John 10:27, “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.” Other passages speak of the Spirit’s drawing power as well (see Lk 14:23; Acts 13:48).

Other features, however, challenge this claim. The phrase “irresistible grace” is in itself a contraction of terms. If God’s grace is a gift, it seems inconsistent to claim that God forces people to receive it. In addition, the Old Testament records that Israel rejected God’s grace (see Isa 65:2, 12). The New Testament also affirms this – the Pharisees resisted the work of the Spirit in their lives (Acts 7:51; Matt 23:37).<sup>1346</sup> Moreover, the biblical texts in support of this doctrine do not specifically connect the Spirit’s drawing with the believer’s response of faith. Other unnamed factors could play a role as well.

Lutheran theology seeks a middle ground here. On the one hand, the Lutheran faith accepts the doctrine of total depravity and the teaching of *solo gratis*, i.e., salvation by grace alone. On the other hand, they also accept the concept of *gratis universalis*, which means that grace for salvation is available to all people. Lutheran theologians do not attempt to explain this discrepancy, but consider it a mystery. Mueller comments,

But if the Christian believer, on the basis of Scripture, maintains both the *gratia universalis* and the *sola gratia*, then indeed the mystery remains: Why are some elected and others not?... This mystery the true Christian believer does not try to solve since it belongs to God’s unsearchable judgments and His ways which are past finding out.<sup>1347</sup>

## 10. Preservation

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<sup>1346</sup>Pekota D. B. The Saving Work of Christ // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 402; Mueller, p. 352.

<sup>1347</sup>Mueller, p. 611.



The Calvinist position includes the claim that all genuine believers in Jesus will remain faithful to the end and never fall away. God predestined them for salvation and will consequently preserve them in faith. Jesus promised that none whom the Father gave to Him will perish, and that no one can pluck them out of His hand (Jn 6:38-40; 10:28-29). Other passages as well speak plainly of God keeping believers (1 Pet 1:5; 2 Tim 1:12; Jn 17:12; 1 Jn 5:18; Rom 16:25; Jude 24). He will complete the work that He began in them (Phil 1:6; 1 Thes 5:23-24).<sup>1348</sup>

In addition, if people have received “eternal life,” then they cannot lose it, otherwise it would not be “eternal.” The Bible also speaks of the Holy Spirit, who abides in the believer as the “pledge” of salvation (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14). Paul exclaims, “Who will separate us from the love of Christ?” (Rom 8:35). The Son of God Himself intercedes for the saints before the Father (Jn 17:11; Heb 7:24-25).<sup>1349</sup> He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world (1 Jn 4:4). The indwelling Spirit can guard us from all danger. Finally, 1 John 2:19 teaches that when someone turns from the faith, it is evidence that that person was never a true believer in the first place.<sup>1350</sup>

Nevertheless, numerous other Scripture passages warn the Church of the danger of backsliding, urging them to remain in the faith. The apostle John exhorts believers, “As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father” (1 Jn 2:24). Paul warns in Colossians 1:22-23, “He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach – if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” It is reasonable to assume that if God warns about apostasy, it is a real possibility. Pekota writes, “In what way are they warnings if they do not correspond to reality?”<sup>1351</sup>

Some opponents of the doctrine of preservation view 1 John 2:19 as a special case that applies to the “antichrists,” or false teachers, mentioned in the previous verse. These are the same people of whom Jesus spoke in Matthew 7:15: “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” Others explain this verse by pointing out that these teachers manifested that they “were not {really} of us” at the time when they departed from the Church. Yet, they may have been genuine believers before that time.

Several passages unmistakably teach that true Christians can fall away. Peter writes of believers who become “again entangled” in sin (2 Pet 2:20-22). In Hebrews, we learn that “after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” one can “go on sinning willfully” (Heb 10:26-27). The most well known passage in this regard is Hebrews 6:4-6, which we analyzed in detail in the previous chapter. Along with these key texts, many other passages warn about backsliding or indicate that it is possible.<sup>1352</sup>

Calvinists attempt to explain some of these biblical texts. In John 15:2, 6 Jesus teaches, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, (the Father) takes away.” It is claimed that such branches had no vital connection to the vine in the first place, otherwise they would have borne fruit. If they had no real connection, then they were never in Christ. Calvinists also hold that if a true Christian “turns away from his righteousness” (Ezek 18:24), this person may die physically, but not spiritually. In their opinion, the phrase “the one who endures to the end, he will be saved” does not mean that salvation comes only to those who persevere, but that those whom God keeps for salvation will invariably persevere. Nonetheless, the weight of biblical evidence still falls in favor of the understanding that falling away is a real danger for the Christian.

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<sup>1348</sup>Pekota, p. 411-412; Thiessen, p. 386-387.

<sup>1349</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1350</sup>Thiessen, p. 390.

<sup>1351</sup>Pekota, p. 414.

<sup>1352</sup>See Rom 11:20-22; Jn 15:2, 6; Lk 9:62; 1 Cor 9:27; Gal 5:4; 1 Tim 4:1; 1 Tim 1:19; 2 Tim 2:12; Matt 7:21-23; Matt 24:13; Rev 3:5; Ezek 18:24; Lk 8:13-15; Lk 12:45-46; Matt 18:21-22; 1 Cor 10:12.

The Lutheran Church, again, occupies a middle ground. On the one hand, Lutherans feel that “all who endure to the end do so alone by divine grace.” Yet, on the other hand, “All who fall from faith do so through their own fault.”<sup>1353</sup>

## 11. New Birth

Calvinism teaches that people turn to the Lord as a result of experiencing the new birth prior to conversion. In other words, regeneration precedes and enables an individual to repent and believe. Since salvation is God’s work, persons cannot repent or believe, that is, fulfill salvation’s requirements, until the Lord gives them new birth. Several biblical texts are cited in support. In Ephesians 2:8, faith is not a human production, but God’s gift (also see Phil 1:29; Heb 12:2; Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 12:9). According to 2 Timothy 2:25, Acts 11:18, and Acts 5:31, God grants repentance.<sup>1354</sup>

Best defends this position as follows.<sup>1355</sup> He notes the unbeliever’s inability to perceive spiritual things: “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:14). To such a person they appear foolish (1 Cor 1:17-18). The darkness does not “comprehend” the light (1 Jn 1:5). God first opens the heart to the Word through spiritual new birth. He did so for Lydia (Acts 16:14) and “shone in our hearts” so that we, too, believed (2 Cor 4:6). He prepares the soil to receive the gospel (Matt 13:18-23).

Moreover, God created us in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:10) and made us alive together with Him (Eph 2:5). He gives us understanding (1 Jn 5:20), just as He enlightened Peter (Matt 16:17). In His light (rebirth), we see light (Ps 36:9). Additionally, Best interprets the following words in a spiritual sense: “The hearing ear and the seeing eye, Yahweh has made both of them” (Prov 20:12).

Finally, in John 3:8 Best notes the comparison of the work of the Spirit and the action of the wind. Like the wind, the work of the Spirit is life-giving, sovereign, and mysterious, that is, it takes place without our awareness. The same sense is present in Ezekiel 37:9, where the breath (or spirit) “from the four winds” enlivens the dry bones.

On the other hand, Arminians teach the reverse order of things. A person first turns to the Lord, then new birth results. At the moment of conversion, the Holy Spirit enters the heart of converts and seals them for salvation. Paul wrote, “After listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation – having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph 1:13). Note that hearing the Word and believing in Christ precedes the reception of the Spirit.

Peter taught the same. On the Day of Pentecost, he announced to his hearers: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38)<sup>1356</sup>. In his first epistle, he taught that we “have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, {that is,} through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Pet 1:23). Again, receiving the Word precedes regeneration. James also so taught: “He brought us forth by the word of truth” (Jam 1:18).

Upon closer examination of Ephesians 2:8, “For by grace you have been saved through faith (πίστεως); and that (τοῦτο) not of yourselves, {it is} the gift of God,” we discover that the word “that” (τοῦτο - *touto*) stands in the Greek neuter tense. The word “faith” (πίστεως - *pisteos*), however, is grammatically feminine. Therefore, the “gift of God” is not faith. The neuter pronoun refers to the entire previous clause, i.e., the salvation granted by grace.

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<sup>1353</sup>Mueller, p. 436.

<sup>1354</sup>Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 772.

<sup>1355</sup>Best, p. 5-86.

<sup>1356</sup>Shedd responds to this point by arguing that Peter’s words, “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (Acts 2:39), indicates that repentance is possible only for those whom God regenerates at the moment of their call to salvation (Shedd, p. 772). Yet, this argument in no way overturns the clear order presented by Peter here of repentance and faith prior to receiving the Spirit.

According to 2 Timothy 2:25, God gives repentance and knowledge of the truth: "...if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth." True, God may grant these things, but the individual must personally respond to God's prompting. We also note that the repentance of those in opposition to the truth depends, in part, on how Timothy behaves. Hence Paul's instruction: "...with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition." So then, there is a human factor involved in this process as well.<sup>1357</sup>

When Peter gave account before the leaders of the Jerusalem church, they replied, "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance {that leads} to life" (Acts 11:18). They did not mean, however, that God specially appointed certain Gentiles to be saved, but rather that the gospel was available to all peoples, including Gentiles. Concerning Acts 5:31, that God "grants repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins," the meaning here is not predestination to salvation, but that God provides opportunity to receive forgiveness through the sacrifice of His Son.

Paul wrote to the saints in Philippi, "For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil 1:29). Here, it seems that God granted them the ability to believe. On the other hand, the meaning could also be not "ability" to believe, but "opportunity" to believe. In other words, the Lord grants opportunity to believe, but the individual makes the actual decision of faith. This interpretation finds support in the rest of the verse, where believers voluntarily participate in suffering for Christ. Just as God grants Christians the *opportunity* to suffer for the Lord, yet they voluntarily participate in those sufferings, He grants them the *opportunity* to accept Him as Savior, but they do so from their own free will.

According to Romans 12:3, "God has allotted to each a measure of faith." This instruction, though, concerns spiritual gifts. This is not saving faith, but faith for the operation of spiritual gifts. Without question, God determines which person receives what spiritual gift. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 12:8-9 we learn that "to one is given... faith by the same Spirit." This context again is dealing with spiritual gifts. Faith here is a special endowment by the Spirit along with words of knowledge, prophecy, etc. In addition, faith for salvation is not only for some Christians ("to one is given"), but to all believers in Jesus.

The Lutheran faith views this question as follows. Mueller comments, "Faith, then, according to Scripture is rightly viewed both as the effect of election and as the means by which its purpose is accomplished."<sup>1358</sup> In other words, faith precedes the rebirth, but it is conditioned by God's election.

## 12. Passivity in Morals

Arminians feel that if we believe that God controls every choice people make, then this would unavoidably lead to passivity in respect to moral behavior. If every act occurs in accordance with God's sovereign and predestined will and a person cannot choose otherwise, what sense is there in personal striving for holiness?

Calvinist, however, deny that their teaching leads to moral inactivity. They respond that if persons are truly born again, they will have a natural impulse to strive for holiness. An authentically born again believer cannot be indifferent toward proper behavior. Did not Jesus say that His sheep would certainly follow Him?

One must also consider that, although theoretically, people do not *have to* strive for obedience, they nonetheless *will do so*, since God is prompting such behavior within them. The Arminian objection fails when we consider that it has force only if believers have genuine free will – only then they can *choose* to display spiritual apathy. However, Calvinists teach that the elect have no such freedom and are predestined to holy living.

## 13. Prayer

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<sup>1357</sup>Новик П. Студенческий реферат. Евангельская теологическая семинария. – Киев, 2005

<sup>1358</sup>Mueller, p. 599.

What about prayer? If the Lord predetermines all events, what sense is there to make requests in prayer? Can we really effect the outcome of any situation or exercise any influence on God at all? Calvinists affirm that prayer has no effect on God. Yet, they add that God's plan is to accomplish His plan through the prayers of His people. God causes saints to pray, then answers their "involuntary" prayers. This is how He performs His will.<sup>1359</sup>

However, the question remains as to why God would employ such a convoluted system. Why does He not just act independent of prayer? Calvinists would respond that through the practice of prayer, Christians exercise humility and learn dependence on the Lord. Nonetheless, we still wish to know why God needs to use means such as prayer to develop character in His chosen? He can at any moment cause a change in character to occur sovereignly and unilaterally. It seems that in the Calvinist's system, prayer plays an insignificant role in God's overall plan.

#### 14. Preaching and Miracles

A similar dilemma arises in connection with God's miracles. In our survey of New Testament passages, we discovered that through Peter's miracle ministry many people came to Christ (Acts 9:32-43). Also significant is that, according to Matthew 11:21, if the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon had seen the works done by Jesus, they would have repented. We can cite many examples in Scripture where miracles and effective preaching directly resulted in many conversions (e.g. Acts 14:1).

The only response open to the Calvinist is to assume that this is the means that God wishes to use to bring some of His elect to salvation. God could, of course, achieve the same result without using any means at all. They must admit that God can operate independently from all human activity, otherwise, in their mind, He would cease to be sovereign. Therefore, in the system of Calvinism all of God's actions occur because He wants to do it that way. Preaching and miracles are, in reality, unnecessary.

However, without exception *all* the means God uses to reach people appeal to their reason and will – to *convince* them to turn to Him. If that was not so, then He could use irrational and flippant acts to accomplish the same predetermined effect. Yet, He does not do so because He is making a genuine appeal to people's reason and volition. His choice of means is not random, but intentional to exert an influence on human free will.

#### 15. Knowledge of God

A major deficit in the Calvinistic view is its effect on the knowledge of God. Calvin comments on this aspect of his theology:

Since, on account of the dullness of our sense, the wisdom of God seems manifold (or, as an old interpreter rendered it, multiform), are we, therefore, to dream of some variation in God, as if he either changed his counsel, or disagreed with himself? Nay, when we cannot comprehend how God can will that to be done which he forbids us to do, let us call to mind our imbecility, and remember that the light in which he dwells is not without cause termed inaccessible.<sup>1360</sup>

In the light of our discussion of the doctrine of unconditional predestination, it appears that we cannot ascribe such qualities to God as "loving" or "holy," since He does not give all persons the chance to be saved and Himself causes evil acts to be performed. If the biblical description of God as "loving" and "holy" do not correspond to reality or if the meaning of those terms in relation to God differs from their meaning in relation to us, then any biblical term that describes God could be either incorrect or incomprehensible. Additionally, the

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<sup>1359</sup>Highfield, *God Controls by Liberating*, p. 154-157.

<sup>1360</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.18.3

problem is not with our misunderstanding of these terms. Where else do we derive our understanding of what “love” and “holiness” mean, except through our study of the inspired Scriptures themselves?

Therefore, looking at Scripture from a Calvinistic perspective robs one of a true knowledge of God. If the words describing God’s character in the Bible hold a different connotation in relation to Him than their conventional sense, then we are totally in the dark as to who God is or what His nature is like.

#### **D. Conclusions**

In comparison with the problems connected with the Arminian view (such as how a sinner is converted), the difficulties encountered in the Calvinist system are much more serious. The Calvinists’ view of God varies greatly from the biblical view in regard to His holiness and justice. Calvinists present God as one who shows partiality (contra Rom 2:11). He chooses some for salvation, but does not provide the same chance for all. Additionally, if every act of the human will is predetermined by the Lord, then He is responsible for all the evil in the world, since He causes people to sin.

This teaching is inconsistent with God’s love as well. How likely is it that God, who loved the world so much as to send His own Son to die for its sins, would intentionally predestine for eternal damnation (actively or passively) those for whom Christ died? Additionally, if God loves only the elect, then He again is showing partiality in whom He chooses to love.

Calvinism also struggles in the area of ethics. If God purposely rejects and condemns the non-elect, how can we follow His example in loving a world that He does not love? If God condemns the non-elect for the goal of receiving greater glory (the “theological center” of Calvinism), then He is employing a utilitarian ethic of the “end justifying the means.”

Also in connection with the “theological center” of Calvinism, if God’s only goal in predestining some for damnation is to have opportunity to demonstrate His justice and wrath, would not the damnation of a small number of people suffice? Why does it seem that the majority of people will be lost (see Matt 7:13-14)?

Finally, the doctrine of unconditional predestination robs the believer of any reliable knowledge of God. Since the biblical terms that describe Him do not actually correspond to who He really is, knowledge of His nature, even on a fundamental level, is inaccessible.

Molinism presents us with a very creative alternative, but is highly speculative and lacks strong support in Scripture. In addition, Molinists commit a major error in positing that God “tempts” people to sin by creating circumstances in their lives that invariably lead to that result. God tempts no one (Jam 1:13), but always makes a way of escape from temptation (1 Cor 10:13).

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## Chapter 19 - God's Sovereignty: The Problem of Evil

Our next topic presents biblical scholars and thinking persons in general with possibly the most difficult and perplexing riddle to solve – the so-called “problem of evil.” This is one of the atheist’s main objections to God’s existence. The premises of the problem of evil are as follows: (1) if God is good, then He must eliminate evil; (2) if God is almighty, then He is able to eliminate evil; (3) evil exists; (4) therefore, a good and almighty God does not exist.

The “philosophical problem of evil,” reflected in this set of premises, is discussed in book 1 of this series. Our aim in this chapter, however, is the discussion between believers in God as to why He allows suffering and evil. The focus is not proving God’s existence, but discovering what goal He is pursuing. This is known as the “religious problem of evil.”

Evil has two forms: moral evil resulting from wrong human choices, and natural evil caused by natural phenomena. In regard to moral evil, in our previous chapter we have already dismissed the possibility that God causes people to sin. Yet, the question remains as to why He *allows* people to make wrong choices. Our dual task, then, is to address the questions why God allows people to sin (moral evil), and why nature sometimes manifests destructive tendencies (natural evil).

### A. Biblical Survey and the Intertestamental Period

#### 1. Old Testament

Opening the pages of the Old Testament, we immediately discover that, in the beginning, evil had no existence. God made all things “very good” (Gen 1:31). Only beginning with the Fall and due to its consequences people began to sin and nature began to manifest the destructive powers, with which we are all well acquainted (Gen 3:16-24). Even Satan, whom we may associate with the sly serpent, was originally created without fault (cf. Ezek 28:12-15).<sup>1361</sup>

The book of Genesis contains many examples where the Lord used the sinful choices of people to advance His purpose. The classic case is when Joseph’s brothers, out of envy, sold him into slavery in Egypt. Yet, as a result of his misfortune, Joseph ended up in a position to save his family from famine (Gen 37-45). Joseph assessed the situation as follows: “As for you, you meant evil against me, {but} God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive” (Gen 50:20).

In addition, in Genesis 21:12 when Sarah insisted that Abraham drive out Hagar and Ishmael, God instructed him to let her have her way, although her motives were wrong. By this means, God was preserving the inheritance for Isaac (Gen 21:10-12). Rebekah and Jacob acted wrongly in deceiving Isaac, but as a result, God secured the inheritance for Jacob (Gen 27).

Furthermore, God took advantage of Rachel’s barrenness and Leah’s fertility to incline Jacob’s heart to the latter (Gen 29:31-35). God turned Laban’s unfair treatment of Jacob into prosperity for the latter (Gen 31:6-9). In connection with this, Laban’s unjust behavior toward Jacob prompted the latter to return to Canaan, the Promised Land (Gen 31:2-3).

The book of Job is a key to understanding the issue of God and evil. The opening scene depicts Satan challenging God to test Job’s fidelity (Job 1-2). The narrative continues that God accepted Satan’s challenge and allowed him to afflict Job. We can safely assume that God meant this situation to serve as a lesson for future sufferers to learn from as well. An important feature of this account is the God limited the damage Satan was allowed to do. This shows that in executing his evil devices, Satan does not enjoy complete freedom. He can function only within the parameters that God allows, which are in accord with His divine purpose, and not beyond.

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<sup>1361</sup>In our chapter on Satan and demons in the next volume, we will demonstrate that this passage actually does relate to Satan.



Job responded to his suffering in various ways. At first, he stood fast in faith, trusting the Lord (Job 1:10). Yet, after a long period of suffering he began to waver in his confidence in God's plan for his life: "Let the day perish on which I was to be born, and the night {which} said, 'A boy is conceived'" (Job 3:3). Job's "friends" blamed Job for his troubles – he surely must have sinned (Job 4:7-11). However, Job insisted on his innocence and believed that he was suffering unfairly (Job 10:1-7, 13-17). Job believed that God had appointed his afflictions: "For He performs what is appointed for me" (Job 23:14). He came to the point of wanting to dispute with God (Job 13:3, 18-19: 23:1-6). Elihu, having heard Job out, rebuked him for ascribing injustice to the Lord (Job 34:18-20, 29).

Finally, after a long period of divine silence, God answered Job (Job 38-41). Interestingly, the Lord never explained to Job who was attacking him or why. Instead, he reminded Job of the greatness of His creative genius. It appears that it was more important to God to correct Job's critical attitude than to give him insight into his dilemma. God's greatness and wisdom are evident in the created order. Therefore, one should not challenge Him. Also important to note is that eventually the Lord restored Job and blessed him beyond his earlier state.

So then, in the book of Job we witness a typical situation where a person suffers, but does not understand why. We can glean the following lessons: (1) God does not always explain the cause of our suffering, (2) suffering is not always caused by personal sin, (3) Satan is the source of undeserved suffering, (4) God can use affliction caused by the Devil to test faith, (5) God can limit the severity of Satan's attacks, (6) although we may not always understand the reason for suffering, we can always trust the Lord who will eventually display His saving mercy, and (7) God is greater in wisdom than we are, so we must not challenge Him.

The main point of this biblical book is that trusting God is more essential than understanding what is happening in our lives. Habakkuk expresses this well: "Though the fig tree should not blossom and there be no fruit on the vines, {though} the yield of the olive should fail and the fields produce no food, though the flock should be cut off from the fold and there be no cattle in the stalls, yet I will exult in Yahweh, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation" (Hab 3:17-18).

At the same time, the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, show us many examples of people who complain to the Lord about their miseries. God does not condemn such behavior. Carson comments, "There is no attempt in Scripture to whitewash the anguish of God's people when they undergo suffering. They argue with God, they complain to God, they weep before God. Theirs is not a faith that leads to dry-eyed stoicism, but a faith so robust it wrestles with God."<sup>1362</sup>

Another example of God permitting evil is that the Lord may allow false prophets to arise in Israel and even perform miracles. The reason is this: "Yahweh your God is testing you to find out if you love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut 13:3). This verse reminds us of Job, where God allowed Satan to test him with various trials. Yet, in this case, God is permitting not suffering, but deception with the same goal – to test the fidelity of His people.

In the Old Testament historical books, we again encounter instances where God uses evil deeds to advance His plan. In the book of Judges, Samson's desire for revenge became the means by which God struck the Philistines (Judg 15:1-8). Similarly, through the assassinations of Abner and Ish-bosheth, God delivered the kingdom over to David (2 Sam 3-4). In addition, the Old Testament abounds with cases where the Lord raised up enemies against Israel to discipline them. (e.g. 2 Kin 15:37; Ps 80:6). Curiously, Elisha accessed the siege of Samaria by saying, "Behold, this evil is from Yahweh; why should I wait for Yahweh any longer (i.e. to prophecy deliverance)?" (2 Kin 6:33). Hobbs explains this verse by saying that Elisha perceived God's hand in the siege, yet understood that God's purpose in this trial was already accomplished and therefore took initiative to predict deliverance for Israel.<sup>1363</sup>

God also used one Israelite to discipline another: "Thus Zimri destroyed all the household of Baasha, according to the word of Yahweh, which He spoke against Baasha through Jehu the prophet" (1 Kin 16:12). We

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<sup>1362</sup>Carson D. A. *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil*. – 2nd ed. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 67.

<sup>1363</sup>Hobbs T. R. *2 Kings // Word Biblical Commentary*. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 81.

observe a special case in 2 Samuel 12:12, where God predicted the future defilement of David's wives by his son Absalom.<sup>1364</sup> The unique feature here is that the Lord does not identify Absalom as the culprit, but instead ascribes the event to Himself as an act of discipline: "I will do this thing before all Israel, and under the sun."

In the historical narratives, we encounter the expression "an evil spirit from Yahweh." In Judges 9:23, we read, "God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the men of Shechem," so that through their mutual animosity He might execute judgment on both. Additionally, after the Spirit of God departed from Saul, an "evil spirit from Yahweh" tormented him (1 Sam 16:14; 18:10; 19:9). The Lord also released a "deceiving spirit" into the mouths of Ahab's prophets to incite the king to go to war and perish in battle (1 Kin 22:23).

In the first two instances, we observe that the word translated "evil" is רָעָה (*raah*), which can refer both to moral and natural evil. When a רִחַרְרָה ("evil spirit") was sent to Saul, it did not prompt him to do an evil act.<sup>1365</sup> In the case of Abimelech and the men of Shechem, Keil and Delitzsch believe that God sent "an evil demon, which produced discord and strife."<sup>1366</sup> This would be consistent with our observation earlier, that God may use means to solidify the already ill intention of those stubborn in rebellion.

Keil and Delitzsch deal the same way with the "deceiving spirit" that Yahweh sent to the prophets of Ahab, comparing this event with Paul's warnings in Romans 1:24-28 that God gives people over to their own persistent rebellion in order to prepare them for judgment.<sup>1367</sup> House insightfully notes that, although God sent a deceiving spirit to Ahab's prophets, He nonetheless warned the king through His prophet Micah that He did so (1 Kin 22:23).<sup>1368</sup> So then, Ahab was informed that his prophets were deceiving him, yet he still accepted their counsel.

A similar case is noted in Ezekiel 14:9-10, where God speaks concerning false prophets, "But if the prophet is prevailed upon to speak a word, it is I, Yahweh, who have prevailed upon that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from among My people Israel. They will bear {the punishment of} their iniquity; as the iniquity of the inquirer is, so the iniquity of the prophet will be."

The word translated twice "prevailed" is פָּתָה (*pathah*), which can mean "convince" or "deceive."<sup>1369</sup> Therefore, the literal translation would be: "But if the prophet is convinced/deceived to speak a word, it is I, Yahweh, who have convinced/deceived that prophet." Keil and Delitzsch repeat their earlier defense that God is again allowing the deception of those already intent on evil, as in was in Ahab's case.<sup>1370</sup> Cooper concurs, "This verse clearly states that the deception of these false prophets was allowed by and even encouraged by God as a part of the judgment process."<sup>1371</sup>

The following examples show that God can employ negative natural forces to accomplish His goals. Concerning the famine in Egypt, the psalmist declares, "He called for a famine upon the land; He broke the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, Joseph, {who} was sold as a slave" (Ps 105:16-17). In addition, God "closed the womb" of Hannah (1 Sam 1:5), but later opened it in answer to her fervent prayer and gave her Samuel. In gratitude, Hannah dedicated her child to Yahweh.

In her expression of gratitude to the Lord, Hannah declares, "Yahweh kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. Yahweh makes poor and rich; He brings low, He also exalts" (1 Sam 2:6-7). Does this mean that the Lord is the instigator of all the harm that occurs on the earth? Taking the context of these verses into consideration, we note that Hannah's goal here was not to comment on the problem of evil, but to speak of God's righteous judgment is humbling the proud and exalting the humble.

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<sup>1364</sup>Blocher H. *Evil and the Cross*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994. – P. 94

<sup>1365</sup>Block D. I. *Judges, Ruth* // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999. – P. 323; Bergen R. D. 1, 2 Samuel // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996. – P. 182.

<sup>1366</sup>Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. *Commentary on the Old Testament*. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996. – V. 2. – P. 264.

<sup>1367</sup>*Ibid.*, v. 3, p. 196.

<sup>1368</sup>House P. R. 1, 2 Kings // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995. – P. 238.

<sup>1369</sup>Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 834.

<sup>1370</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 9, p. 104-105.

<sup>1371</sup>Cooper L. E. *Ezekiel* // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. – P. 160-161.

In some instances, it seems that God allowing evil served no good purpose. For example, His initial choice of king over Israel, Saul, turned away from Him. Moreover, in 1 Samuel 21:7, Doeg, one of Saul's servants, "was there that day, detained before Yahweh" and discovered David's whereabouts, after which he informed Saul.

In the first case, God gave Israel a king because they demanded one (1 Sam 8:5). He gave Israel the very type of king that they desired: "He was taller than any of the people from his shoulders upward. Samuel said to all the people, 'Do you see him whom Yahweh has chosen? Surely there is no one like him among all the people'" (1 Sam 10:23-24). Yet, the Lord knew from the start what was in Saul's heart. Israel (including Samuel) needed to learn that God sees "not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but Yahweh looks at the heart" (1 Sam 16:7).

In the case of Doeg, the text does not inform us what exactly it means to be "detained before Yahweh." It is possible that God was not intentionally detaining Him, but some mitigating circumstances delayed his departure.

In the Psalms, we frequently encounter the cry of a sufferer: "How long, Yahweh? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me?" (see Ps 13:1; 35:17; 44:24). Everyone asks this same question at one time or another. If God can do all things, why does He not intervene in my situation? When Judah was threatened by Babylon, the prophet Habakkuk made the same complaint (Hab 1:12ff). However, the psalmist himself answers his own question – we must trust in the Lord: "But I have trusted in Your lovingkindness; My heart shall rejoice in Your salvation" (Ps 13:5).

The author of Psalm 88 continues our discussion of God and evil, claiming that his own suffering came from the Lord:

You have put me in the lowest pit, in dark places, in the depths. Your wrath has rested upon me, and You have afflicted me with all Your waves. Selah. You have removed my acquaintances far from me; You have made me an object of loathing to them; I am shut up and cannot go out..... I was afflicted and about to die from my youth on; I suffer Your terrors; I am overcome. Your burning anger has passed over me; Your terrors have destroyed me. They have surrounded me like water all day long; they have encompassed me altogether. You have removed lover and friend far from me; my acquaintances are {in} darkness (Ps 88:6-8, 15-18).

In analyzing this passage, we observe, first of all, that the psalmist does not specifically identify the reason for his suffering. Was it discipline from the Lord, or was it for some other reason? In other passages that speak of God bringing calamity on someone, it is connected with correction (see Lam 3:3, 28-38; Jer 9:12-15; 31:28; 45:4; Amos 3:6).

Second, since in Old Testament times there was little revelation about the origin and mechanism of evil, Old Testament writers often ascribe all events to the Lord: both good and harmful. God revealed little about the powers of evil at that time since He wanted to prevent His people from embracing a dualistic worldview with an evil force that could rival Him. In the polytheistic atmosphere of the day, this was a real danger. We recall here God's dealings with Job – He refrained from identifying Satan as the cause of Job's miseries.

We extend our survey now to include the prophetic books. We again see that God can use both evil deeds committed by people and natural forces for His purposes. The book of Joel provides us with some fine examples. To discipline His people, God sent both locust (chp. 1) and Gentile armies (chp. 2). However, in chapter 3, He gathers all the nations against Jerusalem to execute judgment on them. At the same time, in these and similar cases there is no indication that God directly caused or prompted an evil action. He simply takes advantage of the opportunity at hand to work into His good plan an evil deed performed willfully by some person or in the course of nature.

In light of God's holiness and righteousness, we are challenged by the following text:

I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live; and I pronounced them unclean because of their gifts, in that they caused all their firstborn to pass through

{the fire} so that I might make them desolate, in order that they might know that I am Yahweh (Ezek 20:25-26).

Commentators correctly observe that the words “I also gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not live” are not referring to the Mosaic Law. If we examine the context, we discover that God declares that the Law gives life (v. 19-21). God’s law is contrasted with the ordinances of the Gentiles (v. 18), which Israel began to observe when they rejected God’s Law. Therefore, the words “statutes that were not good,” which the Lord “gave” to His people, are better understood in the sense that God gave this generation over to observe Gentile ordinances (i.e., gave them over to idolatry), to which they had already devoted themselves. The Lord’s goal was to “make them desolate” so that they would come to repentance.<sup>1372</sup>

In the book of the prophet Isaiah, we read the surprising words, “The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am Yahweh who does all these” (Isa 45:7). Does this mean that God is the source of all these evils? Commentators explain that these words were spoken to contrast the true God with false ones, in particular, with the gods of Persia (note the reference to Cyrus, the Persian king, in verse 1).<sup>1373</sup> In the Persian system, there were two gods who vied with one another for control of the world. To refute this system (and polytheism in general), Isaiah writes that the true God is one, and that all things in the end trace back to Him. Moreover, the words “darkness” and “calamity” could well refer to His punishment for sin.

Our next passage is taken from Ezekiel 24:16, where God announces to the prophet, “Son of man, behold, I am about to take from you the desire of your eyes with a blow.” Did God take Ezekiel’s wife for the purpose of making her a prophetic symbol (see v. 18-24)? The biblical text does not give us adequate information to know the reason for this tragedy. All that we know is that God used this event to communicate His prophetic message.

The book of Ezekiel also contains an interesting claim that Yahweh punishes the righteous and unrighteous together. According to Ezekiel 21:3, “Thus says Yahweh, ‘Behold, I am against you; and I will draw My sword out of its sheath and cut off from you the righteous and the wicked.’” Cooper sees in this case an example of “corporate responsibility” or “corporate personality,” where the Lord deals with an entire group as a single person.

The Old Testament abounds with examples of this phenomenon. In Numbers 16:27-33, we learn that the rebels Dathan and Abiram perished along with their entire families. When Jericho was rebuilt against the Lord’s command, the re-builder did not perish, but only his children (Josh 6:25; 1 Kin 16:34). When David conducted an illegal census of his kingdom, David did not suffer, but rather the inhabitants of Jerusalem (2 Sam 24:15-17; 1 Chr 21:3). Because of Achan’s transgression, his entire family shared his punishment (Josh 7:24-25).

So then, an entire group can share the destiny of its head: both the righteous and the unrighteous in it. Cooper writes, “The wicked were guilty, but many people, including some righteous, would suffer because of the sins of the wicked.”<sup>1374</sup> In the next volume of this series, we will investigate in detail the idea of “corporate personality” in our treatment of the topic “Union with Christ.”

Finally, we must mention the suffering God’s people experienced because of their faith in Him. From the beginning of the Old Testament narrative to the end, the righteous suffer either at the hand of Gentiles, or from their own people. Prophets and other faithful followers of the Lord are subject to torments and sometimes death to fulfill their ministry and stay faithful to the Lord. Our chapter on suffering for Christ in volume 5 of this series details this topic.

## 2. Intertestamental Period

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<sup>1372</sup>Keil and Delitzsch, v. 9, p. 157-158; Cooper, p. 205.

<sup>1373</sup>Watts J. D. W. Isaiah 34–66 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 157; Keil and Delitzsch, v. 7, p. 444.

<sup>1374</sup>Cooper, p. 211.

Before advancing to the New Testament, we will make a brief stop at the intertestamental literature.<sup>1375</sup> Some of these books indict demonic spirits as the cause of evil deeds performed by people: “Thus the actions of powerful and violent human beings are functions of a rebellious spirit world.”<sup>1376</sup> Special attention is paid to the time when evil spirits allegedly had intercourse with women (see Gen 6:1-4; 1 *Enoch*, 6-16; *Jubilees*, 10).

In other books, suffering results from punishment for personal sins:

- Because he is our Lord, and he our God, and he our Father, yea, he is God to all the ages: He will chastise you for your iniquities, and will show mercy unto you all (*Tobit*, 13.4-5).
- Now I beseech those that read this book, that they be not discouraged for these calamities, but that they judge those punishments not to be for destruction, but for a chastening of our nation (2 *Maccabees*, 6.12).
- On this account he had aforetime no mercy on His own sons, but afflicted them as His enemies, because they sinned, then therefore were they chastened that they might be sanctified (2 *Baruch*, 13.9-10).
- For the Lord spareth His pious ones, and blotteth out their errors by His chastening (*Psalms of Solomon*, 13.9).

The latter view, that suffering is for discipline and correction, dominates in rabbinic Judaism.

### 3. New Testament

According to New Testament teaching, suffering was never part of God’s original plan for the world. Romans 5:12 clearly states that sin and death entered the world through Adam’s transgression: “Just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men.” All evil and suffering among people, therefore, traces back to a single source – the Fall.

Furthermore, as in the intertestamental literature, the New Testament also emphasizes the role Satan and demons play in inflicting humanity. The next volume in this series will devote a chapter to this topic. We can, nonetheless, do a brief survey of their evil activities here. They tempt (Matt 4:1; 1 Cor 7:5), possess people (Mk 5:2; Acts 8:7), spread false teaching (1 Tim 4:1), cause sickness (Matt 9:32; Mk 9:17; Lk 11:14), accuse the saints (Rev 12:10), destroy (Mk 4:36-39), persecute believers in Jesus (2 Cor 12:7; Rev 2:10), hinder the preaching and reception of the gospel (2 Cor 4:4; Mk. 4:15; 1 Thes 2:18), and prompt unbelievers to sin (Col 1:13; Eph 2:2; 1 Jn 5:19).

Why does the Lord allow the powers of darkness freedom to act? What goal is His pursuing? The New Testament sheds some light on this question. When Satan tempts or afflicts a believer, God takes advantage of the situation to test the faith of His people (Rev 2:10; Lk 21:31-32; 1 Pet 1:7). The Lord wants to see how His saints will react to difficulties and suffering. Will they remain faithful in trial or not?

The New Testament also reveals that the destructive and deceptive works of the Devil can be a means for God to punish unbelievers. Paul writes that in the end times God will send a “deluding influence” among those who rejected the love of the truth, leading them on to judgment (2 Thes 2:11-12).

Finally, God may at times used the powers of darkness to advance His redemptive plan. For example, the “rulers of this world” crucified the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 2:8; Lk 22:53). Satan tormented Paul through a thorn in the flesh, which actually benefited Paul by keeping him from exalting himself (2 Cor 12:7-10). Excommunication from the Church can involve delivering the rebellious one over to Satan, which may, in turn, lead to his/her repentance and restoration (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20).

Another aspect of the purpose of pain is that it can lead to the development of Christian character, also called “soul-making.” The classic passage to bring out this truth is in Romans chapter 5:

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<sup>1375</sup>Material taken from Nickelsburg W.E. *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*. – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003. – P. 62-74.

<sup>1376</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 64.

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us (Rom 5:3-5).

James writes in the same vein:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have {its} perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing (Jam 1:2-4).

Following Jesus will unavoidably involve the suffering of self-denial. In Jesus' words, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me" (Mk 8:34).<sup>1377</sup> In addition, disciples of the Lord experience the fatherly discipline of God: "For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb 12:6).<sup>1378</sup>

The word translated "disciplines" is παιδεύω (*paideuo*), which is related to the noun παιδεία (*paideia*), "upbringing."<sup>1379</sup> Therefore, Hebrews 12 is speaking not only of correction for some misdeed, but of the entire process of child raising. In 1 Corinthians 11:30, Paul lists some of the more extreme ways God may discipline His children: "For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep."

The New Testament also reveals that suffering may not only benefit sufferers, but also those whom sufferers might aid in the future through their experience (2 Cor 3:1-7).<sup>1380</sup>

It is fair to say that in most instances when the New Testament speaks of the sufferings of Christians, it is referring to suffering for Christ, which consists of difficulties directly related to the confession of Christian faith or leading a Christian lifestyle. Peter comments on this:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you (1 Pet 4:12-14, cf. 1 Pet 1:7).

Similarly, in the case of the apostle Paul, "momentary, light affliction," which "is producing for us an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor 4:17), consists of troubles encountered in ministry: "{We are} afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus" (v. 8-10, cf. 2 Cor 11:23-29).<sup>1381</sup> When suffering for the Lord, believers should rejoice (Matt 5:11-12; Acts 5:41) because this is part of their union with Christ and an integral aspect of following Him (Jn 15:18; 2 Tim 3:12).

On the other hand, in Romans 8:18-23, Paul expands the concept of Christian suffering to include general sufferings common to all:

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<sup>1377</sup>Carson, p. 74.

<sup>1378</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>1379</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 748.

<sup>1380</sup>Cooper, p. 238.

<sup>1381</sup>Paul's thorn in the flesh, mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, was the difficulties he experienced in connection with his ministry. Our chapter on divine healing in the next volume will defend this view.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for {our} adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.

In this case, Paul counsels his readers to await the coming of the Lord and the redemption of our bodies that will accompany His appearing.

Next, we recall the words of our Lord regarding the last days. He predicted, “Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes (Matt 24:7).<sup>1382</sup> This indicates that wars and natural disasters will be an inescapable consequence of the last days. We learn more about the natural disasters to come during the Great Tribulation in the book of Revelation. Therefore, “natural evil” can serve as a signal of the soon coming of Christ and God’s instrument of judgment on the world.

Another key passage from the life of our Lord is Luke 13:1-3, where people related to Christ a tragedy that befell certain individuals from Galilee. Jesus used this opportunity to comment on the problem of evil and to summon all people to repentance: “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v. 3; cf. Lk 13:4-5).<sup>1383</sup> This is highly significant for our discussion since it reveals that all people deserve to suffer for their sins, and any relief from the problem of pain comes only by the Lord’s mercy.

In addition, when His disciples asked Jesus why the man born blind was so afflicted (Jn 9:2), His answer did not address the reason for the ailment, but rather the result to come from his healing – the glory of God. It seems that Jesus was more interested in relieving the man’s suffering than in answering speculative questions from His disciples.

We conclude our New Testament survey with John’s Revelation. Those not recorded in the book of life await eternal punishment from the Lord (Rev 20:15). For believers, God has prepared a place where “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be {any} death; there will no longer be {any} mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away” (Rev 21:4). The tree of life will appear for the first time since its loss in the Garden of Eden (Rev 22:2). The Bible both begins and ends with the theme of Paradise on earth (now, on the new earth), that is, the total absence of suffering and pain. Evil exists only for a time and occupies a temporary position between the Fall and the creation of the new earth.

#### 4. Conclusions

In summary, we have seen that the experience of evil in the world traces back in its entirety to the Fall, but is eliminated when God makes all things new. This indicates that suffering and pain are merely temporary elements in the experience of the believer. God has included them in His plan for a redemptive purpose.

In addressing the question of evil, however, the Lord emphasizes trust in Him over an exhaustive understanding of the problem of pain. He demonstrated this in His dialogue with Job. Similarly, when His disciples questioned Him about the man born blind, Jesus was more interested in the solution to the problem than in its cause. In Carson’s words, “God is less interested in answering our questions than in other things: securing our allegiance, establishing our faith, nurturing a desire for holiness.”<sup>1384</sup>

The presence of moral evil in the world is best explained by God respecting human free will. According to Scripture, God seeks from people a sincere, wholehearted love (Mk 12:30). However, people must be free to

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<sup>1382</sup>Carson, p. 60.

<sup>1383</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>1384</sup>Ibid., p. 219.

show genuine love. Love by coercion is not true love. Yet, if people have genuine free will, there will always exist the possibility for that freedom to be abused. Freedom means having a choice between alternatives. So then, one who possess actual freedom can at any time make a wrong decision and sin against the Lord. Carson concurs, “We could not be people who truly love and obey God unless we are free; and that freedom entails failures, evil, suffering, whose existence is justified in that it is being used to make us mature.”<sup>1385</sup>

Although persons make wrong decisions, God often uses their sinful actions to bring about a good result. The Lord even incorporates the action of evil spirits into His good plan.

The action of human free will also explains the sufferings unique to believers in Jesus – suffering for the faith. In the course of human history, the servants of Satan persecute true followers of the Lord. God allows this to be so that His people can participate in the sufferings of Christ, which is a component part of their overall union with Him. Christian suffering also serves as a means for testing our faith.

The presence of natural evil in the world is explained by the following factors. The primary source for natural calamities is the Fall. Due to Adam’s sin, the earth is under a curse (Gen 3:17-19), which is why nature displays destructive tendencies. As a rule, these destructive processes occur randomly, without any particular aim or intention. Scripture states that “creation was subjected to futility” and is in “slavery to corruption” (see Rom 8:20-21). These destructive forces afflict people of all ages, nationalities, social classes, etc.<sup>1386</sup>

In addition, the Bible teaches that in the last days, the number of natural disasters will increase, not only as punishment for the world’s sin, but also as marks of Christ’s soon coming.

God may also use natural forces to punish personal sins. Yet, it is misguided to think that all suffering arises from personal sins, as the book of Job convincingly demonstrates. Moreover, according to the principle of corporate personality/responsibility, clearly depicted in the Old Testament, the personal sin of one individual can effect an entire group. On the other hand, one may challenge the claim that this system is still operative in the New Testament.

Finally, one must consider the devil’s activity in the natural world, which is also clearly shown in the book of Job, where Satan brought affliction and destruction on Job and his household (Job 1-2). This and other passages show that the Devil has a certain amount of freedom and power to operate in nature. Yet, his activity is limited by the Lord. As in the example of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” God can use the enemy’s attacks to benefit those subject to them.<sup>1387</sup>

We must not neglect to mention also that the presence of evil in the world makes possible the development of certain positive character traits that are impossible to develop in the absence of conflict. These qualities include courage, compassion, perseverance, and forgiveness among others. This means that God can use evil in the world to develop good character in His people. In Carson’s words, “This fallen world is the region of soul-making.”<sup>1388</sup> Experiencing suffering can equip us to aid others experiencing the same.

## **B. Suggested Solutions**

### **1. Non-Christian Views**

In the non-Christian world, thinkers have long pondered the question of suffering and evil.<sup>1389</sup> Plato reasoned that the essence of evil was in the material world. He theorized the existence of a perfect world of “ideas” or “forms,” (also called “universals”) that correspond to objects existing in the natural world (i.e., “particulars”). “Evil,” in his mind, was any deviation from these universals found in the particulars of the material world. For example, there exists a form (or universal) for the concept “chair.” If a certain “particular” chair does not line up with this ideal form, it is defective or “evil.”

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<sup>1385</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>1386</sup>For a more detailed discussion of the claim that random processes can cause natural calamities, see chapter 15.

<sup>1387</sup>Carson, p. 65.

<sup>1388</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>1389</sup>See Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 128-136; Blocher, p. 20-79.



Gnostics, and in their wake, Neoplatonists, understood good and evil in a different sense. They felt that the essence of goodness was unity. Unity involved absorption into the “One”, that is, Ultimate Reality. Evil, then was a departure from this unification, resulting in division and separation. Pseudo-Dionysius, who advanced Neoplatonism in the Christian world, taught that the “good” emitted from “the One,” that is, God. The further a creature was from the One, the less the rays of divine goodness reached it (see *On the Divine Names*, 3.20-24).

Another ancient view was Fatalism. According to exponents of this view, there exists an impersonal force called “Fate” that randomly determines the destiny of each person. No one can alter one’s fate. Fate controls all things and is the source of both good and evil.

The ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism proposed the existence of two rival powers or gods, who vied with one another for control of the world. Buddhism teaches that suffering arises from human desire. If persons would divorce themselves from desire, they would cease to suffer. Among the more modern approaches, humanism asserts that evil and suffering arise from ignorance. More and better education will lead to corresponding improvements in our quality of life.

In short, these views appear to have little in common with biblical thought or revelation, and are therefore unacceptable for Christian faith.

## 2. Liberal Views

Liberals defend several theories that again deviate from the biblical record.<sup>1390</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), working off the theory of evolution, believed that evil was a remnant of that process. Therefore, the world was progressively improving. We respond that people were not created from apes, but from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7). In addition, does history confirm that people are improving morally?

The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev (1874-1948) focused on the presence of autonomy in God’s created order. Creation enjoys more freedom, in fact, than God can control. The Bible contradicts this, though, claiming “Whatever Yahweh pleases, He does, In heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Ps 135:6).

Process theology advances the view that God is still “in process” of His personal development. He is still on the way to complete perfection. Consequently, at the present time He is unable to eliminate evil. In contrast to this, though, the Scriptures testify of an almighty, all-knowing, and absolutely perfect God.

The liberal theologian Paul Tillich (1886-1965) created his own convoluted system. In his view, God is not a being, but the “ground of being.” When beings appear in reality, they appear as finite beings. *Finite* beings, then, possess not only “being,” but also “non-being.” This “non-being” is present in every creature and is the source of evil in the world. Again, this theory lacks biblical support.

Others postulate that good cannot exist without evil. “Good” makes sense only in contrast to its opposite. In refutation, we respond that God was good before evil ever existed. Therefore, good can exist in the absence of its counterpart and independent of it. Jakob Böhme (1757-1624) went to the extreme of asserting that evil has existed with God from the beginning.<sup>1391</sup> Again, Scripture refutes this claim.

Karl Barth (1886-1968) proposed a unique theory that when God created the world, He said “yes” to that which He made. Yet, for every “yes,” there must be a corresponding “no.” God said “yes” to His creation, but “no” to evil. Yet, if He addressed evil, then He recognized its existence, and thereby actually gave it existence. The Devil is the personification of this “no.” Therefore, evil is a necessary “by-product” of creation. Although Barth’s theory is quite creative, it finds no support in divine revelation.

It is fascinating to note that many of these modern liberal views resonate with the system of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Like Barth, Aquinas (following Augustine and the Neoplatonists) taught that evil was the absence of the good.<sup>1392</sup> Similar to Tillich, Aquinas reasoned that every finite being contained “non-being,”

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<sup>1390</sup>See Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 128-136; Blocher, p. 20-79.

<sup>1391</sup>See Hart D. B. *Providence and Causality: The Divine Innocence* // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. *The Providence of God*. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – C. 49.

<sup>1392</sup>More precisely, Barth spoke not of the absence of good, but of its negation.

which was the source of evil. In harmony with Böhme, evil is a necessary element for the perfection of the universe. However, Aquinas' theory encounters difficulties. God did not create people with some defect, leading them into sin, that is, with "non-being." All that God initially created was "very good" (Gen 1:31).

### 3. Evangelical Views

What approaches to the problem of evil are employed among evangelical believers? Calvinists believe that God is the primary cause of all that occurs: both good and bad. They distinguish God's moral (open) will from His operative (secret) will. God desires good, but nonetheless brings about evil deeds as well. According to God's plan, it was necessary for Him to cause evil so that, through the condemnation of evildoers, He could manifest His wrath and judgment. In this way, God could display all of His perfections. Nonetheless, as we commented earlier, the Calvinist portrait of God is not consistent with the biblical revelation of His love and holiness, which renders this view unacceptable.

Donald Carson advances a more nuanced Calvinistic view.<sup>1393</sup> He asserts that believers must hold to several uncompromising positions, which he feels are outlined in Scripture. First, God controls and predestines all things. Second, people are responsible before God for their behavior. Third, God is good.

On the other hand, the logical contradictions created by these claims are obvious. Nevertheless, Carson insists that our theology of suffering must affirm all of these factors. The fact that they are contradictory should not prevent us from fully embracing them all. Carson assigns the reconciliation of these premises to the realm of mystery – a mystery that is "bound up with the very nature of God."<sup>1394</sup> He also claims that this mystery should not surprise us since there are many aspect of God's nature that are puzzling.<sup>1395</sup> Moreover, Carson explains that God relates to goodness and evil differently. He is "for" goodness in a more direct sense, but in relation to evil, His participation is less direct. Thus, the blame for sinful acts lies completely with the person who performed them.<sup>1396</sup>

We can subject Carson's position to the same criticisms as other Calvinistic views (see chp. 18). On the other hand, we applaud Carson's readiness to admit an element of mystery in his systemization of God's plan, which anyone dealing with the problem of evil must allow.

Apart from the "necessity" of evil's existence for the condemnation of the non-elect, Calvinists join other Evangelicals in citing other reasons for God to allow evil and suffering: soul-making, punishment of sin, the activity of evil spirits, etc. These elements, along with acknowledging human free will, are aspects of the Arminian answer to the problem of evil as well.

Another aspect not acknowledged by Calvinists is the possibility of chance occurrences. Calvinists contend that God is always an active participant in all that occurs in the world. Arminians, though, allow that natural forces may have some autonomy in their operation, which can result in destructive events occurring without God's direct intervention (we discussed this in chapter 15). Nevertheless, the question remains as to why God does not intervene more often with miracles to prevent chance occurrences. We will return to this topic later.

In his day, John of Damascus outlined the following causes of evil and suffering, which we may consider as well:

- Providence often permits the just man to encounter misfortune in order that he may reveal to others the virtue that lies concealed within him, as was the case with Job.
- At other times (providence) allows something strange to be done in order that something great and marvelous might be accomplished through the seemingly-strange act, as when the salvation of men was brought about through the Cross.

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<sup>1393</sup>Carson, p. 205ff.

<sup>1394</sup>Ibid., p. 213–214.

<sup>1395</sup>Ibid., p. 192–193.

<sup>1396</sup>Ibid., p. 189.

- In another way (providence) allows the pious man to suffer sore trials in order that he may not depart from a right conscience nor lapse into pride on account of the power and grace.
- Again another is permitted to suffer in order to stir up emulation in the breasts of others, so that others by magnifying the glory of the sufferer may resolutely welcome suffering in the hope of future glory and the desire for future blessings, as in the case of the martyrs.
- Another is allowed to fall at times into some act of baseness in order that another worse fault may be thus corrected, as for instance when God allows a man who takes pride in his virtue and righteousness to fall away into fornication in order that he may be brought through this fall into the perception of his own weakness and be humbled and approach and make confession to the Lord.<sup>1397</sup>

When the Damascene speaks of God “allowing” sin, he is speaking from (what we would call) an Arminian, not a Calvinistic perspective. According to the latter, God does not “allow” evil, He is the primary cause of all events, be they evil or good.

An extreme form of Arminianism is found in the Word of Faith movement. In this view, when God created the world, He gave *all* authority over it to people. This means that without people’s permission, God can do nothing on this planet. He intervenes only when people invite Him to. Therefore, evil has free reign when God’s people fail to pray.

In refutation of this view, we recall the testimony of Psalm 135:6, “Whatever Yahweh pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps.” We also note that God allowed Satan to enter the Garden of Eden to tempt Eve. Satan had no right to enter there, and Adam and Eve did not invite him. Additionally, God visited the first family in the Garden after their sin, when they did not want to see Him. Yet, they could not prevent His coming, since He is Lord of all.

### C. Conclusions

In light of the above biblical and theological survey, we will attempt to draw some conclusions to this thorny issue. We embrace the Arminian view that God may allow evil and suffering out of respect for human free will, as a result of the Fall, for the purpose of punishment, or to develop character traits in His people (so-called, “soul-making”). Satan also, at times, uses nature for his designs.

So then, we cannot generalize all negative events and ascribe them to a single cause. Each situation must be analyzed individually. Toward this end, it will be helpful to rehearse the breakdown of possible causal forces we presented in the chapter on divine providence.

In regard to natural phenomena, three causes can be highlighted. First, in line with His special providence, God can directly control events in the natural world. Second, according to the principle of general providence, natural processes can operate with a certain autonomy and, due to the presence and effect of sin and death in creation, can lead to destructive acts. Third, the Devil can at times utilize the forces of nature against humanity.

Regarding the causes of historical events, we must factor human free will into the equation. Out of respect for human freedom, God may allow actions that are not according to His perfect will. Complicating this factor is the influence of Satan on human choices, especially among unbelievers (see 2 Tim 2:26).

Therefore, when some disaster occurs in nature or misfortune in history, the question arises: is this from God, from chance (i.e., autonomous natural forces), from Satan, or from wrong human choices? The solution to this dilemma requires wisdom from God, which He promises to give generously to all who ask (Jam 1:5). Interestingly, this passage promising God’s wisdom is located in a context dealing with trials. So then, whenever we are passing through trails, the Lord is ready to reveal its cause.

Nevertheless, whatever the origin or cause of trouble may be, for the believer in Christ, “all things work together for good” (Rom 8:28). God allows evil with a good goal in mind – to somehow bring blessing to His children. Carson warns, however, that one must accept this by faith. In times of trouble, it becomes easy to

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<sup>1397</sup>*An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2:29-30.

doubt God's love. Yet, the Lord has more than adequately demonstrated His concern for us, so that we can confidently depend on Him whatever may come.<sup>1398</sup>

However, the conviction that God works all things for our good should not lull us into passivity. God often allows evil or misfortune in order for His people to learn to resist and defeat it. God may allow Satanic attacks to teach His people spiritual warfare. This was the case in the Old Testament as well, where we read,

Now these are the nations which Yahweh left, to test Israel by them ({that is,} all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan; only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly (Judg 3:1-2).

In his contemplation of the problem of evil, Gottfried Leibnitz proposed that God created the best possible world that could be. Contemporary Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga, however, makes the necessary qualification that the present world is not the best of possible worlds, but the world that leads to the best of possible worlds, i.e., the new heavens and the new earth. Here we learn lessons that we could never learn under other conditions and develop qualities that would be otherwise impossible to develop.

For example, consider God's dealings in the Garden of Eden. He allowed the Devil to enter the Garden and tempt Eve. As Boyd observes, it is unthinkable to imagine that God did not take active part in an event of such magnitude.<sup>1399</sup> God did so knowing what the result would be. Nonetheless, He allowed the temptation to take place. One may assume that here God was pursuing a redemptive aim – to develop a certain quality in His people.

The key to understanding this may be the revelation that Satan, although created without sin, rebelled against the Lord due to pride (Isa 14:13; 1 Tim 3:6). We know that before his fall, the Devil had great glory (Ezek 28:12-15), possibly more than any other creature. God has prepared for us, believers in Christ, glory that far exceeds that which Satan enjoyed. It is very possible that God allowed the Fall to crush human pride and thereby prepare His people to inherit glory while at the same time preventing them from repeating Satan's mistake. It is notable that even while people were still in their unglorified state, they wanted to be gods (see Gen 3:5: 11:4).

Several observations support this thesis. First, God makes salvation available by faith alone, so that "no one may boast" (Eph 2:8; cf. Rom 3:27; 4:2). Second, God chose "the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not... so that no man may boast before God" (1 Cor 1:28-29). Furthermore, the most prominent of all Old Testament figures, Moses, likely gained that status because he "was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Num 12:3).

Similarly, the most prominent preacher of the gospel, the apostle Paul, in humility considered himself the foremost of sinners (1 Tim 1:15). In addition, he was given a "thorn in the flesh" to keep him from exalting himself" (2 Cor 12:7). Proud Peter was not ready to occupy his post as head of the Twelve Apostles until he was "sifted like wheat" (Lk 22:31).

Scripture reveals the general principle that humility precedes honor: "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1 Pet 5:6); "Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you" (Jam 4:10); "Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave" (Matt 20:27). Can we not on this basis assert that humility, obtained as a result of the Fall, prepares us for future glory?

John of Damascus shared this view. He writes,

For it was no profit to man to obtain incorruption while still untried and unproved, lest he should fall into pride and under the judgment of the devil. For through his incorruption the devil, when he had

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<sup>1398</sup>Carson, p. 26.

<sup>1399</sup>Boyd G. A. Response to Paul Kjoss Helseth // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – P. 100-101.

fallen as the result of his own free choice, was firmly established in wickedness, so that there was no room for repentance and no hope of change: just as, moreover, the angels also, when they had made free choice of virtue became through grace immoveably rooted in goodness. It was necessary, therefore, that man should first be put to the test (for man untried and unproved would be worth nothing).<sup>1400</sup>

However, in spite of the benefit the entrance of evil may have for the redeemed, we are still faced with the dilemma of the lost. Scripture seems to indicate that the majority of people will not turn to the Lord (Matt 7:13-14). The introduction of evil into the world is only misery for them. What does God have in mind here? Unfortunately, any answer we suggest would seriously challenge either God's goodness, or His power, or the reliability of His revelation.

The Calvinist opinion that in eternity God intentionally predestined some for salvation and others for damnation undermines the biblical revelation of God's goodness and contradicts the clear biblical witness that God wills the salvation of all people. Craig suggests, "A world having more saved but less damned than the actual world was not feasible for God."<sup>1401</sup> Yet, this seems to undermine God's omnipotence and omniscience. Universalists teach that in the end, all will be saved. However, the Bible does not support that option.

Many Christian thinkers resign this dilemma to the mysterious workings of God. In the words of John of Damascus, "The ways of God's providence are many, and they cannot be explained in words nor conceived by the mind."<sup>1402</sup> However, Carson assures us that we will someday grasp God's plan: "Some answers we are not going to receive here; we shall have to wait for the Lord's return before justice is completely done, and seen to be done."<sup>1403</sup>

So then, in the end we trust in the Lord, that He will bring everything to a perfect result and that we will someday understand it all. Helseth aptly states, "We are called to place our confidence in the character and promises of our Father, even when we have no idea precisely what he is doing as he works out the particulars of his sovereign will."<sup>1404</sup>

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<sup>1400</sup> *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2.30.

<sup>1401</sup> Craig W. L. God Directs All Things on Behalf of a Molinist View of Providence // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 1757-1758. Langford also doubts that God could create a world in which free agents would always choose good (see Langford M. J. Providence. – London: SCM Press, 1981. – P. 177).

<sup>1402</sup> *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 2.29.

<sup>1403</sup> Carson, p. 44.

<sup>1404</sup> Helseth P. K. God Causes All Things // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 814-816

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# Chapter 20 - God's Sovereignty: The Kingdom of God

## A. Introduction and Definitions

Our God is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. How can His kingdom be characterized? In previous chapters, we spoke of God's rule in regard to His providence and miraculous deeds. We also covered the questions of His sovereignty in relation to human freedom and the presence of evil. This final chapter on God's sovereignty is devoted to the biblical theme of His "kingdom" – how we may characterize it and how it manifests in the world.

We will propose a preliminary definition for the kingdom of God that our subsequent study will bring out. First, God's kingdom is manifest whenever individuals live under His rule. Second, His kingdom is manifest whenever people enjoy His care and blessing. In short, God's kingdom is that realm of experience where people are obedient and where they are blessed. Gerhard von Rad concurs, "God as king extends protection and demands obedience."<sup>1405</sup> George Ladd adds, "The Kingdom of God is, then, the realization of God's will and the enjoyment of the accompanying blessings."<sup>1406</sup>

## B. Biblical Survey and the Intertestamental Period

### 1. Old Testament

Although the Old Testament lacks the expression "kingdom of God," it would be incorrect to assume that it did not exist. When John the Baptist and Jesus began to preach "the kingdom of God is at hand," they did not need to explain this expression to their hearers, who were already familiar with it.<sup>1407</sup> Bright correctly claims that God's kingdom is not unique to New Testament times, but "it involves the whole notion of God's rule over His people."<sup>1408</sup>

The kingdom of God was operative from the very beginning of history. It was manifest even in the Garden of Eden. There, the first couple enjoyed God's blessings. Everything was provided for. At the same time, they were responsible to keep the Lord's command. It was no accident that two special trees were planted in Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9). The former represents the blessings available in the kingdom, while the latter provided opportunity for obedience to God's rule. So then, we see both God's authority and His care at work, i.e., His "kingdom."

God's kingdom was evident when the Lord gave Adam and Eve authority over the earth: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth" (Gen 1:28).<sup>1409</sup> Adam's rule over the primeval world, as God's regent, was to be an expression of His rule.

After the Fall, although sinful humans no longer did God's will, He remained Ruler over all. He demonstrated His dominion by destroying the earth with a flood (excepting Noah's family) (Gen 6-7), judging the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19), etc. After the flood, the world witnessed a temporary rise in morals, which reflected a fuller expression of God's kingdom.<sup>1410</sup>

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<sup>1405</sup>Von Rad G. *melek* and *mal'ûṭ* in the OT // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 97-98.

<sup>1406</sup>Ladd G. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959. – P. 24.

<sup>1407</sup>Bright J. *The Kingdom of God*. – Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1951. – P. 17.

<sup>1408</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18. However, unlike our discussion to follow, Bright feels that God's kingdom began on Mount Sinai, not at the time of creation.

<sup>1409</sup>Allen S. *The Kingdom of God in Heaven and on Earth*. – London: Berean Publishing Trust, 1981. – P. 7.

<sup>1410</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 9.

God's kingdom found a still greater expression in the life of Abraham. God's covenant with him included both a call to obedience (Gen 12:1; 17:1) and a promise of blessing (Gen 12:2-3; 17:2). The biblical narrative later confirms that the Lord did indeed bless Abraham and his descendants (Gen 24:1, 35; 26:12-14; 31:9).

The book of Job focuses on God's absolute authority. Job speaks of it in this manner, "But He is unique and who can turn Him? And {what} His soul desires, that He does" (Job 23:13), and "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted."<sup>1411</sup> God speaks of Himself, "{Whatever} is under the whole heaven is Mine" (Job 41:11). Job also declares,

Behold, He tears down, and it cannot be rebuilt; He imprisons a man, and there can be no release. Behold, He restrains the waters, and they dry up; and He sends them out, and they inundate the earth. With Him are strength and sound wisdom, the misled and the misleader belong to Him. He makes counselors walk barefoot and makes fools of judges. He loosens the bond of kings and binds their loins with a girdle. He makes priests walk barefoot and overthrows the secure ones. He deprives the trusted ones of speech and takes away the discernment of the elders. He pours contempt on nobles and loosens the belt of the strong. He reveals mysteries from the darkness and brings the deep darkness into light. He makes the nations great, then destroys them; He enlarges the nations, then leads them away. He deprives of intelligence the chiefs of the earth's people and makes them wander in a pathless waste (Job 12:14-24).

Later in the Torah, we see several direct references to Yahweh's universal authority: "All the earth is Mine" (Ex 19:5); "What god is there in heaven or on earth who can do such works and mighty acts as Yours?" (Deut 3:24); "Behold, to Yahweh your God belong heaven and the highest heavens, the earth and all that is in it" (Deut 10:14); and "Yahweh shall reign forever and ever" (Ex 15:18).<sup>1412</sup>

God's kingdom also found expression through the nation of Israel: "And He was king in Jeshurun" (Deut 33:5). Yahweh established a covenant with Israel, which included, again, a call to obedience and a promise of blessing. These two aspects of the covenant are clearly depicted in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, where we see listed the blessings and curses of the covenant, conditioned on the requirement of obedience. The blessings of God's kingdom for Israel mainly consisted in inheriting the Promised Land, and His authority was expressed in issuing the Law.

Also significant is the right of the Sovereign to appoint authorized representatives. Moses fulfilled that role in Israel. Only he was permitted to meet God on Sinai (Ex 34:2) and personally fellowship with Him (Num 12:6-8). Along with Moses, God appointed Aaron and his sons as priests (Num 3:3) and the Levites as their assistants (Num 1:50). Other expressions of Yahweh's rule include the requirement to dedicate the firstborn to Him and pay tithes (Lev 27:26-33).

The Lord not only exercised dominion over Israel, but also planned to rule over all the earth through them. Israel was to be for Him "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:6). In addition, He says to the sons of Jacob, "You will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you" (Deut 15:6), and, "He will set you high above all nations which He has made, for praise, fame, and honor; and that you shall be a consecrated people to Yahweh your God" (Deut 26:19).<sup>1413</sup> However, because of their disobedience, the Lord's plan for Israel was not fulfilled at that time.

Later in the history of Israel, an interesting development occurred for the advance of God's kingdom on earth. During the time of the judges, God exercised direct rule over His people. When Israel needed deliverance from its enemies, the Lord raised up deliverers. It was a "charismatic" leadership style in that it was not based on a set order or dynasty, but on endowment of supernatural power to an individual chosen by the will of God.

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<sup>1411</sup>Pink A. W. The Attributes of God. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1975. – P. 29-30.

<sup>1412</sup>Von Rad, p. 97-98.

<sup>1413</sup>Allen, p. 30-31



This “charismatic” form of leadership was a key element of God’s rule in the times of the prophets as well. Not infrequently, the prophets rebuked the “established” leadership for sinful behavior. God’s purpose was for Israel to be a theocracy, led by Him through “established” leadership, like kings and priests, as well as through “charismatic” leadership, like judges and prophets. In rare instances, the king was also a prophet, as in David’s case.<sup>1414</sup>

In Samuel’s days, God’s people demanded a visible king. God so interpreted their insistence: “They have rejected Me from being king over them” (1 Sam 8:7). Nonetheless, Yahweh allowed Samuel to appoint a king: first Saul, and then David. God also promised that David’s dynasty would produce a future messianic king, the son of David (1 Chr 17:11-14). The thrones of David and Solomon were even called the “throne of Yahweh” (1 Chr 29:23).<sup>1415</sup> In this way, through the divine Messiah, God would again take up direct dominion over His people.

David served not only as a symbol of the future Messiah, but also became God’s instrument for establishing His kingdom to a greater degree than ever before in Israel. We can justly call the reigns of David and Solomon the “golden age” of Israel. The people, in general, worshiped only Yahweh, and to some decree observed His Law. They enjoyed God’s protection, prosperity and well-being. The Scripture reports, “Judah and Israel {were} as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance; {they} were eating and drinking and rejoicing” (1 Kin 4:20).

A negative aspect of this system was that “church” and state merged into a single entity. This led to the idea that, since the state was a “holy institution,” it could not be defeated or destroyed. The people felt that they could violate the covenant, but Yahweh would continue to protect and preserve them. Israel’s devotion became “nominal,” that is, the nation was God’s people in a superficial sense, but not in heart.<sup>1416</sup>

Moving on to the Old Testament historical books, they testify to God’s universal dominion as well. He is Lord of all: “O Yahweh, the God of our fathers, are You not God in the heavens? And are You not ruler over all the kingdoms of the nations? Power and might are in Your hand so that no one can stand against You” (2 Chr 20:6); and, “Yahweh reigns” (1 Chr 16:31). In an exclamation of praise, David eloquently declares the Lord’s greatness and authority:

Yours, O Yahweh, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, indeed everything that is in the heavens and the earth; Yours is the dominion, O Yahweh, and You exalt Yourself as head over all. Both riches and honor {come} from You, and You rule over all, and in Your hand is power and might; and it lies in Your hand to make great and to strengthen everyone (1 Chr 29:11-12).

The Psalms frequently depict the Lord as king, especially emphasizing the universal character of His reign: «Yahweh reigns” (Ps 93:1; 97:1; 99:1). He was King in the past: “Yet God is my king from of old” (Ps 74:12) and will be King forever: “Yahweh is King forever and ever” (Ps 10:16); “Yahweh sits as King forever” (Ps 29:10); and, “Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and Your dominion {endures} throughout all generations” (Ps 145:13). His absolute sovereignty is seen in that “whatever Yahweh pleases, He does, in heaven and in earth, in the seas and in all deeps” (Ps 135:6; 115:3).

The extent of His kingdom is universal. Yahweh reigns over the entire world. He is “a great King over all the earth” (Ps 47:2). The universe is His possession: “The earth is Yahweh’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it” (Ps 24:1); “The world is Mine, and all it contains” « (Ps 50:12); “The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours; the world and all it contains, You have founded them” (Ps 89:11), and, “His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps 103:19; cf. 95:4-5).

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<sup>1414</sup>Bright, p. 35.

<sup>1415</sup>Von Rad, p. 97-98.

<sup>1416</sup>Bright, p. 42-43.

God's dominion extends beyond the natural world to include the nations and their "gods": "For Yahweh is a great God and a great King above all gods" (Ps 95:3); "God reigns over the nations, God sits on His holy throne" (Ps 47:8); and, "Yahweh nullifies the counsel of the nations; He frustrates the plans of the peoples" (Ps 33:10).

Although the Psalms as a rule emphasize the universal character of God's kingdom, they also indicate that His rule is not yet fully exercised on the earth. Only in the future will His will be fully done: "Arise, O God, judge the earth! For it is You who possesses all the nations" (Ps 82:8); "He will cut off the spirit of princes" (Ps 76:12); "I will be exalted in the earth" (Ps 46:10); and, "Say among the nations, 'Yahweh reigns'" (Ps 96:10).

The Lord will establish His kingdom through His appointed Messiah (Ps 45:6-7; 2:6-9; 110:1-2), who will "rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Ps 72:8). The messianic kingdom is characterized by righteousness: "He will judge the peoples with equity" (Ps 96:10), and peace: "In his days... abundance of peace" (Ps 72:7).

Next, we survey the prophetic books, which depict God's kingdom much like the Psalter did. Accent is placed on Yahweh's universal dominion and absolute authority. Isaiah writes that God directs creation (Isa 48:13) and casts down nations (Isa 40:23-24). He alone is God "of all the kingdoms of the earth" (Isa 37:16). Jeremiah echoes these thoughts: Yahweh is "the God of all flesh" (Jer 32:27), "the everlasting King" (Jer 10:10), and call Himself "King" (Jer 46:18; 48:15). His "throne is from generation to generation" (Lam 5:19). His rule is most evident in Israel. Isaiah declares to Zion, "Your God reigns" (Isa 52:7). Zephaniah adds, "The King of Israel, Yahweh, is in your midst" (Zeph 3:15).<sup>1417</sup>

Furthermore, the prophets announce that God's will invariable fulfill His will, since no one can thwart Him: "Yahweh of hosts has sworn saying, 'Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened'... Yahweh of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate {it?} and as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?" (Isa 14:24, 27); and, "Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned {it, surely} I will do it" (Isa 46:11). Moreover, through Jeremiah the Lord declares, "Who is like Me, and who will summon Me {into court?} And who then is the shepherd who can stand against Me?" (Jer 49:19; 50:44). All the nations are like clay in the hands of the Potter (Jer 18). He gives authority over the nations to the "one who is pleasing in My sight" (Jer 27:5).

Bright notes that Isaiah introduced an innovation in the idea of God's kingdom.<sup>1418</sup> He speaks of it not as the continuation of the status-quo, but of a new beginning for Israel. A new David (Messiah) will come, and God's people will be renewed and redefined, not by physical lineage, but by spiritual quality and character. The Lord will cleanse His people by means of defeat and exile, leaving for Himself a faithful remnant (Isa 1:9; Hos 1:9-10; 2:23).<sup>1419</sup> Here, we see glimpses of the eschatological kingdom.

The following texts further describe the nature of God's eschatological kingdom: "Behold, the Lord Yahweh will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His recompense before Him" (Isa 40:10). Only in the future will the Lord fully execute His authority, which He now by right already possesses, being King of the universe. During that time, conditions on earth will approach utopia:

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little boy will lead them. Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child will put his hand on the viper's den. They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:6-9).<sup>1420</sup>

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<sup>1417</sup>Von Rad, p. 97-98.

<sup>1418</sup>Bright, p. 71-94.

<sup>1419</sup>Zorn R. O. Church and Kingdom. — Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962. — P. 20.

<sup>1420</sup>Other passages in the prophets depict Messiah's kingdom as one of righteousness (Mal 4:2; Isa 32:1; 60:21; Jer 23:5-6), peace (Isa 2:4), joy (Isa 35:10), holiness (Zech 14:20-21), the knowledge of God (Jer 31:33-34; Isa 54:13), and deliverance from oppression (Isa 42:6-7; 49:8-9).

As the Psalms already instructed us, the complete manifestation of God's order will come when Messiah appears: "In that day the Branch of Yahweh will be beautiful and glorious, and the fruit of the earth {will be} the pride and the adornment of the survivors of Israel" (Isa 4:2); and, "With righteousness He will judge the poor, and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth; and He will strike the earth with the rod of His mouth, and with the breath of His lips He will slay the wicked. Also righteousness will be the belt about His loins, and faithfulness the belt about His waist" (Isa 11:4-5).

The final Old Testament witness to God's kingdom comes from books of the exile and restoration. Von Rad makes an interesting comment about the revelation of the kingdom in this literature: "Before the exile Yahweh is mostly the king of Israel, bringing peace to his chosen people. Later he is called King of the World, enthroned in Jerusalem and magnified by all nations."<sup>1421</sup>

Bright observes other special features of this period. The prophets who predicted the defeat of Judah by Babylon explained that this defeat did not reflect weakness in God or in His kingdom. The blame lies with God's people. Moreover, at this time we witness more expressions of personal faith and personal responsibility before the Lord, rather than nationalism or ritualism. In addition, the hope is embraced of a coming restoration of the nation of Israel in its entirety. Ezekiel prophecies of the "resurrection" of dry bones (chp. 37), which represents a time of restoration and renewal in Israel.

The book of Zechariah devotes special attention to the restoration of God's people, particularly in connection with the glorious messianic kingdom. After the battle of Armageddon, Messiah will establish His earthly reign: "And Yahweh will be king over all the earth; in that day Yahweh will be {the only} one, and His name {the only} one" (Zech 14:9). This will be a time of great prosperity for Israel: "The wealth of all the surrounding nations will be gathered, gold and silver and garments in great abundance" (Zech 14:14), as well as peace and safety: "In that day, 'declares Yahweh of hosts,' every one of you will invite his neighbor to {sit} under {his} vine and under {his} fig tree" (Zech 3:10).

We will conclude with a brief look at Daniel's prophecy, where the Lord shows His absolute authority in His dealings with Nebuchadnezzar. Through the prophet Daniel, God revealed to Nebuchadnezzar that he received authority from heaven (Dan 2:36-38). However, when Nebuchadnezzar began to take pride in his accomplishments and glory, Yahweh removed the kingdom from him and gave to him the "heart of a beast" (Dan 4). He remained in that condition until he recognized that "the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes" (Dan 4:25). Upon completion of this period of discipline, Nebuchadnezzar praised Yahweh and acknowledged, "His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom {endures} from generation to generation (Dan 4:34).<sup>1422</sup>

Along with mentions of God's universal reign and authority over all, the book of Daniel also looks forward to the establishment of the Lord's kingdom on earth. A time will come when all the kingdoms of the world will submit to God's kingdom under the leadership of the Son of Man, who received the kingdom from the Ancient of Days (Dan 7:9-14; 2:44). It is written of Messiah's kingdom, "His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away; and His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed" (Dan 7:14).

## 2. Intertestamental Period<sup>1423</sup>

Although in the intertestamental literature, we rarely see specific mention of the title "kingdom of God," nonetheless the concept of it is frequently encountered.<sup>1424</sup> On the one hand, writers of that period recognized

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<sup>1421</sup>Von Rad, p. 97-98.

<sup>1422</sup>Darius acknowledged Yahweh in a similar way in Dan 6:26-27.

<sup>1423</sup>Material from Nickelsburg W.E. *Ancient Judaism and Christian Origins*. – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003. – P. 122-94; Julius S. J. *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1995. – P. 270-303; Bright, p. 153-185; Finkenzer J. *Kingdom of God* // Beinert W., Fiorenza F. S. *Handbook of Catholic Theology*. – New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1995. – P. 419.

<sup>1424</sup>See *Wisdom of Solomon*, 10.9-10, 6.4; *Song of the Three Children*, 33, *Psalms of Solomon*, 5.18, 17.3, 30-34; *Tobit*, 13.1; *Testament of Moses*, 10; *1QM*, 6:5-6.

that God was Lord of all. On the other hand, many also saw Israel as a special manifestation of God's rule on the earth. Other nations were under the rule of Satan.

After the return from exile, expectations were high for the fulfillment of God's promised kingdom. Nonetheless, to Israel's disappointment it did not materialize. Different attempts were made to respond to this. Some sought God's kingdom in personal devotion by observing the Torah. Some, like the Maccabees, sought liberation from Gentile rule.<sup>1425</sup> Others gave up hope in an earthly, historical kingdom and interpreted the kingdom in line with a Hellenistic worldview, anticipating eternal, spiritual bliss without a physical resurrection.<sup>1426</sup> For these, God's kingdom consisted of going to heaven and being in God's presence eternally.<sup>1427</sup> Still others expected an apocalyptic inbreaking into history, leading to God's glorious worldwide reign. God's eschatological kingdom would include judgment on Gentile nations, glorification of Israel and Jerusalem, resurrection of the dead, renewal of the planet, and restoration of the Davidic throne through Messiah.<sup>1428</sup>

Those holding to an apocalyptic expectation conventionally divided history into two epochs: the present and the age to come, after which comes eternity.<sup>1429</sup> In the thought of some, the age to come merged with eternity.<sup>1430</sup> This "age to come" was known by various names: "the day," "the day of the Lord," "the last days," "the final age," "the messianic age," "the days of Messiah," or "the kingdom of God." This is the time when God will exercise direct rule over the world. It will be a time of peace and prosperity,<sup>1431</sup> comparable to life in the Garden of Eden, the Exodus from Egypt, or the kingdom of David.<sup>1432</sup> God's Kingdom (i.e., the age to come) will also be a time of spiritual cleansing and renewal.<sup>1433</sup>

It was sometimes thought that just prior to this time of blessing would come a time of testing for God's people.<sup>1434</sup> In addition, a great battle between the Gentiles<sup>1435</sup> and God's people headed by Messiah<sup>1436</sup> or God Himself<sup>1437</sup> would precede this day. Then God (or Messiah) would judge the nations,<sup>1438</sup> and dispersed Israel would be gathered from the nations<sup>1439</sup> and reign over them<sup>1440</sup> under the headship of Messiah<sup>1441</sup>. His rule would last 200 years,<sup>1442</sup> 400 years,<sup>1443</sup> or 1000 years.<sup>1444</sup> Jerusalem will be glorified.<sup>1445</sup> Some anticipate the descent of New Jerusalem from heaven<sup>1446</sup> and the resurrection of departed Jews.<sup>1447</sup>

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<sup>1425</sup>The same idea existed in the time of Jesus among the Pharisees and the Zealots (Bright, p. 191).

<sup>1426</sup>See *Wisdom of Solomon*, chps. 2 and 5; *4 Maccabees*, *Jubilees*, 23:31; *1 Enoch*, 102-104.

<sup>1427</sup>See *Wisdom of Solomon*, chps. 2 and 5; *Testament of Moses*; *Testament of Noah*.

<sup>1428</sup>*1 Enoch*, chps. 5, 24-27; *Tobit*, 14.4-7; 13; *Sirach*, 48.24-25; 36.1-7, 15-16; 40.10; 47.11, 22; *Psalms of Solomon*, 17; *Testament of Moses*.

<sup>1429</sup>See *2 Ezra*, 6.6-7; 7.3-44, 113; 8.1; *1 Enoch*, 16.1; 71.15; *2 Baruch*, 15.7; 14.13-19; *Mishna Abot*, 4.1; 6.4-7.

<sup>1430</sup>For example, in *1 Enoch*, 45.4-6; 62.13-14; 71.15, *2 Baruch*, 15.7, *Mishna Abot*, 4.1; 6.4, 7; *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.4.

<sup>1431</sup>See *Testament of Levi*, 18.10-14; *Testament of Dan*, 5.12; *2 Baruch*, 4; 73.1-7; *2 Enoch*, 8; *2 Ezra*, 7.36-44, 123; *1 Enoch*, 45.4-5; 62.15; 10.17-19; *Jubilees*, 23.29; 23.27-28, 30; *Philo, On Rewards and Punishments*, 15.

<sup>1432</sup>See *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.4-10, 21; *2 Ezra*, 12.31-32.

<sup>1433</sup>See *1 Enoch*, 10.20-22; *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.26-46; 18.9; *Jubilees*, 23.26.

<sup>1434</sup>See *b. Sanhedrin*, 97a; *2 Baruch*, 25-29; 48.38-41; *2 Ezra*, 4.52-5.13; 6.20-24; 9.1-6; 13.29-32; *Testament of Moses*, 10, *1QM* 1; *1 Enoch*, 1.3-8.

<sup>1435</sup>See *2 Baruch*, 39-40; *11QM* Melch; *1 Enoch*, 90.13-19; *Jubilees*, 23.22-24; *2 Ezra*, 13.31-35.2; *1QM* 15-19.

<sup>1436</sup>See *2 Baruch*, 30.1; 39.7-40.2; 70.2-6; *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.21-25, 28, 39-40; 18.6-7; *Philo, On Rewards and Punishments*, 16, *2 Ezra*, 12.32-33, 13.26-28.

<sup>1437</sup>See *1 Enoch*, 90.15-19, 37-39, *Testament of Moses*, 10.7; *1QM*; *2 Ezra*, 7.26-28.

<sup>1438</sup>See *1 Enoch*, 90.20-27; *2 Ezra*, 13.37-38, *1 Enoch*, 45.3; 49.3-4; 53.2; 55.4; 61.8-10; 54, 62, 69; *Testament of Moses*, 10.7.

<sup>1439</sup>*Sirach*, 36.13-14; *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.28; 11; *1 Baruch*, 5.5-9; 4.36-37; *2 Ezra*, 13.39-47; *Philo, On Rewards and Punishments*, 28-29.

<sup>1440</sup>See *Jubilees*, 1.28-29; 32.19; *2 Ezra*, 9.8.

<sup>1441</sup>See *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.1, 38, *1QM*, *Josephus, Jewish Wars*, 2.8.1

<sup>1442</sup>See *b. Sanhedrin*, 97a.

<sup>1443</sup>See *2 Ezra*, 7.28; *b. Sanhedrin*, 99a.

<sup>1444</sup>See *Jubilees*, 23.27

<sup>1445</sup>See *Testament of Dan*, 5.12-13; *Psalms of Solomon*, 17.30; *2 Baruch*, 32.2; *2 Ezra*, 10.44.

<sup>1446</sup>See *2 Baruch*, 4; 32.2-4; *Qumran*, *2 Ezra*, 7.26; 10.44-59; *1 Enoch*, 53.6; 90.28-29.

<sup>1447</sup>See *1 Enoch*, 51; *Psalms of Solomon*, 3.

Furthermore, in rabbinic literature teachers of that time made a distinction between God's kingdom and the kingdom of Messiah. The latter referred to the earthly reign of Messiah. The former referred to God eschatological kingdom in eternity without special reference to Israel as a separate people of God. Instead of the term "the kingdom of God," rabbis sometimes preferred the term "the kingdom of heaven" to avoid using God's name.<sup>1448</sup>

### 3. New Testament

As the New Testament opens, we encounter specific mentions of God's kingdom. Both John the Baptist and Jesus inaugurated their ministries with the proclamation: "The kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15; Matt 3:2). In addition, Jesus preached the "gospel of the kingdom" (Matt 4:23; 9:35) and commanded His disciples to preach it as well (Matt 10:7; 24:14).

What is meant by the phrase "the kingdom of God is at hand?" We know that God's kingdom already existed in the form of His universal dominion over all things – God is King of the universe. However, at the present time the realization of His kingdom is only partial and depends on the cooperation of people. When Jesus appeared, He brought God's universal kingdom closer to actual fulfillment than at any other time in human history. This is the sense in which "the kingdom of God is at hand." Additionally, the King Himself had come, and the kingdom came with Him.<sup>1449</sup>

God's intention to establish His order among people is expressed in the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). Jesus also encouraged people to zealously seek the kingdom. His disciples should "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matt 6:33). He also said, "The Law and the Prophets {were proclaimed} until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it" (Lk 16:16).

We recall that in the intertestamental period, history was divided into the present age and the age to come, or messianic age. Jesus also spoke of this division: "...either in this age or in the {age} to come" (Matt 12:32), and, "in the present age... and in the age to come" (Mk 10:30). The events that stand at the threshold of the age to come are the Second Coming of the Lord (Matt 24:3) and the resurrection of the dead (Lk 20:35).<sup>1450</sup>

However, Jesus introduces a new element into this picture. In Luke 16:16, the time of the present age "until John" is somehow distinct from the time subsequent to that, when "the gospel of the kingdom of God" is preached. With the coming of Messiah, in a certain sense the age to come has already begun, yet not in its fullness.

A key factor in the New Testament witness of God's kingdom is that it comes through Jesus of Nazareth, God's Messiah.<sup>1451</sup> From the time of His birth, He was hailed as King (Matt 2:2-6; Lk 1:32-33). Before His departure to heaven, He announced, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Matt 28:18). Several times Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as "My kingdom" (Matt 13:41; 16:28; Lk 22:30; 23:42; Jn 18:36).

Curiously, Jesus spoke of the kingdom in the following manner: "The kingdom of God is in your midst" (Lk 17:21). The word ἐντος (*entos*), translated "midst," is typically translated "in," rendering the translation, "The kingdom of God is in you." Since Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, though, who scarcely demonstrated the fruits of the kingdom, many translators prefer the translation "in your midst." BADG comments, "...Luke

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<sup>1448</sup>Kuhn K. G. The Kingdom of Heaven in Rabbinic Literature // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 98.

<sup>1449</sup>Zorn, p. 7; Allen, p. 69; Schmidt K. L. The Word Group *basileús* in the NT // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 99.

<sup>1450</sup>Ladd, p. 26-27.

<sup>1451</sup>Allen, p. 69.

preferring ἐντός in the sense *among you, in your midst*, either now or suddenly in the near future.”<sup>1452</sup> Thus, the kingdom was “in their midst” since Jesus was there with them.

However, Jesus’ earthly ministry did not satisfy the expectations of the Jews of that day, who were waiting for a military deliverer. Even John the Baptist, who announced that Jesus was the Messiah, began to doubt Him. Jesus answered John by referring to the marks of the kingdom present in His ministry: “Go and report to John what you hear and see: {the} blind receive sight and {the} lame walk, {the} lepers are cleansed and {the} deaf hear, {the} dead are raised up, and {the} poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt 11:4-5). Therefore, it is appropriate to speak of the “mysteries of the kingdom of God” (Mk 4:11). God introduces His kingdom subtly into the world, first in a spiritual sense, but only later in the political sphere.<sup>1453</sup>

Let us see how the “marks” of the kingdom were evident in Jesus’ ministry. He brought people blessing and taught them God’s Word. Concerning blessings, He healed the sick, forgave sins, raised the dead, fed the multitudes, etc. Such signs accompanied the preaching of the gospel (Matt 4:23; 9:35; 10:7-8; Lk 10:9). In addition, in Luke 11:20 Jesus associated the coming of the kingdom with casting out of demons. Concerning the second “mark” of the kingdom, Jesus taught the Word with authority (Mk 6:34).

Jesus also spoke of the two temporal aspects of the kingdom. On the one hand, all the earth belongs to God now. He is King over all: “I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth” (Matt 11:25). Consequently, at the end of the present age, angels will gather out of His “kingdom” (i.e. “the world”) all doers of evil, so that “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt 13:43, 49). On the other hand, Jesus referred to the kingdom more frequently as something manifest only in part. For this reason, He compared the kingdom with a mustard seed and with leaven, which begin small and slowly expand and progress (Matt 13:31-33).

Jesus also spoke of the kingdom in an eschatological sense, that is, as a future happening: “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God” (Mk 10:24).<sup>1454</sup> Jesus could thus equate the kingdom with eternal life (Matt 25:34, 46; 19:16, 23).<sup>1455</sup> However, not all will qualify to participate in the blessings of the eschatological kingdom of God (Matt 25:1ff).

In order to take part in God’s eschatological kingdom one should be ready to sacrifice all (Matt 13:44-45; Mk 9:47; Lk 18:29-30). People must make a decisive decision to follow Messiah (Lk 9:57-62). The kingdom of God should be more important than possessions, family, even life (Matt 10:34-39; 19:28-29). The disciples should reckon on the fact that following Jesus and preaching the kingdom will incur rejection by the unbelieving world (Matt 10:16-25).<sup>1456</sup>

However, participation in God’s kingdom is certainly possible, since “your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). For this reason, Jesus sent His disciples to preach the kingdom of God (Matt 24:14; 16:19; Lk 9:2). When Jesus was transfigured, He displayed a foretaste of the glory of the coming kingdom (Matt 17:1-8). It is likely that on the Mount of Transfiguration, Christ’s words were fulfilled that “there are some of those who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom” (Matt 16:28).

Comparing the Old and New Testament witnesses to God’s kingdom, we observe both similarities and differences. On the one hand, the status of those worthy to participate in the new era of the kingdom is greater than the status of John the Baptist, who was, according to Jesus, the greatest of all Old Testament saints (Matt 11:11). On the other hand, submission to God’s moral standard, required in the Old Testament, applies to New Testament saints as well (Matt 5:19). The level of morality expected of Jesus’ disciples even exceeds the Old Testament requirements (Matt 5:20-48).<sup>1457</sup>

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<sup>1452</sup>Arndt W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – 3rd ed. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000. – P. 340.

<sup>1453</sup>Ladd, p. 52-55.

<sup>1454</sup>Note other references to God’s kingdom in its eschatological manifestation: Matt 8:11-12; 7:21; 18:3-4, 23; 25:34; 26:29.

<sup>1455</sup>Ladd, p. 66-67.

<sup>1456</sup>Ibid., p. 98-104, 122.

<sup>1457</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

Also important to note is that entrance into the kingdom comes to those who are “poor in spirit” (Matt 5:3) and humble as children: “Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it {at} {all}” (Mk 10:15). Additionally, as Ladd correctly notes, observance of the kingdom ethics, as reflected in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, requires supernatural grace to attain, which is acquired through spiritual rebirth (Jn 3:3-5).<sup>1458</sup>

When commenting on Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom, one must not overlook a change in Israel’s status as heirs of the kingdom. Jesus offered the kingdom to the Jews (Matt 10:6; 15:24), yet they rejected it by rejecting their Messiah-King.<sup>1459</sup> Consequently, Jesus predicted, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it” (Matt 21:43).

In other passages, Jesus repeats this claim: “Truly I say to you that the tax collectors and prostitutes will get into the kingdom of God before you” (Matt 21:31); and, “I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline {at the table} with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 8:11-12).<sup>1460</sup> Ladd writes, “No longer is the Kingdom of God active in the world through Israel; it works rather through the Church.”<sup>1461</sup>

However, Jesus also foresaw a time when God will again show regard for His Old Testament people. Jesus prophesied concerning Jerusalem, “For I say to you, from now on you will not see Me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matt 23:39). Moreover, when His disciples inquired about the time of Israel’s restoration, Jesus did not deny that it would happen, but simply replied, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority” (Acts 1:7).

In the history of the interpretation of Jesus’ teachings about the kingdom, several erroneous views have been advanced.<sup>1462</sup> Some feel, like the Jews of that day, that Jesus came to restore political independence to Israel and liberate it from the yoke of Rome. Contrary to that view, Jesus taught submission to Roman authority (Mk 12:13-17) and love for one’s enemies (Matt 5:38-47).

Others see in Jesus’ teaching indications of a purely spiritual kingdom. They cite Jesus’ words, “The kingdom of God is *within* you” (Lk 17:21). They argue that when the Gospels speak of a future glorious, earthly kingdom, we are dealing with a remnant of Jewish apocalyptic thought. Alternatively, such verses are taken symbolically to represent one’s inner disposition to God’s rule. Therefore, God’s kingdom is not political, but merely ethical. However, this view does not take into consideration the entirety of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom.

Still others believe that Jesus was predicting the soon appearance of God’s eschatological kingdom. For this reason, He called His disciples to such a high moral standard. The opposite point of view, “realized eschatology,” claims that Jesus taught that the kingdom had already come in its fullness. Again, neither of these extreme points of view comprehensively encompass Jesus’ teaching.

Next, we examine the testimony of the book of Acts, which declares that God is “Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24), speaking of His absolute authority and universal dominion. We find mention not only of the Father’s authority, but also of His appointment of Jesus as Messiah and King (Acts 2:34-36; 5:31; 7:55).<sup>1463</sup> In most cases, in the narration in Acts the preaching of the kingdom is associated with the gospel (Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In some cases, though, the expression “the kingdom of God” refers to the eschatological kingdom that believers in Jesus will inherit (Acts 1:3; 14:22), and in which Israel will at some time participate (Acts 1:6).

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<sup>1458</sup>Ibid., p. 83, 94.

<sup>1459</sup>Ibid., p. 107-108.

<sup>1460</sup>Also see the parables of Jesus that predict Israel forfeiting the kingdom: Matt 21:19, 28-46; 22:1-14.

<sup>1461</sup>Ladd, p. 113.

<sup>1462</sup>Stein R. H. Kingdom of God // Elwell W. A. Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996. – P. 451ff.

<sup>1463</sup>Zorn, p. 26-28.

Finally, the life and activity of the Early Church demonstrates that the kingdom is already present and active. In Zorn's view, at the day of Pentecost the kingdom came "with power."<sup>1464</sup> Acts 2:42-46 masterfully describes what life looks like under God's rule:

They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they {began} selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.

In the General Epistles and the Epistle to the Hebrews, the kingdom of God is infrequently mentioned. In his defense of Christ's deity, the author of Hebrews refers to Him as a divine King (Heb 1:8-9, 13). His regal authority is displayed in that He is seated at "the right hand of God" (Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; cf. 1 Pet 3:22).<sup>1465</sup> At the end of Hebrews, the author speaks of the "unshakable kingdom" which believers in Jesus await (Heb 12:28). James also refers to believers as heirs of the eschatological kingdom (Jam 2:5). Peter adds that faith which produces fruit will ensure "entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet 1:11).

The apostle Paul highlights nearly every aspect of the kingdom of God. First, God is King over all, "the King eternal" (1 Tim 1:17), "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords" (1 Tim 6:15), to whom is "honor and eternal dominion" (1 Tim 6:16). Besides this, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is exalted above all and given a name above all names (Phil 2:9-11; Eph 1:20-22), and He has power "to submit all things to Himself" (Phil 3:21). Christ is the "head over all rule and authority" (Col 2:10). He is "Lord" (1 Cor 12:3). Again, His regal status is displayed by His position at "the right hand of God" (Eph 1:20; Col 3:1) in fulfillment of Psalm 110:1-2.<sup>1466</sup>

Peter and Paul, following the example of our Lord Jesus, sometimes call God's kingdom the "kingdom of Christ" (Col 1:13; 2 Pet 1:11).<sup>1467</sup> In Ephesians 5:5, Paul combines these titles as "the kingdom of Christ and God." So then, we have a coregency of the Father and Son or, more precisely, God's kingdom is accomplished through Christ.<sup>1468</sup> Although the messianic kingdom is essentially an earthly one, Paul once speaks of the Christ's kingdom as a heavenly one (2 Tim 4:18). The Father's plan is the "summing up of all things in Christ" (Eph 1:10) and to judge the world through Him (2 Tim 4:1).<sup>1469</sup> At the end of His reign, the Son "hands over the kingdom to the God and Father" (1 Cor 15:24).

Since Christ "must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet" (1 Cor 15:25), Zorn calls the kingdom of Christ a "kingdom of conquest."<sup>1470</sup> Moreover, Zorn explains the relationship between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Christ: the latter "is derived from, exists within, and will ultimately again be surrendered to" the kingdom of God.<sup>1471</sup>

In imitation of the Old Testament, the intertestamental period, and the teaching of Jesus, Paul divides history into two epochs: the present age and the age to come (Eph 1:21). Although in Christ, believers may already enjoy many of the benefits of the age to come (as shown also in Hebrews 6:5), nevertheless, the

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<sup>1464</sup>Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>1465</sup>Ibid., p. 26-28.

<sup>1466</sup>Ibid., p. 26-29. But Zorn notes that the prediction in Psalm 110 is not completely fulfilled, since it also predicts the realization of God's rule when His eschatological kingdom appears.

<sup>1467</sup>We recall that during His earthly ministry, Jesus claimed that the kingdom of God and His kingdom were the same (see Matt 13:41; 16:28).

<sup>1468</sup>Zorn, p. 48-49.

<sup>1469</sup>Schmidt K. L. The Word Group *basileús* in the NT // Kittel G., Friedrich G., Bromiley G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985. – P. 99.

<sup>1470</sup>Zorn, p. 133.

<sup>1471</sup>Ibid., p. 67.



present age is still an “evil age” (Gal 1:4). It is under the control of the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4; Eph 2:2). Yet, for believers, Jesus offers deliverance from the domain of darkness in their personal lives (Gal 1:4; Rom 12:2).<sup>1472</sup>

On the one hand, Paul teaches that believers are already in the kingdom – God has “transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col 1:13). God’s kingdom is characterized by “righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). It “does not consist in words but in power” (1 Cor 4:20). It is associated with the glory of God (1 Thes 2:12).<sup>1473</sup>

Most of the time, however, Paul speaks of the future eschatological kingdom, that is, when God’s universal dominion is fully manifest. God calls us into that kingdom (1 Thes 2:12). It is connected with the appearing of the Lord Jesus (2 Tim 4:1). Believers suffer for the sake of the kingdom (2 Thes 1:5). Those who practice sin are excluded from it (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5). God preserves us for the kingdom (2 Tim 4:18). Partakers in it anticipate a bodily resurrection (1 Cor 15:50).

The apostle John does not speak voluminously about the kingdom *per se*, but does accent its present manifestation. It is available to those who have been “born again” (Jn 3:3-5). John records that before Pilate (who, by the way, received his authority from God – Jn 19:11), Jesus spoke of His kingdom as a spiritual one: “My kingdom is not of this world” (Jn 18:36). Correspondingly, He refused to receive the kingdom offered to Him by the Jews (Jn 6:15). On the other hand, Jesus claimed that He already possessed this authority (Jn 17:2), but the time for Him to enforce it had not yet come (Jn 7:3-6).

The book of Revelation provides us the last glimpse of God’s kingdom in the New Testament. Here, we see a strong emphasis on God’s sovereignty. He sits on the throne and rules over all (Rev 4:3). He raises up earthly kingdoms and casts them down as He pleases (Rev 17:12, 17).

Revelation even more strongly focuses on the rule of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. He is “ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5); “Lord of lord and King of kings” (Rev 17:14; 19:16), and is crowned with “many diadems” (Rev 19:12).

When Christ returns, the earth will see a manifestation of God’s kingdom as never before in history. Jesus will come to establish the kingdom and personally administer it. The angel cries, “The kingdom of the world has become *the kingdom* of our Lord and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Rev 11:15; cf. Rev 19:11-16). Satan will be cast down (Rev 12:10) and bound (Rev 20:1-3), and the saints will reign with Christ for 1000 years (Rev 20:6; 5:10; 1:6). Then the great expectation of heaven will be fulfilled, “You have taken Your great power and have begun to reign” (Rev 11:17). Then, all will finally see: “The Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns” (Rev 19:6).

The book of Revelation reminds us of the distinction made in the intertestamental period between the age to come and eternity. As was described earlier, Jesus and the apostles taught that the age to come has already “broken into” the present age, and believers may already participate in it, albeit in part. The book of Revelation introduces into that general construal still another element – the thousand year reign of Messiah, which differs both from the present position believers in Jesus enjoy in this life, and from the kingdom of God in eternity.

However, the millennial reign of Messiah is still not a perfect manifestation of God’s kingdom. After a period of rebellion at the close of that time, God will destroy the present heavens and earth, judge unbelievers, and create a new heavens and a new earth “in which righteousness dwells” (2 Pet 3:13; Rev 20-21). At that time, the authority that God, the universal King, always possessed, will be fully exercised, and all will be done in accordance with His perfect will.

We can, then, expand the present age/age to come schema to include four stages in the realization of God’s plan. In each successive stage, His kingdom is more fully expressed: (1) the present age before Christ, (2) the present age for believers in Jesus, (3) the millennial reign of Messiah as an initial expression of the age to come, (4) God’s eternal kingdom as the final and ultimate expression of the age to come.

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<sup>1472</sup>Ladd, p. 28-30, 41.

<sup>1473</sup>Schmidt, p. 100.

## C. Theological Considerations

The appearance of the kingdom of God on earth is the dream of many thinkers in the course of human history. Yet, they often differed in their understanding of exactly what the kingdom is and how it appears. In addition, not all of these interpretations of the kingdom correspond to the biblical revelation. Let us examine some of them.

### 1. Providentialism and Related Theories

Russian Orthodoxy historically anticipated the progressive development of society to the point when it would become the kingdom of God on earth.<sup>1474</sup> The key feature of this development is the sanctifying influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. According to this understanding, the Church is not appointed to rule the world directly, but rather to exert a sanctifying influence on the ruling powers, that is, the government. The rule of the emperor is the rule of God.<sup>1475</sup> So then, the spiritual should sanctify the earthly, and the earthly, in turn, should submit to the spiritual.

In 1453, a certain event occurred that strengthened the Russian Orthodox conviction of their appointment to introduce the kingdom of God into the world – the fall of Constantinople. The fall of the “second Rome” led to the rise of the “third Rome,” which is Moscow, through which the kingdom would come.

Therefore, Russia was considered the preserver of true Christianity, and the Russian Tsar – the preserver of Orthodox Faith. Moreover, since the 16th century Russia has claimed the title “Holy Russia,” a nation entrusted with a holy mission. The drive to fulfill this calling led to a schism in the Russian Orthodox Church, when the Old Believers feared that the introduction of reforms into Russian Orthodoxy threatened the fulfillment of that mission.

However, in the 17th century, when secularism overtook Russian society, interest in the Christianization of society waned, and the Church devoted more attention to its internal affairs. In addition, the Russian Orthodox Church came under the domination of the Russian Tsar Peter I. As a result, the Church was no longer in a position to sanctify the state, but became dominated by it.

Nevertheless, the dream of seeing the kingdom of God did not completely die, neither in the Church (for example, in the thought of the 18th-century Tikhon of Zadonsk), nor among secular thinkers. Prominent among the latter was Pyotr Chaadayev (1794-1856), who was noted for his philosophy of history. Unlike the Orthodox view described above, Chaadayev thought that the kingdom of God would come not through the sanctifying work of the Church, but by means of a natural historical process. History itself is moving toward God’s rule – a view called “providentialism.”

However, not all subsequent philosophers concurred with Chaadayev. Others felt that two factors needed to be considered: not only this natural trajectory, but also freedom. The latter element can indeed hinder the appearance of the kingdom, since it requires the voluntary participation of people. Among exponents of this latter theory were Aleksey Khomyakov (1804-1860) and Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881). In his article *The Doctrine of Providence*, Sonderegger asserts that God's providence will bring all things into unity in Christ. How God will do that remains a mystery: “This divine direction is *mystery*. To discern how this world is becoming the kingdom of Christ, manifesting his death and victory, is the task of the Christian life.”<sup>1476</sup> The final outcome, though, will be “victory.”<sup>1477</sup>

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<sup>1474</sup>Material taken from Zenkovsky, History of Russian Philosophy. Audio series.

<sup>1475</sup>Finkenzeller, p. 421.

<sup>1476</sup>Sonderegger K. The Doctrine of Providence // Murphy F. A., Ziegler P. G. The Providence of God. – London; New York: T.T. Clark, 2009. – P. 156.

<sup>1477</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

Paul Tillich advances a similar view.<sup>1478</sup> He claims that all of history is moving toward the evolution of “New Beings.” We await a “kairos” moment when the world reaches this climax.<sup>1479</sup> At that time, the disjunction between essence and existence will be overcome and the world will attain to utopia. The Church’s role is to catalyze this process resulting in the appearance of God’s kingdom.

Wolfgang Pannenberg proposes a more complex version of providentialism.<sup>1480</sup> He agrees with earlier thinkers that God is actively advancing the world to utopia, i.e., the kingdom of God. In Pannenberg’s words, “The Kingdom of God is that perfect society of man which is to be realized in history by God himself.”<sup>1481</sup> It is the “future of the world.”<sup>1482</sup> People can place themselves under God’s rule now depending on the degree they live “in accordance with that awareness” in justice and love.<sup>1483</sup>

According to Pannenberg, we must not equate the kingdom with the Church. The Church exists for the world, in order to show it the way to the kingdom. The Church, at its best, is nothing more than a temporary representation of the kingdom,<sup>1484</sup> and an imperfect one at that. In the end, the world will become the kingdom apart from the Church. The Church should not occupy itself with preaching and rituals, but with improving the quality of life in society.

In connection with his theory of the kingdom, Pannenberg expounds a unique view on God’s nature. For him, God is the “power of the future.” In some sense, God “stands” in the future and shapes it in accordance with His will. Past events do not lead to future occurrences, but God directs the future. He holds the right to determine the consequences of past events as He pleases and directly cause future events to happen. In this way, He can direct all things to His desired end.

Pannenberg goes to the extreme to claim that God, in the fullest sense, does not yet exist, since the future has not yet come. He states, “The message of the coming Kingdom of God implies that God in his very being is the future of the world.”<sup>1485</sup> However, at the same time he rejects process theology, which asserts that God is undergoing development.

Except for Pannenberg, liberal theology in general proposes that the kingdom of God is the renewal of human society towards utopia by means of human effort. God’s kingdom is the application of Christian norms to all people. Liberals do not expect a dynamic inbreaking of God into history in order to establish His rule. Humanity is undergoing a gradual process of grasping the principles of Christianity. Liberals feel that an apocalyptic view of the kingdom is misguided and is a concept borrowed from the intertestamental literature.<sup>1486</sup> The classic liberal view differs from Pannenberg in that the latter stresses God’s intervention in shaping the future (providentialism), while liberals stress human effort.

## 2. Premillennialism, Postmillennialism, and Amillennialism

The following theories debate the question of whether there will be an earthly, messianic kingdom. Premillennialism holds that Jesus will be physically present on the earth to rule for 1000 years. Although conditions at that time will greatly improved compared to the present, it will not be a perfect expression of God’s kingdom. Both resurrected, glorified saints and common mortals, who survived the Great Tribulation (along with their offspring), will inhabit the earth during that period. Mortal humans will enjoy a long lifespan,

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<sup>1478</sup>Thomas J. H. Paul Tillich // Nineham D. E. Robertson E. H. Makers of Contemporary Theology. – Richmond VA: John Knox, 1965. – P. 39-41.

<sup>1479</sup>“Kairos” is from the Greek *καίρος* and means “time.”

<sup>1480</sup>Pannenberg W. Theology and the Kingdom of God / Neuhaus R. J. ed. – Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1977. – P. 53-93;

Pannenberg W. Systematic theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991-1998. – V. 3. – P. 464.

<sup>1481</sup>Pannenberg, Theology and the Kingdom of God, p. 76.

<sup>1482</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1483</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>1484</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>1485</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>1486</sup>Ibid., p. 51-54.

but will still pass away. Furthermore, Revelation chapter 20 predicts a final rebellion against Christ at the end of the millennium. So then, mortal humans will still have the capacity to sin and rebel against the Lord.

Postmillennialism teaches the progressive triumph of the Church over the world. The Church will progressively exercise more and more influence on society until the entire world converts to the faith. Proponents of this position differ as to how God will accomplish this. The Puritans advanced the “sociological theory,” that the Church will succeed by involvement in the social and political spheres. In contrast to this, others prescribe to the “evangelistic” theory, that the preaching of the gospel will reach the world.

The question arises, though, that if the Church “conquers” the world, then in what sense can we speak of a “millennial” kingdom? Some say that “one thousand years” is symbolic of Church history in its entirety. Others posit that the millennium is the last thousand years of Church history.<sup>1487</sup>

Amillennialism is the view that there will be no earthly kingdom of Messiah. The biblical descriptions of such a time refer symbolically either to eternity, or to the present Christian experience. At the end of time, there will be a general resurrection of all the departed, then the Great White Throne Judgment is followed by the eternal age.<sup>1488</sup>

These theories are discussed in detail in the fifth volume of this series, where preference is given to premillennialism.

### 3. Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology

Within the general school of dispensational thought, there exist three distinct movements: classical dispensationalism, revised dispensationalism, and progressive dispensationalism. The common thread in these movements is the conviction that the millennial kingdom is reserved for Israel alone, who will reign with Messiah Jesus.

Dispensationalism is antithetical to covenant theology, which claims that the Church, not Israel, will inherit the messianic kingdom. Advocates of covenant theology, though, debate among themselves whether the Jewish people will come to Jesus at the end of time. In chapter 9 of book 2 of this series, we provide a detailed overview of dispensationalism and covenant theology in regard to their teachings on God’s kingdom. Nonetheless, we will attempt a brief survey of their teachings here as well.

*Classic dispensationalism* teaches that “the kingdom of God” differs from the “kingdom of heaven,” which only Matthew mentions in his Gospel. The kingdom of God is the Lord’s personal rule over all believers in every dispensation.<sup>1489</sup> The kingdom of heaven, though, is the reign of God’s people over the earth. All believers of every dispensation can participate in the kingdom of God, but only Israel is invited into the kingdom of heaven.

It is thought that Jesus preached to the Jews of His time not the gospel of grace, but the gospel of the kingdom, that is, an invitation to take part in the messianic kingdom (the kingdom of heaven) through faith in Him. The gospel of grace, then, was first preached by the apostle Paul. After the rapture of the Church, the gospel of the kingdom will again be preached, calling Israel to fulfill God’s plan of world domination.<sup>1490</sup>

In *revisional dispensationalism*, no distinction is drawn between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of heaven. The terms are used interchangeably in Scripture.<sup>1491</sup> Instead, such dispensationalists propose a different understanding of God’s kingdom. God has a “universal kingdom,” which consists of His sovereign position over all creation, and a “mediatorial kingdom,” which various individuals have administered in their

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<sup>1487</sup>See Gentry K. L. *Postmillennialism* // Bock D. L. *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*. – Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999. – P. 50-55.

<sup>1488</sup>Thiessen H. C. *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 506; Mueller J. T. *Christian Dogmatics*. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 619ff.

<sup>1489</sup>A dispensation is a period of time during which a certain relationship between God and humanity is established. For example, the special feature of the sixth dispensation, which lasted from the time of Moses to the time of Christ, was observance of the Torah.

<sup>1490</sup>Bass C. B. *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960. – P. 30, 36.

<sup>1491</sup>Compare the following texts: Matt 4:17//Mk 1:15; Matt 5:3//Lk 6:20; Matt 19:14//Mk 10:14; Matt 19:23//Lk 18:24; Matt 11:11//Lk 7:28; Matt 13:11//Lk 8:10 (Allen, p. 73). In Matthew 19:23-24, Matthew himself uses these terms interchangeably (Stein, p. 451).

day, like Abraham, Moses, or David. At present, God's "mediatorial kingdom" is inoperative, but will be restored when Christ returns. Some revisionists, though, are ready to say that one can term God's present rule over the Church as His "spiritual" or "secret" kingdom, which, nonetheless, differs from His messianic reign through the coming Son of David.<sup>1492</sup>

*Progressive dispensationalism* differs from the more traditional views over the question of the Davidic covenant. This branch of dispensationalism teaches that Jesus is presently enthroned in heaven on the throne of David and rules in that capacity over the Church in anticipation of his future millennial reign on earth. Peter indicates this in his Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:34-36).

For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.'" Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified."

Classic and revisionist dispensationalists insist that the Davidic kingdom is now on hold, to be resumed only at Jesus' Second Coming.<sup>1493</sup> Jesus was announced the Messiah at His birth (Lk 2:11), but He does not fill that role until He comes again in glory. Progressive dispensationalists, though, do not differentiate the Davidic kingdom from the "spiritual" kingdom of Messiah. They teach a unity in God's kingdom, recognizing two aspects in it: spiritual and political, which come into force sequentially.

#### 4. Church and Kingdom

How may we best characterize the relationship between the Church and the kingdom? One theory states that the Church and the kingdom are the same. The Church is the kingdom, and the kingdom is the Church. The Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages embraced such a view, citing Augustine. Therefore, the Church must engage in both spiritual and political affairs, since God intends to rule the world through His Church.<sup>1494</sup>

It is curious to note that Luther's compatriot Melancthon also "identified the kingdom of God and the true church."<sup>1495</sup> Luther, though, taught that the kingdom of God in essence was invisible and concerns the personal spiritual life of believers.<sup>1496</sup> He wrote, "Where He (Christ) speaks of the Kingdom of heaven, He speaks of that in which we people are, which stands in the Word, in the faith, in the sacrament."<sup>1497</sup> Luther also accepted that the present "kingdom of faith" will some day give way to the "sight-kingdom," in which the reign of Christ will be fully displayed.<sup>1498</sup>

The Catholic view highlighted above never became officially accepted church dogma regarding the relationship between Church and kingdom. Finkenzeller writes, "There has been no proper magisterial pronouncement of the church on the biblical concept of the kingdom of God."<sup>1499</sup> In his publication *Exploring Catholic Theology*, Brennen Hill communicates a totally different perspective – the Church is not the Kingdom, but simply reflects it:

"The Kingdom of God, although related to the church, is not to be identified with it. The church bears witness to God's power and presence." It is "a living symbol of the reality of the kingdom." "The church consists of people and structures that may or may not witness to God's presence. The church has its

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<sup>1492</sup>It is "secret" because there was no revelation about it in the Old Testament (Fruchtenbaum A. G. *Israel and the Church*. – Willis W. R., Master J. R. *Issues in dispensationalism*. – Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994. – P. 117).

<sup>1493</sup>Ryrie, p. 22-23.

<sup>1494</sup>Ladd, p. 15.

<sup>1495</sup>Finkenzeller, p. 421.

<sup>1496</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>1497</sup>Zorn, p. 75-76.

<sup>1498</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>1499</sup>Finkenzeller, p. 421.

weaknesses, its limitations, its sins. None of these can be equated with God's presence or with the Kingdom of God."<sup>1500</sup>

The Eastern Orthodox teaching, as described above, differs from the Catholic view. God rules the world through human governments, which are in need of the sanctifying influence of the Church. One may note some similarities between Orthodoxy and Calvin, who felt that God's kingdom is a theocracy consisting of the participation of both Church and state.<sup>1501</sup>

The second theory about the relationship of Church and kingdom is that the former is a subset of the latter. It is thought that the kingdom existed before the Church and consists not only of believers in Jesus Christ, but also of Old Testament saints and God's heavenly kingdom of angels.<sup>1502</sup>

The third theory is that the Church is a foretaste of the kingdom. This would mean that the kingdom is a future phenomenon. The Church represents (albeit imperfectly) what life in the kingdom will be like. Yet, we still await the coming of the kingdom.<sup>1503</sup>

The final and most plausible theory is that the Church is a manifestation (although imperfect) of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is the rule of God. To the degree that God's will is being accomplished, the kingdom is in manifestation. So then, the kingdom may find expression in the Church to various degrees depending on the level of the Church's obedience to the Lord and dependence on Him.<sup>1504</sup>

## D. Conclusions

### 1. The Authority and Blessings of the Kingdom

In the introduction to this chapter, we proposed a preliminary definition of the kingdom of God – that is consisted of two aspects: being under God's authority and enjoying God's blessing. We claimed that God's kingdom is where people are obedient and blessed. The fact that the kingdom would involve God's authority is self-evident. The fact that God is good also leads us to conclude that goodness and blessing would characterize His reign.

As we have demonstrated in detail above, both the Old and New Testaments support this view. If Israel would be obedient, they would enjoy marvelous blessing in the Promised Land (Lev 26; Deut 28). In addition, when John the Baptist questioned Jesus' messiahship, Jesus detailed the following signs of the kingdom: "Go and report to John what you hear and see: {the} blind receive sight and {the} lame walk, {the} lepers are cleansed and {the} deaf hear, {the} dead are raised up, and {the} poor have the gospel preached to them." (Matt 11:4-5). God's kingdom is a place of blessing!

### 2. The Kingdom as a Condition or a Place?

Many feel that it is more proper to view God's Kingdom not so much as the realm over which He rules, as it is His act of ruling itself. It is not so much a physical *location*, as it is a *condition* in which all is done in accordance with His perfect will. Correspondingly, the terms מְלוּכָה (*meluvah*) and βασιλεία (*basileia*), i.e., "kingdom" are thought to carry this connotation.<sup>1505</sup>

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<sup>1500</sup>Hill Brennen R. Exploring Catholic Theology. – Mystic, CN: Twenty Third Publishers, 1995. – P. 191-192.

<sup>1501</sup>Finkenzeller, p. 421.

<sup>1502</sup>Noted in Dusing M. The New Testament Church // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 615.

<sup>1503</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1504</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1505</sup>Schmidt, p. 99; Zorn, p. 48; Ladd, p. 18-9; Stein, p. 453.

However, Allen correctly makes the qualification that one must not exclude the idea of the kingdom as a realm or territory where God's rule is enacted.<sup>1506</sup> In some biblical texts, the Kingdom is spoken of in this sense.<sup>1507</sup> Correspondingly, Ladd proposes a more balanced definition, considering both aspects, but emphasizing the action of rulership: "The Kingdom of God is first of all the divine redemptive rule manifested in Christ, and it is secondly the realm or sphere in which the blessings of the divine rule may be experienced."<sup>1508</sup>

We can substantiate that God's active rulership is the primary aspect of His kingdom.<sup>1509</sup> It is unlikely that the expression "the kingdom of heaven" refers to God's reign over a place, i.e., heaven, but rather to the nature of His rule – it is "heavenly" in quality. We may say the same for the expression "the kingdom of the Father" (Matt 13:43; 26:29; 25:34; Lk 12:32). Again, we are emphasizing not a specific location, but rather the One who rules. Other verses stress this "rulership" aspect as well.<sup>1510</sup> Finally, if God's kingdom referred only to a specific territory, then we could not claim that it has, in a certain sense, already come. The present world order is under Satan's dominion, not God's direct control.

This distinction between the kingdom as realm and rulership has a special application to the relationship of Church and kingdom.<sup>1511</sup> If the kingdom in essence is a place, then we must equate the kingdom with the Church. However, if the kingdom is the condition resulting from God's active rule, then we can speak of an "invisible" kingdom found in the hearts of true believers in Jesus and among them in true Christian fellowship.

### **3. The "Universal" and "Operative" Kingdoms**

In light of the biblical data presented above, we are justified in distinguishing two other contrasting aspects of the Lord's kingdom: His "universal reign" and His "operative reign." The designation "universal reign" refers to God's absolute authority over all, everywhere, and at all times. God's "operative reign" refers to the degree that His will is actually done on earth. The Bible testifies of both these aspects of God's kingdom.

How can we characterize the relationship between these aspects? If God already possesses all authority, then why is His will not always done? The answer lies in the fact that God permits people to make free choices that are often not congruent with His perfect will. His rule is intact, however, in that only by His permission do people exercise their freedom of choice. In His sovereignty, He chooses to force neither their obedience, nor their acceptance of His blessings.

### **4. The Present and Future Kingdoms**

What we have said above applies to God's "present" kingdom, that is, to that order which is in place at the present time. God has all authority, but fully exercises that authority only over those who voluntarily submit to Him. Additionally, God is ready to show His fatherly care for all, but only those who are already submitted to His kingdom rule can enjoy His blessings in greater measure. This is the present order of things.

However, the Bible testifies not only of the kingdom existing now, but also of a future, eschatological reign<sup>1512</sup>:

- Present Kingdom: 1 Cor 4:20; Col 4:11; Rev 1:6, 9; Rom 14:17; Col 1:13; Lk 16:16; 17:20-21; Matt 21:31; Mk 10:15

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<sup>1506</sup>Allen, p. 1.

<sup>1507</sup>See Matt 4:8; 12:25-26; 24:7; Mk 6:23.

<sup>1508</sup>Ladd, p. 114.

<sup>1509</sup>Schmidt, p. 99-100.

<sup>1510</sup>For example, in relation to people: Ezra 8:1; 2 Chr 12:1; Jer 49:34; Dan 2:37; 5:26, 31; Lk 19:12-15; Rev 17:12. In relation to God: Ps 145:11, 13; Matt 6:33; Mk 10:15.

<sup>1511</sup>Ladd, p. 117.

<sup>1512</sup>Zorn, p. 52-65; Ladd, p. 17-22.

- Future Kingdom: 1 Cor 6:9-10; 15:50; Gal 5:21; Eph 5:5; 1 Thes 2:12; 2 Thes 1:5; 2 Tim 4:1; Matt 25:34; 8:11; 2 Pet 1:11

God's eschatological kingdom will find its preliminary expression in the millennial reign of Jesus, and then fully in eternity. The millennium will not be a perfect reflection of God's order. Death will still afflict those not yet having glorified bodies, and at the end of that period, the peoples of the earth will again rebel against the Lord. However, when the new heavens and new earth appear, the kingdom of God will be on full display. At that time, the distinction between God's present and future kingdoms will be erased, since the Lord's will shall be perfectly executed. God's people will be in total submission to His authority and will enjoy eternal bliss.

Since we now live in an intermediate position between the present and future kingdoms, we experience features of both of them and find ourselves in the tension created between them, awaiting the full appearing of His reign.<sup>1513</sup> So then, we are advised to avoid two extreme positions: to neglect the power and blessings God offers to us at this present time, and to expect a greater measure of blessing than God apportions in this epoch.

Ladd summarized the concept of God's kingdom in both of these aspects:

Fundamentally, as we have seen, the Kingdom of God is God's sovereign reign; but God's reign expresses itself in different stages through redemptive history. Therefore men may enter into the realm of God's reign in its several stages of manifestation and experience the blessings of His reign in different degrees. God's Kingdom is the realm of the Age to Come, popularly called heaven; then we shall realize the blessings of His Kingdom (reign) in the perfection of their fullness. But the kingdom is here now. There is a realm of spiritual blessing into which we may enter today and enjoy in part but in reality the blessings of God's Kingdom (reign)."<sup>1514</sup>

## 5. Refutation of Incorrect Theories

How should we respond to theories of the kingdom, described above, that deviate from the biblical revelation? Concerning providentialism, Scripture does not confirm that secular society will be transformed into God's kingdom. The testimony of the gospel is plain – God calls people to “be saved from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40) and to enter the kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ in order to avoid the coming wrath of God on the world.

Before the appearance of God's eschatological kingdom, a judgment takes place to determine who may take part in it. Adherents of both providentialism and liberal theology fail to factor in the element of coming judgment, but rather assume that all of society and all individuals will become partakers in this glorious kingdom.

Concerning the existence and nature of the millennial reign of Messiah, that is, premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism, we will evaluate these views in volume 5 of this series. The question of dispensationalism and covenant theology was already investigated in volume 2.

Finally, regarding the relationship between the kingdom and the Church, among the options presented, we give preference to the understanding that the Church is a manifestation (yet imperfect) of God's kingdom. Other writers support this view:

- “We may speak of the Ecclesia as the visible representative of the Kingdom of God, or as the primary instrument of its sway.”<sup>1515</sup>

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<sup>1513</sup>Bright, p. 243.

<sup>1514</sup>Ladd, p. 22-23.

<sup>1515</sup>Hort F. J. A. The Christian Ecclesia. – London: MacMillan, 1900. – P. 19.



- “Autonomous groups of born-again people voluntarily and obediently associated together for the propagation of the message and work of their Lord certainly do constitute agencies as well as evidences of the kingdom.”<sup>1516</sup>
- “The kingdom is the great Divine redemptive work of fulfillment and completion in Christ; the church is that people chosen and called by God which may participate in the salvation of the kingdom.”<sup>1517</sup>
- “The church is an inaugurated form of the future Kingdom of God.”<sup>1518</sup>
- “The Church, in short, is a present manifestation of the Kingdom of God and in her the Kingdom’s transforming power operates and from her its life and blessedness flows to form an oasis in the desert of this world’s sin.”<sup>1519</sup>

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<sup>1516</sup>Stephens J. H. The Churches and the Kingdom. – Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1959. – P. 45.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A: Neoplatonism

### A. Description

Neoplatonism was the most influential worldview in the ancient world. It had a significant effect on the theology of many early Church Fathers and, through them, continues to form the thought of certain branches of Christendom today.

The founder of this system of thought was the Alexandrian native Ammonius Saccas (175-240 A.D.). Alexandria was a famous meeting point between East and West. One could find there, as the historian Copleston notes, “Hellenistic philosophy, special science and Oriental religion.”<sup>1520</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise that we discover in Neoplatonism elements of both Greek philosophy and Hindu faith. The Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky also observes the parallels between Neoplatonism and Hinduism: “‘Neoplatonism’ leads to a ‘mystical plunge’ that in some ways reminds one of the teaching of Hinduism.”<sup>1521</sup>

Neoplatonism is an offshoot of two philosophies that preceded it: Neopythagoreanism and Middle Platonism. Neopythagoreanism arose in Alexandria in the first century B.C. and contains elements of Stoicism, Platonism, and Aristotelianism. According to this view, all reality is contained in a certain “Monad,” which is the basis of all reality. All that exists is a manifestation of the Monad or its emanations. The Monad itself exists beyond all mental perception in complete mystery. Consequently, Neopythagoreanism is an apophatic worldview. One of the emanations, namely the Demiurge, created the world. The “Fall” of humanity occurred when the rational and irrational souls were materialized.<sup>1522</sup> This worldview shares many common features with Gnosticism and the teaching of Marcion.

Middle Platonism (1st c. A.D.) was a mixture of various convictions that were not always clearly interconnected. God’s transcendence was emphasized as well as mysticism and the need for mediators between God and the world. Similar to Neopythagoreanism, in Middle Platonism we encounter the idea of emanations from the “One,” namely “Nous” (i.e., “Mind”), and “Soul.” Humanity’s goal is the ascent to God and ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν, that is, attaining to God-likeness as much as that is possible.<sup>1523</sup>

One could guess that these worldviews affected the famous Jewish philosopher from Alexandria – Philo. Correspondingly, we notice a tendency to apophatism in his teaching. The historian Sahakian writes, “Philo regarded God as exalted above all human understanding, hence as infinite, incomprehensible, nameless, and transcending human knowledge, and he insisted that the most that can be asserted about God is what he is not.”<sup>1524</sup>

The idea of the soul ascending to God was a fascination for Philo.<sup>1525</sup> Since this ascent requires the aid of mediators, Philo proposed the following: Logos, angels, and Wisdom. Through contemplation of the Logos and personal moral conduct, a person can ascend to God and unify with Him. Commenting on Exodus 24:2, Philo wrote, “But he who is resolved into the nature of unity, is said to come near God in a kind of family relation, for having given up and left behind all moral kinds, he is changed into the divine, so that such men might become

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<sup>1520</sup>Copleston F. A History of Philosophy. – New York, NY: Doubleday, 1993. – P. 446.

<sup>1521</sup>Лосский В. Н. Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие. – М: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – P. 201. Author’s translation.

<sup>1522</sup>Copleston, p. 446-448.

<sup>1523</sup>Ibid., p. 451-455.

<sup>1524</sup>Sahakian W. S. History of Philosophy. – New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, 1968. – P. 80-81.

<sup>1525</sup>Gross J. The Divination of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers / trans. Onica P. A. – Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002. – P. 73-79.

kin to God and truly divine.”<sup>1526</sup> Yet, Philo still recognized the distinction between God and the deified human: “There is one true God only.”<sup>1527</sup>

Philo’s views differ greatly from the conventional Jewish understanding of human destiny. Gross comments that the religious atmosphere in which Palestinian Judaism developed was not favorable to the idea of deification.<sup>1528</sup> This observation confirms our suspicion that the theosis teaching did not arise from Jewish (Old Testament) teaching.

One of Ammonius Saccas’ students, Plotinus (205-270), further developed the Neoplatonic worldview and established its basic parameters. Plotinus was raised in Alexandria, but taught in Rome. Two of his followers, Porphyry (233-302) and Proclus (412-485), contributed to the development and propagation of Plotinus’ teaching.

Plotinus’ teachings consisted of the following.<sup>1529</sup> He centered his cosmology in a certain “Ultimate God,” which he called the “One.” A series of emanations flow out of the One, namely the Nous (i.e., “Mind”) and the World Soul. Matter is another emanation from the One, but it is the lowest and least pure of them. Nonetheless, matter reflects the spiritual realities that gave it existence.

The goal of life is return to the One, that is, to “ascend” to it. The first step in this process is personal purification through an ascetic and ethical lifestyle. The latter consists of observing the four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, moderation, and justice (the cardinal virtues in Aristotle’s ethics). By this means, a person can progress from the emanation “matter” to the emanation “World Soul.”

The second step is to rise above sensory perception in order to interface with the Nous by means of philosophy and contemplation. The third and culminating step is mystical union with the One. At this stage, the seeker no longer senses any distinctions between things, and does not even think about the One, but rather enjoys an organic union with it. Proclus recommended “mystical silence before the Incomprehensible and Ineffable.”<sup>1530</sup> Lossky describes Plotinus’ system thusly: “You enter into the sphere of the non-intellectual and non-existent... then silence unavoidably ensues.”<sup>1531</sup> The death wish of Plotinus was for that which was divine in him to return and be united with the Divine.<sup>1532</sup>

A person’s experience with the emanations is self-authenticating. This means that a person knows internally by intuition when he or she progresses from one emanation to another. The deeper one goes in this progression, the more one understands that all reality is a unity. The appearance of variety in the world is an illusion. The closer one is to the One, this apparent “variety” disappears.

The One is beyond understanding or description. It is impersonal and inactive. There are no distinctions in it. It is omnipresent. All existence instinctively strives for reunion with the One and will, in the end, attain unification with it.

Plotinus thought it impossible to ascribe specific attributes to the One.<sup>1533</sup> We may not even speak of its existence. It is beyond existence and serves as the source of existence. Ascribing to the One specific attributes places limitations on it and makes it finite. Proclus taught, “We are not entitled to predicate anything positively of the ultimate Principle; we can only say what it is *not*, realizing that it stands above all discursive thought and positive prediction, ineffable and incomprehensible.”<sup>1534</sup> Plotinus was willing to speak of the One as “good,” yet he made the qualification that this attribute is not “inherent” to it.<sup>1535</sup>

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<sup>1526</sup>Philo. *Questions and Answers on Exodus*, 2.29, in Loeb Classical Library / Ed. T. E. Page / Trans. R. Marcus // Cambridge, MS: Harvard, 1953. – P. 70.

<sup>1527</sup>Philo. *On Dreams*, 1.229, in Yonge C. D. The works of Philo. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995. – P. 385.

<sup>1528</sup>Gross, p. 71.

<sup>1529</sup>See Geisler N. L. *Christian Apologetics*. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976. – P. 174-177; Sahakian, p. 81-86; Copleston, p. 463-471; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neoplatonism>

<sup>1530</sup>Copleston, p. 481.

<sup>1531</sup>Лосский, p. 201. Author’s translation.

<sup>1532</sup>Copleston, p. 464.

<sup>1533</sup>Sahakian claims that Plotinus taught that one may speak of attributes in the One (Sahakian, p. 82).

<sup>1534</sup>Copleston, p. 479.

<sup>1535</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 465.

The One does not act or think. It lacks will or self-consciousness. The presence of such features would require some kind of distinction in it. The One must remain “One.” Emanations flow out of it not by an act of the One’s will, but by necessity. Here, Plotinus operates on the principle that everything must produce something else. Therefore, the One must produce emanations. Yet, somehow, the emanations are distinct from the One. So then, Neoplatonism is not a true pantheistic worldview.

The “Nous” is the location of the Platonic world of “forms.” The Nous’ “thoughts” are aligned in two directions: toward the One and toward itself. This distinguishes the Nous from the One – the Nous has distinctions inherent to it, that is, two orientations.

The World Soul has two components: a higher and lower aspect. The higher aspect communicates with the Nous, and the lower part – with the material world. The Platonic “forms,” located in the Nous, are expressed in the world by means of the World Soul. In the world, they are known by the term “logos.” Matter is considered evil only when it fails to reflect these “ideal forms,” communicated by the Nous through the World Soul.

The human soul derives from the World Soul. It also consists of two parts: divisible and indivisible. The “divisible soul” is the physical body. The human soul became divisible and materialized due to humanity’s desire to be independent of the One.

## B. Effect on Christianity

Without doubt, Neoplatonism exerted a heavy influence on the worldview of the early Church Fathers. Bray relates, “Most of the leading theologians of the classical period of Christian dogmatic development had received a Neoplatonic education.”<sup>1536</sup> This system had its greatest effect on the Alexandrian Fathers, as Copleston notes, “Neo-Platonism exercised a profound influence on Christian thinkers at Alexandria.”<sup>1537</sup> In fact, not only was Plotinus a student of Ammonius Saccas, but Origen was as well. Sahakian relates, “(Origen) adopted Neo-Platonism as a philosophical foundation for Christian theology.”<sup>1538</sup> It is said of Athanasius, “In his understanding of God, Athanasius was heavily influenced by Plato, Plotinus, Albinus, and Proclus.”<sup>1539</sup>

The Alexandrian Fathers, in turn, exercised their influence on the Church as a whole. Sahakian feels, “In the last analysis, Patristic theology and philosophy were actually based upon fundamental concepts of Hellenistic thought.”<sup>1540</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, in particular, constructed his theology from Neoplatonic premises. According to Sahakian, “(Pseudo-Dionysius) introduced it into the Church so effectively that it remained there nine centuries.”<sup>1541</sup>

Pseudo-Dionysius styled himself as Dionysius the Areopagite, mentioned in Acts 17:34. Today, all serious scholars agree that his works are pseudonymic. They note that no one cites his works until the sixth century. In addition, in his work *On Church Hierarchy*, he speaks of initiation into monastic vows and reading the Symbol of Faith during the liturgy. These practices did not exist in the first century. The Orthodox theologian Lossky even admits that the author of these books was not the individual mentioned in Acts who was acquainted with the apostle Paul.<sup>1542</sup>

Meyendorff writes that Pseudo-Dionysius’ goal was to “unite the Christian system with the hierarchical world of Neoplatonism. Dionysius quotes Neoplatonic authors in abundance, especially Proclus.”<sup>1543</sup>

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<sup>1536</sup>Bray G. *The Doctrine of God*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 33.

<sup>1537</sup>Copleston, p. 483.

<sup>1538</sup>Sahakian, p. 82. Sahakian underscores several elements in Origen’s teaching which especially correspond to Neoplatonism: (1) the human mind is unable to “encompass or truly comprehend God’s attributes;” (2) the Godhead is hierarchical – Father above Son, Son above Spirit; (3) God’s “immobility” required that not He, but the Son create the world; (4) all will someday be saved and will participate in God’s essence; (5) salvation includes liberation from matter (Sahakian, p. 87-88).

<sup>1539</sup>Зайцев Е. Учение В. Лосского о Теозисе. – М.: Библийско-богословский институт св. апостола Андрея, 2007. – P. 62. Author’s translation.

<sup>1540</sup>Sahakian, p. 86.

<sup>1541</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>1542</sup>Лосский, p. 21.

<sup>1543</sup>Мейендорф И. Введение в святоотеческое богословие. Минск: Лучи Софии, 2007. – P. 299-300. Author’s translation.

Meyendorff, expressing his astonishment, comments on Pseudo-Dionysius, “Adoption of his teaching by the Church can be considered one of the most amazing phenomenon in history.”<sup>1544</sup>

At the same time, Meyendorff reminds us that, although Pseudo-Dionysius had a significant effect on the Early Church, the latter never totally accepted his teachings, especially his understanding of the sacraments.<sup>1545</sup> On the other hand, Burgess considers Dionysius as “perhaps the most influential intellectual father and spiritual master of Christian contemplatives both in East and West for a thousand years after his death. In the Middle Ages, his writings were put almost on the same footing as the inspired writers of Scripture.”<sup>1546</sup>

Other Eastern Orthodox writers also openly acknowledge that the Fathers’ borrowed from the Neoplatonic worldview. Lossky states that between Dionysius and Plotinus exists “a striking resemblance.”<sup>1547</sup> Lossky considers that Plotinus reached the height of ancient (non-biblical) thought and claims that many Church Fathers assimilated his thought and brought it to completion.<sup>1548</sup> Archimandrite Nikon lists Plotinus among early Christian writers and says of him, “Plotinus taught of ‘God-likeness’ even more precisely.”<sup>1549</sup> Furthermore, Nikon quotes him authoritatively.<sup>1550</sup>

Aside from Neoplatonism, Greek philosophy in general influenced patristic theology. Andrey Kuraev writes, “Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory Nazianzen were able to complete studies at the University in Athens (a still pagan institution) before it closed and counseled their disciples to include in their Christian walk the great pagan authors.”<sup>1551</sup> In comparing Eastern and Western theology, Kuraev reveals the former’s dependence on Greek thought: “Rome never knew names like Aristotle and Socrates, Plato and Plotinus,”<sup>1552</sup> and, “The West received Aristotle and philosophers from antiquity (which were never lost to the Orthodox world)...”<sup>1553</sup> Lossky also sees value in borrowing from Greek philosophy:

Theology should be expressed in the language of the world. It was no accident that God placed the Church Fathers in a Greek context. The required philosophical clarity combined with a need for deep insight motivated them to purify and sanctify the language of the philosophers and mystics in order to communicate the Christian good news, giving it... its universal meaning.<sup>1554</sup>

Zaitsev summarizes well the effect of Neoplatonism on early Christianity:

In the mystical Christian tradition, a tendency is observed to speak about God in an obviously Neoplatonic manner, highlighting God’s unapproachable essence. This tendency reached its climax in the Areopagite, where His super-essential nature is constantly emphasized. It is seen in the works of Maximus the Confessor and Gregory Palamas as well.”<sup>1555</sup>

### C. Comparison of Neoplatonism and Patristic Theology

We will now investigate how the Neoplatonic worldview was expressed in the teaching of many Church Fathers and continues to find expression in the Church today, especially in the East. The teaching of the “ascent

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<sup>1544</sup>Ibid., p. 308. Author’s translation.

<sup>1545</sup>Ibid., p. 309-310.

<sup>1546</sup>Burgess S. M. The Holy Spirit: Eastern Christian Traditions. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1989. – P. 34.

<sup>1547</sup>Лосский, p. 25. Author’s translation.

<sup>1548</sup>Ibid., p. 201.

<sup>1549</sup>Слово об обожении // под ред. Архимандрита Никона (Иванова) и Протоиерея Николая Лихоманова. – М.: Сибирская Благовонница, 2004. – P. 14. Author’s translation.

<sup>1550</sup>Ibid., p. 19. Author’s translation.

<sup>1551</sup>Курьев А. Протестантам о православии. – 7-е изд. – Ростов-на-Дону: Троицкое Слово, 2003. – P. 51. Author’s translation.

<sup>1552</sup>Ibid., p. 55. Author’s translation.

<sup>1553</sup>Ibid., p. 72. Author’s translation.

<sup>1554</sup>Лосский, p. 203. Author’s translation.

<sup>1555</sup>Зайцев, p. 220-221. Author’s translation.

to God,” characteristic of Plotinus’ philosophy, is well accepted among Eastern Orthodox thinkers. Lossky, for example, writes that God’s “original plan was a direct and unmediated ascent of people to God.”<sup>1556</sup> This ascent is connected to an “effusion” from God and “descent” by God. Florovsky comments on the presence of this idea among earlier writers: “Following St. Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius, St. Maximus speaks of a charitable effusion or imparting of Good – a Neoplatonic image.”<sup>1557</sup>

We also note in this regard the patristic doctrine of salvation through the incarnation of God’s Son, as discussed and refuted in chapter 10 of this volume. The Son of God must become incarnate (i.e., “descend”) in order to become an ontological “bridge” between the uncreated God and created humanity, thus making possible people’s “ascent” to God. Many Church Fathers echoed the following thought: “The Son became man, so that man might become God.” However, representing Jesus as an ontological “bridge” corresponds, in Meyendorff’s words, to an “‘Alexandrian worldview,’ according to which the world is structured by the principle of a hierarchical ladder.”<sup>1558</sup> It is necessary “to fill up the gap between the absolute God and relative creation.”<sup>1559</sup> Meyendorff acknowledges, “This was, however, a Hellenistic cosmology, dressed in Christian clothing.”<sup>1560</sup>

In the following except from Pseudo-Dionysius, we see a clear connection between his theology and the Neoplatonic conception of emanations from the One:

Since the All-perfect Goodness, in passing through all, not only passes to the All-good beings around Itself, but extends Itself to the most remote, by being present to some thoroughly, to others subordinately, but to the rest, in the most remote degree, as each existing thing is able to participate in It. And some things, indeed, participate in the Good entirely, whilst others are deprived of It, in a more or less degree, but others possess a more obscure participation in the Good; and to the rest, the Good is present as a most distant echo.<sup>1561</sup>

Keck claims that Pseudo-Dionysius’ concept of an angelic hierarchy (see chapter 13 of this volume) comes from Neoplatonism. He comments, “Each higher order of angels transmits knowledge and instruction through the next lower angels, and only the lowest rank of angels, the angels, interacts with the mundane world directly.”<sup>1562</sup> Burgess adds that the hierarchy of angels aids people to attain unification with God.<sup>1563</sup> In his work *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, John of Damascus approves of Pseudo-Dionysius’ concept of an angelic hierarchy (see 2.3).

Furthermore, Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of God as the “One”: “But One, because He is uniquely all, as befits an excess of unique Oneness, and is Cause of all without departing from the One.”<sup>1564</sup> Like the Neoplatonic understanding of the impersonal One, the God of Pseudo-Dionysius is “in absolute rest and does not manifest Himself externally in any way.”<sup>1565</sup> Lossky supports this view: “The one God abides in absolute rest, and His perfect ‘immobility’ places Him outside of time and space.”<sup>1566</sup> Nikon notes that God, in His essence, enjoys “eternal rest.”<sup>1567</sup> Bray affirms that such a view derives from a Neoplatonism worldview, where

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<sup>1556</sup> Лосский, p. 280. Author’s translation.

<sup>1557</sup> Florovsky G. *Byzantine Fathers of the Sixth to Eighth Centuries* / Trans. Raymond Miller, et al. – Postfach: Buchvertriebsanstalt, 1987. – P. 221-222.

<sup>1558</sup> Мейендорф, p. 304. Author’s translation.

<sup>1559</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>1561</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius. *On the Divine Names*, 3.20. *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite* / Trans. John Parker. – London: James Parker and Co., 1897. – P. 55-56.

<sup>1562</sup> Keck D. *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*. – New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. – P. 54, 58.

<sup>1563</sup> Burgess, p. 34.

<sup>1564</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius. *On the Divine Names*, 13.2. *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, p. 123.

<sup>1565</sup> Лосский, p. 57. Author’s translation.

<sup>1566</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>1567</sup> Слово об обожении, p. 18.

God is found in “uninterrupted tranquility.”<sup>1568</sup> Bloesch makes the following objection to “Christian mysticism” in general:

The Christian mystic sought to maintain the catholic doctrine of the Trinity, but by envisaging God in Neoplatonic terms as a motionless, undifferentiated unity they were not able to preserve the biblical conception of a God who actively works in history and identifies with our pain and sorrow. To find the pure god, they said, we need to rise above words and images, time and materiality, to the realm of pure spirit.<sup>1569</sup>

We also find coherence between the Neoplatonic idea that “all returns to the One and unites with Him” and the following statement by Metropolitan of Moscow Philaret: “(His glory) is bestowed from Him, accepted by the participants, returns to Him, and in this, so to speak, the circulation of the glory of God consists of the blessed life and well-being of creation.”<sup>1570</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius concurs, “There is no single thing which does not participate in some way in the one, which uniformly pre-held in the uniqueness throughout all, all and whole, all, even the things opposed.”<sup>1571</sup>

Archimandrite Nikon proposes that people play a key role in this cycle: “People, abiding in God, must lead all creation to deification, for which purpose all creation received its existence from God.”<sup>1572</sup> Florovsky cites the teaching of Maximus the Confessor in this regard: “Man must unite everything in himself and through himself unite with God”<sup>1573</sup> and, “The multitude of creatures are united around the single human nature.”<sup>1574</sup> Nikon confirms, “The lives of the holy Fathers testify that people who attain a high level of deification, deeply experience their unity with their entire surrounding world, awaiting the revelation of the children of God (Rom 8:18-22).”<sup>1575</sup> In summary, “Everything will manifest God alone. Nothing will remain outside of God.... Everything will be deified – God will be everything, and in everything.”<sup>1576</sup>

So then, the human dilemma and dilemma of all creation is a descent into a condition of “disunity,” which leads to disfellowship with the “One.” Lossky writes, “After the original sin, human nature is divided, fractured, and torn apart into many individuals.”<sup>1577</sup> According to the teaching of Maximus the Confessor, the elimination of disunity in creation must take place gradually. First, the distinctions between the male and female genders must go, then between Paradise and earth, heaven and earth, spiritual and sensual nature, and, in conclusion, between the Creator and the creature.<sup>1578</sup>

The apophatic understanding of God’s incomprehensibility also derives from Neoplatonism. Meyendorff writes in this regard, “Dionysius follows apophatic theology: as among Neoplatonists, God is unknowable, ineffable, and cannot be subject to any affirmative definition.”<sup>1579</sup> Lossky acknowledges this similarity: “This approach (i.e. apophatism) is also employed by Neoplatonists and in Hinduism.”<sup>1580</sup> Zaitsev asserts, “It is necessary to note that apophatic theology, although it has a long history in Christian tradition,... in reality arose

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<sup>1568</sup>Bray, p. 56.

<sup>1569</sup>Bloesch D. G. *God the Almighty*. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 176.

<sup>1570</sup>Noted in Лосский, p. 59. Translation by Google Translator.

<sup>1571</sup>Pseudo-Dionysius. *On the Divine Names*, 13.2. The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite, p. 123.

<sup>1572</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 69. Author’s translation.

<sup>1573</sup>Florovsky, p. 225.

<sup>1574</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 69. Author’s translation.

<sup>1575</sup>Ibid., p. 70. Author’s translation.

<sup>1576</sup>The position of Maximus the Confessor, as represented by Florovsky, p. 244-245.

<sup>1577</sup>Лосский, p. 94. Author’s translation.

<sup>1578</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 69.

<sup>1579</sup>Мейендорф, p. 301. Author’s translation.

<sup>1580</sup>Лосский, p. 204-205. Yet, Lossky stresses that unlike Orthodox Faith, in Neoplatonism and Hinduism God is impersonal.



in Greek philosophy”<sup>1581</sup> and, “Apophatic theology traces its roots to the mysticism of Origen and Greek philosophy and receives its classic development in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius.”<sup>1582</sup>

A striking parallel exists between the concept of “emanations” from the One and the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of God’s “uncreated energies.” The God of Pseudo-Dionysius has two aspects: “Unities” and “Distinction.” These two aspects correspond to Plotinus’ system of the “One” and its “emanations.” Lossky describes Pseudo-Dionysius’ teaching: “‘Unities’” are ‘secret abidings that do not reveal themselves’ – a super-essential nature in which God abides, as it were, in absolute peace and does not manifest Himself in anything outside. ‘Distinction,’ on the contrary, is the procession of the Divine outward... Its manifestations.”<sup>1583</sup> Zaitsev proposes that the system of “essence – energies” appeared in the works of Proclus and, through Dionysius, spread to the Church.<sup>1584</sup>

In addition, the system of “emanations” reminds us of the Orthodox understanding of the “sole rule” of God the Father, according to which the Son is eternally begotten from Him and the Spirit eternally proceeds from Him. Although patristic theology recognizes that the Son and Spirit’s “emanation” from the Father occurs on the level of God’s essence and not His energies, nonetheless, this “movement” of the Son and Spirit out from the Father strongly hints at a Neoplatonic origin of this idea.

One may also draw a parallel between the Neoplatonic concept of the “Nous” and the patristic understanding of God’s nature. According to Maximus the Confessor, Christ is the “source and focus of an ideal world.”<sup>1585</sup> Zaitsev comments that Clement of Alexandria “thinks of God, in general, as the ‘Nous.’”<sup>1586</sup> Similarly, Nikon speaks of the “Mind” as an irreplaceable element in the process of a person’s ascent to God: “The human mind is merely the reflection of the Eternal and First Mind, to which it corresponds. In this case, the human mind, as a symbol and reflection of the Eternal Mind, teaches us through contemplation of it to ascend to the First Image, the Eternal Mind.”<sup>1587</sup>

Additionally, patristic theology echoes the idea of the penetration of the “World Soul” into the material world. Lossky equates this with the “eternal energies”: “In the created world... exists infinite and eternal energies.”<sup>1588</sup> Similar to Neoplatonic teaching, the Eastern Orthodox teach that the human soul is one of the elements that unites creation with God: “This harmony and unity appears in the connection between the material world and the human body, between the human body and soul, and between the human soul and God.”<sup>1589</sup>

Maximus the Confessor taught that God “encloses, unites, embraces and providentially connects with an internal connection all things that exist among themselves and with Himself.” This “hidden and unknown presence of the unifying Cause is present in all beings in various ways.”<sup>1590</sup> In addition, Maximus’ teaching of spiritual (mental) and sensual (physical) aspects of the world reminds one of the Neoplatonic concept of the relationship between the World Soul and the material world: “The world comprehended by the mind is found in the perceptible world, as the spirit (lit. ‘soul’) is in the body, while the perceptible world is joined with the world comprehended by the mind like the body is joined with the soul.”<sup>1591</sup> Vishnevskaya claims that Maximus

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<sup>1581</sup>Зайцев, p. 214. Author’s translation.

<sup>1582</sup>Ibid., p. 18. Author’s translation.

<sup>1583</sup>Лосский, p. 57. Translation from Google translator.

<sup>1584</sup>Ibid., p. 221-222. Yet, the teaching of Pseudo-Dionysius differs from Neoplatonism in that the former taught that God, in His energies, expresses Himself, while in Neoplatonism, the “Nous” and the “World Soul,” being only emanations, are lower in quality than the One (Мейендорф, p. 302).

<sup>1585</sup>Florovsky, p. 243.

<sup>1586</sup>Зайцев, p. 55.

<sup>1587</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 19. Author’s translation.

<sup>1588</sup>Лосский, p. 59. Author’s translation.

<sup>1589</sup>Слово об обожении, p. 69. Author’s translation.

<sup>1590</sup>Ibid., p. 12. Translation from Google translator.

<sup>1591</sup>Florovsky, p. 224.

went to the extreme of saying that the created world is part of God, and that the *logoi* in the created world subsist in the Logos that existed in God.<sup>1592</sup>

Similarities exist as well in how Neoplatonism and patristic theology describe the “ascent to God.” Both systems require the practice of virtuous living. Peter of Damascus wrote, “In the end they (i.e., the commandments) make a man god, through the grace of Him who has given the commandments to those who choose to keep them.”<sup>1593</sup> Likewise, Maximus the Confessor taught, “Love makes a man god.”<sup>1594</sup> In both systems, along with virtuous living, one must practice contemplation. Nikon states that through contemplation a person can “ascend to the First Image, the Eternal Mind.”<sup>1595</sup>

After mastering these ethical and meditative practices, the final step in both systems is mystical unification with God (or the One). In Lossky’s words, the worshiper must aim for the goal of “unification with God in His energies, or unification by grace, making us participants in the Divine nature.”<sup>1596</sup> Maximus the Confessor says the same: “He should make man a god through union with Himself.”<sup>1597</sup>

Maximus’ description of the believer’s ascent to God, as described by Florovsky, precisely matches the one proposed in Neoplatonism.<sup>1598</sup> The first step is recognizing the Logos in the created world (i.e., the “World Soul”): “The problem with knowledge is to see and recognize in the world its first-created foundations.”<sup>1599</sup> Thus, one begins with a more elementary contemplative task before attempting unification with God. Next, one moves on the the level of the “Mind” and then beyond: “The mind must leave the mental or intellectual world and ascend even higher to the mysterious darkness of Divinity itself” and, “The mind rises higher than forms and ideas, and communicates with Divine unity and peace.”<sup>1600</sup> Finally, “Only towards the end does the mind which is hardened in prayerful ‘ordeal’ know God.”<sup>1601</sup>

#### D. Conclusion

We note many obvious and striking similarities between Neoplatonism, patristic theology, and Eastern Orthodoxy in their views on God and unification with Him. They are not merely chance occurrences, but arise from a common source – the city of Alexandria. It is not accidental that, in general, the Alexandrian Fathers developed and promoted this teaching in the Church.

Eastern Orthodox theologians often object that the similarities between their faith and Neoplatonism do not concern the contents of their teaching, but simply the form of its expression.<sup>1602</sup> In other words, the Alexandrian Fathers did not borrow a worldview from Neoplatonism, but only structures and terminology in order to express Christian truth in a way more acceptable to their culture.

We admit that differences do exist between these groups. For example, in Neoplatonism there are no distinctions in the One, while patristic teaching acknowledges the Trinity. In addition, in Neoplatonism the emanations are manifestations of the One, while Orthodoxy teaches creation from nothing. Furthermore, Neoplatonists strive for unification with God, while the Fathers maintain the preservation of a person’s

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<sup>1592</sup> *Ambigua*, 7, taken from Vishnevskaya T. Divinization as Perichoretic Embrace in Maximus the Confessor // Christensen M. J., Wittung J. A. Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions. – Madison: Fairleigh Dickson University Press, 2007. – P. 140.

<sup>1593</sup> Treasury of Divine Knowledge (*Philokalia*, 3.93), noted in Clendenin D. Eastern Orthodox Christianity. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994. – P. 137.

<sup>1594</sup> Various Texts on Theology 1:27-32, *Philokalia*, 2:171, noted in Clendenin, p. 136-137.

<sup>1595</sup> Слово об обожении, p. 19. Author’s translation.

<sup>1596</sup> Лосский, p. 67-68. Author’s translation.

<sup>1597</sup> See Florovsky, p. 216.

<sup>1598</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259, 284.

<sup>1599</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 221.

<sup>1600</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>1601</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>1602</sup> Лосский, p. 25-27; Иларион А. Таинство Веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – P. 222; Мейендорф, p. 303.

individuality. Another distinction is that patristic theology teaches the deification of the human body, which Neoplatonism rejects. Finally, Neoplatonism does not acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Son of God.

Therefore, we concur that the teachings of Neoplatonism and patristic/Eastern Orthodox theology are not identical. Nonetheless, there are enough common characteristics between these systems and sufficient differences from biblical revelation to confidently conclude that, in many ways, patristic/Eastern Orthodox theology is not Christianity expressed in the form of Neoplatonism, but Neoplatonism adapted to Christian teaching. We will list several foundational concepts common to both Neoplatonism and patristic theology, which have no biblical support, i.e., they are foreign to true Christianity:

- Apophatic depiction of God's essence;
- Impassibility and immobility of God's essence;
- Distinction between God's essence and His energies;
- The interpenetration of God's energies into creation;
- Creation of an ontological "bridge" between God and people;
- Return of all creation to God and its unification with Him;
- Deification of humans and all creation;
- Salvation through good works and contemplation, leading to unification with God.

It is misguided to think that these commonalities are simply random overlaps with Neoplatonism, or that they play an insignificant role in patristic/Eastern Orthodox theology – they form the very heart of patristic thought. These points do not align with Christian faith based on Scripture, but align with the philosophical system of Plotinus and his followers, whether pagan or Christian.

One must also ask that if the main reason the Eastern Fathers used this method was to communicate Christian truth to their culture, then why should the Church continue to employ this system today? These concepts are completely foreign to the modern mind and do not clarify spiritual truths, but rather muddle them.

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<http://www.hesychasm.ru/library/dar/tname.htm>

# Appendix B: Jehovah's Witnesses on the Deity of Christ

## A. Introduction

At the present time, the group that most openly denounces the deity of Jesus Christ is the Jehovah's Witnesses.<sup>1603</sup> The movement's founder, Charles Russell (1852-1916), was a successful American businessman. In 1872, he opened a group for the study of Scripture and seven years later began issuing the journal *The Watchtower*. He followed this with a book named *Food for Thinking Christians*. The essence of his teachings is contained in a six volume series named *Studies in the Scriptures*. A seventh volume exists, but its authorship is disputed. Russell also travelled extensively, planting new congregations.

After Russell's death, Joseph Rutherford (1869-1942), a former Baptist and lawyer, led the movement. He organized those congregations that followed Russell's teaching into the Jehovah's Witnesses. He added about 100 publications of his own. Following Rutherford, Nathan Knorr took over leadership. Under his direction, the movement grew from 115,000 to 2 million adherents.

The standard Bible translation used by the Jehovah's Witnesses in the New World Translation (abbr. NWT), which differs greatly from standard translations.

## B. The Deity of Jesus Christ

What do the Jehovah's Witnesses believe about Jesus Christ?<sup>1604</sup> According to their teachings, He is not the eternal Son of God, but was created by God, whom they call Jehovah. This is why Christ is called the "Son of God" and the "Firstborn." He is also named "Only Begotten" since He is the only one that Jehovah created directly. The Son, in turn, created all else. Jesus is considered to be "god," but in a secondary sense – not of the same divine nature as Jehovah. He is also identified with Michael the Archangel.

When the Son became human, He laid aside His divine nature to "be made like His brethren in all things" (Heb 2:17). He was born of the virgin Mary as a perfect human. All that remained of His sub-divine nature was a "vital power." Only at the time of His water baptism did He begin to remember His earlier heavenly existence. During His earthly ministry, Jesus preached the kingdom of God, performed miracles, and revealed to people the nature of Jehovah.

Jesus was crucified – not on a cross, but on a stake. His death involved the complete destruction of His human nature. In this way, He became a "sacrifice" for sin. He rose again, not physically, but spiritually, thus recapturing His original spiritual nature.

In this appendix, we will discuss Scripture texts that appear in the debate between Jehovah's Witnesses and conservative Christians in an effort to give clarity to the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ.

### John 1:1

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<sup>1603</sup>History taken from Martin W. R., Klann N. H. Jehovah of the Watch Tower. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953. – P. 11-42.

<sup>1604</sup>See Reasoning from the Scriptures. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1989. – P. 209-211; Make Sure of All Things, Hold Fast to What is Fine. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, 1965. P. 254-255; Duncan H. Jehovah's Witnesses and the Deity of Christ. – Lubbock, TX: Missionary Crusade. P. 17; McKinney G. D. The Theology of the Jehovah's Witnesses. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962. – 125 p.; What Does the Bible Really Teach? – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2005. – P. 220-224; <http://www.jw.org/en/publications/magazines/wp20110401/jesus-where-he-came-from>; <http://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings>; Schnell W. J. Into the Light of Christianity: The Basic Doctrines of the Jehovah's Witnesses in the Light of Scripture. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1962. P. 155, 165, 174-175; Rutherford J. F. Millions Now Living Will Never Die. – Brooklyn, NY: International Bible Students Association, 1920. – P. 73; Martin W. R., Klann N. H. Jehovah of the Watch Tower. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953. – P. 29, 88-92; The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1991. – P. 10, 42-43.

The most hotly debated passage of Scripture about Christ's deity is the initial verse of John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn 1:1). In the New World Translation, the verse is rendered, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god." Jehovah's Witnesses refer to the Word as divine in a secondary sense, as a "god." They deny that Jesus Christ shares the same divine nature as the Father (Jehovah).

The original Greek text reads as follows:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

The Watchtower's interpretation of this verse derives from the lack of the Greek article before the final appearance of θεός (*theos*), "God," in the sentence. The Greek article indicates a specific or well-known object or person. A noun without the definite article is not specifically defined. Therefore, the Word is not "the God," but something less definite – "a god."

The Jehovah's Witnesses support their view by appealing to other translations similar to their own:<sup>1605</sup>

- The Logos [Word] was divine (*A New Translation of the Bible*)
- The Word was a god (*The New Testament in an Improved Version*)
- The Word was with God and shared his nature (*The Translator's New Testament*)

The issue with this verse is how to correctly translate a predicate nominative that precedes the verbal component. In our case, the compound predicate is θεὸς ἦν (*theos ein*), i.e., "was God." In such an instance, is the predicate nominative (θεός) definite or indefinite? A third option also exists – the lack of the Greek article can infer quality (that is, "divine").

E. C. Colwell, in his groundbreaking article *A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament*,<sup>1606</sup> found that if the predicate nominative is deemed definite by context, it lacks the article in 87% of cases where it precedes the verbal component. He discovered only 15 examples where such a noun had the article. When a definite predicate nominative follows the verbal component, it has the article in 90% of cases.<sup>1607</sup> A study of the Septuagint and Church Fathers yields similar results. Colwell concluded, "A predicate nominative which precedes the verb cannot be translated as an indefinite or a 'qualitative' noun solely because of the absence of the article."<sup>1608</sup>

This research resulted in the issuing of the famous "Colwell's Rule": "Definite predicate nouns which precede the verb usually lack the article."<sup>1609</sup> Colwell produced several interesting examples of his rule. John 1:49, for example, reads, ἀπεκρίθη αὐτῷ Ναθαναήλ· ῥαββί, σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ, σὺ βασιλεὺς εἶ τοῦ Ἰσραήλ, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." He observed that the predicate nominative βασιλεὺς (*basileus*), "king," precedes the verb and is definite without having the definite article.

Note also in this verse that the definite predicate nominative ὁ υἱὸς (*ho huios*), "son," follows the verb and has the definite article. In fact, the predicate nominative "Son of God" follows the verb 30 times in the New Testament and always takes the Greek article.<sup>1610</sup> On the other hand, in 9 of 10 cases where it precedes the verb, it lacks the article.<sup>1611</sup> The same phenomenon is observed with the predicate nominative "Son of Man" (see Matt 13:37; Jn 5:27).

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<sup>1605</sup>What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 202.

<sup>1606</sup>Colwell E. C. A Definite Rule for the Use of the Article in the Greek New Testament // Journal of Biblical Literature. 1933. 52. P. 12-21.

<sup>1607</sup>Colwell excluded instances in conditional sentences, proper names, and simple sentences such as "God is love."

<sup>1608</sup>Wallace D. B. Greek Grammar beyond the Basics. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – P. 257.

<sup>1609</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1610</sup>See Matt 16:16; 26:63; Mk 3:11; 15:39; Lk 4:11; 22:70; Jn 1:39, 49; 11:27; 20:31; Acts 9:20; 1 Jn 4:15; 5:5.

<sup>1611</sup>See Matt 4:3, 6; 14:33; 27:40, 54; Lk 4:3, 9; Mk 15:39; Jn 10:36.

In another example, the same definite predicate nominative either has the article or lacks it depending on its position in the sentence. We read in John 19:21: μὴ γράφε· ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ἀλλ' ὅτι ἐκεῖνος εἶπεν· βασιλεὺς εἰμι τῶν Ἰουδαίων, "Do not write, 'The King of the Jews'; but that He said, 'I am King of the Jews.'" <sup>1612</sup>

We may also mention observance of this rule with predicate nominatives such as "Light of the world," (Jn 8:12; 9:5; Matt 5:14), "My mother," (Matt 12:48; 12:50), and "greatest" (Matt 18:1, 4). Especially remarkable is Matthew 13:37-39, where five times the article stands before a definite predicate nominative that follows the verb and twice the article is absent when a definite predicate nominative precedes the verb. <sup>1613</sup>

Colwell notes occurrences where variant readings of a text also reflect this rule. In other words, one variant has the article before a definite predicate nominative that follows the verb, while another variant of that same text removes the article when the definite predicate nominative is placed before the verb (see Jn 1:49; Matt 23:10; Jam 2:19).

Forty years later, Phillip Harner researched this phenomenon even more closely in the Gospels of Mark and John. <sup>1614</sup> In particular, he investigated over 50 cases in John's Gospel where a predicate nominative preceded the verb without the article. In 40 of those cases, he determined that the noun reflected "quality" without commenting on whether the noun should be considered definite or indefinite. An example is John 8:31: ἀληθῶς μαθηταὶ μου ἐστε, "You are truly disciples of Mine." The quality of "discipline" is in focus. In John 9:24, ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἁμαρτωλός ἐστιν, "This man is a sinner," the idea of quality of character is again in focus. Therefore, Harner asserts that in John 1:1, we should translate θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος as "the Word was divine," that is, has the quality of God.

We must qualify Harner's findings, though, by saying that he recognized that the categories of "quality" and "definiteness" are not mutually exclusive. A predicate nominative preceding the verb can reflect both factors. We see this in several examples. In Mark 2:28, Jesus has the "quality" of being "Lord" of the Sabbath. Yet, He has that quality by virtue of the fact that He Himself is the Lord. Mark 12:35 is another example – Jesus has the "quality" of being the Son of David, i.e., the "right to rule." Yet again, He has that quality by virtue of the fact that He indeed is the Son of David. Similarly, if John 1:1 is taken to mean that Jesus has the quality of divinity, He has that quality by virtue of the fact that He Himself is God.

Another valuable contribution by Harner is his listing of the five possible ways the apostle John could have completed John 1:1:

- ὁ λόγος ἦν ὁ θεός
- θεός ἦν ὁ λόγος (Jn 1:1)
- ὁ λόγος θεός ἦν
- ὁ λόγος ἦν θεός
- ὁ λόγος ἦν θεῖος (θεῖος = divine, see Acts 17:29; 2 Pet 1:3-4). <sup>1615</sup>

However, John could not have used the first option because the article before both nouns renders them identical. Yet, the Word and the Father are not the same Person as indicated in the phrase ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, "The Word was with God". Therefore, John needed a way to express both that the Word was God (in His nature), yet was distinct from Father (in His Person).

If John wanted to specifically indicate that Jesus was God in a lesser sense than the Father, i.e., a "god," he could have employed variant № 4 or № 5 since, "an anarthrous predicate nominative that *follows* the verb will

<sup>1612</sup>In the following passages, the predicate nominative ὁ βασιλεὺς τῶν Ἰουδαίων, "the King of the Jews," follows the verb and has the article: Matt 27:11, 37; Mk 15:2; Lk 23:3, 37; Jn 18:33. In Matthew 27:42, the predicate nominative "King of Israel" precedes the verb and lacks the article: βασιλεὺς Ἰσραὴλ ἐστιν, "He is the King of Israel."

<sup>1613</sup>Similar features in Matthew 23:8-10.

<sup>1614</sup>Harner P. B. Qualitative Anarthrous Predicate Nouns: Mark 15:39 and John 1:1. // Journal of Biblical Literature. 92. 1973. P. 75–87.

<sup>1615</sup>In Acts 17:27 and Titus 1:9, this word is found only in a textual variant (Arndt W., Gingrich F. W., Danker F. W., Bauer W. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature. – Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979. – P. 446).

usually be either qualitative or *indefinite*.”<sup>1616</sup> Yet, he did not do that. In order to communicate that the Word was fully God, yet differed from God the Father, the only two options John had open to him were variants № 2 and № 3. The second option is preferable since such a construction emphasizes that the Word possesses God’s qualities.

Jehovah’s Witnesses recognize that placing the Greek article before both “Word” and “God” would make them identical, but nonetheless they insist that the article’s absence before θεός (*theos*) shows that the Word “is not the same god as the God with whom the Word is said to be.”<sup>1617</sup> Yet, this view fails to appreciate the difference between being identified with the Father as one Person and sharing with Him the same nature. Christians agree that the Word “is not the same god as the God with whom the Word is said to be” in His *Person*. Nonetheless, the Son is equal to the Father in quality and dignity. He is also θεός (*theos*). The grammatical construction used in John 1:1 “stresses that, although the person of Christ is not the person of the Father, their essence is identical.”<sup>1618</sup>

Another researcher who devoted serious attention to the interpretation of John 1:1 is Daniel Wallace. He summarizes the above discussion by stating the rule, “*An anarthrous pre-verbal PN is normally qualitative, sometimes definite, and only rarely indefinite*.”<sup>1619</sup> Wallace went on to show that in verbless clauses, the same rule applies – an anarthrous predicate nominative before the subject was associated with quality or definiteness.<sup>1620</sup>

We must also mention that the Greek article is often omitted before proper names. Since θεός (*theos*), “God,” is practically a proper name, the article is usually not used, even though the noun is definite. We note 282 instances where the article is omitted before θεός (*theos*).<sup>1621</sup>

It is also important examine the context of John 1:1 since in it divine qualities and activities are ascribed to Christ. He is the Light (v. 8), Life (v. 4), and Creator (v. 2-3). Concerning the last feature, John clearly draws a parallel between the first chapter of his Gospel and Genesis chapter 1, where creation is ascribed to God. The Old Testament in general makes God the exclusive agent in creation (see Isa 44:24; 48:13; 40:28; Neh 9:6).<sup>1622</sup>

Moreover, Wallace compares the verbal form describing the eternal nature of God’s Son in verse 1 – Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος – with the verbal form describing His incarnation in verse 14 – ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο. The verb ἦν (*ein*), i.e., “was (God),” is in the Greek imperfect tense, indicating continuous action in the past and, in this case, the eternal nature of the Word. The verb ἐγένετο (*egeneto*), “became (flesh),” is in the Greek aorist tense, which typically indicates a single past action. So then, Christ “was” God eternally and “became” human in time.<sup>1623</sup>

So then, in the light of our discussion above, the only appropriate translations of John 1:1 are: “The Word was God (the definite θεός – *theos*) or “The Word was Divine” (θεός – *theos* as quality). The translation “The Word was a god (indefinite θεός – *theos*) corresponds poorly both to the usage of this construction in New Testament Greek and to the context of John chapter 1.

If θεός (*theos*) in John 1:1 refers to the “quality of God,” this does not imply that Jesus is inferior to the Father in quality or dignity. Christians affirm that the “divinity” of Jesus means that He is one in nature and equal in dignity to God the Father. Our conclusion finds further support in the surrounding context and in other

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<sup>1616</sup>Wallace, p. 262.

<sup>1617</sup>New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1971. – P. 1362.

<sup>1618</sup>Wallace, p. 269.

<sup>1619</sup>Wallace, p. 262. Wallace could only locate four specific examples of an indefinite predicate nominative in that position: 1 Tim 6:10; Jn 6:70; 4:19; Didache 11:8 (p. 265-267). The Jehovah’s Witnesses propose other instances, but they do not qualify: John 6:70; 9:24-25:12:6 better fit in the category of “quality,” and John 10:33 does not contain the verb εἰμί (*eimi*), but its corresponding participle ὢν (*hon*) (see New World Translation, p. 1363).

<sup>1620</sup>Wallace, p. 269-270.

<sup>1621</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

<sup>1622</sup>Орест Б. Учение свидетелей Иеговы об Иисусе Христе // Курсовая работа, Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2013; Schnell, p. 178.

<sup>1623</sup>Wallace D. B. Greek Grammar beyond the Basics. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996. – P. 269.



passages of Scripture affirming Christ's deity (see chapter 9). We also add that the word θεός (*theos*) can reasonably be taken as a definite predicate nominative, and not simply reflect divine quality.

### **John 1:18**

Later in John's first chapter, he writes about Jesus, "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained {Him}." As before, the New World Translators again call Jesus a god: "No man has seen God at any time; the only-begotten god who is at the Father's side is the one who has explained Him." The Jehovah's Witnesses note two points. First, it is written, "No one has seen God at any time." Yet, people have seen Jesus. Therefore, He cannot be God.<sup>1624</sup> Second, Jesus is the "only begotten." Does not this mean that the Father created Him?

To the first objection, we respond that no one has seen God in His non-incarnate form. In His incarnate form, of course, He can be seen. In the Old Testament, select people saw God in the form of a "theophany," that is, in a partial, visible manifestation (see Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:26-28; Num 12:8; Ex 33:23 etc.). John is referring to the fact that no one has ever seen God in *all His glory*.

Our interpretation finds confirmation in verse 14 of this chapter, where we read, "We saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father." Since no one can see God in all His glory, a more "muted" (incarnate) manifestation of God was necessary and accomplished in the Person of Jesus Christ. This is why the Son came to "reveal" the Father. Consider Moses' experience (Ex 33:23). He also could not behold Yahweh in all His glory. We also recall Paul's words, "...who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:16). Again, it is clear that no one has seen God in the full display of His glory (i.e., unapproachable light).

Concerning the depiction "only begotten," we note that John did not write that the Father "created" the Son, but that the latter was "begotten." The Nicene Creed insists that the Son was "begotten, not made." This phenomenon is discussed in chapter 8 of this volume on the Trinity.

### **John 5:18**

In the fifth chapter of His Gospel, John narrates, "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God" (Jn 5:18). The Watchtower adherents explain this by claiming that these Jews did not properly understand Jesus. He was simply referring to God as His father, not making a claim to deity Himself.<sup>1625</sup>

However, in the following discussion Jesus does not correct their supposed misunderstanding in order to escape their threatenings. Just the opposite – He insisted even more strongly on His deity: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes. For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son, so that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (v. 21-23).

### **John 8:58**

One of the clearest self-declarations of Christ deity is John 8:58, where Jesus claims to be the same God who spoke with Moses in the wilderness, the "I Am" (see discussion of this passage in chapter 9).

The Jehovah's Witnesses offer various rebuttals. The New World Translation renders the verse, "Jesus said to them: "Most truly I say to you, before Abraham came into existence, I have been." However, the verb εἶμι

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<sup>1624</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 213; Let God Be True. – 2nd ed. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1952; What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 203.

<sup>1625</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 214.

(*eimi*), “I Am,” is in the present tense, not the past. The Jehovah’s Witnesses respond that translation in the past tense is appropriate because the phrase ἐγὼ εἰμί, “I Am,” follows a construction with an infinitive πρὶν Ἀβραὰμ γενέσθαι, “before Abraham was.”<sup>1626</sup> However, in Greek there is no such rule that after a clause with an infinitive one must translate a present tense verb in the past tense.

Furthermore, Watchtower adherents object that Jesus’ words, ἐγὼ εἰμί, (“I Am”) do not correspond to Exodus 3:14, where we read not ἐγὼ εἰμί, but ὁ ὢν (“The Existing One”).<sup>1627</sup> They error, though, in appealing to the Septuagint instead of the more reliable Hebrew text, which reads אֶהְיֶה, “I Am.”

They also object that Jesus is not referring here to His divine status, but to his age. In other words, He is older than Abraham, but not the Eternal God.<sup>1628</sup> Yet, Jesus’ words do not confirm this interpretation. He did not say that He was born or came into existence before Abraham, but claimed, “I Am.”

Finally, again we note that these Jews responded to Jesus’ claim by attempting to stone Him.<sup>1629</sup> Clearly, they understood perfectly that He was attributing Exodus 3:14 to Himself. These Jews were not reacting here to Jesus’ earlier statement that they were “children of the devil.” He had said this much earlier (in v. 44) and spoke to them in this way in other instances without provoking such a reaction (see Matt 12:34; 23:33). These Jews gathered stones immediately upon His statement ἐγὼ εἰμί, “I Am,” and did so not only in this case, but in similar instances when He made a claim to divinity (see Jn 10:33).<sup>1630</sup>

### **John 10:30**

Jesus said, “I and the Father are One.” Does this mean that Christ is equal in nature to the Father? The Jehovah Witnesses teach that Jesus and the Father enjoy only a unity of will and purpose, not a unity of divine nature. It is the same kind of unity that Jesus desired among His disciples: “The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one” (Jn 17:21-22).<sup>1631</sup>

However, the context of John 10:30 reveals that Jesus had something more in mind than a harmonious interrelationship. Immediately before these words, He claimed equality with the Father by saying, “I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given {them} to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch {them} out of the Father’s hand” (Jn 10:28-29). Notice in this context that Christ Himself gives eternal life – something that only God can do. Furthermore, Jesus claims equality with the Father in power – no one can snatch the sheep out of His hand, just as no one can do so out of the Father’s hand.

Finally, along with the unity of nature between the Father and the Son, they enjoy a unity of will and purpose as well. This is what Jesus is referring to in John 17:21-22 when He is urging His disciples to follow His and His Father’s example. In John 10:30, though, the point is a unity of nature between the Father and the Son, not simply a unity of purpose. The Jews of Jesus’ time, who were better interpreters of these words than the Jehovah’s Witnesses are, understood perfectly Christ’s meaning and attempted to stone Him for blasphemy.<sup>1632</sup>

### **John 10:34-36**

In John 10:34-36, Jesus is responding to objections to His claim of equality with God (see v. 30-31). He states, “Has it not been written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods, to whom the word of

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<sup>1626</sup>New World Translation, p. 1121.

<sup>1627</sup>Ibid., p. 1121.

<sup>1628</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 418.

<sup>1629</sup>Duncan, p. 31.

<sup>1630</sup>Martin, p. 54-55.

<sup>1631</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 487; Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 424; Let God Be True, p. 104.

<sup>1632</sup>Duncan, p. 32.

God came (and the Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of Him, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'"

Jehovah's Witnesses correctly observe that when Jesus says, "you are gods," He was using the word אֱלֹהִים (*elohim*) in the sense of the leaders of Israel (cf. Ps 82:6; Ex 21:6; 22:8). Yet, they are mistaken when claiming that Jesus considered Himself "god" only in this lesser sense.<sup>1633</sup> In fact, the Jehovah's Witnesses themselves do not regard Jesus as simply a human leader, but a divine being, yet inferior to Jehovah.

Warfield handles this verse quite well.<sup>1634</sup> Having already established that He is equal to the Father (see Jn 10:30-33), Jesus' goal in disputing with the Pharisees was not to assert His deity again, but to answer their charge of blasphemy. He shows that the title *Elohim* is appropriate for those who qualify for it. In the Old Testament, it applied to the judges of Israel. Therefore, the Pharisees cannot object if Jesus applies it to Himself since He is greater than Israel's judges – He is the One "whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world" (Jn 10:36).

### **John 14:1-11**

In John chapter 14, we see many examples where Christ is distinguished from God the Father: "Believe in God, believe also in Me" (v. 1), "Lord, show us the Father" (v. 8), etc. Is Christ denying His deity here?<sup>1635</sup> No, but just the opposite. In this chapter, Jesus stresses in unequivocal terms His close relationship with the Father and perfect representation of Him. He said, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also" (v. 7), "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (v. 9), and, "I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me" (v. 10). In addition, Jesus calls His disciples to believe not only in the Father, but in Him as well (v. 1). Of course, Christ is not identical to the Father – they differ as Persons. Still, this context unmistakably asserts the divine nature of the Second Person of the Trinity.

### **John 14:28**

Jesus said, "The Father is greater than I." The Watchtower feels that this verse unequivocally proves the superiority of Jehovah to Christ and excludes the possibility that the latter is fully divine.<sup>1636</sup>

In addition, Jehovah's Witnesses cite other passages leading to the same conclusion.<sup>1637</sup> The Father is the "God" of Jesus Christ (Jn 20:17; 1 Pet 1:3; Mk 15:34; Rev 3:12). Jesus considered Himself a representative of the Father (Jn 10:36; 5:37; 8:17-18; 14:1, 6, 9). Christ submits Himself to the Father (Jn 13:16; 8:42; 5:19; Lk 22:41-42), even after His ascension (1 Cor 11:3; Matt 20:23; 1 Cor 15:27-28). Only the Father knows the time of Christ's Second Coming (Matt 24:36). The Father prepares a kingdom for the Son (Matt 20:20-23). Jesus came to bring revelation from the Father (Jn 7:16) and fulfill His will (Jn 6:38). Jesus prays to the Father (Lk 6:12). The Father exalted Christ (Phil 2:9) and gave Him authority (Matt 28:18).

In defense of Christ's full divinity, we respond that these verses describe the Son's voluntary submission to the Father. They in no way reflect on some inferiority of nature. Christ's voluntary subordination to God the Father is plainly shown in Philippians 2:6-8: "Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied *Himself*" and "humbled *Himself*."

We also consider that these things are said from the vantage point of Jesus' humanity. He is not only fully God, but also fully human. Therefore, one may expect that as a human, Jesus would occupy a place of

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<sup>1633</sup>Noted in Schnell, p. 167.

<sup>1634</sup>Warfield, B. B. *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Volume 1: Revelation and Inspiration. – Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008. – P. 84.

<sup>1635</sup>From the book, *The Word Who is He, According to John*, noted in Duncan, p. 32-33.

<sup>1636</sup>What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 42

<sup>1637</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 485-486; Reasoning from the Scriptures? p. 410-411; Jesus Christ. Our Questions Answered // The Watchtower. 2012. April 1. P. 4-7; A Conversation with a neighbor. Is Jesus God? // The Watchtower. 2012. April 1. P. 20-22; The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived? p. 11-12; What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 204.

submission to the Father and dependence on Him to the point that He would call the Father His “God.” The above-mentioned indications of Jesus’ true humanity must be interpreted in light of His claims to be God – passages we discussed in chapter 9. The nature of Christ must be understood in the light of all these passages. In such a way, we form a proper appreciation of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

Donald Carson views John 14:28 from another angle. He notes that the conjunction beginning the verse, i.e., “for,” requires us to interpret this verse in the light of what was stated prior: “You heard that I said to you, ‘I go away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved Me, you would have rejoiced because I go to the Father.”<sup>1638</sup>

Up to this time, the disciples were thinking only of themselves – what will happen to them after Jesus leaves. Jesus directs their attention, then, to what His departure will mean for Himself. He is returning to the Father to receive again the glory that He enjoyed with Him from eternity past (Jn 17:5). If the disciples “loved Him,” they would think of what awaited Jesus in heaven. Therefore, the words, “The Father is greater than I,” refer to the greater glory the Father enjoyed at that time. Christ’s return to the Father, though, would remedy that discrepancy and restore to Him His pre-incarnate glory.

Some commentators explain Christ’s words, “The Father is greater than I,” by appealing to the theory of the “eternal generation of the Son.” According to this theory, the Son by some unexplainable mechanism is eternally being “begotten” by the Father. This is no way, however, diminishes His deity or dignity as God. In this way, then, the Father is greater than the Son in the sense that the Father is Son’s “source.” Although this theory, which traces back to Origen, is acknowledged by the Church, it nonetheless can lead to the false conclusion that Christ is somehow inferior to the Father. In fact, Arius formed his false teaching of Christ’s creation by the Father from Origen’s view.

### **John 17:3**

Furthermore, in the Gospel of John we encounter the following prayer of Jesus to the Father: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (Jn 17:3).<sup>1639</sup> According to Watchtower teaching, these words convincingly show the uniqueness of Jehovah as the only true God.<sup>1640</sup>

A closer look at the context, though, reveals that people receive eternal life not only from the Father, but from the Son as well (Jn 17:2-3). In addition, before His incarnation Jesus shared heavenly glory with the Father (Jn 17:5). The Son of God, who enjoys heavenly glory along with the Father and grants eternal life, is certainly more than some sort of “secondary god.”

Another key feature of this verse is the phrase “true God.” John uses this expression in 1 John 5:20: “And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.”<sup>1641</sup>

We note a striking parallel between John 17:3 and 1 John 5:20. In both cases, certain features are highlighted: the idea of the “true God,” the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the reception of eternal life. It is vital to note that we receive eternal life in connection with “Him who is true,” and we are “in Him who is true” only by virtue of being “in His Son.” In this way, Jesus’ words in John 17:3 are made clear – eternal life comes through the agency of both the only true God and the Sent One, Jesus Christ. So then, again we see a description of the relationship between the Father and Son that exceeds what we would expect between the Creator and one of His creatures.

The following verse is also significant: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 Jn 5:21). The contrast between “idols” and “Him who is true” reveals that John is concerned that his readers do not follow

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<sup>1638</sup>Carson D. A. The Gospel according to John // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. –Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; W. B. Eerdmans, 1991. – P. 508.

<sup>1639</sup>The New World Translation varies a bit: “This means everlasting life, their coming to know you, the only true God, and the one whom you sent, Jesus Christ.”

<sup>1640</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 485; What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 203.

<sup>1641</sup>The New World Translation incorrectly translates ἐν τῷ υἱῷ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ by the phrase “through His Son Jesus Christ.”

after false gods, whether that be pagan gods, or gods of their own imagination. Therefore, the “One who is true” is not being contrasted with the Son, but with idols, who differ both from the Father and the Son. In a similar way, when Jesus calls the Father the “only true God” in John 17:3, He is contrasting the Father not with Himself, but with false gods.<sup>1642</sup>

### **John 20:28**

The final verse from John’s Gospel that we will examine is John 20:28, where Thomas says after seeing the risen Christ, “My Lord and my God,” i.e., Ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου. Here, Thomas (along with the author John), plainly acknowledges Jesus’ deity.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses respond that other Scripture passages speak of Jehovah as the only true God (Jn 17:3; 20:17) and that John calls Jesus not “God,” but the “Son of God” (Jn 20:31). Therefore, John could not have meant that Jesus is God. Thomas is only acknowledging here that Jesus is “god.”<sup>1643</sup> However, the Greek article stands before both terms κύριος (*kyrios*), “Lord,” and θεός (*theos*), “God.” Therefore, is in incorrect and actually impossible to translate the verse with the word “god.”<sup>1644</sup>

Others explain that Thomas words were addressed to the Father, not to Jesus. Thomas was simply expressing his amazement at seeing the risen Jesus. On the other hand, the text is clear that Thomas was speaking to Jesus and that Jesus accepted his acknowledgement and worship: “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed {are} they who did not see, and {yet} believed” (Jn 20:29).

Finally, John could not have been referring to Jesus as a lesser “god.” The idea of some sort of “secondary god” would have been totally foreign and incomprehensible to the Jewish mind of that time.

### **Worship**

The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that since Jesus taught people to worship only God, He Himself could not be God (see Matt 4:10; Jn 20:17; 4:23-24).<sup>1645</sup> They continue that Jesus received “worship” only as a sign of respect, and that only Jehovah is worthy of worship with “a particular attitude of heart” that He is God.<sup>1646</sup>

However, our discussion of “worship” in chapter 9 of this volume demonstrated that, in some instances, Jesus did receive worship as God. In addition, Morey writes that in Psalm 2:12, the nations are called to worship the Son.<sup>1647</sup> Schnell shows that in Revelation 5:12-13, both the Father and the Son receive worship.<sup>1648</sup>

### **Miracles**

The Jehovah’s Witnesses point out that Jesus Himself did not perform miracles, but they were done by God the Father or the Holy Spirit.<sup>1649</sup> God did so to confirm Jesus’ appointment as Messiah.<sup>1650</sup> The following passages are cited in support: Matthew 12:18; Luke 4:1, 14, 17-21; John 5:19, 30.

It is true that Jesus did attribute His miracles to the Father and the Spirit. Yet, that does not force the conclusion that He has no supernatural power Himself. In most cases, Jesus relied on the Spirit as an example for His disciples. At the same time, some passages seem to indicate that Jesus Himself did at times

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<sup>1642</sup>Duncan, p. 44.

<sup>1643</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 213.

<sup>1644</sup>Martin, p. 68.

<sup>1645</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 283.

<sup>1646</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 215.

<sup>1647</sup>Morey R. A. How to Answer a Jehovah’s Witness. – Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1980. – P. 94.

<sup>1648</sup>Schnell, p. 200.

<sup>1649</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 285.

<sup>1650</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 215.

demonstrate supernatural knowledge or power: John 2:11, 19; John 1:47-50; 2:23; 13:18-19; Matthew 9:4; 8:8-9, 27; Mark 1:23-24.

Additionally, although God the Father also confirmed the ministry of other prophets with miracles, Jesus' ministry differed in that He claimed to be God. It is highly unlikely that the Father would have supernaturally confirmed Jesus' divine claims if they were false.

### Immanuel

In Matthew 1:23, the angel Gabriel predicted of Jesus, "'Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel,' which translated means, 'God with us.'" Watchtower adherents respond that other biblical characters had similar names. For example, Jehu means "He is Yahweh," but Jehu was certainly not Yahweh. Moreover, the angel did not say that Jesus would be "God," but the "Son of God."<sup>1651</sup> Another explanation is offered – Immanuel does not mean that "God" became incarnate, but that "god" became incarnate.<sup>1652</sup>

On the other hand, Matthew 1:23 is a quotation from Isaiah 7:14, which predicts the virgin birth of Jesus. This indicates that we are not dealing with just any biblical character, but with a unique individual – "God with us." In addition, the idea that some sort of "secondary god" was to be born would have been totally foreign and incomprehensible to the Jewish mind of that time. When they read Isaiah's proclamation of a coming Immanuel, they would have associated Him with אֱלֹהִים, "*Elohim*", the God of Israel.

### Firstborn

A very special designation for Jesus Christ is "firstborn," or in Greek, πρωτότοκος (*prototokos*). In the New Testament, this word usually refers to the first child in a family. For example, it applies to Mary's firstborn child in Luke 2:7: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son (πρωτότοκος)." Also see Hebrews 11:28: "By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn (πρωτότοκος) would not touch them."

Jesus is so named in Romans 8:29; Revelation 1:5; Colossians 1:15, 18; and Hebrews 1:6. In what sense is Jesus the "firstborn?" First, in Revelation 1:5 and Colossians 1:18, He is the firstborn from the dead – the first to be resurrected in a glorified body. This resonates with Revelation 3:14, where He is termed "the Beginning of the creation of God" in the sense of the beginning of God's *new* creation. This also coincides with the description of our Lord in Romans 8:29 – Jesus as the "firstborn" (πρωτότοκος) of many brethren." So then, Jesus is the first, but not the last, to enter God's new creation through resurrection from the dead. All believers, that is "Jesus' brethren," will experience the same.

Second, uncovering the Old Testament understanding of "firstborn" will prove enlightening. At that time, the firstborn son held the place of primacy among his siblings. He was the heir of the main share of his father's estate. The right of the firstborn is described in Genesis 25:5-6; 27:35-36; 43:33 and Deuteronomy 21:15-17.

In regard to Jesus Christ, Colossians 1:15 states that He is the πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, i.e., the "firstborn of all creation." Upon examination of the context, we discover that Paul means that Christ is the heir (πρωτότοκος) of all creation. In the following verse, we read, "For by Him all things were created, {both} in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things have been created through Him and for Him." Note that all things were created for Him. He is the πρωτότοκος (*prototokos*) or "heir" of all creation.

Also of note is the use of the genitive case in the phrase πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, i.e., the "firstborn of all creation." The Greek genitive can denote "submission to," a meaning which fits our context well. Creation is

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<sup>1651</sup>Ibid., p. 214.

<sup>1652</sup>Noted in Martin, p. 57.

under the authority of the firstborn/heir, Jesus Christ. In this sense, He is the “firstborn *over* all creation.” Other instances of such a use for the Greek genitive are found in Ephesians 6:12 and Acts 4:8.

Hebrews 1:6 also speaks of Jesus as firstborn in the sense of heir: “And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, ‘And let all the angels of God worship Him.’”<sup>1653</sup> The context confirms that Jesus is portrayed as firstborn/heir in this passage. In verse 2, we read that the Father “appointed (Him) heir of all things.” Verse 4 affirms that Christ is “much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.” Verse 8 mentions the kingdom that He inherits: “But of the Son {He says,} ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever,’” and, “Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet” (v. 13). Finally, in Psalm 89:27 we read about Messiah: “I also shall make him {My} firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” Jesus is “firstborn” in the sense that He is King and heir of all things.

### **Acts 2:36**

Some may misunderstand the meaning of Acts 2:36, where it is written, “Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ – this Jesus whom you crucified.” It seems here that Jesus “became” Lord at His ascension, but was not so beforehand. Yet, we must consider that in the previous verse, Peter cites Psalm 110:1, where the coronation of a king is described. In this light, we conclude that Peter did not mean that Jesus received divine status at His ascension, but officially began to occupy the office of Messiah, i.e., the king of Israel. In this sense, God made Him “Lord and Christ.”

### **Psalm 2:7**

In Psalm 2:7, we read, “I will surely tell of the decree of Yahweh: He said to Me, ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.’” Does this mean that God the Father “gave birth” to the Son? First, we must keep in mind that in its Old Testament context, this verse describes the coronation of Messiah. The expression “I have begotten You” is a figure of speech when Jesus, according to Acts 2:36, officially began to occupy the office of Messiah. We recall that the title “Son of God” can refer to Messiah. When Jesus began to function in His messianic office, He “became” the Son of God in the sense of Messiah. Therefore, we may paraphrase the text as such: “You are Messiah. Today I have appointed You king.”

Second in Acts 13:32-33, Paul applies Psalm 2:7 in a different way – in relation to Jesus’ resurrection. Paul announced, “And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this {promise} to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are My Son; today I have begotten You.’” According to Colossians 1:18, as a result of His resurrection, Jesus became the “firstborn from the dead.”

So then, at His resurrection Jesus began to occupy another new position – firstborn from the dead. He became “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom 8:29), that is, the first individual to experience resurrection in a glorified body and the first to participate in God’s new creation.

Romans 1:3 confirms that Jesus was the Son of God before His resurrection. Paul did not write there that through His resurrection Jesus “became” God’s Son, but “was declared the Son of God with power.” By means of the resurrection, Jesus’ divine Sonship was made manifest to all.

### **1 Corinthians 8:4-6**

Paul wrote the following words to the church at Corinth:

Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in

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<sup>1653</sup>The New World Translation errantly translates this verse: “But when he again brings his Firstborn into the inhabited earth.”

heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is {but} one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we {exist} for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we {exist} through Him.

Followers of the Watchtower point out that Christ is mentioned separately from the Father and therefore is not equal to Him.<sup>1654</sup>

When we examine verse 6, though, we note an obvious poetic structure. Here, we are dealing with some sort of creed or liturgical reading used in the Early Church<sup>1655</sup>:

ἀλλ' ἡμῖν εἷς θεὸς ὁ πατήρ  
ἐξ οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς αὐτόν,  
καὶ εἷς κύριος Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς  
δι' οὗ τὰ πάντα καὶ ἡμεῖς δι' αὐτοῦ.

Donald Carson compares this verse with the Jewish *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!” (Deut 6:4). In both passages we encounter words “Lord” (or “Yahweh”), “God,” and “one.” Carson reasons that Paul, writing in a context discussing pagan religion, is alluding to the *Shema*, adapting it to Christians by including a reference to Christ.<sup>1656</sup>

Consequently, here we have not a refutation of Jesus’ deity, but a strong confirmation of it. Paul incorporates “Christ the Lord into the very definition of the God of Israel.”<sup>1657</sup> He “thus simultaneously reaffirms strict Jewish monotheism and the highest possible Christology imaginable. Christ finds his identity within the very definition of that one God/Lord of Israel.”<sup>1658</sup>

### **Isaiah 43:10**

Christians claim that Isaiah 43:10 removes the possibility that Jehovah created another god: “Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that pagan nations cannot create another god, but that Jehovah can.<sup>1659</sup> Yet, the passage neither makes, nor implies such a qualification.

### **Alpha and Omega**

The expression “Alpha and Omega” appears in Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13. In the first instance, it refers to God the Father since it is associated with the phrase, “Who is and was and is to come,” which is used of the Father in Revelation 1:4.<sup>1660</sup> The Father is again the “Alpha and Omega” in Revelation 21:6.

On the other hand, in Revelation 22:13 the “Alpha and Omega” is Jesus Christ. This is evident by the accompanying phrase, “I am coming quickly” in verse 12. In addition, in Revelation 22:13 the “Alpha and Omega” is also “the first and the last, the beginning and the end,” words that refer to Jesus in Revelation 1:17 and 2:8. Applying the formula “Alpha and Omega” both to the Father and the Son confirms not only the eternal nature of the Son, but also His unity of nature with the Father.

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<sup>1654</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 485; Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 411.

<sup>1655</sup>Carson D. A. Editor’s Preface in The First Letter to the Corinthians // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010. – P. 380.

<sup>1656</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>1657</sup>Ibid., p. 382.

<sup>1658</sup>Ibid., p. 383.

<sup>1659</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 413.

<sup>1660</sup>Beale G. K. The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, Cumbria: W. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1999. – P. 199.



The Jehovah's Witnesses say that using this phrase for both Jesus and Jehovah does not indicate a unity of nature. They compare this with the title "apostle," which applies both to Jesus and to others.<sup>1661</sup> Yet, this objection carries little weight. The term "apostle," that is, "messenger," can refer to various people in various roles. The formula "Alpha and Omega," though, is appropriate only for an eternal, divine being. Therefore, it equates the Father and Son as possessors of the same nature.

### **Almighty**

According to the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses, only God the Father (Jehovah) is called "Almighty." The terms in question are the Hebrew אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי (*el-shaddai*) and the Greek παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*). This supposedly distinguishes Jehovah from the Son of God, who is called only "the Mighty God" (Isa 9:6).<sup>1662</sup> If only Jehovah is "Almighty," then He is superior to the Son.<sup>1663</sup>

We acknowledge that the title παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*) is used only in reference to the Father. With the exception of 2 Corinthians 6:18, it is found only in the book of Revelation,<sup>1664</sup> which is an important consideration here. In Revelation, the Father is ascribed this title to emphasize His sovereignty over all things. The Son, however, is represented as the Lamb of God (26 times). This does not reflect a qualitative difference between the Father and the Son, but rather reflects the author's goal – each Person of the Triune God has a role to play in the end-time drama. God the Father rules over history, directing it to His intended goal, while the Son saves God's people by His sacrifice.

It is also vital to consider that, as shown earlier, the formula "Alpha and Omega" applies to both Father and Son. Yet, in contexts speaking of the Father as "Alpha and Omega," He is also spoken of as παντοκράτωρ (*pantokrator*), i.e., "Almighty" (Rev 1:8). If the Son shares with the Father His eternal nature (Alpha and Omega), then what prevents us from ascribing to Christ omnipotence (παντοκράτωρ) as well?

Concerning the Old Testament usage of אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי (*el-shaddai*), it is incorrect to claim that it applies only to God the Father. The Old Testament does not make a consistent distinction between these two Persons of the Trinity. Therefore, it is fair to assume that the phrase אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי (*el-shaddai*) may refer to the Godhead in general, that is, to all Persons of the Trinity.

Commentators also note that in the Old Testament, God is not only אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי (*el-shaddai*), but also יהוה גִּבּוֹר (*Yahweh gibor*) and אֱלֹהֵי גִּבּוֹר (*el gibor*), that is, the "mighty God" (Isa 10:21; Ps 24:8; Deut 10:17).<sup>1665</sup> This is the same designation given to Messiah in Isaiah 9:6. Therefore, the supposed differences in titles between the Father and Son are not consistent. The Jehovah's Witnesses cannot challenge this by noting that in Isaiah 9:6 the expression אֱלֹהֵי גִּבּוֹר (*el gibor*) lacks the definite article and therefore indicates a lesser "mighty god."<sup>1666</sup> The definite article is also missing in Isaiah 10:21, where Yahweh is called the "mighty God."<sup>1667</sup>

### **Hebrews 1:8-12**

In Hebrews 1:8-9, the author cites Psalm 45:6-7: "Your throne, O God (אֱלֹהִים), is forever and ever; a scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows." Here, the author of Hebrews ascribes to the Son the title אֱלֹהִים, "*Elohim*." Adherents of the Watchtower suggest a different translation of verse 6: "God is your throne forever and ever, and the scepter of your Kingdom is the scepter of

<sup>1661</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 413.

<sup>1662</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 282.

<sup>1663</sup>What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 42.

<sup>1664</sup>Rev 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22.

<sup>1665</sup>Duncan, p. 35.

<sup>1666</sup>Noted in Martin, p. 49.

<sup>1667</sup>Morey, p. 96.

uprightness.” They claim support for this rendering from 1 Chronicles 29:23, where we read of the “throne of Yahweh”: “Then Solomon sat on the throne of Yahweh.”<sup>1668</sup>

Greek grammar allows both translations: ὁ θρόνος σου ὁ θεὸς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος.<sup>1669</sup> However, several factors favor the conventional version. First is the absence of the verb εἰμί (*eimi*), “to be.” The text does not say, “God is (εἰμί) your throne.” Although Greek grammar does not require this verb, its presence would specifically confirm the alternate translations. Second, presenting God as a “throne” demeans His dignity.<sup>1670</sup> Third, God is nowhere else in Scripture called a “throne.” 1 Chronicles 29:23, rather, speaks of the “throne of Yahweh.”<sup>1671</sup> Fourth, the author’s goal in this passage is to demonstrate the Son’s superiority to the angels, which is consistent with calling Him *Elohim*. Finally, we note the quotation of Psalm 102:25-27 in Hebrews 1:8-12:

But of the Son {He says,}... You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain; and they all will become old like a garment, and like a mantle You will roll them up; like a garment they will also be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end.

In the original Old Testament context, these words are addressed to Yahweh (יהוה) and describe His eternal nature. Yet, the author of Hebrews ascribes these words to the Son, attributing to Him the Divine Name יהוה (*Yahweh*) as well.

The Watchtower responds that Hebrews names Jesus יהוה (*Yahweh*) because He is God’s agent of creation.<sup>1672</sup> However, it is unimaginable that God would share His name with one of His creatures.

### **Acts 20:28**

The passage in Acts 20:28 often enters the discussion of Jesus’ deity: “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” Therefore, God (that is, Jesus) purchased the Church with His own blood.

The Watchtower movement objects that the phrase διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ ἰδίου, “with His own blood,” is really an abbreviation of the phrase διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ ἰδίου υἱοῦ, “with the blood of His own Son.” They assume that during the process of transmission of the text, a scribe accidentally omitted the word υἱοῦ (*huiou*), “Son,” after the similar word ἰδίου (*idiou*), “own.” This would render the translation, then, not “His own blood,” but “the blood of His own Son” which better corresponds to how the New Testament usually speaks of redemption. Possibly, it is claimed, the expression τοῦ ἰδίου (*tou idiou*), “His own,” may be an idiomatic expression for “His own Son.” Such a phenomenon, that is, abbreviation of a phrase, occurs in Greek papyri.<sup>1673</sup>

However, the Jehovah’s Witnesses base their claims solely on presumption: either that the word υἱοῦ (*huiou*), “Son,” accidentally dropped out of text, or that the word in question is implied. No textual evidence exists to support this thesis. No ancient manuscript contains the word υἱοῦ (*huiou*), “Son.” So then, the conventional translation, “The church of God which He purchased with His own blood,” is preferred.

### **Romans 9:5**

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<sup>1668</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 442.

<sup>1669</sup>The author of Hebrews quotes the Septuagint: ὁ θρόνος σου ὁ θεός εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα τοῦ αἰῶνος. However, the Hebrew text does not differ.

<sup>1670</sup>Morey, p. 103.

<sup>1671</sup>Ellingworth P. The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1993. – P. 122.

<sup>1672</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 442.

<sup>1673</sup>Metzger B. M., United Bible Societies. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. – London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994. – P. 425-427.

Another well-discussed text is Romans 9:5: "...whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." The Greek text reads, ὧν οἱ πατέρες καὶ ἐξ ὧν ὁ Χριστὸς τὸ κατὰ σάρκα, ὁ ὧν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν. The New World Translation renders it: "To them the forefathers belong, and from them the Christ descended according to the flesh. God, who is over all, be praised forever. Amen."

At first glance, it seems unclear who Paul is referring to with the definite article and participle ὁ ὧν (*ho on*), i.e., "who," – to Christ, or to the Father. In other words, is the second half of this verse, introduced by these words, a conditional sentence referring back to Christ, or a new sentence invoking praise to God the Father? Since the original text lacks punctuation, we cannot decide the question on those grounds.

In their defense, the adherents of the Watchtower note that in 2 Corinthians 1:3 and Ephesians 1:3, the adjective εὐλογητὸς (*eulogetos*), "blessed/praised," is used in reference to God the Father.<sup>1674</sup> Therefore, they feel that the second clause should stand alone: "God, who is over all, be praised forever. Amen"

Other arguments, however, support the translation referring to Christ as God.<sup>1675</sup> First, the usual word order in Greek places the participle after the noun to which it is referring.<sup>1676</sup> In our case, the second clause introduced by "who," then, would refer back to Christ. In fact, Paul usually follows this word order in his epistles in general.<sup>1677</sup> For example, in 2 Corinthians 11:31, the same phrase ὁ ὧν (*ho on*) refers to a noun preceding it, i.e. θεὸς (*theos*), "God":

ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ οἶδεν, ὁ ὧν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ὅτι οὐ ψεύδομαι.  
The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.

Second, when blessings are invoked, the predicate nominative usually precedes the subject (see 2 Cor 1:3; Eph 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3; Lk 1:68).<sup>1678</sup> Yet, in Romans 9:5, it follows the subject: θεὸς εὐλογητὸς. Therefore, it is problematic to translate the final clause as an invocation to bless God, as in the New World Translation: "God... be praised forever." As far as which version fits the context better, opinions vary.<sup>1679</sup>

All things considered, the bulk of grammatical evidence favors the translation that speaks of Christ as God.

### **Philippians 2:6**

Philippians 2:6 provides clear evidence that Jesus Christ is truly God. We read, "Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." The Jehovah's Witnesses interpret the phrase "in the form of God" to mean that Christ "was a spirit person, just as 'God is a Spirit.'"<sup>1680</sup>

However, in another passage of Christ being God's image, Paul refers not to Jesus' "spiritual state," but to His glory: "...the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor 4:4). Therefore, Christ is "in the form of God" in the sense that He shares the Father's glory.

The verse continues, "(He) did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped." The phrase "a thing to be grasped" translates the Greek term ἀρπαγμός (*harpagmos*). The basic meaning here "robbery," yet for the sake of context it is usually rendered as the gain of robbery, or "booty."<sup>1681</sup> Therefore, a literal translation would read "(He) did not regard equality with God to be booty."

<sup>1674</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 419.

<sup>1675</sup>Morris L. The Epistle to the Romans. – The Pillar New Testament Commentary // Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press, 1988. – P. 350; Dunn J. D. G. Romans 9–16 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas: Word, 1998. – P. 528-529.

<sup>1676</sup>Morris, p. 350

<sup>1677</sup>See Rom 1:25; 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:5; 2 Tim 4:18 (Dunn, Romans, p. 528-529).

<sup>1678</sup>Morris, p. 350; Dunn, Romans, p. 528-529.

<sup>1679</sup>Morris thinks the conventional translation fits the context better, but Dunn thinks the opposite.

<sup>1680</sup>Let God Be True, p. 32.

<sup>1681</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 108.

The New World Translation, however, gives the verse a different shade of meaning: “(He) did not even consider the idea of trying to be equal to God.” The Greek, though, does not speak of Jesus thinking or not thinking of *doing* something, but what He considered Himself to be. He did not consider equality with God something He had to “steal by robbery,” but something that was already inherent to Him by nature.

The following verse confirms our conclusion. If Jesus was simply refusing to aspire to deity, as the Jehovah’s Witnesses suggest, then verse 7 would read that Jesus simply remained in His subordinate position before the Father. Instead, we discover that He “emptied Himself” of certain divine privileges by becoming human in order to fulfill God’s salvation plan.

Furthermore, Jehovah’s Witnesses voice the objection that God’s exalting Jesus (v. 9) indicates that Jesus occupies a lower position in respect to divinity than Jehovah does.<sup>1682</sup> A closer investigation, though, reveals that the Father was merely restoring to the Son the glory He emptied Himself of through His incarnation and death. Jesus Himself speaks of this in John 17:5: “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.”

Finally, since the main thrust of the context is imitating Jesus’ example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses inquire, “How can the Christian imitate Christ’s example of relinquishing divine glory?”<sup>1683</sup> We respond that our acts of humility are, of course, going to differ from the ones that Christ made. Still, the *principle* of humility is the same. Additionally, Paul employs here the “greater-lesser” argument. If Jesus displayed greater humility in divesting Himself of divine glory, then the believer, in imitation of the Savior, can forfeit lesser rights for the sake of others.

### **Colossians 2:9**

Colossians 2:9 reads, “For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.” Disciples of the Watchtower deny that this verse ascribes full deity to Christ. They note that in the parallel verse, Colossians 1:19, we read, “It was the {Father’s} good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.” Therefore, they conclude that the Son received this “fullness” from the Father.<sup>1684</sup>

On the other hand, certain features of Colossians 2:9 convincingly demonstrate that Jesus is indeed God. First, the word “fullness,” i.e., πλήρωμα (*pleroma*), means “completeness.”<sup>1685</sup> Paul intensifies this meaning by repeating the same sense by adding the adjective “all the fullness.”<sup>1686</sup> This denotes that all that belongs to θεότης (*theotes*), that is, “Deity,” belongs to Christ with no exception. The term θεότης (*theotes*) is defined as the “nature or essence of deity, that which constitutes deity.”<sup>1687</sup>

It is also significant that Paul speaks of the “dwelling” of this fullness “bodily.” Douglas Moo sees in this a reference to the Old Testament temple, where God “dwelt” in a physical space.<sup>1688</sup> Now, though, He dwells in all His fullness in the person of Jesus Christ rather than in a building.

Examining the Greek original of Colossians 1:19, the parallel verse to Colossians 2:9, will prove insightful: ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι. This differs from the rendering of the New World Translation: “...because God was pleased to have all fullness to dwell in him.” In the original, we note the absence of the word θεός (*theos*), i.e., “God.” If the phrase πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα, “all the fullness,” is in the nominative case, then it is the subject of the sentence. The translation would then be, “It was the good pleasure of all the fullness to dwell in Him.”

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<sup>1682</sup>Let God Be True, p. 40; <http://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings>.

<sup>1683</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 420.

<sup>1684</sup>Ibid., p. 421.

<sup>1685</sup>Dunn J. D. G. The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996. – P. 99.

<sup>1686</sup>Moo D. J. The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon // The Pillar New Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008. – P. 193.

<sup>1687</sup>Dunn, Colossians, p. 151.

<sup>1688</sup>Moo, c. 133.

However, if the phrase πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα, “all the fullness,” is in the accusative case (identical in form to the nominative), it would serve as the subject for the infinitive κατοικῆσαι (*katoikesai*), i.e., “to dwell.” The translation would then be, “It was the good pleasure (of the Father) that all the fullness should dwell in Him. Certain features indicate that “God” is indeed the implied subject of the verb εὐδόκησεν (*eudokesen*), i.e., “was the good pleasure.” First, the verb εὐδόκησεν (*eudokesen*) is often used in the Old Testament in relation to God.<sup>1689</sup> Second, the implied subject for the verbs in the next verse (“reconcile” and “made peace”), which is a continuation of the same sentence, is the Father.

In an attempt to give equal weight to the terms “God” and “all the fullness,” some translators render the verse as follows: “The fullness of God was pleased to dwell in Him,” or, “It was well pleasing that God, in His fullness, should dwell in Him.”<sup>1690</sup> Neither of these translations contradict the claim of Christ’s full deity.

### **Titus 2:13**

A key text in the study of Jesus’ deity is Titus 2:13, where we read, ἐπιφάνειαν τῆς δόξης τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, “...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.” According to this translation, our “great God and Savior” is the person of Jesus Christ. The New World Translation, however, renders it differently: “...while we wait for the happy hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of our Savior, Jesus Christ.” They claim that two individuals are in view: God the Father and Jesus the Savior.

The Jehovah’s Witness support this contention by citing two other texts containing a similar grammatical construction, where two individuals are clearly indicated:<sup>1691</sup>

- Tit 1:4 – χάρις καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς καὶ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ τοῦ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν, “Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.”
- 2 Thes 1:12 –κατὰ τὴν χάριν τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, “...the grace of our God and {the} Lord Jesus Christ.”

To properly translate our passage, we must appeal to a well-accepted rule of Greek grammar, the “Granville Sharp Rule.” It states that when two nouns are connected by the conjunction καί (*kai*), i.e., “and,” and only the first noun has the definite article, then both nouns refer to the same object or person. In line with this rule, the phrase τοῦ μεγάλου θεοῦ καὶ σωτῆρος ἡμῶν (“our great God and Savior”) refers to one Person – Jesus Christ.

This rule holds, however, only under the following conditions. First, both nouns must describe an animate object. Second, both nouns must be in the singular person. Third, neither noun can be a personal name.<sup>1692</sup> Titus 2:13 meets all these requirements. Therefore, the verse teaches that Jesus Christ is God.<sup>1693</sup>

Other arguments support this thesis. In the New Testament, the word ἐπιφάνεια (*epiphaneia*), “appearing,” is always used in connection with Jesus.<sup>1694</sup> In addition, the next verse begins with the singular relative pronoun ὅς (*hos*), i.e., “who,” which refers to one individual – “our God and Savior Jesus Christ.”<sup>1695</sup> Moreover, when Paul refers to the Father and Son together in one verse, he is always careful to distinguish them from one another.<sup>1696</sup>

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<sup>1689</sup>Dunn, Colossians, p. 101.

<sup>1690</sup>Dunn, Colossians, p. 101; Moo, p. 132.

<sup>1691</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 421.

<sup>1692</sup>Wallace, p. 270-273.

<sup>1693</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1694</sup>Arndt, et. al., p. 386.

<sup>1695</sup>Knight G. W. The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle, England: W. B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1992. – P. 323.

<sup>1696</sup>See Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; 1 Thes 1:1; 2 Thes 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; Philemon 3

Titus 1:4, cited by the Jehovah's Witnesses above, does not meet the criteria for the Granville Sharp Rule. First, the second element in a personal name – Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ ("Christ Jesus"). Second, the article is absent before the first element, i.e. θεοῦ ("God"). Furthermore, placing the title "Savior" with the Greek article after the name "Christ Jesus" unmistakably distinguishes Him from God the Father. Two individuals are clearly in view.

The passage in 2 Thessalonians 1:12 is more problematic. The verse meets all the conditions of the Granville Sharp Rule, but the text is usually understood to refer to God the Father and Jesus Christ separately. Wanamaker explains this as an exception.<sup>1697</sup> In the writings of Paul, we often encounter the phrase ἡ χάρις τοῦ θεοῦ, "the grace of God." This is a standard formula for Paul.<sup>1698</sup> Furthermore, Paul often uses the formula κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, "the Lord Jesus Christ" as well without the article before the word κυρίου ("Lord").<sup>1699</sup> It is assumed that when Paul created this sentence, he combined these formulas together without considering that omitting the second article creates the impression that only one Person is in view.

### **Son of Man**

Is it true that Jesus' designation as the "Son of Man" excludes Him from being God?<sup>1700</sup> We will briefly review the material covered in chapter 9 in this regard.

The Old Testament testifies of a heavenly Son of Man who was to become a great king (Dan 7:13-14; Ps 80:17). In addition, the intertestamental books of *Enoch* and *4 Ezra* speak of a supernatural Son of Man, whom people in the time of Jesus expected to appear.

Jesus showed no hesitation in identifying Himself with the heavenly Son of Man who was to become the great coming King:

Again the high priest was questioning Him, and saying to Him, "Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed {One?}" And Jesus said, "I am; and you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Tearing his clothes, the high priest said, "What further need do we have of witnesses? You have heard the blasphemy; how does it seem to you?" (Mk 14:61-64).

Liberals, holding that Jesus is not God, but a mere human, claim that He never spoke of Himself as this heavenly king, but that the Early Church invented this dialogue. It is important to note that in the Gospels, this title appears 85 times, usually as the words of Jesus. However, we rarely see the title "Son of Man" outside of the Gospels: only in Acts 7:56, Rev 1:13, and Rev 14:14.<sup>1701</sup> Therefore, little evidence exists that the Early Church used this title in reference to Jesus Christ, otherwise it would have appeared in the epistles as well. This self-designation originated with the Lord Himself, who did indeed consider Himself the heavenly king of Daniel's vision.

### **Colossians 1:16**

The New World Translation gives Colossians 1:16 a unique rendering: "...because by means of him all other things were created in the heavens and on the earth, the things visible and the things invisible" (Col 1:16). By inserting the word "other," the Jehovah's Witnesses hope to demonstrate that God's Son was created first,

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<sup>1697</sup>Wanamaker C. A. *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* // New International Greek Testament Commentary. – Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1990. – P. 236.

<sup>1698</sup>See Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 1:4; 3:10; 15:10; 2 Cor 1:12; 6:1, etc.

<sup>1699</sup>See Tit 3:4, 12; 1 Thes 1:1; 4:1 Gal 1:3; Phil 1:2, also Bruce F. F. *1 and 2 Thessalonians* // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 1998. – P. 156-157.

<sup>1700</sup>Jesus Christ. *Our Questions Answered*, p. 5.

<sup>1701</sup>See Mk 14:62; Mk 8:38; 13:26; Matt 10:23; 19:28; 25:31; Lk 17:22-30; 18:8; Jn 3:13; 5:27; 6:62.

then all “other” things were created. However, the word “other” is absent in the original Greek text: ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς. The Jehovah’s Witnesses seek to justify this insertion by comparison with the following texts where the word “other” is implied from context:<sup>1702</sup>

- In reply he said to them: “Do you think that those Gal·i·le’ans were worse sinners than all other Gal·i·le’ans because they have suffered these things?” (Lk 13:2 – NWT).
- With that he told them an illustration: “Notice the fig tree and all the other trees (Lk 21:29 - NWT).
- For all the others are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:21 - NWT).

However, in the above-cited examples, the idea of “other” is clearly implied by context and introduces no novelty into the text. In Colossians 1:16, though, the context does not force this assumption, and this insertion introduces a totally new idea into the context – that the Son created only “other things,” an idea which is lacking in other passages about the Son’s participation in creation (see Jn 1:1-3, 10; Heb 1:2). The Jehovah’s Witnesses purposely changed the text in order to support their doctrine.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses also object that this text does not say that the Son created all things, but that all things were created “through” Him.<sup>1703</sup> The Bible usually does, in fact, so describe the Son’s participation in creation (see Jn 1:3; Heb 1:2; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16b). The beginning of Colossians 1:16, however, reads ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα (“all things were created by/in Him”). The phrase ἐν αὐτῷ (*en auto*) could be translated “by Him” or “in Him.” In addition, seeing that the Old Testament ascribes creation exclusively to God (see Isa 44:24; 48:13; 40:28; Neh 9:6), it follows that the Son’s participation in the creative act confirms his divine status.

### **Proverbs 8:22**

Some equate God’s wisdom of Proverbs chapter 8 with Christ the Lord. In Proverbs 8:22, we read about Wisdom: “Yahweh possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old.” The word “possessed” in the Septuagint is the term κτίσω (*ktidzo*), which means “to create.” If God’s wisdom is identified with Jesus, then did the Father create Him?

On the other hand, can we with full confidence apply all aspects of God’s wisdom described in Proverbs chapter 8 to the person of Christ when other passages clearly declare His full deity? We need also consider that the Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew text, and that the latter is generally considered more reliable. The Hebrew has the verb יָרַךְ (*kanan*), which simply means, “to obtain.”<sup>1704</sup>

### **Son of God**

Some interpret the title “Son of God” as a denial of Christ’s full deity. The idea of His “sonship” suggests an inferior status to the Father. The Scriptures call Him the “Son of God,” not “God the Son” (e.g. Matt 16:16-17; Lk 1:35; Jn 3:16; etc.).<sup>1705</sup> Not only is Jesus called the Son of God, but angels (Job 1:6) and Adam (Lk 3:38) bear that title as well.<sup>1706</sup>

These claims are refuted by the clear evidence we presented in chapter 9 on the deity of Jesus Christ. There, we demonstrated that Jesus employed the title “Son of God” in relation to Himself in a divine sense. Let us review the instances when Jesus gave a precise definition of this title.

In Mark 14:36, Jesus called God “Abba.” This Aramaic term expresses an intimate relationship between father and child, such as “Daddy.” The Jews addressed their rabbis with this term, but never God. Therefore, in using this word Jesus revealed His intimate connection with the Father. We noted earlier that Jesus’ claim to

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<sup>1702</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 408.

<sup>1703</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 282.

<sup>1704</sup>Ibid.

<sup>1705</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 238, 255, 486.

<sup>1706</sup>What Does the Bible Really Teach?, p. 41.

possess what God possesses: “All things that the Father has are Mine” (Jn 16:15; cf. Jn 17:10). The Father “loves the Son and has given all things into His hand” (Jn 3:35). Additionally, along with the Father, the Son is the source of eternal life (Jn 17:3).

Jesus also claimed to have enjoyed the glory of God before the world was made (Jn 17:1, 5). In addition, He asserts to know the Father better than anyone and to have received revelation from Him: “...nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal {Him}” (Matt 11:27). He is one with God (Jn 17:22) to the degree that He can say, “You, Father, {are} in Me and I in You” (Jn 17:21). We also recall that Jesus called Himself μονογενής (*monogenes*), i.e., “only begotten,” thereby underscoring His unique relationship with the Father (Jn 3:16, 18).

Furthermore, Jesus showed that His relationship with God differed from that of other Jews, even claiming that the father of some of them was the devil (Jn 8:41-44). His relationship with the Father differed from that of His disciples as well. After His resurrection, He instructed Mary: “Go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God’” (Jn 20:17). Note that he said, “My Father and your Father, and My God and your God,” and not, “our Father and our God.” The disciples also had God as their Father, but not in the same sense that Jesus did.

Christ is μονογενής (*monogenes*), i.e., the only begotten, eternal Son of God. Only He came down from heaven, where He abode with the Father in heavenly glory. Only He possesses what God possesses. He is God Himself in the flesh. Clearly, his opponents understood that Jesus’ claim to Sonship made Him equal with God. They understood that He did not consider Himself merely the Son of God in the sense of Messiah. They perceived His pretension of deity. Consequently, they sought to kill Him as a blasphemer (Jn 10:24-33; Jn 5:18).

### **1 Corinthians 11:3**

In this verse, Paul describes a hierarchical system established by God: “Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” Since God is the “head” of Christ, is the latter somehow inferior to the former?

Earlier we have shown that the Son voluntarily submits Himself to the Father. This principle applies to this text as well. The headship of the Father in no way minimizes the divine character of the Son or justifies the pretension that Christ is a “second-class” god. Duncan correctly points out that the headship of the husband over the wife does not suggest that the wife is not also a human being. She is a full-fledged human who voluntarily submits to her husband. The same idea applies to Jesus Christ. He is fully God and voluntarily submits to the Father’s will.<sup>1707</sup>

### **Hebrews 2:9**

In Hebrews 2:9, we read that Jesus “was made a little lower than the angels” (NIV). Does this contradict His claim to deity? God is not lower than angels.<sup>1708</sup> We respond that the text is referring to the incarnation of Son of God (see v. 10-18). In His human condition, He could occupy that lower place. At the same time, as God He is higher than the angels and is worthy of their worship (chp. 1). In addition, it is written that he “was *made* a little lower than the angels.” This implies that before His incarnation, He occupied a position higher than the angels, namely, the place of Deity.

### **1 Timothy 2:5**

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<sup>1707</sup>Duncan, p. 44.

<sup>1708</sup>Let God Be True, p. 105



According to 1 Timothy 2:5, “There is one God, {and} one mediator also between God and men, {the} man Christ Jesus.” Does this mean that Jesus Christ is merely a man, and not God?<sup>1709</sup>

This verse does not deny the deity of Christ. In fact, if Jesus can serve as a mediator between God and humans, this implies that He has commonality with both sides. As the “God-man,” He makes the perfect mediator. Lea and Griffin concur, “As the God-Man, Christ is uniquely qualified to serve as a go-between who can bring sinful people into God’s family.”<sup>1710</sup>

Why, then, does this verse speak of Jesus only as a man, and not also as God? First, in many of his epistles Paul emphasizes Jesus in the role of the “Second Adam” (see Rom chp. 5, 1 Cor 15:22). In so doing, he stresses the Son’s role in people’s redemption (cf. 1 Tim 2:4). For this purpose, Paul focuses on Christ’s humanity.<sup>1711</sup> Knight writes, “The humanity of the mediator is specified to emphasize his identity with those whom he represents as mediator.”<sup>1712</sup>

Accordingly, as Mounce notes, the word ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*), i.e., “man,” is anarthrous, which indicates that Christ shares the “quality” of humanity. In addition, Mounce comments that the word ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*) is repeated five times in this context. In this way, Paul again emphasized Jesus’ role in the plan of salvation to save ἄνθρωπος (*anthropos*), i.e., “people.”<sup>1713</sup>

We recognize that the Jehovah’s Witnesses do not object to calling Jesus the “god-man,” since they acknowledge Him as “god” in a lesser sense than Jehovah. Yet, this passage does not comment on how Christ became the “God-man.” It nowhere indicates that Jesus was not God from the beginning, or that He “became” god. Therefore, one cannot use 1 Timothy 2:5 as proof for the Jehovah’s Witnesses’ position.

### **God’s Eternal Nature**

Followers of the Watchtower claim that only Jehovah is eternal. Only He exists “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps 90:2; cf. Jer 10:10; Isa 40:28; 1 Tim 1:17).<sup>1714</sup> On the other hand, Hebrews 13:8 teaches, “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” He existed “in the beginning” (Jn 1:1; 1 Jn 1:1) and “before all things” (Col 1:17). Jesus is the “Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev 22:13). Finally, according to Hebrews 7:3, the Son of God has “neither beginning of days nor end of life.”<sup>1715</sup>

### **Mark 10:18**

In response to a person calling Him “good,” Jesus said, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone” (Mk 10:18, parallel in Lk 18:19). Yet, here Jesus did not deny neither that He is good, nor that He is God. He simply stated that only God was good. Other passages of Scripture confirm that Jesus was indeed good.<sup>1716</sup> Thus, in this saying Jesus was covertly affirming His deity.

### **Christ as an Archangel**

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<sup>1709</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 486.

<sup>1710</sup>Lea T. D., Griffin H. P. 1, 2 Timothy, Titus // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992. – P. 90.

<sup>1711</sup>Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>1712</sup>Knight, p. 121.

<sup>1713</sup>Mounce W. D. Pastoral Epistles // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 2000. – P. 88-89.

<sup>1714</sup>Make Sure of All Things, p. 486-487.

<sup>1715</sup>Schnell, p. 176.

<sup>1716</sup>See 1 Jn 2:1; 3:5; 1 Pet 1:18-19; 1 Pet 2:22; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15; 7:26; Jn 8:29, 46; 15:10; Mk 14:55-56; Lk 23:4, 41, 47

Finally, Jehovah's Witnesses claim, "The Son of God was known as Michael before he came to earth and is known also by that name since his return to heaven where he resides as the glorified spirit Son of God."<sup>1717</sup> They advance the following points in support.<sup>1718</sup>

First, the word "archangel" is always in the singular number, which shows that there is only one of them. Second, in 1 Thessalonians 4:16, we read about Jesus, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of {the} archangel and with the trumpet of God." It is observed that the Lord descends "with the voice of {the} archangel." Supposedly, His voice is the voice of the archangel. Third, the Archangel Michael arises at the time of the Great Tribulation (Dan 12:1), which allegedly corresponds to the Second Coming of Christ (Matt 24:30-31). Furthermore, Michael and Jesus are linked in that they both direct the armies of heaven, that is, other angels (see Rev 12:7; Matt 13:41). In addition, both Michael and Jesus are called "princes" (Dan 10:13; Isa 9:6) and both fight against the Devil (Rev 12:7-8; 1 Jn 3:8).

A closer study of Scripture, however, defeats these arguments.<sup>1719</sup> First, Michael is "one of the chief princes" (Dan 10:13), which means he is not the only one in his position. Second, Hebrews chapter 1 clearly teaches that Jesus is superior to all the angels, and that they worship Him. If Jesus is only an angel, it is forbidden to worship Him (see Rev 22:8-9). In addition, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 does not say that the "voice of the archangel" belongs to the Son of God, only that the archangel's voice accompanies His Second Coming. Matthew 24:31 testifies that angels will accompany Christ at His return: "And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other." This verse also mentions the "great trumpet," which further connects it with 1 Thessalonians 4:16.

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<sup>1717</sup>Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 218.

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<sup>1719</sup>Taken from Opect.

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