God’s Self-Revelation
A Course in
Theology Proper

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TorahResource
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Theology: What it is and Its Limitations

When we use the word “theology,” we are talking about the study of God. The word itself is made of two Greek words, 
θεός, theos, “God,” and λόγος, logos, “word,” and thus, the word or topic of God. In a very narrow sense, then, “Theology” is the study of God—Who He is and what He has done and will do. Or, if we can put it in common terms, His person and His works.

But from the very beginning, Theology has a grave difficulty: in theology (and more specifically, Theology Proper) we seek to define, describe, and understand God Who is beyond and above us. By “beyond” I mean that God exists in a realm greater than our minds can fully comprehend. God exists in categories that cannot be grasped by our finite intellect, for we inevitably come to the end of our abilities to even consider (not to mention grasp) the infinite and eternal. When I say that God is “above” us, I mean that even those aspects of God which we can understand are often of such a grand nature that we have great difficulty expressing them in clear and definable terms. Even the language I’ve used in these first two paragraphs could well be disputed as to whether it is possible to speak of God in this way. For instance, when I wrote about God’s “person and works,” I am immediately cognitive of the fact that our word “person” has a limitation of meaning that makes it less than entirely suitable when applied to God. Even more, when I wrote the phrase “His person and His works,” I used the masculine pronoun “His,” which conforms (as we shall see) to the language of the Scriptures, but even so can not be taken to mean that God has gender in the same way as mankind does. For being a Spirit, God does not partake of the physicality which is essential to our own definitions of gender.

Of course, this kind of thinking could go on and on, and we could (as some have) conclude that it is impossible to talk about God for the simple reason that human language fails as an adequate medium for such an enterprise. Yet here we must agree upon an essential truth: it is not necessary to know or

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1 The English word “person” comes from the Latin persona (and perhaps from Eturscan fersit) which means “mask,” or “false face.” These masks were usually made of clay or bark, covering the head, and were worn by actors in the Greek and Roman dramas in order to present a particular character in the story. In Greek, the word πρόσωπον (prosōpon, “front part of the head, face, countenance,” made up of πρό, pros, “to, toward” and ὑπίς, ipsis, “face”) can also mean “mask” and came to be used figuratively to describe someone’s whole being or character, much like our modern word “person.” [See BDAG, “πρόσωπον”; Liddle & Scott, “πρόσωπον”]. Interestingly, the Greek prosōpon came into Rabbinic Hebrew (via transliteration as קֶפֶרֶז, partzuph/partzupha’, cf. m.Yevamot 16.3; b.Eruvin 18a; b.Berachot 61a; b.Sanhedrin 103b, etc. See Jastrow, “Kenerez,” p. 1238) with the meaning “face,” but was not used in a metaphorical fashion to mean “person.” From the perspective of the Tanach, the whole of a living being is better represented by the word נפש, nephesh, “soul, being.” See Helmut Thielicke, The Hidden Question of God (Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 171ff.
express something completely in order to have true and accurate knowledge of the subject at hand. For example, we can certainly consider and discuss light (electromagnetic radiation) from as simple a statement as “Would you turn on the light please?” to something more complex like “The light in this room is not very good,” to something scientific like “Light appears in various phenomena to be either waves or particles.” All of these represent some true aspect of the subject “light” even though everyone (including scientists) agree that we simply do not possess a comprehensive understanding of what light is nor of all of its properties.

We may apply this illustration to our study of Theology: though we affirm without hesitation that mankind is capable of knowing God in truth, we must equally affirm that our knowledge of Him will always be incomplete and limited. We may summarize the reasons for this limitation as follows:

1. **Human understanding is finite**: We have been created with dependence (not independence), which means as humans we are not self-determined, but are dependent upon God for our very existence (cp. Acts 17:28). Thus, even at best, human understanding will be unable to grasp the infinite reality of God.

2. **Human language is inadequate**: It is impossible to encompass the infinite in finite terms. And since our thought processes are inevitably tied to human language, we likewise find our categories of thought inadequate to comprehend the infinite nature of God.

3. **Human understanding and knowledge of the Scriptures is incomplete**: Regardless of how well a person may know the Scriptures, even this primary self-revelation of God contains more in its depths than can be consistently apprehended within the mind of mankind. As such, even the self-revelation of God given in the Scriptures cannot be comprehended in its fulness.

4. **As humans, we suffer from misunderstanding**: Not only were we created to be dependent (and thus with finite ability to understand), but because of the fall of mankind into sin, even our finite ability to know and understand sometimes is errant.

5. **God’s Silence or Hiddenness**: God has not revealed to us everything about Himself and His works (Deut 29:29; cp. Mid. Tehillim, 46.1). As such, even if we were able rightly to comprehend all that He has revealed, our understanding or knowledge of God would still be less than complete. God has determined that this would be the case.

Yet, in spite of these limitations, it is possible to know God in truth, for in all realms of knowledge, we may know truly what we do not know exhaustively. Consider the words of Paul:

… that you, being rooted and grounded in love, 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 Messiah which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God. (Eph 2:17–19)

Here, Paul prays that his readers might “know the love of Messiah which surpasses knowledge.” His meaning can only be that the partial knowledge of Messiah’s love is true knowledge even though it is not exhaustive knowledge.
What does this mean for us as we venture into the study of Theology, and particularly the study of God’s self-revelation, or Theology Proper? It means that we must constantly be aware of our own limitations, and that as we lay hold of the truth, we do so as recipients of that truth, not as originators of it. Moreover, even as we affirm certainty in our own knowledge of God and His works, there is no place for pride. For not only is our knowledge of God that which we have received and not of our own making, but we are always cognizant of the fact that our knowledge is incomplete—there is always more that we need to learn and practice. Thus, humility before God is a necessary pre-requisite for knowing Him: “The fear of Adonai is the beginning of knowledge…” (Prov 1:7).

The Method of Theology

When we seek a method for “doing theology,” we realize early on that knowing God is not a priori, that is, we cannot know God simply by means of deductive reasoning. While the creation itself gives clear evidence of God’s existence, knowing that God exists is not what we mean when talk about “knowing God.” When we speak of knowing God, we mean knowing Him as He truly is. Yet one simply cannot bring God into one’s theological laboratory and come to know Him by subjecting Him to qualitative and quantitative analyses. Rather, if we are to know God as He truly is, this will only come about when He is pleased to reveal Himself to us, and we are enabled to receive His self-revelation, listen to it, and accept it as valid. In short, it is not a priori research of God that brings us to believe in Him. Rather, in our search for God we come to realize that what can be truly known of Him is only that which He makes known.

Is not this the very issue in Gan Eden? The crux of the question posed to Chavah by the evil one is whether or not she and Adam would accept the self-revelation of God as true, or seek to re-created God to fit their own imagination of what He should be like. The question “Has God said...?” therefore strikes at the heart of the human/divine relationship. And this question has been at the core of the human plight ever since.

There’s a God we want and there’s a God who is and they are not the same God. The turning point comes when we stop seeking the God we want and start seeking the God who is. (Patrick Morley)

In what ways, then, has God revealed Himself to mankind? He has revealed Himself

(1) in the creation (Ps 19:1–6; Rom 1:20–23),
(2) in His Son, Yeshua (John 14:7–9; Heb 1:1–2), and
(3) in the Scriptures (Ps 103:7; 2Tim 3:16–17; Heb 1:1).

For us, we may combine numbers 2 and 3, since our knowledge of Yeshua is not direct or face-to-face as it was for those with whom He lived in the 1st Century, but rather through the testimony of eyewitnesses which has been written down in the Apostolic Scriptures. Thus, we have the created universe which we observe, and the Scriptures, which we read and study.

Yet the Scriptures themselves make it plain that by the creation alone, mankind is not able to know God in a saving way. Man may certainly know that God exists and that He is powerful and righteous (Rom 1:20) by an investigation of the world around them. But “natural revelation” is not sufficient to
bring the sinner to salvation primarily because left to himself, natural man rejects the revelation contained in nature.

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (Rom 1:21)

Even more, in their darkened state of rebellion (language which describes ignorance of the truth) against the God they know is there, they rather worship the creation rather than the Creator, and prove themselves to be fools (Rom 1:22–23). Thus, though the existence and power of God is revealed in the physical universe, the revelation of God that leads to salvation is invested in the Scriptures alone.

Yet even the Scriptures themselves, apart from the illuminating work of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit), do not lead to salvation. Indeed, the letter by itself kills—it is the Spirit that brings life (Rom 2:29; 7:6; 2Cor 3:6). Thus, knowing God in the sense becoming part of His family, receiving from Him forgiveness of sins, and covenant membership within the redeemed people, is possible only when the Ruach writes the Torah upon the heart and in so doing, opens or illuminates its eternal message to the person He intends to save. This regeneration by the Ruach awakens the soul to the truth of God, makes clear one’s utter need of forgiveness from God, and, by the Scriptures, unfolds the way of salvation that has been accomplished in God’s Son. It is then, and only then, that the gift of faith may be rightly exercised resulting in the eternal salvation of a lost soul.

So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Messiah. (Rom 10:17)

but just as it is written, “THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN, ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.” For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1Cor 2:9–10)

You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Messiah Yeshua. (2Tim 3:14–15)

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

With these thoughts in mind, we may consider three levels by which a proper Theological Method is engaged:

(1) **Level 1** – Study: investigating the sources [outward looking]
seek the truth of God’s self-revelation

(2) **Level 2** – Meditate: understand via illumination [inward looking]
apply God’s self-revelation to my life

(3) **Level 3** – Commune: share life with the Life-Giver [upward looking]
worship in accordance with God’s self-revelation
We can illustrate these three levels God’s forgiving act. At the first level, a person must know what the Scriptures teach about how one may have his sins forgiven, and must accept as true what the Bible says. At the second level, the teaching of the Scriptures is applied personally through the work of the Ruach. And at the third level, the person communicates to God, seeking to be forgiven in accordance with what the Scriptures teach.

We may note that all three levels are necessary for a proper theological method. The absence of any one or two of the levels will produce errant theology, along the following lines:

First Level Only: 
This approaches a method of Bible study for the sake of study alone. It is gaining knowledge without any intention of applying what is learned to one’s own life. This often produces a “dead orthodoxy” in which facts about the truth, not the truth itself, is the goal.

Second & Third Levels Only: 
Without any appreciation for the objective truth in Level One, this produces an existentialist theology. The objective meaning of the Scriptures is by-passed for the sake of experience, which creates an individualistic theology devoid of objective criteria.

Third Level Only: 
By-passing both the objective truth of Level One and the application of that truth in Level Two, those who begin at Level Three fall prey to mysticism—the idea that one finds the truth through mystical, non-objective experiences. Moreover, there is no real accountability since “truth” derived from mystical experience is inevitably subjective.

First and Second Levels Only: 
Without incorporating Level Three (worship and communion with the self-revealing God), this produces a man-centered form of religion, making the needs of man the all-important center of theology.

Second Level Only: 
In skipping Level One and not continuing to Level Three, this produces a pietistic theology which centers its attention almost exclusively upon personal conformity to a particular religious culture.

First and Third Levels Only: 
In by-passing the Second Level (personal application of the objective truth taught in the Scriptures), this produces a “Theology of Glory.” Thus “take up your cross” as a call to suffer for the testimony of Yeshua is not welcomed in this theological method.

It is important, then, as we set out on this course of study, that we commit ourselves to a theological method which incorporates all three levels. We must give ourselves to a fervent study of the Scriptures in which God has revealed Himself. Then, having come to understand the truth, we must seek the help of the Ruach HaKodesh to illumine our hearts/minds in order to make a proper, personal application of the truth we have been given. Then we must allow what we have learned and applied to energize us in service and praise to the God Who has, in His mercy and love, revealed Himself to us.
Types of Theology

The follow are the categories of Theological Study generally found in Colleges, Universities, Seminaries, and institutions of higher learning that offer studies in Christian Theology.

1. Systematic Theology
   The investigation and explanation of the biblical facts about God and His universe, arranged according to categories and presented as a unified system of truth.

2. Natural Theology
   The investigation and explanation of facts about God and His universe collected only from observation and consideration of the physical world.

3. Biblical Theology
   The investigation and explanation of the truth about God and His universe as it is progressively developed chronologically in the Bible or in a given book or section of the Bible. Thus, sub-categories include:
   a. Theology of the Tanach (Old Testament)
   b. Theology of the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament)
   c. Theology of _________ (individual books of the Bible)
   d. Theology of _________ (various authors of the Bible, such as Isai-anic Theology, Pauline Theology, Johanine Theology, etc.)

4. Historical Theology
   The History of doctrine as it developed throughout the centuries, particularly as it developed in the Christian era.

5. Dogmatic Theology
   The listing and categorizing of biblical doctrines held with great certainty by a given group or denomination, and which defines the doctrinal distinctives of that group or denomination.

6. Practical Theology
   The ways and methods of applying theological doctrine to the lives of people, particularly in a given realm or situation. Thus, examples of sub-categories would be:
   a. Pastoral Theology – methods and guidelines for those who function as elders or overseers in congregations or communities of faith.
   b. Missional Theology – methods and guidelines for those who engage in missionary endeavors.
   c. Theology of Christian Education – methods and guidelines for those who engage in biblical instruction of select groups: young children, teens, young adults, adults, seniors, etc.
Chapter 1 – Theology Proper – Introduction

Sub-categories of Christian Systematic Theology

Generally, works on Systematic Theology categorize their study under the following headings:

1. **Prolegomena**
   Introduction and methods

2. **Bibliology**
   The doctrine of the Scriptures, which form the basis for all subsequent categories; deals with epistemology; canonization of the Scriptures; doctrine of inspiration; infallibility; inerrancy

3. **Theology Proper**
   God’s self-revelation; arguments for the existence of God; His eternal nature; God as the Creator; doctrine of the Trinity

4. **Angeology/Demonology**
   Doctrine of angels; their existence; their work; existence of Satan and demons; their work

5. **Anthropology**
   Doctrine of mankind; the fall and fallen nature of man; imago dei (image of God in man); origin of the soul; essential nature of man (body, soul, spirit); unity of the human race

6. **Hamartiology**
   Doctrine of sin; the fall; imputation of sin; consequences of sin

7. **Christology**
   The Doctrine of Messiah (Christ); His deity; His humanity; His fulfillment of the messianic promise; relationship to the Father and to the Spirit; virgin birth; death, resurrection, ascension

8. **Soteriology**
   The Doctrine of Salvation; election; regeneration; justification; sanctification; eternal life; imputation of righteousness; glorification; eternal state of the righteous; eternal state of the unrighteous

9. **Pneumatology**
   The Doctrine of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit); His nature and work; His relationship with the Father and the Messiah

10. **Ecclesiology**
    The Doctrine of the Ekklesia (Church); nature and mission; organization and function

11. **Eschatology**
    The Doctrine of Last Things; the time of tribulation; the return of Yeshua; the millennium; the final judgment; the eternal state

Not all Systematic Theologies would follow this outline. Some would put numbers 4–11 as sub-categories of “Theology Proper,” while others might entirely rearrange the categories. But in general, these are the primary categories which make up standard, systematic theologies as taught under the broad umbrella of Christian Theology.
The Value of Systematic Theology for Messianic Believers

Within the current “Messianic Movement,” there has developed a general disdain for the study of “Systematic Theology,” primarily because Systematic Theology is so deeply entrenched within Christian Theology and thus generally views the Messianic movement as theologically errant. Moreover, until the 12th Century CE, traditional Judaism never developed a “Systematic Theology.” Indeed, until the 9th Century and Saadia Gaon’s The Book of Beliefs & Opinions, we find no systematic arrangement of theological beliefs presented by the rabbis. Later, Maimonides (Rambam, 1135–1204 CE) formulated his “Thirteen Principles,” which also provided the Jewish community a systematically arranged creed to answer the well formulated creeds of the Christian Church. Given the fact that historically the Jewish community did not feel the need to formulate their beliefs into a system of theology, and since the Messianic movement tends to identify itself within the history of the Jewish people, it is understandable why this would add to the sense that Systematic Theology is not entirely applicable to our messianic faith.

But I would like to challenge this perspective for a number of reasons.

1. The Need to Listen to the Whole of Scripture on any given Doctrine.
   
   First, the primary function of Systematic Theology is to collate the pertinent texts of Scripture that deal with a given doctrine or teaching in order to gain an understanding of the overall teaching of Scripture on that doctrine. This, in turn, is predicated upon the belief that the Scriptures are unified in their message because they are divinely inspired. If we intend to make the Scriptures the foundation of our belief and practice, then surely we must know what the Scriptures teach. And since we find a progress of teaching in the Scriptures, with earlier subjects being developed and enlarged as God’s revelation progressed, it is necessary that we seek to know what the Scriptures as a whole teach about God, His will for His people, and His works throughout the history of mankind. This is one of the functions of Systematic Theology.

2. The Need to Unify the Message of the Scriptures Theologically
   
   Second, since we believe that the Scriptures are the inspired, infallible, and inerrant revelation from God Himself, we likewise believe that ultimately, in the mind of God, the Scriptures do not contradict themselves. While in our finite minds, there will always remain some aspects of theology which appear to be contradictory, and for which we have no satisfactory explanation to resolve the conflict, we yet receive both in their apparent contradiction, and resolve that in God’s mind they are not ultimately contradictory. We therefore hold these as antinomies which will be resolved in the world to come.

   Yet such antinomies are relatively few when compared with the clear and unambiguous teachings of the Bible. What is more, as we gain a better perspective of the overall teaching of Scripture upon the various doctrines it con-

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1 רבי סעדיה בן יוסף אלפונס גאון - lived c. 882–942.
2 We should also note Maimonides’ The Guide of the Perplexed (הללןו: יד ל禄ל), (Univ of Chicago, 1963). In modern times, and most likely as a reaction to Christian Theology, Jewish theologians have formulated theological treatises. For example, Solomon Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology (Macmillan, 1909); Arthur A. Cohen; Paul Mendes-Flohr, Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought (Free Press, 1987).
tains, we are better suited to resolve what might otherwise be left as contradictions.

3. The Need to be Prepared to Answer those who Inquire

But when I look, there is no one, and there is no counselor among them who, if I ask, can give an answer. (Is 41:28)

but sanctify Messiah as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence. (1Pet 3:15)

Third, we are commissioned by our Lord to be His witnesses. This means we must know the unified message of the Scriptures and what they teach so that we can be valid witnesses for our Messiah to a watching and inquiring world. This is particularly an issue within the Messianic movement, for many people within Messianic congregations are not well grounded in the Scriptures and are therefore easily pulled away from the truth. Even more troublesome are the reports of those who abandon their faith in Yeshua because they have been persuaded to convert to modern Judaism. More often than not, these have been people who were ill-prepared to give a biblically based answer to the arguments presented by the anti-missionary movement.

4. The Need to Deepen our Worship of God for what He has Done

Finally, as we come to understand the overall message of the Scriptures, and see its unified message, not only is our understanding of God’s greatness and of His works enhanced, but our desire to worship and serve Him out of gratitude and thanksgiving grows proportionately. True worship and service are the result of a heart overwhelmed with the grandeur of God’s magnificence, made known through His works and ultimately in His Son, Yeshua. Thus, it is important that we continue to read and study the Bible with the goal of knowing well its unified message which in turn will cause us to grow in our worship and service of the God Who has redeemed us.

Therefore, I encourage you, as you study through this course, to have these goals in mind, and to become equipped to know, apply, and give witness to the greatness of God and His works. And in so doing, to grow in your desire and ability to worship Him in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24).

The Problem with Systematic Theology

Though the study of Systematic Theology has its great benefits, there is a danger of which we must be aware, and it is this: too often those who focus upon Systematic Theology fall prey to the practice of allowing their system of theology to take precedence over the Scriptures. This is usually accomplished by eisegesis, that is, inserting a preconceived theology into a biblical text even if it is clear that the given text does not support the infused theology.

Likewise, those who emphasize Systematic Theology to the exclusion or near exclusion of Biblical Theology tend to dismiss the mysteries (unresolved tensions) that are an inevitable part of the divine revelation. If the goal of Systematic Theology is to “leave no question unanswered,” this may well lead to
forced answers derived from eisegesis rather than exegesis.

We must be warned, then, not to allow a system of theology to override honest exegesis. If Scripture appears to contradict Scripture, it is a call to work harder in order to resolve the apparent conflict if possible. But we dare not think that the mystery of God Himself will ever be entirely understood by our finite minds. We must be willing to admit that our “Systematic Theology” will always be less than perfect. There will be times when we must concede that the complete answers we seek for various doctrinal questions are simply unavailable. In such situations, we must be content to hold the partial answers we have, and leave the rest to the all-knowing and all-wise God we worship.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Why is a humble heart/attitude necessary for anyone who seeks to study theology?

2. Discuss the three levels of the Theological Method as noted above, asking this question: what specific challenges confront the student at each of the three levels?

3. Why is regular prayer an important and essential part of theological study? Which level of the Theological Method is being marginalized when we fail to incorporate prayer into our study?

4. In what ways is the very concept of Systematic Theology contrary to the “spirit of our times,” that is, the spirit of post-modernity?

5. According to Romans 1:20, what can a person know about God by observing the physical world? Discuss how this would be possible.
Is Knowing God Possible?

Traditionally, the study of Theology (and particularly that area of theology called “Theology Proper”) often begins by asking what evidence might be offered for the existence of God, and whether mankind is capable of knowing God even if it can be reasoned that He exists.

In fact, these two questions are bound together in the one philosophical question of epistemology: how can we know that we know? Or by what means can we be assured that we can truly know anything? While the study of epistemology is beyond the scope of our current study, it does bear upon the question of whether mankind is capable of knowing God.

We may formulate the possibility of knowing God on three premises: (1) that God exists and that He has relations with the universe; (2) that the human mind is capable of knowing God and comprehending (in some measure) the manner by which God relates to and with the universe; and (3) that these facts have been brought into contact with the mind, or that the mind has perceived these facts. We may illustrate these by considering the possibility of having accurate knowledge that anything exists. Consider an observable object such as the moon: (1) we begin with the objective existence of the moon, (2) accept the possibility of the subjective capacity of the human mind to know the moon, and (3) the provision of some means (e.g., the eye and the telescope) by which the span between man and the moon is bridged, and by which the mind can gather the facts with regard to the moon.

The illustration of knowing the moon also points to the fact that in all realms of human knowledge, there exists a presupposition of trust, that is, a factor in the process of knowing which cannot be absolutely proven empirically. In the matter of observing an object (such as the moon), the human mind trusts the senses by which the object itself is observed as well as the proper functioning of the mind to decipher and interpret the impulses provided by the senses. Yet we live and act on the premise that we do, in fact, have accurate knowledge (even if that knowledge is not exhaustive) of those things and beings which we encounter. It is, therefore, a fallacious charge by some, that since our apprehension and knowledge of God’s existence begins with faith, it is no sure knowledge but only speculative knowledge. We answer in two parts: (1) that all knowledge incorporates at its beginning a trust or faith in its primary premises, and (2) that faith is knowledge, and an even higher sort of knowledge, for faith is never opposed to reason but only to sight. The evidence of that which is not seen (Heb 11:1) may produce and substantiate genuine knowledge.

But we must also reckon with the fact that one may have preliminary knowledge which may or may not advance to a more complete and accurate knowledge. For instance, to refer again to the illustration of knowing that the moon exists, one’s knowledge of this fact may begin by simple observation, and may increase with further investigation (e.g., by use of a telescope). But suppose a person knows the existence of the moon, and has learned (either by observation or through other means) that the moon controls the ocean tides.
Further, suppose this person is camping and decides to set up camp on the ocean beach. He “knows” about the tides controlled by the moon, but disregards what he knows because although he has observed the regularity by which the tides rise and fall, he acts without regard to what he has come to know. Consequently in the middle of the night, his tent is awash in the rising tide. We might say, then, that though he knows the existence of the moon, and even the fact that the moon controls the tides, his knowledge is less than what it should be because his actions bespeak an unwillingness to accept as valid what he claims to know. Similarly, one may study what it means to ride a bicycle, and even be able to explain the process scientifically, but having the ability himself to actually ride a bicycle is what we mean by the phrase, “He knows how to ride a bike!” Thus, true knowledge is validated or manifested by one’s acting upon what one knows.

If we apply this concept to the study of God, we recognize immediately that there are different aspects of such knowledge. For example, James tells us that the demons know that God exists and even shudder as a result of their knowledge (James 2:19). Yet their knowledge, accurate as far as it goes, is less than complete because it does not result in worship of God, something that inevitably results from knowing God more completely and therefore more accurately.

We see, then, that there is more to knowing God than what can be achieved merely by observation of His works or by rational thought and reasoning. Even though both of these enterprises are valuable and even necessary, to know God in truth inevitably requires some level of relationship. What is more, personal knowledge gained through relationship is an exercise that involves both giving and receiving so that participation in the relationship is foundational to the knowledge gained. Given this reality, to “know God” means far more than simply acknowledging the possibility of His existence, or even affirming that He does exist. The person who claims to “know God” must be someone who lives in relationship with the God he or she claims to know. Such a relationship will inevitably have an effect upon that person’s life and the effect will be evident to others.

The Philosophical Case for the Impossibility of Knowing God

The philosophical case for the impossibility of knowing God is based primarily on one of two premises. One premise is that accurate knowledge is possible only in the phenomenal realm, that is, in the realm of what can be observed or known through the five senses. Since God cannot be observed, it would be impossible to know Him even if He does exist. A second premise is that one cannot have knowledge of that which one cannot fathom. Since God, by definition, is greater than all else, mankind has no mental categories by which to reckon that which is beyond his ability to know, and thus God, if He does exist, is beyond our ability to know.

The answers to these premises are obvious. First, to postulate that knowledge is only possible in the phenomenal realm is arbitrary. Surely there is the ability to reason apart from sensory perception and to acquire knowledge by such reason. That one can know one’s own thoughts is proof that true knowledge is not confined to the phenomenal realm. Second, the notion that one must have mental categories available in order to gain new knowledge fails to consider that knowing is distinguishing, and therefore mankind has that mental ability to distinguish between what he knows of himself and in what ways,
therefore, God is greater. Further, one does not need to have a complete or exhaustive knowledge of any particular subject in order for the knowledge they do have to be accurate. We will never be able to know all there is to know about God, but we still may know Him in truth.

Philosophers have sought to give answers to the question of whether God, if He does exist, can be known by the finite human intellect. Immanuel Kant, for instance, posited two realms, the phenomenal and noumenal. In the phenomenal realm knowledge is verifiable, while in the noumenal realm “knowledge” is subjective or personal and therefore unverifiable. Yet Kant would have considered such subjective “knowledge” to be real for the individual even if it could not be verified by others. Paul Tillich sought to solve the dilemma of knowing God by arguing that since a human being is aware of his or her own being, one may know God who is the ground of all being, or being itself. Taking another tact, the pantheist believes that “God” is the ground of existence for all things, so that all things are, in essence, God. Spinoza may have come close to a pantheistic view of God, though he denies so in his writings and correspondences.¹ Perhaps Spinoza meant that all which can be known of God is what is found in the material world.

From a theistic position, however, the answer to the question of whether it is possible to know God is quite straightforward. The answer is “yes” because God has determined to reveal Himself to mankind in ways and terms that mankind can comprehend, that is, through observation of the created universe, through sending His Son as a man, and through writing the Scriptures via human agency and in human languages.

The Answer of the Kabbalists to the Philosopher’s Negation

The Kabbalists of the middle ages were impressed by the philosophical negation of knowledge, that is, that one could not know what one could not describe or categorize. They took this idea of “definition” to its logical conclusion, namely, that anything which can be defined is therefore limited to that definition. As such, to define God would be to limit Him, which would then make Him less than God, Who is infinite. They sought to solve this problem... by postulating two aspects of deity. God as he is in himself is unknown and unknowable. This aspect of deity is call Ein Sof (“That which is without limit.”). From Ein Sof ten powers or potencies—the sefirot—emanate, and it is God as manifested in these sefirot who is the God of religion, the God whom human beings can know and worship.²

Thus, according to the Kabbalists, the “God” (אלוהים, יהוה, אדונִּי) of Israel who speaks and acts in the Tanach is actually one of the ten sefirot and not the Infinite One Himself. In this way, the Kabbalists guard the Ein Sof from being known, i.e., defined, while still having an impression of the Ein Sof via the sefirot. Such a theology favored a dualistic approach (the Ein Sof who is but is unknown, and the sefirot who are and are known) and even was charged by

¹ Correspondence of Benedict de Spinoza, (Wilder Publications, 2009), letter 73.
its opponents as teaching a “decatheism” (ten persons in the godhead) which, from the viewpoint of traditional Judaism, was even worse than the Christian “trinity” doctrine.

Later chasidic teachers and groups (such as Isaac Luria of Safed [16th Century], and Shneur Zalman of Lyady [18th Century], founder of the Lubavitch / Chabad chasidim) sought to adjust the early Kabbalistic doctrines to overcome the apparent dualism it produced. For instance, Shneur Zalman and the Chabad formulated the view that “all is in God,” meaning that nothing has an independent existence outside of God. But in order to deal with the problem of evil under which this view labored, they proposed that all that is “other” than God does not really exist but only appears to exist.

The statement in the Shema that God is One is now understood to mean that, despite appearances, there is only the One and nothing else.\(^1\)

This theology was therefore akin to pantheism (“all is God”) but more precisely it was panentheism (“all is in God”). Either way, the common description of God in the Tanach, that He is the “maker of heaven and earth,” labors for a meaningful interpretation if, in fact, nothing really exists.

Moreover, in seeking to guard the transcendence of God, the Kabbalists distanced Him to the point of making Him unknowable. Instead of the God of the Tanach Who instructed the people of Israel: “Let them construct a sanctuary for Me, that I may dwell among them” (Ex 25:8), the Kabbalists offer the unknowable Ein Sof whose character is imperfectly revealed by ten sefirot.

For Schechter, the whole concept of the Ein Sof as the unknown and unknowable One, is entirely foreign to Judaism and strange in the ears of the Jewish student studying theology:

Among the many strange statements by which the Jewish student is struck, when reading modern divinity works, there is none more puzzling to his mind than the assertion of the transcendentalism of the Rabbinic God, and his remoteness from man. A world of ingenuity is spent to prove that the absence of the mediatorial idea in Rabbinic Theology is a sign not of its acceptance of man’s close communion with God, but of its failure to establish the missing link between heaven and earth.\(^2\)

Yet it is the Kabbalistic approach to theology that has captured the greater part of orthodox Judaism in our day, and in those circles where the mystical perspective reigns triumphant, the attempt to find a close communion with God is theoretically impossible, for only the emanations of the Ein Sof have any connection with the material universe.

**The Incarnational Principle**

It is the attempt to unravel or in some way explain the mystery rather than accepting it as inexplicable that creates the problem. Whether one follows the philosophical school that redefines God into a philosophical category, or the

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1. Ibid, p. 294.
Kabbalists who reason that the transcendent God (Ein Sof) cannot be known, the God of the Bible is lost. From the first pages of Genesis, throughout the Tanach, and culminating in the Apostolic Scriptures, the nearness of God within His creation is manifest. He meets with Adam and Chavah in Gan Eden; He spoke directly to Noach, and visits Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, communicating with them directly. He appeared to Moshe, Aaron, and the 70 elders at Sinai, and His visible presence went with the nation of Israel as they traversed the desert. Through the prophets, the God of Israel revealed Himself and His will to the people.

All of these appearances, visions, and revelations were portends—a foretaste of the promise given at the very beginning (Gen 3:15), that the seed of the woman would indeed come and that in His coming, the eternal, infinite and all-powerful God would dwell with mankind not as “other,” but as one with and within the created world. It is this incarnational principle—God dwelling with His people in the person of Immanuel—that is the greatest of mysteries (cf. 1Tim 3:16) and at the same time the greatest object of wonder and praise. But if we seek to unravel the mystery of the incarnation we will inevitably error, either by diminishing (in what ever way) the absolute infinite nature of God, or by viewing Him as so transcendent that He is unknowable—beyond the reach of human capacity to comprehend.

Corroborative Arguments for the Existence of God

It is obvious that for the people of ancient Israel, there was no question about the existence of their God, even if they questioned at times whether He was as He revealed Himself to be, i.e., the only God Who existed. What I mean by this is quite simple: had someone asked Isaac how he was certain that God existed, he might have simply answer, “I know He exists because my father, Abraham, ate a meal with Him. He came to our tent a year before I was born, along with two others (cf. Gen 18). My father and mother both have told me the story numerous times. What is more, I heard His voice on Mt. Moriah when my life was spared and the ram sacrificed in my place.” Nor would the generation of Israel that came out of Egypt in the exodus have had any need to question whether the God of Israel, the God who appeared to Moses, Aaron, and the 70 elders, existed. He had manifest Himself to them in ways that could never be denied.

We could go on to relate the many times throughout the Scriptures (both in the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures) that God made His presence known through visible and material expressions, but you get the point. For the people of Israel, the question of God’s existence was moot. Most certainly the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob exists! That was an indisputable fact for the ancient people who observed God’s miraculous powers, heard His thundering voice, and experienced His imminent presence.

We are not surprised, then, to find that the rabbinic literature lacks any substantial materials on how one may prove the existence of God. In fact, as far as I know, Maimonides’ “Thirteen Principles”¹ is the first rabbinic statement to include the requirement of belief in the existence of God:

The first fundamental principle is the existence of the Creator, that is,

⁠¹ Found in his introduction to m. Sanhedrin 10, and also found in all standard Daily Siddurim.
the existence of a Being who is perfect in all manners of perfection. He is the cause of the existence of all other beings, and from Him they derive their continued existence. If one imagined that His existence would cease, all other existence would be nullified and would no longer continue to be. Conversely, however, if all other existence ceased, He would continue to exist and would not be lacking, for He is not dependent on any being other than Himself. Everything in existence other than Him, [even] the entities and the forms of the orbits—and surely, the lower [forms of existence] depend on Him for their being. This is the first fundamental principle, and it is alluded to in the commandment, “I am Adonai, your God” (Ex 20:2). 1

Generally speaking, the rabbinic literature simply takes the existence of God as a primary truth without sensing any need to offer further evidence.

However, since Israel’s mission was to be a light to the nations, and it is clear that the nations, though having a concept of divine beings, would need to be informed about the God of Israel Who alone is the Creator and only true God, it would seem probable that the Apostles (particularly those who went to the nations outside of Israel) would have considered various ways of presenting the existence of Israel’s God to those outside of Israel, and perhaps offering proofs of His existence.

We may note how Paul introduces the existence of Israel’s God to the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus in Acts 17:22ff and how he describes God and His deeds.

1. He first notes what the philosophers themselves admit, namely, that they do not know God, for they have erected an altar to “the unknown God.” Paul thus proceeds to tell them about this “unknown God.”
2. This God is the creator of heaven and earth and all things within them.
3. As such, He is the Lord or Ruler of heaven and earth.
4. He is in need of nothing but rather He Himself gives to all people life, breath, and all things.
5. He created one man, and from this one have come all the nations.
6. He has ordained every person’s appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation so that each person might seek and find Him.
7. Everyone lives, and moves, and has their being in/by God.
8. All mankind is created in His image, and therefore each person bears some connection to God by being created in His image.
9. God declares that all people should repent of their sin and turn to Him.
10. There is coming a day of judgment, presided over by the Man God has ordained, that is, Yeshua. Yeshua’s resurrection provided the final and absolute proof that He was worthy to act as the Judge of all the earth.

Note that Paul does not begin by presenting arguments to prove the existence of God, but rather states as a truism that God exists. Yet in his further statements he does lay the groundwork for proofs of God’s existence. For in-

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1 Translation by Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, Maimonides: Pirkei Avot, etc. (Moznaim Pub., 1994), p. 173.
stance, saying that God is the creator of heaven and earth and all things in them would logically mean that the physical world itself would give evidence of the Creator Himself. Likewise, when he mentions that mankind was created in the image of God, this would naturally lead to the idea that there resides within mankind that which testifies of the Creator.

Moreover, the call to repent before God is based upon the idea that the Creator rules as sovereign over mankind, that He is righteous, and that He requires mankind to be righteous as well. Further, an appointed day of judgment, presided over by Yeshua, will require all to give account for the manner in which they lived, whether righteous or unrighteous. This emphasis upon righteousness highlights the moral component innate within mankind, and thus (being created in God’s image) a further reflection of the moral character of God.

Traditionally, the corroborative proofs for the existence of God have been grouped under four main headings:

1. The Cosmological Argument
2. The Teleological Argument
3. The Anthropological Argument
4. The Ontological Argument

None of these are sufficient of themselves to prove beyond doubt the existence of God. They are therefore corroborative evidence giving weight to that which faith alone can know.

1. The Cosmological Argument

Generally, this is an argument of first cause and thus an *a posteriori* argument, that which finds its basis in observation of the world around us. It can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle (e.g., Aristotle’s “prime mover”) but flourished during the Middle Ages with Thomas Aquinas and, to a lesser degree, Duns Scotus. In contemporary philosophy of religion, defenders of the Cosmological Argument for the existence of God include Richard Taylor and Richard Swinburne. Notable critics have been David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and Bertrand Russell.

The Cosmological Argument, as put forth by its proponents, actually consists of two parts, though the first is often considered to be the primary argument. The two parts are: (1) that everything that has begun, whether substance or phenomenon, owes its existence to some producing cause; (2) the universe, as it is in its present observable form, is a thing begun and owes its existence to a cause which is equal to its production. Since the observable universe gives every evidence of having a beginning, a cause sufficient to produce the universe must exist (i.e., a “first cause”), and it is reasoned that this “first cause” must be God.

The deficiency of the Cosmological Argument, at its core, is noted by Russell.

I may say that when I was a young man and was debating these

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3. Note Bertrand Russell,
questions very seriously in my mind, I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill’s Autobiography, and I there found this sentence: “My father taught me that the question “Who made me?” cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question “Who made God?” That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First Cause. If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument.¹

We may summarize the deficiency in this way: even if the Cosmological Argument logically supports the need for a First Cause, there is nothing to prove that this First Cause qualifies as God? And even if one were to concede that the First Cause is God, there is nothing in the argument itself to prove that the God of the Cosmological Argument is unchanging.

Swinburne² agrees that the Cosmological argument as presented classically by Aquinas and others fails to establish its premise. Deductive reasoning simply is not sufficient to prove the existence of God. However, Swinburne holds that the Cosmological Argument still has value if it is used to indicate probability. His argument goes like this:

Everybody agrees that there exists a complex physical universe. The question is how to explain it, and there are at least two hypotheses. One holds that there is no further cause or explanation of the universe beyond its mere existence. The other says that God created it. Swinburne argues that the probability that our universe should exist as a result of creation by God is greater than the probability that it should exist by itself. This doesn’t mean that the probability that God created the world is high. In fact, Swinburne admits that it is low, for at first glance it seems more probable that there would be nothing than that the world would have been created. Even if there is a God, he isn’t required to create anything, but we do have a world, and we must ask how it came to be. It is more probable that an uncaused God created it than that it just happened to be here. This isn’t absolute proof, but it shows that the hypothesis that there is a God is reasonable, and even more reasonable than atheism.³

Strong’s conclusion regarding the Cosmological Argument is as follows:

The Value of the Cosmological Argument, then, is simply this, — it proves the existence of some cause of the universe indefinitely great. When we go beyond this and ask whether this cause is a cause of being, or merely a cause of change, to the universe; whether it is a cause apart from the universe, or one with it; whether it is an eternal cause, or a cause dependent upon some other cause; whether it is intelligent or unintelligent, infinite or finite, one or many, — this argument cannot assure us.⁴

³ Quoted from John S. Feinberg, No One Like Him (Crossway, 2001), p. 195.
2. The Teleological Argument

The Teleological Argument (from the Greek τέλος, telos, “end, goal”) is better known in our day as the Intelligent Design Argument. Simply put, all of the design in our world, both in form and function, is more easily explained on the premise that there is a God than on an atheistic assumption. Put most simply, consistent and workable design requires a designer. That the universe evidences consistent and workable design is clear, and thus it is most logical that an intelligent being produced the design.

Perhaps the most famous exposition of the Teleological Argument was put forth by William Paley (1743–1805), a British theologian and philosopher. Likewise, F. R. Tennant (1866–1957), a professor at Cambridge University, also was a strong proponent of the Teleological Argument. The strongest critique of the Teleological Argument was put forth by David Hume,¹ which remains the tours de force in opposition to the argument from design.

The Teleological Argument is an a posteriori argument, or an argument constructed from inductive arguments. This being the case, it rests upon probabilities and degrees of analogy or similarity, and is therefore more difficult to assess. Paley’s explanation of the Teleological Argument goes like this: Suppose a man was walking and his foot struck a rock. If he were asked how the rock came to be there, he might respond that it had been there forever. Nothing would be considered absurd in that answer. If, however, he was walking along and found a wristwatch and he was asked how the watch came to be there, he surely could not give the same answer. In the case of the watch (as over against the rock), it is obvious that the various parts of the watch have been designed and put together for a specific purpose. Its parts move so as to indicate the hour of the day, or the minutes in the hour, and so forth. If we observed the various parts of the watch and the way it worked, we could only conclude that it was made by a watchmaker who understood its construction and designed it to accomplish a specific purpose.

Further, in the scenario, even if we had never seen a watch before, we could still arrive at the same conclusion, for we could easily see that the watch was constructed for a purpose, and that the purpose for its construction was to mark intervals of time.

In modern times, research into such things as DNA and the mechanisms controlling the manufacture and distribution of proteins in the human body has given rise to an increased emphasis upon intelligent design by creationists, and rightly so. Even if the Teleological Argument, like all rational arguments, cannot prove categorically the existence of God, it does add weight on the side of theism as over against atheism. As Feinberg writes:

…the critic must answer the following question: if there is no God, why does anything ever go right in our universe, and why is this so most of the time? Evolution and chance seem inadequate to explain why there isn’t more evil than we already have.²

¹ David Hume, Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (Doubleday, 1974).
² John Feinberg, No One Like Him, p. 200.
3. The Anthropological Argument

The Anthropological Argument is sometimes also called the Moral Argument. Like the previous two argument, the Anthropological Argument is *a posteriori*, and waited on the side of probability or what is generally observable among people. The argument simply is that generally people, regardless of the era or culture, seem to be governed by an inward, moral principle.

For instance, when promises are broken, people generally complain that the promise should have been kept. When a defenseless person is brutally beaten by thugs, people are outraged. Even those who commit wrong against another recognize that their deeds are contrary, and the proof is that when caught they most often deny the wrong and try to explain it away. They don’t reply “So what? Why does it matter?” All of this seems to suggest that there is some kind of standard for appropriate behavior, morality, or law of fair play which is universal within mankind.

If this is so, then it seem more likely that this moral principle has been implanted into mankind via a conscience than that such an inner principle became a universal component of human reasoning by chance.¹

Those who oppose the Anthropological Argument do so on the basis (primarily) that actions ascribed to a moral principle may equally be the result of naturalistic factors, such as herd mentality, natural selection, and a host of other influences.

In the end, the Anthropological or Moral Argument is generally the least popular of the corroborative proofs for God’s existence.

> It does offer confirmation for the believer and some evidence for the nonbeliever open to argument, but for a confirmed atheist it is probably the least likely of the theistic arguments to be at all rationally compelling.²

4. The Ontological Argument

The Ontological Argument is attributed originally to Anselm (1033–1109) and found in his *Monologium* and more fully in his *Proslogium*. Likewise René Descartes formulates a similar argument in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

The crux of Anselm’s argument is (put very simply), we have the idea of an absolutely perfect Being, but existence is an attribute of perfection. Since we are able to conceive of an absolute perfect Being, that Being must exist. Descartes’ formulation of the Ontological Argument was in a similar form:

> We have the idea of an infinitely perfect Being. As we are finite, that idea could not have originated with us. As we are conversant only with the finite, it could not have originated from anything around us. It must, therefore, have come from God, whose existence is thus a necessary assumption.³

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² John Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, p. 203.

Once again, this form of a theistic argument falls short, for it begins with the presupposition that an absolute infinite Being exists or could exist. Moreover, it is obvious that human beings can conceive of that which is does not exist, as is easily demonstrated by apocalyptic imagery. The Ontological Argument, therefore, finds little value in arguing for the existence of God to those who are determined that no God exists.

The Value of the Corroborative Arguments

It is clear from Scripture that mere argumentation, regardless of how forceful or logical it might be, is not sufficient to prove to unbelievers that God exists. Nor can we posit, on the basis of a text like Romans 1:20–32, that all people actually know there is a God and that logical argument might therefore be the necessary “nudge” to bring them to confess as true what they already know in fact. For apart from a change of heart, even though God has revealed Himself in and through the physical universe, mankind will constantly refuse to accept that revelation and act contrary to it.

What then might be the value of these Corroborative Arguments for the existence of God? First, they are (to one extent or another) valuable in showing that our belief in God is not thoroughly irrational or unreasonable. Thus, for those of us who are believers, the Corroborative Arguments provide confirmation of our belief in God’s existence and control of the universe. For atheists and agnostics, they may provide rational grounds for considering the existence of God, and this might be used by God Himself to investigate further the truth of God.

Secondly, they are valuable to those of us who are believers because they may assist us in understanding more fully the manner in which unbelievers, and particularly atheists and agnostics, argue against the existence of God. In the end, however, it is not our ability to debate nor the conclusiveness of our arguments that will bring a lost soul to depend upon God and His method of salvation. It is rather the Gospel itself, in the hands of the Ruach, that is powerful to effect salvation. As Paul writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “but the righteous man shall live by faith.”

And Yeshua Himself taught that no one can come to saving faith unless the Father draws him:

Therefore the Jews were grumbling about Him, because He said, “I am the bread that came down out of heaven.” They were saying, “Is not this Yeshua, the son of Yoseph, whose father and mother we know? How does He now say, ‘I have come down out of heaven’?” Yeshua answered and said to them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day. (John 6:41–44)

Therefore, while these arguments are good to remind us that our faith is not irrational, and helpful in conversations we may have with unbelievers, we must not think that they will be, of themselves, effective in changing the hearts of those to whom we bear witness. While arguments such as that of Intelligent
Design may open the heart and mind of an inquirer to ponder the reality of God, it is still the sovereign work of the Ruach to prepare the heart, grant the gift of faith, and open the eyes of understanding by which a person comes to repentance, seeking and finding forgiveness and mercy from God.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the view of the Kabbalists, that the *Ein Sof*, the idea of the one true “God,” cannot be known. Contrast this with the biblical doctrine of the Incarnation by reading Philippians 2:5–11 and discussing why the Incarnation is the essential element in knowing God.

2. Discuss the Teleological Argument from the standpoint of Intelligent Design as found in our physical world. Formulate how you might use the Teleological Argument or the Intelligent Design Argument if you had the opportunity to talk with someone who did not believe in the existence of God but was searching out the matter.

3. Read again the message of Paul to the philosophers on the Areopagus in Acts 17:22ff. Discuss the points he makes (cf. p. 20 above) and how these same points might be incorporated into our modern world as we witness to unbelievers about the salvation Yeshua has secured for those who receive Him as Lord and Savior.
God is a Being

Quite obviously, we have entered into the study of God and have quickly discovered that we lack sufficient categories of thought to understand Him. We equally lack expressions and words within human language to convey our thoughts about God even if we felt we had come to a better understanding of His being. Yet here again, we begin with the premise that God is, and that He has revealed Himself to us. And we look to see the means by which He has revealed Himself, we find that He has accommodated our weaknesses by using human language and human expressions of thought in order to describe Himself to us. So we are warranted, then, to venture forward in the study of God even though we recognize at the outset that we will never fully understand the God we seek to know and worship. Yet even though our knowledge of God and His being will inevitably be limited, that knowledge can still be accurate even if it is no exhaustive. And further, we may talk about God in human terms and communicate to each other what we know about Him without fear that somehow our imperfect expressions detract from His glory. For He Himself willed to make Himself known to us in common, human language and expressions.

When we ask questions regarding God’s being, or even if God exists as a being, we have entered that area of philosophy known as metaphysics, and particularly the sub-category of metaphysics known as ontology,1 the study of the nature of beings. It was from the ancient Greek culture that the study of metaphysics developed and thrived, particularly in the philosophical schools founded on the teachings of Plato and Aristotle. We have seen that Paul, for instance, engages the philosophers in Athens, addressing them within their own ontological discussions, for he asserts that in God “we live and move and have our being (ἐσμεν, esmen, literally, “we are,” Acts 17:28).” Using their own ontological terms, Paul affirms that our own human existence—our being—is real or exists because of God’s power to create and sustain our being.

Paul makes a important statement about God’s existence as a real being in Phil 2:6. In this Christological hymn, Paul writes:

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Messiah Yeshua, 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. (Phil 2:5–7).

For our study, it is important that we discover what Paul means when he states that Yeshua existed “in the form of God” (ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, en morphē theou). Since the Greek word morphē can have a range of meanings within classical, Septuagint, and Hellenistic Greek usage, its meaning here must be determined by the context. We are fortunate to find that Paul used the same

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1 The word “ontology” is derived from the Greek participle ὄν, ὄν, “being” (from the verb εἰμί, eimi, “to be”).
word in the parallel phrase of v. 7, that Yeshua, in His incarnation, took the “form of a bond-servant” (μορφὴν δούλου, morphēn doulou). We can see how the two phrases correspond or are in antithetical parallelism:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morphology of God</th>
<th>Equality with God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the form of God</td>
<td>equality with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the form of a bond-servant</td>
<td>the likeness of men</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The point Paul is making seems obvious: before Yeshua came to earth in His incarnation, He enjoyed equality with God, i.e., He was in “the form of God.” Likewise, when He came as a babe in Bethlehem, He came in “the form of a bond-servant,” which is further described by “in the likeness of men,” meaning He became a real man—He did not just appear to be human—He was (and is) human, i.e., endowed with a human nature.

Now, since the statements about Yeshua’s incarnation are parallel to those regarding His pre-incarnate state, we may understand the phrase “in the form of God” to be modified by “equality with God.” But “in the form of God” cannot refer to external appearances since God is immaterial and has no outward appearance. What “in the form of God” must mean, therefore, is that Yeshua existed before His incarnation with the same nature as God, and this also indicates therefore that God is a being.¹

In Gal 4:8 Paul makes an interesting statement regarding the false gods worshiped by some of the Galatian community before they came to faith in Yeshua. He writes:

However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods.

The phrase which bears upon our present subject is “those which by nature are no gods” (τοῖς φύσει μὴ οὖσιν θεοῖς). Here, the key word is φύσει, phusei, translated “nature.” As Feinberg writes:

When Paul speaks of those who by nature are not gods, we must be careful not to read a priori into phusei [phusei] Greek philosophy about being and essence. On the other hand, if Paul isn’t referring to the essential nature or being, it is hard to imagine what he means. If Paul merely wanted to say that before the Galatians came to Christ, they worshiped other gods, gods about whose reality Paul did not wish to make any comment, he could have just said that they worshiped other gods. Evidently, he intended to say more than just that, but what could his point be if not that these gods don’t exist (they have no nature)? By saying that these gods have no being, Paul seems to imply that, in contrast to these gods, there is a God who is a real entity. It makes abundant sense in this context to conclude that Paul believes that the God they now know, having turned to Christ, is that God who is a real being.²

One further Pauline text should be brought to bear upon this subject, namely, Rom 1:19–20. In this text, Paul teaches us that the physical, created

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world gives evidence of God’s existence and being:

> because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 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, so that they are without excuse. (Rom 1:19–20)

The general meaning of Paul’s words here is that anyone looking at the created order should be able to reason that it must have been made by a being who is both intelligent and powerful. That is, the thing made inevitably reveals something about its maker. The power necessary to make the universe must be greater than the universe, and this Paul describes as God’s “eternal power.” We could just as easily understand this to mean “infinite power.” But it is the phrase “divine nature” (which is actually only one word in the Greek, ἡθιότης, theiotēs) that is important for our immediate study. Theiotēs is used only here in the Apostolic Scriptures, but is found in various other places within the non-biblical Greek literature. Generally, theiotēs means “the quality or characteristics pertaining to deity.” Clearly, a non-entity does not make anything, nor can an idea have power to create. Thus, God, Who created, exists as a supreme being and the universe itself gives witness to this fact.

The Tanach as the Foundation

I chose to begin with Paul since he was teaching and writing to people who were, by and large, raised in a Hellenistic society and culture and thus had (most likely) a worldview that was greatly affected by the philosophical side of things, with a great deal of emphasis upon metaphysics and ontological discussions. We, in our western world, have essentially been raised with a similar worldview, although in our post-modern world, the whole matter of reasoning and logic have been put on the shelf in favor of a pluralism that requires feelings and emotions to be given equal or greater weight than reason governed by facts. So in some measure, Paul’s words speak directly to our way of looking at things.

But Paul did not “invent” the concept of God as a divine being, or having a divine nature. That is, it was not Paul nor the other Apostles, nor Yeshua Himself Who gave a “new identification” to the concept of God. In fact, the texts that we have looked in Paul are squarely based upon the foundation of God’s self-revelation in the Tanach.

Some have questioned whether in the Ancient Near East, and among the Semitic cultures, there was a concept of personhood. In other words, is “personhood” only a Greek concept, and if so, is there any thing to substantiate that God is a “person” or has “attributes of personhood?” But the fact that the Hebrew language has no word with the precise meaning of “person” does not mean that the concept of personhood was missing in the Semitic cultures, nor that it is therefore missing in the worldview of the Tanach. Thielicke offers an interesting note on this subject:

> H. Braun thinks that the concept of person is a modern and not a biblical construct and that it is thus inadequate to indicate God. But

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1 BDAG, ἡθιότης.”
when in a television discussion he once tried to embarrass Goppelt by asking him to translate the word “person” into Hebrew, Goppelt unhesitatingly offered shem [שֵׁם], the Hebrew word for name.1

Indeed, in the Semitic way of seeing things, the whole concept of a “name” is that which encompasses the unique characteristics of the individual. A name by itself says and means nothing. It is only when a name is attached to a person, and one is acquainted with that person, that then the name, even by itself, says much. It carries the whole uniqueness of that individual.

It is in this sense that a name encompasses the whole concept of “being” or “personhood” in the Semitic perspective. Indeed, a name, better than any other convention, can do justice to selfhood because in context it is non-interchangeable. If two people in a given setting happen to have the same name, then immediately some convention must be determined to keep the two separate when reference is made to each of them. This is because in practical, day-to-day activities, a name must be uniquely attached to a single individual, for otherwise the ability to properly effect relationship with a particular individual is hampered. If Tom wants to ask Susie if she would like to eat lunch with him, and there are two persons in the room by the name of Susie, he simply cannot say, “Susie, would like to eat lunch with me?” He must have some other way of indicating which of the two person’s he is addressing. And whatever that way is, he has given a unique designation to the Susie he intends to invite to lunch.

This concept of the “name” in Semitic cultures, i.e., its ability to uniquely identify a person, is clearly seen in the Tanach, and particularly in God’s revelation of His own names. In fact, when God reveals His Name, He is revealing His unique character and attributes. But in doing so by way of making His Name known, He reveals that He is a being Who not only is able to have a relationship with other beings, but that He is one Who greatly desires relationship. In other words, He did not reveal Himself in a list of attributes or characteristics (i.e., ideas or concepts), but rather in names such as El, Elohim, YHVH, Adonai, El ‘Elyon, El Shaddai, and so forth, all of which attach to some specific relationship He has with His created world. Yet these names are all designations that are meaningless until they are received, understood, and uniquely attached to the One Who has revealed Himself by making His Name known. God, therefore, is not a concept or an idea. He is not the “ground of being” or “being itself” (Tillich), nor is He an impersonal “force” or “demiurge” in the universe. If we are willing to accept the Bible as containing the self-revelation of God, then we must accept that He is a being Who is real, Who has personhood in the sense of being unique in His being, and Who has the ability therefore to enter into relationship with other beings.

Moreover, throughout the Tanach, we find that when God is described by those who know Him, He is most often described by way of what He has done—His works—not by listing His attributes. A classic example is given to us by Jonah. When on the ship attempting to escape from his prophetic duties, the winds and storm grow strong, and the sailors begin to question Jonah.

Then they said to him, “Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?” And he said to

them, “I am a Hebrew, and I fear יהוה, the God of heaven, Who made the sea and the dry land.” (Jonah 1:8–9)

When Jonah describes the God he serves (the word “fear” has the sense of “serve” or “worship”), he first gives His name, יהוה, and then describes Him as the supreme God (“God of heaven”) and finally His work by which He is proven to be supreme, i.e., that He made the sea and dry land. Indeed, from the first pages of the Tanach and through its entirety, God is portrayed as the God Who acts, and it is in His actions—His work—within the sphere of human existence, and in the course of human history, by which He is known and reveals Himself to those who have been given eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind (heart) to accept the works of God. Thus, creation, the call of Abraham, the exodus, the establishment of the nation of Israel, the sending of the prophets, the exile of Israel, the sending of Yeshua, Yeshua’s death, burial, resurrection, ascension, the outpouring of the Ruach, the Apostolic mission, the writing of Scripture, etc., are all acts of God by which He is known. And in all of these, He is known as the God who enters history for the purpose of establishing relationship with mankind—with those He has created in His image. Of course, the event of Yeshua’s incarnation for the purpose of procuring eternal salvation for all who are His is the crowning work by which God has made Himself known.

The Name יהוה

While an investigation into all of the names by which God has revealed Himself in the Scriptures is beyond the scope of our current study, a brief study of the meaning of the Name most often used of God in the Tanach, יהוה, will demonstrate the manner in which God’s Name functions in the Hebrew Scriptures to describe God as He truly is.

The Tetragrammaton is found throughout the book of Genesis (165x) but it is in Exodus that we first are given an understanding of the meaning of the Name. When Moses is confronted by the scene of a burning bush that is not consumed, he stops to investigate the phenomenon, and is confronted with God speaking from the midst of the bush. God assigns Moses the task of confronting Pharaoh and demanding the release of the Israelite people from Egypt. Moses then asks an important question:

Then Moses said to God, “If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And he said, “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” (Ex 3:13–14)

We might naturally wonder at such a question! Why would the people of Israel not know the Name of the God of their fathers? Why would they be asking Moses “Who is the God of our Fathers Who spoke with you?” Would not they have known the God of their fathers? But notice carefully that the question Moses proposes is not “Who (מִי, mi) is He” but “What (מָה) is His Name.” As Kaiser points out:

As Martin Buber¹ and others have noted, the interrogative מָה, ¹ Martin Buber, Kingship of God (Harper & Row, 1967), pp. 104–06, 189–90.
“what,” is to be distinguished from 

mi, “who.” The latter only asks for the title or designation of an individual, while the former, especially since it is associated with the word “name,” asks the question of the character qualities, power, and abilities resident in the name. What does the “God of our fathers” have to offer in a situation as complex and difficult as ours, was the thrust of their anticipated question.

Therefore, God answers Moses, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, “I will be what I will be.” So He instructs Moses, “Say this to the people of Israel, אֶהְיֶה (eh' eyeh) has sent me to you.” This form of the verb “to be,” an imperfect first person singular, thus reveals the meaning of the Tetragrammaton. But what exactly does it mean? Is this an ontological designation for the God Who never changes? Or the God Who is the source of all being? Such suggestions would be more likely if Moses’ question had been “Who should I say sent me” rather than “What is the name of the God Who sent me.” The Name is explained to answer the question of whether the One Who had sent Moses would be able to rescue the people from the power of their enemies. Thus, “I will be” is best understood by the repeated promise, found in the very same context of Exodus, namely, “I will be with you” (cf. Ex 3:12; 4:12, 15). Rather than offering an ontological designation or a “static notion of being,” God reveals in His Name a dynamic, active presence with His people, the people He will redeem from Egyptian slavery and with whom He will establish an eternal covenant. Indeed, we see this dynamic presence immediately at the exodus, where the pillar of fire and cloud remain with Israel day and night, protecting from harm and leading the nation through the wilderness to the promised Land.

Thus, this is illustrative of all of the revealed names of God. They establish God in various ways and means as the One Who acts on behalf of His people and therefore demonstrate, in His works, the very nature of His being. But, as we will see, the attributes of God are not merely concepts or ideas. They are the very essence of His being revealed to us through His works. In other words, it is not His works that define Him, but His works are the result of Who He is and what He is like. Thus, His works reflect His true being and nature.

**God as Spirit**

In philosophical discussions, the question of material and immaterial is asked, seeking to define each. In these philosophical discussions, the word “substance” is used to describe both material and immaterial, even though the English word “substance” tends to evoke a sense of things material. Material things are generally thought of as extended and bound. That is, material things can be measured, but they also have identifiable or defined boundaries. One can tell where something material begins and ends, and in the same way, one can tell where one material object ends and another material object begins.

Not so with the immaterial things. They are not made of matter nor are they extended and they do not have physical boundaries. Generally, the characteristic of immaterial objects is consciousness and/or cognition, that is, immaterial things are thinking things. In contrast, material things don’t think.

2 Ibid.
While we may be able to offer general definitions of material and immaterial things, it is difficult (some would say impossible) to prove that our definitions are accurate. Some, particularly in our post-modern world, would argue that there are not immaterial things or substances in our world.

Even more difficult for those of us who believe that both material and immaterial things exist in our world is to explain the way in which these two different substances interact. For instance, we believe that human nature or a human being is made up of both a material part (the body) and an immaterial part (the spirit or soul). However, it is difficult to explain how the material and immaterial interact. We know that the material affects the immaterial and vice versa, but we don’t have a good explanation of exactly how this works. The mind-body interaction is still an unsolved mystery.

This same mystery carries over into our understanding of the nature of God, for the Scriptures teach us that God is a spirit without material substance. Theologians commonly remark that God is “pure spirit,” meaning not only that He is without material substance, but that He has no need whatsoever of material substance.

A primary text to which we may appeal is John 4, which contains the story of Yeshua speaking with a Samaritan woman. As their conversation turns to the matter of the place for proper worship (whether in the Jerusalem Temple or Mt. Gerizim), Yeshua emphasizes that the proper place, though important, is actually a secondary question. The primary question one must ask relates to one’s readiness of heart to engage in genuine worship, and in fact, the Father is seeking those who would worship in spirit and in truth. Then Yeshua makes a statement which identifies an ontological truism about God:

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth. (Jn 6:24)

We may note first of all, that in the Greek the word order for the opening phrase is literally “spirit is God.” The word “spirit” πνεύμα (pneuma) is put first in the sentence for emphasis, which might well mean “God is spirit and not a material being.” Secondly, since the combination “spirit and truth” has already been used in the previous verse as a characteristic of proper worship, we may conclude that the word “spirit” in the phrase “spirit and truth” means something like “attitude” or “frame of mind” and does not designate immaterial as opposed to material. We could paraphrase the verse this way: “God is spirit, meaning He has not material substance. Thus, those who desire to worship Him properly must do so with the proper frame of mind and knowing the truth about Him.” It is also possible that the word “spirit” should be capitalized and thus taken to refer to the Spirit of God. If this were the case, then “in spirit and truth” might be understood to mean “by means of the Spirit and truth.” But regardless of these possible variations, it seems clear that Yeshua is making a categorical statement about the nature of God: He is spirit and does not have material substance.

That a “spirit” does not have material substance is confirmed by Yeshua’s

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1 The question of whether human nature is dichotomous (made up of two parts, i.e., body and soul-spirit) or trichotomous (body, soul, & spirit) is beyond the scope of this study. However, it seems that the Scriptures generally speak of human nature in a dichotomous rather than trichotomous fashion.
statement in Luke 24:39. Yeshua, having appeared to the talmidim in His glorified body, they thought they were seeing a ghost, an immaterial spirit. Thus Yeshua shows them His hands and feet to prove to them that they were not imagining things or looking at a ghost.

See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. (Lk 24:39)

Thus, we may combine these two statement in order to give further clarity: God is a spirit, and a spirit does not have flesh and bones, that is, pure spirit is without material substance.

We may marshal one more text for our purposes: 1Tim 1:17. Here, breaking into a kind of doxological salutation, Paul gives a list of divine attributes:

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1Tim 1:17)

What captures our attention is the word “invisible” (αορατο~, aoratos). Some have thought to interpret this metaphorically, meaning “mysterious” or “beyond our understanding,” but this hardly seems likely given the complete list. Clearly “eternal,” “immortal,” and “only God” cannot be taken metaphorically, for if they were, what would they mean? It is thus a very strange hermeneutic that would allow one word in a list of attributes to be taken metaphorically the others not to be so interpreted. Rather, when Paul designates God as “invisible,” we have yet another testimony to the fact that God is pure spirit, without material substance.

Anthropomorphisms

Though the Scriptures we have noted seem clearly to teach that God is pure spirit, there are those who maintain that the physical descriptions of God found throughout the Bible should leave the door open to the idea that God may, in fact, have material substance as part of His being. The Bible speaks of God having hands, eyes, a face, arms, a nose, etc., and does so in a way that would indicate physicality within the nature of God. However, it is universally recognized that these designations are to be interpreted metaphorically and are used by the authors of Scripture to accommodate the human mind which otherwise would be incapable of discerning the thoughts and actions of the Almighty. As Feinberg notes:

Since these parts of the human body play the roles in us attributed to God, and since human language is replete with references to physical things because humans have a body and live in a physical world, it is natural to speak of God in these physical terms. Everyone recognizes that the references to physical body parts is metaphorical, anthropomorphic, and that we use it because we have no other language to depict a nonmaterial thing acting in our world.¹

In addition to the use of anthropomorphisms in the Bible, through which God is metaphorically viewed as having a physical body, we may also note the times in which the Bible seems contradictory in regard to man’s ability to see

God. We’ve already looked at 1Tim 1:17 in which Paul describes God as “invisible.” We may add to this John 1:18 which states that “No one has seen God at any time.” Yet we read in Exodus 24:9–10 that Moses, Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, along with 70 elders “saw the God of Israel.” Moreover, in the Sermon on the Mount, Yeshua states: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matt 5:8). How are we to reconcile these apparently contradictory statements of Scripture?

First, when Paul describes God as invisible, and John states that “no one has ever seen God,” we may understand these to mean that no one has seen God in terms of His essential nature, that is, as pure spirit. And that is obvious, for spirit does not partake of material substance, and thus cannot be seen. In this regard, God is invisible simply because He is pure spirit. But secondly, the fact that God is pure spirit does not preclude Him from interacting with or using material substance in order to make Himself visible and/or to manifest His presence so that people may actually “see” His presence through the physical means He utilizes. He did so via a burning bush, a cloud, fire, wind, and so forth. Yet we must realize that in these cases where God utilized material things to manifest His presence, He did so temporarily. In other words, none of the physical means He utilized were essential or became essential to His being or nature. This whole issue, of God using material substance to reveal His presence, becomes a significant point of discussion in the incarnation, and we will study this later on when we deal with the history of the Trinity within Christian Theology. For when Yeshua took upon Himself human nature, which included a physical body, He retains this nature and body for all eternity. Yet we may still affirm (though it remains a mystery) that His divine nature is still pure spirit, meaning His divine nature was not “humanized” or somehow mixed with material substance to form some entirely new and different nature or being. Though unexplainable, Yeshua retained His infinite and eternal divine nature without any change, but at the same time took upon Himself that which He did not have before, namely, a truly human nature and the physical body that is an essential part of the human nature or being.

Implications of God as Spirit

First, since God is invisible and thus impossible to picture, the Torah forbids making any statues or idols to represent Him. This is the point Moses makes (Deut 4:15–19) when he reminds the people of Israel that when God spoke to them at Horeb (Mt. Sinai), they saw no form, that is, God was invisible. Therefore, any thing they might fashion to represent God would be a false representation. Since God is pure spirit, there is nothing in the universe that is like Him, or could be a faithful representation of Him. In fact, any attempt to represent God by picture or image is an affront to Him, for whatever one attempts to use for such a purpose is actually something other rather than like God. Rather, God is the source of all (Rom 11:36) and thus He gives meaning to all things. Nothing, however, can give meaning to Him, for He is entirely self-defined and self-determined.

Second, since God is a spirit, He thinks. He has intellectual capability, knowledge, and He reveals information about Himself. Moreover, since He is pure spirit, His intellectual capacity is of the highest order. It is His nature as pure spirit that undergirds His limitless ability to know all things.

Third, because God has no body or any matter in His being, He is incor-
ruptible and immortal. Nothing of God’s being or nature can grow old or wear out, or ever needs replacing. He remains the same from eternity to eternity. Moreover, because He is pure spirit, and because He has created man in His image, endowing mankind also with a spirit, we may reason from what we have learned from the Scriptures about the nature of a spirit, that a spirit is immortal. That is, a spirit does not die. When some try to suggest that the spirit of an unbeliever “dies” at death, one wonders what this means. Death pertains to that which is material, and since the spirit is immaterial, the spirit cannot die. Thus humankind partakes of an immortal spirit as part of the image of God in which mankind was created.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the difference between the concept of God as a being existing in our universe, and thinking of Him as a “force” or an “influence.”

2. Significantly, the Hebrew language has no special word that means “person.” Instead, the word “name” offers the Hebraic concept of “person.” Discuss the implications of this, especially pertaining to the names of God which He has made known to us.

3. If, in fact, the basic meaning of the Tetragrammaton, Y-H-V-H, is “I will always be with you,” discuss the wider implications of this meaning. For instance, on what basis could God assure His people that He would always be with them?

4. What do you think is meant by the injunction to worship God “in spirit and in truth?”

5. How does God being pure spirit help explain the prohibition against making any image or idol to represent Him? How might this further define what Yeshua meant when He taught that true worship must be “in spirit and in truth?”
CHAPTER FOUR
The Attributes of God
His Incommunicable Attributes

The Nature of God

In seeking to understand the character of God, we look to the Scriptures in which His attributes are revealed, explained, and described. In undertaking such an enterprise, it is wise to find a method for our study, since in doing so we may assure that we will both give the proper emphasis upon the attributes of God as do the Scriptures, and that we will not by pass a characteristic of God which the Scriptures enjoin upon us.

For instance, the following diagram seeks to visualize the attributes of God as grouped together in a systematic fashion, but gathered around the primary attributes of Love, Holiness, and Truth.

God is the Infinite and Perfect Spirit

AT THE CORE: SPIRITUALITY
“God is a living, personal Spirit”

IN COMPLETENESS: INFINITY
“God is infinite with respect to time-space (eternality, immensity, omnipresence), power (omnipotence), and wisdom (omniscience)

IN CHARACTER: PERFECTION
“God is perfect in truth, holiness, and love.”

Chart from Theology Class
Syllabus: Bruce Stabbert, Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary.
Historically, one of the many methods used to categorize the attributes of God in the field of Systematic Theology is to do so under two main headings: Communicable Attributes and Incommunicable Attributes. By communicable is meant those attributes of God which, in some measure, are shared by mankind. By incommunicable is meant just the opposite: those attributes of God in which mankind does not or cannot participate. In this chapter we will begin our study with the Incommunicable Attributes of God.

But before we do, we can consider that the categories we have chosen to group the attributes of God for our study are not entirely precise. Even though the communicable attributes of God are those we share as creatures created in His image, yet we do not share them completely nor perfectly. For instance, God is infinite in His wisdom, and we too can gain wisdom. But we will never be infinitely wise nor will we ever have all wisdom. Likewise, though in one sense we do not share the attributes of God which are defined as incommunicable, these are not entirely foreign to the nature of man. For instance, God never changes and we do, yet there are aspects of our being which are eternal (at least in one direction), such as our soul or spirit. Yet, in the overall scope of our study, communicable and incommunicable will serve us as useful categories for grouping the attributes of God.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incommunicable Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independence or Self-Existence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet we and the rest of creation can glorify Him and bring Him joy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unchangeableness or Immutability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is unchanging in His being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and He acts differently in response to different situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal or Infinite in respect to Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God has no beginning, end or succession of moments in His own being, and He sees all time equally vividly, yet God sees events in time and acts in time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omnipresence or Infinite in respect to Space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with His whole being, yet God acts differently in different places.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unity or Infinitely One</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is not divided into parts, yet we see different attributes of God emphasized at different times.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptions taken from Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology.
In our attempts to study these incommunicable attributes of God, we must bear in mind, once again, that we do so entirely dependent upon His having made Himself known. Or to put it more succinctly, we know His nature and characteristics only because He has willingly revealed them to us. Moreover, though He has revealed His nature and attributes in and through the created world (e.g., Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:19-20), His self-revelation via creation is far more general and less specific than is His self-disclosure in His presence, actions, and deeds among His people and throughout the history of our world. These acts, while ongoing, are nonetheless especially recorded and emphasized in the Scriptures, and it is therefore to the Scriptures that we must go to find the specific descriptions of God’s nature, that is, His attributes.

The Attributes of God Revealed in His Names

In Chapter 3, we looked briefly at the primary Name of God, יהוה, and how its meaning reveals essential attributes of God. What follows is a brief survey of a number of other names for God encountered in the Tanach. This sampling of God’s self-revelation via His Names is by no means exhaustive. In fact, if one collates all of the designations attributed to God in the rabbinic literature, one can list over 90! Thus, in what follows, I have selected some of the Names of God revealed in the Tanach which are most prevalent and which seem to offer the most specific information about God’s character and attributes.

In looking briefly at God’s character or attributes as revealed in His Names, we will see that each Name encompasses a wide range of His attributes, but often emphasizing one attribute in particular. Consider as we study these Names of God, how they reveal His very character/attributes.

Compound Names with יהוה

2. יהוה יִרְאֶה – Adonai Yir’eh – Adonai Who Sees/Provides

Found in Gen 22:14 – “Abraham called the name of that place Adonai Will Provide, as it is said to this day, ‘In the mount of Adonai it will be provided.’” (NASB)

Now Adonai said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons” (יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יֵאָמֵר יֵרָאֶה).
Meaning
1. From the context of Gen 22 & the Akedah, the meaning must be “Adonai will provide.”
2. The nifal (“it will be provided” or “it will be seen” or “Adonai will be seen”) could well mean that “on this mount Adonai’s provision will be seen.”
3. Did God give Abraham a vision of the coming Messiah while on the mount (cf. Jn 8:56)? Did Abraham realize that Yeshua would be offered one day in the same place? Is this what Abraham means when he says “Adonai will be seen”?
4. *Adonai Yireh* means that God is always able to provide all that is needed, even the ultimate need we have of being saved from our sins. This is a *kal v’chomer*: If God provided the way for us to escape the penalty of sin, then surely He can provide all of our needs. Cp. Rom 8:32, “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?”

Application
1. Do I honestly believe that God is able to supply all of my needs?
2. Do I seek God’s help first or only when other possibilities have been exhausted?
3. Am I growing in my appreciation for all that God has provided for me in His Son, Yeshua?

3. **יהוה רופא** – *Adonai Rophe’* – Adonai Who Heals

    Found in Ex 15:26 – And He said, “If you will give earnest heed to the voice of Adonai your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, Adonai, am your healer (ךָכִי אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹפְאֶ).”

    1. Physical healing: Gen 20:17; 2Ki 20:5; Ps 103:3
    2. Soul healing/Spiritual healing: Is 6:10; 30:26; 61:1; Jer 30:17; 33:6; Hos 6:1; 14:4; Ezek 34:16; Job 5:18; Ps 147:3
    3. God’s ability to heal is demonstrated in the work of His Messiah, Yeshua: Matt 4:23–24; 10:1ff; Mk 2:17; Lk 6:18–19

    **Meaning**
    All that we need by way of healing is to be found in God. He is “Adonai the Healer.” If we find physical healing through whatever means, ultimately the praise is to be given to God. He alone is able to heal the soul and to bind up the brokenhearted.

4. **יהוה נִסִי** – *Adonai Nissi* – Adonai is My Banner

    The Hebrew word נֵס (neis) means “a flag, ensign (banner), or standard.” [In later Hebrew and Aramaic (and in modern Hebrew as well) the word also came to mean “miracle,” probably on the basis
that a miracle was a “sign” and a “flag or banner” also functioned as a sign. Note Syriac نِسَاء in Matt 24:30.

The Name יְהוָה נִסִּי, “Adonai is my banner,” is found in Ex 17:14–16, at the conclusion of the battle against Amalek:

Then Adonai said to Moses, “Write this in a book as a memorial and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” Moses built an altar and named it Adonai is My Banner (וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יְהוָה נִסִּי); and he said, “Adonai has sworn; Adonai will have war against Amalek from generation to generation.”

The Lxx translates the phrase ἐπωνόμασεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ κύριός μου καταφυγή, “and he called its name My Lord is a refuge.” Targum Onkelos translates our verse this way: “So Moses built an altar and worshipped on it before the Lord, who had done miracles for him (Ps. Jon. = the Word of the Lord is my miracle).

Meaning

1. How is נֵס used in the Tanach?
   a. a warning: Num 26:10
   b. a standard around which troops rally (perhaps identifying the commander): Is 5:26; 11:12
   c. a standard or banner pointing in the direction of advance or attack: Jer 51:12 / often set on a mountain or hill to provide orientation (Is 13:2; 18:3; 30:17)
   d. a standard or banner/flag declaring the victor’s possession: Jer 50:2, accompanied by trumpets
2. How does this help us understand the use of נֵס in Adonai Nissi?
   a. Those who belong to Adonai rally to His banner.
   b. He is the commander Who calls us to Him and through Whom we gain the victory.
   c. Note Num 21:8 and cp. Jn 3:13–14. Yeshua, through death, conquered death, and in this sense the cross is the standard around which we rally.
   d. In the battle of life, God raises the standard/banner to assure our victory.
   e. Don’t go into the battle unless you see God’s standard before you.
   f. Consider the context of Ex 17 where the Name occurs. What can be derived from the context which helps to explain the meaning of Adonai Nissi?

Application

1. Do I find my primary self-identity in Yeshua? Do I seek to be known as someone who lives “under His banner”?
2. Am I becoming wiser in understanding the spiritual battles in which I am engaged? Do I engage in the battle by rallying around His standard, or do I tend to fight my own battles my own way?
3. Am I able regularly to take courage in the fact that victory in battle is assured to those who are led by Adonai Nissi?
5. **Adonai Megaddeish – Adonai Who Sanctifies**

This combination is found 10 times in the Tanach (i.e., the declaration יָהְיָה מְקַדֵּשֶׁנּוּ, “I am Adonai Who sanctifies,” usually with objective suffix attached to יָהְיָה, e.g., יָהְיָה מְקַדֵּשֶׁנּוּ, “I am Adonai Who sanctifies you”).

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<tr>
<td>Ex 31:13</td>
<td>יָהְיָה מְקַדֵּשֶׁנּוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשָׁם כיּ אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקַדְּשָׁם</td>
<td>καὶ σὺ σύνταξον τοῖς υἱοῖς Ισραηλ λέγων ορέτε καὶ τὰ σάββατά μου κυρίασίς μου σημαίνον ἐστιν παρ’ ἐμοί καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν εἰς τὰς γενεὰς ὑμῶν ἵνα γνῶτε ὅτι ἐγώ κύριος ὁ ἁγιάζων ὑμᾶς</td>
<td>But as for you, speak to the sons of Israel, saying, ‘You shall surely observe My sabbaths; for this is a sign between Me and you throughout your generations, that you may know that I am the LORD who sanctifies you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 20:8</td>
<td>συμμετέχει Αδωναί Μισέσω</td>
<td>καὶ σὺ σύνταξον τοῖς υἱοῖς Ισραηλ λέγων ορέτε καὶ τὰ σάββατά μου κυρίασίς μου σημαίνον ἐστιν παρ’ ἐμοί καὶ ἐν ὑμῖν εἰς τὰς γενεὰς ὑμῶν ἵνα γνῶτε ὅτι ἐγώ κύριος ὁ ἁγιάζων ὑμᾶς</td>
<td>You shall keep My statutes and practice them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 21:8</td>
<td>αὐτὸν τὸ θύμιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγιάσει αὐτὸς</td>
<td>καὶ ἁγιάσει αὐτόν τὰ δῶρα κυρίου</td>
<td>You shall consecrate him, therefore, for he offers the food of your God; he shall be holy to you; for I the LORD, who sanctifies you, am holy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 21:15</td>
<td>ὐού βεβηλώσει τὸ σπέρμα αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ λαῷ αὐτοῦ</td>
<td>καὶ οὐ βεβηλώσει τὸ ἅγιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι κύριος ὁ ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>so that he will not profane his offspring among his people; for I am the LORD who sanctifies him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 21:23</td>
<td>αὐτοῦ τὸ θύμιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγιάσει</td>
<td>καὶ οὐ βεβηλώσει τὸ ἅγιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι κύριος ὁ ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>They shall therefore keep My charge, so that they will not bear sin because of it and die thereby because they profane it; I am the LORD who sanctifies them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 22:9</td>
<td>συμμετέχει Αδωναί Μισέσω</td>
<td>καὶ ἁγιάσει αὐτόν τὰ δῶρα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγιάσει αὐτὸς</td>
<td>and so cause them to bear punishment for guilt by eating their holy gifts; for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 22:16</td>
<td>αὐτοῦ τὸ θύμιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγιάσει</td>
<td>καὶ ἁγιάσει αὐτός ἐκείνους ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>and cause them to bear punishment for guilt by eating their holy gifts; for I am the LORD who sanctifies them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev 22:32</td>
<td>αὐτοῦ τὸ θύμιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγιάσει</td>
<td>καὶ ἁγιάσει αὐτός ἐκείνους ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>You shall not profane My holy name, but I will be sanctified among the sons of Israel; I am the LORD who sanctifies them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek 20:12</td>
<td>καὶ τὰ σάββατά μου ἐδώκαμεν αὐτοῖς καὶ τὰ ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>καὶ τὰ δῶρα τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτοῦ ἁγιάζων αὐτούς καὶ τὰ δῶρα τοῦ κυρίου ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>Also I gave them My holy name, but they were a sign between Me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD who sanctifies them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek 37:28</td>
<td>καὶ γνῶσται καὶ ἔσται οὕτως αὕτως ἐφ᾿ αὐτοῖς καὶ τὰ ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>καὶ γνῶσται τὰ ἔθνη ὅτι ἐγώ εἰμι κύριος ὁ ἁγιάζων αὐτούς</td>
<td>And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Chapter 4 – The Incommunicable Attributes of God**

**Meaning**

1. Do these occurrences of Adonai Meqaddeish indicate that God automatically sanctifies His people? Why or why not?


3. Since the names of God reveal His essential character (attributes), how does Adonai Meqaddeish function in this way?

4. What is the connection between the Name Adonai Meqaddeish and the requirement for His people to be obedient to His commandments?

**Application**

1. If I confess that my life goal is to become like Yeshua, how am I progressing in holiness? Am I gaining ground against the sins that easily trip me up?

2. Do I live with the reality that God’s presence is with me? How does His presence affect my private life? Do I live with the idea that I am in the presence of Adonai Meqaddeish?

3. How important is it to me that I grow in holiness?

6. **יהוה שלום – Adonai Shalom – Adonai Shalom**

This Name is found in connection with the altar Gideon built after the Angel of the Lord appeared to him.

When Gideon saw that he was the angel of Adonai, he said, “Alas, O Lord GOD (אֲדֹנָי יהוה) ! For now I have seen the angel of Adonai face to face. Adonai said to him, “Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die.” Then Gideon built an altar there to Adonai and named it Adonai Shalom. To this day it is still in Ophrah of the Abiezrites. (Judg. 6:22–24)

Read Judges 6:1–24 to understand the fuller context.

**Meaning**

1. Why does Gideon have fear after realizing that he has seen the angel of Adonai face to face? Is such fear appropriate?

2. Why does he use the combination אֲדֹנָי יהוה (Adonai YHVH) when addressing the angel of Adonai? (Cf. Gen 15:2; 2 Sam 7:18–20, 22, 28–29)

3. How do the words of the angel of Adonai, in response to Gideon’s fear, underscore the Name given to the altar by Gideon?

4. What is the general meaning of the Hebrew word שלום (shalom)?

5. With these data in mind, how should we understand the meaning of the Name Adonai Shalom?
Application

1. Is Shalom a significant trait of my life? Do people who are around me recognize that I am at peace with God, with myself, and with others?

2. Do I consistently give God the credit for victories in my life? Do I really believe that victories I win are because of what God has accomplished in me and for me?

3. Where does peace fall in the list of my life’s priorities?

7. יהוה צְבָאוֹת – Adonai Tzeva’ot – Adonai of Hosts

The Name Adonai Tzeva’ot is found 259x in the Tanach:

Gen–Judges, 0x; 1Sam, 5x; 2Sam, 5x; 1Ki, 1x; 2Ki, 1x; Is, 62x; Jer, 77x; Ezek–Jonah, 0x; Mic, 1x; Nahum, 2x; Hab, 1x; Zeph, 2x; Hag, 14x; Zech, 53x; Mal, 24x; Ps, 8x; Job–Neh, 0x; 1Chron, 3x; 2Chron, 0x.

Number of occurrences of Adonai Tzeva’ot per 1000 words

We see from these data that Adonai Tzeva’ot in the Tanach is especially favored by the Prophets.

1. What does the Hebrew word צָבָא (plural צְבָאוֹת) mean? (from HALOT)
   a. military service; military campaign
   b. military men, troops; collective, the armies of the nations
   c. the people of Israel as they left Egypt (e.g., Ex 12:17, 41, 51)
   d. heavenly body, especially the stars
   e. the heavenly entourage of יהוה
## Chapter 4 – The Incommunicable Attributes of God

### 2. Sampling of texts using Adonai Tzeva’ot

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<tr>
<td>1Sam 1:11</td>
<td>בָא אֵלַי בְחֶרֶב וּבַחֲנִית וּבְכִידוֹן</td>
<td>καὶ ἐπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς</td>
<td>She made a vow and said, “Adonai Tzeva’ot, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to Adonai all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1Sam 4:4</td>
<td>יִנְיָה בַּיָּמִים שֶׁלָּם שֶלָּם שֶׁלָּם שֶׁלָּם</td>
<td>καὶ ἐπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς</td>
<td>So the people sent to Shiloh, and from there they carried the ark of the covenant of Adonai Tzeva’ot who sits above the cherubim; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1Sam 17:45</td>
<td>וַיֹּאמֶר דָּוִד אֶל־הַפְּלִשְׁתִי</td>
<td>καὶ ἐπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς</td>
<td>Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of Adonai Tzeva’ot, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2Sam 6:2</td>
<td>שָׁנְבוּ מִשָּׁם צְבָאוֹת אֱלֹהֵי מַעַרְכוֹת יִשְרָאֵל</td>
<td>και ἐπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς</td>
<td>And David arose and went with all the people who were with him to Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God which is called by the Name, the very name of Adonai Tzeva’ot who is enthroned above the cherubim.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is 1:24</td>
<td>שֶׁיָּמָהוּ בָּאָרֶץ מִמְקוֹמָהּ בְעֶבְרַת יְהוָה</td>
<td>καὶ ἐπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς</td>
<td>Therefore the Lord Adonai Tzeva’ot, the Mighty One of Israel, declares, “Ah, I will be relieved of My adversaries and avenge Myself on My foes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is 5:16</td>
<td>ןַבֶּה הַצְּבָאָה אֲשֶׁר גָּלִיתִי</td>
<td>καὶ ἐπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς καὶ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς</td>
<td>But Adonai Tzeva’ot will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Is 6:3, 5</td>
<td>וַיֹּאמֶר אֶל־אֲרוֹן בְרִית הָהֲלוֹא</td>
<td>καὶ ἐκέκραγον ἕτερον πρὸς τὸν ἑτέρον</td>
<td>And one called out to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is Adonai Tzeva’ot, the whole earth is full of His glory.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is 13:13</td>
<td>נִגְנָב הַצְּבָאָה בְּמַשָּׁפֶת</td>
<td>καὶ ἐκέκραγον ἕτερον πρὸς τὸν ἑτέρον</td>
<td>Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined!” Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, Adonai Tzeva’ot.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jer 11:20</td>
<td>בִּלַּא תִּמְסֹר אֶל־אָרֶץ כִּי נכְפִּיתָ</td>
<td>בִּלַּא תִּמְסֹר אֶל־אָרֶץ כִּי נכְפִּיתָ</td>
<td>Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken from its place at the fury of Adonai Tzeva’ot on the day of His burning anger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zech 1:3</td>
<td>זֶרַע אֲנָשִׁים וּנְתַתִיו לַיהוָה</td>
<td>בִּלַּא תִּמְסֹר אֶל־אָרֶץ כִּי נכְפִּיתָ</td>
<td>But Adonai Tzeva’ot, who judges righteously, Who tries the feelings and the heart, let me see Your vengeance on them, and avenge Myself on My foes. For my eyes have seen the King, Adonai Tzeva’ot.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Meaning

1. The word tzeva`ot clearly combines the Name יהוה with the idea of war, armies, troops, battle. What does this tell us about the essential nature or attributes of God?

2. This Name stresses the power or omnipotence of God to conquer His enemies. How does this produce fear on the one hand, and full confidence on the other?

3. What are some of the battles we face in life, which require us to depend more fully upon Adonai Tzev’aot?

A quote from C. H. Spurgeon:

“The Lord rules the angels, the stars, the elements, and all the hosts of Heaven; and the Heaven of heavens is under His sway. The armies of men though they know it not are made to subservice His will. This Generalissimo of the forces of the land, and the Lord High Admiral of the seas, is on our side – our august Ally: woe unto those who fight against Him, for they shall flee like smoke before the wind when He gives the word to scatter them.”

Application

1. What battles am I trying to win that have already been won by Adonai Tsev’aot?

2. What are my three greatest fears in life?
   Am I willing to entrust these to God and live in confidence that He will be my protector?

3. Is God urging me to a particular task that seems utterly impossible? Am I willing to entrust the outcome to Him and move forward in His strength?

4. Do I fear the uncertainty of the future? Am I willing to entrust my future to Him?
8. Adonai Ro’i – Adonai my Shepherd – Psalm 23:1

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<tr>
<td>מִזְמוֹר לְדָוִד כָּלָּד</td>
<td>ψαλμὸς τῷ Δαυιδ κύριος ποιμαίνει με καὶ οὐδὲν με υστερήσει</td>
<td>A Psalm of David 1 Adonai is my shepherd, I shall not want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>יְהוָה רֹעִי לֹא אֶחָסֵר</td>
<td>κύριος ποιμαίνει με καὶ οὐδὲν με υστερήσει</td>
<td>2 He makes me lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside quiet waters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>בִּנְאוֹת דֶּשֶׁא יַרְבִיצֵנִי עַל־מֵי מְנֻחוֹת יְנַהֲלֵנִי</td>
<td>εἰς τόπον χλόης ἐκεῖ με κατασκήνωσεν ἐπὶ ὑδάτως ἀναπαύσεως ἐξέθρεψέν με</td>
<td>3 He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>נַפְשִׁי יְשׁוֹבֵב יַנְחֵנִי בְּמַעְגְלֵי־צֶדֶק לְמַעַן</td>
<td>4 ἐὰν γὰρ καὶ πορευθῶ ἐν μέσῳ σκιᾶς καί χαμάν ὁ χειρός σου καὶ ἡ βακτηρία σου αὐτά με παρεκάλεσαν</td>
<td>4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>גַּם כִּי־אֵלֵךְ בְּגֵיא צַלְמָוֶת לֹא־אִירָא רָע</td>
<td>τῇ ὑπό σε ἡμῶν ἐνωπίόν μου τράπεζαν ἐξ ἐλαιῷ τῆς κεφαλῆς μου καὶ τὸ κατοικεῖν με ἐν οἴκῳ κυρίου εἰς μακρότητα ἡμερῶν</td>
<td>5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You have anointed my head with oil; My cup overflows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>כִּי־אַתָּה עִמָּדִי שִׁבְטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתֶךָ הֵמָה</td>
<td>τῇ ἐν ἑαυτῷ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς ζωῆς μου καὶ τὸ κατοικεῖν με ἐν οἴκῳ κυρίου εἰς μακρότητα ἡμερῶν</td>
<td>6 Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of Adonai forever.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thoughts from Psalm 23 – What we learn from that fact that God is Adonai Ro’i

V.1 – Because HaShem is my Shepherd, I will never lack
- How are we to understand “I shall not want”? What does this tell us about our wants?
- What is the relationship between a Shepherd and his sheep? How does one come to have Adonai as his or her Shepherd?

V.2 – What does the metaphor of “laying down” mean in practical terms?
- What is meant by the metaphors of “green pastures” and “quite waters”?
- What are my own personal “green pastures” and “quite waters”?

V.3 – What does it mean to have one’s soul restored? (cp. Prov 25:13)
- What are “paths of righteousness” in which the Shepherd guides His sheep?
- What does it mean, “for His own Name’s sake”? 
Note the progression of the four phrases that comprise vv. 2–3:

- He makes me lie down in green pastures; = REST
- He leads me beside quiet waters. = REFRESHMENT
- He restores my soul; = RENEWED STRENGTH/ENERGY
- He guides me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake. = PURPOSE/SIGNIFICANCE

V.4 – What is the “valley of the shadow of death”?
- cp. Jer 2:6; Amos 5:8; Ps 107:10; Job 38:17

- What kinds of things do we encounter in life that are a “valley of deep darkness”?

- According to v. 4, what dispels the fear that would otherwise accompany such darkness?

- How should we understand the metaphors of “rod” (שֶׁבֶט) and “staff” (מִשְׁעֶנֶת)?
  - Rod:
  - Staff:
  - How should we apply this to our lives?

V.5 – A victory feast comes after the battle is won and the enemies are destroyed. What then is the picture here, that HaShem prepares a table “in the presence of my enemies”?

- What is the significance of “You anoint my head with oil”?

- What is the significance of “my cup overflows”?

V.6 – When the Psalmist speaks of “goodness” and “lovingkindness,” of what is he speaking? (cp. Ps 118:1, 29)

- It says “goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life.” Why do they “follow” and not “lead”? What does the word רָדַף (radaph) mean here?

- What does it mean to “dwell in the house of Adonai”?

- Does the expression “length of days” (לְאֹרֶךְ יָמִים) mean “forever”? Cp. Deut 30:20; Psa 21:4; 91:16; 93:5; Job 12:12; Prov 3:2, 16; Lam 5:20

Meaning

1. Adonai Ro’i provides all my needs.
2. Adonai Ro’i gives me rest.
3. Adonai Ro’i energizes my soul and strengthens me for life.
4. Adonai Ro’i guides me in life so that I am able to honor Him.
5. Adonai Ro’i remains with me in life’s deepest struggles so I have no need to fear.
6. Adonai Ro’i is beside me to protect and guide me in the darkness.
7. Adonai Ro’i assures me of the final victory even in the midst of the battle.
8. Adonai Ro’i gives me overflowing joy.
9. Adonai Ro’i gives me hope for the future because He has proven His goodness and lovingkindness.
10. Adonai Ro’i will be my dwelling place forever.

**Application**

1. Am I able to rest in the strong arms of my Shepherd?
2. Do I feed on the “green pastures” and am I satisfied by the “quite waters”?
3. Is my soul regularly restored and refreshed by the words of my Shepherd?
4. Is my “cup overflowing” with the goodness and lovingkindness of God?

9. יוהו צדקנ – *Adonai Tzidqeinu* – Adonia our Righteousness

This Name is found twice in Jeremiah’s prophecy:

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<tr>
<td>Jer 23:6</td>
<td>בְיָמָיו תִוָּשַׁע יְהוּדָה וְיִשְרָאֵל יִשְׁכֹן לָבֶטַח וְזֶה־שְמוֹ אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרָא יְהוָה צִדְקֵנוּ׃</td>
<td>ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις αὐτοῦ σωθήσεται Ιουδας καὶ Ισραηλ κατασκηνώσει πεποιθώς καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἐνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκαλέσει αὐτὸν κύριος Ιωσεδεκ [ἐν τοῖς προφήταις]</td>
<td>“In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘Adonai Tzidqeinu.’”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jer 33:16</td>
<td>בַיָּמִים הָהֵם תִוָּשַׁע יְהוּדָה וִירוּשָׁלִַם תִשְׁכֹּן לָבֶטַח וְזֶה אֲשֶׁר־יִקְרָא לָהּ יְהוָה צִדְקֵנוּ׃</td>
<td>[Not in the Lxx]</td>
<td>In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: ‘Adonai Tzidqeinu.’</td>
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The context of each of these verses in Jeremiah is all important in terms of gaining an understanding of the meaning of the Name יוהו צדקנ.

Jer 23:1–6

1. “Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of My pasture!” declares Adonai.
2. Therefore thus says Adonai the God of Israel concerning the shepherds who are tending My people: “You have scattered My flock and driven them away, and have not attended to them; behold, I am about to attend to you for the evil of your deeds,” declares the LORD.
3. Then I Myself will gather the remnant of My flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and bring them back to their pasture, and they will be fruitful and multiply.
4. I will also raise up shepherds over them and they will tend them; and they will not be afraid any longer, nor be terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the LORD.
5 “Behold, the days are coming,” declares the LORD, 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.

6 In His days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely; and this is His name by which He will be called, ‘Adonai Tzidqeinu.’

Jer 33:7, 8, 16–18

7 I will restore the fortunes of Judah and the fortunes of Israel and will rebuild them as they were at first.

8 I will cleanse them from all their iniquity by which they have sinned against Me, and I will pardon all their iniquities by which they have sinned against Me and by which they have transgressed against Me.

14 Behold, days are coming,’ declares Adonai, ‘when I will fulfill the good word which I have spoken concerning the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

15 In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch of David to spring forth; and He shall execute justice and righteousness on the earth.

16 In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell in safety; and this is the name by which she will be called: Adonai Tzidqeinu.’

17 For thus says Adonai, ‘David shall never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel;

18 and the Levitical priests shall never lack a man before Me to offer burnt offerings, to burn grain offerings and to prepare sacrifices continually.

Note the following important emphases of both passages (Jer 23, 33):

1. Both contexts have the millennial reign of Messiah in view.

2. In Jer 23, it is clear that the One Whose Name is Adonai Tzidqeinu is Messiah Yeshua! In Jer 33, however, it is the city of Jerusalem that is know by the Name Adonai Tzidqeinu. What are we to make of this?
   a. the answer is to be found in the declaration of Israel’s forgiveness and cleansing (Jer 33:7–8). The language in this text is a repeat of what is stated in the “New Covenant” text of Jer 31:34, “… for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” We may conclude, therefore, that the restoration spoken of by Jeremiah is when Israel has come to accept Yeshua as the true Messiah, confessing that only through Yeshua is righteousness to be obtained.

   b. This is why Jerusalem (which stands as a metonym for the whole of Israel) can be called Adonai Tzidqeinu, because the whole nation will then be known as having received Yeshua as their Messiah and King. Yeshua Himself will be the primary identifying aspect of Israel in that day.
3. From these data we may conclude that Adonai Tzidqeinu means "Adonai is the One Who makes us righteous" or "Adonai is our righteousness." From an eschatological perspective, Adonai Tzidqeinu means that there is coming a time when Israel will no longer rely upon their own righteousness (cp. Rom 10:1–4) but will fully confess Yeshua as their means of righteousness.

**Meaning**

1. _Adonai Tzidqeinu_ means "Adonai is our righteousness"
2. This Name looks forward prophetically to the establishment of the New Covenant when Israel as a nation will believe and confess that the only way to stand righteous before God is through the work that Yeshua the Messiah has accomplished.
3. The remnant of Israel, comprised of the descendants of Jacob who have exercised genuine saving faith and those from the nations who have been gathered into the remnant by their faith, have already confessed Adonai Tzidqeinu, and therefore represent the first-fruits of the eventual full ingathering of Israel.

**Application**

1. Am I relying upon anything other than the person and work of Yeshua to make me righteous before God?
2. Do I trust fully in what Yeshua has done for me in His death, resurrection, ascension, and intercession, to present me righteous before the Father?
3. Do I realize the unspeakable value of standing righteous before God because I am “in Yeshua”?
4. Do I find my primary identity in the fact that I am “in Yeshua”? Is that enough for me?
5. Has my appreciation of what God has done for me in Yeshua caused me to hate the sin that remains in my own life?

10. יוהו עליון – Adonai ’Elyon – Adonai Most High

The combination יוהו עליון is found three times: Ps 7:18; 47:3; 97:9

The combination אל עליון, ’el ’elyon, “God Most High” is found five times: Gen 14:18–20, 22; Ps 78:35.

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<tr>
<td>Ps 7:18</td>
<td>יְהוָה עֶלְיוֹן נְאֻרָם</td>
<td>ἐξομολογήσομαι κυρίῳ κατὰ τὴν δικαιοσύνην αὐτοῦ καὶ ψαλῶ τῷ ὄνοματι κυρίου τοῦ ύψίστου</td>
<td>I will give thanks to Adonai according to His righteousness and will sing praise to the name of Adonai ’Elyon.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ps 47:3</td>
<td>כִּי־יְהוָה עֶלְיוֹן נוֹרָא מֶלֶךְ</td>
<td>ὅτι κύριος ὕψιστος φοβερός βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν</td>
<td>For Adonai ’Elyon is to be feared, A great King over all the earth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ps 97:9</td>
<td>כִּי־אַתָּה יְהוָה עֶלְיוֹן מְאֹד נַעֲלֵיתָ</td>
<td>ὅτι σὺ εἶ κύριος ὁ ὕψιστος ἐπὶ πᾶσαν τὴν γῆν ὑπερυψώθης ὑπὲρ πάντας τοὺς θεούς</td>
<td>For You are Adonai ’Elyon over all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods.</td>
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<td>Gen 14:18–20, 22</td>
<td>והמלכי כדיק מלך שלום והHRESULTו לוים: וַיְבָרְךֵהוּ וַיֹּאמַר בָרוּך אַבְרָם לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן׃ וּבָרוּךְ אֵל עֶלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר־מִגֵן צָרֶיךָ בְיָדֶךָ וַיִּתֶן־לוֹ מַעֲשֵר מִכֹל׃</td>
<td>καὶ Μελχισεδεκ βασιλεὺς Σαλημ ἐξήνεγκεν ἄρτους καὶ οἶνον ἦν δὲ ἱερεὺς τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ὑψίστου, ἐπὶ τοῦ ἄρτου τοῦ ὑψίστου δὲ ἔκτισεν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. Καὶ εὐλογηθήσεται ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὕψιστος ὃς παρέδωκεν τοὺς ἐχθρούς σου ὑποχειρίους σοι καὶ ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ δεκάτην ἀπὸ πάντων.</td>
<td>And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of El ‘Elyon, He blessed him and said, “Blessed be Abram of El ‘Elyon, Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be El ‘Elyon, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” He gave him a tenth of all.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ps 78:35</td>
<td>בָּאוּר לְאֵל עֶלְיוֹן:</td>
<td>καὶ εὑρίσκησαν ό θεὸς τοῦ ὑψίστου αὐτῶν ἐστιν καὶ ὁ θεὸς ὁ ὕψιστος λυτρωτὴς αὐτῶν ἐστιν.</td>
<td>And they remembered that God was their rock, and El ‘Elyon their Redeemer.</td>
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We also find the combination Elohim ‘Elyon (Psa 57:3; 78:56) and Elyon, ‘Elyon used alone as a Name of God, often parallel to אֱלֹהִים (Num 24:16; 2 Sam 22:14; Psa 9:2; 18:13; 21:7; 46:4; 50:14; 73:11; 77:10; 78:17; 82:6; 83:18; 87:5; 91:1, 9; 92:1; 107:11; Is 14:14; Lam 3:35, 38).

Note, for instance, Ps 91:1–10

1 He who dwells in the shelter of ‘Elyon
   Will abide in the shadow of Shaddai.
2 I will say to Adonai, “My refuge and my fortress,
   My God (אֱלֹהַי), in whom I trust!”
3 For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper
   And from the deadly pestilence.
4 He will cover you with His pinions,
   And under His wings you may seek refuge;
   His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.
5 You will not be afraid of the terror by night,
   Or of the arrow that flies by day;
6 Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
   Or of the destruction that lays waste at noon.
7 A thousand may fall at your side
   And ten thousand at your right hand,
   But it shall not approach you.
8 You will only look on with your eyes
   And see the recompense of the wicked.
9 For you have made Adonai, my refuge,
   Even ‘Elyon, your dwelling place.
10 No evil will befall you,
    Nor will any plague come near your tent.
The Name “Most High” is found 10 times in Daniel (Aramaic עִלָּא/ה – Dan 3:26; 4:2, 17, 24–25, 32, 34; 5:18, 21; 7:25. Note, e.g., 4:17 – 

This sentence is by the decree of the angelic watchers and the decision is a command of the holy ones,

In order that the living may know that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind, and bestows it on whom He wishes and sets over it the lowliest of men.

We should also note that in the Apostolic Scriptures Yeshua is referred to as the “Son of the Most High” (Mark 5:7; Luke 1:32, 35; 8:28).

Meaning
1. The noun עֶלְיוֹן ‘Elion means “highest” or “top most.” When combined with a divine Name (יהוה, אֱלֹהִים, אֶל, שָׁדַּי - YHVH, Elohim, El, Shaddai) or when in parallel with a divine Name, the noun functions as a personal name of God and reveals that the God of Israel is the supreme sovereign over all other beings.
2. This means His authority is absolute, and that His power to enforce this authority is unmatched.
3. This, in turn, means that He cannot be overpowered but that He is always victorious over His enemies.
4. It is foolhearty, then, to fight against Him, for all who do will only be defeated.
5. The utter sovereignty of God as “Most High” therefore secures the ultimate success of His kingdom, and all who are citizens of His kingdom are therefore assured of His full and complete protection.
6. It also means that He controls the events of our world in such a way so as to bring about His will and the establishment of His eternal kingdom.
7. Since the God of Israel is the Most High God, He alone is worthy of our full devotion and worship.

Application
1. We may entrust all things into the hands of the Most High and His good providence. Nothing is too difficult for Him or beyond His ability.
2. We may be constantly comforted by the fact that the Most High is in control of our world, even when it appears to be out of control. There is no need, therefore, to be anxious about the future.
3. When we contemplate the infinite power and strength of the Most High, we realize that this is matched by His love for His own, those for whom the Messiah has given His life. Even as nothing in our world can overpower Him, so nothing in our lives is too small to be unimportant to Him. His plan for the universe includes His individual care for each of those He has saved.
4. As the supreme, eternal, and infinite Most High, He deserves our full and unending praise and worship.
The Incommunicable Attributes of God

Having looked at some of the more frequently used Names by which God reveals Himself, we see how, in one sense, speaking of an individual attribute or characteristic of God is foreign to the Scriptures. Each of His Names reveal God as unified in all of His attributes as He enters time and space to bring mankind into relationship with Himself. Yet inevitably, each Name of God emphasizes certain of His attributes, not to the exclusion of the others, but in the manner by which He expresses His greatness. It is therefore profitable for us to consider each of the attributes of God in order that we might identify more carefully those which are expressed particularly in His marvelous deeds toward mankind.

1. Independence or Self-Existence

By “Independence or Self-Existence” we mean:

1. God does not need us or the rest of creation for anything, yet
2. we and the rest of creation can glorify Him and bring Him joy.

As we seek to define God’s Independence or Self-Existence more carefully, we may use terms such as Transcendent or Wholly Other, meaning that God exists before and above all else and is in need of nothing. In this sense

(1) He is uncaused, i.e., He is eternal in all of His being and stands entirely as “other” in relationship to His universe.
(2) He is uncontrolled by anything or anyone outside of Himself, i.e., He is entirely and always supreme in His sovereignty.
(3) He is self-determined, meaning He has His ground of being within Himself. He depends on nothing other than Himself for His own existence.
(4) He is the ground of being for all else that exists, meaning that every thing and every person that exists, does so as dependent upon God.

The Scriptures are clear that God had no beginning, that is, He exists in eternity, without beginning and without end. Thus, no person nor thing exists that, in any way, effects the being of God. As the Psalmist proclaims:

Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting (מֵעוֹלָם עַד־עוֹלָם), You are God. (Ps 90:2)

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)

Isaiah proclaims of God:

For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever (שֹׁכֵן עַד, literally “dwelling in eternity”), whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit In
order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Is 57:15)

The author of Hebrews applies this same eternal concept to Yeshua:

Yeshua Messiah is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Heb 13:8)

The only way that Yeshua could be classed as “unchanging” is if He had no beginning and no ending in terms of His divine nature. For a “beginning” constitutes a “change” just as an ending does as well.

Indeed, one of the meanings of God’s ineffable Name, יהוה, as explained to Moses in Ex 3:14, is that God is uncaused and thus unaffected by anything or anyone outside of His being. For the promise “I will be what I will be” (אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה), could only be always and inevitably kept if God is unaffected by the world He created. That is, no one nor anything can cause God to be what He otherwise would not be. If the possibility existed that God could be affected by something outside of His being, then He could never be certain that He would always remain the same, i.e., that He would always be what He is.

This aspect of God’s “Independence or Self-Existence,” that He is eternal in all of His being and thus uncaused and independent from His creation, means that He is in need of nothing in order to exist or in order to do what He wills to do. This aspect of His independence from the created world is what is meant by the phrase “He stands entirely as ‘other’ in relationship to His universe.” Paul makes it clear that those who worship the creation do not worship the Creator, and the reverse is also true: those who worship the Creator do not worship the creation (Rom 1:25). This is because the Creator and His creation, while certainly having a relationship, are clearly different in that the Creator is uncaused, and the creation is caused. Paul hit on this crucial aspect of God’s character when he was dialoguing with the philosophers in Athens. In describing the independence of God, Paul said:

The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands; 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 17:24–25)

This truth, therefore, entirely negates that old notion that God created the universe because He was lonely or lacked relationship with other beings. In fact, in the inexplicable mystery of God’s being, He had self-relationship that lacked nothing. Yeshua speaks of the glory that He shared with the Father before the universe was created (Jn 17:5) as well as the relationship of love He and the Father had “before the foundation of the world” (Jn 17:24). Such self-relationship was infinite and therefore perfect—without the need for being supplemented or perfected.

One other aspect of God’s Independence or Self-Existence is that He is, in His being, entirely unique. Thus, when we speak of God’s “Self-Existence” we do not mean that He exists as we do but eternally, or that His being is like our being yet greater or more significant. Or to put it another way, though God is the source of all that exists (Rom 11:36), His relationship to the creation cannot be summed in the example of “source” and “derived thing.” For in-
stance, when we say that the “source” of a river are the mountain springs and water run-off, we mean that the river is simply a combination of water collected from the mountains. Likewise, when we consider the parent–child relationship, the parent as source and the child as derived from the parents, we still have an inadequate example, for the child possesses the exact nature of the parents.

Not so when we speak of God as the “ground of being for all else.” While all things are “from Him, and through Him, and to Him,” we must at the same time recognize that all things do not partake of His unique nature. As Wayne Grudem puts it:

> The difference between the creature and the Creator is an immensely vast difference, for God exists in a fundamentally different order of being. It is not just that we exist and God has always existed; it is also that God necessarily exists in an infinitely better, stronger, more excellent way.¹

The biblical authors often speak of this difference in terms of time-space categories (thus overlapping the attributes of God’s eternality and omnipresence). For instance, all that is created can pass away in a moment, but God and all He is necessarily exists forever.

> Your name, ADONAI, is everlasting, Your remembrance, ADONAI, throughout all generations. (Ps 135:13)

> 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, Owner of Eternity (טייב, 'vi’ad), Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6)

> Forever, ADONAI, Your word is settled in heaven. (Ps 119:89)

> All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of ADONAI blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever. (Is 40:6–8)

Yet even though God necessarily exists in His own being and is in need of nothing, this does not mean that He is unable or unwilling to interact with His creation and even to receive glory and praise from His creation. In other words, the infinite transcendence of God must not be taken to mean that He is therefore unknowable or unapproachable by His creation. Nor should we think that His Independence and Self-Existence makes the world He created meaningless. The glory of mankind is that we have been created in His image and for a specific and glorious purpose: to glorify God and to enjoy forever a relationship with Him that both honors Him and gives eternal meaning to our own existence (Is 43:7; Eph 1:11–12).

Thus, we hold in tension the utter transcendence of God and His nearness. As the Psalmist confesses:

> But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD (יהוה אדונֵי) my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works. (Ps 73:28)

Application

When we consider the Independence or Self-Existence of God, how should this truth effect our own relationship with God? First, it is this truth that undergirds the immutability or unchangeable nature of God (a divine attribute we will study below). In a world that is always changing, and in our own finite and creaturely status, we constantly are changing and living with change. Deep within us is a longing for that which does not change—that unchanging center from which we can always find our own “location” or “purpose” in life. Some, having succumbed to the falsehood that God does not exist, for if He does exist, He is simply an impersonal force or cause with which we can have no real relationship. People like this have therefore sought to fill the longing for the unchangeable by various substitutes: philosophy, pleasures, specific activities, hobbies, wealth, etc. But of course, all of these change as well. Some (following the existential philosophers) have given way to a kind of hedonism, believing that there can be no real or lasting meaning in life, and so one must simply try to derive meaning from indulging in as much pleasure as possible during one’s brief and every changing existence. But of course, the answer to this human dilemma is God—not a force or a cause, but a personal being Who has created the universe and Who has revealed Himself as the Eternal One Who comes into relationship with His creation. He is the unchanging, forever uncaused and independent One Who alone is able to bring genuine meaning to the lives of the people He has created in His image.

Second, as those who have come into a personal, covenant-based relationship with God through His Son, Yeshua, we cling to Him as the One Who has revealed Himself in truth. As such, we trust in Him explicitly because He can always be counted on. He has told us that He needs nothing, that He is always the same, and that His perfections are infinite and therefore without any lack or flaw. Therefore, we can trust that each and every time we approach the Almighty, we need not fear that somehow something has effected a change in Him—that His attitudes, thoughts, or perspective have in any way been altered by events that have taken place. He is unmoved and unchanged by anything outside of Himself, and thus we may always approach Him as the unique One and only God Whose promises are never altered and Who therefore receives us as He has said He would.

Finally, we know that in our sinful nature constantly seeks to persuade us that we can be independent of all others, including God, and that such independence will bring the greatest joy and happiness in life. As we have considered the Independence and Self-Existence of God, we realize all the more why the sinful nature tries to move us towards independence: because we were created to be dependent upon God, not to be independent from Him. Moreover, He alone is the only being in this universe Who is completely and eternally independent and self-existing. But we derive our existence from Him, for it is “in Him we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:18). Thus, the draw of the sinful nature toward independence is the very sin into which Adam and Chavah fell—to think that one could exist apart from God and apart from His sustaining hand. When we have accepted His independence and our utter dependence upon Him for all of life, temporal and eternal, we have accepted the truth, and it is the truth that enables us to fulfill life’s purpose.
2. *Unchangeableness or Immutability*

The second incommunicable attribute we will focus on is the Unchangeableness or Immutability of God. By “Unchangeableness or Immutability,” we mean:

1. God is unchanging in His being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet
2. God does act and feel emotions, and He acts differently in response to different situations.

The immutability of God is directly connected with His immensity (or infinite being) and eternity. As infinite and eternal, God exists above all the causes of and even above the possibility of change. “Infinite space and infinite duration cannot change. They must ever be what they are.”

This means that God is absolutely immutable (unchanging) in His being and attributes. In none of His character can He increase or decrease. He is not subject to a process of development, whether in terms of His being or His attributes. This means that His wisdom, His knowledge, His power, His righteousness, or His holiness can never be greater or less but is forever and always infinite. God can never be more merciful, more wise, or more holier than He has ever been or ever must be.

The same is true for God’s plans and purposes. Since He is infinite in wisdom and knowledge, there can be no misjudgment or miscalculation in His plans. Moreover, since He is also infinite in power, there is never any failure in accomplishing what He has planned.

Adonai of hosts has sworn saying, “Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.” (Is 14:24)

Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure,’ (Is 46:9–10)

For I, Adonai, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. (Mal 3:6)

The counsel of Adonai stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation. (Ps 33:11)

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. (James 1:17)

In modern times, several new approaches to theology have questioned the immutability of God as set forth in classical theologies. These new approaches have been called “Process Theology” and “Open Theology.” Process theology holds that process and change are essential aspects of true existence. Since God exists, He too, therefore, must be in the process of becoming, adding to
Himself all of the things that happen anywhere in the universe. Proponents of Process Theology point primarily to two things that they feel require such an approach: (1) that the Scriptures seem clearly to speak in language that portrays God as mutable, that is, as changing, and (2) that viewing God as mutable makes a genuine relationship with Him far more possible and appealing. Process theologians suggest that the classical explanation of God’s immutability makes it appear as though nothing mankind does really affects God, for if it did affect Him, then in that sense He would be changed, for in that moment of His experience, He would have an emotion He did not have before. From the vantage point of those who espouse Process theology, the mutability of God fosters the idea that mankind can have a genuine relationship with Him, a relationship that is marked by the same kind of emotions and passions found in human relationships.

Indeed, in the realm of emotions and passions, the Scriptures regularly speak of God in terms generally applied to humans. Thus,

He is grieved (Ps 78:40; Eph 4:30). His wrath burns hot against his enemies (Ex 32:10). He pities his children (Ps 103:13). He loves with everlasting love (Is 54:8; Ps 103:17).¹

Clearly God does not have sinful or evil passions or emotions, but the Scriptures noted above substantiate that God does experience emotions. And this would seem in concert with the fact that He created our emotions and that therefore He is able to experience these same emotions as well.

How are we to reconcile God’s immutability or infinite nature with the fact that He enters into personal relationship with His creation, and that in this relationship He experiences emotions? The Process theologians feel that the only way to find a reconciliation is to diminish one side in favor of the other, and so they diminish the clear statements of Scripture, that God does not change, in favor of those which speak of His experiencing emotions.

On the other hand, classical theology has explained the difficulty by classing the biblical statements about God’s emotions as anthropomorphisms, that is, as God revealing Himself by using descriptions characteristic of humans. In the same way that God describes Himself as feet, legs, arms, eyes, ears, nose, etc. (even though we know He is a spirit without physical form), so He is portrayed in the Scriptures as having the same kind of emotions (though not sinful emotions) as do humans. Those who explain God’s emotions in this way would say that God does have anger or wrath (for instance), but it is not the same as man’s anger or wrath. It rather is the necessary response of an infinite God to that which is contrary to His infinite righteousness or justice. But the only way that God could reveal His own response to sin in a manner comprehensible to finite man would be to do so by speaking in terms experienced within the realm of human existence. Thus, even as we may become angry when we experience something contrary to our sense of “right,” so God reveals to us His disapproval of unrighteousness in terms we understand as anger. Thus, those who take the anthropomorphic view are not willing to say that God experiences emotion as we do, but only that He reveals His disposition toward good and evil in emotional terms that we as finite humans would understand.

In my thinking, this discussion of how God can be both infinite in all of His

¹ Wayne Grudem, Making Sense of Who God Is, p. 57.
being while at the same time have a personal relationship with His finite creation, is yet another instance in which we confront the mystery of God. Rather than seeking to diminish either the clear teaching of Scripture regarding God’s immutability (i.e., that He is infinite in all of His being and thus in all of His attributes) or to error in saying that mankind’s relationship with God is of no consequence (since He cannot be move or experience emotions that in many ways define human relationships), we should affirm both that God is entirely immutable yet inexplicably enters into real, genuine relationship with His finite creation—a relationship in which together we experience joy, sorrow, grieving, happiness, contentment, refreshing of soul/spirit, and love. While we may not be able to explain this in philosophical or theological terms that satisfy human rationale, we can nonetheless affirm both to be true since the Scriptures themselves speak in these very terms.

Application

How does the truth of the Unchangeableness or Immutability of God apply directly to us as we seek to walk out a life of faith and faithfulness? First, we should take to heart the truth of Mal 3:6, “For I, ADONAI, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.” The fact that God does not change—that He is immutable—means that His promises and purposes likewise do not change. Therefore, we may rest assured that what He has said, He will do. In fact, God’s attribute of faithfulness is based upon His immutability as well as His independence or self-determination. Since He is the same yesterday, today, and forever, we can trust Him to be faithful to and consistent with His word. This reality becomes a strong foundation upon which we may live our lives in the true hope of eternal salvation.

Second, the fact that God does not change means that even though we change, we can return to Him in order to find that which is sure—that which unchanging. So often we are moved by the zeitgeist, the “spirit of the times,” so that our thinking and perspective can be subtly molded and morphed to fit the outlook of the moving forces in our society and world. But in the evolving stream of thoughts and worldviews, there remains a standard unchanged, unMOVED, and unencumbered. This One is God, Whose revelation remains the same from generation to generation, and Who continues to work out His plan just as He determined before the universe was even created.

Finally, the fact that God never changes and is not in the process of becoming something He is not already, enhances rather than diminishes the possibility of genuine, meaningful relationship. For the one who believes what God has revealed, and draws close to Him through His Son Yeshua, is assured of God’s promises upon which an eternal (rather than temporal) relationship can be forged. Nothing in human experience so powerfully creates lasting relationship than an unconditional love that is able to conform the one being loved to very image of the One expressing love. And it is God’s immutability that makes His love so powerful, for never do we need to fear that somehow He would be changed in His love, for like all of His attributes, His love is infinite.

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1 Feinberg, No One Like Him, pp. 266ff, seeks to redefine “immutability” in order to overcome the dilemma of an infinite/immutable God Who is still able to have personal interaction with His creation. The outcome, however, is (in my opinion) far more in the realm of speculative philosophy than in the arena of human experience.
and therefore without the possibility of becoming something other than what it has always been. It is on the very basis of God’s immutability that Paul argues for the enduring, unchanging nature of God’s love (Rom 8:38–39), and thus of God’s faithfulness to Israel (Rom 9:13; 11:28).

3. **Eternal or Infinite in respect to Time**

The third incommunicable attribute we list in this study is that of God’s eternality, that is, that He is infinite in respect to time. This means that God has no beginning, end or succession of moments in His own being, and He sees all time equally vividly, yet He still sees events in time and acts in time. We can state it simply this way: time does not limit God.

It is easy to see how this attribute of God overlaps the attribute previously studied, that is, His immutability. Since He does not change, this likewise means that time has no ability to change Him. In this sense, we can say that God exists out of or above time. That is to say, He sees or knows all things as it were in a single eternal moment. This concept means that God does not “know” or “have knowledge” as we do, nor is His thinking processes like ours. For we come to know that which we did not know before, and we do so through a process of putting facts with new facts in order to discern additional facts. Thus, our knowing is always the result of a process.

But God has always known all things infinitely (we call this His omniscience). Thus, time does not effect God in terms of His knowledge, whether in the sense of gaining knowledge He did not have, or losing knowledge, i.e., forgetting that which He once knew.

Now clearly, the whole concept of eternity or the quality of being eternal is beyond our finite ability to grasp in a comprehensive way. For whenever we think of eternity, we do so in terms of a “length of time,” that is, time that never ends. Yet the very concept of time places us in the realm of the finite, for time predicates a past, a present, and a future. That is to say, time presupposes a future which is not yet, and thus events that have not yet taken place. The Eternal One, however, does not experience time as we do, for He knows and sees all things equally and vividly, that is, as occurring within an eternal moment. Yet apart from the God Who is eternal, time would not exist, for it did not exist until God began to create. Thus, like all things, time is the product of God’s creation and He is therefore not subject to time any more than He is subject to any other part of His creation.

Stephen Charnock, in his magisterial work, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, chose Ps 90:2 as the text form which he expounded the doctrine of God’s eternality.

> Before the mountains were born or You gave birth to the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God. (Ps 90:2)

One of the important points that Moses the Psalmist makes here is that God’s eternality is in both directions. That is, “from everlasting to everlasting,” meaning that God has no beginning and no end. An interesting way to express this Hebraically may be found in Elihu’s description of God:

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1 Reprinted by Klock & Klock, 1977, from the 1797 original.
Behold, God is exalted, and we do not know Him; The number of His years is unsearchable. (Job 36:26)

Note also v. 4 of Psalm 90:

For a thousand years in Your sight are like yesterday when it passes by, or as a watch in the night. (Ps 90:4)

Peter alludes to this text when he writes that

... with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. (2Pet 3:8)

The point these authors are making is not an arithmetic equivalent, but that God does not view time as man does. What seems like the longest period of time conceivable to man is as nothing to God. Peter’s addition to Ps 90:4, that “one day is like a thousand years” illustrates what I mentioned above, that God sees all in an eternal moment. Thus, a day may just as easily represent eternity to God as does a thousand years.

Yet in spite of His being eternal, God still acts within the realm of time and in His actions reveals Himself within time. Thus, His providence or His plan is unrolled (so to speak) within the confines of human history. Thus, God promises Abraham and Sarah that a son would be born to them “at the appointed time” (Gen 18:14). Likewise, the appearance of Yeshua as God’s promised Messiah came in the scope of earth’s history at the time appointed by God:

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Torah, so that He might redeem those who were under the Torah, that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Gal 4:4)

In the same way, the consummation of all things has been ordained by God to occur at the end of earth’s history.

He said, “Behold, I am going to let you know what will occur at the final period of the indignation, for it pertains to the appointed time of the end.” (Dan 8:19)

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead. (Acts 17:30)

Thus, we must hold (once again) to two truisms that may, in some ways, appear contradictory. We must affirm that God exists in eternity, infinite in respect to time, and thus outside of or above the finite, time-bound existence we experience. But though this is true, it is also true that God enters into time even though He is not affected by it, for He is the Lord of time, being time’s Creator.

In utter contrast to the Eternal God (cf. Deut 33:27; Rom 16:26), we as finite created beings will, in at least one sense, always exist in time. That is, we will never be eternal as a necessary aspect of our natures, so we will never be able
to see or know all things in an eternal instant as God does. Even in the world to come, we will apparently experience life as successive moments and events. And, we will in this sense always be dependent upon God Who is Himself independent, for our being, even in the world to come and throughout eternity will still be derived, having been created by God. Thus, His eternality will always stand as supreme and other than our own finitude.

Application

We have seen how the eternality of God overlaps the previous attributes we have studied, namely, His Independence or Self-Existence and His Immutability. For if He were not eternal, then He would have changed because He would have become something He was not. Likewise, if He were not eternal, then having a beginning would raise the question of how that beginning could have come about. He would then be dependent upon that which brought about His beginning. Thus, His attribute of eternity is knit together inextricably with His self-existence and immutability.

One of the primary applications of God’s eternality is His role as Creator. Since He is eternal, that is, without beginning and without end, it is necessary to conclude that all that does exist does so by Him—by His act of creation. That being the case, He is Lord of all, for as Creator He has the right to do with His creation as He wills.

Another application is obvious: even when we attempt to think of God’s eternal nature and to express it in meaningful words, we quickly come to the end of ourselves, admitting that we are incapable of even thinking in these categories, not to mention expressing them to others. This exercise, then, helps remind us of our smallness and His infinite greatness. We appreciate the words of the Psalmist all the more:

What is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him? (Ps 8:4)

For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust. (Ps 103:14)

Surely the study of God’s eternality, even the few thoughts compiled here, brings us into the realm of true wonder, that He, the Eternal God, the Creator, would not only set His love upon us, but would draw us to Himself through the Spirit He has given us, and by the grace poured out upon us through the work of Yeshua, and by so doing, to bring us into an eternal relationship with Him as trophies of His grace. If the study of God’s eternality offers us nothing more (and it does offer us much more!), then contemplating once again His greatness in light of our finitude is reward enough!

For you know the grace of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich. 2Cor 8:9
4. Omnipresence or Infinite in respect to Space

The fourth attribute of God which we have designated as “incommunicable” is that of His omnipresence. By this we mean that God does not have size or spatial dimensions and is present at every point of space with His whole being. Still, God acts differently in different places.

In the rabbinic literature, we find varying opinions on the omnipresence of God, with the R. Ishmael’s school teaching this as a certainty, while others were less convinced. But one wonders if by “presence” some of the rabbinic authorities meant one thing, and others, something quite different. For quite often the “Shechinah” (שכינה) is the term used to indicate God’s presence. Yet the rabbis were particularly concerned that their teaching on the presence of God in the world not be misconstrued as a form of pantheism, the teaching that all things contain divine being, so that the material world is essentially divine. As such, the rabbis sought to limit, at times, the presence of God to the community of Israel itself or to the Land of Israel. Yet overall, the sages reckoned with the fact that the Tanach itself speaks of God’s presence in all places.

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. (Ps 139:7–10)

We also see a good amount of rabbinic discussion on the text of Jer 23:24.

Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?“ declares Adonai. Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?” declares Adonai. (Jer 23:24)

Overall, the majority opinion of the rabbis is that indeed, God, the God of Israel, is unlike other false gods, who are confined to a region or a place, and who have no power over other gods who control their own region or place. The God of Israel cannot be contained even in the universe, for His greatness exceeds all else.²

It is important for us to recognize that there is a difference between the presence of God in terms of His self-revelation, and the presence of God referred to as His omnipresence. In the latter, we are considering the fact that God is infinite in the realm of space, even as He is infinite in the realm of time. We cannot say, then that God has dimensions, or that we can quantify God in terms of His being. Some theologians refer to this as the immensity of God. This means that wherever a person may find himself or herself, they are not removed from where God is. Or to put it another way (echoing the words of Psalm 139), there is nowhere in the entire universe where one can flee or hide from God. Wherever one finds oneself, God is there.

However, we should also note that quite often in the Tanach, when we read in our English Bibles about God’s “presence,” the Hebrew idiom uses the word “face” (פנים, paneh). Note, for example, Ex 33:15 and Moses request that God’s “presence” go with Israel as they traverse the wilderness on their way

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1 See A. Marmorstein, The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God (KTAV, 1927), pp. 148ff.
Likewise the “Bread of the Presence” is literally לֶחֶם הַפָּנִים, lechem hapanim, “the bread of the face” (Ex 25:30; 35:13; 39:36; Num 4:7).

Now this use of the term “face” intersects with the idea that God reveals Himself by turning His face toward someone or a people. Thus, the Aaronic Benediction (Num 6:24–26) invokes God’s blessing upon the people by causing His face to shine upon them and face to be lifted toward them.

Moreover, the fact that Moses’ position before God is considered unique by the fact that God spoke to him “face to face” (Ex 33:11; Deut 5:4; 34:10) tells us something more about God’s “presence.” For in one sense, His presence has as its purpose to give a specific or special self-revelation. Such a purpose is to be distinguished from His general omnipresence which is a result of His essential being, i.e., His being infinite in the realm of space.

We can see this in yet another example, that is, the story of the burning bush (Ex 3:2–5).

The obvious question that confronts us here is: why did the ground become holy, requiring Moshe to remove his sandals? The most obvious answer is that the presence of God in the burning bush made the ground around the bush holy, i.e., set apart in a special way. But if God’s omnipresence means that God’s presence is everywhere, should not that mean that all ground is holy? Yet it is only as Moshe approaches the bush that he is instructed to remove his sandals due to the fact that now, as he drew closer, he was about to walk on holy ground.

The point seems clear: when we speak of the “presence of God” we must recognize that there are two aspects to His presence. One relates to God’s being infinite in the realm of space (His omnipresence). This means that one is not able to hide from God or to escape from His presence. The other is when God intends to reveal Himself in a specific way, and He does so by choosing a specific place or time or means for such a self-revelation. Very often in such a situation, the Scriptures speak in spacial language, depicting God as physically coming or dwelling in a specific place (e.g., Gen 11:7; Ex 25:22; 1Sam 4:4; 1Ki 9:3; 2Chr 7:16). It is His choosing to reveal Himself in a specific or special way that differentiates His “presence” in this case from His general presence as a necessary attribute of His infinite being.

We may also connect this revelatory “presence of God” as having specific covenant connections. For in choosing those He intends to bring into covenant relationship with Himself, He also plans the means by which they will come to know Him, that is, the means by which He will reveal Himself to
them and by this revelation, draw them to Himself. Very often when God reveals Himself in a specific or special way, He does so with His covenant people. Consider the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire by which the children of Israel were led in their wilderness wanderings, or the glowing of Moshe’s face when he descended from Mt. Sinai. God likewise revealed Himself at the dedication of Solomon’s temple where the whole house (Temple) was filled with the glory of God (1Ki 8:10–11). These few example help to strength the idea that God’s general presence, that which we call His omnipresence, is the necessary and thus eternal and continual result of His being infinite in the realm of space. His special or specific presence, however, is the result of His own desire to reveal Himself to those whom He has chosen to be part of His family—His covenant people.

This fact, of God revealing Himself in special ways to those with whom He intends to establish a covenant relationship, comes to full realization in the person of the Messiah, Yeshua. We thus read in Col 2:9–10,

For in Him [Yeshua] all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority; (Col 2:9–10)

If God’s presence were manifest in the burning bush, or in the visible glory ascending over the Tabernacle, or in the pillar of cloud or fire that led Israel in the desert, or the shining in Moses face, or in the Angel of the Lord Who appeared at times throughout Israel’s history—then these all were foreshadows of the time when the Messiah would come, for in Him the presence of God in fulness is manifest, and in Him the fulfillment of the covenant is realized.

Thus, the omnipresence of God and His particular presence to reveal Himself to those who are chosen as His covenant people are not contradictory but are in every way complimentary. In one sense, then, Yeshua is the most complete revelation of God given to mankind, for the invisible God, Whom no man has ever seen, is manifest in His Messiah, Yeshua. Even as Yeshua taught, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

Application

The omnipresence of God is at once a comfort to those who are His and dismay to those who are not. How often we seek to hide ourselves from those we despise or who are our enemies. This is particularly true if we have wronged them or for some reason our relationship has been strained. When we see them at a distance, we do our best to avoid them.

We see this played out at the very beginning of earth’s history, when Adam and Chavah, having disobeyed and then experienced the guilt of sin, hear the sound of God coming to them and thus they seek to hide themselves. Here we see God coming to reveal Himself in a specific way, but this story also speaks to us of a reality: we cannot hide from God. Even as Jonah discovered that God is everywhere, so Adam and Chavah came to realize that not only did God know of their sin, but He was there when they committed their sin.

So it is true of us. God is more near than we could imagine. Every part of our lives—our actions, our words, our thoughts, even our intentions, are known to Him for He abides everywhere.

But in this same sense God’s omnipresence is a great comfort for those who are His true children. Even in the darkest hour, in the most remote of places,
God is there with us, ready to hear our pleas for help as well as our words of praise. What is more, the infinite God is often pleased to make His presence known in a special way—to reveal Himself to His chosen ones for their comfort, instruction, and sanctification. Thus, there is, in one sense, a definite display of God’s mercy and love in His attribute of omnipresence.

5. **Unity or Infinitely One**

The fifth attribute of God which is classed as incommunicable is that of His complete or infinite unity. By this is meant that God is not divided into parts even though we can recognize that the Scriptures emphasize different attributes of God which are displayed at different times and in different ways. Traditionally some theologians of bygone years have described this attribute of God by the term “simple” or “simplicity,” using the English word in its philosophical sense meaning “not composed of parts.” But in our modern world, the word “simple” has taken on a range of other meanings and is therefore less than adequate for our purposes. Thus, I will use “unity” or “infinite oneness” to describe this aspect of God’s character.

The reason that I opted to study ten of the revealed Names of God at the beginning of this chapter on the “Incommunicable Attributes of God” was to emphasize the obvious fact that all of the attributes of God must be understood to be equally united in God’s being. We saw how each Name, while perhaps emphasizing one of God’s attributes in particular, still incorporated many of His attributes as united together in the particular self-revelation given in that Name.

Thus, the point of the attribute now under consideration, that of God’s Unity or Infinite Oneness, is that it would be wrong to think that any one of God’s attributes is more prominent in His being than the others. Rather, we could put it this way: each of God’s attributes, being infinite, is never diminished or enhanced by any other of His attributes. This means, for instance, that God’s attribute of eternity does not negate nor impede His attribute of omnipresence, and even His ability and desire to reveal Himself within the confines of time and space.

As we study the communicable attributes of God, those attributes in which we as human beings share in a finite way, the unity of God will become even more important. For though there are those who want to have God’s love rule over His justice, or His righteousness be more prominent than His mercy, if we have well in mind His infinite oneness, we will be reminded that not any one of His attributes is more important than the others, nor is one attribute prominent causing a diminution of other attributes.

Perhaps one of the main difficulties we have as fallen, finite creatures, in understanding or getting a grasp on this attribute of God is that for us, we find it nearly impossible to maintain certain things in perfect balance. For instance, we find it difficult (or even impossible) to maintain a full sense of justice while at the same time have a complete and unabated love. We struggle with showing mercy to someone who we feel is not completely deserving of such mercy, so we find it difficult to maintain an attitude of mercy while at the same time not letting go of a genuine sense of what is righteous.

Not so with God. Because He is infinite in all of His being, and therefore in all of His attributes, never does one attribute trump another. Thus, for instance, we realize that it is not proper to request of God that He would allow His mercy to diminish His justice. For instance, in the traditional Siddur and
the Daily Shacharit service, we read in the passage following the Akedah:

Master of the Universe! May it be your will Adonai, our God and God of our fathers, to recall for our sake the covenant of our fathers. Just as our father, Abraham, suppressed his compassion for his only son and would have slaughtered him to do Your will, so may Your compassion suppress Your anger against us; and may Your compassion prevail over Your [other] attributes to deal with us more leniently than the letter of Your law.¹

While it is always proper to seek God’s mercy, to think that He would suppress His other attributes in favor of His attribute of mercy is to ask that which He would never do, for He would never deny Himself. Thus, we understand that God’s mercy does not require His justice to be diminished, but that God equally fulfills both by mercifully providing the payment necessary to satisfy His justice. Thus the Psalmist writes:

Lovingkindness and truth have met together; Righteousness and peace have kissed each other. (Ps 85:10)

Ultimately, it is through the work of our Messiah Yeshua that God is able to extend His mercy to sinners, for it is in the death of Yeshua that the righteous requirements of God’s attribute of justice are met. If we maintain (as the Bible does) that the payment for sin is death (Ezek 18:4; Rom 6:23), then God could never grant *eternal* life to any sinner who had not paid the penalty due as a result of his or her sins. It is therefore in Yeshua that mercy and justice meet; where righteousness and peace have kissed.

This attribute of God, His unity or infinite oneness, must also remind us that His attributes are not additions or supplements to His very being. Even as all of His attributes are infinite, so they together are the revelation of His oneness. Even though it is good for us to study each of the attributes of God by which He has revealed Himself, we must keep well in mind that as we do this study, we may not view God as being composed of various parts. For if He is infinite in each of His attributes, then in one sense, each attribute represents the infinite nature of God. As impossible as this may be for us to comprehend fully, we must strive to view God and His works as always upholding all of His attributes without emphasizing one to the detriment of another.

*Application*

The obvious application of the unity or infinite oneness of God to our own lives is that need to view God’s attributes as a whole, and not to elevate one attribute to the exclusion of another. Unfortunately, it is always the tendency of human thinking to do just that—to emphasize one attribute of God as more befitting His greatness than do His other attributes. The notion taught by some theologians, for instance, that the “God of the Old Testament” is definitely not the “God of the New Testament,” falls into this trap. For to suppose that when God displays His mercy that then His justice must be diminished is to forget that all of His attributes are infinite and therefore cannot be diminished or enlarged. We therefore must allow the Scriptures to speak as a whole, not taking one part of the Scriptures as more important than other parts.

¹ Quoted from *The Complete Metsudah Siddur* (Metsudah Pub., 1990), p. 25.
allow the whole canon of Scripture to speak to us on its own terms, then we will recognize the unity of God’s being and be willing to hold in tension our inability to reconcile comprehensively the actions of God which may seem on the surface to emphasize one of His attributes to the neglect of others. Ultimately, we find the resolution of many such tensions in the person of Yeshua, Who embodies the fullness of God’s being.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. Why do you suppose that God reveals Himself through more than one Name? How does a Name emphasize both His various attributes while at the same time affirming His infinite oneness?

2. Review the Names of God briefly studied in this chapter and then see if you discern one particular attribute of God which each Name might emphasize.

3. How does God’s attribute of “Independence or Self-Existence” coincide with His sovereignty? Why is it that as fallen creatures we naturally despise God’s Independence, seeking rather to envision ourselves as independent and God as dependent?

4. Discuss how God’s Immutability forms one of the most important foundations for our own faith. Consider also how God’s immutability is underminded by those who teach “replacement theology,” or that the Church has replaced Israel as God’s chosen people.

5. How is the presence of God manifest in our day? Discuss various answers that you might presume would be given to this question by different religious groups.

6. The unity of God or His infinite oneness precludes allowing one attribute to be dominant over His other attributes. Discuss how emphasizing one attribute to the exclusion of other attributes produces bad theology and bad practice.
Excursus – Does God Change His Mind?

As we have considered the immutability of God as one of His incommuni-
cable attributes, a challenge presents itself from the Scriptures themselves,
namely, that a number of times the Scriptures present God as changing His
mind or repenting of what He previously intended to do. Note the following:

Then Adonai saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth,
and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil con-
tinually. Adonai was sorry (נחם) that He had made man on the earth,
and He was grieved in His heart. (Gen 6:5–6)

After the incident of the golden calf, and God’s intention to destroy the nation
on account of their idolatry, Moses intercedes for the nation of Israel and God
withdraws His righteous anger:

So Adonai changed His mind (נחם) about the harm which He said He
would do to His people. (Ex 32:14)

Similarly, after Saul was crowned as Israel’s first king, we hear the words
of Adonai:

“I regret (נחם) that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back
from following Me and has not carried out My commands.” And
Samuel was distressed and cried out to Adonai all night. (1Sam 15:11)

Yet in this same context we read:

Also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change (נחם) His mind; for He
is not a man that He should change His mind. (1Sam 15:29)

And similarly Moses records:

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should
repent (נחם); has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken,
and will He not make it good? (Num 23:19)

How are we to reconcile what appears to be obvious contradictions in the
Scriptures, since on the one hand it appears that God changes His mind (thus
undermining His immutability) while on the other hand, He asserts that He
does not change His mind? The only plausible answer is that when it is re-
ported by the prophets that God “relented” or “changed His mind,” they are
describing the situation from their vantage point—speaking in the language
of men and thus describing God in an anthropomorphic way.

In the same way that God is described to us in the pages of Scripture as
having affections that match our own, and as acting and reacting as do hu-
mans, so in ascribing to God the mobility of change, the prophets are simply
seeking to illustrate or explain the actions of God in patterns with which we
are familiar. Moreover, the immutability of God is not one and the same with
the concept of immobility or immovability. Like the mercury in the thermom-
eter that rises and falls with the temperature but nonetheless remains mercury
in every way, so God in His immutability is not immune from personal inter-
action with His creation even though it is in a constantly state of change.
Further, describing God’s actions from a human perspective is really the only way that we could understand and appreciate the fact that, though inexplicable, God’s ordained plan is worked out in the context of relationship, and relationship by its very nature is two-sided. Consider the thoughts of Augustus Strong:

When a man bicycling against the wind turns about and goes with the wind instead of going against it, the wind seems to change, though it is blowing just as it was before. The sinner struggles against the wind of prevenient grace until he seems to strike against a stone wall. Regeneration is God’s conquest of our wills by His power, and conversion is our beginning to turn round and to work with God rather than against God. Now we move without effort, because we have God at our back. (Phil 2:12–13) God has not changed, but we have changed. (John 3:8) Jacob’s first wrestling with the Angel was the picture of his lifelong self-will, opposing God; his subsequent wrestling in prayer was the picture of a consecrated will, working with God (Gen 32:24–28). We seem to conquer God, but He really conquers us. He seems to change, but it is we who change after all.  

Hirsch likewise notes that God’s interaction with the events of His universe figure into a proper understanding of this seeming controversy. Commenting on Gen 6:6, he writes:

There are those who wonder at what is said here that God changed His mind, and they cite as contradictory the verse: ואיש אלי בותני ובן אדם ויתנחם (Bemidbar [Num] 23:19). It appears, however, at a distinction should be drawn between הניחם [nifil = passive] and היתנחם [hitpael = reflexive]. הניחם [passive] means to change one’s mind due to external circumstances. Thus, of Sha’ul it says: ניחמתי [passive: “I regret ....”] 1Sam 15:11. Although God had appointed Sha’ul as King, he was no longer worthy of the crown. When Sha’ul changed, so did the Divine mandate.  

In summary, then, we may understand these statements that portray God as having changed His mind or as having relented of what He previously had indicated He would do, as speaking in human terms, describing God in relationship with mankind, using terminology with which the human spirit resonates. Even as we naturally respond differently in different situations, so God in His relationship with mankind is portrayed, not as an immovable object but as the personal God that He is, moving with and responding to His people in the course of their lives.

Yet such relational aspects of God’s nature should not be thought to overturn the reality that He remains infinite in all of His being, and therefore remains entirely self-determined. Though He reveals Himself as responding to those with whom He relates in time and space, yet He still remains entirely self-determined and therefore, in the ultimate sense, not in any way changed by the transitory nature of mankind.

1 Augustus Hopkins Strong, Systematic Theology, 3 vols. in 1 vol. (Judson, 1907), p. 258.
CHAPTER FIVE
The Attributes of God
His Communicable Attributes

As I noted in the last chapter, trying to describe the infinite nature and being of God using human categories and language is, in one respect, an impossibility. Yet it is only impossible if we expect to be exhaustive or perfect in our descriptions and understanding. Quite clearly God intends that we should come to know Him, for otherwise there would be no reasonable purpose for why He would have revealed Himself in the first place. He further is intent upon making Himself known even to those who will deny Him, for He implanted within creation itself His “fingerprints” (as it were) so that all will know He is there and He has made His existence known.

Yet when we seek to understand God through His self-revelation, we must always be grateful that He has revealed Himself to us in categories not only that we are able to understand and appreciate, but even in categories in which we ourselves participate. For instance, God has made Himself known as One Who is able and willing to love someone else, and we understand this intuitively because we have this same capacity—we too participate in loving others. Granted, our capacity and willingness to love someone else is neither as complete nor perfect as His love, but it does, nonetheless, share in precisely the same category—that of love.

Thus, the Scriptures, which are our primary source for knowing and understanding the attributes of God, speak of God not in a list of abstract qualities or philosophical ideologies, but by telling of His deeds in the course of human history, and particularly in His relationship to mankind whom He created in His own image. When we consider God’s character as revealed to us in the sum of His deeds, we recognize that His attributes are unified. As we study the communicable attributes, then, we should always keep in mind that all of God’s attributes work together in the absolute oneness and unity of His being. Moreover, even though we will seek to define aspects of God’s attributes as individual characteristics, we must appreciate that all of the attributes of God will overlap to one extent or another.

Omniscient – Infinite in Wisdom and Knowledge

Since God is an infinite and eternal being, He is therefore infinite in all of His attributes. This means that He is infinite in wisdom and knowledge (Job 37:16), which further means that He completely knows Himself and all other things (1Jn 3:20). Moreover, in fully knowing Himself and all other things, He does so without reference to time, that is, He knows all in a single eternal moment. From our own perspective (living as we do within the confines of time), this means that God knows all that could be, as well as all that will be.

That God fully knows Himself is expressed by Paul in 1Cor 2:9–11 when he writes that “…the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.” That He has complete knowledge of all other beings is stated in Heb 4:13,

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.
The Hebraic way of stating that God knows all that exists and all that takes place is by saying that He “sees” everything:

For the eyes of Adonai move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.… ” (2Chron 16:9)

For He looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. (Job 28:24)

It is further made clear in the Scriptures that God knows all that will take place in the future, for He is Himself the One Who ordains the future.

Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim them to you. (Is 42:9)

Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’ (Is 49:9–10)

It is not that God a vague picture of what will take place in our world, or that His knowledge is general rather than specific. Rather, He knows all things even to the smallest of details. He knows every action, thought, or word spoken in the life of every person. He not only knows our thoughts, but He knows them even before they are formulated in our own minds or expressed by word or action!

Adonai, You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, Behold, Adonai, You know it all. (Ps 139:1–4)

Once again, God’s ability to know all things is linked by the Psalmist to God’s sovereign ordination and providence:

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance; and in Your book were all written the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there was not one of them. (Ps 139:16)

That God knows the intentions of the heart is also illustrated by David’s prayer as he sought refuge from his enemies. He wondered whether the men of Keilah, the city in which he was hiding, would surrender him to Saul if Saul discovered him there.

Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down just as Your servant has heard? Adonai, God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant.” And Adonai said, “He will come down.” Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And Adonai said, “They will surrender you.” Then David and his men, about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah, and they went wherever they could go. When it was told Saul that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the pursuit. (1Sam 23:11–13).
When one considers that God knows all things that are possible, and when this truism is combined with the fact that God is infinite, then we are able to consider the fact that even though God created an incredibly complex universe, He had an infinite number of other creative possibilities He did not utilize. When mankind thinks that he has finally plumbed the depths of knowledge, he has, in reality, not even scratched the surface!

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. (Is 55:9)

Consider this amazing statement with me for a moment. Exactly how much higher are the heavens above the highest peak on the earth? Well, we really don’t know, do we? With the most powerful of telescopes, and even with the information relayed back from space probes, mankind has never reached the “edge” or the “end” of outer space. The metaphor used by Isaiah is therefore more clear to us in our modern age than ever before: God’s ways are infinitely higher than ours, and His thoughts are infinitely greater than are our thoughts. This is what we mean when we speak of God’s omniscience.

Given what we have already seen from the Scriptures about God’s complete and infinite knowledge, an obvious difficulty arise: if God knows everything, including what will happen in the future, how is it possible for anyone to have a “free choice”? Or to put it another way, if God knows precisely everything that will happen in the future, then are not all future events ordained? And if so, does this destroy the idea that human beings are “free moral agents” who will be held accountable for their choices?

This difficult question has been the source of debate for millennia, even to the point where some have come to the conclusion that God could not know all things in the future, at least not with absolute certainty. But such a position cannot be held in if one is committed to the authority of Scripture, for as we have already seen, the Bible specifically speaks of God’s complete and accurate knowledge of future events. Indeed, the whole aspect of biblical prophecy would be undermined by those who suggest that God’s omniscience does not include an accurate, detailed knowledge of all future events.

Here, once again, we must be willing to affirm both rather than choosing one or the other. That is, we must affirm the infinite knowledge that God possesses, a knowledge that “sees” all things in a single, eternal moment. For God, there is no future and no past. Thus God knows events which are future to us just as perfectly as He knows events which, from our vantage point, are past. Moreover, it is not simply that He has the ability to see all things. It is that He is the One Who ordains all things (cf. Rom 8:28; 11:36).

Yet in spite of this reality, we must also affirm that we, being created in God’s image, are responsible before Him to do what pleases Him, and therefore our choices are real choices that result in real consequences. Still, our choices in no way overturn or set aside His sovereign and perfect plan. Only an all-knowing God could forge a relationship with His creatures that both follows His ordained plan while at the same time giving them the responsibility to choose what is right and reject that which is wrong. Of course, apart from His grace and mercy, fallen man will always choose that which is contrary to God (Rom 3:9ff; 8:6–9).

So God’s sovereign omniscience and mankind’s responsibility are like parallel railroad tracks that seem never to touch. Yet, like railroad tracks that seem to touch as one looks down them into the distance, so the utter sover-
God’s Infinite Wisdom

When we speak of God’s wisdom, we are talking about the fact that He always ordains the best goals and chooses the best means to achieve those goals. Clearly, God’s attribute of wisdom overlaps His attribute of goodness, for all of His goals or purposes are holy and right. Likewise, the means by which His goals are realized are good, for not righteous goal can be achieved through unrighteous means.

Yet in considering God’s wisdom, we must first remember that because God is all knowing, at times His means of obtaining the goal are not always understood by mere human reasoning. In fact, quite often we discover that God uses means to achieve His desired purpose, means which we in our finite wisdom would have never chosen.

The wisdom of God is manifest in the created universe, as the Psalmist says:

Adonai, how many are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all; the earth is full of Your possessions. (Ps 104:24)

I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully (פּلاء) made; wonderful (פּلاء) are Your works, and my soul knows it very well. (Ps 139:14)

In our modern world, the advancements made in the medical and science fields have only increased our awareness of how complex yet intricate is our universe, in realms both macrocosm and microcosm. The more we learn, the more we marvel at the infinite wisdom of our Creator.

Yet though the world around us gives repeated witness of God’s wisdom, the greatest display of His wisdom is seen in His plan of redemption. Paul tells us:

but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Messiah [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1Cor 1:24)

But by His doing you are in Messiah Yeshua, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption…. (1Cor 1:30)

Yet here is the best example of how the wisdom of God appears as foolishness to man, for the cross of Yeshua, the very means by which God’s goal of redemption is to be realized, is considered to be foolishness by those who reject Him:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1Cor 1:18)

Indeed,

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. (1Cor 1:27–29)

And after Paul has gone to great lengths to expound the plan of redemption revealed in the prophets and realized in and by Yeshua, He comes to this conclusion at the end of Romans 11:

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)

And it is this redemptive plan of God, in blessing not only the seed of Abraham but also all of the families of the earth (Gen 12:2–3, etc.), and bringing them together as one family, that becomes the revelation of God’s wisdom even to the angelic host in the heavens:

To me [Paul], the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Messiah, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the ekklesia to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Messiah Yeshua our Lord … (Eph 3:8–11)

But God’s wisdom is not only manifest in the large, sweeping aspects of His redemptive plan, it is also made known in the individual whom He has called to Himself and whom He has redeemed by His grace:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom 8:28)

And what is the purpose to which He has called us? The next verse explains:

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; (Rom 8:29)

We have been called to be like His Son, Yeshua. Thus, we may take daily courage and strength in the fact that God has set Himself to achieve a goal for each of His children, and that also means that He has ordained wise means by which that goal is to be reached. We may therefore be confident that our lives are in His hands, and all that He brings our way is for His glory and our good.

How then is God’s knowledge and His wisdom communicable to us? We find that He is the source of both, and that He gives knowledge and wisdom to His children when they seek Him as He truly is:

The fear of Adonai is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction. (Prov 1:7)

The fear of Adonai is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Prov 9:10)

James writes:
But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. (James 1:5)

The Torah itself is a means by which the wisdom of God may become the possession of His children:

The Torah of Adonai is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of Adonai is sure, making wise the simple. (Ps 19:7)

Yet, like all of the communicable attributes, we must bear in mind that though we may share in God’s wisdom, we will never have wisdom as He does, that is, wisdom that complete and lacking nothing. Because we are unable to grasp the mind of God—because our wisdom is incomplete, in this life we will frequently be unable to explain or understand why God allows certain things to happen, or why He seems to be inattentive to our prayers. It is then that we must simply trust Him, knowing that His purposes for us are infinitely wise and He is leading us there by the best of all possible means. As Peter wrote in his first epistle:

Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good. (1Pet 4:19, ESV)

For, as Moses informs us,

The secret things belong to Adonai our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this Torah. (Deut 29:29)

We therefore are called to trust the superior wisdom of God and in faith, to entrust ourselves to Him even when we cannot fully understand what He is doing, or why He is doing it.

My goal is God Himself—not joy, nor peace, nor even blessing, But Himself, my God. ’Tis His to lead me there, not mine, but His— "At any cost, dear Lord, by any road!"

So faith bounds forward to its goal in God, And love can trust her Lord to lead her there; Upheld by Him, my soul is following hard, Till God has answered full my deepest prayer.

No matter if the way be sometimes dark, No matter though the cost be oft-times great, He knows how I best shall reach the mark— The way that leads to Him must needs be strait.

One thing I know, I cannot say Him nay; One thing I do, I press on to my Lord; My God, my glory here from day to day; And in the glory there, my Great Reward.

[“My Goal is God Himself” by Alfred B. Smith]
God’s Absolute Truthfulness and Faithfulness

By “truthfulness” we mean that God is the one and only true God, and that all of His knowledge, and thus His words, are true. But also, because God is infinite in all of His attributes, and therefore infinitely truthful, this means that His truth is the final authority by which all truth-claims must be measured.

Some would consider God’s faithfulness to be a separate attribute from His truthfulness, but it is easy to see why putting these together makes sense. Faithfulness means that God will always do what He says He will do and will fulfill what He has promised. Or to put it simply, God never lies. But it is also important to see that God’s faithfulness, while connected on one side to His truthfulness, is equally connected on the other side with God’s omnipotence, i.e., His ability to do all that He wills to do. Thus, God’s faithfulness is not only that He always intends to do what He says He will do, but also that He is able to do what He has promised.

The Scriptures everywhere affirm that God is the only, true God, though man seeks to create his own gods and the demons deceitfully pose as gods (cf. Lev 19:4; 1Cor 10:20). The Shema affirms that God is the only true God, for in its proclamation that God is one, the meaning most surely is that He is “the only one.” This is why in the next line Israel is commanded to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and might. Since there is only one true God, there is no need to divide one’s loyalty or service to others.

Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is one! You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut 6:4–5)

Consider the words of Jeremiah:

But Adonai is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure His indignation. Thus you shall say to them, “The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.” (Jer 10:10–11)

Likewise, in Yeshua’s garden prayer He defines the essence of eternal life:

This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Yeshua the Messiah whom You have sent. (Jn 17:3)

Similarly, in his first epistle John writes:

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 Yeshua Messiah. This is the true God and eternal life. (1Jn 5:20)

As noted above, God’s truthfulness is tied to His faithfulness. Thus, God does not and cannot lie:

… in the hope of eternal life, which God, who cannot lie, promised long ages ago… (Titus 1:2)
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)

The words of Adonai are pure words; as silver tried in a furnace on the earth, refined seven times. (Ps 12:6)

As we consider the attribute of God’s truthfulness and faithfulness, we see how the Church’s teaching of replacement theology or suppersessionism is such an unbiblical and devastating doctrine. For in teaching that the Church has replaced Israel, God’s truthfulness and faithfulness is brought into question. Rather than extolling the God of the Bible Who is infinitely faithful to His word and promises, replacement theology undermines the very character and nature of God Himself.

In fact, God’s sovereign act of bringing the nation of Israel back to Himself and to the Land He swore to give them, that the world at large recognizes God to be the true God.

For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 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. You will live in the land that I gave to your forefathers; so you will be My people, and I will be your God. (Ezek 36:24–28)

Thus says the Lord GOD, “On the day that I cleanse you from all your iniquities, I will cause the cities to be inhabited, and the waste places will be rebuilt. The desolate land will be cultivated instead of being a desolation in the sight of everyone who passes by. They will say, ‘This desolate land has become like the garden of Eden; and the waste, desolate and ruined cities are fortified and inhabited.’ Then the nations that are left round about you will know that I, Adonai, have rebuilt the ruined places and planted that which was desolate; I, Adonai, have spoken and will do it.” (Ezek.36:33–36)

We may note several things from this remarkable prophecy of Ezekiel. First, the people who are blessed in being called “My people,” and who confess the true God as their God are the same people who have been scattered to all the nations out of their own land on account of their sin. So the people who constitute the covenant nation are not a new people but are the same nation that God punished for their idolatry. Second, when God gives this people a new heart by putting His Spirit within them, then they return to live in the land which God gave to their forefathers. This can be no other people than the physical descendants of Jacob, and those from the nations who have join them through faith in their God. Thirdly, it is when exiled Israel returns to the Land through God’s sovereign power, and the ruined cities and desolate Land are restored “like the garden of Eden,” then the nations that are watching will know that Israel’s God, יהוה, is the one and only true God.
We note a similar notice in Jeremiah’s prophecies:

Behold, the days are coming,” declares Adonai, “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, ‘Adonai our righteousness.’ “Therefore behold, the days are coming,” declares Adonai, “when they will no longer say, ‘As Adonai lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of Egypt,’ but, ‘As Adonai lives, who brought up and led back the descendants of the household of Israel from the north land and from all the countries where I had driven them.’ Then they will live on their own soil.” (Jer 23:5–8)

Here, once again, the people who are dwell securely in the Land under the rule of the Messiah, the righteous Branch, are the very people who were driven from their Land by God Himself, and who are likewise gathered from the nations to which they have been dispersed and brought back to the Land by the very hand of God. Thus, the return of Israel to God in faith, and their living securely in the Land which God swore by oath to their forefathers, is one of the greatest displays of God’s faithfulness and truthfulness.

Then they will know that I am Adonai their God because I made them go into exile among the nations, and then gathered them again to their own land; and I will leave none of them there any longer. (Ezek 39:28)

In fact, the fulfillment of the New Covenant promised through the prophecy of Jeremiah, relates directly to the nation of Israel, the very people God delivered from the slavery of Egypt:

Behold, days are coming,” declares Adonai, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares Adonai. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares Adonai, “I will put My Torah within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know Adonai,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares Adonai, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jer 31:31–34)

Here we see that the fulfillment of the New Covenant involves the very nation which at one point in history was enslaved in Egypt, that is, the nation of Israel, the descendants of Jacob. Moreover, in the establishment of the New Covenant, this very people are given a new heart upon which the Torah is written, and in contrast to their former ways, they will live in faithfulness to God. Further, it is clear that when this takes place, the people of Israel will have acknowledged and accepted Yeshua as their true Messiah, for Jeremiah says that God will no longer remember their iniquity and sins. This means that they have experienced true forgiveness from God, which is only possible
if they have believed in Yeshua. For it is only in Yeshua that sins are forgiven (cf. Acts 4:12).

Therefore, to teach that God has abandoned unfaithful Israel, and has forever set them aside because of their sin, replacing them with the “Church” who now constitutes the “New Israel,” is to call God a liar and to deny His infinite truthfulness and faithfulness.

But God is not left to the errant teaching of men. He will, in accordance with His infinite truthfulness, demonstrate His faithfulness to Israel by sovereignly accomplishing what He has promised, and thus “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:25–26), just as the prophets and Apostles have taught.

Once again, if we consider the attribute of God’s truthfulness and faithfulness, we can see how it is one of the communicable attributes in which we participate. For as we seek true knowledge from God Himself, we are actually thinking His thoughts after Him, allowing Scripture to guide us in the very way in which we understand and interpret all aspects of knowledge, in every field. Since all truth must be God’s truth (for He is infinite in His truthfulness, which means that all truth originates with Him), we can trace all that is true back to Him as the source. This means that all learning, if it is done with a mind or heart to know the truth, has a sacred dimension. Paul writes to the Colossians:

Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him. (Col 3:10)

In discovering more of the truth that God already knows, and thus thinking His thoughts after Him, our experience is one with the Psalmist who exclaims:

How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! (Ps 139:17)

But we commune together with God in the attribute of His truthfulness and faithfulness not only in the enterprise of learning and knowing the truth, but also in being true and faithful ourselves. In a world where conversation has increased dramatically, particularly through a growing media of social networking, we more easily fall prey to saying things without due consideration as to whether what we say is true. Indeed, our society is becoming very careless with truthfulness in communication. We should remember the wisdom of the Solomon when he writes in the Proverbs:

When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But he who restrains his lips is wise. (Prov 10:19)

Likewise, we must give due diligence to being faithful to the promises we have made. Once again, our society is stooping to an all-time low in this regard. As those who have confessed Yeshua to be our Savior and Master, we must strive to make our “Yes, yes,” and our “No, no,” just as Yeshua instructed us (Matt 5:37). As we are His witnesses, we must be known as those whose word can be trusted, and who not only speak the truth, but also love the truth and hate falsehood (cf. Ps 15:2; Prov 13:5; Eph 4:25).
Chapter 5 – The Communicable Attributes of God

Omnipotence – Infinite in Power

The word “omnipotence” is formed from two Latin words: “omni” meaning “all,” and “potens,” meaning “powerful.” Thus, “omnipotent” means “all-powerful.” This word is commonly used to describe God as infinite in power, by which is meant that He is able to do whatever He decides to do. Or, to put it another way, God is always able to do all of His will.

This is different than saying that “God can do anything,” because there are things that God cannot do because He will not do them. That is, since God is infinite in His unity, and infinite in His self-determination, He cannot act contrary to His own character. For example, God cannot lie (Num 23:19; Tit 1:2; Heb 6:18). Likewise, James states: “God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13). Thus, God cannot do anything or act in any way that is inconsistent with any of His attributes. This is why we define God’s omnipotence as His ability to do “all of His holy will.”

This all-powerful characteristic of God is found repeatedly in the Scriptures:

- Who is the King of glory? Adonai strong and mighty, Adonai mighty in battle. (Ps 24:8)
- Is anything too difficult for Adonai? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” (Gen 18:14)
- Ah Lord GOD! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and by Your outstretched arm! Nothing is too difficult for You, (Jer 32:17)
- Behold, I am Adonai, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?” (Jer 32:27)
- Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, (Eph 3:20)
- For nothing will be impossible with God. (Luke 1:37)
- And looking at them Yeshua said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” (Matt 19:26)

Closely related to God’s omnipotence is His sovereignty, meaning that He exercises His supreme power by ruling as king over His creation. Because He is able to do all that He wills to do, and because He wills to be the only ultimate sovereign or king over the universe, this is a reality. Having repented of his rebellion against God, Nebuchadnezer rightly confessed:

I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’ (Dan 4:34–35)
This means that God is the ultimate or greatest of Kings, for He rules all and in His sovereign power, controls, sustains, and ordains all. Even though mankind as a whole does not recognize His omnipotence and supreme sovereignty, there is coming a day when all will confess this truth:

And Adonai will be king over all the earth; in that day Adonai will be the only one, and His name the only one. (Zech 14:9)

This prophecy of Zechariah means that in the final day, the day when God restores Israel to the Land, subdues their enemies, and reinstates worship at the Temple, then all will recognize that He is king over all the earth, that He is the only true God, and that there is none other like Him, i.e., His “name” (personhood) is entirely unique, for no being exists that shares the infinite measure of His being.

We may also consider the attribute of Freedom within the context of His omnipotence and sovereignty. For when we say that God is able to do all that He wills, we must also correlate the fact that His will is entirely free from restraints or forces outside of Himself. Or to put it another way: God does whatever He pleases. As the Psalmist writes:

Not to us, Adonai, not to us, but to Your name give glory because of Your lovingkindness, because of Your truth. Why should the nations say, “Where, now, is their God?” But our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases. (Ps 115:1–3)

No one can dictate to God what He must do nor is there any authority outside of or above God to whom or to which He must submit. Thus, for instance, God is not constrained by the laws of physics extant within the created universe, nor is He subject to any other powers, whether mortal or supernatural, that exist in the universe.

Because God is eternally and infinitely free, we should be content to realize that the ultimate answer to the question of why God does this or does that is simply that He has willed to do so. Indeed, the whole “problem of evil” (which has been the focus of theological and philosophical debates from earliest times) is really asking the question why God would created a physical universe, including mankind, in the first place? Surely He had no need for such a creation since He is infinite in all of His being. In the end, the best answer that we can give is that He created the universe because in His totally free will, He decided to do so. Thus, His purposes ultimately return to Himself, which is why all things will, in the final analysis, accrue to His glory:

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:36)

Holy – Infinite in Holiness

It is easy to understand that omnipotence, if existing apart from the attribute of holiness, might not demand one’s praise. For if infinite power were not in every way in concert with infinite holiness, that power could be a used for evil. Thus, “infinite holiness, even more than infinite knowledge or infinite power, is the object of reverence.”

1 Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 1.413.
When we speak of God as infinite in holiness, we are talking about His moral excellence. For instance, in 1Sam 2:2 were read:

There is no one holy like Adonai, indeed, there is no one besides You, Nor is there any rock like our God.

In this we affirm that God alone is infinite in holiness and therefore the only One who is “absolutely pure and free from all limitation in His moral perfection.” That this is one of God’s attributes is clear from the fact that holiness is part of His Name, for He reveals Himself in the Scriptures as “the Holy One of Israel” (אלוהי יששכר, q’dosh Yisra’el).

The Hebrew noun קדוש, q’dosh, is most often used in connection with the Tabernacle or Temple and the sacred services performed there. Thus, the verb (which is denominative, i.e., derived from the noun) “connotes the state of that which belongs to the sphere of the sacred.” Yet its primary emphasis is that what is q’dosh is free from any admixture with that which is “common” (נן, chol). Thus,

Holiness, on the one hand, implies entire freedom from moral evil; and, upon the other, absolute moral perfection. Freedom from impurity is the primary idea of the word. To sanctify is to cleanse; to be holy, is to be clean.

This is the primary lesson learned from the purity laws of the Torah, for since the Tabernacle/Temple was a place in which the glory of God resided (the Shekinah), the “place” must be without mixture of the “unholy.” To teach this aspect of holiness, i.e., that it means “freedom from impurity,” no one was allowed into the Tabernacle or Temple who was ritually unclean. Metaphorically, if impurity were to envelope the Tabernacle or Temple, this would threaten the infinite purity of God Himself, and thus He would be required to extinguish that which was unclean. Thus, the boundaries of the Tabernacle and Temples were for the safeguarding of those who were ritually unclean. It is in this sense that God in His infinite holiness is considered a consuming fire, for fire purifies even substances that are solid, such a metals.

And to the eyes of the sons of Israel the appearance of the glory of Adonai was like a consuming fire on the mountain top. (Ex 24:17)

For Adonai your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God. (Deut 4:24)

Sinners in Zion are terrified; Trembling has seized the godless. “Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?” (Is 33:14)

Since God is infinitely holy, the place of His dwelling must also be holy:

Who may ascend into the hill of Adonai? And who may stand in His

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1 Ibid.
3 T. McComiskey, “קדוש” in TWOT, 2.786.
4 Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, 1.413.
The Communicable Attributes of God – Chapter 5

Since God is holy, and since His people are to be like Him, His holiness provides a pattern to be imitated. Throughout the book of Leviticus we read “You shall be holy; for I, Adonai your God am holy” (Lev 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8). Israel is to be a “holy nation” to God (Ex 19:4–6). Thus, to be holy as God is holy means to live a life separated from evil and sin and devoted to God by serving Him and obeying His Torah.

Moreover, it is when God reveals His holiness to mankind, that we are able to see ourselves as we truly are. An example of this is Isaiah’s vision of God’s holiness recorded in chapter six of his prophecy. Here we find the word qadash, “Holy,” repeated three times in a row, a literary phenomenon only found two other times in the Tanach.¹ Having viewed the holiness of God in His dwelling place, Isaiah cries out:

Then I said, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, Adonai of hosts.” (Is 6:5)

Thus, it is in the light of God’s holiness that we are able to make a proper assessment of our own sinfulness. Here, again, God Himself is seen to be the standard of holiness.

Righteousness and Justice.

Under the heading of “Holiness,” we may also consider God’s attributes of righteousness and justice. While in English we may make a distinction between righteousness and justice, in the Bible (both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures), a single word-group encompasses both terms. In the Hebrew, this word-group is that based upon the verb צָדַק (tzadaq) and the cognate nouns צְדָקָה and צֶדֶק (tzedeq and tedaqah). In the Greek, is it the δικαιος (dikaios) word-group that services both the sense of English “righteousness” and “justice.”

In regarding “righteousness” as a subset of God’s holiness, we mean that God always acts in accordance with what is right. That is to say, being infinite in holiness, all of His actions are in concert with that infinite holiness. When we speak of God’s justice, we mean that since He is infinite in holiness, He is Himself the universal and final standard for what is right, and that therefore His assessment and verdict regarding the actions of all other beings is always right and good.

The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He. (Deut 32:4)

The fear of Adonai is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of Adonai are true; they are righteous altogether. (Ps 19:9)

And I heard the altar saying, “Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, true and righteous are Your judgments.” (Rev 16:7)

¹ I.e., where the exact same word and form is found three times in a row. Jer 22:29 (אֶרֶץ אֶרֶץ אֶרֶץ; Ezek 21:27 (הַעֲצָה הָעִצָּה הָעֲצָה).
If we ask ourselves what is right or what ought to be, the answer is that whatever conforms to God’s moral character is right. In short, since He, and He alone, is infinite in holiness, then He is the unchanging, eternal standard for what is holy, right, and good. Moreover, given this reality, we see how foolish or illogical it is to suggest that God, in any of His actions, could be deemed “unfair” or “unrighteous.” For if He is the eternal and infinite standard of what is holy, righteous, and just, then all of His actions, His thoughts, and intentions are likewise holy, righteous, and just. If we, as mortal and finite beings, come to the end of ourselves in seeking a satisfying explanation for God’s actions, one that “fits” our concept of what is right, then we are best served by remembering that “He is in heaven, and we are on the earth,” and that His ways and thoughts are far above us.

We learn this from the story of Job. When Job questions whether God has been righteous in His dealings with him, God answers this way:

Then Adonai said to Job, “Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? ... Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified? (Job 40:2, 8)

When Job thinks to question whether God has acted in righteousness, God does not answer by giving him an explanation so that Job could understand His actions, but rather with a statement of His grandeur and power. Once Job has seen that God’s actions are right because He is God, not because He is subject to some standard outside of Himself to which He must conform, Job exclaims:

Behold, I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. (Job 40:4)

Simply put, God does not need to explain His actions to Job because He is the Creator and Job is the creature. Once Job is well reminded of that, he accepts as a starting point that God is righteous and just in all of His actions.

It is the attribute of infinite justice within the being of God that stands as the foundation for His requiring propitiation in order to pardon the guilty. In this regard (as with all of His attributes), one cannot put at odds God’s goodness and His justice nor can one fail to distinguish between God’s benevolence and His attribute of justice. Thus, the Bible clearly teaches the necessity of God’s justice being satisfied in order for Him to forgive sin.

This is seen first in the whole matter of sacrifices being offered. If God were able, acting consistently within the realm of His unified attributes, to simply pardon the sinner as an act of His infinite goodness or benevolence, one would have to conclude that the was no attribute of justice within His being. But since (as we have seen) the Scriptures are replete with the teaching that God is just and infinitely just, we must reckon with the fact that in order for God to act in accordance with His justice and yet, on the other hand, pardon the sinner, His justice must first be satisfied. The very fact that the Messiah is set forth in the Scriptures as a propitiation for sin verifies the fact. For in His death being viewed as a propitiation for sin, this presumes that it would be unjust, that is, contrary to moral rectitude, to pardon the guilty without such a propitiation. Consider the following texts:
... being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Messiah Yeshua; 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; (Rom 3:24–25)

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)

and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. (1John 2:2)

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. (1John 4:10)

Regarding the word “propitiation,” one should be aware of the fact that the Greek term used by Paul and John, as well as the author of Hebrews, is ἡιλαστήριον (hilastarion) and its cognates (ἡλαστικός, hilaskomai; ἡλάσμος, hilosmos), the very same word group used in the Lxx of the Torah for the top of the ark, i.e., the “mercy seat,” very place where the blood was sprinkled by the high priest on Yom Kippur.¹ That the Apostles would refer to Yeshua by precisely the same term used by the Lxx to translate כַפֹּרֶת (kaporet, “mercy seat; place of atonement”) is very significant, for in tying the two together, they are teaching us that Yeshua, like the mercy seat, is the very “place” where God’s justice is satisfied, where propitiation is accomplished. This further illustrates that the ultimate revelation given through the sacrificial system was to emphasize this reality, namely, that for God to pardon sinners, His justice must be satisfied. As Paul argues, if pardon for sin could have come about by any other means than through the death of Messiah, then Yeshua died in vain:

I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Torah, then Messiah died needlessly. (Gal 2:21)

This is likewise Paul’s argument in Romans, namely, that for God to justify sinners, that is, to declare sinners “not guilty,” His own justice must first be satisfied:

... [Yeshua] 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 righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Yeshua. (Rom 3:25–26)

Note carefully what Paul says: it was necessary for Yeshua to be clearly set forth as the propitiation for sin so that all would recognize God to be righteous. Why? Because it appeared that God has “passed over the sins” of previous generations. If, in fact He had, this would render Him less than righteous, because it would mean that He lacked the attribute of justice. But, being infinitely just, God’s own justice required that payment for sin must be made

¹ Ex 25:17–22; 31:7; 35:12; 37:6, 8–9; Lev 16:2, 13–15; Num 7:89.
before sin could be forgiven. Thus, through the death of His Son, Yeshua, God remains “just” while at the same time the “Justifier” of those who, by faith, lay hold of the propitiation made in Yeshua’s blood.

This concept of God’s justice being satisfied as the essential component of His forgiving sinners is also found in the wording of Isaiah 53. For after describing the death of the Messiah, v. 11 speaks of His resurrection (in the metaphor of “seeing light”) and thus of His being satisfied:

As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see light\(^1\) and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. (Is 53:11)

Note carefully that His “right” to justify the many is because He has borne their iniquities, that is, He has paid the price for their sins (the price being death) so that His justice is satisfied and thus, in full consistency with His infinitely holy being, He may declare “the many” to be “not guilty.”

**Goodness**

We may also subsume the attribute of goodness under the general heading of God’s holiness. At first it may seem difficult to show any real or significant difference between God’s holiness or His righteousness and His goodness. What goodness adds to holiness, righteousness and justice is the idea of beauty or that which is deemed worthy of approval. When we affirm that God is good we mean that all that God is and does is worthy of our approval. It is on this basis that God admonishes us to give thanks in all things, for since He is sovereign and all powerful, we may rest assured that all which comes into our life is good, that is, for God’s glory and our good:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom 8:28)

The Psalmist recognizes that “goodness” is one of God’s attributes by describing His Name as “good.”

I will give You thanks forever, because You have done it, and I will wait on Your name, for it is good, in the presence of Your godly ones. (Ps 52:9)

Willingly I will sacrifice to You; I will give thanks to Your name, Adonai, for it is good. (Ps 54:6)

This concept, that God’s Name is good, and thus goodness is an essential attribute of His being, is incorporated into the 18th Benediction of the Shemonei Esrei.

We are thankful to You that You are Adonai our God, and the God of our fathers for all eternity. Rock of our lives, Shield of our salvation are You from generation to generation. We give thanks to You and

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\(^1\) “see light” – this is the reading of both 1QIs\(^\text{a}\) and the Lxx. Though missing in the MT, it seems warranted on the basis of the corroborative witness of Qumran and the Lxx to restore the word “light” in this verse.
recount Your praise for our lives which are committed into Your hand, and for our souls which are entrusted to You, and for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and Your goodness at all times—evening, morning, and afternoon. You are good for Your compassion is never exhausted, and You are compassionate, for Your lovingkindness never ceases. Forever we have hoped in You! And for all the foregoing, blessed and exalted be Your Name, our King, constantly, for all eternity. And all the living shall thank You and praise Your Name in truth. The Almighty, our salvation and our help. Blessed are You, Adonai, “The Beneficent” is Your Name and to You it is fitting to give praise.

It is, therefore, a most important aspect of our faith and trust in God, that we affirm His absolute goodness, for it is when we do so that we are able to receive from His hand whatever comes into our lives, and to do so with the strength that comes from knowing that all which He does is good.

Love, Grace, and Mercy – Infinite in Love

When we consider the attribute of love as expressed in God’s self-revelation, we mean that He eternally gives Himself to others, that is, He acts for the goodness of others, meaning that it is within His very nature to bring about blessing or good for others.

Some have argued that love could not be an attribute of God since it requires “others” to exist, for love by its very definition is that which one does for someone other than themselves. It is further argued that until God created the physical universe, there were no objects which could receive His love, and therefore He could not be said “to love” in eternity past. Yet this line of argumentation is directly overturned by the very words of Yeshua Himself.

Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world. (John 17:24)

Here, Yeshua states that “before the foundation of the world” the Father loved Him. Here, therefore, we see that in the mystery of the Godhead, there existed a relationship of love before the universe was created.

God’s love is not determined nor attracted by any thing nor by any one outside of Himself. This means that God’s love is sovereign—He loves as a matter of His own sovereign will.

And He said, “I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of Adonai before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.” (Ex 33:19, cp. Rom 9:15)

In the inexplicable nature of God’s love, He has demonstrated His sovereign love through His relationship with mankind, and particularly with mankind as fallen sinners. For as in all cases, but especially in loving sinners, it is clear

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that God gives of Himself without receiving anything in return. Thus, in a general sense, the love of God is demonstrated by the fact that He sustains the lives of all living creatures, sending the rain upon the righteous and the unrighteous (Matt 5:45). But the full revelation of God’s love is seen in His purposes to bring sinners into relationship with Himself in an eternal way, that is, in a relationship that will never end and will become one of pure joy and happiness. Thus John writes:

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. (1Jn 4:10)

Paul speaks in the same terms, even emphasizing that God loves each individual whom He saves, and that the work of the Messiah, the ultimate expression of God’s love, is applied to each redeemed person individually:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Messiah died for us. (Rom 5:8)

I have been crucified with Messiah; and it is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me. (Gal 2:20)

Thus, it is the purpose of God, in loving those He would save for Himself, to bring them true joy and happiness. And since God is infinite in His love, and omnipotent in His power, His love always gains its purpose. It is with this in mind that John makes the bold statement, “God is love” (1Jn 4:8, 16). For in accomplishing the purpose of His love, i.e., saving sinners, the greatness of God is fully demonstrated.

How then is the love of God a communicable attribute? In the same way that God’s holiness is the standard by which we must define what is holy and what is not, so God’s love is to be emulated by His children. As we understand that God’s love is the demonstration of His goodness to others, so we must realize that in imitating God’s love in our own relationship with Him and with others, such love is not simply inner feelings or emotions. If we love as God loves, then this means that our love is demonstrated by our actions towards others, seeking to bring them joy and happiness. Thus, our love must be infused with wisdom, even as God’s love is always in accordance with His truthfulness and faithfulness.

In this way, our relationship with God is one of covenant, and therefore lived out in the context of loyalty to Him and to the covenant He has made with us. The Shema characterizes this with the word “love” – “You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:5). Likewise, in imitating God’s love, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves (Lev 19:18, cf. Matt 22:37–38). Further, we are not to love that which is contrary to God, such as the “world” which is marked by idolatry (1Jn 2:15). In all of this, we are constantly to be reminded that we demonstrate our love to God by keeping His commandments (1Jn 5:3), remembering that even our desire to love God is because He first loved us (1Jn 4:19).

**Mercy and Grace**

The attributes of God’s mercy and grace are often viewed as subsets of His attribute of goodness. I have linked them to His attribute of love simply
cause in my mind, grace and mercy are the demonstrable extensions of God’s love. Even as God’s love may be viewed as a duality, i.e., His general love for all mankind, and His special love for those with whom He enters into an eternal, covenant relationship, so God’s grace and mercy may be viewed as both general and special. His grace is demonstrated in a broad or general way in that He does not destroy sinners immediately when they sin. And His general mercy is seen in that He sustains the lives of all who are living, for it is in Him that we live and move and have our existence (Acts 17:28).

In addition to His general grace and mercy, God acts in specific and greater ways of grace and mercy toward those whom He saves eternally. For if we were to define God’s grace as His acts of goodness toward those who deserve only punishment, and His mercy as His acts of goodness toward those in misery and distress, then we can see that He has determined to act in these ways toward His chosen ones forever, without end, and thus His eternal mercy and grace toward those who are being saved is the highest expression of these attributes.

Since God is self-determined and infinite in all of His being, His mercy and grace cannot be coerced but are expressed in accordance with His own sovereign will. No one can secure or demand God’s mercy or grace. This is Paul’s point when he teaches that salvation by grace is the opposite of salvation as a reward for human effort or enterprise. Thus, Paul speaks of justification by God’s grace as a gift –

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; (Eph 2:8)

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Messiah’s gift. (Eph 4:7)

Moreover, Paul makes it clear that whatever is earned or gain as a reward is not that which is the result of grace. In this he affirms that biblical fact that God is sovereign in His grace, that is, He gives His grace to those He chooses:

In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. (Rom 11:5–6)

Indeed, God’s choice of Abraham as His covenant partner, and the seed of Jacob, the nation of Israel, to be His covenant people, was also a matter of His sovereign grace and not something based upon the goodness of the Fathers or of Israel itself. Note what Moses writes:

1 So defined by Grudem, Making Sense of Who is God, p. 90.
2 In this verse, a question arises as to the referent of the demonstrative “that” in the clause “... and that not of yourselves.” Since “grace” (χάρις) and “faith” (πίστις) are both feminine nouns, if either of them were the referent for the demonstrative “that,” it would also be in the feminine gender; but it is not—it is neuter (τοῦτο). Thus, being neuter it must be looking at the opening clause as a collective and referring to it in its entirety: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and all of this—the whole of your salvation, is not of your own doing, but rather is the gift of God.”
Adonai did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because Adonai loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, Adonai brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut 7:7–8)

This reminds one of Paul’s words in 1Cor 1:26–29.

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 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. (1Cor 1:26–29)

We see, then, that God’s choice to be gracious and merciful toward those He will save eternally is not based upon anything in those who receive His grace. Rather, His granting grace and mercy to those who are saved extols His own unencumbered love which by His sovereign grace He extends to those He has chosen to eternal salvation.

Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry.
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.

The Love of God, how rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall for evermore endure
The saints’ and angels’ song.

The exact history of this poem is not certain. Some say it was written by Rabbi Mayar in 1096 CE, while others trace it to Meir ben Isaac Nehorai (1050 CE), a Cantor in Worms, Germany. It is still found in synagogue liturgies today, though its edited and amended version by F. M. Lehman has made it far more popular as a Christian hymn. The stanza above, as well as the refrain, are from Lehman’s version.
Questions for Discussion

1. Having considered the fact that God is infinite in His knowledge and wisdom, how does this affect our understanding of prayer? If God knows all things infinitely, what is the purpose of prayer?

2. How does the attribute of God’s omniscience bring comfort in our life of faith?

3. Discuss the interplay of God’s omniscience and our responsibility to make righteous choices.

4. Recognizing that God is infinite in His wisdom, consider the fuller import of a verse like James 1:5.

5. God’s infinite faithfulness and truthfulness is the foundation of His promises. Which of God’s promises are most particularly significant to you now, in your current circumstances?

6. How is God’s sovereignty a source of comfort for those who are in the Messiah Yeshua?

7. Why is God’s infinite holiness a necessary and wonderful component of His omnipotence? What would be the situation if an all-powerful God was not at the same time infinitely holy?

8. Discuss the aspect of God’s infinite justice in light of His ability to forgive sinners of their transgressions. Why does the very nature of God disprove those who teach that He can forgive sin simply as a matter of His goodness?

9. If we believe that God is infinitely righteous, then how are we to explain the fact that at times the Bible seems to portray His actions as less than fair?

10. When someone suggests that God is not always good, what is the standard being used to decide whether He is good or not? Why is using such a standard illogical?

11. If we understand God’s grace to be His goodness expressed to those who deserve His punishment, how does this definition undergird the teaching that God’s grace cannot be earned?

12. Since God is infinite in His love, discuss what would be His motive for loving sinners? Or to put it another way, why would God have decided to express His love to sinners?
chapter six
Plurality & One God
The Mystery of God’s Being

In this chapter, we will be looking at the issue of plurality within the Godhead. When I use the word “Godhead,” I’m referring to the term used twice in the Apostolic Scriptures (Rom 1:20; Col 2:9), the Greek word θεότης (theotēs), meaning “deity” or “divine character/nature.”¹ That is, from the very beginning of the Bible, we are confronted with what appears to be a stark contradiction. The God Who is the Creator, the One and only God Who existed before all else, speaks of Himself and is portrayed by the authors of Scripture in both singular and plural terms. That is, the words of Scripture affirm both singularity as well as plurality within the Godhead.

Of course, from the perspective of human reasoning and logic, this is an impossibility: nothing can, at the same time, be singular yet plural. And it is this impossibility that has given rise to all manner of explanations, interpretations, and doctrines, as well as fodder for those who simply consider the Bible to be nothing more than the mythological meanderings of irrational minds.

At the same time, the inexplicable tension between singularity and plurality in the self-revelation of God became one of the doctrinal issues confronting the emerging Christian Church and ultimately formed one of the primary doctrinal schisms separating the Synagogue and Christian Church.

Yet questions of how to understand and define the Scriptural references to divine plurality became a major point of debate in the early centuries of the emerging Christian Church. As one might expect, these debates resulted in various fractures within early Christianity. Yet the conclusion of this struggle saw the formulation of various Creeds around which the majority of Christendom united, Creeds which defined what came to be known as the doctrine of the Trinity.

Of course, bound together within the struggle surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity were cardinal issues such as the deity of Yeshua, the humanity of Yeshua, the deity of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit), and the question of whether the Messiah and the Spirit exist as distinct “persons” within the Godhead or if these are simply various modes or modalities in which God reveals Himself through time. For those who held that the Father, the Messiah, and the Spirit each have a distinct personage, other issues arose, such as the questions of equality between the Father, Messiah, and Ruach, and how such equality could be understood in light of biblical passages which seem to suggest some subordination within the Godhead.

The history of the Christian Church chronicles how these issues and the various answers given in response to these issues have resulted in what some might consider “Christianities” rather than a monolithic “Christianity.” In short, for many of us, one’s acceptance or denial of plurality within the Godhead, as well as one’s further definition of what such a plurality entails, will in many ways affect all other aspects of one’s theology, because this issue is at the heart of God’s self-revelation. And why is this so? Because we believe Yeshua the Messiah is the most complete and full revelation of God to mankind (Heb 1:3), and thus the question of Yeshua’s relationship to the Father is

¹ BDAG, “θεότης.” Note also θεός in Acts 17:29.
obviously at the forefront of our faith. Further, affirming the deity of Yeshua is an essential element of our faith in Him as the Savior of sinners, for only an infinite being could effect an infinite atonement necessary to pay the debt of sin against an infinitely holy God. But when we affirm the deity of Yeshua, it is obvious that we likewise affirm plurality within the Godhead. This leaves us with the question of how to affirm plurality within the Godhead on the one hand, while holding tenaciously to our belief that there is one and only one God. In short, the question that confronts us is this: can we confess a plurality in the Godhead while at the same time insisting that there is one and only one true God?

Some, feeling that it is impossible to affirm a plurality within the Godhead and still be monotheistic, have abandoned belief in the deity of Yeshua, claiming that He is not eternal but that He is the first of God’s creation. While they may view Yeshua as unique in some ways, they deny that He is divine and thus avoid the question of plurality within the Godhead. They likewise interpret the references to the Spirit (Ruach) or to the Spirit of God (Ruach Ha-Kodesh) as simply another way of referring to God but not to a separate personage within the Godhead. In this way, they believe that they have retained a genuine monotheism and avoided the charge of polytheism.

It is understandable why the question of plurality in the Godhead, and more specifically, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, is a major issue among Messianics. For Messianic Judaism stands between rabbinic Judaism on the one side, and Christianity on the other. With rabbinic Judaism, we appreciate the high value put upon the Torah and many traditions that enhance Torah obedience. Moreover, maintaining a connection to the Jewish people is not only important for those within Messianic Judaism who are ethnically Jewish, but for non-Jews as well, for all have been grafted into the covenant people by faith. On the other hand, with the Christian Church we share our most central belief, namely, that Yeshua is the true Messiah and that He is the only way of salvation for sinners. Further, together with the Christian Church, we receive the Tanach and the Apostolic Scriptures as comprising the authoritative canon of Scripture.

For Jewish people who are raised in a religious context, accepting the deity of Yeshua is one of the greatest hurdles to overcome in accepting Him as the true Messiah and as the Savior of sinners. What is more, since religious Jews are often taught from their earliest years that Christians believe in three Gods, the Trinity doctrine looms large in their minds as that which smacks of paganism—as teaching polytheism and not monotheism.

While it is very important that we maintain the clear distinctions between a genuine faith in Yeshua as the Messiah and the anti-Yeshua posture of rabbinic Judaism, we should also recognize that the gulf between the two was broadened in the early decades as the emerging Christian Church and the Synagogue divided from each other, each posturing their self-definition in terms of the “other,” i.e., how their core beliefs were different than and even opposite of the other.

As such, by the third and fourth centuries, the Christian Church displayed the Trinity doctrine as perhaps the primary teaching that marked Christianity as unique from all other religions, and perhaps from rabbinic Judaism specifically. As the doctrine of the Trinity became fixed in the Christian Creeds, the Synagogue just as firmly affirmed its utter rejection of any plurality within the Godhead. In fact, it seems quite clear that in some respects, the separation of the Synagogue and emerging Christian Church became the fulcrum for a
strengthened doctrinal dogmatism on both sides, each seeking every possible way to make their respective positions impenetrable by the arguments of the other. As such, while each side may have begun with a more moderate position, their antagonism vis-a-vis each other forced them to galvanize their positions to win the debate, whether the debate was intramural or with outside opponents. Thus, as we take the opportunity to survey the history of the Trinity doctrine, we will see how certain aspects of the developed doctrine were considered necessary in order to fend off the arguments of opponents. In this regard, the final wording of the Trinity doctrine in the established Creeds of the Christian Church were, to some extent, formulated out of polemical necessity rather than simply as a positive statement of belief.

Scriptural Evidence: There is Only One God

All who claim to believe in the God of Israel as the Bible presents Him also affirm that He is the only God—all others who may claim to be God, or to whom the status of “God” is ascribed, are false and are not God at all.

That monotheism holds a central place within historic Judaism can be seen by the fact that the Shema (cf. Deut 6:4–9; 11:13–21) became a central feature of the Synagogue liturgy, forming a creedal statement of faith.

Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is one! You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (Deut 6:4–5)

While the Hebrew word יְהֹוָה (‘echad, “one”) can be used to designate a single entity made up of various parts,¹ more often than not, the word ‘echad designates something that is numerically one, and it seems quite clear from the context that this is the meaning here as well. For because there is only one Adonai (יהוה), one must love Him with undivided love of heart, soul, and might. If there were others who could legitimately lay claim to the Name יהוה (YHVH), then one would need to divide one’s love apportionately. But such is not the case—Adonai is the only God and thus requires all of one’s love (=covenant faithfulness).

Throughout Deuteronomy this point is made repeatedly:

To you it was shown that you might know that Adonai, He is God; there is no other besides Him. (Deut 4:35)

Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that Adonai, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other. (Deut.4:39)

See now that I, I am He, And there is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded and it is I who heal, And there is no one who can deliver from My hand. (Deut 32:39)

¹ Some seek to argue the plurality of the Godhead from the word יְחֹד (‘echad) in the Shema. While it is true that יְחֹד can refer to a single entity consisting of various parts, seeking to apply this meaning to יְחֹד in Deut 6:4 violates the context, it seems to me. Cf. the thoughts of Louis Goldberg, God, Torah, Messiah: The Messianic Jewish Theology of Louis Goldberg, Richard Robinson, ed. (Purple Pomegranate, 2009), pp. 130–31.
And Isaiah emphasizes this same truth time and again:

You are My witnesses,” declares Adonai, “And My servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me. (Is 43:10)

Thus says Adonai, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, Adonai of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me. (Is 44:6)

I am Adonai, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God. I will gird you, though you have not known Me; (Is 45:5)

That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am Adonai, and there is no other, (Is 45:6)

Thus says Adonai, “The products of Egypt and the merchandise of Cush and the Sabeans, men of stature, will come over to you and will be yours; they will walk behind you, they will come over in chains and will bow down to you; they will make supplication to you: ‘Surely, God is with you, and there is none else, no other God.’” (Is 45:14)

For thus says Adonai, 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 Adonai, and there is none else. (Is 45:18)

Declare and set forth your case; indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, Adonai? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. (Is 45:21)

Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. (Is 45:22)

Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, (Is 46:9)

Yeshua affirms this truth in His garden prayer:

Yeshua spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Yeshua Messiah whom You have sent. (John 17:1–3)

Paul likewise affirms this cardinal teaching of the Scriptures as he understands the word אֶחָד (’echad, “one”) of the Shema to mean “the only one.”

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. (Rom 3:29–30)
Paul’s argument is quite straightforward: since there is only one God, His definition of “righteousness” applies to all people, Jew and non-Jew alike. Paul teaches that there is only one God in his first epistle to Timothy:

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1Tim 1:17)

For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Messiah Yeshua, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. (1Tim 2:5–6)

Thus, both the Tanach and the Apostolic Scriptures emphatically teach the truth that there is one and only one true God in all of the universe, and that this God is the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It is within the context of this overwhelming affirmation that only one God exists in the universe, and because of this affirmation, that statements introducing plurality in relationship to this one God stand out in bold relief. Moreover, such seemingly contradictory statements require some explanation if the Scriptures are to be affirmed as being free from internal conflict and as presenting a unified message inspired by God Himself.

**Scriptural Evidence: Plurality within the Godhead**

**Genesis 1:26–27**

It is not uncommon that when people seek to substantiate from the Tanach a plurality in the Godhead, they bring up the fact that the Hebrew word most often translated as “God” is generally found in the plural, i.e., אֱלֹהִים, 'elohim. The singular form, אֱלוֹהַ, elôha, is also used, so the question as to why the plural would be used seems obvious. The answer, however, is not that the authors of the Tanach were led by the Ruach to use the plural in order to teach a plurality in the Godhead. Rather, in the Semitic languages, the plural of a noun can be used to indicate the greatest or highest order of the classification represented by the noun. This so-called “plural of majesty” is most likely why 'elohim is so often found in the plural when referring to the God of Israel, for He is the true God, and all those which the nations proclaim are no gods at all, but are rather demons or merely the figment of fallen man’s imagination. But of course, 'elohim (the plural form) is also is used to designate the false gods (plural) of the idolators (e.g., Ex 18:11; 32:1, 23; Ps 86:8, etc.).

Yet it should be pointed out that most often, when 'elohim is referring to the God of Israel, the accompanying verbs are in the singular. Since in Hebrew (as in many languages) the number of both subject and verb must agree, when 'elohim (plural) is accompanied by a singular verb, the singularity or oneness of God is clearly being demonstrated.

However, what are we to think when the context clearly is speaking of the true God, the God Who is the Creator, and then the verbs (as well as accompanying pronouns) are plural? This would be a much better indicator of plurality within the Godhead. And this linguistic phenomenon is exactly what we find in the opening chapter of Genesis:

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1 What follows are just a few examples from the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures. There are many more that could be examined if time and space allowed.
Then God (אֱלֹהִים) said, “Let Us make (נַעֲשֶה) man in Our image (בְצַלְמֵנו), according to Our likeness (וּכִדְמוּתֵנ) and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Gen 1:26)

Here, the verb “Let us make” is in the plural, and the following nouns have plural possessive suffixes: “in our image” and “according to our likeness.” This, of course, was not missed by the rabbis, and we know that in the post-destruction era, this text was used by Christians as a polemic to prove plurality within the Godhead. Note Mid. Rab. Genesis 8.9 –

The minim (heretics) asked R. Simlai (220-250 CE) again: ‘What is meant by, AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN? Read what follows,’ replied he: ‘not, “And gods created (va-yivre’u) man” is written here, but “And God created” (va-yivra)” (Gen 1:27). When they went out his disciples said to him: “Them [the minim] you have dismissed with a mere makeshift, but how will you answer us?” Said he to them: In the past Adam was created from dust and Eve was created from Adam; but henceforth it shall be “In our image, after our likeness” (v. 26); neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Divine Spirit.’ (Mid. Rab. Genesis 8.9)

While we cannot be certain that the term minim refers to Christians, it does seem most likely in the context, for in the 3rd Century (when R. Simlai was active), the Christians would have been the ones who were seeking to prove, from the Torah itself, that there exists a plurality in the Godhead.

Note that first R. Simlai silences the minim by simply explaining to them that the verb in the following verse, “And God created” (אָרֵא) is singular, not plural. Apparently the minim were not reading the text in Hebrew and so were silenced by the rabbi’s knowledge of the Hebrew text. But then the rabbi’s own disciples call him on his weak argument, for the verb in v. 26, “let us make” (лушה) is plural, not singular, and would therefore have countered his argument to the minim had the known. R. Simlai’s answer to his own disciples, however, is hardly convincing, for he teaches that the first person plural “Let us make” refers not to God Himself, but to Adam and Chavah in partner with the “Divine Spirit.” Clearly that cannot be the meaning of the text, for the conversation occurs before either Adam or Chavah have been created.

In this same midrash, just prior to the story about R. Simlai, other explanations are given for the plural “Let Us make man....”

AND GOD SAID: LET US MAKE MAN, etc. With whom did He take counsel? R. Joshua b. Levi said: He took counsel with the works of heaven and earth, like a king who had two advisers without whose knowledge he did nothing whatsoever. R. Samuel b. Nahman said: He took counsel with the works of each day, like a king who had an associate without whose knowledge he did nothing. R. Ammi said: He took counsel with His own heart. It may be compared to a king who had a palace built by an architect, but when he saw it it did not please him: with whom is he to be indignant? Surely with the architect! Similarly, And it grieved Him at His heart (Gen. 6:6). R. Assi said: This may be compared to a king who did some business through an agent and suffered loss: with whom is he to be indignant? Surely with the agent! Similarly, ‘And it grieved Him at His heart.’ (Mid. Rab. Genesis 8.3)
All of the rabbinic authorities cited are from the 3rd and 4th centuries, and so once again, we may presume that their attempts at explaining the obvious sense of divine plurality was at least somewhat fueled by the growing influence of the Christian Church. Yet once again, the explanations are hardly satisfying, for if God took counsel with that which He had already created, how can “in our image” and “according to our likeness” be understood? Genesis 9:6 clearly states that man was created “in the image of God,” which hardly comports with the explanations offered in this midrash.

Another rabbi is mentioned in this same midrash, with yet another interpretation:

R. Hanina said, “When He came to create Adam, He took counsel with the ministering angels, saying to them, ‘LET US MAKE MAN.’”

(Mid. Rab. Genesis 8.4)

Once again, this explanation is clearly grasping at straws, especially since R. Hanina surely knew Genesis 9:6 and its explicit statement that God created man in His image, not in the image of angels.

So here, in the very first chapter of the Bible, we see an explicit example of how God is revealed as possessing a plurality within His being, a plurality that allowed communication: “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness….”

The use of plural pronouns as referring directly to God is also seen in Gen 3:22 (“man has now become as one of Us, knowing good and evil”) and Gen 11:7 (“let Us go down…”). Though various explanations for such an anomaly exist, the straightforward reading would indicate a plurality within the being of God.

**Genesis 18**

Genesis 18 is the story of the heavenly visitors who come to the tent of Abraham and Sarah on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Here is another important text, very early in the Torah, that demonstrates an important fact: יהוה (YHVH) came to Abraham as a man, and what is more, though Abraham received Him as a man, he did eventually realize that he was addressing the Almighty.

The text opens with a matter-of-fact statement:

\[
\text{Now Adonai (יהוה) appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him...} \]

(Gen 18:1–2)

While some rabbinic interpretations try to make a difference between the appearing of יהוה and the approach of the three men, the obvious sense of the

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1 See Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, Samuel Rosenblatt, trans. (Yale, 1948), p. 108 (this is Book II, sec. VI). Saadia Gaon explains the text in this manner, that a bright light shown first to Abraham, which was the appearance of the Divine, by which he was appraised of the fact that the three men approach were “good and saintly men.” Later, when the men go toward Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham is left with the divine light.
text is that one of the three men who approached Abraham’s tent was, in fact, Adonai. Moreover, the Masoretes make this certain by several clear conventions they used in their transmission of the text. First, in the very next sentences we read:

and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, “My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by.” (vv. 2–3)

You will notice that in the quote (which is from the NASB), the word “Lord” in the phrase “My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight...,” is written with initial capital “L” and all lowercase “ord.” As such, the English reader would presume that the word “Lord” was being used as a common address, much like our English word “Mister” or “Sir.” But this is not how the Masoretes understood the word “Lord,” for it is the common word “Adonai” but with this one exception: the final vowel is a qametz and not a chiriq. Thus, it is written אֲדֹנָי (‘adonai) not אֲדֹנִי (‘adoni). What is the significance of this? The Masoretes only used this spelling when ‘adonai is used as the divine Name. Thus, when Abraham prostrated himself (a customary posture of greeting in the ANE) to welcome his guests, and refers to one of them by the title אֲדֹנָי, the Masoretes indicate by the vowelation they preserve that he was addressing יהוה.

“But,” some might protest, “is this not simply the way one would spell the plural, ‘my lords’?” That would seem reasonable since three men were approaching, but if that had been what was originally in the text, then the Masoretes would have used the patach vowel (אֲדֹנַי), not the qametz.

The second indication given to us by the Masoretes, that Abraham was conversing face to face with יהוה, is found in v. 22 of the same chapter. There we read:

Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, while Abraham was still standing before Adonai (יהוה). (Gen 18:22)

Attached to this verse is a Masoretic note indicating that it contains one of the 18 “Tikkunei Soferim,” that is, the “corrections of the scribes.” The “correction” made by the scribes is this: they exchanged the order of the last clause. Originally, the clause read: “while Adonai (יהוה) was still standing before Abraham.” But why would the Masoretes feel the necessity to make this change? The reason is because “to stand before” is a common Hebrew idiom meaning “to serve,” and the Masoretes thought it indelicate to read that יהוה was serv-

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1 The Masoretes were the scribes who standardized the Hebrew text of the Tanach, and developed the system of notations, called nikkud (points), by which the vowels, accents, and cantillation were included in the written text itself. The were intent on confirming the long textual traditions which had been handed down through the generations, putting them into writing rather than allowing them to remain oral tradition. They did their work approx. 600–1100 CE.

2 The form אֲדֹנֵי, “his lord/master” is not an exception to the rule stated above, i.e., that the Masoretes reserve the spelling אֲדֹנָי for the Divine Name. For the addition of the possessive suffix lengthens the vowel in the normal Tiberian vocalization.

ing (standing before) Abraham. Thus, they “corrected” the clause to assure no such misunderstanding would occur.

But how does this serve our current study? It makes it quite obvious that the Masoretes, themselves the guardians of the text, recognized that Abraham was speaking face to face with יהוה, and it was this very fact that, in their minds, required the “correction.”

How, then, does this text imply the concept of plurality in the Godhead? It does so in connection with other Scriptures which maintain that no one has every seen God (Jn 1:18; 1Jn 4:12) or that no one can see God’s face and live (Ex 33:20, 23; cp. Gen 32:30) or that God is invisible (Col 1:15; 1Tim 1:17). If God is invisible and thus cannot be seen with the human eye, how is it that God appears to Abraham? Moreover, if one is unable to see God’s face and live, how is it that Abraham clearly converses with Him face to face?¹

Exodus 24:9–11

This is the same question that must be asked and answered when we read about Moses, Aaron, Nadav, Avihu, and the 70 elders who ascended Mt. Sinai. The text tells us, not once but twice, and in quite a matter-of-fact way, that they saw the God of Israel:

Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Ex 24:9–11)

Not only does the text state that they saw the God of Israel, but it also indicates that He had feet. What is more, they ate together in His presence. Such language, taken in its obvious meaning, would demand the conclusion that the God they saw on Mt. Sinai had a corporeal aspect of His being. Once again, how can this fit with Paul’s statement that God is invisible?

Exodus 23:20–21 / Isaiah 63:4–10

Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Be on your guard before him and obey his voice; do not be rebellious toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, since My name is in him. (Ex 23:20–21)

Here we have an example where the מלאך יהוה, the “Angel of Adonai” is spoken of as being one with God, for the statement “since My name is in him” implies that the very nature of God—His very “person” is in the angel. Moreover, the angel in this text has the right to forgive sins, something that throughout the Scriptures is relegated to God (cp. Mk 2:7; Lk 5:21) and to His Messiah (Acts 5:31).

We should also note the song of Isaiah 63 as containing an interesting par-

¹ The story of Jacob’s wrestling with “a man” evokes similar questions. Who was this One Who wrestled with Jacob? Why does He indicate that His Name is “wonderful,” (פֶּלֶא), a word only used of God throughout the Tanach?
allel to this text in Exodus, with particular attention to v. 9 which speaks of the “Angel of His presence.”

The context is that of a victory song being uttered by the Almighty, recounting the event of the exodus from Egypt:

> For the day of vengeance was in My heart, and My year of redemption has come. I looked, and there was no one to help, and I was astonished and there was no one to uphold; so My own arm brought salvation to Me, and My wrath upheld Me. I trod down the peoples in My anger and made them drunk in My wrath, and I poured out their lifeblood on the earth.” (63:4–6)

In the next verse the prophet raises his voice on behalf of Israel, the redeemed people, to praise God for the victory He has secured for them:

> I shall make mention of the lovingkindnesses of Adonai, the praises of Adonai, according to all that Adonai has granted us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has granted them according to His compassion and according to the abundance of His lovingkindnesses. (63:7)

Then we hear the song of the Warrior again:

> For He said, “Surely, they are My people, sons who will not deal falsely.” So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old. (63:8–9)

It is clear in the context that Adonai (יהוה) is the only One effecting redemption for His people (v. 5), yet here, the “Angel of His presence saved them” (ומלאך פניו הוושיעם, literally, the “Angel of His face saved them”). The language utilized (even if within a poetic genre) is that of plurality—the redemption of Israel from Egypt is effected by Adonai and by the Angel of His presence. Indeed, this very thing is found in the Exodus account itself, for on the one hand Adonai is the One Who slays the first born of Egypt yet on the other, He guards the Israelite homes from the Destroyer Who is the executioner:

> For Adonai will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, Adonai will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to come in to your houses to smite you. (Ex 12:23)

The Hagaddah is well aware of this plurality language and seeks to over come it with the following traditional part of the Pesach liturgy (based upon Ex 12:12 and Deut 26:8) –

> And Adonai brought us forth from Egypt: not by means of an angel, nor by means of a Seraph, nor by means of a messenger; but the most Holy, blessed be He, in His own glory, as it is said, I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will smite every first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment—I am Adonai.
> I will pass through the land of Egypt: I Myself and not an angel. And I will smite the first-born: I Myself and not a Seraph. And on all the
gods of Egypt I will execute judgment: I Myself and not a messenger. I, Adonai, I am He and there is none other.

The statements of the Hagaddah are true, for the text of Exodus makes this amply clear. Yet the words of Isaiah state plainly that “the Angel of His presence saved them.”

Returning to Isaiah’s Song, we should note the verse that follows the statement regarding the “Angel of His presence” (v. 10)

But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them. (Is 63:10)

In spite of the miraculous redemption effected for Israel, they rebel against their Redeemer, and grieve His Holy Spirit. Some might say that the designation “Holy Spirit” is simply another way for Adonai to refer to Himself, and in fact, it is. Yet in the verses immediately preceding, Adonai speaks in the first person: “My heart,” “My year of redemption,” “I looked,” “I was astonished,” “My own arm brought salvation to Me,” “My wrath upheld Me,” “I poured out,” “My people.” Then suddenly, in v. 8, the language changes to the third person, that is, the prophet takes up the Song: “He became their Savior,” “He was afflicted,” “His love,” “His mercy,” “He redeemed,” “He lifted and carried.” And this continues in v. 10, “His Holy Spirit,” “He turned Himself,” “He fought.”

What shall we make of this? Here, I believe, is another instance where God reveals Himself to us in the context of plurality. From the vantage point of Isaiah, the Angel of His face, and the Holy Spirit are distinct from Adonai Himself, yet one and the same with Him. Thus, Isaiah writes the inspired words which portraying this plurality without any thought whatsoever that such a plurality suggests a polytheism. There is one and only one God—Adonai—Who reveals Himself to mankind as the infinite One Who exists in plurality.

Isaiah 9:6–7[Hebrew, vv. 5–6]

These verses contain the well-known prophecy of Isaiah regarding a Son to be born for Israel, a text even considered to be Messianic by Targum Jonathan and Midrash Deuteronomy.¹ yet this is no ordinary Son, for He possesses the attributes of divinity:

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. There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness from then on and forevermore. The zeal of Adonai of hosts will accomplish this. (Is 9:6–7[5-6])

¹ The Targum has; “…and His name from of old will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, He who lives forever, the Messiah, in whose days peace shall increase upon us.” For the Midrash reference, note Mid. Rab. Deut 1.20. For a fuller exposition of Is 9:6–7, see my Messiah in the Tanach (TR, 2003), pp. 96ff.
In this well known text, we see a number of obvious things which point to the issue of plurality within the Godhead. First, the child to be born is distinct from Adonai, for Adonai is the very One Who brings this about. Second, the Name of the child, that is, His very being or nature, encompasses attributes of eternity, for His Name includes אֲבִיעַד, ‘avi’ad, literally, “father of eternity.” We may understand this use of “father” to mean “owner,” “originator,” or “progenitor.” Thus, the child Who would be born is the originator or progenitor of eternity! Third, not only is He the owner of eternity past, but He is also the one Who will reign on the throne of David forever, for His kingdom will never end. Here, once again, we have a distinct entity within the context of divine attributes and prerogative Who nonetheless is Himself eternal in both directions: without beginning and without end.

**Jeremiah 23:5–6**

This use of the Name in connection with the promised Messiah is also found in Jeremiah’s prophecy.

> "Behold, the days are coming,” declares Adonai, “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, ‘Adonai our righteousness וּיהוה צִדְקֵנ.’ (Jer 23:5–6)

The fact that His Name includes the Tetragrammaton cannot simply be explained as though He simply turns the people to be loyal to יהוה. Since the Semitic sense of “name” is that it expresses the essential character or essence of the person, to prophesy that the Branch of David (a clear, messianic title¹) would be called by the Name יהוה is to identify Him as divine. But how could that be possible since there is one and only one God? Here again, we are confronted with a sense of plurality within the infinite One.

**Micah 5:2[Hebrew, v. 1]**

This prophecy of Micah contains the promise of the Messiah Who would come and shepherd the people of Israel, Himself being their peace. But of special interest to us is what Micah states about the Messiah’s pre-existence:

> 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 מִקֶדֶם מִימֵי עֲולָם. (Mic 5:2)

What is the meaning of the words, that “His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity”? This verbiage can only mean that He existed prior to His appearance in Bethlehem Ephrathah, something which cannot be true of any mere human being. Indeed, Yeshua Himself affirms His pre-existence when He tells the Pharisees with whom He was conversing, “Before Abraham was, I am” (Jn 8:58). John the Baptist likewise affirms the pre-existence of Yeshua when he testifies that Yeshua existed before him, even though John was

¹ Cf. Is 11:1,
born before Miriam gave birth to Yeshua: “He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me” (Jn 1:15, 30).

Evidence for plurality within the Godhead abounds in the Apostolic Scriptures as well, and in light of the progressive revelation of the Scriptures, becomes even more emphatic than what we read in the Tanach.

Throughout the Gospels, Yeshua refers to His Father, calling Him God, heavenly Father, and claiming Him to be His Father (e.g., Matt 6:25–34). Even on the cross, Yeshua calls out to His Father referring to Him as God: “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (quote from Ps 22:1). Yeshua prays to His Father using the title “Abba” (אָבָא, Mk 14:36). This portrays Yeshua’s relationship with God as His Father as being unique, even as He states in Matt 11:27,

All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and 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)

Indeed, throughout the Gospels it is very clear that Yeshua speaks of Himself as distinct from the Father, for He speaks to the Father, prays to the Father, makes requests of the Father, only does what the Father wills (Jn 4:34; 5:30; 6:38), seeks to honor the Father, and declares that He was sent by the Father (Jn 5:30; 6:38, 57; 15:21). In the garden, Yeshua prays to the Father, “not My will, but Yours be done” (Lk 22:42). Clearly, such language establishes the fact that the Father and Son are revealed to us as distinct personages. If we lack a better way of describing this, then the word “persons” will have to do, for it is the best our finite human language can offer.

John 10:31–36

Yet, in spite of the clear distinctions made in the Apostolic Scriptures between Yeshua and the Father, there are plenty of statements which indicate the utter equality between Yeshua and the Father. In fact, that the Gospel writers would refer to Yeshua as the “Son of God” (cf. Mk 1:1; Lk 1:35; Jn 1:34, 49; 3:18, etc.) cannot be swept aside, for the very point of the language (which was fully understood by Yeshua’s antagonists) is simply that the very character of sonship is that the son partakes of exactly the same nature as his father. To refer to Yeshua as the “Son of God,” then, is to ascribe to Him the very nature of God Himself.

And this is what was understood by Jewish religious leaders of Yeshua’s day: if someone claimed to be the Son of God, that person was claiming to be divine as God is divine. We see this in John 10:31–36.

The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. Yeshua 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.” Yeshua answered them, “Has it not been written in your Torah, ‘I said, you are gods’? [Ps 82:6] If he called them gods, to whom the word of 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’? (Jn 10:31–36)
Yeshua’s question is quite simple to understand: He asks why they are bothered when He calls Himself the Son of God, since Scripture uses the same language in regard to wicked judges (in Ps 82). Yet they accuse Him of blasphemy. However, the Jewish leaders understood Ps 82 as meaning that the judges are to rule “on behalf of God,” not claiming to be God. But Yeshua’s statements about His unique relationship with the Father and that He existed in eternity with the Father Who sent Him to earth, went over the line as far as the Jewish leaders were concerned. To claim to be the Son of God (which is different than being called “sons of God,” cf. Matt 5:9) means that Yeshua claimed to have the same divine nature as the Father.

But did Yeshua actually accept or affirm the title “Son of God” for Himself? The answer is “yes.” He did so at His trial before the cohen gadol:

The high priest stood up and said to Him, “Do You not answer? What is it that these men are testifying against You?” But Yeshua kept silent. And the high priest said to Him, “I adjure You by the living God, that You tell us whether You are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Yeshua said to him, “You have said it! Nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see the son of man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his robes and said, “He has blasphemed! What further need do we have of witnesses? Behold, you have now heard the blasphemy; what do you think?” They answered, “He deserves death!” (Matt 26:62–66)

Here, Yeshua claims the title “Son of God” and even affirms it by ascribing to Himself the prophecy of Daniel 7:13–14 in which “one like a son man” is presented to the Ancient of Days and given an eternal dominion, reigning as King in an eternal kingdom over all peoples and nations.

And of what crime is Yeshua charged by the high priest and his court? That of blasphemy. Why? Because they understood what so many others in subsequent generations have missed—that Yeshua claimed to be one with the Father in terms of having the same divine nature; that He claimed to be the very One spoken of by Daniel, Who is one with the Ancient of Days in sovereignty.

Clearly, this presents us with yet another affirmation of plurality within the Godhead, for Yeshua comes, not as the Father, but as the Messiah Who is sent by the Father, and Who communes with the Father. Yet, in spite of the Messiah’s unique and individual personage, He shares with the Father that which is unique to the divine nature. His statement that “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30) means far more than “I and the Father have the same perspective,” or “I and the Father agree.” There exists in that concept of oneness something beyond the physicality of our world. Perhaps the closest we as mortal can come to experience such oneness is in the mystery that obtains in the union of husband and wife, as when Moses states, “...they shall be one” (Gen 2:24).

**John 1:18**

John 1:18 makes a specific claim for Yeshua’s divine nature:

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)

There exists variants in this verse, and one can imagine how they occurred as
as scribes and copyists tried to make sense of the phrase “the only begotten God.”¹ But the weight of manuscript evidence together with external evidence supports the reading ὁ μονογενὴς θεός, “the only begotten God,” and given that the Greek word μονογενής (monogenēs) can mean “only child,” the phrase should be understood as the NET Bible has it:

No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known.

So here is yet another direct statement in the Scriptures which affirm the deity of Yeshua.

Hebrews 1:8

In the opening of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the author portrays God the Father saying various things to angels. Then, in v. 8, He addresses the Son. The point being made by the author of Hebrews is that the Son stands above the angels. But in what way does He stand as supreme over the angels? He does so because He is Himself God, for in addressing the Son, the Father speaks the words of Ps 45:6.

For to which of the angels did He ever say, “YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU”? And again, “I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM AND HE SHALL BE A SON TO ME”? And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says, “AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM.” And of the angels He says, “WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS, AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE.” But of the Son He says, “YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM. YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS; THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS.” (Heb 1:5–9)

Note carefully that the quote from Ps 45:6 is applied to the Son: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” Yet in the very next verse (quoting Ps 45:7), God is the One Who has anointed the Son with the oil of gladness. Here, once again, we see plurality in the midst of unity within the Godhead.

We could continue to show passage after passage that highlights the reality of Yeshua and the Father as distinct yet one, as both possessing the same unique, divine nature, but these few will suffice. The question that we must ultimately face is how we are to encompass in faith this apparent antinomy.

But what of the Spirit of God as revealed in the Scriptures? Is the Spirit of God simply another way of referring to “God Himself”? It is clear from the Scriptures that the Spirit of God is God.

Acts 5:3–4

In the story of the early believers selling their possessions and giving the money to the Apostles for the establishment of the early community of Yeshua followers, we read of the story of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira. They

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¹ For a fuller discussion on the textual criticism of this verse, and particularly the phrase ὁ μονογενὴς θεός, see my The Messiah: An Introduction to Christology (TR, 2006), pp. 114–16.
had pledged to sell some property and give the proceeds to the Apostles, but then they reneged and held back part of the money. Peter charges them first with lying to the Holy Spirit but then in reiterating their sin, states that they have lied to God.

But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” (Acts 5:3–4)

Here Peter clearly equates the Holy Spirit with God.

**Hebrews 10:15-17**

When the author of Hebrew quotes the New Covenant text from Jeremiah 31:31–34, he attributes the words to the Holy Spirit:

> And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us; for after saying, “THIS IS THE COVENANT THAT I WILL MAKE WITH THEM AFTER THOSE DAYS, SAYS THE LORD: I WILL PUT MY LAWS UPON THEIR HEART, AND ON THEIR MIND I WILL WRITE THEM,” He then says, AND THEIR SINS AND THEIR LAWLESS DEEDS I WILL REMEMBER NO MORE.” (Heb 10:15–17)

Yet when one reads Jeremiah, he states plainly that these are the words of יהוה, as the text plainly states. So the author of Hebrews seems to equate the Holy Spirit and יהוה.

Yet the Scriptures also portray the Holy Spirit as distinct from the Father and from Yeshua. For instance, when Yeshua underwent a mikvah at the Jordan river with John the Baptist (Matt 3:16–17), a curious phenomenon occurred. When Yeshua came up out of the water, the Spirit descended upon Him as a dove, and then a voice from heaven (בַת קוֹלֹ) was heard proclaiming, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Now various explanations have been offered to explain what actually took place, but if we take the Scriptural text at face value, and begin with the premise that its inspired words are not construed to trick us or lead us astray, then the most sensible way to understand this historic event is that the Father, the Messiah, and the Spirit are three distinct persons.

**John 14:16, 26; 15:26**

When Yeshua informs His disciples that He will depart from them and return to the Father, He promises that they will not be left alone, but that He will send “another Helper.”

> I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; (Jn 14:16)

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (Jn 14:26)
Chapter 6 – Plurality & One God

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me, (Jn 15:26)

But what can this mean if the Father, Messiah, and Ruach are really not distinct in their personage? If the Son and the Spirit are the same person, then the Son would be sending Himself, and this would hardly be “another Helper” (ἀλλὸν παράκλητον). In fact, unless the Father, Messiah, and Ruach are in some way distinct, there is no “other” Helper.

Matthew 28:19–20

When Yeshua gave His orders to the Twelve just prior to His ascension, He told them to make disciples from all the nations and to mark their entrance into the people of God with the common mikvah. In regard to mikvah He states:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19–20)

Though some have suggested that the tripartite formula, “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” is a later addition to the text, the strong weight of the textual evidence demands that it be received as original. 1 As such, why would Yeshua give such a formula? It makes no sense to baptize new believers in the “name (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” if, in fact, these are all just different designations for the same divine being.

Once again, if we take the language of the Scriptures in its historical, grammatical sense, we must admit that a plurality within the Godhead is indicated throughout the inspired words of the Bible, even though equally affirmed is that there is one and only one true God.

And herein lies the primary question: how are we to affirm both the absolute singularity of God, that He is one and the only God that exists and still accept the Bible that portrays Him in the context of plurality, of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

We must first affirm without hesitation that the Scriptures are the inspired and therefore infallible word of God to us, and though in their pages are contained the thoughts of God which may be too high for us to grasp, we must commit ourselves to affirming what the Bible says even when we have no way of explaining it rationally.

Second, we dare not seek to diminish one truth in order to enhance another. Some feel the necessity to deny the deity of Yeshua (for instance) in order to affirm that there is one and only one God. For they believe that as long as they confess Yeshua to be divine, they have accepted a form of polytheism. But such was not the case with the Apostles, for they clearly affirm the deity of Yeshua while at the same time confessing with full faith that there is one and only one God. They were willing to live with that tension rather than diminish either of what might seem to be contradictory truths. So we must be diligent to confess as true what the Scriptures teach, and then continue to seek ways to understand their proper application in spite of seeming antinomies.

Great is the Mystery of Godliness

Having briefly considered, on the one hand, the unified voice of Scripture affirming the infinite singularity of God (monotheism, i.e., there is one and only one true God) and, on the other hand, the Bible seems to have no problem expressing the works of God in terms that suggest plurality within the being of God, we are left with an obvious dilemma. How are we to talk about God when we are given categories that seem patently contradictory?

Further, while throughout the Scriptures God manifests His existence and presence among His people in many ways (smoking pot, flaming torch, pillar of cloud, pillar of fire, burning bush, rushing wind, thunder and lightning on Sinai, a voice from heaven, flaming sword, bright light, etc.), it never attributes to any of these manifestations the things normally associated with God’s works or deeds. Take, for instance, God as the Creator. When the Scriptures speak of God creating the universe, they speak of Him by His Names: God, the Lord, YHVH, El Shaddai, (or any other of His Names). But the Bible also attributes the work of creation to the Son of God, the Word, Yeshua the Messiah (Jn 1:2; 1Cor 8:6; Heb 1:2) as well as to the Spirit of God (Job 33:4). Never do we reading anything like “and the burning bush created the heavens and the earth” or “the pillar of cloud created all flesh.” In short, while God manifests His presence through various means and visible phenomena, these are never portrayed as possessing the attributes of “personhood” with which God is regularly portrayed. The manifestations are never pictured as making decisions, or as displaying emotions, nor does conversation take place between the manifestations and God, as, for example, “and God said to the pillar of cloud….” Yet we regularly see communication between the Father and the Son (e.g., Ps 110:1; John 17:1ff; Mk 14:36) and between the Spirit and the Son (e.g., Matt 4:1f; Lk 4:1f). Further, we discover in the Scriptures that both the Father and the Spirit speak about the Son, all of which gives the strong impression that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are viewed as individually distinct from the other.

Yet this only heightens the theological tension we face, for why would the Scriptures portray God as infinitely one yet at the same time reveal the One God to us in terms that, in our world, bespeak plurality?

In fact, it seems quite possible that one of the reasons the Tanach portrays God in plural terms (as we have seen) was to prepare the way for the incarnation of the Messiah. For it is the incarnation that brings the question of plurality within the Godhead to the forefront. This is because if the Messiah is truly revealed in the person of Yeshua of Natzerat, and if He ascribes to Himself attributes and actions which are rightly the sole possession of God alone (such as eternal existence and the right to forgive sins), then we are faced with a significant dilemma: either Yeshua is deity and thus a plurality exists within the Godhead, or Yeshua is an imposter and His claim to divine attributes and actions is a farce. Yet it is clear that His words are true, for His own resurrection, just as He predicted, is the final seal of His authenticity (Acts 2:31; Rom 1:4). We therefore are left with a mystery that is beyond our explanation, but one we cannot deny, namely, that the one and only God has revealed Himself in ways that bespeak plurality.

At the heart of the matter, at least for the emerging Christian Church, was a question that apparently was of little concern for the early Jewish followers of Yeshua. This question was simply: to Whom should one rightly offer worship? To the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit? But why do we not encounter
that same question in the Apostolic/pre-destruction era? The reason, apparen-
tly, was that the Apostles did not consider worship given to Yeshua as any-
thing different than worship given to God. In the same way that Abraham
recognized the “man” Who appeared at his tent to be יְהֹוָה (Gen 18:1–3), so the
Apostles came to understand that Yeshua was Immanuel, “God with us,” and
they received Him as such. When Yeshua asked His disciples the all impor-
tant question, “Who do you (plural) say that I am?,” Peter responded, “You
are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matt 16:15–16). And, Yeshua re-
sponded that Peter had gotten it right: “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, be-
because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in
heaven” (v. 17).

Likewise, Saul, when he was met by the risen Savior on the road to Damas-
cus, was made to understand that in persecuting the followers of Yeshua, he
was actually persecuting the Messiah Himself (Acts 9:4). Struck blind by the
glory of the שֶׁקִינָה, Saul was led into the city. Subsequently, having regained
his sight through the miraculous power of the Spirit by the hand of Ananias,
Saul (now called Paul) began proclaiming in the synagogues regarding Yesh-
ua, that “He is the Son of God” (Acts 9:20). What is more, in Paul’s epistle to
the Philippians, he considered it no problem to take a text like Isaiah 45:23 and
apply it directly to Yeshua, even though in its original context, it clearly is
speaking of יְהֹוָה:

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him [Yeshua], and bestowed
on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of
Yeshua EVERY KNEE WILL BOW [Is 45:23], of those who are in heaven and
on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that
Yeshua the Messiah is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:9–
11)

Apparently, within the Hebrew worldview, for God to take upon Himself
physical appearance was not out of the question, nor did the language of plu-
rality (as, for instance, that the worship of Yeshua would glorify God the Fa-
ther) offer so great a concern. If the infinite, all-wise, and eternal God desired
to dwell with His people in the person of the Messiah, He could do just that,
and who would dare think that such was impossible for Him with Whom
nothing is impossible?

A New Question Seeks a New Answer

It seems that generally the question of ontology\(^1\) was not at the forefront of
the Jewish mind. That is, the Hebraic perspective was not immediately driven
to ask questions relating to the “nature of being” as it applied either to the
unseen God or the revelation of God in His Messiah, Yeshua. These kinds of
question awaited the rise of the emerging Christian Church in the post-de-
struction era. And it seems obvious why philosophical/ontological questions
arose among Christian Church by the end of the 2nd Century: the leaders and
teachers of the Church were nearly all Greeks who had received their educa-
tion in the Greek academies. From their culture and education, their intellec-

\(^1\) Ontology is that branch of philosophy or metaphysics that deals with
nature of being, and it is ontology that is an essential aspect of Greek
philosophical inquiry.
tual instincts required that questions relating to the nature of being be asked and answered, particularly the nature of the Father and of the Son, and how they could be ontologically one. While this was, from their perspective, a necessary question which required an acceptable answer, it was, nonetheless, generally a new question—one which the human authors of Scripture felt no need to ask and thus no need to answer. For in the Bible itself, we find the clear statements of God’s infinite singularity\(^1\) juxtaposed with the matter-of-fact statements of plurality in the Godhead. And all without the slightest felt need for an explanation, as though the two realities were in any way contradictory.

This felt need of the early Church Fathers to answer the question of ontology as it related to the Godhead was not confined to the relationship of the Father to the Son. It also included the relationship of the Father and the Son to the Spirit. This was so because of Yeshua’s promise to His disciples that He would “send the Spirit...Who proceeds from the Father” (Jn 15:26). He had previously referred to the Spirit as “another Helper” (Jn 14:16) Whom the Father would send. The fact that Yeshua uses language which seems clearly to portray the Spirit as distinct from Himself only prompted further questions from the leaders and teachers of the emerging Christian Church, for even as they required for themselves an ontological explanation of the relationship between the Father and the Son, so they also felt it imperative to know what the relationship was of the Spirit to the Messiah and to the Father. The language of “sending” in their minds marked a clear ontological distinction between the Spirit, the Son, and the Father.

Feinberg suggests that similar questions must have arisen in the early communities of The Way, i.e., the followers of Yeshua in the pre-destruction era, the majority of whom were Jewish.

Questions about Christ raised problems from two perspectives. On the one hand, most of the very first Christians converted from Judaism. With their intensely monotheistic background, there must have been some cognitive dissonance between their belief in one God and their belief that Jesus is divine. The monotheism of these Jewish-Christians plus the NT guarded Christianity from moving too far in the direction of a tritheistic view of three divine beings.\(^2\)

There are several problems with Feinberg’s conclusions. First, the early followers of Yeshua did not “convert from Judaism.” On the contrary, everything that we know of The Way or the Nazarenes (as the early followers of Yeshua were known) is that they both functioned and were known as a sect of Judaism (Acts 24:5, 14). Secondly, if there were a “cognitive dissonance” between their belief in one God and their belief that Yeshua is divine, we find no evidence of it in the Apostolic Scriptures. In point of fact, what we find in the Apostolic Scriptures (which are the best representation of the pre-destruction theology of the followers of Yeshua) is near silence about a supposed “cogni-

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1 In some systematic theologies, God’s infinite singularity is referred to as God’s infinite simplicity, or that God is infinitely simple. This use of the English word “simple” is based upon its original sense (from the Latin *simples*, used in Old French of a medicine made from a single plant) but in our modern times, “simple” has come to mean “elementary” or even “lacking intelligence” and thus does not well suit the discussion of God’s being one.

tive dissonance” over monotheism on the one hand, and the obvious plurality demanded by the incarnation and divinity of Yeshua, on the other. In the Hebrew worldview, such intellectual tensions were clearly permitted and even welcomed, for in being the source of debate, such tensions were accepted as the means by which a deeper appreciation and understanding of God’s greatness could be achieved.

Rather, it was the spread of the Gospel into the Greco-Roman world that fomented the ontologically based questions regarding the being of God. We can point to a number of factors that gave particular impetus to the ontological questions which, within the Greco-Roman world, demanded answers. The first was the rise of Gnosticism, which was one of the earliest heretical threats to emerging Christianity. Gnosticism, taking its cue from Platonic thought, held that all material substance was inherently evil. Thus, as some Christian groups began to incorporate Gnosticism into their theology, they came to affirm that God revealed Himself, not in that which partakes of the material world, but through a series of emanations, each of a different rank or authority. Yeshua, it was believed, was one of these emanations, and therefore His body (material substance) was either not real (it was only imaginary) or His immaterial aspect (His soul) never interacted with His body. Regardless, in countering this early errant theology within the 2nd and 3rd Century Christian Church, the question of Yeshua’s relationship with the Father took center stage and demanded specific definition in order to combat the philosophically driven threat of Gnosticism.

Even more prevalent than Gnosticism was Platonism which, in some measure, formed the warp and woof of the Greek worldview. A prevailing form of Platonism held that the demiurge (a “God” concept) held the real form of all things in its mind, and that by projecting these thoughts or ideas upon the world, gave meaning to all things. Philo, a Jewish philosopher and theologian in the 1st Century, based his worldview upon much of Plato’s philosophy, and even used the concept of the Logos (Greek for “word, thought, concept”) to express the Aramaic Memra of the Targums, which was utilized to describe the agent of God in creation. Thus, Targum Jonathan translates Gen 1:3 as:

Then the Word (memra, memra) of the Lord said, “Let there be light,” and there was light, according to the decree of his Word (memra).

For Philo, the “Word” represented “Wisdom,” which in his theology took on an almost distinct and separate reality from God. Thus, the Wisdom of God was eternal and yet, in some ways, distinct, so much so that Wisdom could become the agent of God to do His bidding. Note Targum Jonathan on Gen 1:1.

From the beginning, with wisdom, the Lord created and finished the heavens and the earth.

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1 So-called “Christian Gnosticism” held that there was an “evil creator” and a “good Creator.” The evil creator was responsible for the material world, and the good Creator, for the spirit (or non-physical) world. Thus, the physical world was endowed by the evil creator with evil itself, and only the non-material world, that of the spirit or soul, was holy. Escaping the physicality of the world was therefore the primary goal of the Christian form of Gnosticism. Influences of Gnosticism can be seen in the monastic movement of the later Roman Catholic Church.
But since Platonic thought was so interwoven in the Greco-Roman worldview, it was an easy (and almost natural) step for some within the emerging Christian Church to see Yeshua, the Logos (the Word, Jn 1), as an ideological projection of God rather than as the incarnate Messiah Who took upon Himself real humanity. This growing controversy thus centered upon whether Yeshua was eternal or if there was a time when He did not exist. It likewise raised the question of whether He was subordinate to the Father in the sense of being of a lesser authority and power, and whether He was divine and human, only divine (with His humanity being a mirage), or only a human endowed with specific, special divine power. One can see, then, that as the emerging Christian Church spread, the questions generated from a Greco-Roman worldview demanded answers within that same philosophical perspective. It was this necessity that began the formation of the Trinity doctrine. Clearly, the question of Yeshua’s incarnation was central and thus the answers to the ontological questions of the emerging Christian Church also became central, so much so, that by the 4th and 5th Centuries, affirmation of a formulated Trinitarian creed marked the distinction between adherent of the true faith and heretic.

**Primary Questions in the Formation of the Trinity Doctrine**

If we were to reduce the long and arduous trinitarian debates that took place in the early centuries of the emerging Christian Church to the most fundamental questions, they would be the following:

1. Are the “forms” in which God reveals Himself to mankind merely extensions of Himself, or do these “forms” exist as separate entities?

Are the various forms in which God reveals Himself analogous to various forms of communication? For example, a person might make himself or herself known to others through letters, literature (stories), pictures, art, etc., but these are not distinct entities but rather are means of expressing one’s thoughts, self-descriptions, actions, etc. Thus, for example, God revealed Himself to people in the form of the “angel of the Lord.” Was the “angel of the Lord” a temporary, extension of God Himself, or did He exist (and possibly still exists) as distinct from God as an individual being? That same question then was asked about Yeshua: is Yeshua simply a projection of God Himself, or does Yeshua exist as distinct from the God Who sent Him? The manner in which this question was asked centered in the Greek word ὑποστασις (hupostasis), meaning “substantial nature, essence, actual being, reality.” Did the “forms” by which God revealed Himself have their own “nature” (hupostasis) or were they actually simply “shadows” of the divine nature projected into the world?

This same question was directed primarily to the issue of the nature of Yeshua, and particularly the issue of His dual nature: His humanity and His deity. How were these united in the one person of the Messiah? The controversy centered on the same Greek term ὑποστασις (hupostasis). We find this word in Heb 1:3, speaking of Yeshua:

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of

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1 BDAG, “ὑποστασις”. 
This verse speaks of Yeshua as “the exact representation of His nature” (χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ) which implies a distinct entity while at the same time being a perfect and complete revelation of God’s nature (ὑποστάσις). It was this Greek word, ὑποστάσις, that gave rise to the concept of the “hypostatic union,” a phrase describing the union of Yeshua’s humanity and deity in one nature. That is, affirming the “hypostatic union,” the Christian Church dismissed the teaching that Yeshua was human in His body and only divine in His spirit, but that the two did not “mix.” Likewise, the opposite view was also overturned by the doctrine of the “hypostatic union,” namely, that Yeshua was neither really human nor divine, but that His human body and His divine spirit “mixed” to form an entirely unique “nature.”

The obvious difficulties with this perspective is that the Bible simply does not speak in this way. Yeshua is portrayed as fully human: He is born as a baby, grows and matures, experiences human emotions, gets tired, hungry, and thirsty, dies, and resurreets. He prays to the Father in the same manner as He teaches His disciples to pray, and in every way lives and dies as a common human being. At the same time, it is clear from His own teaching and that of His Apostles, that He existed with the Father from eternity; that He received the worship of others; that He has returned to the Father where He dwells in the glory He had before the world began; and that He is coming again to receive the worship of all mankind.

2. Are the “forms” in which God reveals Himself to mankind special “modes” of His self-revelation? That is, has God chosen a number of “forms” in which He presents Himself to mankind, and is Yeshua the most significant one of these “modes”?

Another idea that was offered by some in the debates over the nature of God’s being was that the invisible God, Who is pure spirit, takes on different modes of physicality in order to reveal Himself in time and space to mankind. These “modes” could include bright light (Shekinah), a pillar of cloud, fire, an angel, and ultimately, Yeshua. In this way, each of the modes has no “being” or existence distinct from God but is simply the “garments” in which God “clothes” Himself in order to become visible to mankind. In this manner of thinking, Yeshua, though being the most perfect and final representation of God, is neither eternal nor distinct from the Father. Like a change of clothes, each of the “modes” are simply God’s desired method to reveal Himself in visible form.

The obvious problem with this explanation is that it does not coincide with the language of the Bible. For in the Scriptures we read about God “sending” the Son, the Son submitting to the Father, and the Son praying “not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). It further seemed to dismiss the picture offered by Daniel (7:13f), which Yeshua applied to Himself, that He would be sitting on the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven in the eschaton (Matt 26:64). Such language seems clearly to describe Yeshua as being distinct from the Father, something the idea of “modalities” could not accommodate.

In addition to the important term ὑποστάσις, used to designate the concept
of “nature” and particularly the distinct nature of the plurality within the Godhead, the early Church Fathers chose the Greek word ὀὐσία (ousia) meaning “that which exists and therefore has substance, property, wealth.”¹ By “property” is meant “essential qualities” which is also what the word “substance” means, for this term seeks to describe the essential “reality” of that being described. Thus, when we encounter the word “substance” in the trinitarian debates, we should not think that this implies “materialism” or “physicality,” for the word ousia will be used of the Father and the Spirit as well as of the Son.

We will see, then, that the two questions offered above (and the subset of questions they generate) form the primary focus of controversy in the late 2nd Centuries and onward, controversies that eventually led to the formulation of the orthodox Christian trinitarian creeds. Moreover, we will see that the orthodox formulation sought to substantiate one ousia in three ὑπόστασεις.

A Brief Historical Overview

By the 2nd Century, we find the use of the triadic formula “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” in regular use among the writings of the Church Fathers even though they rarely attempt to expound or explain it. Justin Martyr (ca. 100–160 CE) and his disciple, Tatian (ca. 110–170 CE) stressed the unity of essence (ousia) between the Word and the Father, using the illustration of light and emphasizing the impossibility of separating the light from its source. In this way they emphasized that while the Word and the Father are distinct (even as the light is distinct from the sun), they are not divisible or separable.²

By the 3rd Century, the trinitarian theology had developed further, with the Church Fathers giving more attention to questions that continued to arise, primarily over how to articulate the incarnation of Yeshua and His ontological relationship within the Godhead. Tertullian (ca. 160–225 CE) and Hippolytus (ca. 170–236 CE) developed what would become known as the “economic” view of the Trinity, which really did not explore the eternal relations among the Trinity, but focused upon the manner in which the plurality of the Godhead was revealed. The teaching was the creation revealed the role of the Spirit as separate from that of the Father, while redemption manifested the work of the Son to be distinct from that of the Father. Yet both were regarded as inseparably one with the Father in His eternal being.

Tertullian’s view was that there exists three manifestations of the one God.

Although they are numerically distinct, so that they can be counted, they are nonetheless manifestations of a single indivisible power. There is a distinction (distinctio) or distribution (dispositio), not a division or separation (separatio).³

To illustrate this, Tertullian pointed to common things in the physical world: a root and its plant; a water source that becomes a river; the sun and the light it gives. Thus, he sought to illustrate that the Father, Son, and Spirit are one identical “substance” known by three manifestations which are not divided.⁴

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¹ So BDAG, “όυσία”,
² See Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, 61.2; 128.3f.
³ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 3 vols (Baker, 1983), 1.333.
⁴ Tertullian, Apology 21.11–13
But the explanations of Tertullian and Hippolytus were not that precise and failed to answer some of the questions being raised as the Church sought to formulate answers to the ontological questions being raised within her Greco-Roman culture. Thus, in the late 2nd and 3rd Centuries, two theological explanations were offered to define more precisely the relationship between the Messiah and God. Both of these views are labeled as “Monarchianism,” a word derived from the Greek words μόνος (monos, “singular, one”) and ἀρχηγός (archēgos, “ruler”), thus meaning “sole sovereignty.” This label comes from the fact that both of these views sought to guard the uniqueness of God, and particularly His unity or singularity. In other words, the felt need of the late 2nd and 3rd Centuries was to keep the Trinity doctrine from morphing into a tri-theism (i.e., three Gods).

The first Monarchian view has become known as “Dynamic Monarchianism,” from the Greek word δύναμις (dunamis, “power,” “might,” “strength”). It is attributed to a Byzantine leather merchant by the name of Theodotus, who taught this view in Rome about 190 CE. This view held that prior to His baptism, Yeshua was an ordinary man, though a completely virtuous one. It was at His baptism, however, that the Spirit, or the Spirit of Messiah, descended upon Him, and from that time on He performed miracles, showing all that He had become endowed with the power of God. Some of disciples of Theodotus took their teacher’s ideas further, and believed that Yeshua actually became divine at the time of His baptism by John, though apparently Theodotus himself never taught this.

This view of “dynamic monarchianism” could be illustrated in this way: consider a carpenter who takes a hammer and chisel and uses them with skill to build something. In this illustration, God is the carpenter, and Yeshua is the chisel. The work is that of God, and Yeshua is simply the instrument or tool through whom the Father accomplishes His work. Thus there is “one sovereign” whose “work” or “strength” is demonstrated in or through Yeshua. In this theological scheme, there is no need for Yeshua to be divine—He simply is endowed with the divine power (dunamis) of the Father.

Another teacher who taught “dynamic monarchianism” was Paul of Samosata, who taught in around 250 CE and later. He claimed that the Word in John 1 (λόγος, logos) was not a personal, self-subsistent entity, but was rather the commandment or ordinance of God. Thus, the “Word” was not to be interpreted as the Messiah. Once again, Paul of Samosata simply portrayed Yeshua as the conduit through whom the Word was expressed. God the Father was dynamically present in the life of the man Yeshua, but Yeshua was not Himself divine.

Dynamic monarchianism did not gain much popularity, most likely because it appealed more to rationalists than to the masses. By contrast, the second form of monarchianism, “Modalistic Monarchianism,” was fairly widespread and far more popular. While dynamic monarchianism essentially denied a trinitarian viewpoint of the nature of God, modalistic monarchianism affirmed it while at the same time seeking to preserve the unity or oneness of God. Moreover, modalistic monarchianism was strongly committed to the full deity of Yeshua. But how could the deity of Yeshua be affirmed without also holding to a bi-theism, i.e., that two Gods existed?

The primary names associated with modalistic monarchianism are Neotus of Smyrna (latter part of the 2nd Century), Praxeaus (condemned by Tertullian in the early 3rd Century), and Sabellius, who developed the view in its most complete form, and as a result, it also became known as Sabellianism.
The central idea of this theological position is that there is one Godhead which may be variously designated as Father, Son, or Spirit. These terms or names do not stand for distinct “persons” or “entities” within the Godhead, but are designations or names that fit the activity and revelation of God at different times and in different circumstances. Thus, Father, Son, and Spirit are identical. These “names” or “titles” are simply successive revelations of the same person. The solution that this view offered to the mystery of plurality and oneness was, then, to deny plurality but simply to affirm one person with three different names, roles, or activities.

While this theological stance appeared to overcome the dilemma of plurality with the one God, its weaknesses and vulnerability to error were apparent to many. For instance, those who held to Sabellianism or modalistic monarchianism had likewise to believe that the Father suffered on the cross, for if there is but one person Who has three different names, then when the Son was crucified, it was the same as the Father dying. This became known in the debates as “Patripassiansim,” i.e., the “suffering of the Father.” But such a view was quickly labeled as heretical and was one of the primary factors leading to the rejection of Sabellianism in spite of the fact that it preserved the unity of the Godhead and affirmed the deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But perhaps the greatest weakness of modalistic monarchianism were the times in the Scriptures where God, Messiah, and Spirit appear simultaneously within earth’s history. The mikvah of Yeshua, for instance, has the voice from heaven, the Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and Yeshua immersing in the water of the river. Likewise, when Yeshua speaks of sending the Spirit, or when He prays to the Father, if one adheres to the modalistic monarchian view, Yeshua’s words and actions in these passages must be regarded as misleading, for the Scriptures plainly portray Him as speaking to the Father and even submitting His own will to the will of the Father.

The primary difficulty with monarchianism (whether dynamic or modalistic) was that it denied the individuality of the persons within the Godhead. Clearly the Scriptures portrayed Yeshua as distinct from the Father, as well as the Spirit being distinct from the Messiah and the Father (for the Spirit is sent by the Messiah and proceeds from the Father [Jn 15:26]).

The theological debates that ensued in the late 2nd and 3rd Centuries, therefore, sought to guard against modalism in general. For instance, Origen (185–254 CE) proposed a theology that portrayed the Father as begetting the Son in eternity past, and that the Spirit was brought into existence through the Son. In this way, Origen affirmed the deity of all three members of the Godhead and likewise their eternality (for he taught the “eternal generation” of the Son and of the Spirit). So in maintaining a distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit, and granting to each a distinct hupostasis, Origen effectively avoided modalism. Yet, as Feinberg notes, in guarding against modalism, Origen fell into a different doctrinal error:

But in order to guard against modalism, Origen paid too high a price, for he reasoned that Jesus Christ, though distinct from the Father, was an inferior being, a “secondary God,” since his deity was derived from the Father. The Spirit was also a deity to a lesser degree, deriving his divinity from the Father through the Son.1

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1 John Feinberg, No One Like Him, p. 477.
Clearly, if Yeshua is considered a “secondary God,” then there exists more than one God, for in the Scriptures the One God is portrayed as infinite in all of His being. Thus, if Yeshua is a “lesser divine being,” He surely does not participate in the same divine nature possessed by the Father.

Origen’s view of Yeshua and the Spirit as lesser in divine essence than the Father is analogous to describing a triangle with four sides. Quite obviously, by definition a triangle can have only three sides, so it is impossible for a four-sided triangle to exist. Likewise, the Bible defines God as infinite in all of His attributes. To suggest, therefore, that there can exist a “secondary God” who possess a lesser form of divinity is to redefine God as someone He cannot be. It was because of this significant deficiency in Origen’s trinitarian views, i.e., subordination within the Trinity, that they were condemned by later Church councils.

It was in the midst of the 3rd Century, when these intra-ecclesiastical debates to define the Godhead were fully engaged, that Arius (ca. 250–336 CE), a bishop in Alexandria, North Africa, proposed yet another theological position regarding the relationship of the Father and the Son. Though Arius’s own writings have survived only in fragments, his position is fully outlined by his opponent, Athanasius (ca. 296–373 CE).

Arius insisted that the Son was not co-equal and co-eternal with the Father. Instead He was created by God as an instrument through which the world was created. Therefore there was a time when the Father was and the Son was not.¹

Since according to Arius the Son is not eternal, He likewise could not be divine. Thus Arius denied the deity of Yeshua as well as the deity of the Spirit, or at least he taught that if the Son and the Spirit possessed a divine nature, it was of a different kind when compared to the divine nature of the Father.

As a result of Arius’s teaching in which he denied the Son’s deity, Emperor Constantine convened a special Church Council at Nicea in 325 CE. Athanasius took Arius to task, proving his theology errant and as a result, the Council condemned him as a heretic, resulting in his being exiled for a time. But because of his friendship with Eusebius of Nicomedia, he was allowed eventually to return to Alexandria, where his beliefs gained popularity throughout the 4th Century. Regardless, his theology was unequivocally rejected by the orthodox because of his denial of the deity of the Son. The primary modern-day proponents of Arianism are the Jehovah Witnesses.

As we have seen, the primary issue faced by the early Christian Church as it sought to define the Godhead was how to avoid two opposing errors. On the one side was the need to maintain the infinite oneness of God, that is, to avoid teaching a di-theism or a tri-theism. For in seeking to emphasize the deity of the Son as equal with that of the Father, it appeared too close to affirming a di-theism. And to add the deity of the Spirit as equal with that of the Father and the Son moved toward a tri-theism. On the other side, however, was the issue of accepting the Son and the Spirit as having distinct individuality in relationship to each other and to Father. When the infinite oneness of the Godhead was emphasized, this tended toward some form of Sabellianism or modality, which then de-emphasized or even denied the individual distinc-

tions of the Son and the Spirit as clearly portrayed in the Scriptures. In short, the Christian Church, in requiring a way to define the Godhead in ontological terms, had come face to face with defining the undefinable.1

In the Church Council of 325 CE at Nicea, the Nicene Creed was established, which became the orthodox trinitarian creed. It is clear that the creed was established to overturn the teaching of Arius and to curb its spread within the Christian Church. Of prime importance in the creed was the word ὀμοούσιον (homoousion) meaning “of the same nature, like, similar,” translated below as “of one substance.” This was to make clear that the divine nature of the Son was one and the same with the divine nature of the Father. One should also note that the word “catholic” means “universal” and at this time was not yet descriptive of the later Roman Catholic Church. Below is the Nicene Creed of 325, revised at Constantinople in 381, which became the basic orthodox creed of the 4th Century Christian Church. As we shall see, further debates within the Church required yet further creeds to help define the orthodox position, particularly in theological matters related to the Trinity doctrine.

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty; Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (homoousios) with the Father; by whom all things were made; Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; and He shall come again, with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead; Whose kingdom shall have no end. And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life; Who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; Who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; Who spoke by the prophets. And we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

1 Or to put it another way, the Christian Church, immersed within the Greco-Roman worldview, felt an utter necessity to define God in typical Greco-Roman categories, a form of linear logic foreign to the Scriptures. As we survey the controversies and the Church Councils that sought to settle them, we recognize the impossibility of defining the Godhead within the categories of Aristotelian logic. For God has not defined Himself in such categories, but rather within the pages of Scripture which come to us out of the Semitic culture in which tensions of logic are not required to be solved, but are rather appreciated as yielding a view of God Who is above and beyond human capability to understand.
In considering the mystery of the infinite unity or singularity of God on the one hand, and the obvious expressions of plurality attributed to God in the Scriptures, we continue to seek for words or expressions to define such plurality, or at least to be able to speak about this biblical phenomenon. It seems that generally the attributes of “personhood” as generally defined are easily seen in the self-expressions of the Father and of the Messiah. However, the question of the “personhood” of the Ruach has been raised (and still is in some circles), and so I thought it profitable to consider this question and seek some answers.

**The “Personhood” of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit)**

The question of “personhood” constantly arises whenever the Spirit of God is spoken of in some circles. Should we approach the Spirit of God as the expression of God Himself, or is the Spirit a kind of “force” or “presence” without personal attributes? Furthermore, why does this question come up, and what do we intend to gain by answering it?

**“Personhood” in the Hebrew Scriptures**

Our English word “person” comes from the Latin *persona* which, at its base, means “mask,” as that worn by actors in a play. Hence, the word came to mean “role,” “part,” “character,” and “personality.” In English, the word has generally come to mean “an individual person with his or her distinctions.”

Theologically, the term “person” has usually been defined as possessing 1) will (including the ability to make ethical choices), 2) intellect, and 3) individual subsistence (a person can be identified individually as distinct from other persons and other entities). It is the common and standard procedure of the systematic theologians, upon the basis of this definition, to proceed by showing that the Scriptures surely attribute to the Spirit of God all three of these attributes.

And while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2)

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, (John 15:26)

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. (John 16:13–14)

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God,
Of course, these same characteristics can be found attributed to the Spirit in the Tanach as well:

The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, And His word was on my tongue. (2Sam 23:2)

The Spirit of God has made me, And the breath of the Almighty gives me life. (Job 33:4)

Is it being said, O house of Jacob: ‘Is the Spirit of the LORD impatient? Are these His doings?’ Do not My words do good To the one walking uprightly? (Mic 2:7)

You did send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the ground. (Ps 104:30)

Because they were rebellious against His Spirit, He spoke rashly with his lips. (Ps 106:33)

Teach me to do Your will, For You are my God; Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground. (Ps 143:10)

The fact is obvious that in the Tanach as well as in the Apostolic Scriptures, the Spirit is viewed and spoken of with the same language as God. Furthermore, that which is ascribed to the Almighty (creation, sovereignty, omnipresence, righteousness, holiness) is equally ascribed to His Spirit.

1) Isa 6:9, revelation to the prophet ascribed to Adonai, cf. Acts 28:25, where it is ascribed to the Holy Spirit.
2) Jer 31:31ff is said to be the words which Adonai spoke, but in Heb 10:15 the words are attributed to the Spirit.
3) Creation is attributed to the Spirit, Jb 33:4, but is equally attributed to Elohim (Gen 1:1) as well as to the Messiah, Isa 48:12ff; Jn 1:3; Col 1:16f.

There is no doubt that the Scriptures, when taken as a whole, speak of the Spirit as though He is a person, and attribute to Him works and characteristics ascribed to Adonai in other places. It is also of interest that in the Greek Scriptures, \( \textit{pneu`ma}, \textit{pneuma} \), though usually neuter, when speaking of the Spirit of God is regularly referred to by masculine pronouns (e.g., John 16:13, 14). This fact, coupled with the fact that He leads, teaches, sanctifies, and comforts the individual believer as well as the community of the faithful, would indicate His individual personality. He equips for specific ministry and duty (as Bezzelel in the construction of the Tabernacle, or Barnabas and Paul in outreach ministries) and appoints those who should lead the congregation.

Believers in Yeshua are said to be the Temple of God because the Spirit dwells within them (Eph 2:22; 1Cor 6:19). To lie to the Spirit is the same as lying to God (Acts 5:1-4).

Interestingly enough, the issue of the “personhood” and divinity of the Spirit was never an issue until the Greek fathers grappled with the composition of the godhead. The issue of the divinity of the Spirit was a major agenda
item for the Council of Nicea (325 CE) as well as the Council of Constantinople (381 CE). These, along with individual fathers (such as Tertullian and Athanasius) formulated the final orthodox statement on the person and work of the Spirit, more fully defining what was already contained in the so-called “Apostolic Creed”—“I believe in (on) the Holy Spirit.” This was expanded by the councils with “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the divine (τὸ κύριον, to kurion), the life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who is to be worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son, and who spoke through the prophets.” Athanasius (in the Creed named after him) added that the Spirit was of the same “substance” as the Father and the Son, that He was uncreated, eternal, and omnipotent, equal in majesty and glory, and that He (the Spirit) proceeds from the Father and the Son. The Athanasian Creed became the accepted creed of the Church.

The issue of “personhood” as relates to God in general is entirely missing in the Jewish debates and dialogs. While God is surely outside of the realm of creation in terms of His eternal existence, He is, nonetheless, regularly referred to by anthropological terminology (e.g., He has hands, eyes, feet; He rejoices, grieves, sorrows; He sees, touches, feels, walks, desires, etc.). One’s relationship with HaShem is couched in human terms—the same terms we use for inter-personal relationships with each other.

What is more, there is no single word in the Hebrew that captures the idea of “person.” אַדַם (adam, “man”) or נֶפֶשׁ (nefesh, “soul”) can be used to denote an individual and this is as close as one can come to the idea of “person” in the Hebrew. Particularly נֶפֶשׁ emphasizes the unique qualities that give individuality and uniqueness to each person. Thus, loving God with all of one’s soul (שֶׁמֶן) means to love Him with all of one’s unique gifting—the various talents and attributes which separate one person from all others.

But perhaps, if we seek to find a Hebrew concept that speaks to the issue “personhood,” we should consider the meaning of the word “name” (שם), especially as it is applied to God. That is to say, the Name of God encapsulates His entire “person,” and when we consider the many names by which God reveals Himself to us in the Tanach, perhaps we gain a better understanding of how the semitic or Hebraic perspective of personhood is communicated. For God to proclaim “I will be what I will be” (יהוה, Ex 3:14), and thus enunciate the essential character of His being, is to communicate to us His personhood, for He intends to make know His Name to Israel through the events of the Exodus. Thus, the Name distinguishes Him from all other beings, and does so in the context of His relationship to Israel and His utter sovereignty in the entire universe.

The Hebrew mind was grounded in the natural balance of unity and diversity. The year as a unit was always made up of the mo‘edim (festivals), yet the component parts are so bound together as to be indispensable and thus a clear unity. Indeed, the Torah is one, but its teaching many. It can be entirely contained in the first letter of Bereshit (Genesis), yet even the universe cannot contain it all. Israel is one but made up of the tribes. Indeed, all of Israel can be subsumed in the Messiah. This strong idea of corporate solidarity, in which the actions of one affects the many, no doubt gave a sense of unity in the midst of great diversity. Seeing the characteristics, even the sins of the fathers passed on to the next generation gave a clear understanding of generational solidar-
ity within the scope of clear temporal and physical diversity. There seems to be no problem or question aroused by the enigmatic statement of Moses, “the two shall be one” (Gen 2:24). Apparently then, unlike the Greeks and Romans, the ancient Hebrew could allow a pure unity within the context of diversity without asking the questions of composition. There was no need to posit the manner in which each component part made up its unique part of the whole. Each part is the whole yet the whole consists of each part. This outlook or mindset not only allowed diversity within the sphere of absolute unity, but even required and thrived on such a perspective.

It is not, then, until the Hellenized Gentiles began to stream into the synagogues through the preaching of Yeshua by the Apostles, that the need to find an answer to the question of composition of the godhead surfaces. It is not surprising, either, to find that the Greek answer to this Greek question was cast in very Greek or Western terms. How each “part” functioned and how these “functions” overlapped or cancelled each other out became essential questions requiring precise answers. In attempting to describe the mystery of God, the Greek and Latin fathers gave formulations which, though they may describe biblical truth, are nonetheless often interpretive of it and clearly additional to it. Surely the Hebrew Scriptures describe the activity of God and His Messiah, along with the Spirit, as activities of distinct individuals Who nonetheless work in perfect and concise harmony. Such unity in the sphere of diversity was good enough for the Hebrew as he accepted the mystery of God in general. He accepted God’s multiple “faces” all the while affirming His uniqueness as the only God and as the only Sovereign or King. He never considered that though Adonai is invisible, it would be impossible for Him to reveal Himself and to appear in time and space, to make known His will and to come into relationship with His chosen people. Nor did His eternal and infinite “otherness” conflict with the fact that He dwelt “in the midst of Israel” and “walked in her camp.” He could appear as a man (Gen 18) but never lose His essential character as the One Who is not a man (Jb 9:32); He could seek for Adam without ever diminishing the fact that He is the All-Knowing One; He could “argue” with Abraham, or with Moses without ever giving up the clear fact that He is the One Who controls the outcome of all things.

That the Hebrew/Oriental mind could allow these kinds of categories to exist, yea, need them to exist, without attempting to explain how they could exist in the same sphere is, to the Western mind, an anomaly. But the argument against receiving the Scriptural perspective also falls prey to a Western way of thinking, for the arguments against the clear, distinctive persons of the godhead proceed from the linear logic that prohibits diversity to exist in absolute unity.

The somewhat “modern” position that the Spirit did not “indwell” believers in ancient Israel, but only believers following the “initiation of the New Covenant,” is common and widely held. Generally, such a belief is based upon various passages of the Apostolic Scriptures, of which the following will serve as examples:

But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Yeshua was not yet glorified. (John 7:39)

that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He
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abides with you, and will be in you. (John 14:17)

And it came about that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found some disciples, and he said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” And they said to him, “No, we have not even heard whether there is a Holy Spirit.” And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” And they said, “Into John’s baptism.” And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Yeshua.” And when they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Yeshua. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking with tongues and prophesying. And there were in all about twelve men. (Acts 19:1–7)

The examples given above are often misunderstood because they appear to teach that the Spirit did not actually begin His work until the time of Yeshua. The fact that the Spirit had not yet “been given” might seem to imply that His presence had not yet been made known. Furthermore, Yeshua appears to teach His disciples that while the presence of the Spirit may have been theirs, the intimate fellowship of the indwelling Spirit was something still future for them. Finally, that the disciples of John, apparently living in the desert, had not received the Spirit when they believed (in Yeshua?), and further were not even sure about the existence of the Spirit (or so the sentence seems to imply), is often taken as proof that the indwelling work of the Spirit did not begin until the “Christian Church” was fully established.

There are, of course, obvious flaws in this kind of interpretation. First, we should understand that fundamentally what Yeshua promised in the “giving” of the Spirit (Jn 14) is not the beginning of the Spirit’s work but the continuation of His work in bringing the realization of the Abrahamic promise/covenant, i.e., that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his seed, Yeshua. That the disciples were supposed to wait in Jerusalem until the “power from on high” would come upon them (Lk 24:2) speaks to the fact that they were to receive special power/gifting to accomplish the work of worldwide evangelism, i.e., the ingathering of the nations. Surely the fact that the Spirit was “given” on Shavuot emphasized that He was empowering the believers for the specific work of harvesting the nations. That the Spirit can be “given” in a special empowering does not in any way preclude His normal (and wonderful) work of indwelling all those who “belong to God,” nor that He might enable others at other times for specific works and ministries.

When John writes (John 7:39) that “the Spirit had not yet been given” (οὐ θητ άν Πνεύμα, ὡθ Ἡρω…”ν οὐκετω ἔκδοσθη, literally, “For [the] Spirit was not yet, because Yeshua was not yet glorified”), the language of the original (as presented by the translators who insert the word “given”) would indicate that what John means is simply that the special work of the Spirit in empowering the disciples to gather the nations to faith in Yeshua had not yet been initiated because this would require the glorification of Yeshua (i.e., the return of Yeshua to the Father, implying that the work of the Spirit in empowering believers to witness worldwide is based upon the intercessory work of Messiah).

John 14:17 seems to imply that the indwelling nature of the Spirit is clearly future from the time frame of the narrative. But first, we should consider the language itself and a more careful understanding of the terms used:
The first thing to notice is that the preposition translated “with” (παρά, para) carries the idea of “assisting,” “alongside of” in the sense of support or help (though in terms of spacial relationship, παρά followed by the accusative indicates “alongside of”). Secondly, the 2nd person pronouns throughout the verse (“you”) are plural, thus speaking in the context of the group rather than to a given individual. Thirdly, the two prepositions παρά and ἐν (en) are sometimes synonyms, as Col 4:16 would show:

Col. 4:16 And when this letter is read among (παρά) you, have it also read in (ἐν) the assembly of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea.

Fourthly, the statement of Yeshua confirms that the Spirit was already abiding with the disciples, because the Greek word which carries the meaning “abide” is present tense, so that one might accurately translate “because He keeps on remaining with you....” Finally, the preposition ἐν can just as well mean “among” or “near” (in the sense of close relationship). For example, the common “sit at the right hand” (Eph 1:20; Heb 1:3; 8:1) employs the preposition ἐν where the English has “at.” We surely would not want to translate the phrase “sit in the right hand.” Thus, for Yeshua to say that the Spirit would be “in you (pl)” would mostly likely speak of an abiding presence in the community of the disciples as they travelled to accomplish Yeshua’s work of witnessing, beginning in Jerusalem, then going to Judea, Samaria, and to the farther reaches of the world.

We should therefore understand a text like Acts 19:1ff in the same manner, i.e., that the disciples of John had not heard of the extraordinary gifting of the Spirit enabling believers to evangelize the world, nor had they received such gifting. They may well have known that Yeshua promised such “power from on high” to His disciples, but since they were separated from Jerusalem and the work of the Spirit there, they had not participated in His special outpouring. As such, Paul lays hands upon them and they receive the Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues and prophesying, the two primary gifts needed for the evangelism of the pagans (ability to speak in foreign languages, and boldness to proclaim the gospel).

Thus, the work of the Spirit in ancient Israel in which He “entered in” (בוא, bo’, “came” Ezek 2:2; 3:24), “overpowered” (צָלַה, tzalah, Jud 14:6; 15:14; 1Sa 10:10; 11:6), “clothed” (לָבַשׁ, libesh, Jud 6:34; 1Chron 12:18; 2Chron 24:20), “filled” (מָלַא, mala’, Ex 31:3; 35:31), and “fell upon” (נָפַל, naphal, Ezek 11:5) people, would continue among the disciples as they carried out Yeshua’s mission to the nations.

The “newness” of the Spirit’s work after the ascension of Yeshua, then, centers primarily in quantity not quality of expression. Through His empowering, everyone who was truly born from above would be a witness of Yeshua.
in order that the world would come to know Who He is and what He has accomplished within the scope of the Father’s plan of redemption. The establishment of the “new covenant” surely involves the work of the Spirit (note Is. 44:3; Joel 2:28-29; Zech. 12:10 which promises the pouring out of the Spirit upon Israel in the last days) in an expanded and evident way. Indeed, every time the covenant was renewed in the history of Israel, the group to which it was renewed was larger than before. Since at the initiation of the covenant to Abraham the Gentiles are specifically mentioned as those who would benefit from its blessings, we should not marvel that in the unfolding of the covenant, God Himself would assure the ingathering of the nations through the infallible work of His Spirit.

This is not a new work in “kind,” only new in “scope,” for never before had the world-wide application of the covenant become a reality. Beginning with the outpouring of the Spirit on the Shavuot following Yeshua’s death, the Spirit has empowered believers to bring in the final harvest of the nations.
Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss why the biblical teaching of plurality within the Godhead is such a controversial subject for many in the Messianic movement.

2. Why does the question of plurality within the Godhead present itself with more difficult for Messianics than for the mainline Christian Church?

3. Discuss the meaning of אֶחָד, ‘echad, “one” in the Shema (Deut 6:4). What is its primary meaning within the larger context?

4. Talk about the biblical doctrine of monotheism (that there is one and only God). Review the texts collected above on pp. 97–99). Why is this doctrine so essential to every aspect of our faith?

5. Discuss the texts which are used to show that the Scriptures speak of a plurality in the Godhead (pp. 99–111 above). Which of these texts do you consider the strongest for substantiating a plurality in the Godhead and why?

6. Make an honest assessment of the Trinity doctrine as developed by the Christian Church. In the historical development of the Trinity doctrine, did the Church actually believe and teach that there is more than one God? Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so often portrayed by opponents as though it teaches three Gods?

7. Discuss the historical factors that prompted the Christian Church to develop the doctrine of the Trinity. Re-read the Nicene Creed of 325 (p. 122), seeking to understand it within its historical context.

8. How can the plurality of the Godhead (based upon the Scripture texts which affirm this to be true) and the truth that there is one and only one God be affirmed without diminishing either of these truths?

9. Discuss the issue of the “personhood” of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). What difference does it make in our understanding of God’s self-revelation whether or not we affirm the personhood of the Ruach?