

# Smuggling Theology Into “Out of the Silent Planet”

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn provides an overview of how C.S. Lewis wove theology into his ‘Out of the Silent Planet,’ the first book of his space trilogy,*

*Out of the Silent Planet*, C.S. Lewis’ first foray into the science-fiction genre, was originally published in 1938.<sup>{1}</sup> Lewis, who appreciated the science-fiction stories of authors like H. G. Wells, was nonetheless troubled by elements in these stories that were morally and intellectually objectionable. According to Alister McGrath, Lewis realized “that the forms of science fiction . . . used to promote various forms of atheism and materialism could . . . be used to *critique* these viewpoints and advocate an alternative.”<sup>{2}</sup> This is what Lewis *did* in *Out of the Silent Planet*—and what he *continued* to do in two follow-up books: *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. Together, these books are commonly known as “the Space Trilogy.”

*Out of the Silent Planet* tells the story of Dr. Elwin Ransom, who is drugged, kidnapped, and taken aboard a spaceship traveling to Mars. Weston and Devine, the two men who kidnap Ransom, have been to Mars before and believe that the planet’s inhabitants want them to bring back another human being (wrongly assuming that the person *may* be wanted as a sacrificial offering). Weston is a physicist, interested in finding potential planets for humanity to colonize once our own planet becomes uninhabitable. Devine is an investor, hoping to make some money from the enterprise.



On their way to Mars (known as Malacandra to its own inhabitants), Ransom learns that his life may be in danger once they reach the planet. Hence, shortly after their

arrival, Ransom escapes his kidnappers and ends up meeting a creature called a Hross, one of the planet's native inhabitants. He soon discovers that, much like himself, these are intelligent and moral beings. Indeed, in some ways they, along with the other intelligent species on the planet, are superior to human beings, for they have not been infected with the same moral illness that plagues our own species. Eventually, Ransom even meets the designated ruler of the planet, a spiritual intelligence referred to as an Oyarsa. He then learns why earth is known as "the silent planet."[\[3\]](#)

After publishing the book, Lewis confided to one interested correspondent that most of the early reviews had completely missed of Christian theology that he had woven into his narrative. He humorously noted that, apparently, "any amount of theology can now be smuggled into" such a book without anyone's even noticing.[\[4\]](#) So how much theology did Lewis "smuggle into" *Out of the Silent Planet*? That's what we'll discuss in the remainder of this article.

## The Heavens Declare the Glory

As Weston, Devine, and Ransom travel through space on their way to Mars, Ransom is surprised by just how *good* he is feeling: courageous, joyful, alert, and full of life. He reflects upon the fact that he had been educated to regard space as "the black, cold vacuity" separating the worlds. He comes to realize, however, that this was all wrong. The term "space," he muses, was utterly inadequate "for this . . . ocean of radiance in which they swam." He thus *rejects* the term, observing that "Older thinkers had been wiser when they named it simply the heavens—the heavens which declared the glory."[\[5\]](#)

Ransom is here reflecting upon the words of King David in Psalm 19:1, "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands." As one commentator remarks,

“David was moved by observing that the heavens, under the dominating influence of the sun, declare the splendor of God’s handiwork.”{6} The reference to the sun here is apt, for it is largely through the influence of the solar rays that Ransom feels “his body and mind daily rubbed and scoured and filled with new vitality.”{7}

Of course, we must remember that Lewis is here writing science *fiction*—and not science fact. While “the substitution of heaven for space” was Lewis’s “favorite idea in the book,” he also acknowledged “that the rays in interplanetary space, so far from being beneficial,” would actually be harmful to us.{8} But Lewis was attempting to reintroduce a conception of wonder and beauty into the world. He wanted to move his readers’ understanding of “space” from something merely cold, dark, and dead, to a conception of the “heavens” as something radiant and alive with the goodness and bounty of their Creator. And this, in the fictional (and even mythological) world of the story, he has arguably achieved.

Indeed, it’s one of the reasons that many dislike referring to these books as “the *space* trilogy.” Such language misses the fact that Lewis was attempting to shift our attention from the darkness and deadness of “space” to the glory and splendor of the “heavens.” It’s just one of the ways in which Lewis was attempting to reclaim for God a genre of literature that was so often dominated by atheistic and materialistic forms of thinking.{9}

## War in Heaven

Before we go any further, we must address the meaning of Lewis’s title, “*Out of the Silent Planet*.” The novel concerns a voyage from Earth to Mars, and details the adventures of the main character, Dr. Elwin Ransom, after his arrival. In the novel, Earth is known as “the *silent* planet.” But why?

The answer has partly to do with “smuggled theology” and partly with the mythological world of the story created by Lewis. In this mythological world, we are introduced to the idea that each planet in our solar system is ruled by a very great, though still created, spiritual being. These beings were created by God and are something like a cross between a Christian archangel and a Roman god or goddess. Hence, the spirit that governs Mars is something like a cross between the archangel Michael and the Roman god Mars (devoid, of course, of all the negative characteristics traditionally ascribed to Mars in Greco-Roman mythology). In fact, this being is a loyal servant of God and was created (at least in part) for the purpose of ruling the planet assigned to it. In the novel, such a ruling spiritual power is referred to an *Oyarsa*.

Eventually, Ransom meets this ruling power and learns why Earth is known as “the silent planet.” He is told that the *Oyarsa* of *our* world was once very great, even greater than that of Mars.<sup>{1}</sup> Unfortunately, however, he became “bent” (or evil). This happened in the distant past, before there was any life on Earth. Because this “Bent One” desired to destroy “other worlds besides his own,” there was “great war” in the heavens. Eventually, he was “bound . . . in the air of his own world.” “There,” Ransom learns, “doubtless he lies to this hour.”<sup>{11}</sup> The other planets have no communication with Earth. It is “silent.”

Do you see what Lewis is doing? In the fictional world of the novel, he is telling us a story very similar to that of the fall of the devil. In the Bible, the Apostle Paul refers to Satan as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:1-2) and the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4). Lewis is doing something similar in his description of the “Bent One” who rules the Earth as a rebel against God. But Lewis goes much further than this.

## War on Earth

Above, we left Ransom, the hero of C. S. Lewis's novel, *Out of the Silent Planet*, deep in conversation with the divinely appointed spiritual ruler of Mars. After telling Ransom that Earth, alone among the planets in our solar system, is "silent," being ruled by a "bent" (or evil) power, the Martian ruler then says something quite intriguing.

He tells Ransom that they do not think that "Maleldil" (more on this in a moment) would completely surrender Earth to the "Bent One." Indeed, he says, "there are stories among us" that Maleldil has done some "strange" and wonderful things, even personally appearing on Earth and "wrestling with the Bent One" for the right to rule. "But of this," he says, "we know less than you; it is a thing we desire to look into." [{12}](#)

So who is Maleldil, and what exactly has he done? In the world of the novel, Maleldil is the name for God in the Old Solar language, which Ransom has gradually learned during his time on Mars. [{13}](#) Hence, the Martian ruler is essentially telling Ransom that they do not believe that God would completely surrender Earth to the devil. Indeed, they have even heard stories that God (or Maleldil) has visited "the silent planet" and done battle with the evil one. He admits that there is much they do not know about all this but says that he (and other loyal servants of God) long to look into these things.

Those familiar with the Bible will doubtless see what Lewis is doing here, for he concludes this passage with what is basically a biblical quotation. The Apostle Peter wrote of "the prophets who prophesied about the grace" that was to be ours in Christ. So great was the content of this revelation, notes Peter, that even "angels long to look" into such things (1 Peter 1:10-12). Thus, as Christiana Hale rightly notes, the "strange counsel" that Maleldil has taken, and the wonderful things he has done, "the things that all the angels desire to look into, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the Incarnation,

birth, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.”{14}

Once again, therefore, we see Lewis “smuggling theology” into his interplanetary space adventure. In this case, though not stating it explicitly, he clearly alludes to the whole gospel message about Jesus. Next, we’ll consider one final example of “smuggled theology” in C. S. Lewis’s *Out of the Silent Planet*.

## **Divine Providence and the Martial Spirit**

Although God, who is known as Maleldil in the novel, is mentioned repeatedly, He is always mentioned in the third person. We hear about things that Maleldil *has done, is doing,* or may one day *do*, but we do not hear directly from God (or Maleldil) himself. Nevertheless, it is clear that He is ultimately in charge, and He is providentially at work in and through His creatures.{15}

For example, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars, tells Ransom (the hero of the novel) that it was only by Maleldil that he had been able to save his own planet from the destructive rage of the “Bent One” (or devil). Indeed, it was only by Maleldil that the heavenly host were able to stop the “Bent One’s” ambitious cruelty and confine him to the Earth.{16} Moreover, we learn that Maleldil has done marvelous things and even personally visited Earth to do battle with the devil.{17}

Lewis thus portrays God (or Maleldil) not only as a king, but also as a warrior. He is characterized (in an appropriate way) by what might be called the “warrior” or “martial spirit.” Moreover, the spiritual power that Maleldil created to govern Mars is also (like the god of Roman mythology) imbued with the martial spirit. He, too, is a warrior, loyally engaged in fighting in the service of God. In light of this, once we learn that Ransom has been called to Mars by its planetary ruler, we can rightly surmise that it was, in fact, *God’s will*

for Ransom to make this journey. We might even guess that one of the purposes of this journey was to develop the “martial spirit” in Ransom himself.

As Christiana Hale observes, “Lewis does not randomly pick Mars as the location, as if any alien planet would do. No, he chooses Mars for a reason, and an enormous part of that reason is to mold Ransom into a Martial character.”<sup>{18}</sup> In other words, God (or Maleldil) wants to develop certain martial virtues in Ransom, things like courage, strength, determination, perseverance, and grit. Indeed, this is providentially necessary, for He is preparing Ransom for something far greater in the future. Hence, through the providence of God and the influence of Mars, we witness Ransom’s growth in the martial spirit, thus preparing him for [his next great adventure](#) on a different alien world, that of Perelandra.

### Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1965).
2. Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.
3. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.
4. C. S. Lewis to Sister Penelope CSMV, August 9, 1939, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, vol. 2, Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949 (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 262.
5. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 32.
6. Allen P. Ross, “Psalms,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament Edition*. ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Victor Books, 1985), 807.
7. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 31-32.
8. C. S. Lewis to Mrs. Stuart Moore (Evelyn Underhill), October 29, 1938, in *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, ed.



Walter Hooper, vol. 2, *Books, Broadcasts and War 1931-1949* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2004), 233-34.

9. See Alister McGrath, *C. S. Lewis: A Life: Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2013), 234-35.

10. See Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 120-21.

11. All quotations in the paragraph are taken from Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.

12. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 121.

13. Christiana Hale, *Deeper Heaven: A Reader's Guide to C. S. Lewis's Ransom Trilogy* (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Press, 2020), 155.

14. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 88.

15. Lewis, *Out of the Silent Planet*, 67-8.

16. *Ibid.*, 121.

17. *Ibid.*

18. Hale, *Deeper Heaven*, 70.

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# Ancient Perspectives on Happiness

*After examining several pagan view of happiness from the ancient world, Dr. Michael Gleghorn argues for the view of Christian philosopher Augustine.*

The Declaration of Independence says that all men “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,” including “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”[\[1\]](#) Although we could say a lot about this statement, I want to focus on that very last phrase: the pursuit of happiness. What exactly is happiness? And how should we pursue it in order to have the



best chance of attaining it? These questions not only interest us, they also interested some of the greatest thinkers from the far-flung past.

So what *is* happiness? An online dictionary says that happiness “results from the possession . . . of what one considers good.”<sup>{2}</sup> A good start, but it raises another question, namely, what should we consider *good*? Many things can be described as *good*: a cat, a job, a lover, and a book may all qualify. And each of these things might even make us *happy* . . . at least, for a while. But is there a *good* that offers us genuine and lasting happiness? If so, what is it? Now we’re getting closer to what the ancients were interested in knowing about happiness.



Of course, as you can probably guess, many different answers were proposed. A few thought that happiness could be found in the pleasures of the flesh. But most believed you needed something a bit more . . . *lofty*, shall we say, in order to experience *real* happiness, things like friendship, peace of mind, virtue, and even God. One thing they virtually all agreed on was that a truly good and happy life ought to be lived with a sense of mission or purpose. Hence, the ancients did not think about happiness primarily in terms of just “having a good time.” Instead, they thought there was an important *moral* component to happiness. As Christian theologian Ellen Charry notes, for the ancients, happiness “comes from using oneself consistently, intentionally, and effectively, and hence it is a moral undertaking.”<sup>{3}</sup>

The link between morality and happiness has, I fear, become rather under-appreciated in our own day. But important as it is, many (including myself) don’t believe that this can be the *final* word on happiness. So in an effort to find out what is, we’ll spend the rest of this article looking first at some of the most important pagan perspectives on happiness from the ancient world before concluding with a Christian proposal by

possibly the greatest theologian in the early church, a man named Augustine.[{4}](#)

## Epicureanism

Let's begin with Epicureanism. Epicurus lived from 341–270 B.C. and is often viewed as the poster boy for a hedonistic lifestyle. A popular gourmet cooking site, [epicurious.com](http://epicurious.com), creatively plays off this reputation to celebrate the pleasures of a great meal.[{5}](#) But as we'll see, Epicurus was not the total "party animal" that people often think.[{6}](#)

Although he rightly regarded physical pleasure as a good thing, and believed that it was natural for us to want it, he personally thought that friendship and mental tranquility were even better. It was these latter sources of happiness, and not merely the pleasures of the flesh, which Epicurus thought of as the greatest goods. In order to attain them, he even commended a life of virtue. After all, it's the virtuous person, living at peace with his neighbors, who generally has far less cause for fear and worry than someone who's been up to no good. Such a person is thus more likely to experience the true joys of friendship and mental tranquility than his non-virtuous counterpart.[{7}](#)

As you can probably see, there are aspects of Epicureanism that even a Christian can appreciate. But there are problems with this view as well. For example, while Epicurus did not deny either God or the gods, he did teach that they were rather unconcerned about human affairs, and he denied that there would be a final judgment. For him, death was simply the end of existence and you didn't need to worry that God would judge you for your deeds in an afterlife. But these ideas made many people uncomfortable.

For instance, the Roman philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.) reacted strongly against Epicureanism in his book *The Nature of the Gods*. And Lactantius, an early Christian writer (A.D.

250-325), believed that only the fear of God “guards the mutual society of men.”[{8}](#) In his view, if people think they aren’t accountable to God, society will likely be in trouble. Hence, many thinkers worried that Epicureanism might lead to an amoral—or even *immoral*—pursuit of pleasure as the highest good of life. And unfortunately, this “can just as easily lead to debauchery and . . . selfishness as it can to the simple, honest life style of Epicurus.”[{9}](#)

So while the Epicurean view of happiness has some things in its favor, there are several reasons for rejecting it.

## **Stoicism**

Stoicism was another important school of thought that addressed the issue of human happiness. In the ancient world, it “was the single most successful and longest-lasting movement in Greco-Roman philosophy.”[{10}](#) The Stoics’ manly, morally tough philosophy of life had broad appeal in the ancient world. It attracted slaves like Epictetus (ca. A.D. 55-ca. 135) as well as the Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121-180). Even many of the early church fathers admired the Stoic emphasis on moral virtue and integrity.[{11}](#)

So what did the Stoics think about human happiness? According to Ellen Charry, the Stoics viewed “the goal of life” as human flourishing. This was understood, however, not in terms of having a long life or being financially successful. Rather, it was viewed “as maintaining one’s dignity and grace whatever may happen.”[{12}](#) The Stoics understood that things don’t always work out as we want. Life throws us many curve balls and, if we’re not prepared, we’re bound to be disappointed.

Their solution? In a statement reminiscent of the Buddha’s teaching, the Stoic Epictetus declared, “Demand not that events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen, and you will get on well.”[{13}](#) We often don’t have any control over what goes on around us. But we can control how we

react to it. By knowing the good and morally virtuous thing to do, and by consistently choosing to do this, one attains the highest happiness of which human beings are capable; namely, “the enjoyment of self that comes from the conviction that one is living a principled life of the highest integrity.”[{14}](#) This, in a nutshell, is the Stoic conception of human happiness.

But there are some problems with this view. Although Christians will readily cheer the Stoic commitment to a life of moral virtue, they’ll nonetheless deny that such a life is ever really possible apart from the grace of God. As the Christian theologian Augustine observed, Stoicism fails to adequately address the problem of human sinfulness. Moreover, he thought, it holds out the false hope that one can achieve happiness through self-effort. But as Augustine wisely saw, only God can make us truly happy. Hence, while there’s much to admire about Stoicism, as a philosophy of human happiness it must ultimately disappoint.[{15}](#)

## Neo-Platonism

Having now surveyed Epicureanism and Stoicism, and found each of them wanting, we must next turn to Neo-Platonism to see if it fares any better.

Probably the most important Neo-Platonist philosopher was a man named Plotinus, who lived in the third century A.D. Plotinus believed that in the beginning was the One, “the supreme transcendent principle” and the “ground of all being.”[{16}](#) Everything which now exists ultimately originated from the One through a series of emanations. Since everything proceeds from the One *not* by a process of creation, but rather by a process of emanation, “Creator and creation . . . are not sharply distinguished in Plotinus’s account.”[{17}](#)

Although this is certainly different from the biblical view, in which there *is* a clear distinction between Creator and

creation, it would probably not be fair to simply call Plotinus a pantheist—that is, someone who believes that “all” of reality is “Divine.” According to one scholar, Plotinus tried “to steer a middle course” between pure pantheism (on the one hand) and creation by God (on the other).<sup>{18}</sup> But since everything that exists emanates or proceeds from the One, Plotinus’s view is certainly *close* to pantheism. And it is thus quite different from the biblical doctrine of creation.

But how is this relevant to Plotinus’s perspective on the nature of human happiness? According to Plotinus, since everything (including mankind) emanates out of the One, human beings can only truly find happiness by realizing their “oneness” with the One. In Plotinus’s view, “Happiness resides in a person’s realization that she is one with divinity.”<sup>{19}</sup> According to Plotinus, then, realizing one’s “oneness” with the One is the key to human happiness.

Are there any problems with this view? Although there’s much to admire about Neo-Platonism, and while it was quite influential in the early church, it was never entirely accepted, and that for several reasons. From a Christian perspective, Neo-Platonism ultimately has a defective view of God, creation, human nature, the meaning of salvation, and what happens to a person after death. In other words, while the system is very religious, it’s *not* Christianity. And thus, while we can agree with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, we must nonetheless reject his system on the grounds that he’s not pointing us to the one *true* God.

## **Augustinianism**

Having previously surveyed some of the most important perspectives on happiness from the ancient world, we’ll now bring our discussion to a close by briefly considering the thought of Augustine, one of the greatest theologians of the early church. Augustine lived from A.D. 354 to 430 and was

familiar with the various perspectives on happiness which we've already examined.

Like the Epicureans, he believed that our happiness is at least tangentially related to our physical well-being. Like the Stoics, he believed that a life of integrity and moral virtue was important for human happiness. And like the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus, Augustine thought that true human happiness could only be found in God.

Nevertheless, Augustine views each of these perspectives as ultimately inadequate for all who long to experience *lasting* human happiness (and Augustine thinks that's pretty much all of us). After all, neither physical well-being nor a virtuous life can grant us lasting happiness if our existence ends at death. And while he agrees with Plotinus that happiness can only be found in God, Augustine (like all Christians) is convinced that Plotinus ultimately has a defective view of God. [{20}](#)

So where is true and lasting happiness to be found? Ellen Charry sums up Augustine's view quite nicely when she writes, "Happiness is knowing, loving, and enjoying God securely." [{21}](#) In Augustine's view, happiness is a condition in which one's desires are realized. Happy is he who has what he wants," he writes in his little book on happiness. [{22}](#) But he also believed that what we all really want is the *everlasting* possession of the *greatest* good that can be had. That is, we want the best that there is—and we want it forever!

But since the greatest good can only be God, the source and foundation of every other good there is (or ever will be), it seems that what we ultimately want, whether we realize it or not, is God! And if we not only want the best that there is, but want it forever, it seems that we must ultimately want the very thing God freely offers us in Christ, namely, everlasting life in the presence of God. The psalmist urges us to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:8). And those who do

are promised joy in His presence and “eternal pleasures” at His right hand (Psalm 16:11).

This, then, is Augustine’s view on human happiness. In my opinion, it’s far and away the best perspective that we’ve examined in this article, and I hope you’ll think so, too.

## Notes

1. Cited from the text of the Declaration of Independence at [www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html) (accessed August 26, 2011).
2. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, inc., s.v. “happiness,” [dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/happiness) (accessed August 26, 2011).
3. Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 3-4.
4. Ellen Charry surveys the views of each of these persons and perspectives in the first two chapters of her book *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.
5. For more, check out [www.epicurious.com](http://www.epicurious.com)
6. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.
7. This paragraph is indebted to the discussion of Epicurus in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 70-71.
8. Lactantius, “A Treatise on the Anger of God,” in *Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries*, ed. A. Cleveland Coxe, Ante-Nicene Fathers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 269; cited in Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 8.
9. Stanley R. Obitts, “Epicureanism,” in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 358.



10. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
11. Gary T. Burke, "Stoics, Stoicism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1056.
12. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 9.
13. The Enchiridion, VIII; cited in Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 71.
14. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 10.
15. This paragraph is indebted to Ellen Charry's discussion of Augustine's critique of Stoicism in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 14-15.
16. Everett Ferguson, "Neoplatonism," in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 756.
17. Solomon and Higgins, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 122.
18. Frederick Copleston, *Greece and Rome*, vol. 1 of *A History of Philosophy* (Garden City: Image Books, 1985), 467.
19. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 19.
20. This paragraph and the one that precedes it are generally indebted to Charry's discussion in *God and the Art of Happiness*, 3-62.
21. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness*, 29.
22. De beata vita 10; cited in John Bussanich, "Happiness, Eudaimonism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 413.

# The All-Present God

*“As Charles Haddon Spurgeon once observed, there are very few things as uplifting for the heart and the mind as a serious study of the being and attributes of God. Hopefully, this little article on God’s omnipresence will encourage some others to take up such studies for themselves. They won’t be disappointed.” –Dr. Michael Gleghorn*

## Introduction



We can never get away from God. To some, this is quite threatening. To others, it is merely irritating or annoying. But for those who know and love God, it is deeply comforting and consoling, for it means that we are never alone.

In this article, I want to discuss an attribute of God that is often referred to as *omnipresence*. It’s a big word, but all it means is that God is present everywhere. It was while meditating on this attribute that David was led to pen the oft-quoted verses of Psalm 139:

Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast (vv. 7-10).[\[1\]](#)

Clearly David took comfort in the fact that he could never get away from God, that there was nowhere he could go where God was not.

In a similar manner, King Solomon also spoke of God's omnipresence in his prayer at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. He said, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (1 Kings 8:27). Here, Solomon recognizes that unlike human beings, God's presence cannot be localized to merely one place on the earth. Indeed, the universe itself is not sufficient to contain the being of its Creator!

So how is the doctrine that God is everywhere present to be understood? And what practical applications might this have for our lives?

To begin, it is helpful to observe that just as the doctrine of God's eternity attempts to explain how God is related to time, the doctrine of omnipresence attempts to explain how He is related to space. Does God completely transcend space? That is, might He exist completely "outside" or "beyond" our spatial universe in some sense? Or is it better to think of Him as existing everywhere throughout all space? Then again, could it be the case that He somehow exists both within *and* beyond the created order? Obviously, these are deep and difficult questions. But since thinking through such things is part of what it means to love God with our minds, let us ponder these matters as carefully as we can (Mark 12:30).

## **God and Space**

Other Scriptures certainly seem to affirm God's omnipresence. God asks the prophet Jeremiah, "Am I only a God nearby . . . and not a God far away? . . . Do I not fill heaven and earth?" (23:23-24). Here the Lord affirms that He is present everywhere, that there is nowhere in heaven and earth where He is not. But how should we understand this?

Should we think of God as "spread out" through the universe like an invisible gas? Although this might be the mental image

which most naturally suggests itself to our minds, we should carefully avoid embracing it. After all, "God is spirit" (John 4:24). And a spirit, unlike a gas, is a *non-physical* entity.[{2}](#) If we think of God as being spread throughout the universe like an invisible gas, then we might be tempted to think of God as only *partially present* at any one place. For instance, we might come to believe that there is a small amount of God in our bedroom, even more of Him throughout our house, and more still in the three-mile radius around our house. And this, I'm sure you would agree, is crazy![{3}](#) We *don't* want to think of God's omnipresence in *these* terms.

Instead, if we want to think of God as existing everywhere in space (and many theologians would caution us against this), then we ought to think of Him as being *fully present* at every point of space *at the same time*. Now admittedly, this is a difficult concept to grasp. But an analogy may help to clarify the point.

A number of Christian theologians and philosophers have suggested that we should think of God's relationship to the world as similar to the soul's relationship to the body. On one construal of this view, the soul is held to be "spatially present in the body," but "not extended throughout it." Instead, it's thought to be "somehow wholly present at all points in its body." In a similar way, it is said, we can also think of God as being "spatially located in the universe" and yet "wholly present at every point in it."[{4}](#)

Of course, it must be emphasized that this is *only* an analogy. I'm certainly *not* suggesting that the world really *is* God's body![{5}](#) The analogy is intended simply to help us understand *one way* in which God might be thought of as omnipresent. But it's not the only way.

## **God and Spacelessness[{6}](#)**

Many Christian philosophers do not believe that we should

think of God as *literally present in space*. Instead, they believe that God completely transcends space, existing “beyond” or “outside” the spatial universe which we inhabit. But if this is so, then how do they think the doctrine of God’s omnipresence should be understood? Moreover, *why* do they believe that God is not present in space?

Let’s take the second question first. Why think that God isn’t present in space? Well, say these thinkers, consider the doctrine of creation. God created the universe *ex nihilo*, or “out of nothing.” Literally nothing existed (except God) “before” He brought the universe into being.[{7}](#) In other words, prior to creation, not even space existed. Rather, space is brought into being by God at the moment of creation.[{8}](#) But if God does not exist in space *prior* to creating the universe, then why should we think that He is located in space *after* bringing the universe into being? According to this view, there just isn’t any good reason for thinking that He is.

But wait a minute! If God isn’t located in space, then how can it still be said that He’s present everywhere? Doesn’t this amount to a denial of God’s omnipresence? According to proponents of this view, we should understand God’s omnipresence to mean that He both *knows* what is happening everywhere in space and that He is *active* at every point in space.[{9}](#) In other words, God not only knows what is happening everywhere on earth, He also knows what is happening elsewhere in our solar system and in every galaxy of the universe. Moreover, He is continually exercising His power to sustain the universe in being and He is able to act anywhere He desires throughout this vast cosmos which He has created. Hence, even if God is not *literally* present in space, advocates of this view still insist that He both knows what is happening and is able to exercise His power anywhere in the world at any time He chooses.

Having now considered the two major views regarding how we

should understand the doctrine of God's omnipresence, we'll briefly look at some of the difficulties that are raised by this doctrine.

## Difficulties with Omnipresence

Recall how David in Psalm 139 affirms that there is nowhere he can flee from God's presence, for God is present everywhere. But this raises a difficulty, for elsewhere in the Bible David says something which seems to directly contradict this sentiment.

Pursued by Saul in the Desert of Ziph, David, who had the opportunity to kill Saul but humbly refused, pleaded with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord" (1 Sam. 26:20). But wait a minute! If God is present everywhere, as David elsewhere affirms, then what sense does it make to speak of dying far from the presence of the Lord? How can one be far from the presence of the Lord if the Lord is present everywhere?

It seems to me that the best way of handling these difficulties is to make an important distinction regarding the way in which God is everywhere present. What I mean is this. Although God is present everywhere, He is *uniquely present* at certain times and places when He desires to reveal Himself in some special way.

The best example of this is the unique incarnation of God the Son in the man Christ Jesus. Jesus was one person with two natures, one divine and one human. According to His divine nature, He remained omnipresent even during His time on earth. Yet in his human nature, Jesus was limited (like all other men) to a particular time and place. And it was in this more limited sense that God specially chose to reveal Himself to us. Hence, in the Gospel of John we learn that God's grace and truth, His love and salvation, His blessing and glory, are all uniquely revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. [{10}](#)

In a similar way, concerning the example of David above, we can say that while God was certainly present in the Desert of Ziph, He had chosen to specially reveal Himself to the people of Israel. He was thus present to the people of Israel in a way that He was not present to the other nations. It is in this sense that David pleads with Saul not to shed his blood "far from the presence of the Lord."

## **The Importance of Omnipresence**

Let's think about this in terms of a "good news/bad news" approach, beginning with the "bad news" first. Although God's omnipresence, considered in itself, is really only good news, there is certainly a sense in which sinful men and women, much like you and me, might be tempted to regard this doctrine as bad news. Why is that?

Well, if God is always present, then like it or not, every evil thought, word, or deed that we think, say, or do is always done directly in His presence! That's a sobering thought, isn't it? There is literally *nothing* that we can ever do in a hidden or secret way. Whenever we lie or steal, commit adultery or take God's name in vain, we do so in the presence of the God to whom we are all ultimately accountable. Indeed, Jesus warned that on the day of judgment we will even have to give an account for every "careless word" which we have spoken (Matt. 12:36)! This, at least for sinners like ourselves, is what we might call the bad news of God's omnipresence.

But as I said previously, the reality is that God's omnipresence is actually very good news. For it means that no matter what our circumstances, God is always present! When we're anxious or scared, God is there. When we're under pressure at work or having difficulties in a relationship, God is there. Yes; even if we're sick or dying, God is present then, too. David wrote in the Psalms, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they



comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). For the one who’s been reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ, the fact that God is always present is very “good news” indeed!

I hope you can see that the doctrine of God’s omnipresence is not just an interesting issue for philosophers and theologians to ponder (although it is certainly that). It’s also an extremely practical doctrine that is highly relevant to almost every aspect of our lives. For wherever we go, whatever joys we encounter or difficulties we face, God is there. And for the Christian, He is present as our Protector, Savior, Counselor, and Friend!

## Notes

1. All Scriptural citations are taken from the New International Version of the Bible.
2. See, for example, Jesus’ remarks in Luke 24:39: “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”
3. I got this insight from William Lane Craig, “Doctrine of God,” Part 8 [Podcast] (accessed August 2010), available from <http://bit.ly/9ruR74>.
4. These quotations come from the discussion in J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 509-10.
5. Of course, some theologians (e.g., Process theologians) *do* believe that the universe is God’s body. According to them, God is like the soul of the world (which is His body). This view is usually termed *panentheism*, which is not the same as pantheism.
6. This section is particularly indebted to the discussion of omnipresence in Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 509-11.
7. I put “before” in quotation marks since, if God is timeless without creation, there really isn’t literally any temporal moment “before” God brings the universe into being. The

universe, along with time itself, simply has its beginning at the moment of creation. Nevertheless, for the purpose of communicating to our radio audience in the limited amount of time available, it is much easier to simply say “before” creation.

8. Moreland and Craig, *Philosophical Foundations*, 510.

9. *Ibid.*, 510-11.

10. In this regard, please see John 1:1, 14-18; 3:16-21.

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# Reasonable Faith – Why Biblical Christianity Rings True

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn briefly examines some of the reasons why noted Christian philosopher William Lane Craig believes that Christianity is an eminently reasonable faith.*

## Reasonable Faith

One of the finest Christian philosophers of our day is William Lane Craig. Although he has become very well known for his debates with atheists and skeptics, he’s also a prolific writer. To date, he has authored or edited over thirty books and more than a hundred scholarly articles.<sup>{1}</sup> His published work explores such fascinating topics as the evidence for the existence of God, the historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and God’s relationship to time. In 2007 he started a web-based apologetics ministry called Reasonable Faith ([www.reasonablefaith.org](http://www.reasonablefaith.org)). The site features both scholarly

and popular articles written by Craig, audio and video recordings of some of his debates, lectures, and interviews, answers to questions from his readers, and much more.

But before he launched the Reasonable Faith Web site, Craig had also authored a book by the same title. One of the best apologetics books on the market, a revised and updated third edition was recently released. His friend and colleague, the philosopher J. P. Moreland, endorsed Craig's ministry with these words:



It is hard to overstate the impact that William Lane Craig has had for the cause of Christ. He is simply the finest Christian apologist of the last half century, and his academic work justifies ranking him among the top one percent of practicing philosophers in the Western world. Besides that, he is a winsome ambassador for Christ, an exceptional debater, and a man with the heart of an evangelist. . . . I do not know of a single thinker who has done more to raise the bar of Christian scholarship in our generation than Craig. He is one of a kind, and I thank God for his life and work.[{2}](#)

Although the book has been described as “an admirable defense of basic Christian faith,”[{3}](#) many readers will find the content quite advanced. According to Craig, “*Reasonable Faith* is intended primarily to serve as a textbook for seminary level courses on Christian apologetics.”[{4}](#) For those without much prior training in philosophy, theology, and apologetics, this book will make for some very demanding reading in places. But for those who want to seriously grapple with an informed and compelling case for the truth of Christianity, this book will richly repay one's careful and patient study.

Although we cannot possibly do it justice, in the remainder of this article we will briefly consider at least some of the reasons why Craig believes that biblical Christianity is an

eminently reasonable faith.

## The Absurdity of Life Without God

Imagine for a moment that there is no God. What implications would this have for human life? Science tells us that the universe is not eternal, but that it rather had a beginning. But if there is no God, then the universe must have come into being, uncaused, out of nothing! What's more, the origin of life is nothing more than an unintended by-product of matter, plus time, plus chance.<sup>{5}</sup> No one planned or purposed for life to arise, for if there is no God, there was no one to plan or purpose it. And human beings? We are just the unpredictable result of a long evolutionary process that never had us in mind. In fact, if one were to rewind the history of life to its beginning, and allow the evolutionary process to start anew, it's virtually certain that none of us would be here to think about it! After all, without an intelligent Agent guiding this long and complicated process, the chances that our species would accidentally emerge a second time is practically zero.<sup>{6}</sup>

Depressing as it is, this little thought experiment provides the appropriate backdrop for Craig's discussion of the absurdity of life without God. In his view, if God does not exist, then human life is ultimately without meaning, value, or purpose. After all, if human beings are merely the accidental by-products of the unintended forces of nature, then what possible meaning *could* human life have? If there is no God, then we were not created for a *purpose*; we were merely "coughed" into existence by mindless material processes.

Of course, some might wonder why we couldn't just create some meaning for our lives, or give the universe a meaning of our own. But as Craig observes, "the universe does not really acquire meaning just because *I* happen to give it one . . . . for suppose I give the universe one meaning, and you give it

another. Who is right? The answer, of course, is neither one. For the universe without God remains objectively meaningless, no matter how we regard it.”{7}

Like it or not, if God does not exist, then the universe—and our very lives—are ultimately meaningless and absurd. The difficulty is, however, that no one can really live consistently and happily with such a view.{8} Although merely recognizing this fact does absolutely nothing to show that God actually exists, it should at least motivate us to sincerely investigate the matter with an open heart and an open mind. So let’s now briefly consider some of the *reasons* for believing that there really is a God.

## The Existence of God

In the latest edition of *Reasonable Faith*, Craig offers a number of persuasive arguments for believing that God does, in fact, exist. Unfortunately, we can only skim the surface of these arguments here. But if you want to go deeper, his book is a great place to start.

After a brief historical survey of some of the major kinds of arguments that scholars have offered for believing that God exists, Craig offers his own defense for each of them. He begins with a defense of what is often called the *cosmological* argument. This argument takes its name from the Greek word *kosmos*, which means “world.” It essentially argues from the existence of the cosmos, or world, to the existence of a First Cause or Sufficient Reason for the world’s existence.{9} Next he defends a *teleological*, or design, argument. The name for this argument comes from the Greek word *telos*, which means “end.” According to Craig, this argument attempts to infer “an intelligent designer of the universe, just as we infer an intelligent designer for any product in which we discern evidence of purposeful adaptation of means to some end (*telos*).”{10} After the design argument, he offers a defense

of the *moral* argument. This argument “implies the existence of a Being that is the embodiment of the ultimate Good,” as well as “the source of the objective moral values we experience in the world.”[{11}](#) Finally, he defends what is known as the *ontological* argument. Ontology is the study of being, and this much-debated argument “attempts to prove from the very concept of God that God exists.”[{12}](#)

Taken together, these arguments provide a powerful case for the existence of God. As Craig presents them, the cosmological argument implies the existence of an eternal, immaterial, unimaginably powerful, personal Creator of the universe. The design argument reveals an intelligent designer of the cosmos. The moral argument reveals a Being who is the transcendent source and standard of moral goodness. And the ontological argument shows that if God’s existence is even possible, then He must exist!

But suppose we grant that all of these arguments are sound. Why think that *Christianity* is true? Many *non-Christian* religions believe in God. Why think that Christianity is the one that got it right? In order to answer this question we must now confront the central figure of Christianity: Jesus of Nazareth.

## **The Son of Man**

When the previous edition of *Reasonable Faith* was published in 1994, most New Testament scholars thought that Jesus had never really claimed to be the Messiah, or Lord, or Son of God. But a lot has happened in the intervening fourteen years, and “the balance of scholarly opinion on Jesus’ use of Christological titles may have actually tipped in the opposite direction.”[{13}](#)

For example, we have excellent grounds for believing that Jesus often referred to himself as “the Son of Man.”[{14}](#)

Although some believe that in using this title Jesus was merely referring to himself as a human being, the evidence suggests that he actually meant much more than that. Note, for example, that “Jesus did not refer to himself as ‘a son of man,’ but as ‘*the* Son of Man.’”[{15}](#) His use of the definite article is a crucially important observation, especially in light of Daniel 7:13-14.

In this passage Daniel describes a vision in which “one like a son of man” comes before God with the clouds of heaven. God gives this person an everlasting kingdom and we are told that “all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him” (Dan. 7:14). It’s clear that Daniel’s “son of man” is much more than a human being, for he’s viewed as an appropriate object of worship. Since no one is worthy of worship but God alone (see Luke 4:8), the “son of man” must actually be divine, as well as human.

According to Mark, at Jesus’ trial the high priest pointedly asked him if he was the Christ (or Messiah), “the Son of the Blessed One.” Jesus’ response is astonishing. “I am,” he said, “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). Here Jesus not only affirms that he is the Messiah and Son of God, he also explicitly identifies himself with the coming Son of Man prophesied by Daniel.[{16}](#) Since we have excellent reasons for believing that Jesus actually made this radical claim at his trial, we’re once again confronted with that old trilemma: if Jesus really claimed to be divine, then he must have been either a lunatic, a liar, or the divine Son of Man!

Now most people would probably agree that Jesus was not a liar or a lunatic, but they might still find it difficult to accept his claim to divinity. They might wonder if we have any good reasons, independent of Jesus’ claims, for believing his claims to be true. As a matter of fact we do!



# The Resurrection of Jesus

Shortly after Jesus' crucifixion, on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter stood before a large crowd of people gathered in Jerusalem and made a truly astonishing claim: God had raised Jesus from the dead, thereby vindicating his radical personal claims to be both Lord and Messiah (see Acts 2:32-36). The reason this claim was so incredible was that the "Jews had no conception of a Messiah who, instead of triumphing over Israel's enemies, would be shamefully executed by them as a criminal."[\[17\]](#) Indeed, according to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (21:22-23). So how could a man who had been crucified as a criminal possibly be the promised Messiah? If we reject the explanation of the New Testament, that God raised Jesus from the dead, it's very difficult to see how early Christianity could have ever gotten started. So are there good reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead?

According to Craig, the case for Jesus' resurrection rests "upon the evidence for three great, independently established facts: the empty tomb, the resurrection appearances, and the origin of the Christian faith."[\[18\]](#) He marshals an extensive array of arguments and evidence in support of each fact, as well as critiquing the various naturalistic theories which have been proposed to avoid the resurrection. He concludes by noting that since God exists, miracles are possible. And once one acknowledges this, "it's hard to deny that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation of the facts."[\[19\]](#)

This brings us to the significance of this event. According to the German theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The resurrection of Jesus acquires such decisive meaning, not merely because someone . . . has been raised from the dead, but because it is Jesus of Nazareth, whose execution was instigated by the Jews

because he had blasphemed against God. If this man was raised from the dead, then . . . God . . . has committed himself to him. . . . The resurrection can only be understood as the divine vindication of the man whom the Jews had rejected as a blasphemer.[\[20\]](#)

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God has put His seal of approval (as it were) on Jesus' radical personal claims to be the Messiah, the Son of God, and the divine Son of Man! This forces each of us to answer the same haunting question Jesus once asked his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

### Notes

1. See "About William Lane Craig" at [www.reasonablefaith.org/william-lane-craig/](http://www.reasonablefaith.org/william-lane-craig/), accessed 20 May 2018.
2. J. P. Moreland, cited in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 1.
3. C. Behan McCullagh, cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 1.
4. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 12.
5. Ibid., 76.
6. In the minds of some people, this is a rather controversial claim. But it's been convincingly defended by naturalist authors like Stephen J. Gould and Michael Shermer. For a brief defense by Shermer, please see the articles on "Glorious Contingency" at [www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27](http://www.metanexus.net/Magazine/ArticleDetail/tabid/68/tabid/72/Default.aspx?aid=27), accessed 4 September 2008.
7. Ibid., 79.
8. Ibid., 78.
9. Ibid., 98.
10. Ibid., 99-100.
11. Ibid., 104.
12. Ibid., 95.
13. Ibid., 301.

14. See Craig's discussion on pp. 315-318.
15. Ibid., 315.
16. Ibid., 317.
17. Ibid., 388.
18. Ibid., 360-61.
18. Ibid., 399.
20. Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Jesu Geschichte und unsere Geschichte," in *Glaube und Wirklichkeit* (Munchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1975), 92-94; cited in Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 399.

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# Christ and the Human Condition

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn looks at how God has acted in Christ to address those things which ail us most: sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God.*



Early in the book of Job, Eliphaz the Temanite declares that "man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward" (5:7). Whether it's the trouble that befalls us as we're simply minding our own business or the trouble we bring upon others (or even ourselves), difficulties, sin, and suffering seem to plague us wherever we turn. Just think for a moment about some of the natural evils which afflict the human race. This class of evils includes both natural disasters like hurricanes, tsunamis, tornadoes, and earthquakes, and diseases like cancer, leukemia, Alzheimer's and ALS. While natural

evils are bad enough, they are only part of the problem. In addition to these, we must also consider all the moral evils which human beings commit against God, one another, and themselves. This second class of evils includes things like hatred, blasphemy, murder, rape, child abuse, terrorism, and suicide. Taken together, the scope and magnitude of human sin and suffering in the world are truly mind-boggling. What does God have to say about issues such as these? Even better, what (if anything) has He done about them?

The Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga has written

As the Christian sees things, God does not stand idly by, coolly observing the suffering of His creatures. He enters into and shares our suffering. He endures the anguish of seeing his son, the second person of the Trinity, consigned to the bitterly cruel and shameful death of the cross. Some theologians claim that God cannot suffer. I believe they are wrong. God's capacity for suffering, I believe, is proportional to his greatness; it exceeds our capacity for suffering in the same measure as his capacity for knowledge exceeds ours. Christ was prepared to endure the agonies of hell itself; and God, the Lord of the universe, was prepared to endure the suffering consequent upon his son's humiliation and death. He was prepared to accept this suffering in order to overcome sin, and death, and the evils that afflict our world, and to confer on us a life more glorious than we can imagine.[\[1\]](#)

According to Plantinga, then, God *has acted*, and acted decisively through His Son, to address those things which ail us most—sin, suffering, death, and our broken relationship with God. In what follows, we will briefly examine each of these ailments. More importantly, however, we will also see how God has acted in Christ to heal our bleak condition, thereby giving us encouragement, strength and hope, both now and forevermore.

# Moral Evil

When Adam and Eve first sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:6), they could hardly have imagined all the tragic consequences that would follow this single act of disobedience. Through this act, sin and death entered the world and the human condition was radically altered (Rom. 5:12-19). Human nature had become defiled with sin and this sinful nature was bequeathed to all mankind. The human race was now morally corrupt, alienated from God and one another, subject to physical death, and under the wrath of God. The entire creation, originally pronounced "very good" by God (Gen. 1:31), was negatively affected by this first act of rebellion. Like the ripples that radiate outward when a stone is thrown into a calm body of water, the consequences of that first sin have rippled through history, bringing evil, pain, and suffering in their wake. As the Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has noted, "The terrible human evils in the world are testimony to man's depravity in his state of spiritual alienation from God." [\[2\]](#) Indeed, we are so hopelessly entangled in this web of sin and disobedience that we cannot possibly extricate ourselves. This, according to the Bible, is the sorry plight in which all men naturally find themselves.

Fortunately for us, however, God has acted to free us from our enslavement to sin, to disentangle us from the web that holds us captive, and to reconcile us to Himself. He did this by sending His Son to so thoroughly identify with us in our painful predicament that He actually *became* one of us. By identifying Himself with sinners who were under the wrath of God, He was able to take our sins upon Himself and endure God's wrath in our place, so that we might be reconciled to God by placing our trust in Him. The apostle Paul put it this way: God made Christ "who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21).

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, we're told that anyone hanged on a tree because of their sins is "accursed of God" (21:23). In the New Testament, Paul picks up on this idea and says that through His substitutionary death on the cross, Christ became "a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). We should not lose sight of the significance of these words. By identifying Himself with the guilty human race, and becoming a curse for us, He has opened the way for us to be freed from our sins and reconciled to God as we are identified with *Him* through faith. This is just one of the ways in which Christ has met the desperate needs of the human condition.

## Natural Evil

Another reason why we suffer arises from what philosophers and theologians call *natural evil*. Natural evil refers to all the causes of human pain and suffering which are not brought about by morally-responsible agents. This would include the pain and suffering arising from natural disasters like earthquakes, famines, and storms, as well as diseases like cancer and ALS.

Now the question I want to pose is this: Is there a sense in which Christ is also a solution to the problem of natural evil? And if so, then how should we understand this? When we examine the life and ministry of Jesus as it's recorded in the Gospels, we can hardly help but be struck by the number of miracles He performs. He walks on water, calms raging storms, feeds thousands of people with a few loaves and fish, cleanses lepers, heals the sick, restores sight to the blind, and even raises the dead! Although some might demur at all these accounts of miracles, Craig has noted that "the miracle stories are so widely represented in all strata of the Gospel traditions that it would be fatuous to regard them as not rooted in the life of Jesus." [\[3\]](#)

So what is the significance of Jesus' miracles? According to New Testament scholar Ben Witherington, Jesus' miracles show

him to be God's special agent of blessing, healing, liberation, and salvation, as well as the "one who brings about the conditions associated with the final . . . dominion of God." {4} Since the kingdom of God is portrayed in Scripture as a reign of peace, prosperity, health, well-being and blessing, Jesus' miracles of healing, as well as his demonstrations of power over nature, indicate that He is indeed capable of ushering in such a wonderful kingdom. {5} And if Jesus has the power to bring in an era of health and well-being, both for our physical bodies and for the physical universe, and if he in fact will do so, then he clearly provides a solution to the problem of natural evil. Ultimately, in the new heaven and new earth, which God will give to those who love Him, we are promised that there "will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev. 21:4).

## Physical Death

The apostle Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians, described death as an "enemy" (1 Cor. 15:26). People fear death for any number of reasons. Some fear that the process of dying will be painful. Others dread the thought of leaving behind the ones they love. Some may fear that death is simply the end, that whatever joys and pleasures this life holds, death takes them away forever. But others may fear that there is an afterlife and worry that things may not go well for them there. For many people, however, death is feared as the great unknown. {6} Friends and relatives die and we never see or hear from them again. For these people, death is like the ultimate black-hole, from which nothing and no one can ever escape.

But according to the Bible, Christ *did* escape the snares of death, and in doing so He dealt our mortal enemy a mortal blow of his own. I said that Paul describes death as an "enemy," but this is simply to inform us of the fact that our enemy has been conquered by Christ. "The last enemy that will be



abolished,” he writes, “is death” (1 Cor. 15:26). But how has Christ conquered this enemy? And how does *His* victory help *us*?

Christ conquered death through his resurrection from the dead and all who put their trust in Him can share in his victory. Pastor Erwin Lutzer has written:

Thus the resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Standing at the empty tomb, we are assured of the triumph of Jesus on the Cross; we are also assured that He has conquered our most fearsome enemy. Yes, death can still terrify us, but the more we know about Jesus, the more its power fades.[{7}](#)

Consider the life and death of the great Reformation theologian Martin Luther. As a young Augustinian monk, Luther struggled with a very sensitive conscience and a terrible fear of death. But once he understood the gospel and placed his trust in Christ, his fear gradually began to fade. By the time he died, his fear was gone. It’s reported that on his deathbed, he recited some promises from the Bible, commended his spirit to God, and quietly breathed his last.[{8}](#) Believing that Christ had conquered death and given him eternal life, he was able to die at peace and without any fear. And this is the hope of *all* who trust in Christ!

## **The Weight of Glory**

Christian theologians sometimes describe the knowledge of God as “an incommensurable good.”[{9}](#) By this they mean that knowing God in an intimate, personal way is quite literally the *greatest good* that any created being can experience. It is an “incommensurable” or “immeasurable” good—a good so great that it surpasses our ability even to comprehend. The apostle Paul once prayed that the Ephesians might “know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:19). He understood that “intimate relationship with God . . . is incommensurately

good-for created persons.”{10}

Of course, this doesn't mean that one who is intimately related to God will never experience any of the trials and difficulties of life. In fact, it's possible that such a person will actually experience *more* trials and difficulties than would have been the case had they *not* been intimately related to God! Knowing the love of Christ doesn't make one immune to suffering. It does, however, provide indescribable comfort while going through it (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5).

The apostle Paul understood this quite well. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he described himself as a servant of God who had suffered afflictions, hardships, beatings, imprisonments, labors, sleeplessness, and hunger (2 Cor. 6:4-5). In spite of this, however, he did not lose heart. He famously wrote that “momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

But how could Paul describe his sufferings as just a “momentary, light affliction”? Because, says Craig, he had an *eternal* perspective. “He understood that the length of this life, being finite, is literally infinitesimal in comparison with the eternal life we shall spend with God.”{11}

The greatest hunger of the human heart is to know and experience the love and acceptance of God and to enjoy Him forever. In his magnificent sermon “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis wrote, “In the end that Face which is the delight or . . . terror of the universe must be turned upon each of us either with one expression or . . . the other, either conferring glory inexpressible or inflicting shame that can never be . . . disguised.”{12} Incredibly, just as Christ has dealt with the problems of sin, suffering, and death, He has also acted decisively to reconcile us to God. Through faith in him, anyone who wants can eventually experience “an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17).

## Notes

2. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 96-97.
3. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 324.
4. Ben Witherington, *The Christology of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 43-44.
5. Some biblical passages that pertain to Christ's coming kingdom are Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 19:28, and Acts 3:19-21.
6. I was reminded of many of these examples while watching the round table discussion on suffering and death in Catherine Tatge, "The Question of God: Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis" (U.S.A.: PBS Home Video, 2004).
7. Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Vanishing Power of Death* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 13.
8. Mike Fearon, *Martin Luther* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1986), 157-58.
9. See, for example, Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 100.
10. Marilyn McCord Adams, *Christ and Horrors: The Coherence of Christology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 47.
11. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 99.
12. C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1980), 13.

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# Dealing with Doubt in Our Christian Faith

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn points out that it is not having doubts about our Christian faith that is an issue, but rather how we respond to that doubt. Attacking this issue from a biblical*

*worldview perspective, Michael helps us understand our doubts and respond to them as an informed Christian.*

## Help! My Doubts Scare Me!

Have you ever doubted your faith? We all have doubts from time to time. We may doubt that our boss *really* hit a hole-in-one at the golf course last weekend, or that our best friend *really* caught a fish as big as the one he claimed to catch, or that the strange looking guy on that late night TV show was *really* abducted by alien beings from a distant galaxy! Sometimes the things we doubt aren't really that important, but other times they are. And the more important something is to us, the more personally invested we are in it, the scarier it can be to start having doubts about it. So when Christians begin to have doubts about something as significant as the truth of their Christian faith, it's quite understandable that this might worry or even frighten them.



Reflecting on this issue in *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel wrote:

For many Christians, merely having doubts of any kind can be scary. They wonder whether their questions disqualify them being a follower of Christ. They feel insecure because they're not sure whether it's permissible to express uncertainty about God, Jesus, or the Bible. So they keep their questions to themselves—and inside, unanswered, they grow and fester . . . until they eventually succeed in choking out their faith.[\[1\]](#)

So what can we do if we find ourselves struggling with doubts about the truth of Christianity? Why do such doubts arise? And how can we rid ourselves of these taunting Goliaths?

First, we must always remember that sooner or later we'll

probably *all* have to wrestle with doubts about our faith. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig observes, “Any Christian who is intellectually engaged and reflecting about his faith will inevitably face the problem of doubt.”[{2}](#) Doubts can arise for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they’re largely intellectual. We might doubt that the Bible is *really* inspired by God or that Jesus was *really* born of a virgin. But doubts can take other forms as well. If a person has experienced great sorrow or disappointment, such as personal wounds from family or friends, the loss of a job, a painful divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of health, they may be seriously tempted to doubt the goodness, love, and care of their heavenly Father.[{3}](#)

Whenever they come and whatever form they take, we must each deal honestly with our doubts. To ignore them is to court spiritual disaster. But facing them can lead ultimately to a deeper faith. As Christian minister Lynn Anderson has said, “A faith that’s challenged by adversity or tough questions . . . is often a stronger faith in the end.”[{4}](#)

## **It’s Not All in Your Head!**

Sometimes people have sincere doubts about the truth of Christianity, intellectual obstacles that hinder them from placing their trust in Christ. In such cases, Christians have an obligation to respond to the person’s doubts and make a humble and thoughtful defense for the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, as Craig observes, it’s important to realize that “doubt is never a purely intellectual problem.” Like it or not, there’s always a “spiritual dimension to the problem that must be recognized.”[{5}](#) Because of this, sometimes a person’s objections to Christianity are really just a smokescreen, an attempt to cover up the *real* reason for their rejection of Christ, which is often an underlying moral or spiritual issue.

I once heard a story about a Christian apologist who spoke at a university about the evidence for Christianity. Afterward, a student approached him and said, "I honestly didn't expect this to happen, but you satisfactorily answered all my objections to Christianity." The apologist was a bit startled by such a frank admission, but he quickly recovered himself and said, "Well that's great! Why not give your life to Christ right now, then?" But the student said, "No. I'm not willing to do that. I would have to change the way I'm living, and I'm just not ready to do that right now."

In this case all the student's reasons for doubting the Christian faith had, by his own admission, been satisfactorily answered. What was really holding him back were not his doubts about the truth of Christianity, but a desire to live life on his own terms. To put it bluntly, he didn't want God meddling in his affairs. He didn't want to be morally accountable to some ultimate authority. The truth is that a person's intellectual objections to Christianity are *rarely* the whole story. As Christian scholar Ravi Zacharias observed, "A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of a moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God." [\[6\]](#)

Unfortunately, Christians aren't immune to doubting their faith for similar reasons. I know of a young man who had converted to Christianity, but who's now raising various objections to it. But when one looks beneath the surface, one sees that he's currently involved in an immoral lifestyle. In order to continue living as he wants, without being unduly plagued by a guilty conscience, he must call into question the truth of Christianity. For the Bible tells him plainly that he's disobeying God. Of course, ultimately no one is immune to doubts about Christianity, so we'll now consider some ways to guard our hearts and minds.

# I Believe, Help My Unbelief!

As He came down the mountain, Jesus was met by a large crowd of people. A father had brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus' disciples, but they were not able to cast the demon out. In desperation the father appealed to Jesus, "If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" Jesus answered, "If You can! All things are possible to him who believes." The father responded, "I do believe; help my unbelief."[{7}](#)

Can you identify with the father in this story? I know I can. Oftentimes as Christians we find that our faith is in precisely the same state as this father's. We genuinely believe, but we need help with our unbelief. It's always been an encouragement to me that after the father's admission of a faith mixed with doubt, Jesus nonetheless cast out the demon and healed the man's son.[{8}](#) But of course no Christian should be content to remain in this state. If we want to grow in our faith and rid ourselves of doubts, what are some positive steps we can take to accomplish this?

Well, in the first place, it's helpful to be familiar with the "principle of displacement." As Sue "Archimedes" Bohlin, one of my colleagues, has written:

The Bible teaches the principle of "displacement." That is, rather than trying to make thoughts shoo away, we are told to replace them with what is good, true, and perfect (Phil. 4:8). As the truth comes in the lies are displaced—much like when we fill a bathtub too full of water, and when we get in, our bodies displace the water, which flows out over the top of the tub.[{9}](#)

Once we grasp this principle, a number of steps for dealing with doubt quickly become evident. For one thing, we can memorize and meditate upon Scripture. We can also listen attentively to good Christian music. Paul speaks to the importance of both of these in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word

of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

In addition, we can read good Christian books that provide intelligent answers to some of the questions we might be asking. Great Christian scholars have addressed almost every conceivable objection to the truth of Christianity. If you have nagging doubts about some aspect of your faith, there’s almost certainly a work of Christian scholarship that speaks to it in detail. Finally, we must never forget that this is a spiritual battle. So let’s remember to put on the full armor of God so we can stand firm in the midst of it!{10}

## Faith and Reason

How can we [know if Christianity is really true?](#) Is it by reason, or evidence, or mystical experience? Dr. Craig has an answer to this question that you might find a bit surprising.{11} He distinguishes between *knowing* Christianity is true and *showing* that it’s true. Ideally, one attempts to *show* that Christianity is true with good arguments and evidence. But Craig doesn’t think that this is how we *know* our faith is true. Rather, he believes that we can *know* our faith is true because “God’s Spirit makes it evident to us that our faith is true.”{12}

Consider Paul’s statement in Romans 8:16, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” Since every believer is indwelt by God’s Spirit, every believer also receives the Spirit’s testimony that he is one of God’s children. This is sometimes called the “assurance of salvation.” Dr. Craig comments on the significance of this:

Salvation entails that God exists, that Christ atoned for our sins . . . and so forth, so that if you are assured of your salvation, then you must be assured of . . . these



other truths as well. Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit gives the believer an immediate assurance that his faith is true.[{13}](#)

Now this is remarkable. For it means we can *know* that Christianity is true, wholly apart from arguments, simply by attending to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And this is so not only for believers but for unbelievers, too. For the Spirit convicts the unbelieving world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, particularly the sin of unbelief.[{14}](#) So when we're confronted with objections to Christianity that we can't answer, we needn't worry. First, answers are usually available if one knows where to look. But second, the witness of the Spirit trumps any objections we might encounter.

Consider an illustration from the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Suppose I'm accused of stealing a document out of a colleague's office. Suppose I have a motive, an opportunity, and a history of doing such things. Suppose further that someone thought they saw me lurking around my colleague's office just before the document went missing. There's much evidence against me. But in fact, I didn't steal the document. I was on a walk at the time. Now should I doubt my innocence since the evidence is against me? Of course not! For I *know* I'm not guilty![{15}](#)

Similarly, writes Dr. Craig, "I needn't be shaken when objections come along that I can't answer."[{16}](#) For my faith isn't ultimately based on arguments, but on the witness of God's Spirit.

## **Stepping into the Light**

We've seen that both Christians and non-Christians can have doubts about the truth of Christianity. We've also seen that such doubts are never *just* an intellectual issue; there's *always* a spiritual dynamic that's involved as well. But since

we'll probably never be able to fully resolve every single doubt we might experience, I would like to conclude by suggesting one final way to make our doubts flee before us, much as roaches flee to their hidden lairs when one turns on the light!

In John 7:17 Jesus says, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." Here, Jesus frankly encourages us to put His teachings to the test and see for ourselves whether He really speaks for God or not. As biblical scholar Merrill Tenney comments, "Spiritual understanding is not produced solely by learning facts or procedures, but rather it depends on obedience to known truth. Obedience to God's known will develops discernment between falsehood and truth."[{17}](#) Are we *really* serious about dealing with our lingering doubts? If so, Jesus says that if we resolutely choose to do God's will, we can know if His teaching is really from God!

Sadly, however, many of us will *never* take Jesus up on His challenge. No matter how loudly we might *claim* to want to rid ourselves of doubt, the truth is that many of us just aren't *willing* to do God's will. But if you are, then Jesus says that "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."[{18}](#) In other words, we can know by *experience* that Jesus is from God, that His teachings are true, and that He really is who He claimed to be!

As Christian philosopher Dallas Willard observes, the issue ultimately comes down to what we *really* want:

The Bible says that if you seek God with all your heart, then you will surely find him. Surely find him. It's the person who wants to know God that God reveals himself to. And if a person doesn't want to know God—well, God has created the world and the human mind in such a way that he doesn't have to.[{19}](#)

The psalmist encourages us to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”[{20}](#) If we do, we can know not only that God is good, but also that He exists. And even if we still have some lingering doubts and unanswered questions in the back of our minds, as we surely will, they’ll gradually fade into utter insignificance as we become more intimately acquainted with Him who loves us and who reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son![{21}](#)

## Notes

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 316.
2. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 31.
3. Lynn Anderson, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 322.
4. *Ibid.*, 326.
5. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 33.
6. Ravi Zacharias, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 343. See also John 3:19-21.
7. Mark 9:14-24.
8. See Mark 9:25-29.
9. Sue Bohlin, “I’m Having a Terrible Battle in My Mind,” Probe Ministries, [probe.org/im-having-a-terrible-battle-in-my-mind/](http://probe.org/im-having-a-terrible-battle-in-my-mind/).
10. See Ephesians 6:10-20.
11. This section is largely just a summary of the discussion of faith and reason in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 35-39.
12. *Ibid.*, 35.
13. *Ibid.*, 36.
14. See John 16:7-11.
15. Alvin Plantinga, “The Foundations of Theism: A Reply,” *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 310; cited in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 38-39.
16. *Ibid.*, 39.
17. Merrill C. Tenney, “The Gospel of John,” in *The*

*Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 84.

18. John 8:32.

19. Dallas Willard, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 352.

20. Psalm 34:8.

21. See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

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# Body and Soul in the Old Testament

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn addresses how the Old Testament treats body and soul. What does it have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?*

## The Breath of Life

The worldview of Naturalism tells us that the natural world is all that exists. There is nothing “above” or “beyond” this. Space, time, matter, and energy, the sort of things studied in physics, are the only material entities. You are your body, and nothing more. You do not have an immaterial mind or soul that is (in some sense) distinct from your body. You *are* your body. And when your body dies, you will cease to exist.

But is this true? In this article we address body and soul in the Old Testament. What does the Old Testament have to say about the nature and destiny of humanity?



Let's begin with the creation of Adam. Consider the way in

which the Bible describes this event: “Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature” (Genesis 2:7). Note that Adam is created from two distinct elements: the dust of the ground and the breath of life. His body is composed of “dust from the ground.” But he doesn’t become “a living creature” until God takes the second step of breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils. Although this description may well be metaphorical in certain respects, it seems evident that God must add “the breath of life” for Adam to become a living human being.

Here’s another observation. Notice that Adam doesn’t suddenly spring to life once the dust of the earth has been ordered in a particular way. Apparently, human personality does not spontaneously emerge once God has formed the dust of the ground into a human body.[\[1\]](#) Merely ordering the physical elements into a human body is not enough (at least, at this initial stage of human development) to get a human person. That second step, in which God breathes the breath of life into the already formed body, is also necessary.

So what are we to make of this? Does Genesis give us a picture of a human being as a body-soul composite? At this point, such a conclusion would be premature. We have not yet considered what a soul is, nor whether “the breath of life” in some way corresponds to, or produces, it. One thing seems clear, however. The Bible seems to suggest that human beings are more than just physical bodies. There appears to be an additional component to our nature, and we need to spend some time gaining a better understanding of what that is.

## **Surviving the Death of the Body**

The book of Genesis briefly describes the death of Jacob’s wife, Rachel, as she gave birth to their son, Benjamin.[\[2\]](#) We read that “as her soul was departing (for she died),” she

named her son (Genesis 35:18).

How are we to understand the phrase, “as her soul was departing”? In Hebrew, the word here translated “soul” is the term *nephesh*. Part of the difficulty in understanding the phrase is that *nephesh* can be used in a variety of ways. According to the Christian philosopher J. P. Moreland, “The term *nephesh* . . . is used primarily of human beings, though it is also used of animals (Genesis 1:20; 9:10; 24:30) and of God Himself (Judges 10:16; Isaiah 1:14).”[\[3\]](#)

Depending on the context, the term might refer to a part of the body, like the neck (Psalm 105:18) or throat (Isaiah 5:14). It can also be used of the principle of life, as in Leviticus 17:11: “the life [that is, *nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood.” Strangely, however, it can also refer to a dead human body (Numbers 5:2; 6:11). Moreover, it can be used of various psychological aspects of human experience, like emotions or desires (Proverbs 21:10; Isaiah 26:9; Micah 7:1). Finally, there are also indications that the term can refer to what might be called the “soul”—the immaterial component of a human being in which one’s personal identity is located.[\[4\]](#)

So when we read that Rachel’s “soul was departing,” does this simply mean that she was dying, that the “principle of life” (which had sustained her to this point) was departing? Or could it mean that her “soul,” an immaterial component of her being encompassing her personal identity, was departing? In other words, is this verse merely telling us that Rachel’s body was dying, or is it also telling us that, as her body was dying, her soul was leaving her body (possibly to continue its existence elsewhere)?

If we examine other passages of Scripture, we see evidence that the human soul continues to exist after the death of the body. Consider Psalm 49:15: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.” In Hebrew

thought, Sheol was the place of the dead, somewhat like the Greek conception of Hades.[{5}](#) In this passage, the Psalmist expresses confidence that God will ransom his “soul” from the place of the dead and receive the Psalmist to himself. This view of the soul becomes even clearer when we examine what the Old Testament has to say about the afterlife.

## The Place of the Dead

In the Old Testament the place of the dead is called Sheol. Of course, in some places the term simply refers to the grave. Nevertheless, according to John Cooper, “There is virtual consensus that the Israelites did believe in some sort of ethereal existence after death in a place called Sheol.”[{6}](#) What sort of place was this?

Job describes it as a place of “ease,” where “the wicked cease from troubling” and “the weary are at rest” (3:13, 17-18). That sounds pretty good! However, it’s also described as a place of “darkness” and “the land of forgetfulness” (Psalm 88:12), a place where not much is happening. As the author of Ecclesiastes puts it: “There is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (9:10). Hence, J. P. Moreland observes, “Life in Sheol is often depicted as lethargic and inactive.”[{7}](#)

But there are exceptions. Consider the case of Saul and the medium of Endor (1 Samuel 28). The prophet Samuel had died, and Saul is preparing to go to war against the Philistines (vv. 1-4). After seeing the Philistine army, however, Saul is afraid (v. 5). He inquires of the Lord, but the Lord does not answer him (v. 6). In desperation, Saul seeks out a medium at Endor, and asks her to call up Samuel from the dead (vv. 7-11). Incredibly, the plan works, and Samuel actually makes an appearance (vv. 12-14).

Saul inquires of Samuel, but Samuel essentially rebukes Saul

(vv. 15-16), reminding Saul of his prior disobedience. He tells Saul that Israel will be defeated by the Philistines and informs him that “Tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me” (vv. 18-19). It’s a fascinating story, but we must not lose sight of what (for us) is the main point.

Notice that Samuel, who had previously died, and whose body had been buried (v. 3), retains his personal identity in the shadowy underworld of Sheol. He still knows who he is, remembers Saul, and can function as the Lord’s prophet. Although Samuel is pictured in the story as “an old man . . . wrapped in a robe” (v. 14), Moreland reminds us that the Bible often uses such imagery “in a nonliteral way to describe immaterial, invisible realities.”[\[8\]](#) Regardless, the Old Testament teaches that human beings continue to exist after the death of the body. Moreover, the righteous express a hope that God will rescue their souls even from Sheol.

## Redemption from Sheol

The Old Testament pictures all those who die as going initially to Sheol, the place of the dead. However, it also intimates a hope for the righteous even “beyond the grave.” As John Cooper notes, “Several Psalms read most naturally as confessing a steadfast if unspecified trust in God beyond death.”[\[9\]](#)

Consider Psalm 49. The psalmist observes that all people die. Sooner or later each person’s life ends in death (vv. 5-12).

But for the psalmist that is not the end of the story. Though he knows that this life will end with the death of his body, he nonetheless confidently proclaims: “But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me” (v. 15).

Or consider Psalm 73. The psalmist begins by confessing that



he was “envious of the arrogant” and “wicked” (v. 3). However, as he contemplated that their end is “destruction,” his hope in God was renewed (vv. 17-24).

Although the psalmist recognized that he, too, would die, he declares his hope in God: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (v. 26). After surveying such material, one Old Testament scholar notes that before God “there is not only the alternative between this life and the shadow existence in the world of the dead; there is a third possibility—a permanent, living fellowship with him.”<sup>{10}</sup> This third possibility was the confident hope of the psalmists.

Of course, if we’re going to be fair, we must also agree with C. S. Lewis, who observes that throughout much of the Old Testament, belief in the afterlife held virtually no “religious importance” whatever.<sup>{11}</sup> What mattered to the ancient Israelite was life on this earth. It is here that we can enjoy fellowship with family, friends—and God.

So why did God reveal so little to the ancient Israelites about the nature of the afterlife? Lewis suggests that God may have wanted His people to come to love Him primarily as an end in itself—and not for any rewards he might bestow in the afterlife. If one becomes friends with God in this life, then one will naturally fear to lose this relationship in death. And at this point, God can step in with the “good news” that friendship with Him can continue beyond death.<sup>{12}</sup> Indeed, God even promised to raise the bodies of his people from the dead, to continue their friendship with him on a new earth!

## **The Resurrection of the Body**

The resurrection of the body is a doctrine that many believers rarely think about. Yet this doctrine is not only taught

throughout the New Testament, it's even found in the Old Testament.

Consider Daniel 12:2: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt." This verse is not denying a disembodied afterlife between death and resurrection. Rather, it is affirming that the souls of the dead, whose bodies appear to be asleep in in the "dust of the earth," shall be "awakened" and raised from the dead.

Notice that some are raised "to everlasting life," but others to "everlasting contempt." Cooper writes, "This verse . . . connects resurrection, judgment, and two eternal destinies."[{13}](#) The Old Testament suggests that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with their bodies for all eternity. As Moreland observes, "Old Testament teaching implies that the soul or spirit is added to flesh and bones to form a living human person (Genesis 2:7; Ezekiel 37) and that the resurrection of the dead involves the re-embodiment of the same soul or spirit (Isaiah 26:14, 19)."[{14}](#)

How might we sum up Old Testament teaching about the nature and destiny of human beings? First, human beings appear to be composed of both body and soul. When God created Adam, he first formed his body from the dust of the earth, and then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" (Genesis 2:7). This at least hints at the possibility that human beings are a body-soul composite. The evidence for this is strengthened, however, when we consider Old Testament teaching about life after death.

Throughout the Old Testament we see evidence for continued personal existence, after the death of the body, in a place called Sheol. An interesting example of this can be seen when Saul, with the help of a medium, calls up the prophet Samuel from the dead. We saw that Samuel continues to exist and retain his personal identity even after the death of his body

(1 Samuel 28).

But this was not the end of the story. For the Old Testament also teaches that the souls of the dead will one day be reunited with resurrected bodies, either to enjoy eternal life on a new earth, or to suffer eternal shame and contempt. This, in a nutshell, is what the Old Testament has to say about the nature and destiny of human beings.

## Notes

1. John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology and the Monism-Dualism Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), Loc. 727-39, Kindle.
2. See the story in Genesis 35:16-20.
3. J. P. Moreland, *The Soul: How We Know It's Real and Why It Matters* (Chicago: Moody, 2014), 45, Kindle.
4. The material in this paragraph is indebted to Moreland, *The Soul*, 45-46.
5. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 810.
6. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 783.
7. Moreland, *The Soul*, 51.
8. Moreland, *The Soul*, 52.
9. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 906. The preceding words, concerning hope "beyond the grave" are also taken from Cooper, Loc. 902.
10. Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, 109; cited in Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 912.
11. C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1986), 36.
12. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 36-43.
13. Cooper, *Body, Soul & Life Everlasting*, Loc. 916.
14. Moreland, *The Soul*, 53.

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# Tradition and Scripture

*While many evangelical Christians treat tradition with suspicion if not hostility, Dr. Michael Gleghorn makes a case for the value of tradition in understanding and supporting our faith.*

## Understanding Tradition

In this article we'll be thinking about tradition and its relationship to Scripture. Now I realize that some of you may already be asking, "Tradition! Can anything good come from there?" The answer of course is "yes"—for if it were not, then I wouldn't bother writing about it. Indeed, it's actually an important topic to address, for in our day many evangelicals seem to harbor an attitude of suspicion—if not outright hostility—toward the very notion of tradition.[\[1\]](#) In support of this attitude, some might point to what Jesus said to the religious leaders of his day: "You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions" (Mark 7:9 NIV). And if this is what Jesus said, then aren't we better off to simply dismiss tradition and focus solely on the teaching of Scripture?



Before we jump to that conclusion, we must first determine what we mean when we use the word "tradition." After all, in other passages Scripture speaks very favorably of tradition. Paul told the Corinthians, "Now I praise you because you . . . hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you" (1 Cor. 11:2 NASB). Traditions, it seems, can sometimes be good—and sometimes bad. And this is

true even of the *Christian* tradition. But in order to talk intelligently about our subject, we must first understand precisely what we're talking about. What, then, is the meaning of "tradition"?

When theologians speak about the Christian tradition, they are typically referring to the ways in which the faith has been understood by previous generations of Christians. For example, what understanding did our Christian forbears have of worship and theology, and how did they express their understanding through creeds, confessions, sermons, and books? Stanley Grenz and John Franke describe the Christian tradition "as the history of the interpretation and application of canonical scripture by the Christian community, the church, as it listens to the voice of the Spirit speaking through the text."[{2}](#) And Richard Lints describes it as "the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us."[{3}](#)

Defined in this way, we must candidly admit that the Christian faith has been understood somewhat differently from one time and place to another. How are we to think about such differences? Should they always be viewed negatively, as a corruption of the original faith deposit? Or might they sometimes be seen as a positive and healthy development of this deposit?

## **Tradition: A Metaphor**

In a fascinating discussion of these issues, Colin Gunton asks us to think of tradition as an organism.[{4}](#) He notes that just as a child or plant may grow larger and stronger over time, so too the content of Christian doctrine can become more elaborate and enriched with the passage of time. He then observes, "If revelation is something given in the beginning—as undoubtedly one dimension of it is, the faith once for all delivered to the saints—then it may be argued

that through tradition what began as a seed or a seedling is enabled to expand without falsifying its beginnings.”<sup>{5}</sup> This comment helps us see the interconnectedness of tradition and revelation—an issue which we will return to later.

For now, it’s important to notice what this metaphor does for us. It enables us to see tradition, like the growth of a child or a plant, as something *natural* and *healthy*—indeed, something to be *hoped for*, *encouraged*, and *expected*. This is an important reminder for those of us who might be tempted to view tradition solely in negative terms.

At the same time, however, Gunton is aware that things can always go wrong. He writes, “The organism might become diseased, and require surgery; or it might simply grow too many branches, or branches in the wrong places, and require pruning.”<sup>{6}</sup> In this case, instead of the tradition developing in a natural and healthy way from the original revelation, it develops in an unnatural and unhealthy way. We might identify this latter situation with the unpleasant possibility of heresy—something which needs to be corrected or even surgically removed so that the organism doesn’t die or mutate into a completely different, unrelated life-form. If that were to happen, then while we might still have tradition of a sort, it could no longer be properly thought of as *Christian* tradition.<sup>{7}</sup> It will be helpful for us to keep this metaphor in mind as we continue to reflect on the role of tradition and its relationship to Scripture, particularly because we must now deal with a problem that this discussion inevitably raises.

## **Scripture and Tradition: A Problem**

Stanley Grenz and John Franke view tradition as a “source or resource” of the Christian church, which can aid in the church’s task of both theological construction and lived performance.<sup>{8}</sup> Some of the specific elements of the Christian

tradition which they see as especially valuable in informing how we accomplish these tasks are the histories of worship, liturgy, and theology, as well as the “classic” theological formulations of the church, such as creeds and confessions. Of course, they are careful to point out that while these resources are extremely valuable, they “must always and continually be tested by the norm of canonical scripture.”[{9}](#)

In a similar way, Richard Lints describes the “goal of theology” as bringing “the biblical revelation into a position of judgment on all of life,” including tradition.[{10}](#) But this raises a bit of a problem, for in order to bring tradition under the authority of Scripture, Scripture must first be interpreted. And many scholars maintain that the Christian tradition primarily consists of the scriptural interpretation and application of faith communities from the past. Indeed, this is basically how Lints himself defines the term. “In the discussion that follows,” he says, “*tradition* will signify the faith transmitted by the community of interpreters that has preceded us.”[{11}](#)

Moreover, Lints rightly believes that we neglect this tradition at our peril. For in banishing past interpretations of Scripture from our present consideration in doing theology, we can easily become ensnared “in a web of subjectivism” regarding our own interpretation of the Bible.[{12}](#) And this would be an incalculable loss to the church in her ongoing task of preaching and teaching the Bible. The fact of the matter is that these past interpretations are a necessary aid, both in revealing our own biases and blind spots, and in helping us avoid “what C. S. Lewis aptly called ‘chronological snobbery’—the conceit that we are necessarily wiser than our forbears.”[{13}](#)

But this leads to the following problem: If Scripture is to be brought into a position of judgment over all of life (including the Christian tradition), it must first be properly interpreted. But it would be irresponsible to engage in this

interpretative task without the aid of the very tradition of past interpretation over which Scripture is to sit in judgment. How can this difficulty be resolved? Does Scripture occupy a place of authority over tradition, or does tradition rather occupy a place of authority over Scripture?

## **Scripture and Tradition: A Solution**

Before we attempt to respond to this question, we should first take time to remember just how it was that Scripture came into being in the first place. As Grenz and Franke remind us,

[T]he community precedes the production of the scriptural texts and is responsible for their content and for the identification of particular texts for inclusion in an authoritative canon to which it has chosen to make itself accountable. Apart from the Christian community, the texts would not have taken their particular and distinctive shape. Apart from the authority of the Christian community, there would be no canon of authorized texts. In short, apart from the Christian community the Christian Bible would not exist.[\[14\]](#)

It might now be interesting to ask what the Christian community and the Christian Bible have in common. According to Grenz and Franke, it is the work of the Holy Spirit—a work that grants to each one its respective authority. They write,

In this conception, the authority of both scripture and tradition is ultimately an authority derived from the work of the Spirit. Each is part of an organic unity, so that even though scripture and tradition are distinguishable, they are fundamentally inseparable. . . . The authority of each—tradition as well as scripture—is contingent on the work of the Spirit, and both scripture and tradition are fundamental components within an interrelated web of beliefs that constitutes the Christian faith. To misconstrue the



shape of this relationship by setting scripture over against tradition or by elevating tradition above scripture is to fail to comprehend properly the work of the Spirit.[{15}](#)

Does this mean, then, that there is no sense in which all of life (including tradition) should be brought under the judgment of Scripture? This does not seem to be what Grenz and Franke are saying. Although they do contend that the triune God “is disclosed in polyphonic fashion through scripture, the church, and even the world,” they then qualify this by noting, “albeit always normatively through scripture.”[{16}](#) In their view, Scripture is still theology’s “norming norm,” but since Scripture must always be interpreted, it cannot be easily separated from tradition. Scripture still holds the place of prominence in doing theology, but in a carefully nuanced and qualified way that gives appropriate weight to God’s other mediums of revelation, such as tradition, creation, and the church.

## **Tradition in Scripture and Theology**

In one of his 1993 Warfield Lectures, the late Colin Gunton observed that two of the narrative sections in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians contain possibly the most easily recognizable accounts of “the working of tradition in the New Testament.”[{17}](#) In both 1 Corinthians 11, where Paul discusses the Lord’s Supper, and 1 Corinthians 15, where he refers to Jesus’ death and resurrection as the heart of the gospel, Paul specifically declares that he is delivering to the Corinthians certain traditions about Jesus which he himself had previously received. In other words, the biblical writings themselves are seen to be “part of a tradition of interpretation of that which is in certain respects prior to them.”[{18}](#)

The unique revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is *prior* to the traditions about Him which Paul had received. And the traditions which Paul had received, including the meaning

given them by the early church and Paul himself, are also *prior* to his deliverance of them to the Corinthians (as well as those of us who have subsequently read this letter). Tradition, it seems, cannot always be so easily separated from the Bible itself.

Of course, very few Christians would disagree that traditions like those passed on by the Apostle Paul to the Corinthians are “authoritative for the faith and life of the church.”[\[19\]](#) The problem rather arises with how the original revelation “is interpreted and handed on by those who follow the . . . apostles: the way in which revelation is mediated by tradition.”[\[20\]](#) How should we understand this relationship?

For one thing, we should probably grant a certain degree of freedom, in response to the Spirit’s guidance, to the way in which the tradition is articulated in different cultural and historical contexts. This allows the tradition to grow in a healthy way which, at the same time, is still amenable to correction when necessary. Granted, we are speaking of the development of tradition in something like an ideal setting, and the world in which we now live is certainly not ideal. But if tradition is one of the means which God has chosen for mediating revelation from one generation to another, then for better or worse, it will (and should) continue to play an important role in the life of the church. As Gunton wisely concludes, “although we may and must be critical of tradition, as the action of fallible and sinful human beings, we may not lay aside the means which God has himself chosen.”[\[21\]](#)

## Notes

1. Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 109.
2. *Ibid.*, 118.
3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993),

84.

4. Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995), 85-87.

5. Ibid., 85.

6. Ibid., 86.

7. Ibid., 87.

8. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 120-29.

9. Ibid., 124.

10. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology*, 82.

11. Ibid., 84.

12. Ibid., 93.

13. Ibid., 96.

14. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, 115.

15. Ibid., 117.

16. Ibid., 117-18.

17. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation*, 93.

18. Ibid., 95.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 102-03.

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# Historical Criticism and the Bible

*Historical criticism of the Bible often threatens believers' faith. Dr. Michael Gleghorn explains that it is often grounded in false assumptions.*

# What Is Historical Criticism?

Throughout the history of Christianity, students of the Bible have used many different methods of interpreting the text. But since the Enlightenment, one particular method (or rather, family of methods) has been quite influential, especially in the academy.[{1}](#) I'm speaking of what is often called *historical criticism*, or the *historical-critical method* of biblical interpretation.



So what is historical criticism, you ask? Although the term gets used in different ways, I will here be using it to refer to a method of biblical interpretation which attempts to read the Bible as a *purely* human document from the distant past. In other words, the historical-critical method does not typically regard the Bible as divinely inspired. It is *merely* a human book, like any other, and should thus be read like any other book."[{2}](#)

In the past (and to some extent even today) scholars liked to portray this method as “scientific” in character, able to obtain “assured” and “objective” interpretive results. But critics tell a different story. For example, Eta Linnemann, who before her conversion to Christianity was a well-respected scholarly advocate of historical-criticism, claims that in practice the so-called “scientific” character of this method is grounded in a prior assumption of naturalism, perhaps even atheism. As Linnemann observes, “Research is conducted . . . if there were no God.”[{3}](#)

Another critic of this method is the renowned Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. After rehearsing certain principles of historical investigation, which many historical critics would endorse, Plantinga notes that these principles

are understood “to preclude” God’s direct involvement in the world.[{4}](#) Because of this, he notes, such principles “imply that God has not in fact specially inspired any human authors in such a way that what they write is really divine speech addressed to us; nor has he . . . performed miracles of any other sorts.”[{5}](#)

As I’m sure you can see, at least some of the results of this method come about simply because of assumptions the interpreter brings to the text. The problem, however, is that the assumptions are biased *against* Christianity in *favor* of naturalism. We must thus think rather critically about the historical-critical method. But first, we need a bit of background on how and when this method originated.

## The Origins of Historical Criticism

Although many scholars helped develop the historical-critical method, Johann Salomo Semler, an eighteenth-century theologian, is widely regarded as its “father.”[{6}](#) Semler was primarily interested in “critical work” on the canon of biblical writings.[{7}](#) For our purposes, the “[canon](#)” can simply be thought of as the books of the Old and New Testaments. The Church regards these books as the divinely inspired Word of God and, hence, completely authoritative for Christian faith and practice.

Semler, however, considered these books (especially those of the Old Testament) to be largely of merely historical interest. They might give us some interesting information about the religion of ancient Israel or (in the case of the New Testament) the beliefs of the early church, but they could not be regarded, at least in their entirety, as the divinely inspired Word of God.[{8}](#) Hence, Semler was led to make a distinction between “the Scriptures and the Word of God.”[{9}](#) Although the Church had always considered the Scriptures to be the Word of God, Semler made a distinction between them. In

his opinion, “some books belong in the Bible through historical decisions of past ages, but do not make wise unto salvation.”[\[10\]](#) Books of this sort, he reasoned, can still be called “Scripture” (for they are part of the biblical canon), but they are *not* the Word of God (for in his view, they are not divinely inspired).

Although historical criticism continued to be developed after Semler, it’s easy to see why many consider him to be this method’s “father.” In his own study of the Bible, Semler generally disregarded any claims that either it or the Church might make regarding its divine inspiration and authority and attempted instead to read the Bible like any other book. In the opinion of theologian Gerhard Maier, it’s “the general acceptance” of Semler’s view which “has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions.”[\[11\]](#) Before we examine such difficulties, however, we must first consider why so many scholars see value in the historical-critical method.

## **Some Proposed Benefits of Historical Criticism**

To begin, virtually everyone agrees that when you’re attempting to understand a book of the Bible, it can be helpful to know something about the origin of the book. Who was the author? When did he live? What sorts of things were happening at the time the book was written? Was the author influenced by any of these things, or attempting to respond to them in some way? Who was he writing for? How might they have understood him? Answering such questions can often clarify what the author may have been trying to communicate in his book. Historical critics are right to see this as an important part of understanding the books of the Bible. And most everyone agrees on this point.[\[12\]](#)

More controversial would be the principles of historical

investigation originally proposed by Ernst Troeltsch in an essay written in 1898.[{13}](#) These principles are still generally embraced (though with some modifications) by historical critics today.[{14}](#) Briefly stated, Troeltsch proposed three principles that can simply be called the principles of criticism, analogy, and correlation.[{15}](#) Although there's no universal agreement about how these principles should be used in actually doing historical research, historical-critical scholars have generally regarded these principles as helpful guides in critically evaluating what is written in the Bible in their effort to determine what *really* happened. This is considered a great benefit of historical criticism. For, rather than simply accepting the claims of a biblical author uncritically, Troeltsch's principles provide some help in critically evaluating such reports in order to assess their believability.[{16}](#)

Now in one sense this is commendable, for it is good to search for truth about what the Bible is trying to teach us. But there's a problem with how these principles are typically understood by historical-critical scholars. As the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga reminds us, such scholars generally take these principles to exclude any "*direct divine action* in the world."[{17}](#) That is, such principles forbid us to believe that God has ever directly intervened in the world which He has made. And for Christians, this presents a real difficulty with historical criticism.

## **Some Problems with Historical Criticism**

According to Christian scholars Norman Geisler and William Nix, a fundamental problem with historical criticism is that "it is based on an unjustified antisupernatural bias which it superimposes on the biblical documents."[{18}](#) This can easily be seen by examining some of the things which have been written by proponents and advocates of this method.

For example, Rudolf Bultmann, who was interested in “demythologizing” the New Testament, famously wrote, “It is impossible to use electric light . . . and to avail ourselves of modern medical . . . discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”[\[19\]](#) Similarly, another theologian has written that whatever the biblical authors may have believed about such things, “we believe that the biblical people lived in the same” world we do, that is “one in which no divine wonders transpired and no divine voices were heard.”[\[20\]](#)

Now if we ask such scholars why it is that we’re to think that miracles are either unbelievable or impossible, we’ll usually notice rather quickly that the responses are generally short on arguments and long on assumptions. That is, such scholars typically just *assume* that God is not directly involved in the world and that miracles never occur. But if a personal Creator of the universe exists (and there are [good reasons](#) to think that one does), then why should we simply *assume* that He would never directly intervene in the world which He has made? Such intervention would hardly seem *impossible*. And if it produced an effect which would not have come about had nature been left to itself, then this could quite properly be regarded as a miracle.

So it seems to me that if a personal God exists, then miracles are possible. And if miracles are possible, then it is nothing more than “an unjustified antisupernatural bias” (as Geisler and Nix assert) to simply *assume* that the Bible’s reports of miracles are all false and unbelievable. And since historical criticism of the Bible often begins with just such an assumption, it appears to offer us an inadequate method for correctly reading the Bible.

## **An Alternative to Historical Criticism**

Having looked at some problems with historical criticism, we



can now consider a preferable alternative, namely, theological interpretation.[{21}](#)

So what is theological interpretation? As I'm using the terminology here, it's a method of reading the Bible like a Christian, with the aim "of knowing God and of being formed unto godliness."[{22}](#) Theological interpretation takes a sober and serious account of what Christianity is, believes, and teaches. It then attempts to read and interpret the Bible as "a word from God about God."[{23}](#)

It's a radically different way of reading the Bible from that practiced by historical critics. Of course, as theologian Russell Reno reminds us, "There is obviously a historical dimension" to the truth found in the Bible. "Nevertheless," he continues, "to be a Christian is to believe that the truth found in the Bible is the very same truth we enter into by way of baptism, the same truth we confess in our creeds, the same truth we receive in the bread and wine of the Eucharist."[{24}](#)

But historical criticism attempts to read the Bible in the same way one would read any other book from the ancient world. It assumes that the Bible is merely a human book. The only way to really understand a book of the Bible, then, is to try to understand how it originated and what the original author was trying to say.

Theological interpretation, on the other hand, does not view the Bible as a merely human book. Of course, it realizes that each of the biblical books has a human author. But it also insists, along with the consensual teaching of the Christian community, that each of these books also has a Divine author.[{25}](#) It thus views the Bible as a divinely-inspired document.

Is this a legitimate way to read the Bible? Alvin Plantinga has written extensively on the theory of knowledge.[{26}](#) According to him, the biblical scholar who is also a Christian

“has a perfect right to assume Christian belief in pursuing her inquiries.” Doing so, he says, is just as legitimate as assuming the principles of historical criticism.<sup>{27}</sup> Indeed, for the Christian it is arguably better—for it allows us to read the Bible in continuity with the tradition and faith we profess and believe.

## Notes

1. Gregory Dawes, for example, notes that both form criticism and redaction criticism would fall under the umbrella of historical criticism. See Gregory Dawes, “‘A Certain Similarity to the Devil’: Historical Criticism and Christian Faith,” in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture: Historical, Biblical, and Theoretical Perspectives*, ed. Carlos R. Bovell (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 354.
2. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in Josephine M. Guy, *The Victorian Age: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. n.p.: Routledge, 1998. eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), EBSCOhost (accessed February 9, 2013), 295.
3. See Eta Linnemann, *Historical Criticism of the Bible: Methodology or Ideology?* trans., Robert Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), 84.
4. Alvin Plantinga, “Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship,” in *“Behind” the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephan Evans, Mary Healy and Murray Rae (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 33.
5. Ibid.
6. James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 29.
7. Ibid.
8. Peter Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Toward a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 38-40.
9. Edgar Krentz, *The Historical-Critical Method* (Eugene, OR:

Wipf and Stock, 2002), 19.

10. Ibid.

11. The first sentence of Maier's book declares, "The general acceptance of Semler's basic concept that the Bible must be treated like any other book has plunged theology into an endless chain of perplexities and inner contradictions." See Gerhard Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method*, trans., Edwin W. Leverenz and Rudolph F. Norden (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 11.

12. Plantinga, echoing the language of Robert Gordon, grants that we might refer to the attempt to answer such questions as a "warranted" form of historical biblical criticism. See Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in *"Behind" the Text*, 94.

13. For those interested in this essay, see Ernst Troeltsch, "Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology (1898)," trans. E. Fischhoff, rev. W. Bense in *Religion in History-Ernst Troeltsch: Essays*, trans. J. L. Adams and W. F. Bense (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).

14. Edgar Krentz states, "Contemporary historians use Troeltsch's three principles, but with significant modifications" (*The Historical-Critical Method*, 56). However, it does not seem necessary to qualify the modifications of Troeltsch's principles by practicing historical-critical scholars with the adjective "significant," for (in my opinion, at any rate) they are generally more severe in critically evaluating the sources with which they are dealing than the average historian is with his.

15. For two very helpful discussions of Troeltsch's principles, see Alvin Plantinga's discussion of "Troeltschian HBC" in "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 31-35, as well as Gregory Dawes discussion in "'A Certain Similarity to the Devil': Historical Criticism and Christian Faith," in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Authority of Scripture*, 358-70. Although Plantinga and Dawes reach different conclusions about if and how Troeltsch's

principles can be legitimately employed, both discussions are well worth reading.

16. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 45.

17. Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 33.

18. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible: Revised and Expanded* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), 440.

19. Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology," in *Kerygma and Myth*, edited by Hans Werner Bartsch (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 5.

20. Langdon Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," reprinted in Owen C. Thomas, ed., *God's Activity in the World: the Contemporary Problem* (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1983), 31; cited in Alvin Plantinga, "Two (or More) Kinds of Scripture Scholarship," in *"Behind" the Text*, 34.

21. Kevin Vanhoozer defines "theological interpretation" as "the process of keeping the canonical practices alive and well in the believing community." A bit later he describes a "canonical practice" as "divinely authorized use of language and literature, which, when learned, presents and forms Christ." As examples of "canonical practice," he discusses, first, the typological, or Christological, interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Jesus Christ and, second, prayer. He concludes his discussion by noting, "Christians learn to speak about, to think about, and to live for God by indwelling the diverse canonical practices that comprise the Scriptures. By participating in such practices-interpreting figurally, praying to the Father, and the like-Christians grow in faith toward understanding." This, it seems to me, is a helpful way of fleshing out, in greater detail, all that is involved in the concept and practice of the "theological interpretation" of Scripture. See Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster

John Knox Press, 2005), 219-226. The citations in this note are from pp. 219 and 226.

22. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, edited by Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 23.

24. R. R. Reno, "A Richer Bible," *First Things* (August/September, 2010), 44.

25. I adopt this language from Thomas Oden who, in his book on *Classic Christianity*, states as his intention the setting forth of the "classic consensual ecumenical teaching" of the church throughout history. See Thomas Oden, *Classic Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), xiii.

26. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (Oxford, 1993), *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford, 1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000).

27. Alvin Plantinga, "Reason and Scripture Scholarship: A Response to Robert Gordon and Craig Bartholomew," in *"Behind" the Text*, 99.

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## The ALL-Powerful God

*Dr. Michael Gleghorn examines the important doctrine of the omnipotence of God, and what it means for God to be all-powerful.*

### Introducing Omnipotence

When the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her that she would give birth to Israel's promised Messiah, she was stunned. After all, she was a virgin. How could she possibly

give birth to a son? But the angel informed her that God's power was more than sufficient to accomplish such a thing, "for nothing is impossible with God" (Luke 1:37; NIV).



A foundational element of a Christian worldview is a proper view of God. This article is about God's omnipotence. Although the term may sound a bit intimidating, it simply means that God is all-powerful. A number of scriptural passages speak to this issue.

For example, through the prophet Jeremiah God warned the people of Judah that because of their wickedness their land would soon be conquered by the Babylonians (Jer. 32:26-35). Nevertheless, God also promised that he would one day restore his people to their land and bless them with great prosperity (Jer. 32:37-44). As if to make clear that the Lord was completely able to fulfill his promise, the context twice leads us to reflect upon the fact that nothing is too difficult for God (Jer. 32:17, 27). The text, therefore, seems to clearly indicate that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent.

This power is revealed in a number of different ways. For example, the creation of the universe reveals his "eternal power and divine nature" (Rom. 1:20; Heb. 1:3). The resurrection of Jesus reveals his "mighty strength," which not only raised Christ from the dead, but which seated him at the right hand of God, "far above all . . . power and dominion" (Eph. 1:18-23). Finally, his might is also revealed in the gospel, which the apostle Paul described as "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

In fact, He is often referred to as God *Almighty*. In the book of Revelation the twenty-four elders who are seated before the throne of God fall on their faces and worship the Lord

declaring, “We give thanks to you, Lord God Almighty, the One who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign” (Rev. 11:17).

The cumulative picture is indeed a grand one—and quite naturally leads to the believer’s affirmation that God is all-powerful, or omnipotent. But how is this attribute to be understood? What exactly does it mean to say that God is omnipotent? These are some of the questions with which we’ll grapple in the remainder of this article.

## Omnipotence and Creation

The Apostle’s Creed begins, “I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.”<sup>{1}</sup> Not only does this statement affirm a central (and biblical) Christian truth-claim, namely, that God is the creator of the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1), it also clearly links this affirmation with God’s attribute of omnipotence by referring to him as “God the Father *almighty*.” By linking God’s omnipotence with creation in this way, the creed reaffirms what the Apostle Paul had previously taught in his letter to the Romans, that God’s “eternal power and divine nature” are “clearly seen in what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

But why does the Bible, and Christian tradition, link God’s omnipotence with creation in this way? One of the most important reasons is to be found in the Christian doctrine of creation itself. You see, unlike certain pagan doctrines of creation, which taught that the universe was *formed* out of pre-existent matter, Christianity teaches that God *created* the universe out of nothing. And when we say that God created the universe “out of nothing,” we are claiming, as the theologian Thomas Torrance reminds us, that the universe “is not created out of anything.” Rather, “it came into being through the absolute fiat of God’s Word in such a way that whereas previously there was nothing, the whole universe came into

being.”{2}

Now what’s astonishing about this is that it’s perfectly consistent with today’s standard Big Bang model of the origin of the universe! This is because, as physicist P. C. W. Davies observes, “On this view the big bang represents the creation event; the creation not only of all the matter and energy in the universe, but also of spacetime itself.”{3} Hence, the origin posited by this model is “an absolute origin” out of nothing.{4}

This is why omnipotence and creation are so closely linked in the Christian tradition. It’s one thing to merely *form* a universe out of pre-existent matter. It is another thing entirely to *create* a universe out of absolutely nothing! As Christian philosophers Paul Copan and Bill Craig observe, “It is difficult to imagine any more stunning display of God’s almighty power than the world’s springing into being out of nothing, at his mere command.”{5}

## Omnipotence and Morality

Now you might be thinking that if God is all-powerful, then he can do absolutely anything. But if we adopt this understanding of omnipotence, we quickly run into conflict with the teaching of Scripture, for Scripture tells us plainly that there are some things God cannot do.

For example, in Numbers 23:19 we read: “God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?” According to this text, God is not the sort of being to tell a lie. When he makes a promise, we can be confident that he will keep it, because God does not lie (see also 1 Sam. 15:29 and Tit. 1:2).

This is particularly important for New Testament believers, for God has made many wonderful promises to those who have



trusted Christ for salvation. Is there any reason to fear that God may not keep some of these promises? No, there is not, for as the author of Hebrews reminds us, “it is impossible for God to lie” by making a promise and then failing to keep it. And because of this, our hope in Christ is “firm and secure” (Heb. 6:18-19).

But if we say that God cannot lie, or break a promise, or do anything else that is morally evil, then haven't we denied that God is all-powerful? Not necessarily. The vast majority of Christian theologians throughout the history of the church have consistently taught that God's omnipotence does not include the ability to do that which is logically impossible or contradictory.

Of course, there is no contradiction in saying that an omnipotent being can commit a morally evil act. But there does seem to be a contradiction in saying that a completely good, morally perfect being can perform such an act. As a morally perfect being, God not only has no moral faults, but as James reminds us, he cannot even be tempted by sin and evil (James 1:13). Hence, as one Christian philosopher observes, “for an essentially morally perfect being, doing what is wrong is just a special case of doing what is impossible for that being to do.”<sup>[6]</sup> And clearly, the inability to do what is morally evil should not be seen as detracting from God's omnipotence. Instead, it should be viewed as exalting his moral perfection.

## **Omnipotence and Freedom**

We've seen that omnipotence cannot mean that God can do absolutely *anything*. For as a morally perfect being, God is incapable of doing what is morally evil. This might lead us to think that God can do anything that is consistent with his morally perfect nature. But most theologians would still reject such a view. They would insist that some things are just logically impossible and that it can't count against

God's omnipotence to admit that he cannot do such things.

Let's consider an example. A square is a geometrical object with four angles. A triangle has only three. This being so, what do you think the chances are of constructing a square triangle? Not very good, right? After all, if something has four angles, then it has more than three. And if it has only three angles, then it has less than four. Regardless of how much power one has, a square triangle is a *logical impossibility*.

With this in mind, let's now consider another example. Suppose that John is the kind of person who, if married, would *always* freely seek his wife's input before making any major financial decision. If this is true, then it would seem that not even God could create John, place him in such circumstances, and have him freely *refrain* from seeking his wife's input—for this is simply *not* what John would *freely* do in such circumstances.

Of course, God still has plenty of options. He could always refuse to create John, or refuse to let him get married, or refuse to let him be confronted with a major financial decision. Alternatively, God could put John in the circumstances we're considering, but *make* him decide not to seek his wife's input. But what he cannot do is place John in these circumstances and then *make* him *freely* decide not to seek his wife's input. For to *make* John *freely* do something is as logically impossible as creating a square triangle.[{7}](#)

Of course, God's inability to perform a logically impossible task can't fairly count against his omnipotence. For this would suggest "that a task has been specified, that transcends the capacities . . . of Omnipotence. But no task at all has been specified by uttering a self-contradictory . . . mixture of words."[{8}](#) So we needn't worry that we've abandoned the doctrine of omnipotence by admitting that God cannot perform meaningless tasks! We've simply clarified the meaning of omnipotence.

# The Importance of Omnipotence

The doctrine that God is omnipotent, or all-powerful, is, as one philosopher has observed, “not a bit of old metaphysical luggage that can be abandoned with relief.” Instead, it’s “indispensable for Christianity.” After all, God has made many wonderful promises to his people. But if he “were not almighty . . . he might . . . sincerely promise, but find fulfillment beyond his power.”<sup>{9}</sup> So only if God is omnipotent can we confidently bank on his promises. But this is a bit of a two-edged sword.

On the one hand, the doctrine of God’s omnipotence can be very comforting for believers, who are rightly related to God through faith in Jesus Christ. After all, “God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Whatever problems and difficulties we face in life, our omnipotent God has more than enough power to see us through. If he chooses, he can easily deliver us from fire or water, sword or famine, sickness or disease. And if he lets us go through such things, he can provide all the grace and strength we need to endure. While the suffering of God’s saints can indeed be great, we must also remember that this life is not the end of our story, for “in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Pet. 3:11). A promise our omnipotent God is more than able to fulfill!

On the other hand, however, an omnipotent Deity is a most frightening prospect for anyone who persists in spurning his love and grace. For as the author of Hebrews reminds us, we are each “destined to die once, and after that to face judgment” (9:27) and “it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:31)—especially when that God is all-powerful! It’s a sobering thought to remind ourselves that not one of us can ultimately escape God’s power and judgment. If we make the omnipotent God our enemy, then no one can

deliver us from his hand.

Thankfully, however, peace with God is available to anyone who wants it. The Bible tells us that God does not want anyone to perish, but for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). He pleads with men to be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). "Whoever is thirsty," he says, "let him come . . . let him take the free gift of the water of life" (Rev. 22:17b). The omnipotent God offers us all good things in Christ—and nothing can prevent him making good on his offer!

## Notes

1. John H. Leith, ed., *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: John Knox, 1982), 24.
2. Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 207; cited in Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 14.
3. P. C. W. Davies, "Spacetime Singularities in Cosmology," in *The Study of Time III*, ed. J. T. Fraser (New York: Springer Verlag, 1978), 78-79; cited in Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 222.
4. Copan and Craig, *Creation out of Nothing*, 223.
5. *Ibid.*, 26.
6. Edward Wierenga, "Omnipotence Defined," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 43, no. 3 (1983): 367.
7. See J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 539.
8. Antony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Rev. 2nd ed. (New York: Gramercy Books, 1999), s.v. "impossibility."
9. All of these citations are taken from P. T. Geach, "Omnipotence," *Philosophy* 48, no. 183 (1973): 8.