

THEOLOGY  
for the PEOPLE of GOD



# A HANDBOOK OF THEOLOGY

EDITORS

*Daniel L. Akin | David S. Dockery | Nathan A. Finn*



“As a contributor to the Theology for the People of God series, I am delighted to recommend this introductory volume, *A Handbook of Theology*. In about a dozen pages for each topic, this readily accessible volume ranges widely over theology and its method and history, core doctrines, and Christian living and cultural engagement. From responsible handling of biblical affirmations on nearly fifty topics, to tracing their development historically, and including practical counsel for their application, this *Handbook* is a comprehensive guide that will be consulted many times and on many occasions.”

—**Gregg R. Allison**, professor of theology,  
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“This is a book you can confidently place in the hands of church leaders and students to introduce them to an array of different kinds of theology (biblical theology, historical theology, and so forth), and especially to an outline of systematic theology. Most of the contributors have sought to forge connections between their respective chapters and the life and vitality of the church. Confessionally, the work is conservative and baptistic but will doubtless serve readers from a wide range of backgrounds.”

—**D. A. Carson**, theologian-at-large, The Gospel Coalition

“This handbook successfully addresses a wide range of subjects: theological foundations, theology, history, geography, doctrines, Christian living, and engagement with culture. The chapters are short enough to be digestible but long enough to inform. The essays are very competently written by scholars and practitioners in their fields. Both men and women as well as younger scholars and seasoned theologians are contributors to this very readable and worthy volume.”

—**Graham A. Cole**, dean emeritus, Trinity Evangelical  
Divinity School and emeritus principal, Ridley College

“A massive work. So much here to read, enjoy, immerse yourself in, and use as teaching tools for others. Let no one say Baptists don’t know how to do theology!”

—**Josh Moody**, senior pastor, College Church in Wheaton,  
and president, God Centered Life Ministries

“This handbook treats classic and contemporary topics in theology in a way that is biblically faithful, ecclesially rooted, and solidly evangelical. Written by both leading and emerging Baptist scholars, the chapters are insightful, succinct, edifying, and timely. The editors are to be commended for this significant achievement.”

—**Christopher W. Morgan**, dean and professor of theology at the  
School of Christian Ministries, California Baptist University

“In a day when theology as the ‘queen of the sciences’ has been challenged, *A Handbook of Theology* joyfully reminds us of the enduring power and proper place of theology in Christian discourse. In this remarkable guide, dozens of respected theologians have laid a proper foundation of the broad contours of Christian theology, upon which a lifetime of study can be built. I heartily recommend it.”

—**Timothy C. Tennent**, president and professor of  
World Christianity, Asbury Theological Seminary

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A  
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*Daniel L. Akin | David S. Dockery | Nathan A. Finn*

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ACADEMIC  
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# PREFACE

The apostle Paul, writing to the church at Thessalonica, urged the followers of Jesus Christ to stand firm and hold to the tradition that they were taught (2 Thess 2:15). Similarly, the apostle exhorted Timothy, his apostolic legate, to keep the pattern of teaching (2 Tim 1:13). In his letter to Titus, the apostle noted that leaders need to hold to the faithful message as taught in order to be able to encourage with sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict it (Titus 1:9). In what represents a summary of these various exhortations, Paul instructed Timothy to commit the teachings he had heard to faithful Christ followers so that they will be able to teach others also (2 Tim 2:2).

These important priorities continue to be the focus of ecclesial theologians, those Christian thinkers who understand that their calling and work should be carried out in service to the church, the people of God. Ecclesial theology, among other things, must be grounded in the Scriptures; it must be trinitarian, Christ-centered, Spirit-enabled, and doxological; it must be informed by the thinking of God's people throughout church history; and it must be ministry- and mission-focused.

The contributors to *A Handbook of Theology* understand the importance of speaking to both minds and hearts, seeking also to provide application for hands and feet. Ecclesial theologians in the twenty-first century must make every effort to help people develop a theologically informed way of seeing and understanding the world in order to engage the great ideas of the past and current issues in our context and culture. Such a theological framework will provide right motivations for Christian living and Christian ministry. This handbook in many ways serves as both an introduction to and a summary for the new multiauthored and multivolume series called *Theology for the People of God*, which is grounded in a calling to serve the church.

The more than four dozen contributors to this volume believe there must be a place for the true intellectual love of God, for Jesus has commanded us to love God with our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and to love our neighbor as well (Matt 22:37–39). This, however, should not lead to some cold, intellectual approach to the faith unaccompanied by affection. For too many people, the work of theologians seems to be characterized by a kind of intellectual aloofness or uncommitted intellectual curiosity.

Those contributing to *A Handbook of Theology* heartily affirm a commitment to the truthfulness of the Bible, the transformational power of the gospel, and the centrality of the church. In this way, those participating in this volume seek to be faithful to the best of our evangelical heritage. It is our prayer that this volume will render service to the church in many ways, satisfying the mind and heart so that we can know God (Jer 9:23–24) and lovingly follow the living and exalted Christ (Phil 3:10–14). We fully believe that theology is necessary to strengthen the church's worship as well as its tasks of evangelism, discipleship, teaching, service, and missions.

While the contributors to this volume have attempted to be faithful to the best of the Baptist and evangelical heritage, they have also sought to engage the issues of the day and prepare followers of Christ for the challenges of tomorrow. That said, our goal in this work has not been to be caught up in the latest movement, trend, or fad, always seeking that which is novel based on the newest thought or proposal in the theological world. The kind of maturity pictured in Ephesians 4 calls for a more carefully articulated theological foundation that will speak in a fresh way while not falling into the ill-suited paths leading to gullibility, instability, or heterodox thinking. The participants in this volume have written with the goal of providing a renewed vision for the relationship of theology, church, worship, ministry, and missions. They do this with an awareness that the health of the church requires a solid theological foundation.

Our hope is that this volume will serve as a helpful resource for students, pastors, and church leaders. We ask that readers join with us in asking God to use this volume as a source of strength, renewal, and revitalization for the church in the days to come. We trust that this will take place as people better understand what they believe and why they believe it. We believe that the sound, reliable theology found in these pages will serve as a source of strength and hope for God's people for decades to come.

The three of us have been working on this project for a few years. We now pray that it will serve as an instrument of grace for readers and those who will be influenced by the faithful efforts of the contributors who have collaborated with us. We are grateful for each author and the dedication, experience, skills, and gifts each person brings to this shared effort. We want to express our gratitude for our friends at B&H and the Lifeway administration for their wholehearted support, guidance, and patience, as well as for the assistance from colleagues and staff members at our institutions, especially Devin Moncada and Chris Kim. We are genuinely thankful for our families, who have encouraged us through the process of yet another writing project. We ultimately thank our great God for the privilege to work together on this project, trusting the Lord that it will strengthen the people of God in many and multifaceted ways.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

Daniel L. Akin, David S. Dockery, and Nathan A. Finn

# INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

At the heart of this volume is an understanding that the study of theology matters for the life and health of the church. The term “theology,” however, often scares people. For some it sounds formidable, esoteric, technical, and abstract. Others believe theology to be irrelevant to our life with God, even suspicious that theology is some sort of human presumption that provides a distraction from genuine ministry. Most of us have encountered this kind of thinking. You might be surprised to hear us say that the suspicions are at least partly well-founded because theology has too often been studied in the wrong way. That has led to misthinking or even hurtful thinking in some contexts.

## **Guidance from the Apostle Paul**

It will be helpful for us to take a step back and look at a passage from the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4. Here we see the goals of the teaching ministry for the people of God as threefold: (1) to build up the church; (2) to lead the church to maturity in faith; and (3) to lead the church to unity. Theology at its best aims to do these three things, equipping and strengthening God’s people in a holistic way, addressing heads, hearts, and hands. If those involved in the work of theology focus only on the head, we will at best have followers of Christ who are well informed but not conformed to the character of Christ. It is our prayer that this volume will serve as a resource to help people develop (1) a theologically informed way of seeing the world (the head), (2) Christian responses in our experience and our affections (the heart), and (3) Christian strategies and motivations for ministry (the hands). We believe

that a full-orbed understanding of these things can only be addressed when we understand that theology finds its focus in the church, recognizing that head, hearts, and hands should not be separated.

## **Guidance from Church History**

In the history of the church, both church leaders and church members were called to ongoing study (2 Tim 2:15) in order to provide oversight for the ministry of the Word of God in worship services, as well as to disciple new converts (2 Tim 2:2; Titus 1:9). Even during the time of Augustine in the fifth century, personal mentorship, guidance, and teaching from older pastors and bishops remained the primary model for doing theology for the people of God. By the time of the Reformation, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin gave themselves to the work of theology and the teaching of theology. From their work came a threefold approach to the study of theology, which included (1) the study of the Bible and its interpretation in the history of the church; (2) the study of doctrine; and (3) the application of these subjects with special attention to the practical administration of churches, preaching, worship, and ministry. In many ways, the shape of this volume follows this pattern.

## **Enlightenment and Post-Enlightenment Challenges**

It needs to be recognized that even in the twenty-first century, we still wrestle with the residual effects of the vast influence of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought, which challenged the very heart of the Christian faith. While the purpose of this volume is not primarily one of apologetics or polemics, the contributors to this book do not share the approaches of Enlightenment thinking and its questions about supernaturalism, biblical authority, Christian tradition, and the role of reason. The Enlightenment, which blossomed in the eighteenth century, was a watershed in the history of Western civilization. The Christian consensus that had existed from the fourth through the seventeenth centuries was hampered by a radical secular spirit. Enlightenment emphases were characterized by a stress on the primacy of nature and reason over special revelation. Along with this elevated view of reason, the movement reflected a low view

of sin, an antisupernatural bias, and an ongoing questioning of the place of authority and tradition.

In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher led the various attempts to synthesize the Christian faith with both Romantic and Enlightenment ideas. His attempt to translate the Christian faith to those changing times, as articulated in works such as *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), was not just an attempt to make the Christian faith relevant or to bring Christianity to a place where it could be heard afresh. Rather, his work transformed the Christian faith into something quite different. Schleiermacher's thinking was formed in the context of pietism; yet, in his attempt to save the spiritual by divorcing theology from spirituality, he wound up losing both. Schleiermacher initiated a trajectory that created a disruption between the study of theology and the congregations, bringing about a separation of head and heart.

## Theology for the People of God

Our desire in providing *A Handbook of Theology* is to help us all think afresh about bringing together to the people of God the study of theology, the importance of spiritual formation, and service. Thus, when we speak of theology, we are not merely echoing Schleiermacher's understanding of theology as an attempt to articulate our feelings about our dependence on God. On the other hand, we do not wish to overswing the pendulum by defining theology only in objective terms of putting truth in proper order. Faithful to our free church heritage, we suggest that theology involves both the developing of our minds for truth so that we indeed articulate "the faith once for all delivered to the saints" and developing a heart for God so our lives are built up in the faith. Ultimately, a theology for the people of God seeks to serve the church by building up the body of Christ so that it may grow up into the Head, which is Christ himself, in order to bring maturity in thought and in life (Eph 4:13–16).

For too many people, however, the province of theology has not been the church but has been limited to the realm of specialists in the academic world. We certainly believe that Christian theology should be a part of the academic world and should engage the academy as well as society-at-large. We affirm that there is a rightful place for academic and public theology.

Ultimately, however, we believe theology should have its focus on serving the church, building up believers in the faith. This does not mean that all Christ followers are to be theologians uniquely summoned to the task of leading in theological thought. It does mean, however, that all believers are responsible before God to think lofty thoughts about the triune God and to live according to his revealed Word to us. It is our prayer that the articles found in this volume will help men and women to see and understand the revelation of God for their foundational beliefs while integrating these beliefs into their life and practice.

In no way do we wish to suggest that theology is the whole of church life. But there must be a place for the true intellectual love of God, for Jesus taught us to love God with our heart, soul, strength, and mind, while loving our neighbors as well. This should not lead to some cold, intellectual approach to the faith unaccompanied by affection. For too many, theology is a kind of intellectual aloofness, merely a detached academic pursuit.

We believe theology renders service to the church in many ways. It satisfies the mind so that we can know God and know the living Christ. Theology is necessary for the church's teaching and apologetic tasks (1 Pet 3:15). Theology is important as a touchstone for understanding what the church believes and for recognizing the principles by which the allegiance of its members will be judged. Such beliefs and practices come from serious theological reflection. Such an understanding recognizes that the Christian faith is more than a personal and subjective experience; it is also the body of truth "delivered to the saints once for all" (Jude 1:3). It certainly includes "belief in," but it also must be understood in terms of "belief that." Moreover, theology points to ethics. Certainly, it is possible to act one way and think another, but it is not logically possible for one to do so for long, for as persons think in their hearts, so they will live (Prov 23:7). If the church is to live in the world with a lifestyle that issues forth in glory to God, it must think deeply about personal ethics as well as the implications of the biblical faith for society, culture, and marketplace. Such necessities touch the heart of the church's life and mission; they are not just matters on the periphery of options from which we can pick and choose.

One of the main problems the church faces in the twenty-first century is a failure to recognize one of the primary purposes of the church, which is articulated for us in Eph 3:10. God's intent is that, through the church, the

manifold wisdom of God is to be made known. The history of the Christian church and the unfolding drama of redemption has been called a graduate school for the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realm. The church is central to God's working in history as well as to the gospel and Christian living. Thus, theology is more than God's words for us as individuals, for God is not just saving individuals; he is saving a people for himself. We suggest that theology is best understood as theology for the church, the community of faith. If the church is central to God's plan, then we cannot push to the periphery what is central for God. We need a framework for understanding a theology of the church before we can talk about doing theology for the church.

In Ephesians, Paul seems to advance the understanding of the church beyond that of a local body of believers to include the people of God on earth at any one time, plus all believers in heaven and on earth, which is often referred to as the universal church. At Pentecost, God inaugurated the church as his new society (Acts 2), founded on Christ's finished work (Acts 2:22–24) and the baptizing work of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). The church is a mystery (Eph 3:1–6) that Christ prophesied (Matt 16:18) and that was revealed at the Spirit's coming at Pentecost. The church has apostles and prophets as its foundation and Christ as the cornerstone (Eph 2:20–21). In origin and in purpose, the church is God's church. The church is not created by our efforts, but received as God's gift, constituted by him and for him.

Membership in the community of faith is by divine initiative, for we love him because he first loved us (1 John 4:10). God creates a fellowship of people indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The New Testament presents the church as the household of faith (Gal 6:10), the fellowship of the Spirit (Phil 2:1), the family of God (Eph 3:14–15), the pillar of truth (1 Tim 3:15), the bride of Christ (Rev 19:7), the body of Christ (Eph 1:22–23), the new creation (Eph 2:15), and the temple of the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:21). More than a human organization, the church is a visible and tangible expression of the people who are reconciled to Christ and to one another.

Joining with the church's confession throughout the ages, we can maintain that the church is one—holy, universal, and apostolic. All four markers are vitally important and must be taken seriously, even as we live with the tensions inherent within them. The people of God must seek to pursue unity, to reflect holiness, and to remain in continuity with the past, primarily the

apostolic doctrine and practice made known to us in Christian Scripture (Eph 2:20; 3:2–13), while seeking to live a commitment to the communion of saints across all generational, social, ethnic, and economic boundaries. The church must take seriously the work of doing theology as an aspect of its overall purpose and mission, for the role of the “Rule of Faith” since the church’s earliest generations has served a shaping role.

Carrying out the image of the pillar of truth (1 Tim 3:15), we believe that the first responsibility in the work of theology is the equipping or building up of the church (Eph 4:13–16). Equipping involves moving believers toward (1) the unity of faith and (2) a maturity of the faith that involves the full knowledge of God’s Son. When the church is equipped, the people of God will evidence stability in precept and practice, growing up in every way into Christ, with each member supporting the other, fitted together in harmony and built up in love. The church should not be characterized as unstable, always caught up in the latest movement, trend, or fad, always seeking the new and novel. A commitment to apostolicity and the Christian tradition provides an anchor for the church.

The kind of maturity described in Ephesians 4 needs a carefully articulated theological foundation that will lead the church away from instability and gullibility. The church must always be aware of deceptions and counterfeits to the truth, which can only be known when we learn to think wisely in theological categories. Theological maturity often comes by being able to recognize genuine heresy as found in Marcion, Arius, Pelagius, Abelard, and the denial of cardinal Christian doctrines. Almost all heresies throughout the history of the church have been adaptations of these four wrongheaded thinkers. Heresy must be rejected while we recognize that mere disagreement over secondary or tertiary matters must not be characterized as heresy.

Careful theological thought leading to the building up of the people of God results in the advancement of the gospel mission among the nations (Rev 5:7). In actualizing that mission, the church is called to be faithful, to discern, to interpret, and to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ as the transforming power for the world. Unfortunately, the contemporary separations that we often find among theology, spirituality, and church ministry results in mutual suspicion of the work of theology. The church has at times not encouraged, and in fact at times seemingly has discouraged, the need for

faithful and collaborative work of theologians. Sadly, the flip side of the coin is not much better.

What is needed is a renewed eschatological vision for the people of God with a recognition of the importance of the church in God's overall plan and a fresh appreciation of the significance of a theological foundation for the church. Our prayer is for faithful theologians who are also faithful churchmen, faithful teachers who are also faithful evangelists. Our goal in this volume is for the articles to be applicable to and for the people of God. Moreover, theology must be set before the church and the world as a system of truth that depends on the regenerated mind and exposes the radical differences between Christianity and the philosophies of the world.

### **Theology and the Church's Beliefs, Proclamation, and Ministry**

Beliefs about God and his Word have ultimate consequences in this life. Our beliefs about God have significant consequences not only for this life but for all eternity. Christian theology then forms the foundation of the church's beliefs, proclamation, and ministry. It involves not only believing revealed truth but articulating it in such a way that calls the church to genuine spirituality, purity, and ethical holiness. If Christian theology is the study of God and his works, then it cannot be merely the work of specialists. Theology is the responsibility of the church seeking to communicate what the church believes, practices, and proclaims, primarily for the good of believers, but also for a watching world.

We sometimes hear voices suggesting that theology is too divisive and therefore should be deemphasized. Theology, however, serves as the backbone of the church. Without good theology the church cannot and will not mature in the faith and will be prone to be tossed back and forth by waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching (Eph 4:14). Healthy theology that matures the head and the heart not only will enable believers to move toward maturity but will result in the praise and exaltation of God among all peoples (Psalm 96). Good theology should always lead to vibrant and faithful doxology. The apostle Paul—after expounding the doctrines of sin, justification, sanctification, and the future of Israel in the first eleven chapters of Romans—concludes the section by declaring,

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and untraceable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? And who has ever given to God, that he should be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36)

Theology that does not lead to doxology may be intellectually helpful, but it falls short of the biblical vision of doxological reflection for God’s glory and the flourishing of his people.

We honestly acknowledge some theologians have unduly complicated the Christian faith or distracted us from aspects of Christian living. We should not, however, conclude that theology in itself is distracting or divisive. Theology needs to be as much a part of the church as worship, evangelism, benevolence ministries, and missions. Indeed, it should inform each of these priorities. Ministry based on unsound theology will itself be unsound and even dangerous. Worship that does not see God for who he is and how he has revealed himself will not glorify God. Theology can help us better understand the faith we desire to share in our evangelistic efforts and, moreover, can help lead us to an awareness of the grandeur, the greatness, and the goodness of the one, true, and wise God we worship and serve.

Theology can also enable God’s people to recover a true understanding of human life. In this sense God’s people can once again gain a sense of the greatness of the soul. Theology can help us recover the awareness that God is more important than we are, that the future life is more important than this one, and that a right view of God gives genuine significance and security to our lives. We will understand that hope is the promise of heaven and that holiness is the priority here in this world.

The church can better understand what we believe and why we believe it. We can appreciate our heritage and enliven our future hope. When the church carries out this theological task, and when theologians do theology for the church, the truth content of the faith can be preserved. For it is the express task of theology to expound the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:7). When this takes place, the church can be strengthened. The gospel and its fullness can be proclaimed. Without the foundation of solid theology, there can be no effective long-term preaching, evangelism, discipleship, or

missionary outreach. Those who would suggest that what you do not know cannot hurt you could find themselves in great difficulty if this approach is taken toward ultimate matters such as heaven and hell. On the other hand, sound, reliable theology, based squarely on God's Word, offers reassurance and hope.

Understanding theology in the context of the history of the church provides insight for today and guidance for the future. In this way theology can preserve the church from wrongheaded fads. Knowledge of the past keeps the church from confusing what is merely a contemporary expression from that which is enduringly relevant, keeping us from falling into the trap of presentism. Theology helps present to the church a valuable accumulation of enduring insights along with numerous lessons and warnings, both positive and negative. Thus, theology done for the church will always have one eye on the church's historical paths.

Such an awareness of the church's history provides a bulwark against the pride and arrogance that would suggest that "we" are the only group or tradition that carries on the orthodoxy of the apostles. Knowledge of such continuities and discontinuities in the past will help us focus on those areas of truth that are truly timeless and enduring while encouraging authenticity and humility, as well as dependency on God's Spirit. Hopefully, this awareness will encourage us not just to accept things in accordance with our tradition or to do things in accordance with our own "comfort zones," but will repeatedly drive us back to the New Testament with fresh eyes and receptive hearts. We will then rest our case there.

Finally, we believe that a theologically informed and equipped church will be better prepared for times of duress and trial, whether through means of persecution, in the face of faithless scholarship, or during the church's internal bickering and divisions. With hope the church can focus on the triumphal work of God in Jesus Christ, living in expectation of the glorious reign of the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The Editors

**FOR ADDITIONAL STUDY**

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PART I

THEOLOGICAL  
FOUNDATIONS

# God's Existence

JEREMIAH J. JOHNSTON

The question of the existence of God can be approached from different angles. Theologians and philosophers usually address forms of the “Cosmological Argument” (the argument for the existence of God based on the origin and nature of the universe), the “Teleological Argument” (the argument from purpose or design), the “Ontological Argument” (the argument from being and existence), the “Moral Argument” (the argument from moral or ethical necessity), or arguments based on design, intelligence, or consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The present essay will consider the evidence for the existence of God that arises primarily from experience as recounted in biblical literature, which supports and clarifies the reality of God's existence. The Scriptures are about the experience of God. This literature includes Israel's ancient Hebrew Scripture. Here we find secondhand stories of the experience of the patriarchs and other figures of antiquity as well as firsthand accounts of prophets who claim to have seen God or have heard his audible voice. This literature also includes the sacred literature of the Christian Church, which provides secondhand accounts of events in which God or a supernatural being (viz., an angel) is seen or otherwise experienced as well as firsthand accounts of persons, such as the apostles Paul or John, who see God or, in some sense, enter God's presence.

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<sup>1</sup> See J. P. Moreland, Chad V. Meister, and Khaldoun A. Sweis, ed., *Debating Christian Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

## Teleological and Spiritual Arguments for the Existence of God

In biblical literature, we find teleological arguments for the existence of God based on what can be observed in nature or experienced in one's heart. Reflecting the former, the Psalter declares, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the expanse proclaims the work of his hands. Day after day they pour out speech, and night after night they communicate knowledge" (Ps 19:1–2). The logic of this confession lies in the idea that nature reflects God's greatness.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere the Psalter declares, "When I observe your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you set in place, what is a human being that you remember him, a son of man that you look after him?" (Ps 8:3–4). Reflecting the belief that God is in some sense known by what he impresses on one's heart, the Psalter speaks of God giving counsel (Ps 16:7) or of God writing his law on one's heart (40:8). We find a similar idea in the prophets. In anticipation of future restoration, the prophet Jeremiah, speaking the words of God, says, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD" (Jer 24:7), and "I will give them integrity of heart and action so that they will fear me always" (Jer 32:39). In the context of the promise of a new covenant, God says through Jeremiah,

"I will put my teaching within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will one teach his neighbor or his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know me, from the least to the greatest of them"—this is the Lord's declaration. "For I will forgive their iniquity and never again remember their sin." (Jer 31:33b–34)

To have God's law "within" or "written upon" the heart is to know God intimately and truly. This is why God through Jeremiah can say that "no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me" (31:34 ESV). Because all will know God, it will not be necessary that they be taught. The old covenant was written on stone tablets (i.e., at Sinai) that required reading, interpreting, and teaching,

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<sup>2</sup> See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 270.

so that one may know God and his law. The prophet envisions a time when knowledge of God and his law will be unmediated and therefore will require no reading, study, or teaching.<sup>3</sup> Similar ideas are expressed in Ezekiel, who promises that God's people will be given a "new heart" (Ezek 11:19; 36:26), and eschatologically in Isa 11:9 and Hab 2:14.

In his sharp critique of the pagan culture of his day, the apostle Paul declares,

Since what can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, that is, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen since the creation of the world, being understood through what he has made. As a result, people are without excuse. For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened. (Rom 1:19–21)

Paul here probably echoes elements of Greek philosophy, in which it is argued that though God is invisible, he is perceived by what he has made and what he does.<sup>4</sup> Paul's argument presupposes and, in some places, goes beyond the Psalter's confession that the heavens declare the nature and creative power of God. The truth of God is known, Paul says, "because God has shown it to them." They are, therefore "without excuse."

## Patriarchal Experiences of God

In Genesis, we read stories of God speaking to the patriarchs. For example, we read, "Then God said to Noah" (Gen 6:13), but we are told nothing of what Noah actually experienced. Did he see God, and how did he hear him? So also, in the case of Abram (later Abraham), "The LORD said to Abram: 'Go from your land, your relatives, and your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gen 12:1). God repeatedly speaks to Abra(ha)m, but only once are we told that the patriarch sees something: "After these events, the word of

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21–36* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 470.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Ps.-Aristotle, *De mundo* 6 §399b; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliothekē Historikē* 2.21.7.

the LORD came to Abram in a vision" (Gen 15:1), but the vision that follows is strange and terrifying and occurs while Abram sleeps (Gen 15:12–21). The "angel of the LORD" appears to Hagar (Gen 16:7–11; 21:17). Afterward Hagar asks herself, "In this place, have I actually seen the one who sees me?" (Gen 16:13). The "angel of the LORD" also appears to Abraham (Gen 22:11, 15). Three mysterious men meet Sarah and Abraham, and one of them, identified as "the LORD," speaks to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 18:13–15). Angels appear to Lot, Abraham's nephew, warning him to flee from Sodom (Gen 19:1, 15).

Another strange story involves Jacob, the "supplanter," who was swindled by his uncle and father-in-law Laban and then later swindled him in return. When Jacob and his family arrive at a place called Mahanaim, he is met by "God's angels" (Gen 32:1–2). There is no further explanation. The terse statement is probably intended to set the context for what happens later in the night, when Jacob, alone, encounters a mysterious man with whom he wrestles through the night (Gen 32:24–32). The man tells Jacob, "Your name will no longer be called Jacob. . . . It will be Israel because you have struggled with God . . ." (Gen 32:28). Jacob names the place Peniel ("Face of God"), explaining, "I have seen God face to face . . . yet my life has been spared" (Gen 32:30). Jacob's grateful acknowledgment that his life has been preserved (or lit. "was spared") reflects the widespread belief that seeing God was dangerous, for "to see God meant death."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps one of the most celebrated encounters with God narrated in the Old Testament is found in the story of Moses and the burning bush. The relevant portions of this passage read,

Then the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire within a bush. As Moses looked, he saw that the bush was on fire but was not consumed. So Moses thought, "I must go over and look at this remarkable sight. Why isn't the bush burning up?" . . . Then he continued, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God. (Exod 3:2–3, 6)

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<sup>5</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 323; cf. Exod 33:20; Deut 4:33; 5:24, 26; 18:16; Judg 6:22–23; 13:22; and Isa 6:5.

Moses both hears and sees God, yet in what sense he sees God is not clear. We are only told that he sees “a flame of fire.” Presumably that is all that Moses could see of God. In any case, his fiery encounter adumbrates the many appearances of God to come.

The depiction of God as fire is a commonplace in biblical literature. Already mentioned is Abram's terrifying vision, or dream, of God as “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch” (Gen 15:17). During Israel's wilderness wanderings, God “went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to lead them on their way during the day and in a pillar of fire to give them light at night” (Exod 13:21; cf. 14:24; Num 14:14; Neh 9:12, 19). When God descended on Mount Sinai to make his covenant with Israel, we are told that “the Lord came down on it in fire. Its smoke went up like the smoke of a furnace” (Exod 19:18), and that “the appearance of the LORD's glory to the Israelites was like a consuming fire on the mountaintop” (Exod 24:17). When the tabernacle was completed and the “glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40:34), from that time on “the cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle by day, and there was a fire inside the cloud by night, visible to the entire house of Israel” (Exod 40:38; cf. Num 9:15–16).

On one occasion when Israel angered God, “and fire from the LORD blazed among them, and consumed the outskirts of the camp. Then the people cried out to Moses, and he prayed to the LORD, and the fire died down. So that place was named Taberah, because the LORD's fire had blazed among them” (Num 11:1b–3). Similarly, men offering pagan incense were destroyed by fire that “came out from the LORD” (Num 16:35; cf. 26:10). Harkening back to this event, Moses reminds Israel that “your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (Deut 4:24). Indeed, Israel is promised that God will go before them as a “consuming fire” that will destroy their enemies (Deut 9:3; cf. Ps 50:3). The prophet Isaiah warns that God will come in judgment, “like a consuming fire” (Isa 30:27, 30; 66:15–16). It is not surprising that the author of the book of Hebrews declares that “our God is a consuming fire” (Heb 12:29). Several times in Deuteronomy Israel is reminded of God's fiery presence at Mount Sinai/Horeb (Deut 4:11–12, 15, 36; 5:4–5, 22–25; 9:10, 15; 10:4 “the LORD had spoken to you on the mountain out of the midst of the fire” ESV). Indeed, says the psalmist, “The voice of the LORD flashes flames of fire” (Ps 29:7). According to Daniel, God's chariot throne has wheels of fire, and “a river of fire was flowing, coming out from his presence” (Dan 7:9–10).

In what is probably meant to be a parallel to the fiery divine presence in the tabernacle (and perhaps, too, a nod to Elijah's dramatic triumph over the prophets of Baal), the Chronicler tells us that "when Solomon finished praying, fire descended from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple" (2 Chr 7:1). The Chronicler adds that "all the Israelites were watching when the fire descended and the glory of the LORD came on the temple. They bowed down on the pavement with their faces to the ground. They worshiped and praised the LORD: 'For he is good, for his faithful love endures forever'" (2 Chr 7:3).

### Seeing God Was Believed to Be Fatal

To hear the voice of God or in some way sense his presence was not considered necessarily dangerous (though see below), but to see God could well mean death. The biblical tradition, however, is complex. When Moses first encountered God at the burning bush, he "hid his face because he was afraid to look at God" (Exod 3:6). Later, as leader of Israel in the wilderness, Moses frequently met with God, and God spoke to Moses "face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod 33:11; cf. Num 14:14; Deut 5:4; 34:10). As a result of these encounters with God, Moses's face began to shine, which frightened the people (Exod 34:29–30, 35).

These encounters notwithstanding, Moses's request to see God's glory (Exod 33:18) is declined, for as God tells him, "You cannot see my face, for humans cannot see me and live" (Exod 33:20). If Moses regularly spoke with God "face to face"—and did so apparently without suffering injury—why can he not see God's face? The explanation lies in recognizing that the expression "face to face" is meant to denote intimacy, not theophany.<sup>6</sup> God spoke to Moses as a man would speak to his friend. But when Moses requests to see God's "glory" (his *kabōd*), he asks to see the very being and essence of God. Moses cannot see in his mortal body; to do so would be fatal.

In Deuteronomy's review of Israel's exodus and the giving of the law, Moses asks the people, "Has a people heard God's voice speaking from the fire as you have, and lived?" (Deut 4:33; cf. 5:24, 26). Usually, it is in *seeing* God that brings danger, but in *hearing* God speak at Mount Sinai (or

<sup>6</sup> John Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), 443.

Horeb), the people fear they will die.<sup>7</sup> The refrain “out of the midst of the fire” (ESV) could explain why close encounters with God were sometimes fatal, which seems to be implied when Moses reminds the people that at the mountain they said, “Let us not continue to hear the voice of the LORD our God or see this great fire any longer, so that we will not die!” (Deut 18:16).

Seeking a sign from God, Gideon prepares an offering (Judg 6:11–18). The sign is given when “the angel of the LORD . . . touched the meat and the unleavened bread. Fire came up from the rock and consumed the meat and the unleavened bread. Then the angel of the LORD vanished from his sight” (Judg 6:21). Gideon perceives that it was the angel of the Lord and cries out, “Oh no, Lord God! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!” But the LORD said to him, “Peace to you. Don’t be afraid, for you will not die” (Judg 6:22–23). Here again God seems in some sense to be present in the fire. Although the divine being is described as “the angel of the LORD,” ancients such as Gideon might well have assumed that God was himself present. Indeed, it is God who speaks and reassures his servant, “Peace to you. Don’t be afraid, for you will not die.” The word of peace reassures the frightened Gideon that all is well in his standing before God. His encounter with God will not result in his death.

We find a similar story later in the book of Judges. Manoah entreats God on behalf of his childless wife (Judg 13:8–14). A mysterious “man” appears, who, as it turns out, is identified as “the angel of the LORD” (Judg 13:13). Like Gideon before him, Manoah prepares an offering, and a “flame went up from the altar toward heaven,” and “the angel of the LORD went up in its flame” (Judg 13:20; cf. Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7). It is then that Manoah perceives who the “man” truly was and so says to his wife, “We’re certainly going to die, because we have seen God!” (Judg 13:22). This time, however, it is not God who reassures the frightened human; it is his wife, who rightly reasons that God would not have accepted the offering if he desired to kill them (Judg 13:23).

One of the most dramatic descriptions of an encounter with God is found in the book of Isaiah. While in the temple, Isaiah says, “I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the hem of his robe filled the temple” (Isa 6:1). The prophet, assuming he is a dead man, cries out, “Woe is me for I am ruined

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<sup>7</sup> Exod 20:19; A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 157.

because I am a man of unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips, and because my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Armies” (Isa 6:5). In this case an explanation is offered: Isaiah is lost (Heb. *dāmah*, “lost” or “ruined”) because he is a man of “unclean lips” and lives among a people of unclean lips. From this confession we should infer that mortals risk death in the presence of God because they are sinful and therefore spiritually estranged from God. This might well have been the point when the awestruck Peter, seeing the great catch of fish and perceiving more fully who Jesus truly is, says to Jesus, “Go away from me, because I’m a sinful man, Lord!” (Luke 5:8).

From these encounters with God, we may infer that the ancients believed humans were in mortal danger because of God’s fiery and holy nature and because mortal humans were sinful. These stories are early and widespread. Although not always well understood, they attest to the ancient belief that, on occasion, a human being encountered God and that such an encounter sometimes resulted in death. It is no surprise, then, that such encounters were not sought out. They were accordingly as rare as they were unwelcome.

## Experiencing God in Prophetic Visions

The existence of God in biblical literature is also seen in prophetic visions, which often were not visions in the sense of seeing things but hearing the divine voice. The voice of God is revelatory and experiential. Young Samuel hears the voice of God (1 Sam 3:1–14), which he first mistakes for Eli. At the fourth call from the Lord, Samuel responds, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10). At the end of the chapter, we learn “the LORD continued to appear in Shiloh, because there he revealed himself to Samuel by that his word” (1 Sam 3:21). God frequently spoke to Samuel: (a) God revealed the people’s desire for a king betrayed their rejection of God (1 Sam 8:7, 22); (b) The Lord spoke to Samuel with regard to where to find Saul, the first king of Israel, hiding among the supplies (1 Sam 10:22); and (c) in the scene anointing David King of Israel, the Lord appeared four times to Samuel (1 Sam 16:1–2, 7, 12). With divine omniscience, the Lord said “Do not look at his appearance or his stature because I have rejected him. Humans do not see what the LORD sees, for humans see what is visible, but the LORD sees the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). From a negative perspective, Saul is impacted by the reality that he no longer hears from the Lord: “God has turned away from me. He

doesn't answer me anymore, either through the prophets or in dreams" (1 Sam 28:15); indeed, Samuel's spirit pronounces, "The LORD has turned away from you" (1 Sam 28:16). Saul's experience shows that if he inquired of the Lord, he could expect a reply, at least from an intermediary, but the communication was broken off. From this I infer the existence of God is known because God reveals himself in sight or, more commonly, in word.

In establishing the Davidic covenant, God spoke to Nathan the prophet "this entire vision" that David's house, kingdom, and throne would be established "forever" (2 Sam 7:4, 16–17). As the Lord spoke to David, so he spoke to his son, Solomon, in the temple dedication: "I will fulfill my promise to you, which I made to your father David" (1 Kgs 6:11–12). A discouraged Elijah hid in a cave at Horeb and witnessed a strong wind rend the mountains, then an earthquake, and then a fire; yet he heard the Lord, not in these "acts of God," but in a "still small voice" (KJV) as God revealed the faithful remnant numbering seven thousand who had not bowed to Ba'al (1 Kings 19). Following the vivid manifestation of divine victory over the prophets of Ba'al, Elijah discerned that God's transformational power is also revealed through the "still small [gentle] voice" (see 1 Kgs 17:8–9; 18:1; 19:15; 21:17–18).

Turning to the sacred Christian Scriptures, the two occurrences of God speaking in Mark's Gospel are at Jesus's baptism (Mark 1:9–11) and transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8). In both cases, God refers to his "beloved Son" (cf. Ps 2:7) and at the transfiguration appeals to those who are present to "listen to him." According to Mark, the theological point is that to listen to Jesus is to listen to God himself. God is experienced through his word. Paul is the most important New Testament witness to God's existence because of his firsthand testimony. Paul writes several letters, and he is rarely visionary. His style is prosaic and didactic, so we have great confidence that Paul has experienced God in 2 Corinthians 12 (see also 1 Cor 9:1; 15:8). Sometime before his first missionary journey (AD 43), Paul narrates an experience of visiting heaven and hearing things in the heavenly setting which come from God. Whether it is angels talking to God or God talking to angels, Paul has heard "inexpressible words, which a human being is not allowed to speak" (2 Cor 12:4), and he simply cannot communicate these things in human speech.

In another firsthand New Testament account, the author of Revelation sees the risen Christ (Rev 1:9–20) and nearly died: "I fell at his feet like a dead man" (Rev 1:17). To see Christ is to see God, for Jesus said, "The one

who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Additionally, John had the experience of visiting heaven itself (Revelation 4–5). John describes seeing the very throne on which God sits, which Ezekiel (chs. 1 and 10) and Daniel (ch. 7) also described. John sees the elders bowing before God. He hears the worship from an uncountable number and describes the continual “Amen” from the four living creatures. God is light. God is consuming. The exegetical point is that the existence of God is known not through argument but through experience. Therefore, the experiences of God described in biblical literature support and clarify the reality of the existence of God.

The ancients did not have a bias against experience, which is important to understand. Experience is a legitimate teacher. The word “science” (from *scientia* in Latin) means “knowledge,” and one can acquire knowledge in a variety of ways. The Scriptures do not point to a committee of scientists, philosophers, and theologians reasoning through deductions related to the existence of God or surveying if the evidence is convincing. (This process is important to moderns, to be sure.) Throughout the Scriptures, the presence of God, both his existence and his benevolence with humanity, is experienced. From a biblical perspective, the experience of God is the prime proof for the existence of God in both the Old and New Testaments. God is unexpectedly encountered; to experience God is frightening. As we have seen, biblical characters (real people, real events, to be sure) are not necessarily eager to meet God because it could be deadly. Experiencing God shows that he exists, and he is different from the created order. This comparison establishes a contrast where the human being recognizes how small, weak, and vulnerable one is in dissimilarity to God. This leads to the study of what God has made in nature (which would include the human being, “remarkably and wondrously made,” Ps 139:14), so deductions and inferences are made about the attributes of God (his skill, greatness, holiness, love, wisdom). As I have written elsewhere, the God of Israel—specifically his love, grace, and forgiveness—stood out in sharp contrast to the gods of the pagans, Greeks, and Romans. These gods felt no obligation toward humans and were viewed as potentially dangerous, jealous, and vindictive, which could have influenced the fear the biblical characters felt in entering God’s presence.<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew

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<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah J. Johnston, *Unimaginable: What Our World Would Be Like without Christianity* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 2017), 169–79.

people deduce the pagans have it wrong. The creation is such that the polytheistic pagan explanation is clearly inadequate. There is one Almighty God, who is all-wise, all-powerful, and he is the maker of the universe. The important point is God's nature and attributes are intelligently deduced based on observations, but God's existence is known through direct experience, which is not a deduction at all.

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