

The Question of God's Perfection

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Philosophers often describe theism as the belief in the existence of a “perfect being” — a being that is said to possess all possible perfections, so that it is all-powerful, all-knowing, immutable, perfectly good, perfectly simple, and necessarily existent, among other qualities. This way of understanding God's nature is the source of much of contemporary theological discourse. Moreover, something like it has become quite widespread among lay people as well.

However, there are a number of reasons to question whether this long-standing conception of God's nature is appropriate as a basis for Jewish theology, and indeed, for religious belief more generally. This informal paper seeks to highlight some of the issues that should move philosophers, theologians, and scholars of the Bible and Talmud to reexamine whether this notion of divine perfection is in fact consistent with Judaism's foundational texts, and whether it needs to be revised or replaced by one that is better suited to Jewish thought.

1. The God of Scripture

A first question derives from the manner in which God is portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Historically, it has often been said that the view of God as perfect being has its roots in Hebrew Scripture. However, the Bible itself seems far removed from supporting this view. Much of biblical narrative depends for its coherence on a view of God as being unable to control human action (and perhaps also the behavior of animals), and at times also as lacking foreknowledge of what human beings are going to do.¹ For example, God is

¹ My characterizations of God's behavior and attitudes here are no doubt too quick. For example, it will be asked why God should be described as “unable” to prevent man from eating from the forbidden fruit; rather than as being “unwilling” to prevent this. This question is well-motivated, but answering it requires a more sophisticated textual discussion than I can include here. For now, I will only suggest that on this point we must make a frank investigation into whether the texts in question really do depict a parental “decision not to interfere” with the eating of the fruit, say, or with the fashioning of the gold calf, on God's part; or whether, alternatively, what is depicted is a reaction of surprise, anger, and humiliation. If the latter, then the so-called “decision not to interfere” will be seen to be a misreading whose source is an assumption, introduced from

plainly portrayed as wanting man not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and yet contrary to God's wishes, man eats from the fruit. Similarly, God obviously wants Cain to control his anger and refrain from shedding blood, and yet contrary to God's wishes, Cain slays his brother. In the same way, God wants the freed Hebrew slaves to obey his commandments as given at Sinai, and yet contrary to God's wishes, they make a gold calf and declare this abomination to be their god. And the same may be said of hundreds of additional points in the biblical narrative and in the orations of the prophets, in which God is presented as wanting one thing to happen, even though what happens in practice is something else entirely.

In the same vein, Scripture describes quite a few instances in which God is depicted as changing his mind (e.g., regretting having made man, regretting having made Saul king over Israel), or as changing his plans to accommodate decisions that human beings have made (e.g., the giving of laws governing the shedding of blood in the time of Noah, the acceptance of a king in Israel, the construction of Solomon's Temple). There are also human innovations that are not anticipated by God (e.g., Abel's invention of shepherding, the midwives' resistance to Pharaoh, the zealotry of Pinchas), although God is pleased with them anyway. In all these cases, the biblical text remains comprehensible and coherent if, and only if, we understand God's relationship to the created world as analogous to that of a human being: Like a human being, God strives to achieve desired ends, and experiences pleasure and disappointment as matters unfold that are not entirely in his control and not entirely anticipated.²

The fact is that the God of Hebrew Scripture is not presented as the "perfect being" of classical perfect-being theology. He appears to be neither eternally unchanging nor impassable (that is, unaffected by human behavior), neither all-powerful (in the sense that all that he wishes comes true) nor all-knowing (in the sense that he always has knowledge of what human beings will do before they do it).

Which raises the question of why we should think that the God of the Bible is "perfect being" in the first place. After all, the source of the equation of God with perfect being is quite clear in Greek thought: We find it in Xenophanes, Parmenides, and Plato. For example, the realm of immutable and perfect forms is at the center of Plato's philosophy, providing relief from the realm of ceaseless change in which we live, which for Plato is but an arena of illusion and tragedy.

outside, that in these texts God has both complete foreknowledge of all events and the power to alter their course.

² Here, too, I apologize for the excessive simplicity of my textual treatment. Although I cannot enter into this matter at present, I agree that an appropriate reading will place these isolated episodes within the context of the entire narrative "History of Israel" from Genesis to Kings. Such a reading will, I believe, support the oft-mentioned thesis that what is described is a process by which God comes to accommodate the world and human nature, thereby "learning from his mistakes."

In Platonic philosophy, it is quite natural to place an immutable and perfect being at the center of a realm of immutable and perfect forms. Even Aristotle identifies the heavens with eternal and unchanging perfection, and so has a fitting place in the structure of his cosmos for an eternal and unchangingly perfect being.

In Scripture, however, it is difficult to locate sources supporting the existence of a comparable realm of eternally unchanging being. In Genesis, for example, all things – including the heavens – emerge from God’s wind blowing upon chaotic waters at the creation. This means that in the Bible, all things emerge from movement and change, without any reference to a static source of being such as the Greek philosophers proposed.³ Even God himself is described as possessing no static nature, responding to Moses’ questions about his name with “I will be what I will be.”⁴ And the great four-letter name of God, YHVH, is likewise couched in the imperfect tense, again suggesting incompleteness and change. An immutable perfect being is a Greek conception of what God must be like, not a biblical one.

Similar questions can be raised with respect to classical rabbinic sources as well. In the Talmud and Midrash we find it said, for example, that neither God’s name nor his throne (i.e., his essence and his rule) will be perfect so long as the heirs of Amalek persist in the world;⁵ that God asked to be blessed by R. Ishmael, and so can apparently benefit from, or be strengthened by, the blessings of human beings;⁶ that God determined the judgment of Israel in accordance with Moses’ proposals and even thanked him for his assistance;⁷ that God permits true legal judgment to emerge from the debates of human beings even in cases in which his opinion would have been otherwise;⁸ that God never ceases to regret the destruction he has inflicted upon Israel;⁹ and so forth. All of these opinions of the rabbis stand in stark contrast with the view of God as perfect being, and a great many additional texts might be mentioned that are no less problematic from the perspective of Greek perfect being theology. All this suggests that the view of God as perfect being needs to be reexamined in light of the views of the rabbis, not less than in the case of Hebrew Scripture.¹⁰

³ Indeed, we can say that the biblical account is one in which a degree of order is imposed by God on the primordial chaos, but the result is a world in which all things continue to change.

⁴ Exodus 3.14.

⁵ Tanhuma, Ki Tetzeh 11; Rashi on Shemot 17.16.

⁶ Talmud Brachot 7a.

⁷ Mechilta on Numbers 14.20.

⁸ Talmud Baba Metzia 59b.

⁹ Talmud Brachot 3a.

¹⁰ Nor are these questions limited to classical rabbinic sources. Kabala, as well, has often relied upon concepts such as *tzoreh gavoia* (divine need), which explicitly understand God as being dependent on human action.

2. The Choice of Metaphors for God

The difficulty in finding a toehold for perfect being theology in the Hebrew Bible and classical rabbinic sources points us to a more general question. Theologians have long been of the opinion that human categories cannot describe God directly, so that all of our terms for describing God are necessarily metaphors – terms drawn from other domains and used with reference to God by way of analogy.¹¹ This is not merely an opinion of later theologians. We can easily see that the prophets and scholars who composed the Hebrew Bible were aware that all terms for God are metaphors from the fact that they freely use multiple and shifting metaphors for one and the same aspect of God’s actions in the world. Indeed, we can say that the Bible relies upon “mixed metaphor” as perhaps the principal means by which human beings can approach a knowledge of God!

Given this very basic fact, it is important to notice that nearly all of the metaphors chosen in Scripture for describing God are drawn from comparisons to human beings or other living or moving things: God is envisioned as a king, a lover, a father, or as a speaker, or as breathing his breath upon the world, or as an eagle or a fountain of living waters. God’s thoughts and plans, his emotions and his actions are all depicted as changeable as they are in human beings and other living and moving things, with the result that reality itself is presented as being analogous to a living, changing thing. Consider, for example, the declaration of God’s essential nature to Moses at Sinai, which consists of a shifting series of metaphorical attributes, all drawn from the sphere of human thought and action, and specifically that of a king or a judge: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, and on the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.”¹²

This is in sharp contrast to the metaphors used in describing God in perfect-being theology: Metaphors such as immutability, impassibility, and

¹¹ In using the term *metaphor* here, it is not my intention to commit to any particular metaphysical system. It is common to suppose, following Aristotle, that a metaphor must refer to a different, independently existing object, whose attributes can also be described in non-metaphorical language. On this reading, for example, to say that “The moon is a galleon” draws attention to similarities between the moon and a galleon, but it remains possible to speak of the moon as spherical, white, and so on without relying on metaphor. However, this model of metaphor may not be apt, at the very least, when speaking of God, who may perhaps be approached only through metaphor, without there being any non-metaphorical language that might be usable. Such an alternative understanding of how metaphor works may also have relevance for metaphorical language that does not refer to God. However, for present purposes it is not necessary to resolve these questions. I will return to them in a more formal version of this paper.

¹² Exodus 34.6-7.

simplicity are not drawn from the realm of living things at all.¹³ No living creature resembles them or can be grasped by invoking them. Rather, these are metaphors that are drawn from the realm of inanimate (or perhaps mathematical) objects. The metaphor of God as “necessarily existing” likewise relies on a rigidity that is entirely alien to our understanding of living things. So is the metaphor of God as “being” – as something whose essence can be said to be “existence” – which relies on a category most of whose members are inanimate objects, and whose content is, as it seems, a quality that living things share with these inanimate objects. Indeed, given this proliferation of metaphors from the sphere of non-living and non-moving things, one must wonder whether even attributes such as “all-knowing” or “all-powerful,” which are supposed to impart the qualities of a living thing to perfect being, are really successful in achieving this aim; or whether they are so far removed from any imaginable characteristic of living things as we know them that they in fact complete an image of God as something that does not live at all.

The metaphors used to describe God in Scripture are, when taken as a group, far removed from those that are central to perfect-being theology. Although Western theology has often sought to avoid having to choose between these two collections of metaphors, in fact the tension between them seems to be so great as to force a choice as to which constitutes the better approach to understanding God and his action in the world. And in practice, we will notice that a great many theologians do tend to consider mankind’s ultimate experience of the world as resembling either a “perfect being,” or a lord or king, but not both.

3. Splitting God in Two

There have, of course, been attempts to embrace both sets of metaphors for God simultaneously. Indeed, there is a common synthetic view according to which God should, in effect, be regarded as being split in two: On the one hand, there is that view of God which is in accordance with mankind’s experience of the world, and with the specifically human vantage point that generates this experience. Such a human perspective is said to give rise to a view of God as resembling a lord or a king, and it is this perspective that is found in Hebrew Scripture. On the other hand, there is a view of God that is not in accordance with mankind’s

¹³ Perhaps philosophers do not actually intend such terms to be metaphorical. Instead, these terms are non-metaphors that are capable of describing God’s reality. But if so, then the existence of non-metaphorical language suited to describing the reality of God needs to be explored carefully: How is it that the traditional limitations on what can be known of God can be surmounted with respect to these terms? However, it is more likely that these philosophical terms are metaphorical just like all other terms that describe God, and that the sense that they are non-metaphorical is misguided.

experience and perspective, but is a description of God as he is in and of himself (or alternatively, as he is “from God’s perspective”), and this is the view of God that we find in perfect-being theology.

The difficulty with this view, of course, is that it seems to elevate the God of perfect being to the status of the true God, while reducing the metaphors used in describing God in Scripture – often dismissed as “anthropomorphisms” – to a less desirable status, as though these were metaphors that are to be accepted only by the uneducated or simple-minded, who might not have any view of God at all if they could not think of God as resembling a human king. In this sense, this composite model of God is nothing more than a variation on perfect-being theology, since it dismisses the God of Scripture as being inappropriate to individuals who have the desire and the ability to know God as he really is.

But setting aside its condescension toward the metaphors deployed in Scripture, there is a more fundamental difficulty with such a composite view of God’s nature, which is this: If all terms used to describe God are really metaphors, it is unclear what are the grounds for determining that the metaphors drawn from perfect-being theology are the ones that “really” describe God, whereas metaphors that compare God to a living and moving thing are “not really” appropriate descriptions of God. To put this more directly, it is unclear why there should be this bias toward one set of metaphors rather than another, as though the biblical metaphors were not true descriptions of God’s nature. As has been said before, the terms used in perfect-being theology are not less human constructs – and not less metaphorical – than those of Scripture. So on what basis are they to be held as more truthful or more illuminating than those that compare God to a living and moving thing?

4. Mathematics as a Model for God

The most obvious source for this bias toward perfect-being metaphors is in Plato, whose entire theological effort can be directed to stripping the pagan gods of their human qualities, and recreating them as perfect, eternal, static forms: Thus Aphrodite is transformed into the eternal form of the beautiful, Apollo into the eternal form of truth, Zeus into the eternal form of justice, and so forth. Plato’s theology must therefore be seen as a systematic attempt to eradicate metaphors and analogies for the gods drawn from the world of living things, and to replace them with immutable, perfect beings.

This Platonic theology draws its inspiration, as we are told explicitly in the *Republic*, from mathematics.¹⁴ This is for Plato the highest discipline, precisely because it turns the human mind from the world of change and contingency and trains it to enter into a realm of immutable and necessary things. It is through

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic* 521c-530c.

these disciplines that we understand that there is a realm of immutable and necessary things – which Plato refers to as the realm of “true being,” because only unchanging and necessary things are things that truly are. Once this is accepted, it is only fitting that one should wish to find God in the realm of the things that truly are, rather than in our own realm of illusion.

However, it is unclear whether this Platonic metaphysical structure is at all relevant to Jews, or to modern people more generally. It is unclear, for example, that Scripture and rabbinic tradition, or contemporary thought in general, are so easily brought into conformity with the dualistic view that our world is a realm of illusion, and that “true being” is found elsewhere, in a realm of eternal, perfect things. In the Bible, true being would seem to be found in the world of our experience, for Hebrew Scripture knows only this one world. And if this is so, then God, too, must have true being in this world of our experience and not elsewhere.

By the same token, it is doubtful whether mathematics can serve as a model for Jewish theology as it does for Platonic theology. Whereas Plato believed that the eternal and perfect forms of mathematics – he was thinking principally of geometry – are a window into the world of true being, we do not tend to regard them in this way at all. In mathematics, we recognize only a science of manipulating idealizations. Mathematical forms, if considered in themselves, are mere fictions. The internal validity of a given mathematical system is no longer believed to be sufficient to make it true. A mathematical system is true only to the extent that it is discovered to be a reliable description of human experience in practice. Thus Euclidean geometry, which for Plato is an opening into true being, is for us only a construct – one that is useful in certain contexts as a simplification of reality, but which has for more than a century been recognized to be false as a description of reality.

Far from serving as an example of how idealization leads us into the world of true being, mathematics thus demonstrates how idealization can mislead us: How it can fool us into thinking we are discussing true being, when in fact all we are discussing is ideal constructs that may have no bearing on what is true and real.

For this reason, the attempt to understand God’s nature by means of a science of ideal forms modeled on mathematics must be far less attractive than it has been in the past. Given that neither the Bible nor the Talmud seeks to understand God using such tools, it is at least a question why they should be considered relevant to Jewish theology, or to theology at all.

5. Questions About Certain Ideal Conceptions of God

This having been said, it seems worthwhile to make a careful reexamination of the various idealizations that have been introduced as the basis for formal

theological systems, and to determine whether they are in fact as useful for understanding God as has often been supposed.

For example, as has been suggested many times, the ontological argument for God's existence attempts to make an inference to a conclusion about actual reality based on what can or cannot be said concerning certain ideal forms: As the argument goes, the greatest or most perfect being is one that cannot logically lack existence, for then it would not in fact be the greatest or most perfect being. But the concept of a "most perfect being" is an ideal construct of the human mind, just as a Euclidean "perfect line" is an ideal construct of the human mind. All idealizations are simplifications of reality, and as such they can be useful in certain contexts. But there does not seem to be reason to suppose that the idealization of a "most perfect being" describes anything that exists in reality any more than the Euclidean idealization of a "perfect line" does.

The same would appear to be true regarding arguments from the contingent to the unconditioned or "Absolute," which are also often invoked in describing God. The very distinction between contingent and necessary beings depends on the acceptance of logical necessity as a quality that exists in reality. But logical necessity is not a quality that is found in our experience of reality. It is a property that exists only in formal or ideal systems, and is only an idealization of our experience of real relations. If so, then any argument to the effect that real-world objects are "contingent" (i.e., non-necessary) beings, and that for this reason they must be caused by some necessary being, will be based entirely on properties drawn from formal systems that may or may not have any bearing on what exists in reality. And the same will be true of any other qualities that are ascribed to God on the basis of their existence in ideal systems without reference to what is found to be the case in reality.

6. Questions About Perfection

This brings us to the question of what we are talking about when we speak of God as "perfect." The Bible and the Talmud appear to avoid explicitly attributing perfection to God – although they do of course refer to God's justice, mercy, wisdom, and so forth; and we do find that God's works, his path, or his teaching are called *tamim* (Hebrew, meaning unspoiled, innocent, simple-hearted, or perfect).¹⁵ This hesitation to refer to God himself as "perfect" is particularly striking in that the early rabbis were certainly aware that Greek philosophy

¹⁵ E.g., Deuteronomy 32.4; Samuel 2.22.31; Psalms 18.30, 19.7. I assume that biblical or talmudic attempts to attribute perfection to God would have to rely on terms such as *tamim* and *shalem*, although we should be willing to consider other options, including the possibility that no biblical term in fact approaches the meaning of our concept of the "perfect." Compare Maimonides, who refers to God as *yesh shalem* ("perfect being").

equates God with perfect being. There seems to be a good reason for this avoidance, but to get at it we need a clear view of what it means to say that anything is perfect. On its face, the term perfection is used to refer to two different things:

First, there is the perfection that is found in formal or ideal systems such as mathematics. An ideal circle is perfect in that each of its points is, without exception, equidistant from a given center. But this kind of perfection exists “by definition”: The ideal circle has no points that fail to be equidistant from its center because a circle is defined as a figure all of whose points are equidistant from its center. But this kind of perfection – perfection by definition – exists only in fictional constructs. There are no perfect circles in reality, and the same will be true of all other ideal constructs: None of them exist in reality. None of them have true being. This means that the perfection that is found in mathematics and other ideal systems is not of much use in discussing God’s perfection. For if perfection is to be meaningfully attributed to God, it must be something that can exist in reality. And the perfection found in formal or ideal systems is not a quality of real things.

Second, there is the perfection that is attributed to real things. When we say that some real-world thing is “perfect,” we mean something quite different from mathematical perfection. Normally, we mean that the thing under discussion has attained the best possible balance among the principles involved in making it the kind of thing it is. For example, if we say that a bottle is perfect, we mean it can contain a significant quantity of liquid in its body; that its neck is long enough to be grasped comfortably and firmly; that the bore is wide enough to permit a rapid flow of liquid; and so on. Of course, you can always manufacture a bottle that will hold more liquid, but only by making the body too broad (so the bottle doesn’t handle well) or the neck too short (so it’s hard to hold). There is an inevitable trade-off among the principles, and perfection lies in the balance among them. And this is so whether what’s being judged is a bottle or a horse, a wine or a gymnastic routine or natural human beauty.

However, when we speak of the perfection of a real-world thing such as a bottle or a horse, we do so because these are things that can be encompassed (more or less) by our senses and understanding. That is, it must be something that can be viewed in full, or that at least approaches being something we can view in full. For example, having the whole bottle before us so that we can look at it on all sides and weight it in our hands and pour from it, we feel that we can judge how close it is to being a perfect instance of its type. But if asked to judge the perfection of a bottle poking out of a paper bag, or of a horse that’s partly hidden in the stable, we will surely protest that we cannot know – for we can only see part of it.

This is the key point that must be taken into account in any discussion of God’s proposed perfections. For biblical accounts of man’s relations with God emphasize that all human views of God are partial and fragmentary in this very

way: In their encounters with God, human beings can glimpse a corner or an edge of something too immense to be encompassed, a “coming-into-being” as God approaches and passes, and no more. The most important texts dealing with man’s ability to gain an understanding of God are of course the passages in Exodus dealing with Moses’ seeking to know God’s nature. In the climactic text, we are told (i) that God’s “face” can never be seen by any man; and that what Moses, the greatest of the prophets, was able to see of God was (ii) only seen in passing, (iii) from within a crevice in the face of the mountain, and (iv) with God’s hand covering him and so mostly obscuring his sight.¹⁶ Other relevant texts point in the same direction: Man cannot hope to approach encompassing God with his senses and with his mind.¹⁷

The conclusion from this must be stated with care. And readers should also strive to read the following carefully so that nothing ends up being misunderstood or misrepresented:

The perfection of real things can only be known to human beings where the object in question can approach being encompassed by man’s senses and mind. This is to say that human beings cannot reasonably attribute perfection to something that is grasped in only a partial and fragmentary fashion. But human beings are capable of knowing God only in a partial and fragmentary fashion. For this reason, it would appear to be a mistake for a human being to attribute perfection to God. This would be to attribute to God a quality that no human being can experience God as having.

At this point, one may wish to suggest that perhaps God is perfect as he is in himself, even though human beings cannot have any experience of this perfection.¹⁸ To which one might respond: If there is no way for a human being to have experience of God’s perfection, and neither Scripture nor arguments drawn from formal or ideal systems reveal God’s perfection to us in some other way, then human beings have no way of knowing anything at all about God’s supposed perfection.¹⁹ And if we have no knowledge of such a thing, it is best to

¹⁶ Exodus 33.20-23.

¹⁷ An immediate question arises as to why Jacob believes he saw God “face to face” in Genesis 32.30. Perhaps we should suspect that Jacob’s report is in some way mistaken, since he has just asked God for his name but, unlike Moses, was rebuffed. See Genesis 32.29. Compare also Genesis 33.10.

¹⁸ This question is presented from a dualist perspective, as though there exists a reality that can be distinguished from what is before the minds of observers. Hebrew Scripture does not assume such a dualist metaphysics, so that it may also be said that this question is for this reason misconceived.

¹⁹ Moreover, there is no other source for the claim that God possesses this quality of perfection other than the experience of human beings: As has been said, arguments based on the qualities of ideal systems do not speak to us of real things, so they cannot help us here. And if it is revelation one is looking for, there appears to be no source in Scripture for the claim that God is perfect. (Christians often seek a proof-text in Matthew 5.48, which calls upon them to be perfect as God is perfect. But this text seems to settle nothing even for Christian readers, since the meaning of the

refrain from asserting something concerning which no man can have any knowledge whatsoever.

Again, let us be careful in our understanding of this discussion. What has been said should not be read as suggesting that God, whose perfection cannot be known by men, should be considered as being imperfect in the sense of being “flawed” – in the sense of having moral flaws, for example, or any other failings when compared with some standard that the human mind can apply. It is entirely true that where we are capable of encompassing the entirety of an object with our senses and our mind, or of approaching this, the lack of perfection perceived in the object is necessarily the same as the perception of a flaw or failing. But this is not the case where the object of our attention is something that our senses and our minds cannot encompass. For example, it is no imperfection in the horse that only its head and forelegs are visible to us from where we stand outside the stable. It is simply impossible to judge the perfection of the horse because our view of it is fragmentary and partial.

The same will be true more generally of any object that is too vast or great to encompass with our minds. Famous examples are the ocean, or a storm, which are so vast and overwhelming that our experience of them must at all times be partial and fragmentary. In these cases, too, we should say that it is meaningless to call the object of our attention “perfect,” for no man can have sufficient experience of an ocean or a hurricane to permit him to judge it perfect or not.

In aesthetics, a distinction is traditionally drawn between the beautiful and the sublime. The term *beautiful* is restricted to those things that can be recognized as approaching perfection because the mind can encompass them: A beautiful horse is one that approaches being a perfect horse. The term *sublime* has been introduced, on the other hand, to describe the grandeur – the awe-inspiring character, the breathtaking quality – of something the mind cannot hope to approach encompassing, and which cannot therefore be judged to be approaching perfection. The ocean and the storm are never known to approach perfection, yet they can be experienced in their enormity and power, and this experience is said to be sublime.

In the same way, Scripture describes man’s experience of God in a manner that admits of being described as sublime, precisely because our view of God is of something vast and overpowering, something which our mind cannot hope to encompass. But it does not admit that man can know God as beautiful, since the mind of man cannot encompass God, and so cannot be in a position to judge his beauty.²⁰

Greek term is obviously a quality that is attainable by human beings, and so cannot serve as a clear assertion that God’s nature is that of a truly “perfect being.”)

²⁰ Longinus and Edmund Burke touch briefly on the Hebrew Bible, describing the Jewish God as sublime: Longinus refers to Genesis 1.3 in *On the Sublime*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), p. 14; Burke refers to passages from Job in *The Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Notre Dame: Notre Dame, 1968), pp. 63-67.

Our inability to recognize perfections in God is akin this inability to recognize beauty in God. It is the sublime that we see in the biblical attribution of lack of perfection to what human beings can see of God: In the lack of a perfect form so evocatively suggested by the assertion that “No man can see my face”; or in the lack of a perfect form indicated by the visibility only of God’s wind or breath or word at the time of the creation; or in the use of the imperfect tense, the tense of incompleteness, in God’s self-description as “I will be what I will be.”

7. Perfect Being Theology as a Conceit?

Is an awareness of the severe limitations on mankind’s knowledge of God universal throughout Scripture and rabbinic writings? This question requires further inquiry and discussion before it can be answered unequivocally. But in this context it is worth noticing that additional techniques are deployed in the Bible for emphasizing God’s sublime nature and man’s limited grasp of it. One such technique is descriptions of God’s grandeur that rely upon questions such as “Is anything too wondrous for God?”²¹ and “Can anything be hidden from God?”²² Later philosophy tends to interpret such rhetorical forms as if they were equivalent to propositions such as “God is all-powerful” or “God is all-knowing.” But it would appear that this indirect approach to describing the seemingly unbounded quality of certain divine attributes is more characteristic of the prophetic tradition than declarative assertions. Questions of this kind purposely approach God as sublime, not as perfect, seeking to instill in the listener or reader the intuition that God is too vast to be assessed and judged by any man.

Notice also how limited the claims being made in such questions are, even if we attempt to translate them into propositions. The statement “Nothing is too wondrous for God” does not assert that God’s might is perfect and total, or that his power is infinite, or that God is capable of all things – all of which are things that are apparently beyond the possibility of any human being to know. Its meaning is rather that in human experience, nothing should be ruled out as impossible, for God at times does things that defy man’s limited imagination. Likewise, the statement that “Nothing is hidden from God” falls far short of being a claim about God’s knowledge being perfect and total, or that God has always had foreknowledge of all events. It means only that there are no human actions that are without consequences, no matter how carefully hidden, and that God’s judgments will take man’s every action into account. In other words, these are more limited constructions that address our experience of God’s actions in the world, and that affirm the possibility that the world is ruled with justice.

²¹ Genesis 18.14; Jeremiah 32.17, 27; Job 42.2; Daniel 4.35.

²² Jeremiah 16.17, 23.24, 32.19; Psalms 139.7; Job 34.21-22.

They are also more humble, being without the presumption that man is capable of assessing God's perfection.

Such considerations mean that we must take seriously this possibility: That the belief that a human mind can grasp enough of God to begin recognizing perfections in him would have struck the biblical authors and the rabbis of the Talmud as a vain conceit. Is it not, after all, impudence to believe that we can know enough of God's nature to assert the ways in which he is perfect? Are our notions of divinity at risk of turning into "idols of the mind," in Ezekiel's chilling phrase?²³

8. What Makes God 'Worthy of Worship'?

Discussion of God's perfections is often linked to the concept of God's being "worthy of worship." Here the argument is that if we do not believe that God is perfect being, then we would not have suitable grounds "for worshipping him." This is perhaps a useful test case of the contrast between the conception of God as perfect being and that of God as lord or king.

Neither Hebrew Scripture nor the rabbinic literature seems to treat the question of whether God is "worthy of worship." In Jewish tradition, prayer consists of giving thanks to God, praising God, and asking God for assistance: One thanks God for the things he has given us; one praises God for the good he has done; and one asks for assistance where it is needed. None of these three things requires a prior judgment that God is perfect, any more than one would need to consider any human being perfect to be worthy of being thanked for the good they do, or praised for it, or asked for assistance. More generally, devotion to God may be said to consist of fear of God, as expressed by an avoidance of any kind of wrongdoing; and love of God, as expressed through loyalty and adherence to his covenant. Here, too, it would seem that no prior recognition of God's perfection is required in order to fear him or love him, to be loyal to him or to be grateful to him, or to recognize his goodness or his wisdom – any more than a human being needs to be recognized as perfect in order to be feared, or loved, or for us to be loyal to him or grateful to him, or for us to recognize his goodness and wisdom.

Overall, then, the metaphor of God as a living king or father permits us to orient ourselves and to embrace habits of thought and action that are appropriate to the world of our experience, and to the reality in which we find ourselves. Yet it does so without our presuming to judge God's perfection. In the context of Scripture or the classical rabbinic tradition, the claim to be able to judge God's perfection would be conceived of as arrogant, and as involving an

²³ Ezekiel 14.3.

overestimation of what can be grasped with man's limited faculties. Only once an insistence on God's perfection is introduced into theology do we find human beings presuming to judge whether God is "worthy of worship," and this through a discussion of perfections that no man can know God to have.

9. The Distortion of Metaphor

Perfect being theology invokes metaphors for describing God's attributes, but in general these metaphors appear to be less useful in understanding God than the metaphors found in Scripture and in rabbinic teaching. This is due to the fact that all of these metaphors are idealizations of others that are more conventional and easily understood. For example, the assertion that God is perfectly unchanging is an idealization of the metaphor that God is like a king who rules heaven and earth *at all times*. The assertion that God is perfectly simple and has no parts is an idealization of the metaphor that God who rules heaven and earth *is one*. The assertion that God is "all-knowing" is an idealization of the metaphor that God rules *like a wise king*. The assertion that God is "all-powerful" is an idealization of the metaphor that God *acts in the world as its lord and king*. And so forth.

But these idealizations come at a heavy price. For the purpose of the metaphor here is to attract attention to what is supposed to be a valid analogy between human experience of the world and our experience of a human lord or king. However, the more thoroughly idealized the metaphor becomes, the more questionable it is whether it can be applied in such a way that it is any longer valid. In other words, the idealization of the metaphor is always an exaggeration of the metaphor and a distortion of it. And the further the metaphor is distorted, the less it appears to apply.

For example, the metaphor of God as king permits God to be seen as acting unevenly in the world: As having remained silent in the face of the oppression and murder of the Hebrew slaves, but then as finally "awakening" or "rising" and liberating these slaves and destroying Pharaoh's armies – as a powerful human king might. The validity of the metaphor derives entirely from the similarity that is perceived between the behavior of a great and just human king who may for various reasons be slow to action, but whose deliverance will ultimately come once circumstances enable him to act. However, when this metaphor of God's acting in the world is idealized and transformed into the metaphor of God as "all-powerful," there is no longer any reason for any event that takes place to be anything other than the expression of God's will. The result is a view in which God is envisioned as being equally responsible for all things. This means that God is equally the author of the act of drowning the Hebrew children in the Nile, and equally the author of the act of saving Israel from Egypt; by the same token, God is equally the author of the slaying of his own prophets

in the time Ahav, and of the destruction of the prophets of Baal. In this way, the image of God is transformed into that of a “being” that has no particular preference for good over evil – precisely the opposite of the metaphor of the king who is slow to act but ultimately just, and precisely the opposite of the biblical claim to have discerned that the world is ruled by a just God.

Similarly, the assertion that God is perfectly powerful deprives us of the ability to learn almost anything from the theology of the biblical History of Israel (Genesis-Kings), or from the orations of prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, which rely heavily on metaphors of God’s weakness and neediness to describe reality: All of them return time and again to the need for an alliance (i.e., covenant) between decent men and women and God, for God is unable to bring the world to righteousness without such assistance.

And what is true of God’s “omnipotence” is true of all other perfections that are introduced into God’s nature by Greek-inspired divine perfection theology: The assertion that God must know of all things in advance turns our own struggles and decisions into a great game in which God toys with us without purpose and without end; the assertion of God’s immutability and impassability renders human action and prayer irrelevant in altering the course of ultimate reality; the assertion of God’s simplicity, which is interpreted as meaning that he possesses only one attribute, means that metaphors such as “God’s love” and “God’s justice” must all be collapsed into one another so that “really” none of them have any meaning that can make sense to human beings; and so on with regard to every idealization that is introduced into theology in accordance with the pattern proposed by Greek philosophy.

What we witness with the adoption of Greek idealizations into religion is thus the destruction of the metaphors with which biblical religion was capable of advancing its view of the world. This is not merely a destruction of the metaphors that primitive or childish or common people “need” in order to maintain their belief. It is the destruction of the capacity of any human being, no matter how intelligent or wise, to interpret the world in such a way as to recognize in reality the action of the God of Israel, a just God who rules. We have all met people who say that they cannot believe in God – or even that they have lost their faith – because they cannot accept that an all-powerful God with perfect foreknowledge would have allowed, say, the Holocaust. From the perspective of Scripture, we have to admit that these individuals may simply be right: For they have been deprived by Greek-influenced theology of the most elementary tools that the prophets of Israel offered for making sense of the world. These are tools that systematically rely on metaphors of God as a living and moving thing to assist us in recognizing that reality is the product of a good and just God who longs for us to turn to him so that together we may repent of our mistakes and create a more just reality.

10. Metaphor and Reality

All terms used to describe God in Scripture are metaphors, and they were understood as such by the prophets and scholars who deployed them. When the prophets spoke of God's hand or God's breath, they used metaphors and did not mean to say that God's hand is just like a human hand, or that God's breath is just like human breath. However, we have been trained since childhood to believe that in speaking of God's hand or his breath, this means that "God doesn't really have a hand." If we are to understand anything that is written in Scripture concerning God's nature, we have no choice but to recognize that we were trained poorly, and that this conclusion is false. The truth is that Scripture deploys metaphor to point to what is real – to proposed truths about reality. And so while the metaphor of God's hand is a metaphor, it nonetheless points to something real: To see God's hand or God's breath acting in our world is to rely upon a metaphor in order to see something real. This is just as Newton relies on the metaphors of "mass" or "force" to describe real things for which he had no words other than these, which are borrowed from other usage. It is just as Darwin relies on the metaphor of natural "selection" to describe something real, for which there is no other term available, although it is clear that nature cannot, in keeping with the normal meaning of the term, select anything. So too in Scripture: God really does have a hand and God really does have breath. The things that are described by these terms are real, even though it is by way of a metaphor that the prophet describes these real things, for he has no other terms for them.

In the same way, God's kingship is to be understood as metaphorical, but nonetheless real. So is God's disappointment, and his inability to attain what he wills, and the covenant and alliance he offers mankind, with which he seeks to establish a kingship that is not sufficiently strong without it. All these are metaphorical but nonetheless real things. We must learn to use these metaphors to recognize the reality that is described by them – or we will learn nothing from them at all.

We should end the contempt with which we view biblical ways of thinking and speaking. Although both Israelite and Greek use metaphors to describe God, it is the biblical metaphors that are arguably superior in speaking to us of what is in fact real, of what in fact has true being – whereas Greek theology speaks of things that cannot be known, and so constantly risks being one great fiction. What is so compelling in Greek-inspired perfection theology is the claim to be offering praises for God that are more lavish, more extravagant, than those that are dispensed by the prophets in Scripture. On its face, this makes the perfection theologians more pious for what they are willing to say, and their God all the greater for the more extensive praise he receives.

But in fact, these praises are empty: They are empty because they speak of things no human being can judge. And they are empty because we cannot use

them to understand our own reality, the reality in which the God of Israel is to be found. It is the metaphors of Hebrew Scripture and of the Talmud that teach us to see our experience in terms drawn from the world of living and moving things, terms that permit us to approach reality and true being. And so it is these metaphors, and not others, that have a hope of revealing God's true nature to the human mind.