

# THE LORD IS ONE:

*Reclaiming Divine Simplicity*

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# CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The World that Passed Away <i>Onsi A. Kamel</i>	1
2	Divine Simplicity, the Ancient Near East, and the Old Testament <i>James Duguid</i>	8
3	A Biblical and Theological Case for Divine Simplicity <i>Steven J. Duby</i>	23
4	The Brightness of God's Own Light: Divine Simplicity in the Theology of Athanasius <i>Steven Wedgworth</i>	58
5	Divine Simplicity, Triune Action, and Appropriation in Augustine and Aquinas <i>J. David Moser</i>	81
6	Classical Theism in the Magisterial Reformers and Reformed Orthodoxy <i>David Haines</i>	95
7	"Everything That is in God is God": Jonathan Edwards on Divine Simplicity <i>Joe Rigney</i>	111
8	The Parting of God: Diagnosing the Fate of Divine Simplicity in Twentieth-Century Theology <i>Derrick Peterson</i>	130

9	A Sacred Monster: On the Secret Fears of Some Recent Trinitarianism <i>Derrick Peterson</i>	174
10	Divine Simplicity: A Reply to Common Philosophical Objections <i>Nathan Greeley</i>	214
11	Conclusion: Quo Vadis, Classical Theism? <i>Joseph Minich</i>	244





I:  
INTRODUCTION  
THE WORLD THAT PASSED AWAY

Onsi A. Kamel

FROM THE bush that burned without being consumed, God revealed Himself to Moses: “I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex. 3:15). God had “seen” the affliction of Israel, “heard” their cries, and known their sorrows (Ex. 3:7). He determined to “come down to deliver them” from the Egyptians (Ex. 3:8). But Moses pressed God: when your people ask who sent me, whom shall I name? God answered, “I AM THAT I AM” (Ex. 3:14). To Moses, God revealed Himself first personally, relating as a Subject to other subjects, and second as the One who simply is who He is, who will be who He will be.

These two self-characterizations of God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the great I AM—were held together for most of Christian history. This was true even as the orthodox tradition interpreted God’s name as a claim about the divine nature, and especially as a claim about the divine simplicity. Although theologians sometimes differed about the particulars, the doctrine of divine simplicity, which holds that God is a unity without parts, constituted a fundamental element of orthodoxy. For over a millennium—for nearly two—the doctrine of divine simplicity was both catholic and crucial to supporting the doctrines of God, Christ, and creation, among others.

St. Augustine argues in *De Trinitate* that, “In the marvelous simplicity of the divine nature, to be wise and to be are not different things; what

constitutes wisdom, itself constitutes being.”<sup>1</sup> Appealing back to this doctrine, Augustine subsequently argues for the deity of the Word. In Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy*, lady Philosophy argues that denying simplicity—in this case, by holding the substance of happiness to be “different from that of God the possessor”—opens up the possibility of a “more excellent” power behind or logically prior to God.<sup>2</sup> Following St. Augustine, St. Thomas declares that “God is in nowise composite, but is altogether simple.”<sup>3</sup> Thomas then builds his doctrines of God’s immutability and eternity atop the edifice of simplicity.<sup>4</sup> Even Schleiermacher has room for a kind of simplicity in his system, arguing that it “excludes not only materiality but also...everything we designate as ‘finite spirit.’”<sup>5</sup> Since “materiality” and “finite spirit” comprise the world, the clear implication of Schleiermacher’s doctrine of simplicity is that God cannot be confused with the world.

To sum up, then, for those who have championed the doctrine of divine simplicity in one of its many articulations, simplicity has supported the deity of the Word, maintained God’s absolute primacy, upheld God’s immutability and eternity, and ensured that God is not confused with any element of created reality. For defenders of this doctrine, therefore, a great deal is at stake in the contemporary debates about it.

Alas, the debates have raged anyway. As modernity developed, the reconcilability of the God of covenants with the God of simplicity was increasingly called into question. The biblical God, so it was suspected, the God who speaks and thinks and feels, could not be the philosophical God, the God who simply is and is simply. The former is personal, the latter abstract; the former revealed, the latter a product of reason; the former self-moving subject, the latter inert object. Pascal brilliantly captured this sensibility in his famous “Memorial”: “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and of the scholars.” Like many of us, Pascal sensed contradiction where the Fathers saw unity.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XIII.22, as found in Augustine, *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. John Burnaby, 1st Edition (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1955), 152.

<sup>2</sup> Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, III.x.40–63, as found in Boethius, *Theological Tractates/ The Consolation of Philosophy* (Loeb Classical Library, 1989), 291.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, ST Q.3, A.7.

<sup>4</sup> See ST. Q. 9, A. 1 and ST Q.10, A.2.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christian Faith (Two-Volume Set): A New Translation and Critical Edition*, trans. Terrence N. Tice, Catherine L. Kelsey, and Edwina Lawler, Translation, Critical edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 334.

The felt irreconcilability of these two conceptions of God became only more intense with the rise of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophical and theological movements. Because Schleiermacher, for example, aimed to defend the theological enterprise and maintain orthodoxy within what he believed were rationally responsible limits, he was unwilling to bring the full weight of the ascendant rationalism against the retreating orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> The nineteenth-century German theologian David Friedrich Strauss, by contrast, had no such qualms. His two-volume Dogmatics, *Die Christliche Glaubenslehre*, he wrote in a letter to a friend, “attacked theism from every side and [had] come out quite openly with pantheist language.”<sup>7</sup>

Today, in contrast to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the rejection of the doctrine of divine simplicity does not generally correlate with anti-Christian sentiment or so-called “theological liberalism.” Critics attack divine simplicity from numerous directions, but two in particular stand out: some claim it is metaphysically incoherent, others argue it runs roughshod over the Biblical witness. The philosopher Alvin Plantinga, for example, objects to the doctrine on metaphysical grounds in *Does God Have a Nature?* Although “the intuition underlying the doctrine of divine simplicity,” namely, that God is not dependent on anything outside of Himself, “must be taken with real seriousness,” Plantinga concludes that classical theism’s “swarm of Platonic paraphernalia infringes on the sovereignty of God.”<sup>8</sup> This commitment to God’s sovereignty leads Plantinga to embrace not divine simplicity, as it does the classical theists, but nominalism. He rejects “Platonic paraphernalia” *tout court*.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Plantinga worries that the doctrine of divine simplicity makes God merely a “self-exemplifying property,” an “abstract object” rather than a person.<sup>10</sup>

In the evangelical world, a great deal of ink has been spilt by and about James Dolezal and John Frame, the former fiercely contending for a

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<sup>6</sup> Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 59–60, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Horton Harris, *David Friedrich Strauss and His Theology*, Monograph Supplements to the Scottish Journal of Theology (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1973), 134.

<sup>8</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), 34–40.

<sup>9</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 36. Interestingly, Plantinga’s rejection of God’s simplicity is accompanied by a rejection of God’s eternity, thus, perhaps, confirming what proponents of the doctrine suspect: much of the classical doctrine of God stands or falls with simplicity.

<sup>10</sup> Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?*, 47.



Thomistic doctrine of divine simplicity (as opposed to, say, a Scotist variant), the latter arguing that this tradition is insufficiently attentive to the scriptural witness.<sup>11</sup> Although Frame claims to uphold many of the doctrines which Dolezal defends, he ultimately concludes God’s personal relationships with human beings and His entrance “into time,” as described in Scripture, require rejecting Thomistic metaphysics.<sup>12</sup> While Dolezal follows the orthodox Christian tradition in holding the biblical witness together with a classically metaphysical doctrine of simplicity, Frame doubts whether the two are compatible. “God has given us a book, and we ought to be able to trust its statements about God without fearing the wrath of the scholastics.”<sup>13</sup>

Unlike in past centuries, then, for men like Plantinga and Frame, *faithfulness* to the reality of God and His revelation demands the rejection of divine simplicity. And, frankly, no honest observer can simply hand-wave their arguments away or dismiss their concerns as rooted in mere misapprehension of the doctrine. Regardless of his intellectual commitments, the contemporary theologian cannot help but sense, at the very least, an *apparent* tension between certain entailments of divine simplicity and the Scriptural witness. Indeed, this may be a constitutive feature of modern theology.

For champions of the doctrine of divine simplicity, likewise, *faithfulness* is the watchword: faithfulness to Scripture and to the time-tested theological articulations of Scripture handed down from the classical tradition. The proponents of this doctrine, including the authors featured in this volume, cannot simply be dismissed as classical-theist fundamentalists or metaphysically illiterate rubes. Indeed, not only do they have a firm grasp on the issues, but their critiques land: rejecting divine simplicity *does* seem to correlate with promoting grievous error in the doctrine of God. So what is a Christian to do?

In the fury of fierce debate, one can easily lose perspective. These arguments are occurring in the context of extraordinarily rapid shifts in the metaphysical fashions of the philosophy guild, the breakdown of catechesis in churches, and amnesia about the various heresies that the doctrine of divine simplicity helped the Church fend off: pantheism, tritheism, Arianism, and

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<sup>11</sup> James E. Dolezal and Paul Helm, *God without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Pickwick Publications, An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011); “Scholasticism for Evangelicals: Thoughts on All That Is In God by James Dolezal,” accessed October 15, 2019, <https://frame-poythress.org/scholasticism-for-evangelicals-thoughts-on-all-that-is-in-god-by-james-dolezal/>.

<sup>12</sup> Frame, “Scholasticism for Evangelicals.”

<sup>13</sup> Frame, “Scholasticism for Evangelicals.”

so forth. The disputes currently roiling Christian waters call for an orienting resource, one that not only defends the doctrine of divine simplicity, but describes its contents, supports it exegetically, contextualizes the history of its development and rejection, and ultimately helps theologians to reconcile the doctrine of divine simplicity to the real and warranted concerns of its detractors.

This volume aspires to do just that, starting with Scriptural exegesis. James Duguid's "Divine Simplicity, the Ancient Near East, and the Old Testament" begins with the recognition that discerning whether the Old Testament is compatible with or supports the doctrine of divine simplicity is not merely "a matter of reading what the text says, but of finding a principled way to harmonize the texts and to work out their implications in rigorous ontological terms." He argues first that we must treat the Old Testament's statements about God's uniqueness and oneness in "a metaphysically serious" way, and second, that when this is done, the Old Testament witness to God may not be so distantly removed from the concerns of the early Church as many have supposed. Steven J. Duby's contribution, "The Biblical and Theological Case for Divine Simplicity," complements Duguid's discussion by examining the witness to God's nature in both Testaments, arguing that it implies much of what is propounded in the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity.

Following the exegetical investigations of the doctrine of divine simplicity, this volume turns to history. In "The Brightness of God's Own Light: Divine Simplicity in the Theology of Athanasius," Steven Wedgworth demonstrates the role of simplicity in the theology of St. Athanasius, highlighting that Athanasius defends the Son's deity with the weapon of divine simplicity. J. David Moser moves us forward in time, illuminating St. Augustine's and St. Thomas' accounts of simplicity, triune action, and appropriation. He focuses especially upon the way that simplicity helps give a coherent account of the indivisible operations axiom, the notion that all of the works of the Trinity *ad extra* are "numerically identical for all three divine persons."

Although certain twentieth-century revisionist historians consigned simplicity to the dustbin of the "Dark Ages" or, perhaps worse, to the "Neo-Scholasticism" of Roman Catholicism, they painted a misleading portrait of the Reformation's relationship to the doctrine. Hence the fittingness of David Haines' contribution, "Classical Theism in the Magisterial Reformers and in Reformed Orthodoxy." He convincingly demonstrates that both early

Reformed theological giants and Reformed confessions unequivocally upheld the doctrine of divine simplicity. Joe Rigney's welcome contribution, "Everything that is in God is God': Jonathan Edwards on Divine Simplicity," demonstrates how a properly modern and classical theologian creatively articulated an orthodox doctrine of divine simplicity. Edwards neither repeated the old confessions nor abandoned them; rather, as Rigney shows, he appropriated them in an original, somewhat idiosyncratic way.

With Derrick Peterson's two contributions, we move squarely into the twentieth century, its phobias and misunderstandings brought into sharp relief. In his first essay, "The Parting of God: Diagnosing the Fate of Divine Simplicity in 20th Century Theology," Peterson narrates the sad tale of classical theism's creation and reception in the twentieth century. Indeed, he argues, classical theism was a *creation* of the twentieth century, a homogenizing imposition of the concerns of process theologians onto the diverse classical theologies of the past. Relatedly, in his second essay, "A Sacred Monster: On the Secret Fears of Some Recent Trinitarianism," Peterson ties a certain historiography of Trinitarian theology to contemporary constructive positions justified on its grounds. "The constructive moves made in [recent] theologies," he writes, "are brought into question to the extent that these false or misleading histories have been incorporated as key platforms for their broader arguments."

As important as re-narrating false histories is, the metaphysically motivated opponents of divine simplicity must be answered head on. To this end, Nathan Greeley offers a response in "Divine Simplicity: A Reply to Common Philosophical Objections," arguing that most objections to divine simplicity only have teeth against a Thomistic articulation of the doctrine. By contrast, Greeley contends, Duns Scotus' rather different articulation is better-suited to meet the objections of contemporary metaphysicians and theologians alike. Finally, Joseph Minich's "Quo Vadis, Classical Theism?" directly tackles the problem of historical contingency in the doctrine of God. Our discourse about God is not disembodied and angelic; it is, rather, conducted in particular times and places, in contexts which shape and delimit our conceptual worlds. The Ancient Near Eastern peoples, Hellenistic Greeks, and Western European moderns each inhabit a different *cosmos*—can they really be expected to speak the same language? And if this expectation is unreasonable, can their discourses be translated?

We live in confusing times. Every narrative is contested by a counter-

narrative, making constructive theological work difficult. Because we do not tell ourselves the same stories, we have generated irreconcilable understandings of our place in the world and, therefore, how to proceed from it. We need to orient ourselves Scripturally, historically, and metaphysically. We cannot and should not abandon the theological traditions of the Church—her accumulated rational reflections on Scripture and nature—but neither can we pretend that Modernity generated no destabilizing insights. We cannot unsee what we have seen. The old world has passed away, and we must honestly confront this world as we find it, come what may. But we do so in the confidence that the God of peace, whose Word shall never pass away, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

II:  
DIVINE SIMPLICITY, THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST,  
AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

James Duguid

PHILO OF Alexandria offers a thoughtful commentary on the following verse: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone, I shall make for him a helper corresponding to him’” (Gen. 2:18). Why was it not good for the man to be alone? Philo has our answer: to be alone is good only for God.<sup>1</sup> God alone can be alone without His aloneness being a defect. And what does it mean for God to be alone? Philo tells us that God is alone in two senses: first, God is unique, so that nothing in the world can be placed beside God as if it were on his level. Second, God’s very nature is alone in the sense that it is pure and simple oneness, not composed out of parts. In these two attributes, *singularity* and *simplicity*, God is distinct from and superior to all that he has created. As subsequent theologians have discovered, the latter attribute, simplicity, is wonderfully useful for dogmatic purposes: if God is simple, it can be shown that He has no body (since anything physical is composed of parts) and that he must be eternal (since He cannot be divided by a succession of moments). With more sophisticated metaphysical categories, it can even be proven that God is “pure act” and that He exists necessarily.

But is this doctrine of divine simplicity actually in the Old Testament? Many recent interpreters have been less enthusiastic about finding it there. Granted that the God of the Old Testament is “one” in some sense, can we really give such a robustly philosophical interpretation of this oneness? Or

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<sup>1</sup> Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation* 2.1–3.

would we just be reading into the text later philosophical categories derived from the Greeks? Even worse, there are passages in the Old Testament which seem to flatly contradict the doctrine, passages which seem to describe God as physical (we may refer to passages which describe God in human terms as “anthropomorphic”). One monograph has gone so far as to make an impassioned argument for quite the opposite conclusion: “The God of the Hebrew Bible has a body.”<sup>2</sup>

In defense of the doctrine of divine simplicity, it may be asserted that the Old Testament does teach us about other attributes of God which might imply the truth of divine simplicity. For example, the Old Testament teaches that God does not change and can never cease to exist (Ps. 102:26–27; Mal. 3:6). But Aquinas argues that everything which has parts could at least possibly be taken apart and destroyed.<sup>3</sup> If we accept Aquinas’ premise, then it would seem that if God cannot be destroyed, He cannot have parts either. But if this is true, what should we do with all these passages that speak of the power of God’s “strong arm” (Ex. 13:9), or his feet (24:10), or describe him like an old man (Dan. 7:9)? The traditional answer, from Aristobulus to Augustine to Calvin, is to say that these passages are metaphorical. God is not like us: the full reality of who God is towers above our ability to understand it, and so if we read two passages, one of which says that God is like us in some way, and the other which says that God is not like us in the same way, the first must be metaphorical and the second literal. This in no way implies that these metaphors are to be dispensed with: indeed, since God is always beyond our comprehension, we will always need these metaphors to understand how He relates with the world. But we should not understand them in a way that contradicts what the negative passages have to say about how God is different from us. We may refer to this interpretive strategy as the “metaphor strategy.”

This defense of divine simplicity runs into two important objections. First, one can ask whether the passages cited in defense of traditional divine attributes such as immutability deserve such a strong interpretation: perhaps the prophets did not wish to claim that God is absolutely immutable, but just that He has an unchanging character. Here the specter of philosophy and the Bible raises its head: is the text really making strong metaphysical claims, as

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *SCG* 1.18.4.

later readers have interpreted it?<sup>4</sup> Second, we may wonder what justifies the interpretive strategy of taking certain passages as metaphorical. Is this not simply a betrayal of the text? Doesn't the text teach both that God doesn't change (Mal. 3:6), and that He sometimes changes his mind (e.g., Gen. 6:6–7)? Doesn't it teach that He has no visible form (Deut. 4:12), but also that He appeared to many Old Testament saints (e.g., Genesis 18)? Who says we should read the Bible according to this interpretive strategy? At its strongest, this objection becomes the claim that there is no one coherent theology in the Old Testament at all, simply a collection of contradictory viewpoints.

It would be naive to think that the debate over divine simplicity could be solved simply through careful study of the Old Testament. This goes both for those who would defend divine simplicity and those who would refute it—either way, it is not simply a matter of reading what the text says, but of finding a principled way to harmonize the texts and to work out their implications in rigorous ontological terms. A complete discussion of divine simplicity would require: (1) the witness of the New Testament, not least because it includes some very handy proof texts for the construction of a classical doctrine of God, (2) an understanding of the dogmatic development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the face of numerous heresies, without which the Christian doctrine of divine simplicity could not have become what it is, and (3) an elaborated metaphysics, not indeed as a principle governing Scripture, but worked out in submission to Scripture as a tool to understand its full implications. This is beyond the scope of this article. I hope instead to show (1) that the claims made about God in the Old Testament are quite strong indeed, and that it is reasonable to take them in a metaphysically serious way, and (2) that already in the Old Testament itself we find authors reflecting on the tensions mentioned above, and adopting something like the “metaphor strategy.” To see this, we will also need to tell the story of God's *singularity* or uniqueness in the Bible: we will be unable to understand what sort of God we find in the Bible unless we grapple with the unprecedented claim that there is really only one of Him.

It might be helpful to approach the question of God's uniqueness in the

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<sup>4</sup> There have been a number of recent works arguing that we can in fact find philosophy in the Old Testament: see Yoram Hazony, *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Jaco Gericke, *The Hebrew Bible and Philosophy of Religion* (Atlanta: Society for Biblical Literature, 2012), Dru Johnson, *Biblical Knowing: A Scriptural Epistemology of Error* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013), and *Epistemology and Biblical Theology: From the Pentateuch to Mark's Gospel* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

Old Testament by listing some of the strongest claims made about His nature, beginning with the divine name given to Moses, YHWH. Exodus 3:14 explicates this name as “I am that I am,” or “I am the one who I am.” Admittedly, the meaning of the verb here is ambiguous, leading to the claim that it could be translated “I will be what I will be,” or even “I will become what I will become,” meanings which seem less conducive to the idea of an immutable God. But these proposals do not give due weight to the same idea expressed in an entirely verbless construction in Deuteronomy 32:39 (translated by the ESV as “I, even I, am he,” but correctly understood and translated by the Septuagint as “I am”). Since there is no verb in this construction, it seems best to interpret the idea in both cases as one of continuous existence, without any implication of time or process. We should be careful about immediately filling this mysterious “I am” revelation of God with all the content of “Being” on a Parmenidean or Platonist construal. Nevertheless, this construction does ascribe existence to God’s nature in some special way, unconditioned by any other predicate, and the idea that God is in some sense more really and truly existent than other things doesn’t seem too far off the mark here. In addition to this language, we also have the description of God as one: “Hear O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4), or alternatively interpreted, “the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.” We also find language expressing God’s uniqueness through the claim that no other god is like Him: “Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods?” (Ex. 15:11). Furthermore, we find language stating that there is no god with or beside God, i.e., on his level (Deut. 32:39).

However, it is not enough simply to cite these formulae to understand what biblical monotheism is. Readers may be surprised to know that all the above phrases have good parallels in polytheistic literature predating the composition of the whole Old Testament. “Who is like you?” is a frequent refrain in Ancient Near Eastern hymns, language of the god as “one,” “unique,” and “without equal” are abundant in Egyptian texts, and even the phrases “I am as myself” and “I am the one who is” are attested.<sup>5</sup> If these phrases can be

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<sup>5</sup> For language of uniqueness in Egyptian religion, see Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1995), 68–70, 111–2, 134–6; Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 184–185; Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 168–207. Consider also the description of Marduk: “There is [none] among all the Igigi-gods who can boast before you, You have [no] rival above or below. Whatever the gods of all the inhabited world may have done, they cannot be like you lord! [ ] of the depths of knowledge, where is



used in openly polytheistic contexts, perhaps they are just hyperbole, and we should not understand them as strong claims in the Bible either.

To get a handle on the question, we must consider the complexities of one of these phenomena as it occurs in Egyptian texts: the description of god as “one” or “unique.” Whether there are traces of “monotheism” in Egyptian religion is a vexed question. The religious reformer Akhenaten is the best candidate for one who promoted something like monotheism, since he advocated the worship of the sun disk (Aten) to the exclusion of other gods. However, Akhenaten’s religion represents a radical break with Egyptian religion before and after, and there is disagreement as to whether anything like monotheism existed in Egypt beyond his reign. The idea that Egyptian texts provide evidence for an original monotheism that degenerated into polytheism, or a secret monotheism observed by the elite, has been strongly challenged by Hornung.<sup>6</sup> But while these theories may be regarded as debunked, there is still room to talk about “monotheistic tendencies” in Egyptian religion.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Assmann complicates Hornung’s account by adding historical nuance: the theme of divine oneness/uniqueness from Akhenaten’s religion has a prehistory in 15th century Amun theology, and a legacy in later Ramesside Amun theology, where the oneness of the god begins to be interpreted in a proto-pantheistic manner.<sup>8</sup> Traditional Egyptian religion contained themes of oneness and diversity, and the main difference with Akhenaten’s religion seems to be the fact that for Akhenaten, the oneness of the Aten excluded the worship of a diversity of other gods.<sup>9</sup>

What we should emphasize here is that the diversity of Egyptian religion in place and time requires careful attention to context to understand the

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your equal?”, from the Great Hymn of Marduk, translation from Benjamin Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 2005), 618. The phrase “I am as myself” is attested in the Book of the Heavenly Cow (see Charles Maystre, *Le livre de la vache du ciel dans les tombeaux de la vallée des rois*, BIFAO 40 (1940), 84), and the phrase “I am the one who is” is attested in the Papyrus of Nu (see Günther Lapp, *Catalogue of Books of the Dead in the British Museum I: The Papyrus of Nu (BM EA 10477)* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1997), pl. 56). Unfortunately, the occurrence of these last two phrases is without parallel, and too obscure in context to shed much light on the biblical usage.

<sup>6</sup> Hornung, *Conceptions of God*.

<sup>7</sup> Von Eberhard Otto, “Monotheistische Tendenzen in der ägyptischen Religion,” in *Die Welt des Orients* 2 (1955), 99–110.

<sup>8</sup> Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*, and “Mono-, Pan-, and Cosmotheism: Thinking the ‘One’ in Egyptian Theology,” in *Orient* 38 (1998), 130–49.

<sup>9</sup> James P. Allen, “Monotheism,” in *Archaeology Odyssey* 2:3 (July/August 1999), 44–54.

meaning of religious epithets. This may be illustrated by a brief study of “one” as a divine epithet in Egyptian texts. As Hornung argues, this epithet, as well as the epithet “without equal,” is applied to many Egyptian gods and goddesses simply in the sense of “unique,” and in such uses it “has nothing to do with monotheistic conception or ‘tendencies,’ but prevents the gods from being equated indiscriminately with one another.”<sup>10</sup> However, the term may take on a special meaning in the context of creation accounts, in which everything is created by one god.<sup>11</sup> Even here, “one” has different shades of meaning in different creation accounts. According to one popular account, creation begins with Atum bringing himself into existence in the primeval waters, after which he creates Shu (the air), then Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). We may take Coffin Text Spell 80 as a representative of this tradition. Here, Atum is described as “one in his becoming”—but in the context of this passage, the word “one” really means “alone,” and always describes a particular point in time: “while I was alone with Nu in weariness,” and “when he was alone in his becoming, without me.” Atum’s singularity is a point of prestige, to be sure, but it is also a negative condition to be overcome. The name Atum means both “he who is complete,” in the sense that he contains everything, but also “he who is not.” Alone and socially isolated, Atum is deficient. To become fully actualized, he must bring his children Shu and Tefnut into existence. They are necessary for him to live and stand: “I live with my two children... I stand up upon them both, their arms about me.” So while “one” is a divine epithet of Atum, its use in this text underscores his dependence on other deities.

With this we may contrast a hymn that belongs to Assmann’s category of “early Amun theology,” represented in P. Cairo 58038 (P. Boulaq 17).<sup>12</sup> Here Amun is the “unique image, who makes all that is, One alone who makes what exists, from whose eyes humanity came forth, at whose word the gods came to be...who made of all this, One alone with many arms.” Amun is also called “One king among the gods.” In this text, Amun is qualified as unique by virtue of creation. Though there are other gods, they are not involved in the creation. Amun is not embedded in a “constellation” of other

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<sup>10</sup> Hornung, *Conceptions of God*, 185–6.

<sup>11</sup> “Creator-god” is one of Otto’s categories of “monotheistic tendencies”, Otto, “Monotheistische Tendenzen”, 100.

<sup>12</sup> Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*, 120–28.

III:  
A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CASE  
FOR DIVINE SIMPLICITY

Steven J. Duby

**“THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE”: DIVINE  
SINGULARITY AND DIVINE SIMPLICITY**

THIS chapter discusses ways in which two of God’s attributes—singularity and immutability—entail His simplicity. We will look first at God’s singularity. Here, exegetical tracings of the scope of God’s sovereignty, the relative (*ad alterum*) descriptions of God in contradistinction to the gods of the nations, and the occasional absolute (*ad se*) and positive descriptions of God in himself as the only God are drawn together to search out the character of God’s singularity. Though these threads are somewhat artificially considered in distinction from one another, this approach has some organizational value. From here, the movement from plain exegetical comment on various texts to dogmatic elaboration guides us to the claims of divine simplicity.

**Biblical Teaching**

The theme of the universal scope of God’s sovereignty begins with the creation account in Genesis 1, which is, *inter alia*, an implicit rejection of the polytheistic theogonies on offer in the ancient Near East. Genesis 1 opens with the simple statement that “in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).

[W]e have overemphasized the similarities between Gen 1 and the other ancient cosmogonies without fully appreciating the

differences. This text soars above them in such a way as to deny implicitly any possibility of the theologies expressed in Egyptian or Mesopotamian accounts. If we consider it an ideological polemic, we must admit that it is not specifically so and only indirectly. It contains no theomachy, or cosmic conflict among the gods, or victory enthronement motif. Both are excluded by ‘in the beginning when God created...!’ Israel’s God has no rivals. There can be no struggle with forces opposed to his actions or corresponding to his power. There can be no victory enthronement motif because God’s victory was never in doubt; rather, God has never not been enthroned. There can be no enthronement portrait here because God has not become sovereign; he has simply never been less than sovereign.<sup>1</sup>

As God makes, separates and names by sheer *fiat*, He demonstrates Himself to be the Lord of all the spheres of reality (1:2–25).<sup>2</sup> Of course, the narration of the creation of humanity in 1:26 recounts God speaking in the plural (“Let us...”), but, Gordon Wenham observes, “Gen 1 is distinctly antimythological in its thrust.” It therefore opposes “ancient Near Eastern views of creation,” and “modern commentators are quite agreed that Gen 1:26 could never have been taken by the author of this chapter in a polytheistic sense.”<sup>3</sup> Suggestions for interpretation, then, include that “God is surrounded by His angelic host,” in which case “[t]his is the Israelite version of the polytheistic assemblies of the pantheon—monotheized and depaganized,” or that perhaps this plural form signals God’s immanent fullness, self-deliberation or self-exhortation.<sup>4</sup>

As corruption intensifies throughout the earth, Yahweh takes it upon Himself to restructure all of human existence by the flood and Noahic covenant (6:1–9:17) and then ultimately to bless all peoples through one man,

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<sup>1</sup> Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32.

<sup>2</sup> So, e.g., Bruce Waltke (*Genesis: A Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001], 56): “Naming...is an indication of dominion.”

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1987), 28.

<sup>4</sup> The quote is from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 12. The options are helpfully delineated in Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 27–8; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 132–34.

Abram, and his descendants (12:1–3). When the mysterious priest Melchizedek appears in chapter 14, he blesses the God of Abram as “the Most High” and as the “Maker” or “Possessor” of the heavens and the earth (14:19).<sup>5</sup> Later in the book of Genesis, yet another glimpse of the universality of God’s sovereignty is given in the story of Joseph, where God orchestrates a famine in the mighty land of Egypt and at the same time preserves that land and the people of Jacob by way of Joseph’s unlikely rise to power (41:28–32; 45:5–8; 50:20).

In the period of the divided kingdom with the threat of Assyrian oppression looming over Judah, Hezekiah prays to Yahweh as both the “God of Israel” and “the only God to all of the kingdoms of the earth” (2 Kings 19:15; cf. Isa. 37:14–20).<sup>6</sup> In the Psalms God reigns over all the nations, though they may claim otherwise about their own deities and rulers, and he judges them in righteousness (Ps. 2:1–12; 9:5–8, 15–20; 33:10–17; 96:7–13). The psalmists therefore invite all the peoples to bow before God in awe and praise (67:1–7; 99:1–3; 148:1–14).<sup>7</sup> This is echoed in the prophecy of Isaiah as the worship of Yahweh is extended to Egypt and Assyria (Isa. 19:19–25). Surprisingly, Yahweh is able to anoint and send Cyrus, king of a pagan land, to execute his will in subduing nations and enabling the people of God to return to Jerusalem (44:28–45:4). Thus, Yahweh invites the peoples, whose gods cannot save, to repent and inherit salvation (45:20–25). Toward the end of Isaiah’s prophecy, Yahweh declares himself to be the eschatological light who illumines the world for Israel and calls upon the peoples either to serve Israel or face destruction (60:1–22). Even as the Israelites are under Babylonian government, Daniel exalts God as the one who reigns over history and removes and enthrones kings (Dan. 2:21). Even the proud Nebuchadnezzar

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<sup>5</sup> On the semantics of the verb *qānā* in Genesis 14:19, 22, see, e.g., E. Lipinski, “qānā” in G. Johannes Botterweck et al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 13, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 62–63.

<sup>6</sup> In his commentary on Isaiah, Campegius Vitringa notes that “the reign of God is universal, while all peoples everywhere attribute a particular reign to their own gods, or the demons which they worship for gods. His reign is single, true, and one; indeed only God presides over all things” (*Commentarius in Librum Prophetiarum Jesaiae, Pars Posterior* [Herbornae Nassaviorum, 1722], XXXVII, vs. 17, 378–79). See also, recently, Christopher Seitz, *Isaiah 1–39*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993), 248–50.

<sup>7</sup> Israel’s singers knew well that the unexplained choice of a unique people was conditioned by an ulterior purpose: happiness for all the families of the earth (Gen 12:3)...With utmost joy, the psalmists recited the fabulous events through which the Hebrew ancestors were invested with worldwide responsibility’ (Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* [Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2003], 49).

X:  
DIVINE SIMPLICITY: A REPLY TO  
COMMON PHILOSOPHICAL OBJECTIONS

Nathan Greeley

## INTRODUCTION

IN THE discipline of philosophical theology, how to best understand the being of God is a perennially contentious area of debate. Since the eighteenth century, in particular, new conceptions of the divine nature and the relation of God to the world have multiplied, and today one finds people applying the appellation “God” to notions that have little in common with one another. In spite of this variety, one of the commonplaces of modern thought has been to discard the classical or traditional idea of God as a metaphysically simple, pure act of being, who can further be described as necessary, independent, immutable, and eternal. Naturally, those who have followed this tendency conceive of God as marked by the contrasting qualities of composition, dependence, temporality, and contingency. While this departure from classical theism has been most prevalent among liberal theologians and philosophers, it has many devotees among more ostensibly conservative thinkers, who, for various reasons, think the traditional view untenable.

Those who reject classical theism often subject the doctrine of divine simplicity to their most serious criticisms. This is understandable, since simplicity is in many respects the foundation of the traditional way of understanding the divine reality. Without it, it is difficult to make compelling arguments for most of the other attributes that are considered characteristic

of God within classical theism.<sup>1</sup> Hence, an incisive critique of simplicity, if mounted successfully, would be sufficient to dispatch the classical portrait of God. Not a few people, as it happens, are quite convinced that they or others have made successful critiques.

The purpose of the present paper is to offer a response to some of the more common philosophical objections to divine simplicity, for the purpose of taking some modest steps to defend the classical doctrine of God. The motive for doing so is not a belief that older theology is more faithful, rigorous, and compelling than modern theology (though this is often the case), but a belief that the God offered to us by modern theologians and philosophers is not sufficiently differentiated from creatures to successfully provide either an adequate object of worship or a satisfying explanation of that age old question—why does anything exist at all? The God of classical theism, in contrast with this, is a God who does evoke awe and wonder, and also suffices to explain why things exist because He presents us with a fully adequate foundation for reality. As Peter Weigel avers, “simplicity profoundly marks the division between created and uncreated being.”<sup>2</sup> James Dolezal concurs: “Divine simplicity is necessary for a proper understanding of the distinction between the being of God and the being of creatures and for understanding the absolute self-sufficiency of God’s existence.”<sup>3</sup> Because of this, simplicity can provide us with an understanding of God and His significance in relation to the created order that other conceptions of God cannot.

In what follows, I will first make an effort to define simplicity and outline two prominent formulations of it, those of Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. Aquinas offers us what can be described as a doctrine of absolute simplicity, while in Scotus we find a doctrine perhaps best described as moderate or qualified simplicity. Being aware of these different views will make simplicity appear less rigid and therefore more defensible. Next, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Weigel calls attention to the fact that “Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae* makes divine simplicity the foundational divine predicate of his philosophical treatment of the divine nature. In this later work, the doctrine of divine simplicity generates the basic account for the other classic predicates of God’s nature in *Summa theologiae* Ia qq.3–11.” Though other medieval theologians (and Aquinas earlier in his career) did not give simplicity this same place in their account of the divine nature, it makes sense to do so given the importance and far-reaching implications of the doctrine. Peter Weigel, *Aquinas on Simplicity: An Investigation into the Foundations of his Philosophical Theology* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008) 23.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Weigel, *Aquinas on Simplicity*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> James Dolezal, *God Without Parts: Divine Simplicity and the Metaphysics of God’s Absoluteness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011) xix.

indicate some of the reasons why one would hold that God is simple, and in so doing delineate the most significant difficulties faced by those who wish to maintain that God is *not* simple. These difficulties, perhaps more than anything else, are what have led me to become a proponent of simplicity. Finally, I will raise some of the chief objections commonly levelled against simplicity, and then indicate what I think to be the best responses to these objections. I do not aspire to satisfy all who see problems with the doctrine, nor do I imagine every proponent of simplicity will find a perspective here that they can endorse. My goal is merely to show how the difficulties commonly alleged to obtain with respect to simplicity can be mitigated when the doctrine is understood in a specific way. I therefore conclude that simplicity can be defended against these objections. In any case, I believe my discussion will make clear that the positive reasons that can be marshaled in favor of some form of simplicity significantly outweigh its alleged problems.

## DEFINING SIMPLICITY: AQUINAS AND SCOTUS

Before mounting a defense, one must be clear about what stands in need of defense. Although simplicity is often represented as a homogenous doctrine, to which theologians either adhere or do not, this is not the case. There are different formulations of the doctrine, united by their denial that God is composed of separable parts. This means that whatever is in God is necessarily in God, and hence is necessarily one with God, and therefore God cannot possibly gain or lose parts or intrinsic properties. This also entails that God is purely actual; He has no potential to be other than He is. This is the basic area of agreement one finds in all proponents of simplicity; I think it is thus appropriate to designate it the essence of simplicity. Beyond this core tenet, however, exponents of the doctrine diverge.<sup>4</sup>

The most widely known version of simplicity is that found in the works of Thomas Aquinas, and at this version most criticism has been directed. Hence, grasping what Aquinas teaches is crucial. In addition to the tenets of

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<sup>4</sup> It is not uncommon to hear people affirm that simplicity is the denial of distinctions in God. But this is not true, and affirming distinctions is not antithetical to simplicity, which, as mentioned, is the denial that God has separable parts. Dolezal remarks that “Trinitarian adherents to divine simplicity have long insisted that simplicity only proscribes division and composition in the Godhead, not distinction.” James E. Dolezal, “Trinity, Simplicity and the Status of God’s Personal Relations,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* Vol. 16 No. 1 (Jan. 2014): 85.



XI:  
CONCLUSION  
QUO VADIS, CLASSICAL THEISM?

Joseph Minich

INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

THE FOLLOWING reflections are offered as a way beyond the current impasse over the doctrine of God, roughly constituted by (a) those whose doctrine of God is derived partially from philosophy versus those who limit the doctrine of God to the testimony of special revelation, or (b) between those who believe that classical (as opposed to contemporary) philosophy provides a conceptual apparatus that is very helpful in describing the inner-nature of God and His relationship to creation. This essay is composed on the premise that even a firmly persuaded classical theist *should* feel the sting of the critique that the categories of classical theism are not as obvious as one might hope in Scripture. Moreover, it would seem that Scripture is content to speak about God on a register that classical theist discourse might be somewhat uncomfortable with, and it does so promiscuously and without immediate clarification. I will qualify all of this below, but this essay is birthed in an attempt to honestly confront these facts. My proposed “way forward” involves recognizing the historical contingencies involved in any doctrine of God and identifying the manner in which one discourse about God and the world (Ancient

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to James Duguid, Peter Escalante, R. M. Hurd, and Onsi A. Kamel for commenting on a draft version of this essay—and to Patrick Stefan for a few corrections. They have saved me from several errors. I take full and exclusive responsibility for those that remain (i.e. I am also not speaking for any of the other contributors in this volume).

Near Eastern thought) transformed into another (Hellenistic thought). The New Testament was written during, and bears some nascent marks of, that transition. And the resultant discourse and trajectory of that early synthesis continue into the reflections of Nicaea and the triumph of scholasticism. But, and this is difficult to pin down, this synthesis is in the process (and has been for several centuries) of being integrated into another vantage point—a vantage point we might inaptly call “modernity”—but which itself has created another layer of meaning and discourse that complicates any attempt to articulate the doctrine of God within the current context. I will clarify how I think this is the case below. But it is worth stating, in a preliminary way, that the conviction behind these words is, despite opinion to the contrary on both sides, that real translation between these various ways of speaking about God is possible—and that each is useful and fruitful in its own limited ways (relative to its own legitimate and particular questions).

Resisting the temptation to offer all sorts of caveats at the beginning, I will try to address these in footnotes or as they arise in the text. In what follows, I will seek to describe the doctrine of God as it developed in the context of Ancient Near Eastern thought, the doctrine of God as it morphed in conversation with Hellenism, and the doctrine of God as it is in the process of morphing today. Of course, the historical boundaries between these are fluid, but they are nevertheless discernable when looking at the picture from (as it were) 30,000 feet.

In order to forestall the *most immediate* stumbling blocks, however, it is worth making three preliminary points. First, following in the historical approach of Julian Marias, I take it for granted that philosophical and conceptual language develops in human discourse against the backdrop of a lived world of meaning.<sup>2</sup> That is, human beings have never and *cannot* make sense of what is said about God in any period without a sense of how that way of talking about God relates to a whole world of images, implications, and meanings. Said differently, theology has a particular use and horizon of concerns within any particular community. This might raise concerns of subjectivism that I cannot address fully here, but the most immediate way to address this concern is to note that I think we can *translate* across worlds of meaning. Indeed, the history of thought just is that process of translation.

Second, while it seems obvious that we have talked about and

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<sup>2</sup> An accessible overview of Marias' thought has recently been made available at <https://mercorthodoxy.com/julian-marias/>.

understood God in relatively different ways in the history of the human race, this is not to say that the human's primal *relation* to God has actually changed. This essay is a very brief biography of theology, *not* of the God-man relationship in its most essential form, which has continuity across these shifts in discourse. The most immediate sense in which we relate to God is as a divine Person who is for us, who keeps His promises, who sustains all things, and who is worthy of our worship. And it is *from* this that we move to greater understanding. We do not set this basic relation aside for a minute, but always move about from within it. The most primal relation to God is that of trust, dependence, prayer for help, and praise for His mighty acts. But while this primal relation to God has remained the same from Adam to Kanye, our way of speaking about God has not. And this essay offers an extremely general (but arguably useful) reading of how and why that changed. Moreover, these changes do not necessarily suggest a motion from error to truth, but rather from truth to truth.

Third, the Bible is suited in its speech primarily to this primal and unchanging relation to God on top of which more philosophical God discourse is added. I take for granted that the Bible is inerrant in all that it claims. I would only add that the Bible, while authoritative over all historical speech about God, is also a part of the very history that it shapes. Its parts were written at particular times and bear the marks of their eras of composition. This should bother no Reformed theologian with a nuanced account of inspiration.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, it is the Bible itself that showcases the kind of transition in God-discourse that I aim to investigate. The movement from the Old to the New Testaments bears enormous continuity, but also some discontinuity—not in truth, emphasis, or vision of reality, but in *ways* of speaking about and interpreting God. This is most obvious in the plain fact of a linguistic transformation between Old and New Testament, and it is right to expect that, in God's providence, such a linguistic transformation is not *mere* linguistic transformation. Divine speech straddles this transition, and perhaps could be said to “manage” it—absorbing the imprint of ancient man in such a way as also to seminally set modern man on his path. In short, *divine revelation authorizes the project of expanding our speech about God relative to certain vantage points of understanding and lived worlds of meaning*. Indeed, it is the glory of kings to

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Herman Bavinck's discussion in *Reformed Dogmatics*, Vol 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 387–448. One might even speculate that divine inspiration was strategized to run parallel with key moments in the development of human thought.