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APOPHATICISM, ACCOMMODATION, ANTHROPOMORPHISM



Creator is largely a theological commentary on portions of Genesis 1:1–2:3, an attempt to articulate a fundamental theology explicitly and rigorously controlled by the Bible’s first chapter.

I would prefer to jump right in. You may do so by skipping to chapter two. Alas, I cannot. I must, reluctantly, begin before I begin, with a brief defense of my assumptions about the task of theology, which, for me, means assumptions about Scripture and how it is to be read. My reluctance rises from several sources. As Jeffrey Stout famously put it, methodological discussions are like a speaker’s throat-clearing before he begins to speak.¹ One needs a clear throat, to be sure, but too much academic speech is swallowed up in throat-clearing, question clarifying, framing. It is easy to forget that frames exist not for themselves but for the sake of the painting; we clear our throats so our throats are clear to *say* stuff. Fortunately for you, this chapter is comparatively brief. I could not explain or defend all my assumptions without writing a complete

¹Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 163.

prolegomenon, and I cannot in good conscience subject readers to more “ahems” than is strictly necessary.

I am also reluctant because method too often pre-determines the outcome of an investigation. As Jean-Luc Marion observes, *meta-hodos* implies we begin “at the end of the path . . . onto which [we] have just barely set forth.” Method allows us to “run ahead of the phenomenon, by *fore*-seeing it, *pre*-dicting it, and *pro*-ducing it.”² Method immanentizes the eschaton and attempts to survey the territory to be explored from an impossible position outside, or on the far side of, the territory. Method bewitches us into thinking it guides us from the beginning toward a reliable end, but in fact method is discernible only in retrospect. We can only know the *meta-hodos* from the end of the *hodos*. Discovery occurs when we are confronted by an other, often a new acquaintance. Method saves time by netting and taming the other as soon as we meet him, without the fuss of listening to what he has to say, without considering whether or not he knows a better path toward our destination.³ This is bad form in general, fatal when the Other is the Creator.

Every way of proceeding is shaped by substantive convictions about the subject matter that is yet to be studied. Sometimes, the convictions arrive from outside the subject at hand. Even the “clean” methods of the physical sciences are never purely methodological,⁴ since they rest on metaphysical premises about

²Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 9-10.

³Summing up Gadamer’s objections to “method,” Anthony Thiselton writes: “Interpreters conditioned by their own embeddedness in specific times, cultures, and theological or secular traditions need to *listen*, rather than seeking to ‘master’ the Other by netting it within their own prior system of concepts and categories. This premature assimilation of the Other into one’s own prior grooves of habituated thought constitutes the ‘control’ and advance commandeering that Gadamer calls ‘Method.’” In Roger Lundin et al., *The Promise of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 134.

⁴Stephen Shapin, *Never Pure: Historical Studies of Science as if It Was Produced by People with Bodies, Situated in Time, Space, Culture and Society, and Struggling for Credibility and Authority* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

causation, the law-like regularities of created phenomena, the irrelevance of supernatural factors—none of which have been or can be proven by the method they are used to support.⁵

There is no way round the knotted aporia at the origin of all human exploration: We must know what we are looking for before we begin, yet we cannot. We cannot immanentize the eschaton, and yet we *must* if we are going to move toward the end at all. Every human investigation requires contact with the already before we grope toward the not yet.

This aporia is perhaps most evident in theology. “He who is not with Me is against Me,” Jesus says, and we must know the Jesus we befriend in order to come to know him (Mt 12:30; Lk 11:23). Theology is for disciples. For theologians, the only *meta-hodos* that truly meets the requirement is the *hodos* who is also *telos*, who is also Truth and Life.

We must know God in order to know God more deeply. As Karl Barth insists, it will not do to begin by positing a generic divine being in order to work our way up to the true God. Christian theology seeks to know, praise, and proclaim the one living God, the Father who begets the eternal Son by his eternal Spirit, the God who is a communion of three equal divine persons. Any theology that seeks to know God while prescinding from incarnation and Pentecost is founded on idolatry, no matter that the living triune God is clumsily squeezed into the idolatrous frame. This gets very much to the problem I investigate and seek to correct in this book, for the heart of my critical argument is that Christian theology has been tainted by a failure to integrate creation fully into its doctrine of God. To put it provocatively, much Christian theology has unwittingly posited a nonexistent idol and attributed creation to that idol, rather than to the living God who is Father, Word, and Spirit.

⁵Rupert Sheldrake, *The Science Delusion* (London: Coronet, 2012).

One aspect of this aporia is directly pertinent to *Creator*: This book is an extended exercise in theological interpretation of the creation account, but any understanding of the truth value of Scripture depends on a prior understanding of creation. Our understanding of the function and force of the words of Genesis 1 depends on our understanding of the teaching and content of Genesis 1. This is an aporia indeed, for we cannot begin to grasp how we are to construe the words of Genesis without having already construed the words of Genesis 1 in some particular fashion. Without trying to relieve the tangled tension that meets us at the outset, I believe some pathways are more consistent with the content of Genesis 1 than others. I focus the discussion by posing this question: Are the words of Scripture adequate to convey the truth God intends to reveal? This, of course, is a species of a more general question about creation: Is *creation* capable of conveying the truth God intends to reveal?

The Christian tradition has answered yes, but the yes has quivered and wobbled. Below I seek to steady a few wobbles and worries—worries about babbling theologians, about the babbling God, about the words with which we babble.

BABBLING THEOLOGIANS

For many theologians, T. S. Eliot's words about words, about their strain, slippage, and imprecision, apply most especially to words about God.⁶ Though revelation authorizes us to use the language of creation to speak of God, it must, it is said, be "hedged about with the cautionary reminder that the sense in which some words are used cannot be the primary and familiar one."⁷ These qualifications on our language about God are

⁶"Burnt Norton," *Four Quartets*.

⁷Rowan Williams, *Understanding and Misunderstanding "Negative Theology"* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2021), 14.

rooted in the metaphysical conviction that God is so transcendent that our words are, at best, distant pointers to the one who is beyond speech and thought. Nothing we can say positively can capture “what it is ‘like’ to be God” because finite minds have no “adequate perspective on unlimited actuality as such.”⁸

The majority tradition of the church has oscillated between positive and negative theology, modulated between cataphatic and apophatic registers, often treating the apophatic as a moment in what is primarily a cataphatic quest.⁹ In one of his theological *Oration*s, Gregory of Nazianzus insists that negative theology is not a stopping point for theology: “He who is eagerly pursuing the nature of the Self-existent will not stop at saying what He is *not*, but must go on beyond what He is not, and say what He *is*; inasmuch as it is easier to take in some single point than to go on disowning point after point in endless detail, in order, both by the elimination of negatives and the assertion of positives to arrive at a comprehension of this subject.”¹⁰

Gregory follows with an analogy:

A man who states what God is *not* without going on to say what He *is*, acts much in the same way as one would who when asked how many twice five make, should answer, not two, nor three, nor four, nor five, nor twenty, nor thirty, nor in short any number below ten, nor any multiple of ten, but would not answer ten nor settle the mind of his questioner upon the firm ground of the answer. For it is much easier, and more concise to show what a thing is not from what it is, than to demonstrate what it is

⁸Williams, *Understanding and Misunderstanding*, 17.

⁹In fact, every negation implies some positive knowledge. See Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 34-36.

¹⁰*Oration 28.9*. Translation by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 7 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1894).

by stripping it of what it is not. And this surely is evident to every one.¹¹

Here, apophasis is the fruit of cataphasis, not the opposite.

Pseudo-Dionysius is a key figure here. He recognizes the interplay of apophatic and cataphatic discourses, and insists we name God only by names authorized by Scripture. In principle, everything in creation can name God since God is the cause of each thing. Dionysius encourages the multiplication of the names of God. Cataphatic theology does not say too little; it says more than it can possibly know, and, for that reason, should speak to excess.¹² Excess saves us from the prim and frugal idolatry of using a few favored names for God, which can seduce us into thinking we have snagged God on a concept.

At the same time, multiplication of names creates a crisis for naming as such. At its height, when applied to God, language is destined to collapse into paradox. God is light, Dionysius says, following Scripture. But God is also darkness. Employing both names does not yet arrive at the pinnacle of learned ignorance. We attain that peak when we both affirm and deny all cataphatic descriptions, and then proceed to negate the contradiction between them. God is light *and* God is not light, but the paradox that

¹¹*Oration 28.9*. Of recent efforts to characterize Thomas Aquinas as a thoroughgoing apophaticist, Victor Preller's is among the most rigorous. Preller claims that Thomas formulates an "apophatic rule" according to which "in this life God is radically *unintelligible*." Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 28. For a rejoinder, see Kevin Hector, "Apophaticism in Thomas Aquinas: A Re-Formulation and Recommendation," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60, no. 4 (2007): 377-93. Hector regards Thomas's apophaticism as a "strategy" that opens up into positive claims about God.

¹²Summarizing Pseudo-Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas, Denys Turner writes, "God is beyond our comprehension not because we cannot say anything about God, but because we are compelled to say too much, more than we can know how to mean. In short, for the pseudo-Denys and for Thomas following him, the 'apophatic' consists in the superfluity of the 'cataphatic,' the darkness of God consists in the excess of light." Turner, "Tradition and Faith," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6, no. 1 (2004): 34.

surpasses mere contradiction is the confession of God as bright darkness, dark brilliance, a celestial darkness visible. This ultimate paradox violates the normal semantic rules and represents, according to Denys Turner, “the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which can only be expressed . . . in bits of collapsed, disordered language, like the babble of a Jeremiah.”¹³

The way of Dionysius is, without doubt, dizzying, delicious, yet Turner’s final comment gives pause. It marks one of the potholes along the apophatic way. It is not clear which portions of Jeremiah Turner considers “babbling.” Even if some passages of the prophet merit that label, surely babbling does not characterize the whole. Is Jeremiah “babbling” when he warns of impending disaster, when he rebukes Judah’s kings, when he instructs the exiles to settle down to seek the peace of Babylon, when he encourages the residents of Jerusalem to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar? Most of Jeremiah is perfectly lucid, and even when he speaks of Yahweh, he does not “babble.” Dionysian apophaticism threatens to nullify the possibility of sense in the biblical text, not only when it speaks about God but when it speaks about anything. “God said” does not mean God spoke, because God utterly transcends what we think of as “speech.” “God made” does not refer to a specific activity of God. “Day” does not mean a period of time. All these words mean something ineffably beyond words.¹⁴ We know them only in their erasure.¹⁵

¹³Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22.

¹⁴As Jonathan Tran notes, this is a theological version of the philosophical dilemma that posits that some reality is “necessarily on the far side of human language and thought,” which we “cannot quite reach because we are stuck in, and so blocked by, language.” “Linguistic Theology: Completing Postliberalism’s Linguistic Turn,” *Modern Theology* 33, no. 1 (2016): 47-68.

¹⁵I evoke the deconstructive formula as a reminder of the faddish apophaticism of postmodern theory. See Daniel Bulzan, “Apophaticism, Postmodernism and Language: Two Similar Cases of Theological Imbalance,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50, no. 3 (1997): 261-87.

This pothole is the product of more basic instabilities in apophatic theology. There is, for starters, a risk of misplaced mystery. Language, it seems, more or less transparently grasps creation and discloses finite realities. Language as such is univocal; only language about God is problematic. On these premises, if Scripture says, “Jeremiah said,” it means, straightforwardly, “Jeremiah said,” but if Scripture says, “God said,” it must be hedged with caution signs. But the world itself is full of mystery, for in its depth creation is nothing but the created effulgence of the glory of the Creator.¹⁶ Our capacity to name and shape the world through words at all is a continuous miracle, a daily aftershock of the Creator’s first magical *fiat lux*.¹⁷ Mystery does not suddenly confront us when we begin to speak about God. Mystery confronts us at every turn, in every encounter with anything at all, because every encounter is an encounter with the Creator in his creation. God is not a creature, yet if we must “babble” about God, then all speech is reduced to babbling. But then if babbling is all we do, perhaps we should conclude that, for creatures, babbling simply is the form that rational speech takes. We babble, but compared to *what*?

There is also a risk of a false transcendence, which leads immediately to a false immanence. Apophaticism can be formulated in a way that posits a zero-sum game between the transcendence and immanence: To the degree God is transcendent, to that degree he is not immanent. The more transcendent he is, the less he is thinkable, speakable, and knowable by creatures. In reality, true transcendence is not in opposition to immanence; on the contrary, they are mutually determinative. *Because* God is transcendent, unbounded by temporal and spatial limits, he is

¹⁶Hartshorne, *Divine Relativity*, 40-41.

¹⁷I hope to address the theology of language in more depth in a future volume on anthropology.

immanent, present, and active in every space and time. His immanence in every space and time implies, in turn, his transcendence of spatial and temporal limits. By the same token, the oddness of our talk about God, a marker of God's transcendence, is not in opposition or tension to the ordinariness of our talk about God. God-talk is at once the oddest of human talk *and* the most ordinary. It is the most ordinary *because* it is the oddest.¹⁸

God is not hidden away at the inaccessible peak of an ontic hierarchy of being. He is the transcendent source of being; he is Creator. Because God is triune, further, there is a perfect convertibility between God and his manifestation as Word: "his hiddenness—his transcendence—is always already manifestation."¹⁹ False transcendence is the transcendence of the non-Creator, a God who may or may not create, a God who may or may not be related to creatures.²⁰ As I will argue at length in chapter four, no such non-Creator exists, for the living God *has* created. On trinitarian and creationist premises, every disclosure of God discloses the God who shows himself. Appeals to transcendence that render us mute implicitly deny God's transcendence is the transcendence

¹⁸John Frame, "God and Biblical Language: Transcendence and Immanence," in John W. Montgomery, ed., *God's Inerrant Word* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Fellowship, 1974). Frame speaks of transcendence and immanence as "perspectivally related." Jeremy Begbie observes that some accounts of God's transcendence make it appear that "language is something by its very nature that God would long to escape," on the assumption that "something so finite and susceptible to corruption could have no integral role in God's purposes." *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts: Bearing Witness to the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018), 111.

¹⁹David Bentley Hart, *The Hidden and the Manifest: Essays in Theology and Metaphysics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 147. It seems to me that Hart's strongly apophatic approach in *Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 142, comes close to precisely the false transcendence he rejects in Plotinus.

²⁰This is the key point in Franz Rosenzweig's refutation of Maimonides. Scripture is not concerned with God or man in isolation from one another, but with the event of their meeting in time. Anthropomorphism expresses a theology of the Creator. See Rosenzweig, *Kleinere Schriften* (Berlin: Schocken, 1937), 521. I rely on the summary found in Leora Batnitzky, *Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 21-23.

of the Trinity, the Father who manifests himself in the Word who, by the Spirit, is the manifestation of the Father. Apophatic appeals that negate the propriety of biblical language implicitly deny that God's transcendence is the transcendence of the Creator, who is, *for us*, always already related to creation. False transcendence offers a grammar for theology that claims to contextualize the Bible, but in so doing often obliterates the Bible. False transcendence does not merely nullify this or that statement of Scripture, but erodes the very possibility of Scripture: For how can a God beyond manifestation manifest himself in the fixed and determinate words of a text?

We can cut through the fog more simply: we in fact *do* speak of God. We may speak of God badly, but the church has recognized such a thing as proper speech. If we do speak well of God, we must be capable of doing so. We use language—often quite ordinary, albeit modified, language—to speak of God. As Jonathan Tran points out, the fact that we fill in the concept “God” with terms like transcendence, eternity, simplicity, unity, triunity, reveals the *abundance* of language, not its poverty. Of course, we cannot encompass or fully comprehend God. We cannot subject him to our conceptual control. He is a living God, a God capable of surprise. But then we cannot encompass or comprehend *anything* in its fullness, for *nothing* is under our control—most especially nothing that is alive. Whatever we say about our God-talk, we must insist God's purpose is “not to render us dumb.”²¹ God transcends language not because our words are nonsensical, or because they say nothing determinate about God. God created language; he has spoken, and his speech is recorded in Scripture; he can ensure that his speech communicates exactly what he wants it to communicate. He transcends language because there is

²¹Begbie, *Redeeming Transcendence in the Arts*, 112.

always *more* to say of him, *always forever* more to say, even after he has spoken the “last word” of final judgment.

Apophatic cautions are sometimes brought forward as a reminder that our knowledge of God arises not in scientific scrutiny but in personal encounter. We cannot claim to know God when we know creed, confession, or even the contents of Scripture, but only when we know *him*. It is a salutary reminder. Yet, once again, it does not imply that our knowing of other things is otherwise. Despite its marketing to the contrary, scientific knowledge is not impersonal and objectivized but arises from deep communion with reality.²² Importantly, a personal encounter does not exclude, but *requires*, determinate knowledge. The ways I know my wife and children exceed words, but I would never have achieved that knowledge without words. Even when the Word becomes flesh to dwell among us, he talks and talks and talks. And even after the resurrection, he spends a fair proportion of his time leading Bible studies with his disciples (Lk 24).²³ We commune with God in, with, under, and through his talk to us and our backtalk.

BABBLING GOD

Let us grant, as the church has done, that we can make positive claims about God. The question then is, Is Scripture up to the task? Is it adequate to reveal God? The church has answered yes, but with worries and a wobble.

Commenting on John 3:22-29, Augustine quotes Psalm 35:1, which describes God as light and fountain. Augustine wonders, How can he be both? He replies with this lovely passage:

²²See, for instance, Evelyn Fox Keller’s *A Feeling for the Organism* (Times Books, 1984), on the genetic research of Barbara McClintock. More generally, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015; first published in 1958); Esther Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011).

²³Thanks to my pastor, Rich Lusk, for this way of putting the point.

On earth a fountain is one thing, light another. When you are thirsty you look for a fountain, and in order to get to the fountain you look for light; and if it is not daytime, you light a lamp in order to get to the fountain. Now that fountain itself is the light; for the thirsty it is a fountain, for the blind it is light. Let the eyes be opened to see the light, may the mouth of the heart be opened so as to drink from the fountain; what you drink, that is, what you see, what you hear. God becomes everything for you, because he is for you the fullness of the things that you love. If you are thinking of visible things, bread is not God, water is not God, this light is not God, a garment is not God, a house is not God. In fact, these things are visible and distinct from one another; bread is not water, and a garment is not a house; and these things are not God, for they are visible. For you God is everything; if you are hungry, he is bread for you; if you are thirsty he is water for you; if you are in the dark he is light for you, because he abides imperishable; if you are naked he is the garment of immortality for you when this perishable thing shall put on imperishability and this mortal thing shall put on immortality (I Cor 15:54). . . . What have lamb and lion got in common? Each name is applied to Christ: Look, there is the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29). How about “lion”? Look, the Lion from the tribe of Judah has conquered (Rv 5:5).²⁴

Augustine then sums up: “Everything can be said about God, and nothing that is said is worthy of God. Nothing is more extensive than this poverty of speech. You look for a suitable name, you cannot find one; you look for something to say in any way at all, and you find everything.”²⁵ Augustine runs on and on about the glories of God, gives him name upon name upon name, and then pulls out the rug: “Of course, this is all inadequate. All that I have

²⁴Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John, 1–40*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City, 2009), 13.5.

²⁵Augustine, *Homily on the Gospel of John 13.5*.

said is unworthy of God.” Why should it be unworthy? Inadequate *to what purpose?*

It is a common theological tick.²⁶ Herman Bavinck, who quotes the passage, does the same. Because God reveals himself, we have “the right to name him on the basis of his self-revelation.” We can use human words because God does, and “manifests himself in human forms.” Scripture is not anthropomorphic here and there, but “anthropomorphic through and through,” culminating in God’s “self-humanization” in the incarnation. *All* biblical descriptions of God “are derived from earthly and human relations.” He has a soul and spirit; a face, eyes, eyelids, ears, nose, mouth, arms, legs, and, unlike idols, his organs are in working order; he rejoices, grieves, expresses anger and delight, hates and loves; he searches, knows, intends, forgets and remembers, speaks, calls, commands, sees, smells, hears, walks, meets, visits, writes, heals, kills and makes alive, washes and anoints and clothes; he is bridegroom, father, judge, king, warrior, architect, gardener, shepherd, physician; he has all the accoutrements of a king—throne, footstool, rod, scepter, sword, bow and arrow, shield, chariot. Scripture even describes him by reference to nonhuman creatures: he is lion, eagle, lamb, hen, sun, morning star, spring, food and drink, rock and refuge, stronghold, shadow, road, and temple.²⁷

Then the tick: These names “present a peculiar intellectual difficulty.” Why? The knowledge these names offer is not “fully

²⁶And an ancient tick. See Mark Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), who explores, among other things, Origen’s criteria for identifying passages where the literal sense is “unworthy of God.”

²⁷Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), 95-101. Bavinck is in the mainstream of Christian theology here. As we shall see, Thomas argues that all creatures bear some resemblance to the Creator. Bavinck quotes Bonaventure: Because God is Creator of all, “we must transfer to the divine that which pertains to the creature.” Since every creature glorifies God, so “every name that is ascribed to creatures might glorify him” (102-3).

adequate to the subject.” There is no exhaustive “fit” between the names and the God to whom the names refer. How can God be both nameless and the bearer of infinite names?²⁸ Bavinck resolves the difficulty with an appeal to accommodation: “We have the right to use anthropomorphic language because God himself came down to the level of his creatures and revealed his name in and through his creatures.”²⁹

The obvious thing to say is what Thomas Aquinas says: Every created thing resembles God in some specific fashion simply because God created it that way. Its resemblance is its essence. In naming God from creation, we are naming him by the created resemblances he made, resemblances he presumably made just so we might speak of him. Conversely, God possesses every perfection of creation as Creator, in the way of eminence. God is *not* a rock—not because he bears no resemblance to a rock, but because his rockiness is so infinitely realized that no created rock or collection of rocks can fully express his eternal rockiness. He is not an idol, because he does not have malfunctioning eyes, ears, nose, hands, and feet (Ps 115:1-8). God has no physical hands as idols do, but he has infinite manuality. He has no physical eyes, but he has the eternal original power of which our capacity for sight is a shadow and symbol. The biblical logic is: He who created the eye, does he not see? He who created the ear, does he not hear? He who created the tongue, can he not speak? The one who created arms and hands acts with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm (Ps 94:9). The heavenly Father is the father by whom every earthly fatherhood (*patria*) is named (Eph 3:14-15). And then we can also say: The one who created passionate creatures, does he not love, have compassion, show wrath toward sin?

²⁸Dionysius, *Divine Names* 596C-D, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987).

²⁹Bavinck, *God and Creation*, 104.

If we can say this, why the wobble? Why the pseudohumble confession of inadequacy?

Anthropomorphism is not projection from finite to infinite. In the order of knowing, it seems so. In the order of being, it is the opposite: It is authorized from top down. Scripture uses anthropomorphic and cosmomorphic language of God because God created man in his image and the cosmos as a manifestation of his glory. It is not accommodation. The Bible uses apophatic language of God because our human capacity for emotion is a reflex of God's emotional life. We can speak of God using the categories of creation because he created them to be used in our speaking of and to him.³⁰

Bavinck says all this. So, why the tick? Having created a world that comprehensively speaks of God, why would God prohibit us to use the language he made? How could it possibly be inadequate or inappropriate?³¹ Why is it unworthy of God when we use created things as God intended them to be used? Where does the instinct to explain away the "crudeness" of Scripture come from?

The Bible is embarrassing. Even many who believe Scripture is inspired by God find much in it that is "unworthy of God." Who

³⁰Brian Howell, *In the Eyes of God: A Contextual Approach to Biblical Anthropomorphic Metaphors* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 57, makes a related point about theological language: "There is a spectrum of meaning within any given divine predicate that is neither located exclusively within the human, nor the divine realms. Rather, this semantic field ranges from the 'natural' to the 'supernatural,' with both God and humans potentially capable, with some concessions, of action involving elements of both ends of the spectrum. . . . The fact that these denotations can be transferred to the divine and human subjects demonstrates that the nature of the action is derived as much from its context as its actor."

³¹Science's hostility to anthropomorphism is one source of our deep alienation from creation and from ourselves. Teleology and purpose, it is said, are human projections onto nature. If so, it is hard to see how human beings can be natural and also persons who act with ends and purposes. Our relation to nature thus becomes purely instrumental. See the compact, brilliant argument of Robert Spaemann, *Essays in Anthropology: Variations on a Theme* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 9-12.

can believe a book that describes God in such blatantly anthropomorphic terms? Who can believe early humans lived for centuries? Who can believe the world was created in six normal days? Accommodation is a method, or a trick, to relieve the shame of devoting a lifetime of study to a children's picture book. It is a way of justifying the thoroughly anthropomorphic, pictographic Bible to its cultured despisers. Accommodation is the theologian's wink that tells everyone he knows just how childish the Bible is. He knows, as Calvin does, it is as if God stoops to babble to us as a mother to her infant, since we are incapable of grasping whatever adult speech about God would be.³²

Despite this suggestion, Calvin of course takes the specific words and sentences of the Bible with the utmost seriousness. Others, not so much. If the Bible is baby talk, then grownups are apt to search for more dignified ways to talk. Maimonides and his many heirs provide a pious rationale for exterminating the Bible's accommodated anthropomorphism. He turns the iconoclastic impulse of Judaism against Judaism's own text. Religious language must be purged of conceptual idols as much as worship has been purged of material idols. "God is our rock" forms an idolatrous image in the brain, which must be ground to powder like the golden calf. Unsurprisingly, pure, grown-up language about God turns out to be metaphysical language. Eventually the impulse turns against "God" as such, since the adults in the room eventually realize *any* determinate statement about God is an illegitimate attempt to fix and limit him.³³

John Polkinghorne puts accommodation to a similar use when he writes that the "human writings [of Scripture] bear witness to timeless truths, but they do so in the thought forms and from

³²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.13.1.

³³Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2-3.

the cultural milieu of their writers.” As a result, “we find attitudes expressed in the Bible that today we neither can nor should agree with.”³⁴ Accommodation allows Polkinghorne to uphold a version of Scriptural authority, while overtly denying the truth value of what Scripture actually asserts. More fundamentally, his version of accommodation assumes the writers of Scripture intend to communicate timeless truths, *rather than* an account of history. In this form, accommodation does not *lead to* liberalism; it is liberalism.³⁵

Even when accommodation is used within an orthodox context, it is a source of many confusions and is ultimately theologically insupportable. A first confusion: It is often assumed that abstract theological language eludes accommodation in a way that concrete, poetic language does not.³⁶ If accommodation is right, though, it applies to *all* human speech about God; it is dumbed all

³⁴John Polkinghorne, *Science and the Trinity: The Christian Encounter with Reality* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 45-46.

³⁵As George Lindbeck points out, liberalism treats doctrinal claims as symbols of religious experience. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th anniv. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 17-18. Markus Barth saw Bultmann’s demythologizing as an example of accommodation gone to seed; quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 316. See also the role of accommodation in Kenton Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Sayings of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 52-55. Spinoza is a key figure here, the thinker in whom opposition to anthropomorphism, cultivation of “higher criticism,” and promotion of liberal theology converge with liberal political theory.

³⁶This is explicit in Pseudo-Dionysius. He distinguishes “conceptual” from “perceptual” names, which correspond both to the distinction between the things that immediately flow out erotically from the Creator and the things that are flow further down, and to the distinction between unity and multiplicity. Given God’s nature, the simplest and most abstract names are the most fitting. Naming God begins with “the first things,” which are the most abstract and conceptual names, and then moves down toward the more concrete names. “My argument traveled downward,” he writes, “from the most exalted to the humblest categories, taking in on this downward path an ever-increasing number of ideas which multiples with every stage of the descent” (*Divine Names* 712A). The movement is from the “most exalted” to the “humblest” of God’s names (*Mystical Theology* 1033C). Those at the top of the hierarchy are “similar similarities,” while those lower down are “dissimilar similarities.” All created things name God, Dionysius insists, yet some names are more

the way down. To say “God is a rock” is no *more* accommodated than saying “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” “God is simple, eternal, impassible, immutable, *actus purus*” is no less accommodated than “God is my sun and shield.” The abstract metaphysical terminology feels more impressive, but, strictly speaking, it is just as childish.

The difference between “Yahweh is my shepherd” and “God is *esse ipsum*” is not the difference between accommodated and non-accommodated. Rather, the first is more obviously metaphorical than the latter. Which leads to a second confusion: Metaphor and accommodation are *not* the same thing, though they are frequently conflated. The recourse to accommodation devalues the figurative language of Scripture in favor of a truth stripped of ornamentation and poetry. Scriptural language is implicitly cast as primitive, and this exerts pressure on theologians to transcend Scripture in search of a more sophisticated, more culturally acceptable, idiom, which often involves learning to speak with a Greek accent.

The attempt to transcend metaphor does not work, in any case. Another confusion: Even abstract language rests on metaphor that has concrete, physical roots.³⁷ “God is simple” stands in contrast to multiparted composites, but still evokes a homogeneous physical entity or substance—perhaps especially a fluid. “In him we live” seems more ontologically substantive than “he sits on the circle of the heavens,” but the former is also a spatial metaphor, which portrays God as a container of our lives, movements, and existence. The prepositions “of him, through him, and to him”

divine than others. God is more Being than He is Rock. For more, see Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*, chap. 2.

³⁷See George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

describe physical relations—of origin, instrumentality, and destination. When we attempt to ascend out of the this-worldly idioms of Scripture, we do not ascend into a higher reality. We remain within the creation, using created things to describe the Creator. There is no alternative for creatures. Happily, we need no alternative to speak God’s words after him and back to him.

Even in its best forms, accommodation is theologically insupportable.³⁸ It suggests God must adjust to circumstances outside his control. Yahweh faces an ancient cultural context full of poetic myths and primitive beliefs, and he has to adjust his mode of communication to make himself heard. He brings Israel from Egypt into a world of suzerainty treaties, so he adopts and adapts the form in his rule over Israel. But where did these treaties come from? Yahweh is Lord of history, who orchestrates and arranges the world as he pleases. He is never faced with a world that is not of his own making, and so does not need to adjust to it. Rather, he arranges the world to be just the sort of world he wishes to speak into. If the suzerainty treaty form—if that is what the Sinai covenant is—is lying around for Yahweh to pick up, it is because he put it there.

Accommodation suggests God does not take full responsibility for his own speech. Why does God allow the biblical writers to attribute passions and actions to God that are manifestly “inappropriate” to deity? Why does his covenant with Israel take the form it does? Why does Genesis 1 recount the origins of the world as it does? God has to speak this way because he has to make himself understood to the primitive minds of ancient hearers. “Don’t blame *me*,” God might say. “*Of course*, I know Genesis 1 does not describe how it actually happened. *Of course*, I too am a

³⁸The next few paragraphs summarize Vern Poythress, *Interpreting Eden: A Guide to Faithfully Reading and Understanding Genesis 1-3* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 323-40.

theistic evolutionist. But this was all I could expect these ignorant ancient peoples to understand. Babbling to infants; it's all babbling to infants." If we cannot imagine a blame-shifting God, we should not imagine a God who fails to say what he wants to say because of outside pressures.

In the eternal life of the triune God, God responds to God. In the creation, God responds to God-as-God evaluates the words and works he speaks and does in the world (see chap. 7). Scripture is included within God's address to God, embedded within the covenant God makes with his people, which he enables his people to keep. Yahweh commissions Moses to write the covenant documents and deposit them in the ark of the covenant. The covenant is two sided, as God the covenant Lord and Father binds himself to his people, and the covenant document is likewise two-sided. Scripture is God's word to himself as well as to Israel. In committing himself to Israel, the covenant God commits himself to himself, to be God-for-Israel. As Vern Poythress points out, Scripture's intratrinitarian location comes to unique expression in Jesus' prayer in John 17. There, as in all Scripture, "God addresses us, but he also addresses himself as the second party." When we receive Scripture, "the Holy Spirit stands with us, indwelling us" as the hearer of the Word of the Father. The Son speaks and the Spirit hears, but the receptive Spirit is the Spirit who indwells us to enable our reception. In our hearing the Word of the Son, the Spirit also hears. Scripture's language is not accommodated language suitable to children. It is the way God talks to God about God.³⁹

To close the circle: Accommodation often betrays a faulty theology of creation. By some definitions, accommodation is the claim that God speaks in a form suited to our capacity as hearers.

³⁹Vern Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity: A Trinitarian Approach to the Attributes of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2020), 645.

God speaks in human language because he speaks to humans. He refers to created things to reveal his character, because he speaks to creatures surrounded by created things. If that is what accommodation means, it is true and important. It is also just another way of talking of creation as such. God creates by Word; creation is his speech to us. By virtue of creation, we are surrounded by the inescapable speech of God (Rom 1:18-20). That is accommodation enough.

Typically, though, accommodation is a *second* condescension, over and above creation itself. This is the Augustinian tick we noticed above. Scripture speaks with creation in all kinds of ways, Bavinck says, but then adds, “Of course, this is because God stooped down from his proper height.” Why do we need this second stoop? Was the condescension of creation itself not adequate?

Behind these ticks and tricks is the unacknowledged assumption that creation as such is not capable of conveying God’s self-revelation. In the view of many theologians, the concrete stuff of the world—light, rocks, stars, the sun, shields and bucklers—is not an adequate vehicle for informing us truly about God. In order to know God as he really is, we need him to descend. Or, we need to ascend from “God is a rock” and “our God is a consuming fire” to “God is immutable” or “God is morally perfect.”⁴⁰ Once again, the move does not work. Whether the words are Hebrew or Hellenistic, some medium separates the Creator’s voice from the creature’s ear, producing inescapable static and distortion. This second accommodation betrays a desire to bypass history, bodies, words, Scripture in pursuit of a contact with God that does not have to deal with the crudities of creation. There is

⁴⁰Again, this is explicit in Dionysius: “The sheer crassness of the signs is a goad so that even the materially inclined cannot accept that it could be permitted or true that the celestial and divine sights could be conveyed by such shameful things” (*Celestial Hierarchy* 141B-C).

a gnostic impulse here: Something stands in God's way—recalcitrant matter, evanescent time, chaos—and makes it impossible for God to speak clearly. This second condescension suggests creation is not *entirely* good, not entirely God speaking “to the creature through the creature.”⁴¹

I leave it to Robert Jenson, on whom I will rely periodically throughout this book, to put my point with blunt clarity: “The Bible’s language about God is drastically personal: he changes his mind and reacts to external events, he makes threats and repents of them, he makes promises and tricks us by how he fulfills them. If we understand this language as fundamentally inappropriate, as ‘anthropomorphic,’ we do not know the biblical God.”⁴² And that means we simply do not know God at all because the biblical God is the only available option.

Put it positively: Creation is a suitable vehicle for speaking of God because creation is itself an image of the glory of God. It is the created effulgence of the uncreated glory of the Trinity.⁴³ When Scripture says, “God is a sun” or “God is a rock,” it is not imposing a theological meaning on atheological material reality. The innermost being of all things is its revelation of the glory of the Creator. Of course, Scripture speaks of God by speaking of the creation. What other language does he need? What other language do we need? What other language could there possibly be?

IN ALL THE SCRIPTURES

Ahem . . . ahem . . . ahem. I am almost finished, about ready to begin speaking. My throat is so clear that I may break out in song.

⁴¹The phrase is Hamann’s from *Aesthetica in nuce* in *Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75.

⁴²Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1: *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 222.

⁴³David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 240.

Before I do, let me make a few more commitments explicit. First, let me state a fundamentalist presupposition that has been implicit throughout this chapter. I believe God speaks in the normal sense of the word *speak*. He appeared in Eden to utter audible words to Adam, then to Adam and Eve. He confronted Cain, instructed Noah, called Abram and promised him land and seed, consoled Hagar in the wilderness, thundered from Sinai, spoke to Solomon in a dream, came as Word of Yahweh to prophets. After speaking in many portions and in many ways, he spoke in the last days through his Son (Heb 1:1-3).

Scripture is God's Word in written form. It contains *nothing* unworthy of its divine Author. What Scripture teaches, God teaches. It is our final rule for all theology and Christian practice. Through Scripture, the Spirit tests, judges, and corrects every creed and theological claim, and the Bible also has the theological, and therefore the philosophical, resources we need to formulate a positive theology and biblical metaphysics.⁴⁴ Scripture does not need to be "translated" into metaphysical terms to provide the "grammar" of divinity. Of late, "classical theism," with its emphasis on metaphysical perfections such as simplicity, immutability, eternity, and impassibility, has been put forward as that grammar. I propose the Bible and the creed ("I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth") as a more suitable and stable grammar, to which all other conceptualities must be drastically subordinated.

Second, *Creator* is a theological reading of Genesis 1, but Genesis 1 does not stand alone. There is heuristic value in isolating a single chapter and asking what it can tell us on its own. We should make

⁴⁴Every important philosopher in the Western tradition intrudes on theology, though sometimes without much attention to or understanding of the texts and resources of theology. See chap. 2 below for a discussion of some of the theological dimensions of Hellenic philosophy.

our initial approach to understanding the meaning of the phrase “image of God” (Gen 1:26-27), for instance, by asking what kind of God has been introduced in the first twenty-five verses of the chapter. In its immediate context, we learn that man is the image of a God who creates, speaks, makes, has a Spirit, and so on. That is where we should begin our theological anthropology, but it is not where we end our theological anthropology. Genesis 1 is only the first chapter of a very long book, and, besides, many passages of Scripture refer to and illuminate the creation account. Though I offer a close reading of the Hebrew text of Genesis 1, my theological interpretation will range across the canon.

There are two justifications for pursuing a *sensus plenior*. First, later writers of Scripture not only allude to earlier sections of Scripture but comment on those earlier Scriptures. John employs terminology from Genesis 1 to make his own theological claims. With “in the beginning” and his references to the Word, “coming into being,” light and darkness, and his enumeration of a sequence of days, John signals that his account of the life of Jesus marks a new genesis for the world. Redemption is new creation, as the God who spoke the worlds into being speaks again, as the God who spoke creation unveils himself in his Word, now tabernacled among us in our flesh.

Yet John 1 is not simply a new covenant rewriting of Genesis 1. It is also a *commentary* on the original account.⁴⁵ We can infer from Genesis 1 that the Word was “in the beginning with God,” that “all things came into being” by the Word, and that the Word is the source of both light and life. We might even be able to infer that the Word of creation “enlightens every man.” What is revealed in the incarnation is the divinity of the Word, the fact that the Word who is in the beginning, by whom God made all things,

⁴⁵Peder Borgen, “Logos Was the True Light: Contributions to the Interpretation of the Prologue of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 14, no. 2 (1972): 115-30.

who is light and life, *is* God and God-toward-God (*pros ton theon*, Jn 1:1). What is revealed in the incarnation is also the *personhood* of the Word, the fact that he is not only a divine utterance but a divine *he*, who bears the glory of his Father as the only begotten of the Father. This is not merely, I suggest, a new covenant insertion into John’s riff on Genesis. John interprets Genesis 1 in the light of the gospel, justifying a fresh reading of the creation account. Though not explicit, this is the logic of Augustine’s trinitarian reading of Genesis 1,⁴⁶ and it will be the logic behind my trinitarian reading as well. We do not know the Trinity from the opening chapter of the Bible, but in the light of the remainder of the Bible, we find the hints of Trinity inescapable.

We reach the same conclusion through a different route. Jesus said the substance of Scripture is the suffering and glory of the Christ (Lk 24). Every page of Scripture speaks of Jesus the Christ. And if all Scripture is about Jesus, then it is also about the Father of the incarnate Son and the Spirit by whose anointing Jesus is the Christ. Just as we search for Jesus on every page of Scripture, so we expect to find the other divine persons on every page. Even without the direct commentary of John 1 and other passages, a christological—that is, a true—reading of the creation account would necessarily yield a *trinitarian* reading.

Finally, and briefly: I say *plenior*; I actually mean *plenissimus*. I am after the fullest sense I can discover. I will squeeze everything I can out of textual features large and small. Thus I will suggest a radical reorientation of theology proper by emphasizing the theological, as well as textual, primacy of Genesis 1:1 (chap. 4), draw theological conclusions from the literary texture and the divine plurals of Genesis 1 (chap. 5), indulge in an extended numerical speculation to lay foundations for a “metaphysics of

⁴⁶Especially in *Literal Meaning of Genesis*.

Genesis” (chap. 6), and meditate on the echoes and re-echoes across the creation days to formulate an understanding of the Creator’s relationship to created time (chap. 7). My sources are eclectic, and I will frequently, tastelessly, mix theological genres and styles, shifting from tedious exegesis to flights of mystical speculation with little warning and no hesitation. It may appear that I believe I can find a fully developed trinitarian theology in Genesis 1. I do not. But I do believe the Bible is a single book and that we can only plumb the depths of its first chapter if we see it through the prism of every other chapter. And I believe the church’s creedal and theological tradition provides further resources to illumine the creation account.

Call it maximalism if you like. Call it a “kitchen sink” hermeneutic because I do not intend to leave out that crucial piece of kitchen gadgetry. For this reason, I do not offer a completed system with tidy, totalized, smoothed edges. The coherence I aim for is biblical, and I pick up whatever is at hand to illumine and fill out a scriptural metaphysics. *Creator* is more suggestive than systematic; it is a form of bricolage, though the bits and pieces form a whole, something akin to Irenaeus’s mosaic portrait of a beautiful prince.

I am prepared to have much of *Creator* dismissed as childish mythology. I relish the dismissal, for being childish puts me in the best theological company. All theologians *should* be, and the best theologians *are*, companions of the divine Child who calls us to follow him as little children. That is not a call to naiveté or innocence. It is a call to play at the edges of viper’s dens, heedless to our safety.⁴⁷ The methodological principle that has most consistently guided me over the decades is encapsulated in a little poem by G. K. Chesterton:

⁴⁷I learned this many years ago from Pastor Toby Sumpter.

Stand fast! And keep your childishness.
Read all the pendant's creeds and strictures,
But don't believe in anything
That can't be told in colored pictures.⁴⁸

⁴⁸G. K. Chesterton, "Lines Written in a Picture Book," *G. K. Chesterton Collected Works*, vol. 10: *Collected Poetry, Part I* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 304.

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