

# Truth: Metaphysical or Eschatological?

## The God of Parmenides and the God of Abraham

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At the heart of the Platonic legacy enshrined in the tradition of Western thought and culture is a metaphysical orientation to truth. By “metaphysical,” I refer to the general notion that reality is not primarily what we see around us, that is, the visible world that we perceive with our physical senses; rather, reality transcends or underlies the material universe, being both invisible and immaterial. And whereas the visible realm is “temporal,” locked into the categories of time and space, in which all things are continually appearing and disappearing, coming and going, being born, growing old, and dying, reality is “eternal,” the realm of pure Being, in which things unchangeably and immutably exist. The material world, then, consists only of appearances; the real world, on the other hand, of essences: things-in-and-of-themselves-as-they-really-are. Philosophically and theologically speaking, this metaphysical concept of reality has shaped the Western understanding of the terms “spirit,” “spiritual,” and “spirituality.” From a religious standpoint, in other words, the real world is not the material world that we see around us but the “spiritual” world that exists beyond us.

### **Metaphysics, Science and Theology**

It might appear as though modern science has long since forsaken this metaphysical notion of truth in favor of a strictly physical and material approach, known as the scientific method, utilizing the technology of empirical investigation. That this is not the case, however, is plain from the fact that much of what contemporary science “reveals” to us comes from a world just as invisible as Plato’s world of transcendent Forms, or Ideas,

which is the paradigm for metaphysics. Modern physics, for example, has been “revealing” for quite some time that what appears to us as matter — solid and concrete — is, in reality, energy; that if we could see any material object as it really is — in its essence — we would see a constant swirl of motion, as postmetaphysical philosopher G. B. Madison writes:

a mass of insubstantial, swarming atoms which I cannot see and cannot rest upon, for if I attempted to, I would be engulfed in the void of their immense interstices. Solidity vanishes into the ethereal realm of the purely intelligible which has as little to do with the sensible as did Plato’s ideal Forms. For modern science, the substance or reality of things consists, as it did for the Pythagoreans, in the numerical and the theoretical. . . . Metaphysics is alive and well and lives on in modern physics.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, a scientific description of matter “as-it-really-is” is not visible, evident or apparent to anyone. The invisible macrocosmic world of the philosophers has simply been replaced by the invisible microcosmic world of the scientists. To believe in that world is as much to place one’s faith in the words of scientists as to believe in a transcendent world is to place one’s faith in the words of most philosophers and theologians. In other words, scientific revelations can be equally as metaphysical as any revelations from philosophy or theology have ever been. The difference is that instead of talking about “spirit,” as have theologians and philosophers, scientists talk about “energy,” an energy that is no more visible than is spirit.

When it comes to the notion of truth, metaphysics, then, purports to reveal what is not perceptible to, and therefore not empirically verifiable by, the human senses. It purports to reveal Reality: things-as-they-really-are as opposed to things as they are commonly or variously perceived. When applied theologically, of course, metaphysics reveals God as He — or in Eastern versions of religious faith, as it — really is.

Trinitarianism is clearly a metaphysical construct in that it constitutes the claim to reveal God’s essential form: three Persons in one Being. The various uses of the term “substance” in the history of Trinitarian theology are clearly metaphysical in that the term “substance” signifies that which

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<sup>1</sup> G. B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 130.

underlies all outward manifestations, the unchanging essence of a thing, in this case, of God. By comparison, the Bible nowhere claims to reveal God's essential nature or being. Instead, the Bible tells us not what God is but what God is like: a king, a judge, a father, love, light, and other metaphors which come from our human frame of reference. Rather than a metaphysical revelation of God, the Bible is a metaphorical revelation, using metaphors not to inform us of what God is (which is beyond the powers of all but God Himself to conceive) but to persuade us to believe what God has said and to behave accordingly.

Christianity, in virtually all of its forms — Catholic, Protestant and sectarian — bears the marks of Platonic philosophy's impact, initially mediated through late first- and second-century Neo-Platonism and Gnosticism. The metaphysical revelation of the Trinitarian God which was produced by these influences and codified into orthodoxy in the fourth and fifth centuries has roots, however, which extend backward to a figure who preceded even Plato. The inventor of the metaphysical God, which eventually became the Trinitarian God, was the pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides.

### **The Gods of Parmenides and Abraham**

Parmenides was the first to posit the notion that reality is Being, that which exists, without motion or change. Since this is not the reality that humans perceive with their senses, he asserted that the perceptible world is an illusion, a matter only for the unreliable "opinions of mortals," as opposed to what he called "the motionless heart of well-rounded Truth."<sup>2</sup> For Parmenides, there could be no past or future because if something is not present, then it is not. That is to say, it does not and cannot exist. There can be no coming into Being or passing from Being because Being itself ever and always is; all there is, then, in terms of time, is now: the eternal present, the now that always is, the Being that always exists. Translated into religious terms: God. Plato subsequently adopted, refined, and elaborated Parmenides' metaphysical scenario, and four to five centuries later, Christian Neo-Platonists substituted the God of Parmenides for the God of Abraham in the Christian tradition.

Unlike Parmenides' God of the eternal present, however, the God of Abraham — the God of both Old and New Testaments — is the God of the

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<sup>2</sup> K. Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983, 42.

promised future. God is revealed in the Bible as a God of promise. The Bible is the history of the fulfillment of God's two-fold promise to Abraham: to make of him a great nation, the fulfillment of which is the subject of the Old Testament, and to bless all nations through him, the fulfillment of which is the subject of the New Testament (Gen. 18:17-18). The gospel proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles is the point of transition, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, from the fulfillment of God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation to the fulfillment of His promise to bless all nations through Abraham.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the God of Parmenides, then, who has allegedly been experienced in the immediacy of the present through the metaphysical contemplations of philosophers and mystics throughout the centuries, the God of Abraham is known only through the mediation of promise: Rather than being here now, in the eternal present, God is always coming, out of the promised future. The past fulfillments do not make Him a God of the past; instead, they certify that He is faithful to His promises and, therefore, lend assurance to the faith that He will indeed yet fulfill His ultimate promise (2 Cor. 1:18-20; Heb. 10:23; 11:11). Which is to say that when God's Messiah Jesus comes again, the kingdom of God, which is not yet a reality (and so, according to Parmenides, cannot ever exist), will become the new reality that will include a new time (now called "the age to come") and a new space ("new heavens and a new earth").

The very terms "eternity" and "eternal" have a questionable place in a biblical understanding of the God of Abraham. The traditional binaries of the temporal, or time-bound, and the eternal, or timeless, are Greek categories of thought appropriate only to the God of Parmenides: The temporal is the visible while the eternal is the invisible, but both are present realities; the difference is that while the temporal is perceived in terms of past, present and future, the eternal, because it transcends time, is only, always and ever the present.

As a result of the lordship of Parmenides' God over the mainstream of Christian theology, Christian eschatology was long ago transformed from the expectation of God's promised future into the experience of God's eternal present: That is to say, God's eternal present has intervened in human history in the death and resurrection of Christ and can be entered through faith in the gospel so that salvation becomes, first and foremost, a present experience rather than a future expectation.

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<sup>3</sup>Rom. 1:1-5; 15:8-12; 16:25-26; Gal. 3:6-9.

Consequently, the biblical categories of “present age” and “age to come,” as well as the end-time events connected with the coming of the kingdom of God, including the second coming of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead, and the day of judgment, have become virtually irrelevant addendums to the faith. In the biblical scenario, however, the age to come (the Greek adjective form of which is so often mistranslated “eternal”) is not a timelessly eternal present but the future time which will arrive when the present age comes to an end. The terms “eternal” and “eternity” are metaphysical terms which, thus, seem incompatible with the God whose home is the promised future.

### **Eschatological Truth**

All of this is to say that while the philosophical revelation of truth is metaphysical, the biblical revelation of truth is eschatological: Biblical truth is communicated in metaphorical terms because it reveals realities which will not exist until the end of the age and, therefore, for which we have no frame of reference. In short, whereas philosophy claims to reveal truth about the present, the Bible claims to reveal truth about the future. Biblical truth, then, is revealed in terms of the promise of God; all past events in the biblical witness are true with reference to fulfilled promise, which always points to the yet-to-be-fulfilled promise of the kingdom of God, just as the national promise of God to Abraham, fulfilled in the Old Testament nation of Israel, has always pointed to the promise of blessing to all nations. The Bible is, after all, not a divine dictionary or encyclopedia, God’s book of facts to give us a religious education. The Bible, rather, aims to persuade us to believe the promise of God and to behave accordingly.

Due to this orientation towards the future, the attention of the audience of the biblical witness, like the attention of the original hearers of Moses and the prophets and Jesus and the apostles, is always given to the future. The emotional quality of faith is always one of anticipation, always directed toward hope. While one reads in Scripture about God’s progressive fulfillment of His promise in the past — whether regarding its Old Testament fulfillment in the nation of Israel or the New Testament transition to its fulfillment for all nations through the resurrection of Jesus — the significance of these past fulfillments is always to direct one’s attention to its fulfillment in the future, which has been lit up, that is, revealed, in the gospel. The past fulfillments, of course, also serve to strengthen one’s persuasion as to the faithfulness of the God who promises.

This, it seems to me, is the meaning of Paul's contrast of "letter" with "spirit." The original hearers of the gospel were "in-spirit-ed" insofar as they believed God's promise and aligned their own futures with God's ultimate messianic future. The spiritual realities were those which God revealed as forthcoming, at the end of the age. The Judaizers, however, refused to let go of the past, as it was contained in the "letter" of the law. Their vision of the future was confined to a restoration of Israel's glorious past; they viewed the law as everlasting (as if a manifestation of God's eternal present) rather than as a temporary expedient connected to the national phase of the promise which God used to prepare His people for its international phase as revealed in the gospel. They even appear to have believed that the fulfillment of God's ultimate kingdom promise depended on their obedience to the law.

Obedience to the law had indeed been the way through which Israel was to express its faith in God's promise under the old covenant. With the resurrection of Messiah, however, the place of the law in the ongoing fulfillment of God's promise had been taken by the gospel: In the new covenant, faith in God's promise would be expressed not through obeying the law but through proclaiming the gospel in word and deed. On one hand, those who clung to the letter, as if it expressed something eternal and unchanging, would perpetuate the condemnation which befell Old Testament Israel for its unbelief regarding the promise. On the other hand, those who heard in the law its testimony to the promise, which had now been extended to all nations through the gospel, and continued to believe the promise, now found themselves led by the Spirit — that is, by the hope of life in the age to come — toward God's promised future. Thus, "the letter kills" because it enslaves one to the past (often in the guise of the eternal present) whereas "the spirit gives life" (2 Cor. 3:6) because it frees one to enter the promised future.

The continuing usurpation of the place of the God of Abraham in the Christian tradition by the God of Parmenides would be hard to overstate. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann writes:

Since the shaping of Christian dogmatics by Greek thought, it has been the general custom to approach the mystery of Jesus from the general idea of God in Greek metaphysics: the one God, for whom all men are seeking on the ground of their experience of reality, has appeared in Jesus of Nazareth — be it that the highest eternal idea of goodness and truth has found its most perfect

teacher in him, or be it that in him eternal Being, the Source of all things, has become flesh and appeared in the multifarious world of transience and mortality. The mystery of Jesus is then the incarnation of the one, eternal, original, true and immutable divine Being. This line of approach was adopted in the Christology of the ancient Church in manifold forms. Its problems accordingly resulted from the fact that the Father of Jesus Christ was identified with the one God of Greek metaphysics and had the attributes of this God ascribed to him. If, however, the divinity of God is seen in his unchangeableness, immutability, impassibility and unity, then the historic working of this God in the Christ event of the cross and resurrection becomes as impossible to assert as does his eschatological promise for the future.<sup>4</sup>

According to Moltmann, the God of Parmenides is ahistorical, taking the believer out of history into His metaphysical and eternal presence; the God of Abraham, on the other hand, roots the believer in history, in the hope of God's promised future. In short, the God of Parmenides is a God of presence, the God of Abraham a God of promise.

### **The Language of Faith and the Spirit**

This has weighty implications for one's understanding of faith and the knowledge of God. In the eternal kingdom of Parmenides' God, faith has come to mean an experience of the presence of God; in contemporary evangelical terms, "a personal relationship with God." This experience is described in terms of "knowing God" as opposed to merely "knowing about God." That is, the presence of God is allegedly experienced in a direct and immediate way that circumvents the mediation of language and thought. Faith, in biblical terms, however, is always understood as a thoughtful response to and experience of language: "Faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). The believed word — the gospel — mediates the knowledge of God. And the gospel is a word of promise: God, who has shown His faithfulness to His promise by raising Jesus from the dead, promises to and for all who believe a future resurrection into His everlasting kingdom.

The biblical definition of faith, as opposed to common religious definitions, concerns believing God's promise: "Now faith is the assurance of

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<sup>4</sup> J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993, 140.

things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). The “things not seen,” of which faith is the conviction, are not “things” which exist in the eternal present; rather, they are “things hoped for,” that is, “things” which do not yet exist, or exist only in the promised future.

If the knowledge of God comes through faith, and the object of faith is the promise of God, then it would seem to follow that the presence of God is located in His promise. To experience the presence of God, then, is to experience His promise, that is, His word, the gospel of His kingdom. This is another way of saying that through faith we enter the realm of hope: Believers enjoy a kind of pre-experience of God’s presence, rejoicing in hope and serving in love, both in response to the good news that God, who raised Jesus from the dead, will fulfill His ultimate promise when Jesus comes again.

While Christians experience the love of God externally through the works of service that they perform in one another’s lives, the love of God is experienced internally in the form of the resurrection-hope. While the promised age to come has not yet arrived, it has indeed dawned in the mind and heart of one who has understood and been persuaded of the good news that God raised Jesus from the dead. The blood of Jesus stands as the assurance that the day of judgment will be the day of salvation rather than the day of destruction for the community of faith. To believe the gospel is to believe God’s promise that just as He raised Jesus from the dead, He will raise believers of all nations from death to incorruptible life in His kingdom. To believe, therefore, is to experience hope, the mind-renewing and life-transforming resurrection-hope of the gospel.<sup>5</sup>

Understanding truth in terms of the God of promise has further implications for our understanding of the Spirit of God and spirituality. The term “spirituality” signifies for new age religious faiths much of what “personal relationship with God” signifies for popular evangelical Christianity: a direct and immediate experience of the presence of God. The Person of the Holy Spirit in popular Trinitarian Christianity is the agent of the believer’s personal relationship with God. Religious faiths in general use the term “spirit” and its various forms to signify the experiential element of religious faith, the element that transcends language and elevates one into the eternal present.

Biblically speaking, however, the Spirit is primarily associated with language: In the biblical narratives, the Spirit of God inspires the prophets

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<sup>5</sup> Rom. 12:2; 13:11-14; 2 Cor. 3:12-18; Col. 3:1-9; 1 John 3:1-3.



of God to speak the word of God. The word “spirit” literally means “breath,” making it a metaphorical rather than a metaphysical term: Just as human breath reveals human thought through speech, so the breath of God reveals the mind of God through the word of God. Spirit and word are as closely related as breath and voice: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63).

Rather than positing the coexistence of a material, temporal world with a spiritual, eternal world, as does a Platonized Christianity, the Bible constructs a line of time that stretches from the present age to the age to come, and associates the term “spiritual” with the latter. What is “spiritual,” once again, is unseen not because it exists in an eternal world that transcends this one but because it does not yet exist, except in God’s word of promise. What is spiritual is a matter of promise, of what has been spoken by the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17). And so, the Spirit — that is, God’s revelation about the future of His Messiah and His people in the gospel — is God’s “deposit on our inheritance” (Eph. 1:14) until the fulfillment of His promise is complete (and, thus, the Spirit conditions the aforementioned pre-experience of the presence of God). Likewise, the “spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:44) is not a metaphysical body but, rather, the eschatological body of the future, the body revealed in the gospel of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

The Spirit of God dwells in believers to the extent that they believe, that is, understand, are persuaded by (a linguistic transaction), the promise of God, the fulfillment of which is revealed in the gospel: The human spirit — which I understand to be the human capacity to hope — becomes one with the Holy Spirit when it grasps the hope of the gospel. From a biblical standpoint, to be “spiritual,” to practice “spirituality” is, through a growing understanding and deepening persuasion of the promise of God (which is to say, through faith), to live a life of hope and, consequently, of love.

### **Conclusion**

To say, then, that the biblical notion of truth is eschatological, as opposed to metaphysical, is to say that the Bible reveals truth not about being but about doing, specifically about what God has done and what God will do in terms of the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham. Eschatological truth does not disclose a transcendent world that exists out of reach of the senses, a Reality beyond perception or interpretation; instead, the eschatological truth of the Bible constitutes an interpretation of time-and-space events, matters of sensory perception for the flesh-and-blood

witnesses of the death and resurrection of Jesus, who bear witness to those events in the words of Scripture. While metaphysical truth is not subject to corroboration or verification, at least by the senses, eschatological truth, as revealed through the gospel, is corroborated and verified by the testimony of the witnesses of the risen Messiah: Their words confirm his identity as both the crucified Jesus and the coming Lord, who will fulfill the promise of the God of Abraham when he comes again.

Increasingly throughout the twentieth century, postmodern philosophers have been deconstructing the metaphysical assumptions and presuppositions that have been foundational to Western thought, including Western religious thought. In so doing, they have assumed that they were launching part of their assault on the Christian faith. The effect of their work, however, has been to undermine faith not in the God of Abraham (who remains, to a troubling extent, unheard of) but in the God of Parmenides. A philosophically influential tenet of postmodern theory is that language cannot be shown to refer to the presence of being, a concept that, for better or worse, threatens to dismantle the entire structure of the Western philosophical and religious tradition. If postmodernism constitutes the gradual undermining and eventual overturning of metaphysical “truth,” it also presents a golden opportunity for believers in the eschatological truth of the gospel to advance an understanding of the Christian God of promise that may yet prove persuasive to many thinking people who are seeking good reasons for faith, hope and love.