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<center>The Mythic Figure of God as Presented in the Bible</center>

What is the meaning of God? The answer varies widely according to each culture's

particular pantheon and the mythological accounts over which it presides. The answer according

to Christian mythology alone can differ from one interpretation of its pantheon to another. While

some mythologists consider the Christian pantheon as consisting of a singular supreme being,

commonly known as "God," others view it as a polytheistic system, crediting God the Father,

God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit as three distinctly separate deities. There are even

mythologists who would go so far as to say that the God of the Old Testament in the Bible is an

entirely different God than that of the New Testament, the argument being that the Old

Testament God is strict, demanding, and distant, whereas the New Testament God is gracious,

forgiving, and kind. In order to understand the meaning of God in the context of Christian

mythology, it is first necessary to properly determine who He is according to what the Bible

documents, not only in the stories told about Him but also in the commentaries made regarding

His character.

The first matter to investigate involves the confusion regarding the singularity or plurality

of deities amounting to God. Undoubtedly, the first and most prominent story in the Bible to

allow for this confusion is the account of creation. During the first five days of creation, God is

referred to as one entity and with singular pronouns: "God called the light Day, and the darkness

He called Night" (Gen. 1.5). However, when it comes time for God to create humans, the Bible

records, "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness'" (Gen.

1.26). The drastic shift in pronoun usage often prompts the question, "Who else is God referring

to?" when perhaps the correct question to ask is, "*What* else does 'God' refer to?" besides God as

the Father and Creator.

Genesis 1.2 potentially answers both questions: "And the Spirit of God was hovering

over the face of the waters." The Spirit of God obviously exists with God prior to the formation

of the world, and "God" and "the Spirit of God" are not used interchangeably in the account of

creation, so one might assume that the two are mutually exclusive. And yet, the questions posed

in the previous paragraph, concerning whether God and the Spirit of God make up two separate

deities as opposed to two entities of the same deity, remain unanswerable with a mere surface

reading of the creation myth alone. In the New Testament, Apostle John writes, "God is Spirit,

and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4.24). Apostle Paul also

writes to the church in Corinth, "Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is,

there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3.17). Despite the assumptions that an initial reading of the creation

myth may generate, the matter must be viewed in the context of Christian mythology as a whole,

which includes the writings of men, like the Apostles John and Paul, who made significant

contributions to Christian tradition, as documented in the New Testament. In light of these

commentaries, it appears as though God the Father, also referred to as "the Lord," and the Spirit

of God, also known as "the Holy Spirit," are understood in the Bible to exist as one and the same

deity, though they may embody different aspects of God's divinity.

While the declaration, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen.

1.26) only requires two subjects to justify the pronoun plurality, and Genesis does not refer to

any divine beings in the creation story besides God and the Spirit of God, the New Testament again provides necessary clarification. Particularly explicit through the Gospel of John, a third and final entity of God comes into play: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (John 1.1-3). Even as the Father and the Holy Spirit both amount to God, so does the Word also claim a place in the supernatural person of God. According to the Gospel of John, not only was the Word present during creation, which took place "[i]n the beginning" (Gen. 1.1), but apparently He also represents the creative force of God the Father by being the very vehicle for creation: "Then God *said* [spoke "the word"], 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Gen. 1.3) (emphasis added). Besides participating in creation "*with* God," it says in the Gospel of John that "the Word *was* God" (emphasis added). Again, just like the Spirit of God, the Word is presented as part of the singular deity of God, and not as His own.

As Apostle John elaborates in subsequent verses, however, the Word does not remain as "the Word" in the New Testament gospels or in Christian mythology as a whole: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1.14). This information introduces the figure of Jesus Christ, which the Word becomes through Mary's Immaculate Conception by the Holy Spirit, and whom God the Father calls his "Son" on more than one occasion. The first time occurs immediately following Jesus's baptism: "And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matt. 3.17). A similar moment occurs on the Mount of Transfiguration when Moses and Elijah appear before Jesus, Peter, James, and John: "[…] a bright cloud overshadowed them; and suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying,

'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.'" (Matt. 17.5). Together, the Word and

His manifestation as Jesus Christ conclude the apparent triplication of God's divine makeup.

The next issue that needs be determined is whether the God of the Old Testament and the

God of the New Testament are one and the same or whether they are in fact two different Gods,

based on their attributes in the respective texts. Again, God in the Old Testament is often seen as

something of a dictator, arbitrarily mandating dos and don'ts for the people and meting out harsh

punishments to those who disobey. For instance, some may consider God's issuing of the Ten

Commandments a considerably restrictive and unreasonable act, starting with the first two

statutes that He gives Moses on Mount Sinai: "You shall have no other gods before Me. You

shall not make for yourself a carved image—[…] you shall not bow down to them nor serve

them" (Exod. 20.3-5). The God of the Old Testament obviously holds little regard for the

principle of religious freedom. In fact, when God saw the Israelites worshipping a golden calf

that they had Aaron fashion for them, His reaction was anything but tolerant:

> And the LORD said to Moses, "Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him
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> out of My book. […] in the day when I visit for punishment, I will visit
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> punishment upon them for their sin." So the LORD plagued the people because
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> of what they did with the calf which Aaron made. (Exod. 32.33-35)

As opposed to the Old Testament God, the New Testament God seemingly has the

reputation for being a much more loving, gracious, and forgiving God, not having the "doom and

gloom" attitude of His presumed predecessor. Nevertheless, the New Testament in fact does not

shy away from condemning certain behaviors as sin, which Apostle Paul demonstrates in his

letters of instruction to the early Christian churches. Though God does not play a visible role in

either of the following two New Testament writings, Christian tradition views Apostle Paul as

both divinely called and inspired to teach "the gospel of God" (Rom. 1.1), and therefore he is

understood to be a mouthpiece for God's word and discernment. To the church of Galatia,

Apostle Paul writes a laundry list of "no-no's" reminiscent of the Ten Commandments:

> Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication,
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> uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts
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> of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness,
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> revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in
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> time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.
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> (Gal. 5.19-21)

Based on the same acts of disobedience outlined in his letter to the Galatians, Apostle Paul

addresses the immorality of a specific instance in the church at Corinth, where a man was

committing adultery with his own father's wife. Apostle Paul therefore admonishes the

Corinthian church, "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along

with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, deliver such a one to Satan for the

destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor. 5.4-5).

Ultimately, one can see God represented in both testaments as having rather strict expectations

for His people and a high level of commitment to punishing disobedience; the role of God as an

authoritarian ruler is not confined to the Old Testament and therefore does not allow for any

reason to suspect two separate deities.

Just as the presumed rigidity and austerity of the Old Testament God appears in both

sections of Christian Scripture, so does the loving kindness that is stereotypical of the New

Testament God. Although God the Father does not appear nearly as often in the New Testament

as in the Old Testament, He is expressed through the Son, Jesus Christ. Again, one must recall

that the Bible presents God as having three aspects to His divinity, one of them being His physical manifestation as Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Jesus Himself claimed, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14.9) and "I and My Father are one" (John 10.30). He even tells the Pharisees, "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also" (John 8.19). Considering God in both respects, one can see direct similarities between God the Son in the New Testament and God the Father in the Old Testament, especially in terms of portraying a loving and protective God.

During His ministry on earth, one of the ways that Christ referred to Himself was as "the good shepherd" (John 10.11). The good shepherd, Jesus explains, leads his sheep and keeps them safe. He even declares, "I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10.10). Moreover, the good shepherd is willing and ready to sacrifice himself for his sheep in order to protect them. Jesus develops the analogy even further, depicting the intimacy of His relationship with His people: "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (John 10.27-28).

Interestingly, in the same account where Jesus describes Himself as the good shepherd, He also indicates having inherited the role from God the Father: "My Father, who has given them [the sheep] to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand" (John 10.29). Whereas Jesus compares Himself to a shepherd mainly because of the shared attribute of self-sacrificial love, the Old Testament portrays God as a shepherd for His leadership and provision. During the Exodus, Moses constantly acknowledges God for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and directing them to Canaan: "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to

go by day and night" (Exod. 13.21). God also provided "bread from heaven" (Exod. 16.4) and

quail for the Israelites to eat (Exod. 16.13), and gave instructions to Moses for the procuring of

drinking water (Exod. 17.6). Though the theme of God as shepherd somewhat shifts from the

first half of the Bible to the latter half, God is ultimately represented as a caring, protective

shepherd in both testaments, dispelling the argument that love, kindness, and grace is limited to

the God of the New Testament. The aspects of God shared by these two accounts also further

dismisses the argument that the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament

must exist as separate beings for lack of commonality in Their attributes.

While there are separate references to and stories involving God the Father, God the Son,

and God the Holy Spirit, the three beings reconcile into one when viewed in a comprehensive

scope of the Bible. Furthermore, there remains no real basis for any supposition regarding the

Christian God's split-personality, as it were. The only question now left to answer is: What is

the meaning of God in the context of Christian mythology? In *The World of Myth*, David Adams

Leeming writes, "Gods are symbols of ultimate reality. Their existence provides us with a sense

of significance in an otherwise random universe. To say that there are gods or a God is to say

that we have meaning, a reason for being" (93). Leeming further contends that pantheons are

reflections of the value systems of their respective cultures (95). Mythologically speaking, in

order to understand the meaning of a particular god, one must look for "the mask" or metaphor

that he or she represents in that particular culture (123).

What then is behind the mask that God represents in Christian mythology? In terms of

creating significance, the belief in a God who creates human beings equates the sense of being

wanted, a very basic human desire. The Bible claims that God created all things for His pleasure

(Rev. 4.11). In other words, God created human beings because He desired to have a

relationship with them. What's more, starting with the provision of fruit for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Christian mythology propagates the concept of a God who cares for His people and provides for their needs. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells the people, "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' […] For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (6.31-32). Essentially, humans generate personal significance through their relationship to God.

As a monotheistic pantheon, having one god is an extraordinarily defining characteristic for a nation or people. According to Rodney Stark in *One True God*, "[…] in conceptions of One God is the concept of One True God—which provides a potent basis for intense solidarity and for equally intense conflict" (34). Stark also adds that with One True God comes "the desire, indeed the duty, to spread knowledge of the One True God" (35). In this light, one could conclude that by having One True God, those that adhere to Christian mythology create meaning for themselves, not just in knowing Truth, but in knowing Truth with others, fulfilling the sociological need to identify oneself with a particular group. In addition, believing in One True God creates a sense of purpose, as Stark points out the natural inclination, even drive, to then share Truth with others. Again in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus directs His disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you" (28.19-20). One True God gives human beings purpose in life.

In the preface to his book, *God and the Creative Imagination*, Paul Avis poses the question, "How can we envisage God, who is beyond all human imagining?" Rather than considering the ways that God reveals Himself to humans, as is the tendency of theologians, Avis suggests examining what humans do "to express the truth of God" (vii). Truth being a

relative term, Avis echoes Leeming's stance that God is merely a "[symbol] of ultimate reality"

(Leeming 93). This being the case, what is ultimate reality for Christians? Having a God who is

Father, Savior, and Spirit respectively addresses the realities of having an origin, needing

redemption, and desiring an eternal future. Finally, the three aspects of God combine to form a

God who remains somewhat mysterious and even incomprehensible to human reason. Perhaps if

the deity of God were small enough to fit into human understanding, He would not be big

enough for man to acknowledge as God. Therefore, a bit of mystery must remain, even in the

Christian "[symbol] of ultimate reality."

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