



NONE GREATER

THE UNDOMESTICATED
ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

MATTHEW BARRETT

FOREWORD BY FRED SANDERS



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To Georgia.

“But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.”

1 SAMUEL 5:4

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Foreword

Usually when theologians find out they were wrong about something, they admit it readily enough. But then they cover their tracks. They revise their views in light of the evidence, adopt the correct views, and from then on simply teach and talk as if they had always held these new, improved views. They may have taken a journey out of confusion to get to the truth, but once they arrive, they only tell about the destination. That's fair enough: what we want from theologians is a description of the land of truth.

The best thing about Matthew Barrett's book *None Greater* is that he doesn't wipe out his own footprints. He retraces them and takes us along for the journey. And it is a strange journey of discovery, because what Barrett discovered was the God he already knew. He had been praising God, trusting God, serving God, studying God in his Word, teaching true things about God, and praying to God all along. But somehow, at some point, it dawned on him that there was something unreal, incomplete, and inadequate in the way he had become accustomed to thinking about God.

This is where Barrett's journey intersects the journeys of so many of us raised in the Christian faith. Focusing on a preselected

subset of things we like to remember about God (his mercy, intimacy, concern for us, attention to us, love for us), we let our thoughts about God orbit around that familiar center. We grow comfortable with a certain set of reassuring, familiar, and cozy divine attributes. There are no sheer cliffs, dizzying heights, or fathomless abysses in the doctrine of God we let ourselves settle into. It's as if we have a doctrine of God that gets everything right except that it accidentally leaves out the sheer "godness" of God. But that means it gets everything wrong.

That is the shock that Barrett's book captures: Meeting the God you thought you knew, and being shocked by his sheer godness. God is greater than he thought God was! Extending that moment of shock into a whole book, Barrett explores all the divine attributes that we are so tempted to diminish, downplay, avoid, or ignore. Perfection, aseity, simplicity, immutability, impassibility, eternity, and all of the "omni-" attributes come parading by as we learn to confess a higher, more classical, and more biblical doctrine of God.

The main discovery Barrett records in this book is the discovery that God is greater, but there is another discovery that accompanies it: theology is hard. Theology is hard because once you realize how much greater God is—that than which nothing greater can be conceived, in the Anselmian ways of saying it—you realize how much harder God is to talk about. The problem cannot be overcome simply by studying theology books and learning some new, more technical vocabulary. Most readers will in fact pick up a few helpful new words from this book, since words like "aseity" are not exactly household words, and words like "simplicity" have a special meaning in theology. But picking up those terms, and using them to say more of the right things about God, is not enough. These words and concepts of the classical Christian doctrine of God are just markers along the way to reversing some deep-seated habits of thought. Those habits of thought mostly start out with a sentiment like "If I were God . . ." We are easily lulled into a

style of theology that starts from ourselves and imagines some ways in which God must be like that, but bigger and better. I feel sad when I am rejected, so God must feel even more rejected, but without acting out because of it. I need to be loved, so God must need to be loved even more, but also somehow he must be able to accept when he isn't. It's possible to take statements like these and nuance them enough, or hedge them with some biblical principles, or rule out gross errors, so that we end up with a decent theology of a respectable God. But there is an underlying problem that will keep generating errors every time we let down our guard. The underlying problem is a theological style that, even in its reading of Scripture, works up from us to God.

With *None Greater*, Barrett is determined to reverse that direction. He has learned that the proper path of theology is to follow the revelation of God from above to below instead, and he wants to bring readers along with him on this journey. It requires some truly counterintuitive moves, because we really have to get outside of ourselves to hear the message of God's perfection and blessedness. And it requires us to pay more attention to some of the major theological witnesses of the great tradition of Christian thought than we may be accustomed to do. That's because many of these older voices—Athanasius with his shocked reaction to Arianism, Augustine with his autobiographical *Confessions*, Anselm with his book-length meditative prayer—also wrote as pilgrims who had been surprised by the godness of God. So there is plenty of company on the journey that Barrett invites readers to join him on. What matters most, though, is to start the journey. What matters is to join the company of those who are permanently shocked by the sheer godness of the God we thought we knew.

Fred Sanders
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Preface

Fill the House

For my own part, I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that “nothing happens” when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.

C. S. LEWIS, “ON THE READING OF OLD BOOKS”

I have often lamented that there are very few books on the attributes of God written for those in the church in a style that is clear and accessible yet uncompromising and rigorous. While stacks of books invite the scholarly student to pick up and read, the churchgoer has little opportunity to dive headfirst into the deep things of God. Sadly, they turn to popular devotional literature to feed a spiritual hunger that only theology can satisfy.

Is it any wonder that our churches have a big heart for ministry but look almost anemic when asked about the big God we claim to worship?

To make matters worse, that gaping hole is all too eagerly filled by liberal theologians. The last two centuries have demonstrated that the modern and postmodern person is quick to substitute a God who is like us, a God we can domesticate, for the high view of God affirmed by figures like Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. The parable of the unclean spirits applies: when bad theology is cast out by one generation but not replaced with a substitute by the next, the home of Christian theology is left empty. When that bad spirit of theology returns and finds the home empty, it brings with it seven more unclean theologies. The last state is worse than the first (Matt. 12:45). Such is our heritage.

But it can change.

This book is meant to *fill the house* with good theology proper, the type that will keep the demons away for good. That means dispensing with the modern theologian's agenda to create a God in our own image, a God whose immanence has swallowed his transcendence, a God that can be controlled by the creature because he is not that different from the creature. But it also means filling the house with a biblical understanding of God as one who is, as Isaiah said, "high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1), whose attributes remain undomesticated. He is the God Jeremiah confessed, saying,

There is none like you, O Lord;
You are great, and your name is great in might.
(Jer. 10:6)

There is none greater than this God, not because he is merely a greater version of ourselves but because he is nothing like ourselves. Only a Creator not to be confused with the creature is capable of stooping down to redeem those who have marred his image. Our "situation would surely have been hopeless," exclaims

John Calvin, “had the very majesty of God not descended to us, since it was not in our power to ascend to him.”¹

All that to say, I’ve written this book not for scholars (though I hope many scholars will read it) but instead for churchgoers, pastors, and those beginning students who have yet to pick up a book that takes them into the classical view of God. Sincerely, I hope this book will be passed around among the people of God so that churches of tomorrow will be fortified against those who might cleverly attempt to fill our theological house with a theology proper foreign to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

To that end, I’ve tried to write this book in a way that is clear and accessible. I have provided a glossary at the end of the book to help readers understand terms and concepts as they work through the book’s arguments. I am a strong believer in divine simplicity, so the attribute discussed in one chapter is always related to the attributes in every other chapter. The glossary will assist the reader with terms and concepts even before they have been fully addressed in any given chapter.

I am, of course, truly grateful to many. I must thank Brian Vos, who first approached me about writing a book on the attributes of God for Baker Books. I will admit, I was unsure at first. Writing a popular-level book in a way that is accessible and clear but on a subject as intimidating as the doctrine of God felt a little like trying to climb Sinai as it quaked and smoked. I have found myself hiding in the cleft of the rock with Moses, humbly seeking to know who God is by means of his mighty works and words but without so arrogantly assuming I can see the glory of his essence. While I was writing this book, R. C. Sproul went to be with the Lord. Brian encouraged me to further study Sproul, one so gifted at articulating the complexity of theology in a way the churchgoer could embrace.

I am also indebted to the sharp editorial eye of James Korsmo, who helped smooth out the rough edges so that the arguments and prose were as lucid as possible. I should also like to thank

some of my students—Ronni Kurtz, Sam Parkison, and Joseph Lanier—for reading the book ahead of time.

I am especially grateful to Jason Allen, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Jason Duesing, provost of MBTS, for their support as my family transitioned to Kansas City. Not only did they ensure I had time to write this book, but their excitement to have me teach theology to students has inspired me to excel in scholarship for the church. It is a joy to be on their team.

As always, my wife, Elizabeth, has been my bulwark. What Katie was to Luther, Elizabeth is to me. In the midst of creating a home life that is full of joy and happiness, she never tires of theological conversations. I struggle at times to imitate the lowliness of Christ, but such humility characterizes Elizabeth's spirit daily. She genuinely loves others as Christ does, and no one knows that more personally than her children.

I dedicate this book to my daughter, Georgia. She is a quiet spirit. When she talks I listen. Her gentleness must have come from her heavenly Father. I pray this book shows you something of his beauty so that you are drawn ever closer to his Son by his Spirit.

Matthew Barrett
Kansas City, 2018

Introduction

Surprised by God

You are clothed with splendor and majesty.

PSALM 104:1

The transcendent, majestic, awesome God of Luther and Calvin . . . has undergone a softening of demeanor.

MARSHA WITTEN, *All Is Forgiven*

“Aslan is a lion—*the* Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh!” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he—quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” . . .

“Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. . . . “Who said anything about safe? ’Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

C. S. LEWIS, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*

An Awakening

I fell in love twice when I was in college. The first time I fell in love was when I met my wife, Elizabeth, as a first-year university student outside the cafeteria in sunny Los Angeles. It’s hard to

believe, but we've been married thirteen years now, and yet I remember the day we first met as if it were yesterday.

Everything happened backward. Valentine's Day was all too quickly approaching, and she had promised her roommate she would find her a date . . . and fast. Like most freshmen, I was clueless, but apparently Elizabeth had decided that date was me. As my friends later told me, for the next two weeks she stalked me, making sure I was a good fit for her roommate. Finally, one day she worked up the nerve to introduce herself to me for the first time. I had just walked out of the cafeteria and was startled by the sudden "hello" from a terribly pretty freshman girl. For the next hour we talked, but she had decided I was not a good fit for her roommate after all. Instead, I was just the right fit for her! Long story short, her roommate had to get another date, and I showed up with flowers at Elizabeth's door that Valentine's Day.

That same year, however, I fell in love a second time. No, it wasn't with another girl. It was with a book, as nerdy as that sounds. As a new student at a Christian university, Elizabeth was enjoying her theology classes. One day she asked me whether I had read any of the books she was reading. Embarrassed, I coughed up a no. Here was the girl I wanted to impress, and she apparently knew more about theology than I did. Unaware of my humiliation, Elizabeth began sharing how much she had learned about the doctrine of grace, for example, and how she was wrestling with the big questions surrounding the Christian faith, like the mystery between divine sovereignty and free will and the problem of evil.

My curiosity was sparked.

A few days later I stumbled across a beat-up and abandoned copy of John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* outside the school cafeteria. For the next several days I couldn't sleep. I was glued to this book. I'd never read anything like it before. Sure, I had grown up in a Christian home. And yes, I had gone to church every week to hear the Bible taught. I had even read many Christian books as a young believer. But this book was different. Why?

Calvin articulated so clearly and profoundly the majesty of God. With eyes freshly peeled, no longer was I “studying” God—as the label “theology” sometimes communicates. No, I was meeting the *living* God. That semester I had embarked on a mission to *know* God himself like I’d never known him before. I may have read my Bible for years and been a devoted Christian, but now a window—a door, really—was swung open wide for me to behold the glory of God like never before.

That year, the more I learned about God, the more I had to admit just how little and insignificant I was next to this big God. While the culture told me that God was just a bigger, better version of ourselves, the God I was discovering was one nothing like humans. Like never before, I resonated with Calvin’s confession: “Man is never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God’s majesty.”¹ Much like Job, the more I fathomed “God’s wisdom, power, and purity,” the more overwhelmed I became, especially in light of my own “stupidity, impotence, and corruption.”² Once I was sobered by God’s majesty, his infinite glory, supremacy, and perfection suddenly beamed bright, like the sun’s warm rays after a merciless, icy winter. The brightness of his divinity had blinded me, yet ironically, I could now see his beauty better than before.

Little did I know that I would undergo yet a further awakening to God’s glory that summer during a memorable camping trip.

A Further Awakening

Camping really is the hallmark family adventure. Sleeping in the great outdoors with the stars staring down. Roasting marshmallows and telling ghost stories at night next to a crackling fire. Catching that giant bass with just a worm on your hook. Camping is where memories are made.

Except in my experience, camping can be a total nightmare. I remember the first time my wife and I went camping after we had been married for several years. The mosquitoes had decided to hold their family reunion on our campsite. The first morning, we woke up ready for a hearty breakfast only to realize we had forgotten the pancakes, syrup, eggs, and bacon. And then came the heat. It was so hot I couldn't sleep. Apparently our one-year-old daughter agreed and decided she would let the entire campground know she was an unhappy camper, disgruntled with Mom and Dad's decision to leave the comforts of home (especially air-conditioning). At 3 a.m., we could take it no longer. We threw everything in the back of the car and headed home, defeated.

Despite my recent history of camping disasters, I do have fond memories from when I was growing up of moving from site to site in our old station wagon. I enjoy the stillness of a lake in the morning mist or the gentle breeze on a mountaintop after a rigorous hike, and there are few moments better to reflect on the character of God.

After leaving home and going to college, I tried to keep up the camping tradition. That first summer, I was invited to join my future in-laws, and it was memorable: French toast in the mornings, followed by waterskiing in the afternoons. Believe it or not, that was not the highlight of the trip, as much as I loved maple syrup and skiing at twenty miles per hour with the wind in my face. The highlight came one quiet morning when I had woken up much earlier than everyone else. I had just been given a copy of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. It was a little paperback that I had accidentally dropped in a dog's water bowl the day before. The book was swollen up like a blowfish, so I almost threw it away. For some reason I kept it, and that dewy morning I sat down under the light of the sunrise to give Augustine a try. My life would never be the same.

Here was a man who had deep struggles with sin, fighting his flesh until he finally surrendered his life to God and trusted in

AUGUSTINE

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) was steeped in Manichaean philosophy as an unbeliever, and this North African’s troubled conscience was restless until he discovered that only Christianity could answer the questions he struggled to untangle. You can read about his conversion in his *Confessions*, perhaps the most famous Christian autobiography in history, though atypical of biographies, grounded as it is in theological prayers that say much about the character of God. Augustine would be embroiled in controversy throughout his career. Against the Pelagians, for example, Augustine defended the doctrine of original sin, demonstrating that humanity’s inherent depravity necessitates a grace that will powerfully and effectually grant humans new spiritual life, resulting in conversion. Against the Arians in the West, Augustine defended the full deity of Christ, and he went on to articulate a doctrine of the Trinity that is still discussed and debated today. For our purposes, it is Augustine’s reflections on the ever-so-delicate balance between divine transcendence and divine immanence that will prove enlightening.

Christ. Augustine would one day look back and retell the story of his conversion. But *The Confessions* is no mere autobiography; it’s a rich portrayal of God, one that comes in the form of countless prayers. As I took in the beauty of the lake’s navy blue, I suddenly encountered a prayer that opened my eyes to divine beauty I had never seen before:

Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new and “leading” the proud “to be old without their knowledge” (Job 9:5, Old Latin version); always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need, supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and

bringing to maturity, searching even though to you nothing is lacking: you love without burning, you are jealous in a way that is free of anxiety, you “repent” (Gen. 6:6) without the pain of regret, you are wrathful and remain tranquil. You will a change without any change in your design. You recover what you find, yet have never lost. Never in any need, you rejoice in your gains (Luke 15:7); you are never avaricious, yet you require interest (Matt. 25:27). We pay you more than you require so as to make you our debtor, yet who has anything which does not belong to you? (1 Cor. 4:7). You pay off debts, though owing nothing to anyone; you cancel debts and incur no loss. But in these words what have I said, my God, my life, my holy sweetness? What has anyone achieved in words when he speaks about you? Yet woe to those who are silent about you because, though loquacious with verbosity, they have nothing to say.³

Carefully differentiating between the Creator and the creature, Augustine is like an acrobat walking the tightrope.⁴ Yes, God is immanent (“intimately present”), but he remains transcendent and incomprehensible (“deeply hidden”). Yes, he effects change in the world (“changing all things”), but he never changes in himself (“immutable”). Yes, he creates and renews, but he himself is timelessly eternal (“never new, never old”). Yes, he nurtures others, but he is never one in need of nurture. Yes, he brings the world into maturity, but he never matures, nor is he ever in need of reaching his potential or being activated; he is maximally alive, pure act (“always active”), never changing (immutable). Yes, he loves, but always impassibly (“you love without burning”). Yes, he is jealous, but his jealousy, unlike human jealousy, is never desperate or impotent (being “free of anxiety”). Yes, he pours out judgment on the wicked, but never as a capricious God (“[you] remain tranquil”), his judgment always metered by his righteousness. And yes, he redeems, paying our debt, but only because he owes debt to no one, being a God of absolute aseity (“owing nothing to anyone”).

Not explicitly stated, but quietly interwoven throughout Augustine's prayer, is a foundational premise: *the attributes sing in harmony*. While simplicity—the belief that God is not made up of parts, but he *is* his attributes (see chap. 5 and the glossary)—is never mentioned in Augustine's prayer, it is infused throughout. Augustine not only balances God in himself with how God relates to his creation, but he never partitions one attribute from another, believing each to illuminate the other. In such illumination, we step back and marvel at the perfection of God's one, undivided essence. "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth" (Ps. 50:2).

After reading Augustine's prayer again and again, I put down the bloated book, looked out at the peaceful horizon, and felt perplexed. Why had I not learned of *this* God before? He was so . . . big, much bigger than I had been taught. Sure, I knew the basics: God is Creator. God is Lord. God is love. But never had I thought about God's perfections like Augustine had. To be honest, some of them I had never considered before. Part of me felt frustrated, too. How could I be a Christian for so long, have studied the Bible for so many years, and been in church so regularly, and yet never have heard about attributes like simplicity, aseity, impassibility, and others? Nevertheless, I was simultaneously overwhelmed by joy. With Augustine by my side, I reread the Scriptures and saw these attributes on every page of the Bible. How could I have missed them before? They were everywhere. Although I had known God for years, in that moment I was completely caught off guard. I was surprised by God.

In the months ahead, I kept returning to Augustine's prayer. Except, as I did so there was one phrase that I just couldn't escape: God is, Augustine observes, "perfection of both beauty and strength." It's the word "perfection" that especially haunted me. What did it mean? And why would Augustine use it to refer to God's many attributes?

In the years ahead, the haunting would grow louder.

Haunted by the Perfect Being

I was slow to admit it, but the fact that I had been surprised by God in this way meant my life had to change. I took just about every theology class I could when I returned from that unforgettable camping trip. I had to know more about this God that Augustine described, especially that word “perfection.”

In the years ahead, the smoke started to clear, until finally it all started to make sense. But this time it wasn’t Augustine who opened my eyes; it was Anselm. If Augustine was my first awakening to this God, Anselm was my second. I had read handfuls of popular, contemporary Christian books about God, but none of them took God as seriously as Anselm. He asked questions that no one else was asking. The central question was this: Is God the most perfect being? There it was, that word again: “perfect.” Anselm had a way of getting at this concept of perfection by asking whether God is someone than whom none greater can be conceived.⁵ If he is, then he must be the most perfect being conceivable. And if he is the most perfect being conceivable, then certain perfect-making attributes—or perfections—have to follow, perfections like infinitude (chap. 3), aseity (chap. 4), simplicity (chap. 5), immutability (chap. 6), impassibility (chap. 7), and timeless eternity (chap. 8), perfections that shield God from being crippled by limitations, perfections that ensure he remains the most perfect, supreme, and glorious being.

That explained everything. The reason I had not come into contact with the type of attributes Augustine had described was that no one ever introduced God to me as the *perfect* being, someone than whom none greater can be conceived. As I reflected on my own journey, it was obvious that God had always been introduced into conversations in a very *experiential* way: love is a common human experience, so God must be a God of love; mercy is a commendable virtue, so God must be a God of mercy; and so on. Thinking about God was always from the bottom up—that is, from my experience to who God is. But with the help of Augustine

ANSELM

An Italian by birth, Anselm (1033–1109) lived his early years as an unbeliever, taking after his father, though his mother was a follower of Christ. When he was converted, Anselm took a monastic vow and eventually traveled to England, where he was appointed archbishop of Canterbury. Over the course of his career, Anselm wrote some of the most important works on theology, books like *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*). For our purposes, Anselm’s *Monologion* and *Proslogion* are especially relevant. The latter is his famous argument for the existence of God. Most inspiring is Anselm’s belief that God is “something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought.”^a What many fail to remember is that Anselm’s argument for the existence of God was but one part of his contribution. From that basic premise in Latin—*id quo maius cogitari nequit*, or “that than which it is impossible to think anything greater”^b—Anselm demonstrated, through logical rigor, that certain great-making attributes *must* follow. Even though later thinkers, some as colossal as Thomas Aquinas, took issue with Anselm’s ontological argument, nevertheless they too saw an unbreakable chain from God’s perfection to the rest of his attributes. Our treatment of the divine attributes will be indebted to Anselm’s argument, and our attitude throughout this book will be that of Anselm’s, one of humility before the infinite Holy One. It will be an attitude of faith seeking understanding. As Anselm prayed near the start of his *Proslogion*, “I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand.”^c

^a Anselm, *Proslogion* 2 (*Major Works*, 87).

^b Anselm, *Proslogion* 2; the translation is from Hart, *Experience of God*, 117.

^c Anselm, *Proslogion* 1 (*Major Works*, 87).

and Anselm, that approach now seemed dangerous, always flirting with the possibility of creating a God in our own image, always defining God’s attributes according to our own limitations.

What was so different about the God of Augustine and Anselm was that they first thought of God as one who is *not* like us. They started from the top (God) and then worked their way down (to humanity). They moved from the Creator to the creature. And this approach seemed far more aligned with the way the biblical authors approached God. As David says, “For with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light” (Ps. 36:9).

Being surprised by God changed my entire perspective and approach to God, and for the better. It is my hope that you will be surprised by God too.

One Core Conviction

This is a book about the attributes of God. But it is probably unlike any book you’ve read before on the attributes of God. Most books on the subject address one attribute and then another and then another. But it is unclear how these attributes relate to one another and whether they all stem from a foundational belief about God.

This book is different. Not only do I believe each and every attribute is key to each and every other attribute in God, but I am convinced that we can only understand God’s attributes in all their glory if such attributes originate from one core conviction: *God is someone than whom none greater can be conceived.*

Today, oddly enough, that core conviction is restricted to apologetics, specifically arguments for the existence for God. Anselm meant it to be far more, a conviction that sets a trajectory for how we understand the attributes of God.⁶ With that core conviction in mind, the chapters of this book revolve around this central question: *What must be true of God if he is the most perfect being?*⁷ If God is someone than whom none greater can be conceived, then certain great-making perfections *must* follow. His perfections are only truly perfections if they are great-making perfections.

Identifying those great-making perfections is our primary mission. But if your experience is anything like mine, then you will be surprised by God too, shocked to discover attributes central to who God is yet never talked about within the doors of the church.

Ancient Roots: The Undomesticated God of Our Fathers

Many of the great-making perfections mentioned by Augustine above are terribly unpopular in our own day. Modern and contemporary Christian thought has either despised them or neglected them altogether, preferring instead a God who is *like us* rather than distinct from us and above us. As a result, God has been domesticated. Nevertheless, the greatest thinkers in the history of the church affirmed these attributes, understood them to be rooted in Scripture itself, and believed that unless they characterize God, he cannot be the most perfect being, the one to whom we owe all glory, honor, and praise.

That is both good and bad news. It is bad news because it means we will have to embark on a quest that most today are not taking. The road ahead has not been paved in a very long time; clearing brush will be part of the job description. It is good news because though few contemporaries are coming with us, the journey is an ancient one. Like the walnut tree in my front yard, this book has roots deep and wide.

If you've ever read John Bunyan's famous allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, then you know that picking the right friends to travel with can be the difference between reaching the celestial city and not. Friends can corrupt us, or they can lead us home. Over the years I've made a handful of friends who can lead us down the right path to knowing God. They are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination, but they have stood the test of time, proving to be faithful to the revelation God has given in Scripture. They're not

only faithful but insightful. Isn't this true with old friends? They tend to ask questions that those in our age neglect.

So who are these old friends who will show us the way forward when dark storms blind us from seeing the way ahead? They will be introduced along the way, but I like to call them the A-team: Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas. We will add other "greats" to this team—Puritans like Stephen Charnock, and Dutch theologians like Herman Bavinck. But all those additional friends tend to depend on this A-team. Their picture of God has sometimes been referred to as "classical theism." Call it what you want; I am persuaded—and I hope you will be too by the end of this book—that the God of classical theism is simply the God of the Bible.

We will invite the A-team to talk to us, and we will listen as they warn us of ditches on the side of the road and inform us of hidden gardens to enjoy while we refresh. At times, our friends will even talk to each other, complementing each other, even building off each other. The goal (their goal) is not merely to help us see the way ahead but to lead us all the way home, back to the one who is the most perfect being. It's a quest each of them has ventured before us, and the writings they have left behind were written to guide pilgrims, like you and me.

Traveling with friends is always a risk. Will they help us persevere along the way that is hard but leads to life, or will they woo us to the way that is easy but leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13–14)? The risk involved reminds us that any friend is only as good as they are true to Scripture, our final and only infallible authority. For there we hear the voice of the one, true, and living God. Our friends from the past will add their voices of support or caution throughout this book, but the ultimate voice to be heard is the voice of God himself. From beginning to end, therefore, the Scriptures will have pride of place, informing our every move. "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). Our roots will be as ancient as Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, and Paul.

Trinity and Attributes

One last introductory word must be mentioned before we begin our pilgrimage. This is a book about God's attributes, not a book about the Trinity. To incorporate something more than a superficial understanding of the Trinity (which is usually necessary since the Trinity is one of the deepest mysteries of the faith!) would take us beyond the parameters of this book, requiring another book altogether.

Nevertheless, I strongly believe that the attributes and the Trinity are not unrelated. The God whose attributes we are describing is none other than the Triune God. That said, at key points throughout the book we will inevitably connect our discussion of the attributes to the three persons of the Godhead. For the three persons fully and truly share the one, undivided essence, and as we will learn in our chapter on simplicity, the attributes of God are not only synonymous with one another but identical with the essence of God.

So while we cannot indulge in a full treatment of the Trinity (as tempting as that would be), the Triune God will be the fabric of everything we say.

From Theology to Doxology

A. W. Tozer once said, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."⁸ If Tozer is right, then knowing God, as he has made himself known, is at the very center of our identity. Each and every one of us has been made in God's own image and, as John Calvin liked to say, has a sense of divinity within. In that light, the Christian life really is a quest for the truth about God, a pilgrimage that should lead us into a personal encounter with the living God. Naturally we have a desire, even a hunger, to understand God better, to know what to expect from him, and to conform our thoughts to his will. As

Augustine so famously prayed, “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”⁹

On our pilgrimage together, we will go back to the Scriptures in order to understand who God is. The God of the Bible is a God who is not silent. He has spoken and told us what he is like. In doing so, the Creator and Lord of the universe has invited us to know him and enjoy him forever. Our goal is not to walk away with mere knowledge. Rather, this knowledge of God is meant to lead us into worship. Contrary to popular caricatures, doctrine is always meant to lead to doxology, and nowhere is that truer than when we study the *doctrine of God*. As Paul Helm says, “In the Christian theological tradition metaphysics”—the study of God’s being or essence—“is but a prelude to worship.”¹⁰ Our aim, ultimately, is to know God’s perfections and in so doing learn what it means to actually know God in a saving way. Only then will our affections for God be kindled, as Augustine says.

But I must warn you at the start: I will not be interested in wasting your time with a God who is tame and domesticated, a God whose divinity is humanized. That may be the God of popular culture, but it is not the God of the Bible. The God of biblical revelation is the God Isaiah saw, the one who is high and lifted up (Isa. 6:1), possessing all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18), and yet one who is simultaneously with us and for us as our Savior (Matt. 1:21–23).

Let the pilgrimage begin.

1

Can We Know the Essence of God?

Incomprehensibility

He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.

1 TIMOTHY 6:15-16

Truly, Lord, this is the inaccessible light in which You dwell. For truly there is nothing else which can penetrate through it so that it might discover You there. Truly I do not see this light since it is too much for me; and yet whatever I see I see through it, just as an eye that is weak sees what it sees by the light of the sun which it cannot look at in the sun itself. . . . O supreme and inaccessible light.

ANSELM, *Proslogion*

He must have been petrified.

Most likely in the fetal position, he curled up behind a rock. Knees shaking, palms sweaty, throat dry, he prepared himself to see that which no one had dared to see before.

He must have wondered whether he would live to tell others about it. Perhaps not. No one would believe him even if he did.

The man hiding behind the rock was Moses. And he was about to see the back of God.

How could this be? For as Moses knew all too well, God is incomprehensible; no one can know—or see!—the very essence of God and live.

Face-to-Face with the Almighty

If there was anyone who had God’s ear, anyone who could sit within God’s inner counsel, anyone who could petition God on behalf of his people, anyone who could dare to enter into the innermost council of the Triune God, it was Moses, God’s chosen leader and mediator. Few prophets, kings, and priests had God’s attention like Moses did.

After liberating Israel from Egypt, Moses delivers the people to Mount Sinai. It is there that God will meet with Moses one-on-one to give him the stone tablets, the law by which Israel is to live. Tragically, Israel commits the most horrific of sins: idolatry. The people create a golden calf and bow down in worship, saying this is the god who has delivered them from Egypt (Exod. 32). Moses has to intercede on their behalf: “You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the **LORD**; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin” (32:30).

When Moses is told to depart and take the people to the land God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, God still promises to drive out Israel’s enemies in the land. But there is a catch: no longer will God go with Israel, due to her sin. “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (33:3). When the people hear “this disastrous word,” they mourn (33:4), but Moses intercedes once more. With Moses alone the

Lord speaks “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (33:11). These “face to face” conversations take place in the tent of meeting as the pillar of cloud—representing the presence of God—descends on the tent.

Please Show Me Your Glory

In one encounter, Moses expresses his reservation at entering into the land without the Lord. “If your presence will not go with me, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people? Is it not in your going with us, so that we are distinct, I and your people, from every other people on the face of the earth?” (Exod. 33:15–16). After listening to Moses, the Lord agrees to go with the people, but he makes it very clear that it is because Moses has “found favor” in his “sight” (33:17). Moses is the one the Lord knows “by name” (33:17). The relationship Moses has with the Lord is more personal and more intimate than that of anyone else in Israel. If anyone knows the Lord, it is Moses.

And yet, even Moses cannot experience the very essence of God. Perhaps it is because Moses speaks “face to face” with the Lord so often that he then feels so bold as to ask the unimaginable: “Please show me your glory” (33:18). God’s glory? Seriously? How can Moses be so bold? How can he think seeing God’s glory is humanly possible? Does he not know whom he is speaking to?

To his credit, Moses is Israel’s covenant mediator. In light of the catastrophe in chapter 32 (i.e., Israel’s idolatry), Moses is desperate to see God’s presence continue with his people into the land, lest they be destroyed. Perhaps Moses also desires confirmation.¹ Previously, God had confirmed his covenant by manifesting his presence with Moses: “The glory of the **LORD** dwelt on Mount Sinai” by means of a cloud, and the Lord spoke to Moses “out of the midst of the cloud” (24:16). The Lord’s glory had also

appeared in the form of a “devouring fire on the top of the mountain” for all Israel to see (24:17). One might assume Moses is simply asking for a repeat experience. Still, Moses seems to be asking for something that goes well beyond anything he’s ever experienced before.

The response Moses receives is remarkable. On the one hand, it is impossible for Moses to see the very glory of God. “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (33:20). It is safe to infer from this sobering statement that no one can know or see the very essence of God. He is so glorious, and his glory so infinite, that we would be consumed. He is like the sun. If we look at the sun straight on, our eyes will burn, and our sight will be lost. Should we dare to approach the sun, we will be disintegrated before we can ever lay a foot on its surface. The proper way to experience the sun is through its effects. Its rays warm us, and its beams give us light where there is darkness. But look at the sun? No way. Impossible.

On the other hand, God has promised to go with his people, rather than merely sending his angel. So it is pivotal that God’s presence is manifested to Moses, Israel’s mediator, even if not directly. So the Lord announces his plan: “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name ‘The LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (33:19). Moses cannot see the “face” of the Lord and live, so the Lord will tuck Moses behind a rock as he passes by. “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (33:21–23).

We know from elsewhere in Scripture that God does not have a body but is spirit (Deut. 4:12, 15–16; John 4:24). The language is anthropomorphic, using human features (hands, back, face) to describe the way the Immortal’s passing presence and glory will

be experienced in the eyes of a mortal, like Moses. The language is protective, guarding Moses from God's glory and God's glory from Moses. That Moses is even allowed to be hidden in a nearby rock is a privilege. Yet Moses is given more. He may not be allowed to see the Lord's face, but he may see the Lord's back. Moses is permitted to be hidden in the rock, but it is God who is hidden from Moses. Only the Lord's back will be seen. The Lord will place his hand over the face of Moses, keeping Moses from seeing his face, only to remove his hand to allow Moses to see his back as he passes by. Surely "Moses must have quickly realized that, in knowing God more fully, God had become an even greater mystery (problem) than he was before."²

If Moses's encounter teaches us anything, it is this: God's essence is beyond the reach of finite mortals like you and me. Not even Moses could see the divine essence and live. Dead men tell no tales, especially those who've seen the very essence of God. It is incomprehensible in all its glory, perfection, and brilliance.

"To Whom Will You Liken Me?"

Moses learns that day that God is so great he defies comprehensibility. That reality will lead Moses to his knees countless times, fearful of the one who is a consuming fire, dwelling in light inaccessible.

Israel, however, does not fear the Lord as Moses does. Divine incomprehensibility does not leave them awestruck that the Infinite One would stoop down to enter into a covenant with such finite, sinful people. They know they cannot touch the foot of Mount Sinai, lest they die, but instead of bowing in worship, waiting for the words of life, they turn away, settling for gods they can see and touch, gods they can make with their own hands, gods they can control and domesticate.

But God cannot be domesticated. As he says through the prophet Isaiah, "To whom will you liken me and make me equal,

and compare me, that we may be alike?” (Isa. 46:5). The answer is obvious: no one! God specifically has in mind the false idols of Babylon that Israel is being tempted to worship. They are made by human hands. Craftsmen melt and mold gold, crafting an image; then they elevate that gold image, prostrate themselves on the floor before it, and worship it as a god.

The picture painted by Isaiah is intentionally ironic: the creator worshipping the creature? But the scene becomes even more humiliating still. The worshiped object is, well, an *object* and no more. It can be seen; it can be touched. It is limited to one place, for it does not move; in fact, it cannot move. Mockingly, God laughs: “They lift it to their shoulders, they carry it, they set it in its place, and it stands there; it cannot move from its place” (46:7a). Could there be a more impotent object? God thinks not.

But let’s play along, shall we? Perhaps this newly minted idol can at least listen to the words of its worshipers and then respond accordingly. No, it cannot do that either. “If one cries to it, it does not answer,” and if it does not answer, then it cannot save that person from their trouble (46:7b). This is a god you can domesticate.

How different is the God of Israel? Listen to him respond: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me” (46:9). Earlier in Isaiah, God thunders:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?
Who has measured the Spirit of the **LORD**,
or what man shows him his counsel?
Whom did he consult,
and who made him understand?
Who taught him the path of justice,
and taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as the dust on the scales;
behold, he takes up the coastlands like fine dust.
(40:12–15)

And then comes one of the most sobering statements of all:

All the nations are as nothing before him,
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and
emptiness.
To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him? (40:17–18)

An idol perhaps?

An idol! A craftsman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold. . . .
He who is too impoverished for an offering
chooses wood that will not rot;
he seeks out a skillful craftsman
to set up an idol that will not move. (40:19–20)

Not so with the Creator. It is he

who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to dwell in;
who brings princes to nothing,
and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.
(40:22–23)

Unlike his creation, the “**LORD** is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.” And he “does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable” (40:28).

What is abundantly evident from Isaiah 40 is that this God is not just a greater being than us, as if he were merely different

in *degree*, a type of superman. No, this God is different in *kind*. He is a different type of being altogether. He is the Creator, not the created. From this fundamental difference—what theologians have called the Creator-creature distinction—every other difference follows. He is not placed into the hands of the creature, but holds every person—even entire nations!—in the palm of his hand. He is not limited to a specific place, to be put up on a stand, like the idols crafted out of gold, but he transcends any one place and is everywhere at once with his whole being. Even when he “sits,” so to speak, he sits on his heavenly throne judging the nations. He is not a god whose ears have been fashioned from melted stone but a God who hears the prayers of his people, knows their every need, and therefore can and will save them from their enemies.

There is no one like this God. He is, as Isaiah 40:28 says, “unsearchable.” That word “unsearchable” is key. It’s not only true that God is incomparable, but he is also incomprehensible. His power, his knowledge, his presence, and his wisdom are inexhaustible and unfathomable. No one ever has known, and no one ever will know, the depths of his essence, the scope of his might, or the height of his glory. He is, in a word, *infinite*. That we cannot say of anyone else. “I am God, and there is none like me” (Isa. 46:9). “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the **LORD**. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (55:8–9).

No-Man’s-Land

If God were not incomprehensible, would anything be compromised? And what would have to be true for God to be comprehensible? The short answer is that if he were not incomprehensible, God himself would change for the worse for a variety of reasons.

To begin with, we, the creature, would have to be God to comprehend God in all his glory.³ But of course, if we were to become divine to comprehend him who alone is divinity, then God himself would cease to be divine. Listen to Augustine’s wisdom: “We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder if you do not comprehend? *For if you comprehend, it is not God you comprehend.* Let it be a pious confession of ignorance rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To attain some slight knowledge of God is a great blessing; to comprehend him, however, is totally impossible.”⁴

Thomas Aquinas says something similar: “No created mind can attain the perfect sort of understanding of God’s essence that is intrinsically possible.” Aquinas then makes a statement that will be echoed by all theologians after him: “The infinite cannot be contained in the finite. God exists infinitely and nothing finite can grasp him infinitely.” Aquinas concludes, “It is impossible for a created mind to understand God infinitely; it is impossible, therefore, to comprehend him.”⁵

Even the names for God in Scripture—Elohim, El Shaddai, Sabaoth, Yahweh—are not meant to reveal the divine essence in *all its fullness*.⁶ They certainly do reveal God *truly*, just never *exhaustively*. Never was this God’s intention. “He cannot fully impart himself to creatures.”⁷ To do so would be to compromise his very own existence.

In the past, God’s essence has been referred to as his “quiddity.”⁸ Quiddity constitutes “the essential nature of something.”⁹ God’s quiddity is unlike our quiddity. Infinite as he is, his quiddity is ineffable.¹⁰ “Ineffable” means something is “incapable of being expressed in words.”¹¹ To say that God’s quiddity is ineffable is to say that God’s essence is indescribable. It is so infinite, so supreme, so glorious, that its majesty, its beauty, and its perfection transcend our feeble human words. Like God told Moses, if we were to directly encounter God in his very essence, we would surely die. Since God’s quiddity is ineffable, we would be right to say it is no-man’s-land.

The Role of Humility in the Quest for Majesty

Living two decades into the twenty-first century has its advantages. It gives us a bird's-eye point of view, soaring over centuries past, using the eyes of an eagle to see the missteps of past generations. During the Enlightenment era, for example, many thinkers, Christians included, had an extremely optimistic view of humanity. By reason alone, humans could scale the greatest heights the arts and sciences had to offer. Religion was not exempt either. While different approaches were taken, some believed they could determine who God is simply by means of using their reasoning powers alone. The Bible could be set aside for good; reason was enough.

As time passed, it became evident that the Enlightenment experiment had failed. War, for example, exposed the fact that humanity is not morally neutral but corrupt. The ill use of reason demonstrated that humanity was desperately in need of special revelation after all. Autonomous reason was not so autonomous, as it turned out. In fact, it was idolatrous, attempting to remove God from his throne and replace the Creator's authority with the creature's intellect instead. The follies of the Enlightenment should forever remind us that attempting to scale the ladder of heaven to pull God down is the height of human hubris. It is the tower of Babel all over again.

A much better approach couples the quest for knowledge with humility, a humility that looks to God's revelation of himself for understanding. It is the approach of faith seeking understanding. As Anselm prays, "For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand."¹² God's Word, the holy Scripture, opens the door for us to have a true knowledge of God. Yet the more we know, the more we realize we don't know. "The more God reveals who he is and the more we come to a true and authentic knowledge of who he is, the more mysterious he becomes."¹³ It's like spending countless hours looking in the

microscope at some aquatic creature, only to step back and discover the specimen is a humpback whale.

Two Temptations

God's incomprehensibility is a helpful reminder that whenever we speak of the infinite God, there is a proper, biblical role for mystery. Not agnosticism—*mystery*. The agnostic denies that we can know God or that he even exists. At the heart of agnosticism is an irremovable distrust, a piercing skepticism of the divine.¹⁴ It is one step removed from atheism, and some would argue that atheism is its logical conclusion.¹⁵ It has been labeled the “death of theology” for a reason.¹⁶

But Scripture never accepts such uncertainty. Instead, the biblical authors confidently declare from Genesis to Revelation that God does exist and that the reason we know he exists is that he is not silent. This speaking God has revealed who he is and what his will is for his people. In the eyes of the world the skeptic is considered the sage; in God's eyes the skeptic is called the fool (Ps. 14:1). God may be incomprehensible, but he is not unknowable. Any doubt is removed the moment God opens his mouth.

Others may not go as far as secular agnosticism. They remain unflinchingly religious (God certainly does exist) but religiously mystical (we cannot know him) in their view of God. God is so high that the Mysterious One is robbed of any definition at all. One is left only with total emptiness. These individuals pride themselves on knowing God by knowing nothing about God, ironic as that may sound. They “attempt to transcend all the limitations of space and time, strip our idea of God of all likeness to a finite creature, and end up with an empty abstract idea devoid of value for religion. . . . The Absolute has been reduced to nothing.”¹⁷

Herman Bavinck calls this tendency an “insoluble antinomy.”¹⁸ An “antinomy” is a “fundamental and apparently unresolvable

conflict or contradiction.”¹⁹ The word “insoluble” refers to something that has “no solution or explanation.” In science, something is insoluble if it is “incapable of being dissolved in a liquid and especially water.”²⁰ Think back to your school days in the science lab when your teacher asked you to mix oil with water. The result? The two won’t mix. Oil remains undissolved by water.

But why would Bavinck call this second temptation an insoluble antinomy? It is because we have given up any reconciliation between God’s transcendence and immanence. “Absoluteness and personality, infinity and causality, immutability and communicability, absolute transcendence and likeness to the creature—all these pairs seem irreconcilable in the concept of God.”²¹ It is to think that there can only be an “irresolvable contradiction.”²² Yet could this “irresolvable contradiction” actually be an “adorable mystery,” we might wonder?²³

Notice, to claim God is incomprehensible, an adorable mystery, is already to say a whole lot about him, as we discovered in Isaiah 40. Incomprehensibility does not encourage but undermines agnosticism and mysticism.

At the same time, incomprehensibility guards the Christian from thinking that a mere mortal can know God’s very essence—know God *per essentiam*, “in terms of his essence.”²⁴ It keeps us finite individuals from the theistic rationalism of the Enlightenment—that is, the aggressive belief that we mortals can, by our own unaided human reason, attain comprehensive knowledge of the divine.

The Most Perfect Way of Seeking God: Knowing God by His Works

Augustine once wrote that whenever we think about God, “we are aware that our thoughts are quite inadequate to their object, and incapable of grasping him as he is.” Yet Scripture commands us to “think about the Lord our God always,” though we “can never

think about him as he deserves.” How, then, should we approach him? “Since at all times we should be praising him and blessing him, and yet no words of ours are capable of expressing him, I begin by asking him to help me understand and explain what I have in mind and to pardon any blunders I may make. For I am as keenly aware of my weakness as of my willingness.”²⁵

That may be one of my favorite passages Augustine ever wrote. Every time he sat down to write about God, he put down his pen, got on his knees, and prayed. He knew he would never exhaust the mystery of the one who is incomprehensible. Augustine also knew that his finite attempt to describe him who is incomprehensible was tainted by Augustine’s own weakness. To describe God, Augustine desperately needed God’s own help.

Respecting this mystery requires a certain degree of modesty, a recognition of our earthly perspective. It entails an acknowledgment that *we are* the recipients and beneficiaries, not the originators and creators, of divine revelation. If *we know* anything about God, it is because he has chosen to make it known; revelation is a gift. In that light, our task cannot be speculation. Our response to his revelation concerning himself is not to demand knowledge of that which he has chosen to conceal.

Instead, Christian humility requires us to receive with gratitude what he has spoken and to limit ourselves to what he has said and done, rather than pine after what he has not said and those works he has left unperformed. “We know,” observes John Calvin, “the most perfect way of seeking God, and the most suitable order, is not for us to attempt with bold curiosity to penetrate to the investigation of his essence, which we ought more to adore than meticulously to search out, but for us to contemplate him in his works whereby he renders himself near and familiar to us, and in some manner communicates himself.” Echoing Augustine, Calvin concludes: “Because, disheartened by his greatness, we cannot grasp him, we ought to gaze upon his works, that we may be restored by his goodness.”²⁶

God's works, not his essence, arrest our attention. We may probe the former, but we restrict ourselves to marveling at the latter. For that reason, we can say with Bavinck that our God "is the sole object of all our love, precisely because he is the infinite and incomprehensible One."²⁷ For that reason we can sing,

Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
in light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.²⁸