

§ 1. The Perfect Oneness of God

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength.” (Deut. 6:4–5, NEB)

The Christian doctrine of God begins, is governed by, and finds its rest in the call to the One God, the One Lord of Israel. This call is issued first by Moses to the Israelites, gathered east of the Jordan, east of the land of promise. Rabbinic tradition calls this commandment the *Shema*, from the Hebrew for “hear,” and there is scarcely any commandment more central than this to the pious observance of Judaism. Jesus exemplifies this piety by citing the *Shema* when challenged about the law. After citing the divine manifestation to Moses that begins the great liberation of Exodus, Jesus answers the lawyer who asks about the greatest commandment. Jesus replies, “The first is, Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is the only Lord; love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:29–30, NEB). So axiomatic is the Oneness of God to the apostle James that he can place that confession on the lips of his opponents: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19).

The confession of the One God belongs not to the past alone, but to our day as well. Within Holy Scripture itself we see the living commandment, bound not to ages past, but living and free, fresh in each generation's ears. "Not with our ancestors did the Lord made this covenant," Moses teaches, "but with us, who are all of us here alive today" (Deut. 5.3). So the apostle Paul hears the law alive and vibrant in his generation: Abraham's faith, the trust that was "reckoned to him as righteousness" was "written, not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Rom. 4:22–24). So too we now stand under Moses' authority, under the teaching of the apostle to the gentiles, under the gracious yoke of Jesus Christ; today we hearken to this commandment. The Lord our God is One.

But what does it mean for Almighty God to be One? Already in Scripture we see the breadth of this term in denoting God: the *one* of Deuteronomy has been translated *only* in the Gospel of Mark, in the New English Bible. Luther, with his uncanny ear for the richness of language, translates the Hebrew *echad*, and Greek, *eis*, or *ho on*, *einige*, a German word that concisely binds together the English "one" and "unique" (on(e)ly). Everett Fox translates, "Hearken O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH (is) One!" and retains that traditional interpretation in the face of modernist revisions, ones he notes in a quiet footnote: "Despite the centrality of this phrase as a rallying cry in later Jewish history and thought, its precise meaning is not too clear," Fox writes. "It most likely stipulates that the Israelites are to worship YHWH alone; a secondary meaning might be reflected by the translation, 'YHWH is (but) one'—that is, God has no partner or consort as in the mythology of neighboring cultures."¹ The Lord's Oneness carries apocalyptic force as well. The prophet Zechariah discloses the eschatological word of the Divine Oneness: "On that day there shall not be either cold or frost. And there shall be continuous day (it is

known to the Lord), not day and not night, for at evening time there shall be light. . . . And the Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one” (Zech. 14:6–7, 9).

In his commentaries, Calvin points to the centrality of the Shema for the church’s doctrine of God, and most significantly, for its achievement at Nicaea: “The orthodox Fathers aptly used this passage against the Arians; because since Christ is everywhere called God, He is undoubtedly the same LORD who declares Himself to be the One God; and this is asserted with the same force respecting the Holy Spirit.”² Perhaps no Greek word has been more fateful in the church’s doctrine of God than *eis*: for God to be “One” has carried the Divine Reality into the worlds of Middle and Neoplatonism, into the realm “beyond Being,” and to the ineffable sublimity of the “utterly Unique,” surpassing human knowledge, tongue, and praise.

And it is here that a Christian doctrine of God must pause for close attention to our question at hand: What does it mean for Almighty God to be One? How are we to hear Moses’ instruction in our day, for us, now? Karl Barth began a movement in the doctrine of God that we can only say has far outstripped even his own iconoclastic demands. In *Church Dogmatics* II.1, the doctrine of God, Barth famously says that we must do away with a false, pagan, and mythological superstition about the number one. Only Jews and Muslims have succumbed to such a myth!³ Of such projection of the human intellect and its fetish for the number one, Barth says Christians can only shrug this aside, and seek out the true biblical meaning of the unity of God. Now there is probably nothing less successful in Barth interpretation than proof-texting from the *Dogmatics*. Hardly any section or paragraph, much less any few sentences, taken on its own, and seemingly standing on its own two feet alone for the whole, can survive the weight placed on them.

We do well, then, not to carry too much freight on these words of Barth's. But they have been powerfully influential.

Robert Jenson stands for a whole movement when he writes that "we must reckon with and seek to identify a plurality of what can only be called *dramatis dei personae*, 'characters of the drama of God.'" He applies that directly to our cardinal text: "It is fundamental for the church as for canonical Israel and Judaism: 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' What must be noted is that the proclamation of God's singularity is not in Israel the outcome of a metaphysical analysis but the slogan for a drama."⁴ Entailed in that tight phrase, "Outcome of a metaphysical analysis" is a Barth-styled, programmatic revision of Greek philosophy:

Greece identified deity by metaphysical predicates. Basic among them is timelessness: immunity to time's contingencies and particularly to death, by which temporality is enforced. The Greeks' great fear was brought to a formula by Aristotle: "Can it be that all things pass away?" . . . All Greek religion and its theology, that is, "philosophy," is a passionate insistence that the answer be no.⁵

To this analysis of ancient philosophy as Mediterranean religion, Jenson appends a militant deduction:

The God to be interpreted in this work is the triune God. For the doctrine of Trinity is but a conceptually developed and sustained insistence that God himself is identified by and with the particular plotted sequence of events that make the narrative of Israel and her Christ.

The primal systematic function of trinitarian teaching is to identify the theos in "theology." Under most circumstances such teaching must therefore appear at the very beginning of a theological system. For if a systematically developed discourse about God precedes the exposition of Trinity there is danger that a nontrinitarian identification of God may be hidden in that discourse, to confuse all that follows. Western theology's late-medieval and modern tradition has tended to treat first of God simply as he is God and only thereafter of his Trinity; the

temptations posed by this ordering have recently been much discussed. [citing K Rahner]⁶. . . .

Thus the phrase “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” is simultaneously a very compressed telling of the total narrative by which Scripture identifies God and a personal name for the God so specified; in it, name and narrative description not only appear together, as at the beginning of the Ten Commandments, but are identical. . . . The Church is the community and a Christian is someone who, when the identity of God is important, names him, “Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Those who do not or will not, belong to some other community.⁷

Programmatic for the whole is Jenson’s definition of a doctrine of God that conjoins divine identity, narrative, Trinity, philo-Judaism and anti-Hellenism. A powerful mixture! Part of its attraction, surely, is its strong counterintuitive movement: its defiant starting point in the doctrine of Trinity moves it not away, he says, but closer to the law, observance, and piety of rabbinic Judaism. And Jenson’s conviction that “narrative” constitutes the proper conceptuality for theology has found wide support in contemporary Anglo-American theology. So strong is this movement away from a “naked” doctrine of God—a God considered apart from or prior to Trinity—that *monotheism* appears from time to time as a term of contempt.⁸ Undergirding much of this “narrative” or “postliberal” Trinitarian theology is the conviction, common since Rahner’s landmark essay “On the Trinity,” that the Immanent Trinity must be not be prized apart from the Economic, or in the more incautious, and thereby more famous maxim of some Rahnerians, *The Economic Trinity is the Immanent, and vice versa*.⁹ Much more must be said about this move in Trinitarian doctrine in its own place; and no Christian doctrine of God can ever dispense with a full and dogmatic doctrine of Trinity. We must be quick to repeat that our argument here is for a starting point in a proper doctrine of God, not to the doctrinal content of the complete Christian understanding of God. We are

advocating here for a proper starting point in the Oneness of God, a beginning favored by Thomas Aquinas and many Reformers, but quietly—or more noisily—disputed by Peter Lombard and many modern dogmaticians. Peter Lombard took up a medieval practice of gathering citations from the fathers—most especially of Augustine—for use in the teaching of doctrine: florilegia. This careful textual work alerted the early medieval theologians to the danger of contradiction or ambiguity in the authoritative sources of theology.

As truth must be one, so these sources, they reasoned, must ultimately be reconciled. (Not for them the modern tolerance or applause for contradiction and diversity!) Peter Lombard offered church theologians a compendia of patristic texts, and a ruling on how such divergent voices are to be read and harmonized. His compendium, *The Sentences*, served as textbook for Latin theologians for many generations; Thomas Aquinas himself wrote a commentary on them, a traditional rite of passage for medieval schoolmen.

But Thomas differs from the Lombard on a key point. Peter Lombard considered Augustine's *De Trinitate* to be the central governing authority for the doctrine of God; *De Deo Trino* would begin and ground the teaching on God. Thomas orders doctrine differently: for him *De Deo Uno* would stand at the head of the doctrine of God.

Famously, the *Summa Theologica* does not make much of its decisive organizing principles, so we moderns are left speculating about these matters of principle and method. It may be that the prominence of the doctrine of Creation in Thomas's theology influenced his decision here. Or, to express this in other idiom, Augustine's conviction that the works of God *ad extra* are one took pride of place over his teaching of Trinity as a starting point in scholastic questions. Alternatively we may look to the growing reflection on epistemology in medieval schools, to demonstration in

theology, to encounter with Jewish and Muslim theologians, and finally the exegetical prominence of the Revelation to Moses as players in this pivotal revision of Lombard's ordering in the *Sentences*.

Much more must be said about the relation of God's Oneness to the Divine Threeness in its proper place, but here we need only say that the Oneness of God comes under heavy threat in the world that Barth and Rahner have made.

What then should Christian theology say about the Oneness of God? And why, after all that has been said and argued for achieved in Christian dogmatics in the last halfcentury, should the doctrine of God all the same begin there?

It is difficult to argue for a position so deep, so fundamental as the Oneness of God. If any axiom deserves the title of "proper basicity"—to borrow Alvin Plantinga's famous term of neofoundationalism—this surely would be the one. As Plantinga rightly observes, no foundational statement can be directly justified; it rather justifies all other statements that rest upon it. Yet, as with all first principles, indirect warrants for this axiom can be given, and it is the task of systematic theology to assemble and order just such indirect justifications. In just such a way does Calvin, for example, justify Scripture as the first principle in dogmatics. In just such a way, too, our axioms about theological language, from the doctrine of divine predicates to the doctrines of providence and creation, receive indirect warrants from Scripture, tradition, and philosophical coherence. We are not left, then, with only a general or even a formed intuition about which axiom in the doctrine of God is first and foundational. Rather, the Oneness of God is pressed upon us by tradition and by philosophical coherence, both ingredient in a churchly reading of Scripture, and thus to dogmatic theology as a whole; but even more Divine Oneness is recommended principally by Holy Scripture itself.

§1a. The Divine Oneness in Holy Scripture

Here we seek to offer something broader and more sustained than the cardinal texts used to open this section. As all the world knows, there is no convincing another of one's position by pointing to particular texts of the Bible, and pretending that adducing evidence is all the same as offering an argument. Always the particular texts lie within a world of coherence and persuasiveness: these bring to prominence the text that, for proponents, seals the testimonies. The systematic task here is to bring forward that coherent world from backdrop to foreground. And that coherent world is "the church, built upon the prophets and the apostles." Christian doctrine, that is, rests upon the foundation given in the prophets of Israel, or as revelation has it, in the twelve tribes of Israel, inscribed into the gates of the heavenly Jerusalem, coming down in the last days from the heaven of heavens. Now, to be built upon the people Israel, and its chief prophet, Moses, is not simply to share Holy Scripture with them. It is that, to be sure. However we sort out the relation of "Old Testament" to "Hebrew" or "Jewish Bible," we must say as Christians that the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Writings, and Psalms are the common languages of church and synagogue, and the world out of which our traditions are forged. But to be built upon these language worlds is something more than sharing a textual heritage.

It is even more than sharing a "common story." Again, it is this, but much more as well. The appeal to narrative, prominent in Robert Jenson's work, and common to much contemporary North Atlantic Protestant theology, finds its roots, once again, in Barth and his passionate conviction for "historical thinking." The historical or "history-like" narratives (the phrase is Hans Frei's) of Israel come alive with particular vibrancy in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and it is this

fresh ear for the language of Zion that has made Barth so central for the Christian reconsideration of Judaism. For Christians to know that story, to enter into it, to rejoice in it, and to be clothed by it is one of the central acts of the Christian life. In just that way, no theological defense of the Oneness of God could part ways with Jenson or Barth on the centrality of Israel's story for the church. Yet we must go further. For, as Barth observed famously in the preface to the third edition of the Epistle to the Romans, "I cannot, for my part, think it possible for an interpreter honestly to reproduce the meaning of any author unless he dares to accept the condition of utter loyalty. . . . Nevertheless, we must learn to see beyond Paul. This can only be done, however, if, with utter loyalty and with a desperate earnestness, we endeavour to penetrate his meaning."¹⁰ "Seeing beyond, while accepting utter loyalty": these are the doorposts of our biblical world. Christians need not, may not find the telos complete and sufficient in the Old Testament; yet there can be no proper reading of it at all without serious commitment to its own meaning and aim. The subject matter—the *Sache*—of the Old Testament is not "story" or "narrative." These are not even the principle form of the subject matter, however important they be in some biblical books. Rather, the form or pattern of ancient Israel's teaching is Torah; its subject matter is the One God.

The order and traditional titling of the books of the Old Testament give us the first reason for "penetrating the meaning" of Scripture in this way. The first five books of Holy Scripture were ascribed by tradition to Moses, the prophet without parallel in Israel's history, the one who spoke with God as "with a friend, face to face." So firm and time honored is this ascription that Jesus himself effortlessly refers to texts in Genesis and Deuteronomy as words of Moses. The Pharisees, he tells us, sit on Moses' seat. The Wisdom literature, including the Psalms, ring out with praise for the law, the teaching

given to Moses after liberation from Egypt at Sinai and after guidance and preservation at Horeb, in the land of Moab. The apostle Paul understands the law to be given to and written by Moses, and he finds that law in the first five books of the Bible. It is loyalty to that Torah to which the prophets call Israel, and all of us; it is the heartless and callous indifference to that law, especially in its Deuteronomic form of compassion to the alien, widow, and orphan, that the prophets denounce, in their day and in ours. The New Testament is built upon Deuteronomy, the second law. Jesus cites it against the tempter in the wilderness, he draws out the Great Commandment from its opening teaching, and he reinterprets it in his great sermons in Matthew, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. St. Paul works and reworks Deuteronomy in his molten hot wrestling over Torah and mission to the Gentiles. Indeed, so central is Torah, and especially its representation in Deuteronomy to the authors of the New Testament, that we risk simply repeating these Gospels and Epistles when we set out the citations.

But this can never be a matter simply of numbers! To recognize the leading pattern or subject matter of a text is never an act of counting. It is rather an act of hearing, of judgement, of following the pattern the text lays out. We need not develop an entire hermeneutic to know that reading a text for its main theme is an art, a discipline in which we are schooled by the very text we aim to hear. It is this irreducible human act of reading before the grace and truth of the Holy Spirit that prompts Barth to reach for such evocative, personal and emotive language in his search to “penetrate with desperate earnestness the meaning” of the Letter to the Romans. And so here.

The whole testimony of Scripture, I believe, bears down upon the Torah, the holy law of the covenant people, the law of the Spirit of life. And although the relation between law and covenant, as between law and the prophets, or Old Testament law and New,

has been a complex preoccupation of Protestant higher critics since the nineteenth century, it cannot unsettle the pattern the Bible itself has built up. This is because the proper reading of Scripture—not developed but only named here—is one of continuity with the rabbinic and churchly reading of the Bible. Not innovation but “loyalty,” that is, generous reading within a living tradition, marks the proper theological use of Scripture. This does not mean “slavish” or “uncritical”! Rather, it means seeking out the pattern, the aim, and end of a scriptural book or author in the company of all who have read, and struggled, and interpreted before: it is the pattern of Scripture within the *communio sanctorum*. Such a churchly reading amounts to this: the pattern of Holy Scripture is discerned in the order of Scripture itself. In sum, the Bible rests upon its own foundation, the law given to Moses, and inscribed in the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses. There are narratives within these books; what would Scripture be without the liberation from Egypt? Yet these books have their own “meaning” to which we all called to be “loyal”: the giving of the law, and the covenant of grace, sealed between the Lord and his people, sealed by Moses, the great prophet of the law.

Now it is one thing to read Scripture for its formal pattern, the law. It is another to discern its *Sache*, its proper subject matter. Now, again to state, rather than to argue, for a proper exegesis: the hearing and picking out of the proper subject matter of Scripture, as with Scripture’s pattern, is a communal, ecclesial act; but even more, it is a matter of the working of the Holy Spirit. To hear the commandment of God, to see the pattern that the Word sets out for us, to follow the pathway the prophets and apostles mark out for us: this is the human act made possible by the gracious liberty of the Holy Spirit. It is a creaturely act, a created grace. There are disagreements about these readings; the pattern and voice and direction discovered in

Scripture will vary, in great things and small, and no single line of interpretation can be named the exclusive gift of the Spirit. Always the reading of Scripture is an invitation, not a coercion, an open doorway we may approach and walk through; it is itself gospel, the law of liberty. Yet the Holy Spirit calls and commands, and our discernment of this Word is the first act of obedience the Lord of Life requires of us. It is, in its own creaturely idiom, a part of the indirect justification scriptural exegesis demands.

So we discern in Scripture its proper heart and subject matter: the Oneness of God. Now, we might take this term, *Oneness* in a number of ways, as Everett Fox has noted. It might be, for example, that we consider God's Oneness to be his Name or, in Jenson's terms, his Identity: the Lord God is this One, and not another. He acts in this way; He is the Creator, not another; and his covenant dealings in the world are with Israel, the chosen people, and not with other nations of the earth. Or we might with Fox say that, at least in part, God's Oneness is his Solitariness: God has no consort. Not Astarte with Baal; not Hera with Zeus; not agrarian gods with sky gods; not female principle with male; light with dark or thesis with antithesis. Rather, God alone; God only!

Now we must admit that such interpretations of God's Oneness comport well with narrative readings of Scripture. For narrative theologians, the commandment to worship the One God is not a "metaphysical analysis" of Divine Nature. Rather, this commandment, they say, focuses on God's ways in the world. For Jenson, that way can be given an eschatological summary: "God is the One who raised Jesus Christ from the dead."¹¹ The True God acts in certain concrete, scriptural, and particular ways, Jenson says, and no other. For Fox, the True God is not like the powers, ancient and modern, that come paired, the spiritual acme of complementarity in the created realm. Echoing Maimonides, we might say that this

narrative reading finds God's predicate, Oneness, not in the Divine Nature but rather in the Divine activity *ad extra*. The Identity of this God is the One who acts in the world in this way, without aid or counterpart.

It is hard to disagree with this reading—but we must go further. In the end, Holy Scripture reveals to us what kind of Being God is: Divine Oneness, we must say, is a metaphysical predicate. Now, we can only invite such a reading of Holy Scripture; but invite we must. We must make plausible the claim that Holy Scripture, while different in genre and style of argument from ancient Greek philosophy—or modern—nevertheless teaches content and subject matter we can only call “metaphysical.” Certainly, the Bible is not a Platonic dialogue nor even more a treatise like Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*. It is not a philosophical treatise as these are. (We must leave to one side Jenson's claim that Hellenism is the religion, not philosophy, of the ancient Mediterranean.) The Bible does not raise explicitly the speculative questions about ontology, nature and essence, substance and accident that the architects of Greek philosophy, indeed of all Western philosophy, raised in their work. There are to be sure more philosophically inclined books in Scripture than others: the *Wisdom of Solomon* might count as such a book, as might the *Gospel of John*, or perhaps better, its prologue. But our aim here is not to search for scriptural texts that appear in genre and argument more compatible with the metaphysical claims of Western philosophy, early and late. We are not justifying our ontological analysis of Divine Oneness through genre alone. Rather our metaphysical reading of Scripture's subject matter rests on a careful determination to not conflate genre with subject matter.

As a genre, Holy Scripture speaks in a particular idiom, concrete, visual, and yes, narrative. One reading of *Ecclesiastes*, and its vivid eye for detail and gesture, alongside of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* will

convince any reader of this striking difference in vocabulary and expression. Where do we find in Aristotle anything like this: “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to the skillful; but time and chance happen to them all” (Eccles. 9:11)? These are hardly definitions and syllogisms—and the verses are incomparably better for it!—yet the subject matter is recognizably the problem of evil, and finds its natural home in philosophers of *fortuna* such as Boethius and Augustine. A proper theological reading of Holy Scripture, that is, should make a distinction between form and content, between genre and subject matter.

I hasten to add, not a complete separation! The content of the Bible cannot be cut off completely from its form as Torah, Gospel, Writing, Prophet, and Letter such that the “Golden Rule” or “ethical monotheism” or “Immanuel” or the “sacramental universe” could be considered “what the Bible is really about.” The subject matter of the Bible cannot be expressed properly and fully in another religious or moral vocabulary that has no ties to the Biblical witness. The form of revelation in Sinai and in Bethlehem cannot be so quickly sheared off from the Word it contains. Yet a distinction can and should be made. Without such, the language of Nicaea can scarcely refer to the One God of Israel—and it is this very battle that was so hard fought and so painfully won. Even the Reformers, tempted to conflate the subject matter of the Bible with its genre—to insist that only the vocabulary of Scripture can be used to speak of divine things—came to affirm the probity of Nicene and Chalcedonian language as expression of *sola scriptura*. Doctrinal theology is scarcely possible without distinctions such as these. So too we distinguish the genre and subject matter of Scripture when it speaks of the reality of God. We must see in the idiom of Scripture, that is, the incomparably searching investigation of God’s Nature, God’s Being

as One. Consider the opening of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy. Here we see in the genre of narrative and concrete description the metaphysical teaching about God's Oneness. The One God is both "formless" or "invisible," and He is "unique."

In Deuteronomy, Moses rehearses before the people Israel that great manifestation of God and his Torah after the Exodus from Egypt: Remember, he says,

how you once stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble the people for me, and I will let them hear my words, so that they may learn to fear me as long as they live on the earth, and may teach their children so"; you approached and stood at the foot of the mountain while the mountain was blazing up to the very heavens, shrouded in dark clouds. Then the Lord spoke to you out of the fire. You heard the sound of the words but saw no form; there was only a voice. He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets. And the Lord charged me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy. (Deut. 4:10–14)

Here we have an exalted theme of the Divine Nature, echoing throughout Scripture: God has "no form," no similitude or likeness; he is not visible to creaturely eyes. Almighty God has a dwelling place—the temple and the Incarnate Word—and He has a footstool, the ark of the covenant and a manger in Bethlehem, and He manifests His glory and Name in storms and thunder, in pillars of cloud and fire, and in a voice, burning in one's bones or calling out of ceaseless fire or descending from the high heavenly places to the Beloved, rising up out of the waters. God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor His ways our ways, the prophet Isaiah tells us; no one has ever seen God, John assures us, but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is perfected in us. It is the King of kings and Lord of lords who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or

can see, 1 Timothy concludes in a rich Christological benediction. Even the voice of the Lord brings to dust the creatures who hear it. Almighty God is a consuming fire—from Numbers to Hebrews we read of the Lord’s annihilating holiness—so that even those who “approach the tabernacle of the Lord will die” (Num. 17:13). When the voice of the Almighty spoke out of the thick darkness and smoke and fire on Horeb that day, the Israelites “spoke rightly”: “So now why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of he Lord our God any longer, we shall die” (Deut. 5:25). As the voice, so the vision of God is the end of the creature; no one looks on the Lord and lives.

We can move from this firm center in Deuteronomy outward to Scripture as a whole. So firm is the axiom of God’s Invisibility to the apostle Paul that he concludes his great love hymn with the eschatological promise: after death—only then—will the enigma be put away and he shall see God face to face. So we might read Psalm 17, a psalm of David: At the psalmist’s vindication, he shall awake to see the Lord’s face, satisfied with God’s likeness. And so too we might read Jacob’s night wrestling at the Jabbok: though Jacob names the place *Peniel*, for “I have seen the face of God and lived,” Scripture speaks only of a “man” or an “angel,” a mighty figure who takes the wings of the morning to depart at dawn. Only the incomparable Moses, the prophet whose direct heir can only be Jesus Christ, only he entered the tent of meeting, and conversed with God as with a friend. So powerful is this exception that Scripture itself cannot speak of it in a single voice. On one hand, Exodus assigns a mark of transfigured glory to Moses—his skin shines with effulgent light—for the Lord knows Moses “by name,” in that pregnant phrase of the covenant. And on the other, when Moses beseeches the Lord to manifest His glory to him, not one moment after the disclosure that Moses spoke to the Lord face to face, the Lord answers, “I will make

all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘the Lord’; . . . but . . . you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” Into the cleft of a rock is Moses hid; and the glory passes by under the shadow of the Lord’s hand. Moses sees the Lord’s back; but his face “shall not be seen.” (Exod. 33:17–23)

Just so, when the prophet like Moses journeys up to the mountain to be transfigured, caught up in the cloud of the Lord’s glory, Jesus speaks as with a friend to Moses and Elijah; but the Lord’s voice only is to be heard. And just so, when the eschatological glory of Christ’s victory over sin, death, and the devil erupts in his rising from the realm of the dead, no “form” is seen. The resurrection itself is not narrated or seen or explained, for it is in itself the giving of the whole law of life. Rather, the whole glory and goodness of the Lord passes by under the hand of Jesus’ own appearances, his voice calling to the grieving and blind, his bodily manifestation entirely under his own command. When the Lord speaks out of the fire of the suffering death, we hear the sound of his voice, the earthquakes and thunder and thick darkness, but the whole form of his goodness, his shattering of the last enemy and rising with healing wings, this Divine Reality, present among us, the dead, we cannot see, but only believe.

In Holy Scripture, the Divine Nature as One pairs the Divine Invisibility with its opposition to visible divine powers and forces. Metaphysical claims about Oneness and idolatry go together. The One God is supreme in “formlessness,” in superabundant glory and hiddenness beyond all sight, imagination and figure. For God to be One is to be a nature beyond and also opposed to that spiritual force that is visible and creaturely. In biblical idiom, the Lord cannot be ranged against, placed alongside of, or ranked superior to “idols,” the formed and visible gods of the nations. It is the first commandment: I am the Lord; beside me there is no other. We can scarcely enter into the Book of Deuteronomy without seeing that the framework

of this “second law” is built up on the opposition to the gods of the empires, nations, and peoples of the ancient Near East. The war against idolatry—this is the true “holy war” of the Bible—dominates Scripture, from the calling of Israel up from Egypt to the destruction of the great beast at the end of all ages. The searing memory of apostasy with the golden calf overshadows the giving of the Decalogue, so that the recitation of the law can never be unaccompanied by the reminder that idolatry is first the act of the covenant people themselves. The prophets rebuke the covenant people for betraying the Lord with idols; in Jeremiah the Lord himself cries out with the agony of a pure love defiled in his beloved people by idolatry; the Psalms ridicule the idols, tricked-up images of the darkened minds that made them; and the apostle to the gentiles speaks for all Israel when he praises the nations who “turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). The interplay between the people Israel and its neighbors is dominated by the opposition and attraction to these other gods, as the unrelenting campaign against “foreign wives” in Ezra and Nehemiah testify. Indeed the inclusion of the alien and sojourner within the Sabbath and festival legislation underscores the fear not of foreigners within Israel, but rather of their gods. The narratives of Ruth, as exemplar, and of Solomon, as cautionary tale, fix our attention on idolatry as the great threat to covenant loyalty.

In sum, we can say that the geopolitical life of Israel—its foreign policy, its trades and treaties, its warfare and civil revolt, its tribal and family orders—all turn on the religious question of worship to the True God or the false. The theological center of the Old Testament is not a matter of “henotheism” or of a progressively strict monotheism, however we sort out the historical order of references to the One God of Israel. The center, rather, is the conviction that the True God, the God of Torah and covenant, and thus the True God of Judaism and

of the church is marked off from the false by invisibility: the nature of the One God is to have no image, form, or likeness.

So we see the indirect justification for the Oneness of God offered to us in Holy Scripture: both its form as law and its subject matter as the One God, true apart from and beyond all idols, recommend to us that we begin our doctrine of God here, with the confession that the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And now we must draw out just what is meant by Oneness as a divine predicate—indeed, the foundational predicate. How in our doctrine of God do we obey the First Commandment, “You shall have no other god to set against me”?

Notes

1. *The Five Books of Moses*, ed. and trans. Everett Fox (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 880.
2. *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses: A Harmony*, trans. C. W. Bingham (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 420.
3. *Church Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, vol. II.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), § 31.1, esp. pp. 448–57.
4. *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 75.
5. *Ibid.*, 94.
6. *Ibid.*, 60.
7. *Ibid.*, 46.
8. Consider the treatment of monotheism and Trinity in Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), esp. ch. 7.
9. See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), for a radical expression of the “Rahner maxim.”
10. Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, Edwyne Hoskyns, trans. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968) pp. 18, 19.

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

11. *Systematic Theology*, 42.