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# PAUL IN ATHENS

(ACTS 17:16-34)

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**Version:** 19 May 2004; 13 May 2015; 14 November 2020

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## STUDIES

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Barclay, William. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Rev. ed. The Daily Study Bible. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

Haenchen, Ernst. *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary*. Translated from 14th German edition of 1965 by Bernard Noble and Gerald Shinn, with revised translation by R. McL. Wilson. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971. ISBN 0-664-20919-X.

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PHOTO AT THE AREOPAGUS, 30 MAY 2014

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## TEXT

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**Paul in Athens.** <sup>16</sup> While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he grew exasperated at the sight of the city full of idols. <sup>17</sup> So he debated in the synagogue with the Jews and with the worshipers, and daily in the public square with whoever happened to be there. <sup>18</sup> Even some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers\* engaged him in discussion. Some

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\* Paul's presence in Athens sets the stage for the great discourse before a Gentile audience in Acts 17:22–31. Although Athens was a politically insignificant city at this period, it still lived on the glories of its past and represented the center of Greek culture. The setting describes the conflict between Christian preaching and Hellenistic philosophy.

\* *Epicurean and Stoic philosophers*: for the followers of Epicurus (342–271 B.C.), the goal of life was happiness attained through sober reasoning and the searching out of motives for all choice and avoidance. The Stoics were followers of Zeno, a younger contemporary of Alexander the Great. Zeno and his followers believed in a type of pantheism that held that the spark of divinity was present in all reality and that, in order to be free, each person must live “according to nature.” *This scavenger*: literally, “seed-picker,” as of a bird that picks up grain. The word is later used of scrap collectors and of people who take other people’s ideas and propagate them as if they were their own. *Promoter of foreign deities*: according to Xenophon, Socrates was accused of promoting new deities. The accusation against Paul echoes the charge against Socrates. *‘Jesus’ and ‘Resurrection’*: the Athenians are presented as misunderstanding Paul from the outset; they think he is preaching about Jesus and a goddess named *Anastasis*, i.e., Resurrection.

asked, “What is this scavenger trying to say?” Others said, “He sounds like a promoter of foreign deities,” because he was preaching about ‘Jesus’ and ‘Resurrection.’<sup>19</sup> They took him and led him to the Areopagus\* and said, “May we learn what this new teaching is that you speak of?”<sup>20</sup> For you bring some strange notions to our ears; we should like to know what these things mean.”<sup>21</sup> Now all the Athenians as well as the foreigners residing there used their time for nothing else but telling or hearing something new.

**Paul’s Speech at the Areopagus.**<sup>22</sup> Then Paul stood up at the Areopagus and said:\*

“You Athenians, I see that in every respect you are very religious.<sup>23</sup> For as I walked around looking carefully at your shrines, I even discovered an altar inscribed, ‘To an Unknown God.’\* What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.<sup>24</sup> The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands,<sup>h</sup><sup>25</sup> nor is he served by human hands because he needs anything. Rather it is he who gives to everyone life and breath and everything.<sup>26</sup> He made from one\* the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and he fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of their regions,<sup>27</sup> so that people might seek God, even perhaps grope for him and find him, though indeed he is not far

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\* *To the Areopagus*: the “Areopagus” refers either to the Hill of Ares west of the Acropolis or to the Council of Athens, which at one time met on the hill but which at this time assembled in the Royal Colonnade (*Stoa Basileios*).

§ 1 Cor 1:22.

\* **In Paul’s appearance at the Areopagus he preaches his climactic speech to Gentiles in the cultural center of the ancient world. The speech is more theological than christological. Paul’s discourse appeals to the Greek world’s belief in divinity as responsible for the origin and existence of the universe.** It contests the common belief in a multiplicity of gods supposedly exerting their powers through their images. It acknowledges that the attempt to find God is a constant human endeavor. It declares, further, that God is the judge of the human race, that the time of the judgment has been determined, and that it will be executed through a man whom God raised from the dead. **The speech reflects sympathy with pagan religiosity, handles the subject of idol worship gently, and appeals for a new examination of divinity, not from the standpoint of creation but from the standpoint of judgment.**

\* *‘To an Unknown God’*: ancient authors such as Pausanias, Philostratus, and Tertullian speak of Athenian altars with no specific dedication as altars of “unknown gods” or “nameless altars.”

<sup>h</sup> 7:48–50; Gn 1:1; 1 Kgs 8:27; Is 42:5.

\* *From one*: many manuscripts read “from one blood.” *Fixed ... seasons*: or “fixed limits to the epochs.”

from any one of us.<sup>i</sup> <sup>28</sup> For ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’\* as even some of your poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ <sup>29</sup> Since therefore we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divinity is like an image fashioned from gold, silver, or stone by human art and imagination.<sup>j</sup> <sup>30</sup> God has overlooked the times of ignorance, but now he demands that all people everywhere repent <sup>31</sup> because he has established a day on which he will ‘judge the world with justice’ through a man he has appointed, and he has provided confirmation for all by raising him from the dead.”<sup>k</sup>

<sup>32</sup> When they heard about resurrection of the dead, some began to scoff, but others said, “We should like to hear you on this some other time.” <sup>33</sup> And so Paul left them. <sup>34</sup> But some did join him, and became believers. Among them were Dionysius, a member of the Court of the Areopagus, a woman named Damaris, and others with them. <sup>1</sup>

### Paul at Athens (verses 16-34)

16 Ἐν δὲ ταῖς Ἀθήναις ἐκδεχομένου αὐτοῦ τοῦ Παύλου παρωξύνετο τὸ πνεῦμα αὐτοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ θεωροῦντος κατείδωλον οὔσαν τὴν πόλιν. 17 διελέγετο μὲν οὖν ἐν τῇ συναγωγῇ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις καὶ τοῖς σεβομένοις καὶ ἐν τῇ ἀγορᾷ κατὰ πᾶσαν ἡμέραν πρὸς τοὺς παρατυγχάνοντας. 18 τινὲς δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἐπικουρείων καὶ Στοϊκῶν φιλοσόφων συνέβαλλον αὐτῷ, καὶ τινες ἔλεγον, Τί ἂν θέλοι ὁ σπερμολόγος οὗτος λέγειν; οἱ δὲ, Ξένων δαιμονίων δοκεῖ καταγγελεὺς εἶναι, ὅτι τὸν Ἰησοῦν καὶ τὴν ἀνάστασιν<sup>c</sup> εὐηγγελίζετο. 19 ἐπιλαβόμενοί τε αὐτοῦ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἄρειον Πάγον ἤγαγον λέγοντες, Δυνάμεθα γνῶναι τίς ἢ καινὴ αὕτη ἢ ὑπὸ σοῦ λαλουμένη διδαχὴ; 20 ξενίζοντα γὰρ τίνα εἰσφέρεις εἰς τὰς ἀκοὰς ἡμῶν· βουλόμεθα οὖν γνῶναι τίνα θέλει ταῦτα εἶναι. 21 Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ πάντες καὶ οἱ ἐπιδημοῦντες ξένοι εἰς οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἠυκαίρουν ἢ λέγειν τι ἢ ἀκούειν τι καινότερον.

22 Σταθεὶς δὲ [ὁ] Παῦλος ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ Ἀρείου Πάγου ἔφη, Ἄνδρες Ἀθηναῖοι, κατὰ πάντα ὡς δεισιδαιμονεστέρους ὑμᾶς θεωρῶ. 23 διερχόμενος γὰρ καὶ ἀναθεωρῶν τὰ σεβάσματα ὑμῶν εὔρον καὶ βωμὸν ἐν ᾧ ἐπεγέγραπτο, Ἄγνώστῳ θεῷ. ὃ οὖν

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<sup>i</sup> Jer 23:23; Wis 13:6; Rom 1:19.

\* *‘In him we live and move and have our being’*: some scholars understand this saying to be based on an earlier saying of Epimenides of Knossos (6th century B.C.). *‘For we too are his offspring’*: here Paul is quoting Aratus of Soli, a third-century B.C. poet from Cilicia.

<sup>j</sup> 19:26; Is 40:18–20; 44:10–17; Rom 1:22–23.

<sup>k</sup> 10:42.

<sup>1</sup> *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Ac 17:16–34.

ἀγνοοῦντες εὐσεβεῖτε, τοῦτο ἐγὼ καταγγέλλω ὑμῖν. 24 ὁ θεὸς ὁ ποιήσας τὸν κόσμον καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ, οὗτος οὐρανοῦ καὶ γῆς ὑπάρχων κύριος οὐκ ἐν χειροποιήτοις ναοῖς κατοικεῖ 25 οὐδὲ ὑπὸ χειρῶν ἀνθρωπίνων θεραπεύεται προσδεόμενός τινος, αὐτὸς διδοὺς πᾶσιν ζωὴν καὶ πνοὴν καὶ τὰ πάντα 26 ἐποίησέν τε ἐξ ἐνός<sup>5</sup> πᾶν ἔθνος ἀνθρώπων κατοικεῖν ἐπὶ παντὸς προσώπου τῆς γῆς, ὀρίσας προστεταγμένους καιροὺς καὶ τὰς ὁροθεσίας τῆς κατοικίας αὐτῶν 27 ζητεῖν τὸν θεόν<sup>6</sup>, εἰ ἄρα γε ψηλαφήσειαν αὐτὸν καὶ εὖροιεν, καὶ γε οὐ μακρὰν ἀπὸ ἐνός ἐκάστου ἡμῶν ὑπάρχοντα. 28 Ἐν αὐτῷ γὰρ ζῶμεν καὶ κινούμεθα καὶ ἐσμέν, ὡς καὶ τινες τῶν καθ' ὑμᾶς ποιητῶν<sup>7</sup> εἰρήκασιν,

Τοῦ γὰρ καὶ γένος ἐσμέν.

29 γένος οὖν ὑπάρχοντες τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ὀφείλομεν νομίζειν χρυσῷ ἢ ἀργύρῳ ἢ λίθῳ, χαράγματι τέχνης καὶ ἐνθυμήσεως ἀνθρώπου, τὸ θεῖον εἶναι ὅμοιον. 30 τοὺς μὲν οὖν χρόνους τῆς ἀγνοίας ὑπεριδὼν ὁ θεός, τὰ νῦν παραγγέλλει τοῖς ἀνθρώποις πάντας πανταχοῦ μετανοεῖν, 31 καθότι ἔστησεν ἡμέραν ἐν ἣ ἔμελλει κρίνειν τὴν οἰκουμένην ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ, ἐν ἀνδρὶ<sup>8</sup> ᾧ ὥρισεν, πίστιν παρασχὼν πᾶσιν ἀναστήσας αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν.

32 Ἀκούσαντες δὲ ἀνάστασιν νεκρῶν οἱ μὲν ἐχλεύαζον, οἱ δὲ εἶπαν, Ἀκουσόμεθά σου περὶ τούτου καὶ πάλιν. 33 οὕτως ὁ Παῦλος ἐξῆλθεν ἐκ μέσου αὐτῶν. 34 τινὲς δὲ ἄνδρες κολληθέντες αὐτῷ ἐπίστευσαν, ἐν οἷς καὶ Διονύσιος ὁ Ἀρεοπαγίτης καὶ γυνὴ ὀνόματι Δάμαρις καὶ ἕτεροι σὺν αὐτοῖς.<sup>2</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

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### Paul's second missionary journey—to Europe (Acts 15:36—18:22).

Paul and companions are travelling the famous Roman road from Philippi called **the Via Egnatia**—the main East-West Roman road. What has just happened, which explains why Paul was alone in Athens and “waiting for them,” is explained in the previous verses (vv10-15).

The great Roman highway, the Via Egnatia, began at Neapolis and ran through Philippi, *Amphipolis* (16:12 note), *Apollonia* and *Thessalonica*, and then on westwards across

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Aland et al., eds., *The Greek New Testament*, Fifth Revised Edition. (Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014), Ac 17:16–34.

Macedonia to the coast of the Adriatic Sea at Dyrrachium, from where travellers could cross to Italy. Paul’s missionary campaigns were greatly eased where good highways, the motorways or autobahns of the ancient world, aided his progress. **The missionaries made their way some 33 miles (53 km) to Amphipolis, 27 miles (43 km) to Apollonia, and then 35 miles (56 km) to Thessalonica; if these distances are meant to represent each a single day’s journey, the travellers must have made use of horses (see 21:15), but Luke may be simply noting the main towns through which they passed.** If missionary work took place in these towns, Luke does not mention it; **possibly they did not possess synagogues (there is no evidence of any), or possibly Paul was concerned to reach the main city of the province and work there.** *Thessalonica*, like Philippi, was an ancient city which had acquired a new lease of life in the Hellenistic era. It was made a free city by the Romans in 42 BC and had the appropriate rights of self-government on a Greek, rather than a Roman, pattern (Sherwin-White, pp. 95–98). It had a Jewish population, probably more than sufficient to establish a *synagogue*. Recent archaeological evidence indicates that later there was a Samaritan synagogue in the town.<sup>3</sup>



Regarding the city of Thessalonica in Macedonia, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Thessalonica**): “The chief city in Macedonia, located at the head of the Thermaic Gulf.... The city was founded in 316 BC by Cassander, a general in the army of Alexander the Great, who gave the city its name in honor of his wife, Thessalonikeia, the daughter of Philip II and half-sister of Alexander. The new city

<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 292–293.

included the ancient Therme and some thirty-five other towns. **When Macedonia became a Roman Province in 146 BC, Thessalonica was made the capital and thus the center of Roman administration ...** its location as a main station on the famous Via Egnatia, which ran through the city on the east/west axis from the Balkans to Asia Minor.... The religious life of Thessalonica included a strong Jewish component.”

Regarding the city of Beroea in Macedonia, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Beroea**): “Located twenty-four miles inland from the Aegean Sea in the plain below Mount Bermion. Springs in the area gave the city its name, ‘place of many waters’.” The city was one through which the Via Egnatia ran.

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### PAUL ALONE IN ATHENS: SOCRATES-LIKE

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After an introduction designed to attract the attention of the audience and to state the theme (verses 22f.), the main portion falls into three parts: (1) God is lord of the world; he does not need a temple or human cultic ritual (verses 24f.); (2) Man is God’s creation; he needs God (verses 26f.); (3) God and man are related; therefore idolatry is foolish (verses 28f.). There follows a conclusion, calling on men to abandon their ignorant ideas of God and to repent (verses 30f.; Dibelius, p. 27).<sup>4</sup>

- While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. (v 16)

**παροξύνω** impf. pass. παρωξυνόμην; literally *sharpen*; figuratively *arouse, excite, stimulate*; in a negative sense *provoke, irritate, cause to be upset*; only passive in the NT (AC 17.16; 1C 13.5)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 298.

impf. imperfect

pass. passive

NT New Testament

<sup>5</sup> Friberg, Timothy, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller. Vol. 4, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Baker's Greek New Testament library, Page 302. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000.

Ernst Haenchen (1971: 517) writes: “Athens, at that time a quiet little city [Horace speaks about *vacuae Athenae*] of some 5,000 citizens lived on its great past. For Luke it represents Gentile culture. That Paul was disturbed about the many idols (*kateidolon* where the *kata-* prefix means “full of”) reminds us that the **Christians did not regard them as works of art**. As 1 Thessalonians 3:1 shows, Timothy had come to Athens with Paul, but Paul had sent him back forthwith to Thessalonica.”

The picture of the city painted by Luke has impressed different scholars as being remarkably true to life or as a brilliant literary product. There was in fact at Athens a blend of superstitious idolatry and enlightened philosophy. Paul’s speech, which is delivered before the philosophers, has often been thought to be rather irrelevant to their concerns, since it was directed more against popular idolatry. **In fact, however, it would have been very relevant to Epicureans, who thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment, and to Stoics, whose concept of God was pantheistic**. Paul in fact uses the insights of the philosophers in his attack on the beliefs of the Athenian populace; **the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man**. What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough.<sup>17 6</sup>

Regarding the ancient city of Athens, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Athens**): “The city stands on a site that has been continuously inhabited since the fourth millennium BC.” And regarding the Areopagus, see s.v. **Areopagus**: “The name means ‘Hill of Ares’, a low hill in Athens northwest of the Acropolis. The hill had stone seats for the council that met there, the origins of which went back to the advisory council of Athenian Kings. **Though the council’s political power had declined by the fifth century BCE, it retained jurisdiction over cases of homicide.**”

**Although Athens had once been the intellectual centre of the ancient world, it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university, but it tended to live on its reputation**. When Paul arrived, he was not so much impressed by the culture as irritated by the evidences of idolatry. ‘He found himself confronted by a veritable forest of idols’, with vast numbers of images of Hermes all over the city and

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<sup>17</sup> C. K. Barrett, ‘Paul’s Speech on the Areopagus’, in M. E. Glaswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke, *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London, 1974), pp. 69–77.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 298.



especially at the entrance to the *agora* (RSV *market place*) through which he probably walked.<sup>197</sup>

- So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. (v 17)

Like the ancient philosophers, Paul walks about the city speaking about deep things with anyone willing to engage him.

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 527)** writes: “The narrative framework is composed of a number of motifs which at that time every half-educated person recognized as specifically Athenian: the many temples and images, the special religiosity of the Athenians, their philosophical schools, the Areopagus (hill and court!), the Socratic dialogues in the marketplace, the introduction of new gods, **the Athenian curiosity**. Luke has let these motifs follow one another so closely that the impression of Athenian life and spirit grips the reader.... The reader should not indeed analyze the narrative, but rather surrender to its overall impression. So Luke conjures up the shadow of Socrates—without calling his name, we should note!—and the reader feels Paul is here entering upon a dangerous adventure, and begins to breathe freely again when Paul finally ‘goes out of their midst’.”

- Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) (v 18)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 517)** writes: “Luke now introduces some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers detached from this general audience.... The Greek word here *sumballo* can mean ‘to converse with’ but also ‘to engage in an argument’. This double meaning or lack of sharpness in the description continues all through and is part of the individual character of this scene.... Luke will be thinking of the Epicureans with their materialism and practical atheism; for them Paul is a ‘babblers’. The Stoics, the ‘other ones’ certainly recognize that Paul is presenting a new religious message, but they do not comprehend

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RSV American Revised Standard Version, Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, Second Edition, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> R. E. Wycherley, ‘St Paul at Athens’, *JTS* 19, 1968, pp. 619–621.

<sup>7</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 300.

this preaching either. **Luke reflects this by representing them as considering *anastasis* [“resurrection”] polytheistically, as a goddess standing alongside Jesus.”**

Reading Haenchen’s remarks above, I am reminded (13 May 2015) about how challenging it is to communicate religious knowledge to people who lack all access to the experiences, to the religious experiences that are the underpinning of the religious language. Without them having experienced God, it is exceedingly difficult to find the language to analogize to what you are trying to communicate to them.

Regarding the Epicureans, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Epicurean**): “The followers of the philosopher **Epicurus (342-270 BCE)**.... Epicurean teaching was expounded in a lengthy poem by the first-century BCE Latin writer Lucretius. Epicureans were often attacked as atheists, since they held that sense perception was the only basis for knowledge. Everything had come into being out of atoms and the void.... **No god had created or ruled over human beings**. Epicureans argued against fear of death, since in their view death was merely the dissolution of the atoms entangled to make up the human, and against fear of the gods, who would enjoy their own blessedness without troublesome concern for human affairs. **Free from these fears, they counseled, one should seek to live a peaceful life in which the body is free from pain and the mind peaceful and undisturbed. Consequently, one should choose a private life, pursuing this ideal in the pleasant company of friends.**”

Paul’s hearers included adherents of the *Epicurean and Stoic* philosophies. The former, who took their name from their founder Epicurus (341–270 BC), tended to be materialistic in outlook. **For them either the gods did not exist, or they were so far removed from the world as to exercise no influence on its affairs**. They taught a rudimentary atomic theory, and in their ethics they stressed the importance of pleasure and tranquility. They have often been falsely represented as sensualist in outlook, but in fact they had a lofty view of ‘pleasure’ and scorned sensualism.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the Stoics, see *Harper-Collins Bible Dictionary*, 2d ed. (1996, s.v. **Stoics**): “The members of a philosophical school founded in Athens by **Zeno (335-263 BCE)**.... the philosophy was best known for **its emphasis on moral conduct**. The school was named for the ‘Painted Porch’, a colonnade (Greek *stoa*), in which it met at Athens. The Stoics held that the entire universe was a living creature animated by the divine Logos (“reason” or “mind”). **This Logos was identified with Zeus**. Every person was a slave of the ruling Logos. Since the Logos pervaded everything, whatever happened in the universe was governed by this universal law of nature or providence. All human beings

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<sup>8</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 300.

were brothers and sisters in this universal, living body.... **Since everything that happens to people was determined, the only way in which individuals could control their lives was to control the passions governing how external events affected them.**

*Control of oneself was the avenue by which humans shows their freedom and superiority to fortune....* One of the most famous Stoic teachers and writers of the first century, **Epictetus**, was a lame Phrygian from Hierapolis.... Another famous Stoic teacher was Nero's tutor and advisor, **Seneca**, who retired from the Court when Nero's career turned bad and was later forced to commit suicide by the suspicious Emperor. In the second century, the emperor **Marcus Aurelius**, who had studied Epictetus, recorded his meditations while in the field with his army.”

**Their initial impression of Paul was not favourable. They dismissed him contemptuously as a *babbler*; the word designated a bird picking up scraps in the gutter, and hence came to be used of worthless loafers (the kind of person who today would pick up cigarette ends and smoke them) and also of persons who had acquired mere scraps of learning.** There would appear to be a deliberate echo of the tradition about Socrates when Paul is said to proclaim strange *divinities*; here the word ‘demon’ is used in its neutral, Greek sense. The divinities in question were *Jesus* and *Resurrection*, the latter possibly being understood as the name of a goddess, although a contemptuous dismissal of the idea of resurrection, as taught by Paul, is just as likely an interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

#### PAUL TAKEN TO THE AREOPAGUS BY THE PROFESSIONAL PHILOSOPHERS

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- So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? (v 19)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 518)** writes: “The Greek verb *epilambanomai* [‘they took him’] has more than one meaning. Scholars either find in it an arraignment before the authorities or hold that Paul was brought out of the tumult of the marketplace to the quiet Hill of Mars. Both interpretations are doubtful: **there was room for only a very few men on the rugged, rocky summit** and not for such a large audience as Luke presupposes for this speech....”

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<sup>9</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 301.

In favour of view (2) are the facts that Paul's speech does not look like a legal defence and that there is no hint of any legal proceedings. **The argument that the hill was not large enough to hold a crowd is false.** The reference to Dionysius the Areopagite (verse 34), however, suggests that Luke meant to describe a meeting of the court, no doubt in public session and not necessarily taking the form of a legal trial.<sup>10</sup>

- It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what it means.” (v 20)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 520)** writes: “The whole passage as it stands gives the impression that the philosophers expressed themselves in very refined language. Because the ‘foreign things’ are incomprehensible to the listeners, they will ‘to know’ (*gnonai*) what Paul means.... **The curiosity of the Athenians was proverbial** (see following verse).”

The occasion gave Paul an opportunity to spell out his views. His audience recognized that he was teaching strange things which they had not heard before, and they wanted to know what it all meant. **In a rare aside Luke comments that the Athenians themselves and visitors to the city were moved by sheer curiosity to hear something new, and that they had nothing better to do with their time than to enjoy intellectual titillation. Luke implies that they were not greatly concerned about the truth of what they heard; his tone is distinctly sarcastic.**<sup>11</sup>

- Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new. (v 21)

Here, the proverbial Greek curiosity is expressed. But perhaps what is captured here in this “curiosity” of the Athenians is their impatience with “old” wisdom, and their interest in hearing “new” and therefore “interesting” thoughts. I recall St. Augustine and his criticism of *curiositas*, by which he meant not a virtue (as we tend to use the word, a compliment given to someone always “curious”), but **the habit of an undisciplined mind, a mind that has lost contact with what it really needs to know and, instead, wanders about in the world of ideas, constantly searching for “interesting” things to wonder about.**

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<sup>10</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 301–302.

<sup>11</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 302.

## PAUL'S SPEECH BEFORE THE PHILOSOPHERS

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### PAUL APPEALS TO THE TRADITIONAL GREEK PIETY

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- Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. (v 22)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 520)** writes: “Paul assumes the attitude of an orator (*statheis*).... The Athenians indeed ranked as particularly religious because of their many temples and idols.”

**William Barclay (1976: 130)** writes: “Athens had long since left behind her great days of action but she still was the greatest university town in the world, to which men seeking learning came from all over. She was a city of many gods. It was said that there were more statues of gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together and that **in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a man**. In the great city square, people met to talk, for in Athens they did little else. Paul would have had no difficulty in getting someone to talk to, and the philosophers soon discovered him.”

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 528)** writes: “**What the speech attacks, with arguments from the philosophy of the Greek enlightenment, is the heathen popular belief and not the religion of the philosophers**. If the speech is nonetheless directed to these philosophers, it is because Greek culture is to be exhibited in its highest representatives.”

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 529)** writes: “At the time when the Acts originated, the Gentile-Christian Church was hardly any longer recruiting its members from the Gentile synagogue-visitors as in the days of Paul [the God-fearers]. **The Jews stood alienated and hostile against the Christians—Acts again and again points out this fact**. The Christian missionary preaching could no more expect in its Gentile hearers the same presuppositions as formerly for the proclamation of the gospel. The missionary could not longer begin with the Scripture proof for the Messiahship and resurrection of Jesus, when he addressed himself to the Gentiles.... *The Areopagus speech presented a new type of missionary preaching which met the different situation.*”

- For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. (v 23)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 521)** writes: “Paul concludes from this devotion that the heathen live at one and the same time in a positive and negative relationship with the right God: *they worship him and yet do not know him*—they worship him indeed, but along with many other gods! Still, this altar shows that Paul introduces no ‘new gods’: the accusation raised against Socrates cannot validly be made against Christianity. Out of the ignorance of the Athenians concerning this God, it inevitably follows that Paul must proclaim him.”

That comment by Haenchen reminds me (13 May 2015) how far too often I have worked among people who worship God but do not know Him. What I mean is that so many worship in a rote way, a “going through the motions,” which I think is in large measure taught by priests who celebrate the Sacraments in a perfunctory way.

**William Barclay (1976: 131-2)** writes: “There were many altars to unknown gods in Athens. Six hundred years before this a terrible pestilence had fallen on the city which nothing could halt. A Cretan poet, Epimenides, had come forward with a plan. A flock of black and white sheep were let loose throughout the city from the Areopagus. Wherever each lay down, it was sacrificed to the nearest god; and if a sheep lay down near the shrine of no known god, it was sacrificed to ‘The Unknown God’. From this situation, Paul takes his starting point.”

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### AGAINST IDOLS MADE BY HUMAN HANDS

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- The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, (v 24)

Paul has in mind here the verse from **Isaiah 42:5**—

“Thus says God, the LORD,  
 who created the heavens and stretched them out,  
 who spread out the earth and what comes from it,  
 who gives breath to the people upon it  
 and spirit to those who walk in it.”

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 522)** writes: “Paul constructs out of the Isaiah material a formula which expresses God's continuing Lordship—the point here is not the *conservatio* but the *gubernatio*—: *kurios huparchon*. This turn of phrase and the addition of the word *kosmos* makes the Old Testament statements sound Greek as well.”

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### GOD DOES NOT “NEED”

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- nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. (v 25)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 522)** writes: “After the polemic against the Temple comes the attack on Sacrifices. It is further based upon the idea of the Greek enlightenment (borrowed from the Jewish Hellenistic mission) that God needs nothing. But this negation is supplemented—and here again Isaiah 42:5 gains credit—without any loss of rapport with the enlightened Gentiles, by the positive sentence: God is the great provider who dispenses life, breath, and everything.”

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### GOD AS GOVERNOR OF THE KOSMOS, NOT MERELY ITS CONSERVATOR

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- From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, (v26)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 523)** writes: “Behind the whole much discussed expression stands the Psalm 74 (73):17.”

**Psalm 74:15** You cut openings for springs and torrents;

you dried up ever-flowing streams.

16 Yours is the day, yours also the night;

you established the luminaries and the sun.

17 *You have fixed all the bounds of the earth;*

*you made summer and winter.*

- so that they would search for God [*zetein ton theon*] and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. (v 27)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 524)** writes: “*To search for God* is the second task of mankind (which is to be accomplished during earthly life and first gives to man his own true meaning).”

**Verse 27** - God’s purpose in all this was that men *might seek after him* in the hope of touching him and finding him. The language can be taken Hellenistically of the philosophical search for what is true or divine, without any certain hope of success. **But it is better taken in the Old Testament sense of the thankful and reverent longing of the whole man for the God whose goodness he has experienced (for the vocabulary of seeking and finding God see Isa. 55:6; 65:1; Ps. 14:2; Prov. 8:17; Jer. 29:13; Amos 9:12 LXX).** The unusual element is the word *feel after* which is perhaps suggestive of men groping in the darkness in order to find God. This groping takes place despite the nearness of God to men, of which Paul goes on to speak, and it may indicate the sinful failure of man to find God to which Romans 1:20f. point. **Nevertheless, the main point is that seeking should not be difficult since God is not far from each one of us. This was a thought current in Stoic philosophy, but there it was taken in an impersonal, intellectual sense.** Paul’s concern is with the living God of the Old Testament (Ps. 145:18) who is near to his worshippers despite his transcendence and greatness (Jer. 23:23f.).<sup>12</sup>

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A REVERSAL OF STOIC PANTHEISM: WE LIVE IN GOD RATHER THAN GOD  
IN ALL THINGS

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- For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’ (v 28)

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LXX The Septuagint (pre-Christian Greek version of the Old Testament).

<sup>12</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 305.



**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 524, note 3)** writes: “That Luke himself constructed the opening clause is unlikely: he would himself have maintained no such immanence of man in God as the wording of the text asserts. It must be a matter of a received Stoic formulation.”

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### GOD IS GREATER THAN OUR SYMBOLIZATION OF HIM

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- Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. (v29)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 525)** writes: “On the basis of this understanding of God, pagan image worship is now assailed. The speaker falls back on the Jewish polemic against idolatry.... What originates in our artistic ability and consideration, and therefore stands under us, cannot portray the divine, which stands over us! **To the philosophers who were being addressed, this polemic would of course have offered nothing new: it hit only Greek popular religion and not he enlightened philosophical Hellenism.**”

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### GOD IS NO LONGER “UNKNOWN”

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- While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, (v 30)

God can no longer be said to be “Unknown,” because Paul is making sure of this with this audience. Not only can the true God be claimed to be unknown, but also this God immediately makes claims on his hearers: “Repent!”

Until the coming of the revelation of God’s true nature in Christianity men lived in *ignorance* of him. But now the proclamation of the Christian message brings this time to an end so far as those who hear the gospel are concerned; **they no longer have any excuse for their ignorance**. God was prepared to *overlook* their ignorance, but now he will do so no longer, and calls on *all men everywhere to repent*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I. Howard Marshall, [\*Acts: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 306.

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## REPENTANCE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF IMMINENT JUDGMENT BY GOD

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- because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.” (v 31)

The *because* here is essential to Paul's argument. In other words, repentance is not linked to personal knowledge and love of God, but on the simple reality that God who has the governance of the whole cosmos has already fixed the day on which He will judge each person. Time is running out!

This is a vague but specific reference to Jesus. Note that for these Greek philosophers, the argument about the First Person of the Trinity (God's governance, creating, providence, and so forth) is the key one to make.

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 530)** writes: “**The later theologians deemed it unsatisfactory that the work of reconciliation between the gospel and Greek thought should be confined to the province of the first article of the Creed, and so they sought to tie up Christology with the concepts of Greek ontology.** This certainly did not eradicate the problem for good and all: it confronted the Church again and again. It confronts us too....”

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## THE SCANDAL OF THE RESURRECTION

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- When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” (32)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 526)** writes: “Once again the proclamation of the Resurrection of Jesus is incomprehensible to the Gentiles (cf. 17:18), and once again both groups react differently: one with open scoffing (Luke is probably thinking of the Epicureans), the other courteously requesting a deferment of further instruction.”

**Verse 32** – Paul's return to his starting-point provoked the scorn of some of his hearers. Although Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, the idea of a bodily *resurrection* was alien to their thinking, since the body was increasingly regarded as earthly and evil

in comparison with the soul which was the seat of the divine in man.<sup>28</sup> **Not only was the cross ‘folly to Gentiles’, but so also was the resurrection.** Others of Paul’s hearers said that they would *hear* him on another occasion; this is often interpreted as simply a more polite form of dismissal, but the contrast expressed with the first group may suggest that this was a more positive reaction, and that these people longed that what Paul said was true.<sup>14</sup>

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#### PAUL’S DIGNIFIED AND UNENCUMBERED DEPARTURE

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- At that point Paul left them. (v 33)

**Ernst Haenchen (1971: 526)** writes: “Luke does not portray a pitiful departure, but rather lets the reader feel that Paul has happily emerged from a difficult situation. **Not he but the audience has failed.**”

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#### MISSIONARY SUCCESS: A FEW CONVERTS

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- But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them. (v 34)

**Verses 33-34** – This verdict is confirmed by the fact that after Paul had left the gathering he did gain some converts. **One in particular was a member of the Areopagus called *Dionysius*. This indicates that Paul’s audience certainly contained members of the court of the Areopagus, whether or not we identify the occasion as a meeting of the court.** Nothing certain is known about Dionysius, although later tradition turned him into the first bishop of Athens (a fair inference since the first converts often became the leaders of the church, 1 Cor. 16:15f.). Later still he was credited with the authorship of some fifth-century Neoplatonic writings. Along with the men converted there was also a woman called *Damaris*, about whom we again know nothing. Whether a church was

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<sup>28</sup> It may be significant that the Greek poet Aeschylus had depicted the god Apollo as denying the resurrection on the occasion of the inauguration of the Court of the Areopagus (*Eumenides*, 647f.; Bruce, *Book*, pp. 363f.).

<sup>14</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 308.

formed at this stage is doubtful; Paul describes some of his Corinthian converts as the 'first fruits of Achaia' (1 Cor. 16:15).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I. Howard Marshall, [\*Acts: An Introduction and Commentary\*](#), vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 308.

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# GANZ NOTES ON DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE (C. 500 CE)

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**Version:** 23, 27 October; 2, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18 November 2020

**Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite** (fl. c. 500). Author who assumed the name of Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned in Acts 17:34, and who composed the works known as the *Corpus Areopagiticum* (or *Dionysiacum*). These writings were the foundation of the apophatic school of mysticism in their denial that anything can be truly predicated of God.<sup>1</sup>

**Dionysius (6) the Pseudo-Areopagite** (c. 500), mystical theologian. The name given to the author of a *corpus* of theological writings to which the supporters of \*Severus (Patr. of Antioch, 512–18 CE) appealed at a colloquy at Constantinople in 533 CE, attributing them to Dionysius (1) of Athens. Though at an early date Hypatius, Bp. of Ephesus (c. 520–40 CE), rejected the attribution, it was normally accepted until, and even after, the 16th cent. Since the author draws on \*Proclus (410/2–85 CE) and is first cited by Severus, he is believed to have written in the early 6th cent. (perhaps as late as the 520s CE), probably in Syria.<sup>2</sup>

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## ACCESSIBLE STUDIES

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<sup>1</sup> [\*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Introduction and Biographic Information\*](#) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 502.

Patr. Patriarch.

Bp. Bishop.


cent. century.

cent. century.

<sup>2</sup> F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., [\*The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church\*](#) (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 488.

The text below is the most accessible version of all of the published works of Dionysius the Areopagite, which includes also excellent Introductions. The most accessible of his works to those unfamiliar with him is *The Mystical Theology* and *The Celestial Hierarchy*. But be prepared to be genuinely puzzled by him. He is subtle, brilliant, and incredibly deep. This is why reading the Preface to this edition by Roques and the first of the three Introductions to this edition is a good idea.


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"Reading these books one is brought yet again to hope that our society as a whole will be seriously drawn to a more systematic study of the deeper aspects of man's life..." A.M. Allchin Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works translation by Colm Luibheid forward, notes, and translation collaboration by Paul Rorem preface by René Roques introductions by Jaroslav Pelikan, Jean Leclercq, and Karlfried Froehlich "Indeed the inscrutable One is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name." Pseudo-Dionysius (5th or 6th century) There are few figures in the history of Western Spirituality who are more enigmatic than the fifth or sixth-century writer known as the Pseudo-Dionysius. The real identity of the person who chose to write under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite is unknown. Even the exact dates of his writings have never been determined. Moreover the texts themselves, though relatively short, are at points seemingly impenetrable and have mystified readers over the centuries. Yet the influence of this shadowy figure on broad range of mystical writers from the early Middle Ages on is readily discernible. His formulation of a method of negative theology that stresses the impotence of humans' attempt to penetrate the "cloud of unknowing" is famous, as is his meditation on the divine names. Despite his influence, relatively few attempts have been made to translate the entire corpus of his written into English. Here in one volume are collected all of the Pseudo-Dionysius's works. Each has been translated from the Migne edition, with reference to the forthcoming Göttingen critical edition of A.M. Ritter, G. Heil, and B. Suchla. To present these works to the English-speaking public, an outstanding team of six research scholars has been assembled. The lucid translation of Colm Luibheid has been augmented by Paul Rorem's notes and textual collaboration. The reader is presented a rich and varied examination of the main themes of Dionysian spirituality by René Roques, an incisive discussion of the original questions of the authenticity and alleged heresies in the Dionysian corpus by Jaroslav Pelikan, a comprehensive tracing Dionysius's influence on medieval authors by Jean Leclercq, and a survey by Karlfried Froehlich of the reception given the corpus by Humanists and sixteenth-century Reformers.

## ACTS 17 – ST. PAUL AT THE AREOPAGUS

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See my Notes on this biblical text.

The picture of the city painted by Luke has impressed different scholars as being remarkably true to life or as a brilliant literary product. There was in fact at Athens a blend of superstitious idolatry and enlightened philosophy. Paul's speech, which is delivered before the philosophers, has often been thought to be rather irrelevant to their concerns, since it was directed more against popular idolatry. **In fact, however, it would have been very relevant to Epicureans, who thought it unnecessary to seek after God and had no fear of his judgment, and to Stoics, whose concept of God was pantheistic.** Paul in fact uses the insights of the philosophers in his attack on the beliefs of the Athenian populace; **the Epicureans attacked superstitious, irrational belief in the gods, expressed in idolatry, while the Stoics stressed the unity of mankind and its kinship with God, together with the consequent moral duty of man.** What Paul was doing was to side with the philosophers, and then demonstrate that they did not go far enough.<sup>17 3</sup>

**Although Athens had once been the intellectual centre of the ancient world, it was now in a period of decline. It was a free city and had a famous university, but it tended to live on its reputation.** When Paul arrived, he was not so much impressed by the culture as irritated by the evidences of idolatry. 'He found himself confronted by a veritable forest of idols', with vast numbers of images of Hermes all over the city and especially at the entrance to the *agora* (RSV *market place*) through which he probably walked.<sup>19 4</sup>

**Hermes** was one of the most popular and frequently represented, if most complex, of the Greek Olympian deities. Identified by the Romans with **Mercury**, he was associated from the archaic through the Hellenistic periods with cunning and theft, music and eloquence, travel and commerce, and (especially as the Hellenistic Hermes Trismegistus) magic, alchemy and astrology. In the Bible, Hermes occurs as a divine

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<sup>17</sup> C. K. Barrett, 'Paul's Speech on the Areopagus', in M. E. Glaswell and E. W. Fasholé-Luke, *New Testament Christianity for Africa and the World* (London, 1974), pp. 69–77.

<sup>3</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 298.

RSV American Revised Standard Version, Old Testament, 1952; New Testament, Second Edition, 1971.

<sup>19</sup> R. E. Wycherley, 'St Paul at Athens', *JTS* 19, 1968, pp. 619–621.

<sup>4</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 300.

name in Acts 14:12, and as the name of an otherwise unknown Roman Christian greeted by Paul in Rom 16:14.<sup>5</sup>

**Their initial impression of Paul was not favourable. They dismissed him contemptuously as a *babbler*; the word designated a bird picking up scraps in the gutter, and hence came to be used of worthless loafers (the kind of person who today would pick up cigarette ends and smoke them) and also of persons who had acquired mere scraps of learning.** There would appear to be a deliberate echo of the tradition about Socrates when Paul is said to proclaim strange *divinities*; here the word ‘demon’ is used in its neutral, Greek sense. The divinities in question were *Jesus* and *Resurrection*, the latter possibly being understood as the name of a goddess, although a contemptuous dismissal of the idea of resurrection, as taught by Paul, is just as likely an interpretation.<sup>6</sup>

**Verses 33-34** – This verdict is confirmed by the fact that after Paul had left the gathering he did gain some converts. **One in particular was a member of the Areopagus called *Dionysius*. This indicates that Paul’s audience certainly contained members of the court of the Areopagus, whether or not we identify the occasion as a meeting of the court.** Nothing certain is known about Dionysius, although later tradition turned him into the first bishop of Athens (a fair inference since the first converts often became the leaders of the church, 1 Cor. 16:15f.). Later still he was credited with the authorship of some fifth-century Neoplatonic writings. Along with the men converted there was also a woman called *Damaris*, about whom we again know nothing. Whether a church was formed at this stage is doubtful; Paul describes some of his Corinthian converts as the ‘first fruits of Achaia’ (1 Cor. 16:15).<sup>7</sup>

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## IDENTITY OF DIONYSIUS

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**It seems valid to conclude that the author of the *Corpus* was a Syrian Christian who lived long at Athens, where he enthusiastically followed—and was profoundly influenced by—the**

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<sup>5</sup> L. H. Martin, “[Hermes](#),” ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999), 405.

<sup>6</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 301.

<sup>7</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 5, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980), 308.



**courses of \*Proclus and \*Damascius. An indication of his affective ties to Athens is his choice as a pseudonym, among the many options, of the Athenian Dionysius the Areopagite, and that in the titles of his works he calls himself the bishop of Athens.** In the 5th c. the Athenian school was frequented by various Syrians: Damascius was from Damascus; Salustius, Odenathus, Uranius, Hilary and Mara were of Syrian origin; Marinus, Proclus's successor, was a Palestinian who abandoned Judaism for Hellenism (*Vita Is.* 141, p. 196). The author of the *Corpus* must have been part of this circle.<sup>8</sup>

**Han Urs von Balthasar** – “First, that this writer, like no other, is ‘indivisible’ and that his person is wholly identified with his work; in other words, that there is nothing ‘made-up’ about him, that he is no ‘pseudonym’ for another. **And then, that such power, such radiance of holiness streams forth from this unity of person and work—as the Middle Ages sensed immediately—that he can in no case be regarded as a ‘forger’, not even as a clever ‘apologist’ pulling off a trick.** From the first it follows that it is this indivisibility that has made the theology of Denys, whatever the influences are—Neo-Platonic or Christian, Alexandrian or Cappadocian—into an original whole of such character and impact that none of the great theological thinkers of the following ages could avoid him, could escape a fascination to which the supposed august authorship may have contributed something, but which could scarcely have had less influence, had there been no claim to apostolic authority. Or is one to say that Scotus Eriugena, the Victorines, Bernard and his followers, Albert, Bonaventure and Thomas, Eckhart, Tauler and Ruysbroek, Gerson and Nicholas of Cusa, the Spanish mystics up to and including John of the Cross, Bérulle and Fénelon have all fallen victim to a crass forgery without which the theological substance and power of the CD would never have had any influence? **All one needs to do to be convinced of this explosive and yet constructive originality is to listen to the unmistakable sound of gifted self-consciousness which, in union with the deep humility of the author, echoes throughout the *Corpus*, above all in the letters, where the man appears most strongly as he responds to questions and**

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\* articles within the EAC

\* articles within the EAC

c. “century” or “centuries”

<sup>8</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 718.

doubts raised in the course of the systematic work: a tone the genuineness of which has nothing to do with so-called literary fiction.”<sup>9</sup>

## SUMMARY OF THE WORKS

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The texts themselves are not long, although their dense style has given many that impression. They are here presented in the order suggested by the author’s internal allusions, since there are no dependable historical references. *The Divine Names* uses the various biblical names for God, such as “Good,” “Being,” and “Life,” as a starting point for a thorough philosophical discussion of the divine attributes. Yet whatever is affirmed about God must also be denied. *The Mystical Theology* provides an extremely brief summary of the author’s method of affirmative and negative theology and its spiritual goal. It begins with Moses ascending into the dark “cloud of unknowing” and ends with the negation of all presumed attributes of the transcendent God. *The Celestial Hierarchy* considers the three triads of angelic beings, as described in the scriptures. *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* presents the rites and offices of the church: the three sacraments (baptism, Eucharist, and consecration of the *myron*-ointment), the three ordinations (of the hierarch or bishop, priests, and deacons), monastic tonsure, and funerals. To describe the relationship of the hierarch to those below him, Dionysius invented the word “hierarchy.” The nine *Letters* consider different aspects of these same topics.<sup>10</sup>

In the cross-references and the index, the treatises are abbreviated as follows: DN = *The Divine Names*, MT = *The Mystical Theology*, CH = *The Celestial Hierarchy*, EH = *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, and Ep. = one of the *Letters*. The column numbers and letters are taken from the Corderius edition in Migne with the line numbers often supplied as well. Thus DN 1 588A 2–5 indicates *The Divine Names*, chapter one, column 588A, lines two through five. The biblical citations are noted and indexed according to the divisions used in the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), including its numbering of the Psalms. The notation LXX (for Septuagint) indicates a

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<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, [The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics II: Clerical Styles](#), trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (San Francisco; New York: Ignatius Press; Crossroads Publications, 1984), 147.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Rorem, [“Foreword,”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.

quotation or allusion that is not identifiable in the RSV translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, but only in the Greek Old Testament.<sup>11</sup>

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## THEOLOGY AS “THEOS” AND “LOGOS”

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The first meaning of “theology” back when the word was coined did not refer to an academic discipline as in “I am studying Theology.” **It was the combining into one the two divine names of the Father – God, *ho theos* – and of the Son – the Logos, *ho logos*.**

**It meant *a relationship of love* that lay at the very center of reality: the love of the Father and the Son.**

It would be like us Ganzes referring to our parents as *FatherMother*, the Source from which all six of us children proceeded (*próodos*).

Jesus was very early referred to as “the Logos” (*ho logos*), because it was in Jesus the God-Man that all things have their “reason” or “cause” (logos means “reason or cause, or *explanation*”<sup>12</sup>).

Thus later on it may not be surprising that Theology came to mean “the study of God”, the *giving of reasons* why God, for what Purpose God, etc.

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## THEOLOGY AS PERCEPTION OF ARCHITECTURE

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In our Age, and for many centuries, Theology, sometimes in olden days called the “Queen of the Sciences”, considered as its formal object *the study of God* within the Trinity (**immanent**; Who God is; the THEARCHY) and what has proceeded from the Trinity (**economic**; What God does; the HIERARCHY).

In Greek the noun *archē* means: “the beginning, the source, the origin” and with the preposition *ek-* it means “from the beginning, from of old, from the first.” As a result, an *archē* in Philosophy meant “a First Principle”. And it does not surprise us that eventually an *archē*

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RSV Revised Standard Version

<sup>11</sup> Paul Rorem, [“Foreword.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 2.

<sup>12</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**to explain**” - *transitive*. “To describe or **give an account of in order to bring about understanding**, to explicate; to give details of, enter into details respecting.”

meant **something of pre-eminent importance or significance or value**, and even **first in power or influence**.

And yet for Dionysius, Theology is first and foremost about perceiving **the overall structure of reality** as expressive – a luminous vision – of the kindly God. And this structure, especially the HIERARCHY is, as Paul Rorem writes, “This three-fold definition of hierarchy as order, understanding, and activity could and does serve as the organizing principle for a comprehensive treatment of the hierarchical structure of the Dionysian universe”, exists for one purpose, as Paul Rorem explains: “The entire purpose of the arrangement called hierarchy is to enable the imitation of God and conformity to God.”

A way of considering this VISION OF THE WHOLE that Dionysius lays out is as a UNIFIED FIELD THEORY, about which Britannica summarizes: “Unified field theory, in particle physics, is an attempt to describe all fundamental forces and the relationships between elementary particles in terms of a single theoretical framework. In physics, forces can be described by fields that mediate interactions between separate objects. In the mid-19th century James Clerk Maxwell formulated the first field theory in *his theory of electromagnetism*. Then, in the early part of the 20th century, Albert Einstein developed general relativity, *a field theory of gravitation*. Later, Einstein and others attempted to construct a unified field theory in which electromagnetism and gravity would emerge as different aspects of a single fundamental field. They failed, and to this day gravity remains beyond attempts at a unified field theory.”

## THE KINDLY PROVIDENCE

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*The Celestial Hierarchy* – “Of course this ray [the Light which pours forth from the Father; Jesus is the first (in principle) manifestation of this Light] never abandons its own proper nature, or its own **interior unity**. Even though it works itself outward to multiplicity and proceeds outside of itself as befits **its generosity**, doing so to lift upward and to unify those beings for which it has a **providential responsibility**, nevertheless it remains inherently stable and it is forever one with its own unchanging identity. And it **grants to creatures the power to rise up**, so far as they may, **toward itself and it unifies them** by way of its own simplified unity. However, **this**

divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the Providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings.<sup>7</sup>[121C]<sup>13</sup>

## REMAINING, PROCESSION, RETURNING

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I think essential for understanding, or beginning to understand, what is meant by the divine “outpouring” that becomes “distinct existences” – the multiplicity of all created things – is to understand how an Artist “goes out” of himself or herself into his or her painting or poem or novel. The “work of Art” is genuinely distinct from the Artist, but it does not deplete, or fracture the unity (the “abiding” or “remaining”) of the Artist as it becomes distinctly other. In fact, the “work of Art” causes the Artist to become more fully himself or herself.

### *The law of monē, proodos and epistrophē.*

The Greek *monē* means “abiding, tarrying” or by association “persistence”, which derives from the Greek verb *menein*, “to remain or abide.”

The Greek *próodos* means “going onwards, advancing” or by association “progress”, but it also means “coming out of a house” and more importantly in the Neoplatonic literature “proceeding forth, **emanation.**” But this Greek noun as a combination of the preposition pro- gives the meaning to this noun “farther along the way; forwards.”

The *Oxford English Dictionary* at “**emanation**” (Latin compound *ex-* “out of” and *mānāre* – “to flow”) – “The process of flowing forth, issuing, or proceeding from anything as a source. *literal* and *figurative*. **Often applied to the origination of created beings from God; chiefly with reference to the theories that regard either the universe as a whole, or the spiritual part of it, as deriving its existence from the essence of God, and not from an act of creation out of nothing. Also, in Theology, used to denote the ‘generation’ of the Son, and the ‘procession’ of the Holy Ghost, as distinguished from the origination of merely created beings.**”

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<sup>7</sup> This entire paragraph echoes the full Neoplatonic structure of remaining, procession, and return. See note 4, above. The veils that “upliftingly conceal” are the scriptures and the liturgy, as indicated in the rest of this chapter and in DN 1 592B 20–27.

<sup>13</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 146.

The Greek *epistrophē* means “turning about; turning or wheeling about; turning towards” but especially in the Neoplatonic literature it means “return” to the Source.

*Monē* refers to the absolute transcendence of the first principle: motionless, detached from everything, unalterable and always the same (*De div. nom.* 9,8,916B), and practically identical with *henōsis*<sup>14</sup> (*De div. nom.* 2,4,640D). *Próodos* indicates its emanation—or overflowing—due to the superabundance of its energy, both when it produces beings by multiplying itself and when it manifests its providence and love toward them: it is thus identified on the one hand with *diakrisis*<sup>15</sup>, *pollaplasiasmos*<sup>16</sup> and creative activity, and on the other with *prónoua* and *ἔρωσ* (*De div. nom.* 4,4,712C). Yet *próodos* in no way alters the stable unity of *monē*. Finally, *epistrophē* means the return of *próodos* to its original source (*De div. nom.* 2,11,549B), as well as the conversion of beings—produced by *próodos* toward the first principle and their tendency to unite to it: well considered, this second aspect of *epistrophē* is nothing but a particular case of the first, **since all beings emanate from the “one” and are thus part of the divine *próodos*.**<sup>17</sup>

While *monē* is the original source and the point from which emanation starts and to which it returns, *próodos* and *epistrophē* represent **a genuine cyclical movement of the divine energy that emanates from the transcendent “one” and returns to it** (*De div. nom.* 4,14,712D–713A). These three moments were already fundamental in Neoplatonism.<sup>18</sup>

**“Unions” and “distinctions.”** These two basic concepts are widely illustrated in the second chapter of the *Divine Names*. On a more general level, while union (*henōsis*) refers to the deity considered in his absolute transcendence (*monē*) distinction (*diákrisis*) regards his emanations

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<sup>14</sup> *Henosis* means “combination into one; union”.

<sup>15</sup> *Diákrisis* means “separation, dissolution” but here it means “differentiation” meaning that something comes from its source with enough distinctness in itself to be recognizably different from its Source.

<sup>16</sup> *Pollaplasiasmós* is a word from the works of the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus, who was so influential in the thought of his student Dionysius, and which means “multiplication”.

<sup>17</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 719–720.

<sup>18</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

(*próodoi*), manifestations (*ekphanseis*<sup>19</sup>) and multiplications (*pollaplasiasmói*), which produce the various real existents.<sup>20</sup>

## GOD'S "REAL PRESENCE"

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*The immanence of the deity in the universe.* If, considered in its *monē*, the deity remains absolutely transcendent, **considered in its emanation (*próodos*)—which is both providential and creative—it pervades everything, reaches all beings and is therefore immanent in the universe (see, e.g., *Cael. hier.* 1,1, 12B 4).** This *emanation*—which becomes a genuine “transmission” (*diadosis*<sup>21</sup>, *chorēgia*<sup>22</sup>)—comes about as a result of the overflowing (*ekblyzein*, *hyperblyzein*) of the infinite power (*dynamis*) of which **God is immeasurably full (*Cael. hier.* IV, 1,177 C 13–14; *De div. nom.* VIII, 8,892B1 etc.). **The doctrine of the divine power that pervades (*diēkei*) the universe and holds it together (*synēchei*) is characteristic of Stoicism and is also found in \*Hellenistic Judaism, \*Middle Platonism, \*Neoplatonism and \*Gregory of Nyssa.** The idea of the **immeasurably full divine principle** whose infinite power overflows of its own accord, originating the emanation that reaches everywhere, is typically Neoplatonic.<sup>23</sup>**

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<sup>19</sup> The Greek noun *ekphansēis* meaning “showing itself” but more appropriately here it means “bright-shining”, what in the Old Testament is called the glory of God – not God Himself (unknowable, unseeable by humans) but the “bright-shining” from God’s Self.

<sup>20</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

<sup>21</sup> The Greek *diadosis* means “distribution,” or “communication” in the sense that creation is how God “communicates” Himself to the whole universe.

<sup>22</sup> The Greek *chorēgia* means “abundance” in the sense of God having an “abundance” of resources ever-flowing outward.

\* articles within the EAC

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\* articles within the EAC

<sup>23</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

Despite, however, this infinite multiplication or subdivision of the divine *próodos*, the original Source—corresponding to *monē*—**suffers no alteration or diminution either in its superessential unity or in its superabundant energy, remaining always the same in its unmoving identity** (e.g., *De div. nom.* II, 11,649B 6–7; 9–11; 12–14).<sup>24</sup>

A corollary of this “real presence” of God to the created world is we human beings through love become “really present” to God while suffering no alteration or diminution in our unity and energy as persons. Rather, by “going out” (*próodos*) in love to God, we more than ever establish our essential unity as persons.

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## THE TRINITY

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*The three persons of the Trinity.* The superessential unity of the first principle comprehends in itself, in a manner that surpasses human understanding, the persons of the Trinity who, as we have seen, represent the *diakrisis* [the “differentiation”] at the heart of the transcendent deity’s *henōsis* [“unity”]; while remaining clearly distinct and admitting no reciprocity or confusion between their roles (640C, 641A 12–13, 641D), the three persons nonetheless exist in one another in such a way as to form a higher unity, just as the lights of different lamps merge into one light.<sup>25</sup>

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## THEOLOGY – AFFIRMATION & NEGATION

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Language, while an extraordinary gift by which who we are on the inside, for example, can manifest itself to others, needs much careful thought. For example, how often we stumble and imagine that our words *for* things *are* what those things are.

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<sup>24</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

<sup>25</sup> Salvatore Lilla, “[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#),” ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.



Deny's theology is profoundly *dialectical*<sup>26</sup>. Dialectical is a method of thinking through something, from unknown to known. It assumes that the truth of the still unknown object of thought – of the reality one seeks to know – *requires the tension of opposites to cause the truth to appear* as the fruit of that tension of thought. An famous example of this is in Aristotle's discussion of the virtues, where a virtue is *the middle way between two extremes*, rather than the opposite of a vice: the vice at one extreme; the virtue at the other extreme.

According to ps.-Dionysius, the two "ways" do not contradict one another: whereas negative theology considers the deity in his absolute transcendence (*monē*) and stresses his difference from beings, positive theology considers it as the cause of all beings, i.e., the principle from which all beings emanate by virtue of *próodos* and in which they are thus potentially contained. Whereas **positive theology**, through *próodos* considers the descending process from the deity to beings, **negative theology** rises from beings to the first principle, which remains always detached from them. **These two methods also explain how the deity can be simultaneously nameless and the object of all possible names**—a doctrine also found in the *Corpus Herm.* V, 10.<sup>27</sup>

The *via negativa* is one of the main characteristics of the theology of the whole Platonic and patristic tradition. Ps.-Dionysius's words in *Cael. hier.* II, 3 140D 5–6, "which designate not what is, but what is not," should be compared with \*Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* V, 71,3 (CGS II, 374, 13–15) and with Plotinus, *Enn.* V, 3,14 (V, 68,6–7 Bréhier).<sup>28</sup>

**The absolute transcendence of the deity.** The natural consequence of the application of the negative concepts of the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides* to the divine *monē* is the stress put on the transcendence of the first principle. The most characteristic motifs of the Pseudo-Dionysian doctrine of divine transcendence are these: God is formless and untouchable; he is above all beings; he is unlike any being; he is above being; he is a nonbeing; he is above mind; he is above thought and knowledge, and is thus absence of thought and unknowable; the

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<sup>26</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* at "dialectical" – "In Hegelian and Marxist thought: subject to or driven by **the interaction of the contradictory or opposing forces or impulses held to be inherent in the world**; or of relating to this phenomenon. More generally: characterized by the existence or operation of opposing forces, tendencies, etc."

<sup>27</sup> Salvatore Lilla, "[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#)," ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

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<sup>28</sup> Salvatore Lilla, "[Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)](#)," ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720.

knowledge that we can have of him is the same as ignorance; he is above words, and so ineffable, without names and above every name: he is above every state (including those of quiet and movement) and every affirmation and negation; he is above infinity and limit; he is at the same time identical to infinity in a threefold sense (because he includes everything potentially in himself, because he is provided with an infinite number of creative powers, and because he is unknown); he is above time and eternity.<sup>29</sup>

The same doctrines, therefore, characterize the theology of the whole subsequent Platonic tradition—until the last, Neoplatonism—and that of Philo and the Greek patristic tradition.<sup>30</sup>

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## A TRIADIC PATTERN

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Dionysius illustrated in his own way the Platonic and Neoplatonic pattern of the three classes, three functions, and three levels. **In his eyes, indeed, all reality is hierarchic and triadic.** Thus the angelic universe includes three **triads**, each subdivided into three **orders**, which are themselves partitioned into three **levels** of intelligences, each of which corresponds to the ternary structure. In each one of these triadic groups, the function of *perfection or union* pertains to the first term, that of *illumination* to the second, and the function of *purification* to the third. The distribution of orders and functions is largely identical in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>31</sup>

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## DESCENT AND ASCENT

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**The totality of *this twofold universe*, the angelic and the human, constitutes a sacred order, an understanding, and an activity, all regulated by the law of hierarchical mediations, both in the sense of the “descent” of divine *illumination* and in that of the “ascent” of**

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<sup>29</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 720–721.

<sup>30</sup> Salvatore Lilla, [“Dionysius the Areopagite \(4th–5th C.\)”](#), ed. Angelo Di Berardino and James Hoover, trans. Joseph T. Papa, Erik A. Koenke, and Eric E. Hewett, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic; InterVarsity Press, 2014), 721.

<sup>31</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Roquemore, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 5.

*divinization. The harmony and the rigor of the whole and of the parts demand that each triad, each rank, and each intelligence remain strictly in its proper place and there perform entirely and uniquely its proper function.* In sharp contrast with most visions of the world, that of Dionysius includes only those intelligences able to be divinized, and excludes anything that may be closed to divinization. This explains why the stability, the movement, and the efficacy of the Dionysian hierarchy are entirely dependent on the divine “Thearchy,” the source and goal of all divinization.<sup>32</sup>

Recall Piccarda’s reply to Dante in *Paradiso*, Canto III (see immediately below). She perfectly captures the Dionysian insight about the *contentment* of each created thing, when it understands its particular place, role, duty, in the functioning of the whole.

About this text from *Paradiso*, Hollander has this comment: “In a sense it contains a central message of Piccarda’s speech in that it insists on the relationship that binds all saved Christians in their fellowship in God, a sense that overcomes the inevitable hierarchical distinctions found among them in this life. The love that governs their will is nothing less than charity, with the result that it is impossible for them to want advantage over their brothers and sisters in grace. **To wish things other than they are, to desire one’s own “advancement,” is nothing less than to oppose the will of God. And thus all members of this community observe the gradations among themselves, but find in them the expression of their general and personal happiness.**” [Dante. *Paradiso* (The Divine Comedy series Book 3) (Kindle Locations 27508-27513). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.]

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<sup>32</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 5–6.

'But tell me, do you, who are here content, →  
desire to achieve a higher place, where you  
66 might see still more and make yourselves more dear?'

Along with the other shades, she smiled, →  
then answered me with so much gladness  
69 she seemed alight with love's first fire: →

'Brother, the power of love subdues our will →  
so that we long for only what we have  
72 and thirst for nothing else.

'If we desired to be more exalted, →  
our desires would be discordant  
75 with His will, which assigns us to this place.

'That, as you will see, would not befit these circles  
if to be ruled by love is here required  
78 and if you consider well the nature of that love.

'No, it is the very essence of this blessed state →  
that we remain within the will of God,  
81 so that our wills combine in unity.

'Therefore our rank, from height to height,  
throughout this kingdom pleases all the kingdom,  
84 as it delights the King who wills us to His will.

'And in His will is our peace. →  
It is to that sea all things move, →  
87 both what His will creates and that which nature makes.'

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## GOD WHO REVEALS AND HIDES

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The approach to God will come about through the hierarchy, in the midst of which the divine “names” will be elaborated and purified. Whatever the origin of these names—biblical or philosophical—all are related to the same method, to a **double and apparently contradictory axiom that the whole creation reveals God (Rom 1:20), while on the contrary no one has ever seen God (Ex 33:20; Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12)**. Hence, God will receive many names, an infinity of names (“polyonomos,” “apeironomos”); or, on the contrary, he will remain without a name, above every name (“anonomos,” “hyperonomos”). More precisely, from the viewpoint of the creative procession, it will be possible to qualify or name God by means of his total work (*affirmative or cataphatic theology*); from the viewpoint of the divinizing return, it will be necessary to eliminate every name (*negative or apophatic theology*). From the latter point of view, the truest according to Dionysius, it will become necessary even to contest the validity of the essential terms of trinitarian dogmatics (unity, trinity), those same terms that John the Scot

(Eriugena) will oppose even more radically in his critique of the notions of relationship and love.<sup>33</sup>

Paradoxically, then, the divinization of the intelligence is dependent on this same intelligence renouncing its own output, its order of thought, and, more radically, its own self.<sup>34</sup>

*Divine Names* [588A] – Let us therefore look as far upward as the light of sacred scripture will allow, and, in **our reverent awe** of what is divine, let us be drawn together toward the divine splendor. For, if we may trust the superlative wisdom and truth of scripture, **the things of God are revealed to each mind in proportion to its capacities; and the divine goodness is such that, out of concern for our salvation, it deals out the immeasurable and infinite in limited measures.**<sup>35</sup>

Notice how in contemporary American culture the very idea that people have different capacities for excellences of different kinds is regarded with deepest suspicion or it is outright rejected as “unfair” to those with “less capacity” for excellence.

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## IMAGES “DISSIMILAR” AND “SIMILAR”

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Perceptible symbols will be but a particular field of this same method. The intelligence must interpret, correct, straighten out, “reduce,” and deny the images, forms, and schemes in which are materially represented the divine realities they are unable to contain.<sup>36</sup>

For Dionysius, **scriptural symbolism is intended first of all for teaching.** It is educational, and thus temporary, and it is divided empirically into two groups, which are treated in slightly different ways and which seem at first to have different degrees of efficacy. **“Similar” symbolism—beautiful, simple, agreeable to the senses—seems better adapted to the**

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<sup>33</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 6.

<sup>34</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 6–7.

<sup>35</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, [Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works](#), ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 49.

<sup>36</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 7.

**education of beginners. “Dissimilar” symbolism, on the contrary, through its very dissimilarity, its ugliness or monstrosity, and by the natural repugnance it inspires, proves from the very first to be better adapted to the method of negation that it demands.** That is why it is much preferable to the similar symbolism, since it avoids the naturalistic and aesthetic obstacles by engaging the intelligence more directly in the way of negation.<sup>37</sup>

It occurs to me that at the center of the Christian mystery is the most monstrous of “dissimilar” images: a crucified God-Man! At the center of any Christian theological system is an ugliness so monstrous that “all our teacup talk of God” (as Hafiz puts it), our theological language come crashing into pieces.

I recall, and sometimes painfully recall, how so many of my Theology professors got bewitched by their own sophisticated intellectual systems that they actually believed that they knew God, were experts. But what kept striking my awareness with many of them is how dull, un-alive these Professors were, how filled with insecurities and hyper-sensitivity to being challenged. Their whole manner *proved* that what they knew was a lot, but it was not God. I am guessing that Dionysius perceived the same thing among all of those from whom he sought wisdom, from whom he desired to learn about God. But what he discovered was what Qoheleth discovered: “All is vanity.” Dionysius recognized the danger of theological language that asserted far too much.

## THE CELESTIAL HIERARCHY

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The following translations represent a variety of genres, all of which comment on the *Celestial Hierarchy* of Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius). Dionysius’s *Celestial Hierarchy* was most likely written at the end of the fifth century or the beginning of the sixth (though the writings themselves locate the writer in the first century, a companion of Paul). Today, the identity of the writer of the Dionysian corpus is completely unknown. However, Dionysius’s apostolic credentials were unquestioned throughout most of the period of writings represented in this volume. Dionysius was considered to be the Dionysius of Acts 17:34. In the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius’s apostolic authority and wisdom were invoked not only on the subject of angels but also on the proper method of interpreting symbols, the process of procession and return to God, the nature of hierarchy, what we might call spiritual enlightenment, the theology of beauty or aesthetics, and even architecture. By the time of the rise of humanism, the authorship of the Dionysian corpus began to be questioned, and it is generally agreed that the denial of Areopagitic authorship by the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla dealt such a blow to

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<sup>37</sup> René Roques, [“Preface.”](#) in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Roem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 7.

interest in Dionysius that by the time of the Reformation the reformers, as a rule, had little use for him. Today, while there is universal agreement denying the authorship of the Areopagite from Acts (hence the often-used “Pseudo”), interest in the Dionysian corpus is at a near revival pitch, and the literature on the corpus is almost overwhelming.<sup>1 38</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A few recommended works on Dionysius that focus especially on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and are particularly helpful are Paul Rorem’s commentary on the *Celestial Hierarchy* and his survey of Dionysius’s reception in the medieval period in Rorem, *P-D*, 47–90; Andrew Louth’s helpful volume, *Dionysius the Areopagite* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989), 33–51; the introductory material and notes in Classics of Western Spirituality Series volume on Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987); and Chase, *Angelic Wisdom*, especially the sections on Dionysius’s symbolic theology, apophatic methodology, and angelology. Helpful studies on the subject in French include Dionysius, *Hiér. cél.*, lviiff., on the Christian sources of Dionysian angelology, and René Roques, *L’univers Dionysien* (Paris: Aubier, 1954), 135–67, on angels and intellectual hierarchies.

<sup>38</sup> Bernard McGinn, ed., [Angelic Spirituality: Medieval Perspectives on the Ways of Angels](#), trans. Steven Chase, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2002), 159.

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# THE CELESTIAL HIERARCHY<sup>1</sup>

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Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 143–191.

## CHAPTER ONE

[120A] *Dionysius the Elder to Timothy the Fellow-Elder: Even though in various ways every divine enlightenment proceeds, out of its goodness, toward those provided for, it not only remains simple in itself but also unifies those it enlightens.*<sup>2</sup>

[120B] 1. “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights.”<sup>3</sup> But there is something more. Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in. [121A] For, as the sacred Word says, “from him and to him are all things.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Celestial Hierarchy* has no other dependable modern translation into English. The best translation yet in print, abundantly annotated and accompanying a critical Greek text, is the French rendition by M. Gandillac (*Sources Chrétiennes* 58), to be abbreviated as Gandillac, CH. As to the overall structure of the treatise, Giuseppa Saccaro Battisti has argued for certain similarities with classical rhetoric: exordium (chapters 1–2), narratio (3–5), divisio (6–10), confutatio (11–14), confirmatio (15), and conclusio (the final sentence of chapter 15) (“Strutture e figure retoriche nel ‘de Caelesti Hierarchia’ dello Pseudo-Dionigi: Un mezzo di espressione dell’ ontologia Neoplatonica,” *Archivio di Filosofia* 51 [1983]: 293–319).

<sup>2</sup> On the doubtful authenticity of these chapter headings, see DN 1, note 2, and EH 1, note 2.

<sup>3</sup> Jas 1:17.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 11:36; cf. DN 4 708A 4f., DN 13 980B 27f. This opening paragraph has bracketed the Neoplatonic theme of procession and return with two supporting biblical quotations. The cyclical pattern of “remaining,” a downward “procession,” and an upward “return” is essential to the structure of late Neoplatonism. Proclus received this motif from his predecessors Iamblichus and Syrianus and summarized it succinctly: “Every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and returns to it” (*The Elements of Theology*, ed. E. R. Dodds, no. 35, p. 38; see also nos. 25–39, pp. 28–43, and the comments by Dodds, XIX–XX and pp. 212f.). The language of a logical cause and effect helps avoid both the obvious mistake of interpreting this theme literally as a movement in space and also the more subtle pitfalls of understanding it sequentially as a movement in time. Stephen Gersh has organized a major monograph around this construct of the “downward and upward processes” (*From Iamblichus*, see especially pp. 46, 224, and 286). Dionysius used this framework primarily to express the divine revelation,





2. Let us, then, call upon Jesus, the Light of the Father, the “true light enlightening every man coming into the world,”<sup>5</sup> “through whom we have obtained access”<sup>6</sup> to the Father, the light which is the source of all light. To the best of our abilities, we should raise our eyes to the paternally transmitted enlightenment coming from sacred scripture and, as far as we can, we should behold the intelligent hierarchies of heaven and we should do so in accordance with what scripture has revealed to us in symbolic and uplifting fashion. We must lift up the immaterial and steady eyes of our minds to that outpouring of Light which is so primal, indeed much more so, and which comes from that source of divinity, [121B] I mean the Father. This is the Light which, by way of representative symbols, makes known to us the most blessed hierarchies among the angels. But we need to rise from this outpouring of illumination so as to come to the simple ray of Light itself.

Of course this ray never abandons its own proper nature, or its own interior unity. Even though it works itself outward to multiplicity and proceeds outside of itself as befits its generosity, doing so to lift upward and to unify those beings for which it has a providential responsibility, nevertheless it remains inherently stable and it is forever one with its own unchanging identity. And it grants to creatures the power to rise up, so far as they may, toward itself and it unifies them by way of its own simplified unity. However, this divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the Providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings.<sup>7</sup>[121C]

3. All this accounts for the fact that the sacred institution and source of perfection established our most pious hierarchy. He modeled it on the hierarchies of heaven, and clothed these immaterial hierarchies in numerous material figures and forms so that, in a way appropriate to our nature, we might be uplifted from these most venerable images to interpretations<sup>8</sup> and assimilations which are simple and inexpressible. For it is quite impossible that we humans should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires. [121D] Hence, any thinking person realizes that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness. The beautiful odors which strike the senses are representations of a conceptual diffusion. Material lights are images of the outpouring of an immaterial gift of light. The

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which “descends” to its recipients and then “uplifts” them, as perhaps suggested by the very sequence of his treatises (see MT 3, note 17) and as clearly stated in several passages: CH 1 120B to 121C 27, CH 2 141B 21–31, CH 9 260B 15–21, EH 3 428D 38 to 429B 25, DN 4 712C 29 to 713A 2. MT 3 1033C.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 1:9.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 5:2; cf. Eph 2:18, 3:12

<sup>7</sup> This entire paragraph echoes the full Neoplatonic structure of remaining, procession, and return. See note 4, above. The veils that “upliftingly conceal” are the scriptures and the liturgy, as indicated in the rest of this chapter and in DN 1 592B 20–27.

<sup>8</sup> On this use of the term “uplifting” (anagogy) to mean an “interpretation,” see CH 15 337D 47, note 179.



thoroughness of sacred discipleship indicates the immense contemplative capacity of the mind. [124A] Order and rank here below are a sign of the harmonious ordering toward the divine realm. The reception of the most divine Eucharist is a symbol of participation in Jesus. And so it goes for all the gifts transcendently received by the beings of heaven, gifts which are granted to us in a symbolic mode.<sup>9</sup>

The source of spiritual perfection provided us with perceptible images of these heavenly minds. He did so out of concern for us and because he wanted us to be made godlike. He made the heavenly hierarchies known to us. He made our own hierarchy a ministerial colleague of these divine hierarchies by an assimilation, to the extent that is humanly feasible, to their godlike priesthood. He revealed all this to us in the sacred pictures of the scriptures so that he might lift us in spirit up through the perceptible to the conceptual, from sacred shapes and symbols to the simple peaks of the hierarchies of heaven.

## CHAPTER TWO

*That divine and heavenly things are appropriately revealed even through dissimilar symbols.*

[136D] 1. The first task I think is to set down the purpose of every hierarchy and to indicate how this is to the advantage of its members. Then, following on what scripture has revealed to us, a hymn of praise must be offered up to the heavenly hierarchies. I must describe the sacred forms given to these heavenly ranks by scripture, [137A] for one has to be lifted up through such shapes to the utter simplicity of what is there.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot, as mad people do, profanely visualize these heavenly and godlike intelligences as actually having numerous feet and faces.<sup>11</sup> They are not shaped to resemble the brutishness of oxen or to display the wildness of lions. They do not have the curved beak of the eagle or the wings and feathers of birds.<sup>12</sup> We must not have pictures of flaming wheels whirling in the

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<sup>9</sup> These references to the Eucharist and to the beauties, odors, and lights there perceived by the senses suggest that the opening of *The Celestial Hierarchy* also introduces “our” hierarchy, more thoroughly discussed in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Chapter 3 of *The Celestial Hierarchy* concludes the introduction to both hierarchies; Chapter 4 then begins the specific discussion of the angelic hierarchy.

<sup>10</sup> This opening paragraph may outline the rest of the treatise. The purpose of a hierarchy is discussed in CH 3. Perhaps CH 4–14 could loosely be called a hymn of praise. The specific discussion of the “sacred forms” is found in CH 15.

<sup>11</sup> All of these introductory examples are discussed later in the treatise, most of them in Chapter 15. The angels’ facial features and feet are explained in CH 15 332A–D.

<sup>12</sup> The symbols of the ox, the lion, and the eagle (Ez 1:10) are considered in CH 15 336D to 337A.



skies,<sup>13</sup> of material thrones made ready to provide a reception for the Deity,<sup>14</sup> of multicolored horses,<sup>15</sup> or of spear-carrying lieutenants,<sup>16</sup> or any of those shapes handed on to us amid all the variety of the revealing symbols of scripture. The Word of God makes use of poetic imagery when discussing these formless intelligences but, [137B] as I have already said, it does so not for the sake of art,<sup>17</sup> but as a concession to the nature of our own mind. It uses scriptural passages in an uplifting fashion as a way, provided for us from the first, to uplift our mind in a manner suitable to our nature.

2. These pictures have to do with beings so simple that we can neither know nor contemplate them. What if someone therefore thinks that the scriptural imagery for these minds is incongruous and that the names given to the angels have the inadequacy of a pretense? Indeed, [137C] it could be argued that if the theologians wanted to give corporeal form to what is purely incorporeal, they should have resorted to a more appropriate and related fashioning, that they should have begun with what we would hold to be noblest, immaterial and transcendent beings, instead of drawing upon a multiplicity of the earthiest forms and applying these to godlike realities which are utterly simple and heavenly. Now perhaps this intends to lift us upward and not lead the celestial appearances down into incongruous dissimilarities. But in fact it illicitly defies the divine powers and also misleads our mind, entangling it in profane compositions. One would likely then imagine that the heavens beyond really are filled with bands of lions and horses, that the divine praises are, [137D] in effect, great moos, that flocks of birds take wing there or that there are other kinds of creatures all about or even more dishonorable material things, whatever the completely dissimilar similarities of the revealing scriptures depict as tending toward the absurd, counterfeit, and emotional.

[140A] But if one looks at the truth of the matter, the sacred wisdom of scripture becomes evident, for, when the heavenly intelligences are represented with forms, great providential care is taken to offer no insult to the divine powers, as one might say, and we ourselves are spared a passionate dependence upon images which have something of the lowly and the vulgar about them. Now there are two reasons for creating types for the typeless, for giving shape to what is actually without shape.<sup>18</sup> First, we lack the ability to be directly raised up to conceptual

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<sup>13</sup> The flaming wheels (Dn 7:9) and the entire image of fire are discussed in CH 15 328D to 329D.

<sup>14</sup> Dn 7:9; Rv 4:2; cf. Ep. 9 1105B 16. Of course, “thrones” as a celestial name is treated below in Chapter 7 (205D).

<sup>15</sup> Zech 1:8, 6:2; Rv 6:1–9; cf. CH 15 337AB.

<sup>16</sup> Jos 5:13; cf. CH 15 333A 19.

<sup>17</sup> R. Roques has considered this phrase, and its Latin translation by Eriugena, in “‘Valde artificialiter’: le sens d’un contresens,” *Annuaire de l’école pratique des Hautes Études* 77 (1969–1970): 31–72.

<sup>18</sup> The double rationale for symbolism is also discussed later in this chapter in 145A 8–10, and in EH 1 377A 1–5, Ep. 9 1105C 36–45, and 1108AB 7–20.



contemplations. We need our own upliftings that come naturally to us and which can raise before us the permitted forms of the marvelous and unformed sights. Second, it is most fitting to the mysterious passages of scripture that the sacred and hidden truth about the celestial intelligences be concealed through the inexpressible and the sacred and be inaccessible to the *hoi polloi*. Not everyone is sacred, and, as scripture says, knowledge is not for everyone.<sup>19</sup>

As for the incongruity of scriptural imagery or the impropriety of using humble forms to represent the divine and holy ranks, this is a criticism to which one must say in reply that sacred revelation works in a double way.

[140C] 3. It does so, firstly, by proceeding naturally through sacred images in which like represents like, while also using formations which are dissimilar and even entirely inadequate and ridiculous.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes the mysterious tradition of the scriptures represents the sacred blessedness of the transcendent Deity under the form of “Word,” “Mind,” and “Being.” It shows thereby that rationality and wisdom are, necessarily, attributes of God, that he is also to be deemed a true subsistence and the true cause of the subsistence of every being, and that he may also be represented as light and hailed as life.<sup>21</sup> Now these sacred shapes certainly show more reverence and seem vastly superior to the making of images drawn from the world. Yet they are actually no less defective than this latter, for the Deity is far beyond every manifestation of being and of life; no reference to light can characterize it; [140D] every reason or intelligence falls short of similarity to it.

Then there is the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invisible,<sup>22</sup> infinite, ungraspable, and other things which show not what he is but what in fact he is not. This second way of talking about him seems to me much more appropriate, for, as the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, [141A] God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility.

Since the way of negation appears to be more suitable to the realm of the divine and since positive affirmations are always unfitting to the hiddenness of the inexpressible, a manifestation

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Cor 8:7; cf. Mt 13:11; Lk 8:10; cf. EH 1 376C 34f.

<sup>20</sup> Note that the author does not advance two separate types of images that are mutually exclusive. The rest of the corpus explains that this is a “double” way in that “the very same things are both similar and dissimilar to God” (DN 9 916A 8–10). Thus later in this chapter, the author arranges some scriptural symbols in a continuum of similarity and dissimilarity (144C to 145A).

<sup>21</sup> “Word”: Jn 1:1; for further biblical examples and discussion, see DN 1 596B 20 and DN 7 872C. “Mind”: Is 40:13; see DN 1 596B 19. “Being”: perhaps Ex 3:14; see DN 1 596A 13 and DN 5 816B to 825B. “Light”: 1 Jn 1:5; see DN 1 596A 13. “Life”: Jn 11:25; see DN 1 596A 13 and DN 6 856B to 857C.

<sup>22</sup> Col 1:15; 1 Tm 1:17; Heb 11:27.



through dissimilar shapes is more correctly to be applied to the invisible.<sup>23</sup> So it is that scriptural writings, far from demeaning the ranks of heaven, actually pay them honor by describing them with dissimilar shapes so completely at variance with what they really are that we come to discover how those ranks, so far removed from us, transcend all materiality. Furthermore, I doubt that anyone would refuse to acknowledge that incongruities are more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are. High-flown shapes could well mislead someone into thinking that the heavenly beings are golden or gleaming men, [141B] glamorous, wearing lustrous clothing, giving off flames which cause no harm, or that they have other similar beauties with which the word of God has fashioned the heavenly minds.<sup>24</sup> It was to avoid this kind of misunderstanding among those incapable of rising above visible beauty that the pious theologians so wisely and upliftingly stooped to incongruous dissimilarities, for by doing this they took account of our inherent tendency toward the material and our willingness to be lazily satisfied by base images. At the same time they enabled that part of the soul which longs for the things above actually to rise up. Indeed the sheer crassness of the signs is a goad so that even the materially inclined cannot accept that it could be permitted or true that the celestial and divine sights could be conveyed by such shameful things. [141C] And remember too that there is nothing which lacks its own share of beauty,<sup>25</sup> for as scripture rightly says, “Everything is good.”<sup>26</sup>

4. Everything, then, can be a help to contemplation; and dissimilar similarities derived from the world, about which I have been talking, can be applied to those beings which are both intelligible and intelligent.<sup>27</sup> Of course one has always to remember the enormous difference between what is typical of the domain of intelligence and that of the senses.<sup>28</sup> [141D] Thus, among those lacking in intelligence, anger is a raging, passionate and irrational urge, whereas among those endowed with reason it is something else, and has to be understood to be such. For intelligent beings anger is, I believe, the sturdy working of reason in them and the capacity they have to be grounded tenaciously in holy and unchanging foundations.

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<sup>23</sup> CH 2 here continues the discussion of affirmations and negations begun in MT 3, applying the principles of negative theology to the interpretation of perceptible symbols, beginning with those most easily denied in their literal sense.

<sup>24</sup> Dn 10:5f. (LXX); cf. Mt 28:3; see also CH 15 328D 41, 333A 6–10.

<sup>25</sup> See also CH 4 177CD 19–21, DN 4 720B 15f., and DN 7 868C 31–33.

<sup>26</sup> Gn 1:31.

<sup>27</sup> On this expression for the angels, see Gandillac, CH, p. 81, n. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Iamblichus, *de Myst.* I, 21, 66.5–9. On the comparison and contrast of Dionysius and Iamblichus regarding perceptible symbols, especially those connected to ritual, see P. Rorem, “Iamblichus and the Anagogical Method in Pseudo-Dionysian Liturgical Theology,” *Studia Patristica XVII*, ed. E. A. Livingstone (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 453–60.



Similarly with desire. For those lacking in reason it is a limitless appetite for the material, [144A] a thrust originating in that chronic urge to dwell with the ephemeral, that living, mastering longing to remain with whatever is applauded by the senses. Now when we apply dissimilar similarities to intelligent beings, we say of them that they experience desire, but this has to be interpreted as a divine yearning for that immaterial reality which is beyond all reason and all intelligence. It is a strong and sure desire for the clear and impassible contemplation of the transcendent. It is a hunger for an unending, conceptual, and true communion with the spotless and sublime light, of clear and splendid beauty. Intemperance then will be an unflinching and unturning power, seen in the pure and unchanging yearning for divine beauty and in the total commitment to the real object of all desire.<sup>29</sup> [144B]

What we call lack of intelligence and lack of perception in animals and in objects is in fact the deficiency of reason and of perception. But when we are talking of immaterial and intelligent beings we say this, as befits holy beings. They, as transcendent beings, far surpass our discursive and bodily reason, just as material perception is something far beneath those entities which are intelligent and disembodied.

So, then, forms, even those drawn from the lowliest matter, can be used, not unfittingly, with regard to heavenly beings. Matter, after all, owes its subsistence to absolute beauty and keeps, throughout its earthly ranks, some echo of intelligible beauty. Using matter, one may be lifted up to the immaterial archetypes. [144C] Of course one must be careful to use the similarities as dissimilarities, as discussed, to avoid one-to-one correspondences, to make the appropriate adjustments as one remembers the great divide between the intelligible and the perceptible.

5. We will find that the mysterious theologians employ these things not only to make known the ranks of heaven but also to reveal something of God himself. They sometimes use the most exalted imagery, calling him for instance sun of righteousness,<sup>30</sup> star of the morning which rises into the mind,<sup>31</sup> [144D] clear and conceptual light.<sup>32</sup> Sometimes they use more intermediate, down-to-earth images. They call him the blazing fire which does not cause destruction,<sup>33</sup> water

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<sup>29</sup> On these emotions, see Gandillac, CH, pp. 81–83

<sup>30</sup> Mal 4:2. For further physical symbols of God such as those considered here in notes 30–38, see Ep. 9 1104C 25 to 1105B 28.

<sup>31</sup> 2 Pt 1:19; Rv 22:16. Neither of these verses is precisely echoed in the Areopagite's wording; see Plotinus, *Enneads*, II, 3, 12, 20.

<sup>32</sup> 1 Jn 1:5; see DN 1 596A 13, note 26, for other biblical texts. Mt 5:14–16 concerns an unhidden light.

<sup>33</sup> Ex 3:2 concerns a nonconsuming fire. Wisd of Sol 18:3 refers to the pillar of fire (Ex 13:21f.) as a harmless sun. For other discussions of fire as a symbol for God and for the angels, see Ep. 9 1108C 39 and CH 15 329A.



filling up life and, so to speak, entering the stomach and forming inexhaustible streams.<sup>34</sup> Sometimes the images are of the lowliest kind, such as sweet-smelling ointment<sup>35</sup> and corner stone.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes the imagery is even derived from animals so that God is described as a lion or a panther, a leopard or a charging bear.<sup>37</sup> [145A] Add to this what seems the lowliest and most incongruous of all, for the experts in things divine gave him the form of a worm.<sup>38</sup>

In this way the wise men of God, exponents of hidden inspiration, separate the “Holy of Holies” from defilement by anything in the realm of the imperfect or the profane. They therefore honor the dissimilar shape so that the divine things remain inaccessible to the profane and so that all those with a real wish to see the sacred imagery may not dwell on the types as true. So true negations and the unlike comparisons with their last echoes offer due homage to the divine things. For this reason there is nothing ridiculous about representing heavenly beings with similarities which are dissimilar and incongruous, for the reasons mentioned. [145B] And I myself might not have been stirred from this difficulty to my current inquiry, to an uplifting through a precise explanation of these sacred truths, had I not been troubled by the deformed imagery used by scripture in regard to the angels. My mind was not permitted to dwell on imagery so inadequate, but was provoked to get behind the material show, to get accustomed to the idea of going beyond appearances to those upliftings which are not of this world.<sup>39</sup>

But enough now about these material and incongruous images of the angels as found in sacred scripture. What I must now do is to explain what I mean by hierarchy and to say what advantage such hierarchy offers to those who are members of it. So, I hope that my discourse will be guided by Christ, by my Christ, if I may put it this way, the inspiration of what has been made known about the hierarchy. And you, [145C] my child, must follow the recommendations of our hierarchic tradition. Listen carefully to things sacredly said and be inspired by them in an initiation into inspired things. Keep these holy truths a secret in your hidden mind. Guard their unity safe from the multiplicity of what is profane,<sup>40</sup> for, as scripture

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<sup>34</sup> Jn 7:38, from Prv 18:4; cf. Jn 4:14. See also EH1 373C 40, DN1 596B 19, Ep. 9 1104B 20; Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI, 9, 9, 49.

<sup>35</sup> Sg 1:3; EH 4 concerns the sacrament of the ointment or myron as a symbol for Christ.

<sup>36</sup> Is 28:16; Eph 2:20 (Ez 10:1); see the fuller range of biblical sources in note 68 to DN 1 596C 30f.

<sup>37</sup> Is 31:4; Hos 5:14, 13:7f. Dove: Mt 3:16; Eagle: Dt 32:11.

<sup>38</sup> Ps 22:6.

<sup>39</sup> This remark is perhaps genuinely (unintentionally) autobiographical. For “uplifting” (anagogy) as an “interpretation,” see CH 15, note 179.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Tm 6:20.



says, you must not throw before swine that pure, shining and splendid harmony of the conceptual pearls.<sup>41</sup>

## CHAPTER THREE

*What a hierarchy is and what its benefit is.*

[164D] 1. In my opinion a hierarchy is a sacred order, a state of understanding and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine.<sup>42</sup> And it is uplifted to the imitation of God in proportion to the enlightenments divinely given to it. The beauty of God—so simple, so good, so much the source of perfection—is completely uncontaminated by dissimilarity. It reaches out to grant every being, according to merit, a share of light and then through a divine sacrament, in harmony and in peace, it bestows on each of those being perfected its own form.

[165A] 2. The goal of a hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him.<sup>43</sup> A hierarchy has God as its leader of all understanding and action. It is forever looking directly at the comeliness of God. A hierarchy bears in itself the mark of God. Hierarchy causes its members to be images of God in all respects, to be clear and spotless mirrors<sup>44</sup> reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself. It ensures that when its members have received this full and divine splendor they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God's will to beings further down the scale.

It would be quite wrong for those granting initiation in the sacred things, as indeed for those sacredly initiated, ever to do anything or even to exist against the sacred orderings of him who is after all the source of all perfection. This would certainly be wrong, particularly if they themselves desire the splendor of God, if they are forever gazing on this splendor in a way appropriate to its sacred character, [165B] and if it is to this splendor that they are conformed, proportionately to each mind.

If one talks then of hierarchy, what is meant is a certain perfect arrangement, an image of the beauty of God which sacredly works out the mysteries of its own enlightenment in the orders and levels of understanding of the hierarchy, and which is likened toward its own source as much as is permitted.<sup>45</sup> Indeed for every member of the hierarchy, perfection consists in this, that it is uplifted to imitate God as far as possible and, more wonderful still, that it becomes

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<sup>41</sup> Mt 7:6

<sup>42</sup> This definition of hierarchy (order, understanding, and activity) provides the organizing principle for R. Roques's masterful *L'Univers Dionysien* (see p. 30). Other statements of general definition for hierarchy are found below, 165BC 17–32, in EH 1 373C and EH 5 500D to 504A3.

<sup>43</sup> On this goal of assimilation and union, see Gandillac, CH, p. 88, n. 1.

<sup>44</sup> Wisd of Sol 7:26.

<sup>45</sup> For other definitions of hierarchy, see note 42 above.





what scripture calls a “fellow workman for God”<sup>46</sup> and a reflection of the workings of God. Therefore when the hierarchic order lays it on some to be purified and on others to do the purifying, on some to receive illumination and on others to cause illumination, on some to be perfected [165C] and on others to bring about perfection, each will actually imitate God in the way suitable to whatever role it has.

What we humans call the beatitude of God is something uncontaminated by dissimilarity. It is full of a continuous light and is perfect, indeed it lacks no perfection whatsoever. It is purifying, illuminating, and perfecting; or rather it is itself purification, illumination, and perfection.<sup>47</sup> It is beyond purification; it is beyond light; it is the very source of perfection which is more than perfect. It is also the cause of every hierarchy and yet it surpasses by far every sacred thing.

[165D] 3. Now it seems to me that those who have been purified should in fact be perfectly uncontaminated, that they should be free of all dissimilar blemish. I think that those receiving sacred illumination should receive the divine light in full, that they should be uplifted in the holy eyes of their mind so as to be fully able to engage in contemplation. I think that those being perfected should draw away from imperfection and join the company of those who behold sacred things with a perfected understanding. [168A] It is also right that those who purify should give of their superabundant purity to others. It is right too that those who give illumination—those minds clearer than the others, joyfully full of the sacred radiance, and obviously able both to receive the light and to pass on what they acquire—that these should spread their overflowing light everywhere among those worthy of it. Finally, it is only proper that those charged with the task of creating perfection, as those who understand the perfecting impartation, should cause the perfect to be what they are by introducing them to an understanding of the sacred things so reverently beheld. And so it comes about that every order in the hierarchical rank is uplifted as best it can toward cooperation with God. By grace and a God-given power, it does things which belong naturally and supernaturally to God, things performed by him transcendentally and revealed in the hierarchy for the permitted imitation of God-loving minds. [168B]

## CHAPTER FOUR

*What the designation “angel” signifies.*

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<sup>46</sup> 1 Cor 3:9; 1 Thes 3:2

<sup>47</sup> The triad of purification, illumination, and perfection is particularly prominent in the discussion of the three clerical orders of deacons, priests, and hierarchs. See EH 5 504A 5 to 509A 3, and CH 7, note 75. On the origins of this famous trio, see the argument of A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), pp. 57–59.

1. I think I have now explained what I mean by hierarchy itself and I must, accordingly, lift up a song of praise to the angelic hierarchy.<sup>48</sup> With eyes that look beyond the world I must behold the sacred forms attributed to it by the scriptures, [177C] so that we may be uplifted by way of these mysterious representations to their divine simplicity.<sup>49</sup> Then with due worship and thanksgiving we will glorify God, the source of everything we understand concerning the hierarchy.

One truth must be affirmed above all else. It is that the transcendent Deity has out of goodness established the existence of everything and brought it into being.<sup>50</sup> It is characteristic of the universal Cause, of this goodness beyond all, to summon everything to communion with him to the extent that this is possible. Hence everything in some way partakes of the providence flowing out of this transcendent Deity which is the originator of all that is. Indeed nothing could exist without some share in the being and source of everything. [177D] Even the things which have no life participate in this, for it is the transcendent Deity which is the existence of every being. The living, in their turn, have a share in that power which gives life and which surpasses all life. Beings endowed with reason and intelligence have a share in that absolutely perfect, primordially perfect wisdom which surpasses all reason and all intelligence.<sup>51</sup> And, clearly, these latter beings are nearer to God, since their participation in him takes so many forms.

2. Compared with the things which merely are, [180A] with irrational forms of life and indeed with our own rational natures, the holy ranks of heavenly beings are obviously superior in what they have received of God's largess. Their thinking processes imitate the divine. They look on the divine likeness with a transcendent eye. They model their intellects on him. Hence it is natural for them to enter into a more generous communion with the Deity, because they are forever marching towards the heights, because, as permitted, they are drawn to a concentration of an unflinching love for God, because they immaterially receive undiluted the original enlightenment, and because, ordered by such enlightenment, theirs is a life of total intelligence. They have the first and the most diverse participation in the divine and they, in turn, provide the first and the most diverse revelations of the divine hiddenness. [180B] That is why they have a preeminent right to the title of angel or messenger, since it is they who first are granted the divine enlightenment and it is they who pass on to us these revelations which are so far beyond

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<sup>48</sup> The author here turns from the general discussion of any hierarchy, whether angelic or human, to the specific subject of this treatise on the celestial hierarchy.

<sup>49</sup> Note the similarities between this statement on biblical exegesis and the one on liturgical interpretation in EH 4 472D 9–12.

<sup>50</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions* VIII, 12, 6 (Funk, 496.22); cf. DN 1 592A 3f. and Ep. 8 1085D 45.

<sup>51</sup> The participation in the source of all by thinking, living, or merely existing beings (the Neoplatonic triad of mind, life, existence) is also discussed in DN 4 720B 15f., and DN5 816B–817B.

us. Indeed the Word of God teaches us that the Law was given to us by the angels.<sup>52</sup> Before the days of the Law and after it had come, it was the angels who uplifted our illustrious ancestors toward the divine and they did so by prescribing roles of conduct, by turning them from wandering and sin to the right way of truth, or by coming to announce and explain sacred orders, hidden visions, or transcendent mysteries, or divine prophecies.<sup>53</sup>

[180C] 3. Someone might claim that God has appeared himself and without intermediaries to some of the saints. But in fact it should be realized that scripture has clearly shown that “no one ever has seen”<sup>54</sup> or ever will see the being of God in all its hiddenness. Of course God has appeared to certain pious men in ways which were in keeping with his divinity. He has come in certain sacred visions fashioned to suit the beholders. This kind of vision, that is to say, where the formless God is represented in forms, is rightly described by theological discourse as a theophany. The recipients of such visions are lifted up to the divine. They are granted divine enlightenment and are somehow initiated in the divine things themselves. Yet it was the heavenly powers which initiated our venerable ancestors to these divine visions.

[180D] It could be argued that in the scriptural tradition the sacred ordinances of the Law were given directly by God himself to Moses, so that he might truly teach us that these ordinances are themselves a copy of the divine and the sacred. [181A] Yet theology quite clearly teaches that these ordinances were mediated to us by angels so that God’s order might show us how it is that secondary beings are uplifted through the primary beings.<sup>55</sup> Now the Law which was laid down by the transcendent source of all order has prescriptions affecting not only the highest and the lowest groups of intelligent beings but also those of equal order and it establishes that in every hierarchy appropriate order and power must be distributed within the primary, middle, and lowest strata and that those closer to God should be the initiators of those less close by guiding them to the divine access, enlightenment, and communion.

[181B] 4. I note that the mystery of Jesus’ love for humanity was first revealed to the angels and that the gift of this knowledge was granted by the angels to us.<sup>56</sup> It was the most divine Gabriel who guided Zechariah the hierarch into the mystery that, contrary to all hope and by God’s favor, he would have a son who would be a prophet of the divine and human work of Jesus, who

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<sup>52</sup> Acts 7:38, 53; Gal 3:19; Heb 2:2.

<sup>53</sup> For example, Ex 23:20–23; see below, 181BC.

<sup>54</sup> Jn 1:18; Ex 33:20–23; 1 Tm 6:16; 1 Jn 4:12; cf. Ep. 1 1065A 9–11.

<sup>55</sup> The biblical tension between a direct gift of the law to Moses (Ex 31:18) and an angelic mediation (see note 52 above) is partially relieved by the possibility of calling Moses himself an angel since he, like all hierarchs, is also an “announcer” or mediator (CH 12 293A 7–12, EH 7 561C 39–41, 564A 6f.).

<sup>56</sup> That Jesus’ “philanthropy” or love for humanity is directly tied to the incarnation is apparent not only from the context here but from other uses of the term (EH 4 437A 12, 441A 12, 444A 14, 444C 36, 444C 39, DN 1 592A 8, DN 2 640C 33, 648D 42, Ep. 3 1069B 13, Ep. 4 1072A 9, 1072B 21).

was beneficently about to appear for the salvation of the world.<sup>57</sup> Gabriel revealed to Mary how in her would be born the divine mystery of the ineffable form of God.<sup>58</sup> Another angel forecast to Joseph the true fulfillment of the divine promises made to his ancestor David.<sup>59</sup> Yet another angel brought the good news to the shepherds who, because of their quiet life withdrawn from the crowd, had somehow been purified. And with him “a multitude of the heavenly host” passed on to those on earth that famous song of jubilation.<sup>60</sup>

[181C] But let us lift our eyes now to the most exalted revelations of scripture. Jesus himself, the transcendent Cause of those beings which live beyond the world, came to take on human form without in any way changing his own essential nature. But I observe that never once did he abandon that human form which he had established and chosen, and he obediently submitted to the wishes of God the Father as arranged by the angels. It was the angels who announced to Joseph the Father’s arrangements regarding the withdrawal into Egypt and the return to Judaea.<sup>61</sup> The commands of the Father were given to Jesus himself by the angels. I do not need to remind you of the sacred tradition concerning the angel who comforted Jesus<sup>62</sup> [181D] or of the fact that because of his generous work for our salvation he himself entered the order of revealers and is called the “angel of great counsel.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, when he announced what he knew of the Father, was it not as an angel?<sup>64</sup>

## CHAPTER FIVE

*Why the heavenly beings are all called “angel” in common.*

[196B] So, then, this is the reason, as far as I know, for the use of the designation “angel” in scripture.

But I think we must ask why it is that on the one hand theologians give the title of angel to every heavenly being without distinction while yet at the same time in their discussions of these transcendent ranks they reserve the “angelic” order for the one which finally completes the

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<sup>57</sup> Lk 1:11–20.

<sup>58</sup> Lk 1:26–39.

<sup>59</sup> Mt 1:20–25; 2 Sm 7:12–17.

<sup>60</sup> Namely, the “Gloria in excelsis” in Lk 2:8–14; the shepherd’s “withdrawal” seems presented as almost a monastic virtue.

<sup>61</sup> Mt 2:13, 19–22.

<sup>62</sup> Lk 22:43; Mt 4:11.

<sup>63</sup> Is 9:6 (LXX).

<sup>64</sup> Jn 15:15. The word play between “announce” and “angel” is unmistakable in Greek.

divine and heavenly orders,<sup>65</sup> that is for those subordinate to the ranks of archangels, principalities, authorities, and powers, in short, those groups deemed by scriptural tradition to be superior. Now in every sacred rank the higher orders have all the illuminations and powers of those below them and the subordinate have none of those possessed by their superiors. [196C] Theologians give the name “angel” also to the highest and holiest orders of the heavenly beings by virtue of the fact that they too make known the enlightenment proceeding from the Deity. But if one is talking about the last order among the heavenly beings it would be silly to give to the members of this the title of principalities or thrones or seraphim since they lack participation in these latter supreme powers. However, just as this order lifts our own inspired hierarchs up toward whatever light of God is known to it, so the sacred power of the highest beings lifts up the subordinate members of the angelic hierarchy toward the divine.<sup>66</sup> If scripture gives a shared name to all the angels, the reason is that all the heavenly powers hold as a common possession an inferior or superior capacity to conform to the divine and to enter into communion with the light coming from God.<sup>67</sup>

[196D] But to clarify all this, let us look with a clear eye on the holy attributes of each of the heavenly ranks, such as they have been revealed to us in scripture.

## CHAPTER SIX

*What is the first rank of the heavenly beings, what is the middle, and what is the last?*

[200C] 1. How many ranks are there among the heavenly beings? What kind are they? How does each hierarchy achieve perfection?

Only the divine source of their perfection could really answer this, but at least they know what they have by way of power and enlightenment and they know their place in this sacred, transcendent order. As far as we are concerned, it is not possible to know the mystery of these celestial minds or to understand how they arrive at most holy perfection. We can know only what the Deity has mysteriously granted to us through them, for they know their own properties well. I have therefore nothing of my own to say about all this and I am content merely to set down, as well as I can, what it was that the sacred theologians contemplated of the angelic sights and what they shared with us about it.

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<sup>65</sup> Just as “theology” usually means the word of God in the scriptures, so here and elsewhere the “theologians” are the scripture writers: Ps 103:20; Mt 25:31; Heb 1:4. See CH 8, note 90, and MT 1, note 1.

<sup>66</sup> See CH 10 272D 11 to 273A 5 and its note (note 108).

<sup>67</sup> See the arguments in Chapter 11 on why the celestial beings can all be called “heavenly powers” (284B–285A).

[200D] 2. The word of God has provided nine explanatory designations for the heavenly beings, and my own sacred-initiator has divided these into three threefold groups.<sup>68</sup> According to him, the first group is forever around God and is said to be permanently united with him ahead of any of the others and with no intermediary. Here, then, are the most holy “thrones” and the orders said to possess many eyes and many wings, [201A] called in Hebrew the “cherubim” and “seraphim.” Following the tradition of scripture, he says that they are found immediately around God and in a proximity enjoyed by no other. This threefold group, says my famous teacher, forms a single hierarchy which is truly first and whose members are of equal status. No other is more like the divine or receives more directly the first enlightenments from the Deity.<sup>69</sup>

The second group, he says, is made up of “authorities,” “dominions,” and “powers.” And the third, at the end of the heavenly hierarchies, is the group of “angels,” “archangels,” and “principalities.”<sup>70</sup>

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*Concerning the seraphim, cherubim, and thrones, and theirs, the first hierarchy.*

[205B] 1. We accept that this is how the holy hierarchies are ordered and we agree that the designations given to these heavenly intelligences signify the mode in which they take on the imprint of God. Those with a knowledge of Hebrew are aware of the fact that the holy name “seraphim” means “fire-makers,” that is to say, “carriers of warmth.”<sup>71</sup> The name “cherubim” means “fullness of knowledge” or “outpouring of wisdom.”<sup>72</sup> This first of the hierarchies is hierarchically ordered by truly superior beings, for this hierarchy possesses the highest order as God’s immediate neighbor, being grounded directly around God and receiving the primal

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<sup>68</sup> The author admits that the triadic arrangement of the nine biblical names is not itself scriptural but is taken from Hierotheus (DN 3, note 128). This triple triad is also enumerated in EH 1 372C 31–42.

<sup>69</sup> The first triad is the subject of the following chapter, CH 7. See also EH 4 480B 10–484A 11 and its note (note 125). Dionysius here applies to both seraphim and cherubim the description of “many eyes” (Ez 1:18) and “many wings” (six wings in Is 6:2 and four in Ez 1:6).

<sup>70</sup> The second and third triads are treated below in Chapters 8 and 9, respectively.

<sup>71</sup> The seraphim make their only explicit biblical appearance in Is 6:2–6, a passage discussed at length in CH 13. This scriptural image of the seraphim and their wings is the source of the author’s interpretation of the “wings” which cover the sacramental ointment or myron (EH 4 480B 10 to 484A 11). The seraphim are also briefly discussed in CH 10 273B 16–20, and in CH 15 329A 4f., where the image of fire is pursued more fully. See Gandillac, CH, pp. 105f., n. 5, on this etymology for “seraphim,” which is expanded below in 205BC 17–26 and repeated in CH 13 304A 7, 304D 39–44, and EH 4 481CD 26–37.

<sup>72</sup> This etymology for “cherubim” is repeated immediately in 205B 15f., expanded below in 205C 26–32, and perhaps echoed in CH 10 272D 11 and CH 13 304A 8. On the cherubim, see also CH 8 241AB 14–36 and CH 12 292CD 14–18. The biblical cherubim are mentioned in Gn 3:24; Ex 25:18–22, 37:6–9; Nm 7:89; 1 Sm 4:4; 1 Kgs 6:23–28, 8:6–7; Pss 18:10, 80:1, 99:1; Is 37:16; Ez 10:3–22. Dionysius also uses Ez 1:4–28 in his description of the cherubim, although that passage does not explicitly name them.

theophanies and perfections. Hence the descriptions “carriers of warmth” and “thrones.” Hence, also, the title “outpouring of wisdom.” These names indicate their similarity to what God is.

For the designation seraphim really teaches this—a perennial circling around the divine things, penetrating warmth, [205C] the overflowing heat of a movement which never falters and never fails, a capacity to stamp their own image on subordinates by arousing and uplifting in them too a like flame, the same warmth. It means also the power to purify by means of the lightning flash and the flame. It means the ability to hold unveiled and undiminished both the light they have and the illumination they give out. It means the capacity to push aside and to do away with every obscuring shadow.

The name cherubim signifies the power to know and to see God, to receive the greatest gifts of his light, to contemplate the divine splendor in primordial power, to be filled with the gifts that bring wisdom and to share these generously with subordinates as a part of the beneficent outpouring of wisdom.

[205D] The title of the most sublime and exalted thrones conveys that in them there is a transcendence over every earthly defect, as shown by their upward-bearing toward the ultimate heights, that they are forever separated from what is inferior, that they are completely intent upon remaining always and forever in the presence of him who is truly the most high, that, free of all passion and material concern, they are utterly available to receive the divine visitation, that they bear God and are ever open, like servants, to welcome God.<sup>73</sup>

[208A] 2. This, then, is the explanation insofar as we can understand it of why they are called what they are, and I must now say something about how I understand the hierarchy which exists among them. Now I think I have already said enough about the fact that the aim of every hierarchy is always to imitate God so as to take on his form, that the task of every hierarchy is to receive and to pass on undiluted purification, the divine light, and the understanding which brings perfection. What I have now to do is to discuss, in words which, I pray, will be worthy of these superior intelligences, the scriptural revelation concerning their hierarchy.

The first beings have their place beside the Godhead to whom they owe their being. They are, as it were, in the anteroom of divinity.<sup>74</sup> They surpass every visible and every invisible power which is subject to becoming. They constitute an entirely uniform hierarchy. One has to think

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<sup>73</sup> Although the cherubim act as a throne (Pss 80:1, 99:1), Col 1:16 presents “thrones” as heavenly beings among others. See the “fiery thrones” in CH 15 329A 3, the thrones as a symbol connected to God in Ep. 9 1105B 16, and Jesus’ throne in Ep. 8 1100C 36. On this image in the church fathers and in Neoplatonism, see Gandillac, CH, p. 108, n. 2.

<sup>74</sup> For this Neoplatonic terminology of “anteroom” see also DN 5 821C 34f. and Gandillac, CH, p. 109, n. 2.

of them as utterly “pure,”<sup>75</sup> [208B] not because they are free of all profane blemishes and of all tarnish or because they are innocent of earthly imaginings, but because they utterly transcend all weakness and all the lesser grades of the sacred. Because of their supreme purity, they are established beyond all the most godlike powers, and firmly adhere to their own order which is eternally self-moved according to an immutable love for God. They know no diminution at all toward inferior things, for they have as their own godlike property an eternally unfailing, unmoved, and completely uncontaminated foundation.

They are “contemplative” too, not because they contemplate symbols of the senses or the mind, or because they are uplifted to God by way of a composite contemplation of sacred writing, but, rather, because they are full of a superior light beyond any knowledge and because they are filled with a transcendent and triply luminous contemplation of the one who is the cause and the source of all beauty. [208C] They are contemplative also because they have been allowed to enter into communion with Jesus not by means of the holy images, reflecting the likeness of God’s working in forms, but by truly coming close to him in a primary participation in the knowledge of the divine lights working out of him. To be like God is their special gift and, to the extent that is allowed them, they share, with a primordial power, in his divine activities and his loving virtues.

They are “perfect,” then, not because of an enlightened understanding which enables them to analyze the many sacred things, but rather because of a primary and supreme deification, a transcendent and angelic understanding of God’s work. They have been directed hierarchically not through other holy beings but directly from God himself and they have achieved this thanks to the capacity they have to be raised up directly to him, [208D] a capacity which compared to others is the mark of their superior power and their superior order. Hence they are founded next to perfect and unfailing purity, and are led, as permitted, into contemplation regarding the immaterial and intellectual splendor. As those who are the first around God and who are hierarchically directed in a supreme way, they are initiated into the understandable explanations of the divine works by the very source of perfection. [209A]

3. The theologians have clearly shown that the lower ranks of heavenly beings have harmoniously received from their superiors whatever understanding they have of the operations of God, whereas the higher ranks have been enlightened in initiations, so far as permitted, [209B] by the very Godhead. For they tell us that some of them are sacredly initiated

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<sup>75</sup> In applying the motif of purification, illumination, and perfection to these angelic beings (see also CH 3 165B 27 to 168B 16, note 47), Dionysius makes two characteristic adjustments. First, he transposes the category of purity from the realm of morality, where the angels have no need to progress, to that of knowledge, e.g., “purified of ignorance” 209C 35f. and EH 6 537ABC. Second, he substitutes the language of “contemplation” for that of “illumination” (208B 26). This equivalent language is also used when discussing the motif’s application to the human hierarchy (e.g., EH 6 532BC). In applying these three concepts to the angels, he first contrasts this application to the normal use of the terms “pure,” “contemplative,” and “perfect” as applied to humans. Thus, by way of contrast with its proper subject, this section also provides a capsule definition of purification, illumination or contemplation, and perfection on the human level, as also discussed in EH5 504A5 to 509A 3.



by those of higher rank. Some learn that the “King of Glory,” the one raised up into the heavens in a human form, is the “Lord of the heavenly powers.”<sup>76</sup> Others, as they puzzle over the nature of Jesus, acquire an understanding of his divine work on our behalf and it is Jesus himself who is their instructor, teaching them directly about the kindly work he has undertaken out of love for man. “I speak of righteousness and of saving judgment.”<sup>77</sup>

Still, there is something here which I find surprising. The very first of the heavenly beings, those who are so very superior to the others, are nevertheless quite like those of more intermediate status when it comes to desiring enlightenment concerning the Godhead. They do not first ask, “Why are your garments red?”<sup>78</sup> They begin by exchanging queries among themselves, [209C] thus showing their eagerness to learn and their desire to know how God operates. They do not simply go leaping beyond that outflow of enlightenment provided by God.

So, then, the first hierarchy of the heavenly minds is hierarchically directed by the source of all perfection, because of its own capacity to be raised up directly to this source. It is filled with its due measure of utter purification, of infinite light, of complete perfection. It becomes purified, illuminated and perfected in that it is unmixed with any weakness, filled with the first of all light, and achieves perfection as a partaker of primary knowledge and understanding.

In summary, we can reasonably say that purification, illumination, and perfection are all three the reception of an understanding of the Godhead, namely, being completely purified of ignorance by the proportionately granted knowledge of the more perfect initiations, being illuminated by this same divine knowledge (through which it also purifies whatever was not previously beheld but is now revealed through the more lofty enlightenment), [209D] and being also perfected by this light in the understanding of the most lustrous initiations.<sup>79</sup>

[212A] 4. This, so far as I know, is the first rank of heavenly beings. It circles in immediate proximity to God.<sup>80</sup> Simply and ceaselessly it dances around an eternal knowledge of him. It is forever and totally thus, as befits angels. In a pure vision it can not only look upon a host of blessed contemplations but it can also be enlightened in simple and direct beams. It is filled with divine nourishment which is abundant, because it comes from the initial stream, and

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<sup>76</sup> Ps 24:10.

<sup>77</sup> Is 63:1 (LXX).

<sup>78</sup> Is 63:2 (LXX). Pseudo-Dionysius apparently sees Isaiah 63:1f as a conversation between Jesus and the highest angelic beings.

<sup>79</sup> Note that in this definitive, summary statement purification, illumination, and perfection are not three separate subjects but rather three levels of spiritual knowledge. See also 208BCD and EH 6 537ABC.

<sup>80</sup> Is 6:2 (LXX); Rv 4:4.

nevertheless single, because the nourishing gifts of God bring oneness in a unity without diversity.

This first group is particularly worthy of communing with God and of sharing in his work. It imitates, as far as possible, the beauty of God's condition and activity. Knowing many divine things in so superior a fashion it can have a proper share of the divine knowledge and understanding. Hence, theology has transmitted to the men of earth those hymns sung by the first ranks of the angels whose gloriously transcendent enlightenment is thereby made manifest. Some of these hymns, [212B] if one may use perceptible images, are like the "sound of many waters"<sup>81</sup> as they proclaim: "Blessed be the glory of the Lord from his place."<sup>82</sup> Others thunder out that famous and venerable song, telling of God: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory."<sup>83</sup>

In my book *Divine Hymns* I have already explicated, to the best of my ability, the supreme praises sung by those holy intelligences which dwell beyond in heaven.<sup>84</sup> I think I have set down there all that needed to be said. For the sake of my present purpose, I will simply repeat that when the first rank has directly and properly received its due understanding of God's Word from the divine goodness itself, then it passes this on, as befits a benevolent hierarchy, to those next in line. [212C] The teaching, briefly, amounts to this. It is right and good that the revered Godhead, which in fact is beyond all acclamation and deserves all acclamation, is known and praised by those minds which receive God, as far as possible. To the extent that they conform to God they are the divine place of the Godhead's rest, as scripture says.<sup>85</sup> And this first group passes on the word that the Godhead is a monad, that it is one in three persons,<sup>86</sup> that its splendid providence for all reaches from the most exalted beings in heaven above to the lowliest creatures of earth. It is the Cause and source beyond every source for every being and it transcendently draws everything into its perennial embrace. [212D]

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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<sup>81</sup> Ez 1:24; Rv 14:2, 19:6.

<sup>82</sup> Ez 3:12 (LXX).

<sup>83</sup> Is 6:3; cf. Rv 4:8.

<sup>84</sup> A treatise or chapter thereof which is either lost or, more likely, fictitious.

<sup>85</sup> This is an oblique biblical reference involving the imagery of the ark of the covenant. In Isaiah 66:1 (quoted in Acts 7:49), the mention of the divine "rest" echoes the tradition of the ark (Nm 10:36; 1 Chr 6:31; 2 Chr 6:41) where God is "enthroned on the cherubim" (Ex 37:7-9; 1 Sm 4:4; 2 Sm 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:15; Pss 80:1, 99:1; and Song of the Three Young Men 42).

<sup>86</sup> The expression "in three persons" or "tri-upostatic" is trinitarian terminology, as also found in DN 1 592A 1, EH 2 396D 43f., and EH 6 533B 25f.

[237B] *Concerning the dominions, powers, and authorities, and theirs, the middle hierarchy.*

1. I must turn now to the middle rank of the heavenly intelligences and, with eyes that look beyond the world, I must behold, as far as possible, the dominions and the astonishing sights of the divine authorities and powers.<sup>87</sup> Each designation of the beings far superior to us indicate ways in which God is imitated and conformed to. [237C]

The revealing name “dominions” signifies, in my view, a lifting up which is free, unfettered by earthly tendencies and uninclined toward any of those tyrannical dissimilarities<sup>88</sup> which characterize a harsh dominion. Because it does not give way to any defect, it is above any abject creation of slaves, and, innocent of any dissimilarity, it is forever striving mightily toward the true dominion and the true source of all dominion. Benevolently and in accordance with capacity, it receives—as does its subordinates—the semblance of that domination. It rejects empty appearances, returns completely to the true Lord, and shares as far as it can in that everlasting and divine source of all dominion.

As for the holy “powers,” [237D] the title refers to a kind of masculine and unshakable courage in all its godlike activities. It is a courage which abandons all laziness and softness during the reception of the divine enlightenments granted to it, [240A] and is powerfully uplifted to imitate God. Far from abandoning its godlike movement out of cowardice, it looks undeviatingly to that transcendent power which is the source of all power. Indeed this courage becomes, so far as possible, the very image of that power to which it shapes itself, being powerfully returned to it because it is the source of all power. And at the same time, it transmits to its own inferiors its dynamic and divinizing power.

The holy “authorities,” as their name indicates, have an equal order with the divine dominions and powers. They are so placed that they can receive God in a harmonious and unconfused way and indicate the ordered nature of the celestial and intellectual authority. Far from employing their authoritative powers to do tyrannous harm to the inferiors, they are harmoniously and unfailingly uplifted toward the things of God and, [240B] in their goodness, they lift up with them the ranks of those inferior to them. They are likened, insofar as they can be, to that authority which is the source of all authority and creates all authority; and they make that authority evident, to the extent that angels can, in their harmonious orders of authoritative power.

Hence the middle rank of the heavenly intelligences manifests its conformity to God. This, as has been said, is how it achieves purification, illumination, and perfection, at second hand from

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<sup>87</sup> On the dominions, authorities, and powers which form the second triad, see Eph 1:21, 3:10; Col 1:16, 2:10; 1 Pt 3:22; and perhaps Rom 8:38.

<sup>88</sup> On this expression, see Gandillac, CH, p. 120, note 2.

the divine enlightenments by way of the first hierarchical rank, and passed on secondarily through that mediating rank.

[240C] 2. This process of handing on from angel to angel can be a symbol for us of that perfection which comes complete from afar and grows dimmer as it proceeds from the first to the second group. Our holy instructors in the sacred sacraments have taught us that the directly revealed fulfillments of divine reality are superior to that participation in the divine visions which comes by way of others. Similarly, it seems to me, the immediate participation in God of those angels first raised up to him is more direct than that of those perfected through a mediator. Hence—to use the terminology handed down to us—the first intelligences perfect, illuminate, and purify those of inferior status in such a fashion that the latter, having been lifted up through them to the universal and transcendent source, thereby acquire their due share of the purification, [240D] illumination, and perfection of the One who is the source of all perfection.

The divine source of all order has established the all-embracing principle that beings of the second rank receive enlightenment from the Godhead through the beings of the first rank. This has been asserted frequently by the scripture writers, as you may discover.

Now God, out of his fatherly love for humanity, chastised Israel so as to return it to the road of sacred salvation. In order to cause a change of heart he handed Israel over to the vengeance of the barbarian nations. [241A] This was to ensure that the men who were under his special providence would be transformed for the better. Later, in his kindness, he released Israel from captivity<sup>89</sup> and restored it to its former state of contentment. Zechariah, a theologian, had a vision concerning this. It was an angel of the first group, one of those in the immediate entourage of God, who was learning from God himself what scripture calls the “comforting words.”<sup>90</sup> (Incidentally, the term “angel,” as already stated, refers to all of the heavenly beings without distinction.) An angel of an inferior rank met the first and received enlightenment from him. Instructed thus by him as by a hierarch in the matter of what God willed, he, in turn, was entrusted to initiate the theologian that “Jerusalem will be fully inhabited once again with crowds of people.”<sup>91</sup>

Ezekiel, another theologian, says that all this was sacredly ordained by God himself who in his supreme glory stands over the cherubim.<sup>92</sup> [241B] God, out of fatherly love for humanity, willed correction for the sake of Israel’s improvement and in an act of righteousness appropriately

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<sup>89</sup> Is 61:1 and Lk 4:18.

<sup>90</sup> Zec 1:13. Note that Zechariah, Ezekiel a few lines later, and Isaiah throughout CH 13 are all called “theologians.” The generic use of the term “angel” is discussed in CH 5 196BCD.

<sup>91</sup> Zec 2:4 (LXX).

<sup>92</sup> Ez 10:18.

divine he commanded the innocent to be separated from the guilty. The one first initiated in this, after the cherubim, was the one whose loins were girt in sapphire and who wore a full-length cloak as a symbol of the hierarch.<sup>93</sup> He in turn announced the divine decision to other angels, those who carry the axes, and he did so on the instructions of the Deity who is the source of order. To the one, the orders were to traverse all of Jerusalem and to put a mark on the foreheads of the innocent. The others were told: “Follow him into the city, lay about you and do not spare your eyes. But do not go near any of those who have been given the sign.”<sup>94</sup>

And what is one to say about the angel who said to Daniel, [241C] “The word went forth”?<sup>95</sup> or about the first who took the fire from the midst of the cherubim? or of the cherubim who gave the fire into the hands of the one wearing “the holy stole,”<sup>96</sup> something which shows in particular the good order existing among the angels? What is to be said regarding the one who summoned the most divine Gabriel and declared, “Make him understand the vision”?<sup>97</sup> And are there not other examples, given by the sacred theologians, of the divine and harmonious arrangement befitting the heavenly hierarchy? This arrangement is copied by our own hierarchy which tries to imitate angelic beauty as far as possible, to be shaped by it, as in images, and to be uplifted to the transcendent source of all order and of all hierarchy. [241D]

## CHAPTER NINE

[257A] *Concerning the principalities, archangels, and angels, and theirs, the final hierarchy.*

[257B] 1. It remains now to contemplate that final rank in the hierarchy of angels, I mean the godlike principalities, archangels, and angels.<sup>98</sup> However, I think I should first explain, as best I can, the significance of these holy designations. The term “heavenly principalities” refers to those who possess a godlike and princely hegemony, with a sacred order most suited to princely powers, the ability to be returned completely toward that principle which is above all principles and to lead others to him like a prince, the power to receive to the full the mark of the Principle of principles and, by their harmonious exercise of princely powers, to make manifest this transcendent principle of all order.

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<sup>93</sup> Ez 9:2. (LXX), 10:6–8. See below 241C 35f (note 96) and CH 15 333A 10.

<sup>94</sup> Ez 9:5f. The symbolism of the ax is taken up in CH 15 333B 20.

<sup>95</sup> Dn 9:23.

<sup>96</sup> Ez 10:6–8 (LXX); see above 241B 22f. (note 93) and CH 15 333A 10.

<sup>97</sup> Dn 8:16.

<sup>98</sup> The “principalities” (archai) are mentioned in Eph 1:21, 3:10; Col 1:16, 2:10. Human rulers seem intended in Lk 12:11, 20:20, and Ti 3:1. The principalities in 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 6:12; and Col 2:15 are hostile powers. The term “archangel” is found only in 1 Thes 4:16 and Jude 9.

[257C] 2. The holy archangels have the same order as the heavenly principalities and, as I have already indicated, they join with the angels to form a single hierarchy and rank. Still, every hierarchy has first, middle, and last powers, and the holy order of the archangels has something of both the others by virtue of being a mean between extremes.<sup>99</sup> It communes with the most holy principalities and with the holy angels. Its relationship with the former derives from the fact that like a principality it is returned to its transcendent principle [source], that it receives upon itself as far as possible the mark of this principle, and that it brings about the unity of the angels, thanks to those invisible powers of ordering and arranging which it has received from that principle. Its relationship with the angels is due to their shared order as interpreters of those divine enlightenments mediated by the first powers. [257D] It generously announces these to the angels and through them to us insofar as we are capable of being sacredly enlightened.

[260A] As I have already said, the angels complete the entire ranking of the heavenly intelligences. Among the heavenly beings it is they who possess the final quality of being an angel. For being closer to us, they, more appropriately than the previous ones, are named “angels” insofar as their hierarchy is more concerned with revelation and is closer to the world. Now I have already said that the superior rank—superior because it is closer to what is hidden—hierarchically directs the second group. This second group, made up of holy dominions, powers, and authorities, is in charge of the hierarchy of principalities, archangels, and angels. Its revelations are clearer than those of the first hierarchy, more hidden than those of the one after it. The revealing rank of principalities, archangels, and angels presides among themselves over the human hierarchies, [260B] in order that the uplifting and return toward God, and the communion and union, might occur according to proper order, and indeed so that the procession might be benignly given by God to all hierarchies and might arrive at each one in a shared way in sacred harmony.<sup>100</sup> So, then, it is the angels who take care of our own hierarchy, or so the Word of God tells us. Michael is called the ruler of the Jewish people, and other angels are described as rulers of other nations, for “the Most High has established the boundaries of the nations by the number of his angels.”<sup>101</sup>

[260C] 3. Someone might ask why it was that only the Hebrew people were lifted up to the divine enlightenment. The answer to this is that the angels have fully done their work of guardianship and that it is no fault of theirs if other nations wandered off into the cult of false gods. Indeed it was on their own initiative that these others abandoned the good uplifting

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<sup>99</sup> “Mean terms” in triads were a typical Neoplatonic concern, as in Iamblichus dM V.8.225.5–8. See EH 5 501C 42f., where “our” hierarchy is a mean term between the hierarchy of the Law and the angelic hierarchy. See also DN 10, note 245, and DN 11, note 250.

<sup>100</sup> This passage, unusual for its reference to plural human hierarchies, illustrates the author’s adaptation of the Neoplatonic concept of procession and return. See CH 1, note 4.

<sup>101</sup> Dt 32:8 (LXX); Michael: Dn 10:13–21, 12:1; others: Dn 10:13 (Persia) and Dn 10:20 (Greece).

toward the divine. Their irrational worship of what they took to be god-pleasing was an index of selfishness and presumption, and this can be proved by what happened to the Hebrew people. “You rejected the knowledge” of God, it says, and you followed the call of your heart.<sup>102</sup> Our way of life is not predetermined and the free will of those benefiting from the gift of divine Light does not take away from such light its attribute of being a providential source of enlightenment. What actually happens is this. The dissimilarity of the intelligent sights either makes the overflowing gift of light of the Father’s goodness completely unpartaken and unbestowed, [260D] because of their resistance, or there is an unequal participation in these gifts in large or small amounts, in clarity or obscurity. And in the meantime the shining well-spring of all this continues to be single and simple, forever the same and forever overflowing.

All this can be said of the other nations, those peoples from whom we ourselves are come so that we too might raise our gaze up to the limitless and bounteous ocean of divine Light, [261A] that Light which forever unfolds and bestows its gifts upon all beings. No strange gods were in command here. There is one universal source and it is toward this source that the angels, charged with the sacred and hierarchical direction of each nation, led those willing to follow them. Think of Melchizedek. He was filled with love for God and he was a hierarch not of false deities but of the true God on high. Experts in sacred learning were not satisfied to describe Melchizedek as a friend of God. They described him as a priest<sup>103</sup> so as to make clear to sensible men that his task was not simply to be returned to the true God but, rather, as a hierarch to lead others in their uplifting toward the one true God.

[261B] 4. And here is another item for your understanding of the hierarchy. It was revealed to Pharaoh by the angel presiding over the Egyptians and to the ruler of the Babylonians by their angel that there is a concerned and authoritative Providence and Lordship over all things. Servants of the true God were established as leaders for those nations, and the manifestation of things represented by the angelic visions were revealed by God through the angels to certain sacred men near the angels, namely Joseph and Daniel.<sup>104</sup> For there is only one ruling source and Providence in the world, and we must not imagine that the Deity took charge of the Jewish people alone and that angels or gods, on an equal footing with him or even hostile to him, had charge of the other peoples. The passage which might suggest this notion must be understood in this sacred sense,<sup>105</sup> [261C] for it could not mean that God shared the government of mankind with other gods or angels or that he reigned in Israel as a local prince or chieftain. The single Providence of the Most High for all commanded angels to bring all peoples to salvation, but it was Israel alone which returned to the Light and proclaimed the true Lord. That is why

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<sup>102</sup> A composite of Hos 4:6 and a variation on Jer 7:24 and Hos 5:11 (LXX). Was Dennis quoting from memory? See Gandillac, CH, p. 133, n.2.

<sup>103</sup> Gn 14:18–22; Ps 110:4; Heb 7:1.

<sup>104</sup> Joseph: Gn 41:1–32; Daniel: Dn 2:1–45, 4:1–27.

<sup>105</sup> Namely Dt 32:8 (LXX), quoted above at 260B 24f., note 101.

the word of God indicates that Israel chose itself for special devotion to the true God by saying: “He became the portion of the Lord.”<sup>106</sup> But the theologians also say that Michael presides over the government of the Jewish people and that this is in order to make clear that Israel, [261D] like the other nations, was assigned to one of the angels, to recognize through him the one universal ruling source. For there is only one Providence over all the world, a supra-being transcending all power visible and invisible; and over every nation there are presiding angels entrusted with the task of raising up toward that Providence, as their own source, everyone willing to follow, as far as possible.

## CHAPTER TEN

*Repetition and Conclusion regarding the angels’ coordination.;*

[272D] 1. So, then, the most primordial rank of those intelligent beings in God’s company is hierarchically ordered by enlightenments coming from the source of all perfection, and they rise up to it with the help of no intermediary. For them, thanks to the gift of the hidden and resplendent lights of the Godhead, there is purification, illumination, and perfection. Such lights are all the more hidden because they have to do with what is all the more conceptual, and they bring all that much more simplification and union. And they are all the more resplendent for being received directly, firstly, and completely. As they are poured forth, they are radiant with that greater proximity to their source.<sup>107</sup>

[273A] Then by this rank [of angels] the second one, and by the second the third, and by the third our hierarchy is hierarchically uplifted, in due proportion and divine concord and according to this regulation of the harmonious source of order, toward that source beyond every source and consummation of all harmony.<sup>108</sup>

2. All angels bring revelations and tidings of their superiors. The first bring word of the God who is their inspiration, while the others, according to where they are, tell of those inspired by God. For the transcendent harmony of all the world has providentially looked after every being endowed with reason and intelligence and has ensured that they are rightly ordered and sacredly uplifted. In a fashion appropriate to its own sacred character this harmony has arranged the hierarchical groups, [273B] making due allowance for what is particular to each group, arranging them as we have seen as first, middle, and lower powers, and, finally, harmoniously managing them in a way suitable to the degree of participation in the divine

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<sup>106</sup> Dt 32:9 (LXX).

<sup>107</sup> “Poured forth” is an expression that seems to depend on the author’s pun on the name of the cherubim as “an outpouring of wisdom” in CH 7 205BC 9f., 15f., 32f. “Do not imagine that the proximity here is physical. Rather, what I mean by nearness is the greatest possible capacity to receive God” (Ep. 8 1092B 18–20).

<sup>108</sup> Note the interlocking agency in the overall anagogical or uplifting movement: Each rank, including the human hierarchy, is uplifted by the one above it. See also CH 5 196C 26–30.



which each of them has. Furthermore, the theologians tell us that the holiest of the seraphim “cry out to one another,”<sup>109</sup> and, it seems to me, this shows that the first ranks pass on to the second what they know of God.

[273C] 3. There is something else which I could reasonably add here. Each intelligent being, heavenly or human, has his own set of primary, middle, and lower orders and powers, and in accordance with his capacities these indicate the aforementioned upliftings, directly relative to the hierarchic enlightenment available to every being. It is in accordance with this arrangement that each intelligent entity—as far as he properly can and to the extent he may—participates in that purification beyond purity, that superabundant light, that perfection preceding all perfection. Nothing is perfect of itself. Nothing is completely free of the need for perfection. Nothing, that is, except that Being truly perfect in himself and truly preceding all perfection.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

[284B] *Why all heavenly beings are called “heavenly powers” in common.*

1. Having made all these distinctions, it is right that we should now consider why we actually have the habit of giving the name of “heavenly powers” to all of the angelic beings.<sup>110</sup> For of course one may not proceed as we have done when using the word “angels.” That is to say, [284C] one may not assert that the rank of the holy powers is the last of the ranks, that the ranks of superior beings participate in the holy enlightenment available to inferiors, and that these latter have no part in what is there for their superiors. Hence the title “heavenly powers” cannot be stretched to include all the divine minds, any more than one could do so in the case of seraphim, thrones, and dominions. For the final ranks have no share in the attributes of the superior.

Yet the angels and, before them, the archangels, the principalities, and authorities, which are held by theology to be subordinate to the “powers,” are nevertheless often called “heavenly powers” by us, just like all the other holy beings.

[284D] 2. I would claim that, whenever we use the designation “heavenly powers” as a collective term for all of these beings, this results in no confusion of the attributes peculiar to each rank. One clearly observes that, for reasons beyond this world, there is within all divine minds the threefold distinction between being, power, and activity.<sup>111</sup> Now suppose that we loosely describe some or all of them as “heavenly beings” [285A] or “heavenly powers,” it must be recognized that in talking thus of beings and powers we are engaging in circumlocution,

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<sup>109</sup> Is 6:3.

<sup>110</sup> Namely, the Greek term behind the English translation “hosts,” as in “Lord of hosts” in Pss 24:10 and 46:11. The term “angel” is also applied to all the heavenly beings, but for a different reason (CH 5 196BCD).

<sup>111</sup> This interior triad within each mind has Neoplatonic overtones. See Gandillac, CH, p. 143, n.2.

because of the being or power that is in each one. There can be no question of a blanket attribution to inferior beings of the preeminent characteristic of the holy powers, such as I have already described. To do so would be to upset that principle of order which controls the ranks of the angels and which excludes all confusion. For the reason so frequently and so rightly expounded by me, the superior ranks possess in eminent degrees the sacred attributes of their inferiors, while the final ones do not possess the transcendent fullnesses of those more honored, although the initial enlightenments are partially conveyed to them through the first ones, proportionately to themselves.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*Why human hierarchs are called “angels.”*

[292C] 1. There is another problem facing those devoted to the understanding of scripture. If the last ones do not partake in what is available to the higher, why is it that our human hierarch is designated in scriptures as “angel of the all-powerful Lord”?<sup>112</sup>

2. Now it seems to me that this expression does not actually contradict what has been said already. We affirmed that the final ranks lack the full and complete power of the more senior ones. But they do have a partial, proportionate share in that power and they do so as part of that one, harmonious, intertwined communion of all. Thus, even if it is the case that the order of the holy cherubim possesses a higher wisdom and knowledge, [292D] the ranks of beings below them also have some share of wisdom and knowledge, although this is partial and inferior as compared to them. Indeed all intelligent godlike beings have their own participation in wisdom and knowledge, and the difference between them depends on whether this share is direct and primary or secondary and inferior, [293A] relative to the capacities of each. This is something which can rightly be said of all the divinely intelligent beings, and just as the first possess, in a complete fashion, the holy attributes of their subordinates, so too do the latter possess those of their superiors, though not in the same way but in a humbler mode. Hence, I see nothing wrong in the fact that the Word of God calls even our hierarch an “angel,” for it is characteristic of him that like the angels he is, to the extent of which he is capable, a messenger and that he is raised up to imitate, so far as a man may, the angelic power to bring revelation.

[293B] 3. You will also notice how God’s word gives the title of “gods” not only to those heavenly beings who are our superiors,<sup>113</sup> but also to those sacred men among us who are distinguished for their love of God.<sup>114</sup> Now the hiddenness of the Godhead is a transcendent one. It is far above everything. No being can in any way or as a matter of right be named like to

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<sup>112</sup> Namely, “the messenger of the Lord of hosts,” Mal 2:7 (LXX); see also Mal 3:1; Gal 4:14; and perhaps the “angels” of the seven churches in Rv 2–3. Cf. EH7 561C 40f.

<sup>113</sup> Pss 82:1, 95:3; cf. Gn 32:28–30.

<sup>114</sup> Ex 4:16, 7:1; Pss 45:6 (LXX), 82:6; Jn 10:34.

it. Yet every being endowed with intelligence and reason, which, totally and as far as it can, is returned to be united with him, which is forever being raised up toward his divine enlightenments, which if one may say so, tries as hard as possible to imitate God—such a one surely deserves to be called divine.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*Why the prophet Isaiah is said to have been purified by the seraphim.*

[300B] 1. There is something else which we must consider as best we can. Why is it said that one of the theologians was visited by a seraphim?<sup>115</sup> Someone could well be puzzled by the fact that it was not one of the subordinate angels but someone from among the most senior beings who came to purify the interpreter.<sup>116</sup>

2. Some would say this. Given the earlier explanation of what it is that all these intelligent beings have in common, the scriptural passage does not declare that the intelligent mind which came down to purify the theologian belonged to that senior rank of those in immediate proximity to God. What was here was one of those angels assigned to us. He had the sacred task of purifying the prophet. He was named one of the seraphim since he had to wipe out the sins referred to by means of fire and he had to rekindle obedience to God in the one who had been purified. [300C] On this interpretation, therefore, when the passage refers just to seraphim what is not meant is one of those enthroned beside God but one of those powers assigned to purify us.

3. Someone else has provided me with an answer to this problem which is not completely inappropriate. He says that this mighty angel, whoever he was, caused a vision so as to initiate the theologian into the divine things, then he attributed to God and, after God, to the senior hierarchy his own sacred work of purification. [300D] Could this statement also be true? The person who affirmed this was saying that the power of the Godhead spreads out everywhere, [301A] penetrates all things irresistibly and yet remains inapparent to all,<sup>117</sup> not only because it is transcendentally above everything but also because it transmits all its providential activities in an ungraspable way. Nevertheless it manifests itself in due measure to every intelligent being. It bestows the gift of its own light on the most senior beings and, because of their premier rank, it uses them as intermediaries to pass that same light harmoniously along to beings of lower order in a way which is adapted to the capacity of each rank to look upon the divine. Let me make myself clearer by means of appropriate examples, more apparent to us, I mean, even if they all

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<sup>115</sup> Is 6:6. Dionysius never used the singular term “seraph.” In fact, he suggested elsewhere that he knew no Hebrew (CH 7 205B 7f., EH 4 481C 31 f. and 485B 17.).

<sup>116</sup> This term for interpreter applies to biblical authors (here and CH 2 145A 5) as well as to the hierarch (EH 7 564A 7) and to the priests (Ep. 8 1088C 40).

<sup>117</sup> Wis of Sol 7:24; see also Heb 4:12?

fall short of the absolutely divine transcendence. The rays of the sun pass easily through the front line of matter since it is more translucent than all the others. The real light of the sun lights up its own beams more resplendently through that section of matter. [301B] But as it encounters more opaque matter, it appears dimmer and more diffused, because this matter is less suited to the passage of the outpouring of light. This unsuitability becomes progressively greater until finally it halts completely the journey of light. Similarly, the heat of fire passes more easily into those entities which are good conductors, more receptive and in fact quite like it. But when its burning activity comes up against resistant or even opposing entities, it becomes ineffective or leaves only a very slight trace of itself. This is fully seen when fire moves through those things properly disposed to it, and then comes to things not akin to it, as when something on fire first happens to affect things which can be ignited and then through them either water or something else not easily ignited is proportionately heated.

Following that same harmonious law which operates throughout nature, [301C] the wonderful source of all visible and invisible order and harmony supernaturally pours out in splendid revelations to the superior beings the full and initial brilliance of his astounding light, and successive beings in their turn receive their share of the divine beam, through the mediation of their superiors. The beings who are first to know God and who, more than others, desire the divine virtue have been deemed worthy to become the prime workers of the power and activity which imitate God, as far as possible. In their goodness they raise their inferiors to become, so far as possible, their rivals. They ungrudgingly impart<sup>118</sup> to them the glorious ray which has visited them so that their inferiors may pass this on to those yet farther below them. Hence, on each level, predecessor hands on to successor whatever of the divine light he has received and this, in providential proportion, is spread out to every being.

[301D] Of course God himself is really the source of illumination for those who are illuminated, for he is truly and really Light itself. He is the Cause of being and of seeing. But, in imitation of God, it has been established that each being is somehow superior to the one to whom he passes on the divine light. And so all the other angelic beings follow the first rank of intelligent beings in heaven as the source, after God, [304A] of all sacred knowledge of God and of all imitation of God, for it is this latter order which mediates the divine enlightenment to all other beings, including ourselves. All their sacred activity, done in imitation of God, is attributed on the one hand to God as ultimate Cause, and on the other hand to the senior intelligent beings who live in conformity with God and who are the first ministers and teachers of the divine things. Angels of the first rank possess, more than the others, the power of fire and a share of the divine wisdom which has been poured out to them,<sup>119</sup> a knowledge of the ultimate in divine enlightenment, and that capacity which is summed up in the word “thrones” and which indicates their special power to be open to receive God. Beings of lower ranks have their share

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<sup>118</sup> Wis of Sol 7:13; cf. EH 4 481C 26.

<sup>119</sup> More word plays on “seraphim” and “cherubim”; see CH 7 205BC.

of fire, of wisdom, of knowledge, of openness to receive God, but this is so in a lesser fashion and on condition that they look upward to those intelligent beings of the first rank through whom, [304B] as the ones primarily worthy of imitating God, they will be uplifted to the possible likeness of God. Since the secondary beings share in these holy properties through the mediation of the primary beings, they attribute such properties to those primary beings, the ones who, after God, are like hierarchs to them.

4. The person who said all the above declared that the vision revealed to the theologian came from one of those holy and blessed angels assigned to look after us. [304C] Under the illuminating guidance of this angel he was raised up to such a sacred contemplation that, if I may speak in symbols, he was able to look upon the most superior beings established under, around, and with God. He was able to look beyond those beings to that summit, beyond every source, enthroned amid the subordinate powers, and yet super-ineffably transcending them and all things. In this vision the theologian learned that the Deity surpasses every visible and invisible power in a total excess of transcendence. It is completely set apart from everything. It is unlike even the foremost of beings. It is the Cause and the source of being for every entity. It is the unchanging basis of the stability of everything and is, for even the most exalted powers, [304D] the author of being and indeed of well-being.

Then he was instructed regarding the godlike powers of the most holy seraphim themselves. The name “seraphim” signifies fiery, and I will shortly explain as well as I can how it is that the power of fire causes a lifting up to the godlike.<sup>120</sup> The sacred image of their six wings signifies an endless, marvelous upward thrust toward God by the first, [305A] middle, and lower conceptions. Seeing the limitless number of feet, the multitude of faces, those wings blocking out the contemplation of their faces above and their feet below, and the unending beat of the middle set of wings, the sacred theologian was uplifted to a conceptual knowledge of the things seen. There were shown to him the many facets of the most exalted of the intelligent minds, the power of their multifarious vision. He witnessed that sacred caution of theirs which, in an unearthly fashion, they maintain regarding any brash, bold, and unpermitted search of the highest and the deepest things. He saw the harmony among them as they acted to be like God amid a stirring that was ceaseless, exalted, and forever.<sup>121</sup>

He was also introduced to the mystery of that divine and much-honored hymnody, for the angel of his vision taught the theologian, as far as possible, whatever he knew himself of the sacred. He taught him, furthermore, that for anyone purification consists of a participation in the transparent clarity of the Godhead. [305B] For reasons out of this world, all the sacred and intelligent beings are given a mysterious and transcendent initiation by the Deity itself into this clarity. It is something which is more obvious, more evident and better known to those dwelling in the neighborhood of the Deity since they are superior powers. As for the powers of

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<sup>120</sup> See note 119 above, and CH 15 328C 36 to 329C 38.

<sup>121</sup> On the imagery of the wings, see also CH 15 332D 43–48.

the second and last rank, together with our own intelligent powers, he concentrates his clear enlightenment for the unknown union with his own hiddenness, in proportion to the degree of distance from conformity to God. He enlightens the second ranks by way of the first, on each level. Indeed, to sum up, the Deity first emerges from secrecy to revelation by way of mediation by those first powers.

This, then, was what the theologian learned from the angel sent to lead him to the light. What he discovered was that purification, together with all those other activities of the Deity which are reflected through the superior beings, [305C] is spread out among all the others in proportion to the share that these have in the Word of God. And this was why he reasonably attributed to the seraphim, next to God, the property of bringing the fire of purification. Hence it is not out of place to say that it was a seraphim who purified the theologian. God purifies all beings insofar as he is himself the cause of every purification. Or rather, if I may use a more familiar example, there is our own hierarch. Through his deacons and his priests he brings purification and light. But he himself is said to purify and to illuminate, since those orders ordained by him attribute to him the sacred activities in which they themselves engage.<sup>122</sup> [305D] So, in like fashion, the angel who sacredly worked out the purification of the theologian attributed his own purifying understanding and power first to God, as the Cause, and then to the seraphim, as the initial hierarch.

It is as if, informing the one he purified, the angel were prudently to say this: “The purification which I am sacredly working in you has as its source, [308A] being, creator, and cause that Transcendent One who led into being the first ranks, who holds and preserves them, immobile and unchanged in a foundation next to Him, who stirs them first of all to share in his providential activities.” (This is what I learned from my teacher regarding the mission<sup>123</sup> of the seraphim.) “After God, the hierarch and ruler is the rank of primary beings, the one which so divinely instructed me in the task of purification and which, by my agency, is purifying you. Through their mediating efforts he who is the Cause and indeed the author of all purification has brought out from the domain of the hidden the workings of his own providence down to the point where they are available to us.”

This was what I learned from him, and I pass them on to you. And it is up to your intelligence and your critical understanding to decide on one or another of the solutions to the problem referred to, accepting it as more likely, [308B] more reasonable, and hence closer to the truth. Unless, of course, you yourself have a solution closer to the real truth or have learned it from someone else—God having given the word<sup>124</sup> and angels having explained what he said. And

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<sup>122</sup> For example, the hierarch disrobes the candidate for baptism “by means of the deacons” in EH 2 396B 12f.; see also EH 5 505BC 22–34 and 508A.

<sup>123</sup> Did Dionysius see a pun on “mission” or “apostolate” in the reference to “send” in Is 6:6?

<sup>124</sup> Ps 68:11 (LXX).

then you might be able to reveal to me, a lover of the angels, a contemplation which is clearer and thus more beloved to me.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

*What the traditional number of angels signifies.*

[321A] I think we also ought to reflect on the tradition in scripture that the angels number a thousand times a thousand and ten thousand times ten thousand.<sup>125</sup> These numbers, enormous to us, square and multiply themselves and thereby indicate clearly that the ranks of the heavenly beings are innumerable. So numerous indeed are the blessed armies of transcendent intelligent beings that they surpass the fragile and limited realm of our physical numbers. Only a conception and understanding of their own kind—transcendent and heavenly, the blessed gift to them of the Deity and the all-knowing creator of wisdom—could know them and define them. For this transcendentally real Godhead is the source of everything. It is the cause which gives being. It is the power holding all things together and the goal embracing all things.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

[325D] *What are the formed images of the angelic powers? the fiery property, the human likeness, the eyes, the nostrils, the ears, mouth, sense of touch, eyelids, eyebrows, fingers, teeth, shoulders, elbows and hands, heart, chest, back, feet, wings, nakedness, garments, the bright clothing, the clerical clothing, the belts, the sceptres, the spears, axes, plumb lines, winds, clouds, brass, electron, choirs, clapping, colors of different stones, the likeness of the lion, of the ox, of the eagle, the horses, the differences in the horses' colors, the rivers, chariots, wheels, the previously mentioned joy of the angels.*

[328A] 1. So now, if you will, the eye of our intelligence is going to relax the effort by which it tries to reach the solitary heights of contemplation befitting the angels. We must come down to the plains of distinction and multiplicity, to the many variegated forms and shapes adopted by the angels. Then, once more, we will take off from these images, and will, by retracing, rise up again to the simplicity of the heavenly minds.<sup>126</sup>

But, for a start, remember this much. The explanations of the sacred imagery indicate that the same ranks of heavenly beings sometimes direct in sacred things, and sometimes are themselves

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<sup>125</sup> Dn 7:10; Rv 5:11.

<sup>126</sup> This use of the motif of procession and return is unique in the corpus in that it is the exegete who “comes down” and “rises up” in interpretation rather than God who descends in revelation and then returns, uplifting the interpreter. See CH1, note 4.

directed,<sup>127</sup> that those of the last rank direct and those of the first rank are directed, that, as I have said already, they all have powers that are superior, intermediate, and subordinate. This mode of explication has nothing foolish about it. [328B] It would have been a silly mix-up and a stupid confusion to assert that such and such ranks are exclusively directed regarding sacred things by their superiors and, at the same time, that these latter are themselves directed by the former, or, again, that superior directs inferior and is in turn directed by the very one it has directed. When I say that the same beings both direct and are directed, I do not mean that director is directed by the very one it has directed. All I wish to say is that each rank is directed in sacred matters by its predecessors and that it directs those which come after it. There is therefore nothing odd about declaring that the holy forms described by scripture can properly and correctly be attributed sometimes to the superior powers, sometimes to the intermediate, and sometimes to the inferior. The power to be raised upward in an ever-returning movement, the capacity unfailingly to turn about oneself while still holding on to one's own special powers, the ability to share in the power of Providence in a procession which shares with successively lower orders—this surely is typical of all heavenly beings, [328C] typical of some, as I have said often, in a transcendent and complete way, typical of others in a partial and inferior way.

2. This question must now be discussed, and our explication must begin with the question of why the Word of God seems to honor the depiction of fire above all others.<sup>128</sup> You will find that it depicts not only flaming wheels,<sup>129</sup> but also burning animals<sup>130</sup> and even men who are somehow aglow.<sup>131</sup> [329A] It places masses of lighted embers surrounding these heavenly beings<sup>132</sup> and rivers roaring with endless fire.<sup>133</sup> It speaks of fiery thrones<sup>134</sup> and invoking the etymology of the word “seraphim,” it describes them as on fire and attributes to them the characteristics and the activity of fire.<sup>135</sup> In general, whether the reference be to high or low

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<sup>127</sup> The author makes a verb out of “hierarchy,” as in “to hierarchize” or “to be hierarchized.” While the sense of this language is largely preserved in the translation “to direct in spiritual things,” the role of the hierarchy in mediating revelation should be remembered

<sup>128</sup> On the symbol of fire, including its nonbiblical background, and the other symbols discussed in this chapter, see the notes by Gandillac, CH, pp. 165ff. See also Buffière, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1956), pp. 155f.

<sup>129</sup> Dn 7:9.

<sup>130</sup> Ez 1:13; 2 Kgs 2:11 (horses).

<sup>131</sup> Mt 28:3; Lk 24:4; Ez 1:4–7; Dn 10:1.

<sup>132</sup> Ez 1:13, 10:2.

<sup>133</sup> Dn 7:10.

<sup>134</sup> Dn 7:9. On “thrones” as a title, see CH 7 205D, note 73. Rv 4:5.

<sup>135</sup> Is 6:6; on “seraphim” as “heating,” see CH 7 205B.



within the hierarchy, the Word of God always honors the representation of fire. And indeed it seems to me that this imagery of fire best expresses the way in which the intelligent beings of heaven are like the Deity.

Actually this is why the sacred theologians frequently describe the transcendent and shapeless Being as fiery.<sup>136</sup> As an image derived from the things that are visible it does reflect, if one may say so, many of the characteristics of the Deity. Visible fire, after all, is, so to speak, in everything. It passes undiluted through everything and yet continues to be completely beyond them. It lights up everything and remains hidden at the same time. In itself it is undetectable and becomes evident only through its own workings on matter. [329B] It is unstoppable. It cannot be looked upon. Yet it is master of everything. Wherever it is, it changes things toward its own activity. It bestows itself upon all who draw near. With kindling warmth it causes renewal. With unveiled enlightenments it grants illumination, yet continues to be pure and undiluted. It makes distinctions and is nevertheless unchanging. It rises up and penetrates deeply. It is exalted and is never brought low. It is ever on the move, moving itself and others. It extends in all directions and is hemmed in nowhere. It needs no one. It grows unseen and it manifests its greatness wherever it is received. It is dynamic, powerful, invisibly present in everything. If ignored it does not seem to be there, but when friction occurs, it will seek out something; [329C] it appears suddenly, naturally and of itself, and soon it rises up irresistibly and, losing nothing of itself, it communes joyfully with everything.

One could discover many other attributes of fire which, like images drawn from perceived things, can be applied to the activities of the Deity, and the connoisseurs of things sacred revealed their understanding of this when they described heavenly beings as fiery. In this way they show how closely these resemble the divine and how much they are, to the extent possible, imitators of God.

3. But they also describe them with forms drawn from the realm of the human.<sup>137</sup> For man is, after all, intelligent and capable of looking toward the higher things. Sturdy and upright he is, by nature, a leader and a ruler, and even if by comparison with the irrational animals he is least in the scale of the power of sense perception, [329D] still it is he who dominates all with the superior power of his intelligence, with the mastery deriving from rational understanding, and with the natural freedom and independence of his spirit.

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<sup>136</sup> On God as fire (e.g., Dt 4:24), see Ep. 9 1108CD 39f. The presumed subject of *The Symbolical Theology* is the perceptible symbols for God, see below 336A 1–5.

<sup>137</sup> On the bodily shapes in general, the most quoted biblical passage is Dn 10:5f., followed by Ez 1:5–10. Other texts include Mk 16:5; Lk 24:4; Rv 4:7; and Rv 10:1f. For some of the patristic precedents for these interpretations, see the Gandillac notes, p. 173. Most, but not all, of the specific powers or features discussed here are explicitly biblical. Some seem extrapolated from the general anthropomorphic descriptions, for example, the sense of smell, the teeth, the heart, and the breast.

[332A] I also think that each of the many parts of the human body can provide us with images which are quite appropriate to the powers of heaven. One could say that the powers of sight<sup>138</sup> suggest their ability to gaze up directly toward the lights of God and, at the same time, to receive softly, clearly, without resistance but flexibly, purely and openly the enlightenments coming from the Deity, yet without emotion. The powers to discern smells<sup>139</sup> indicate their capacity to welcome fully those fragrances which elude the understanding and to discern with understanding those opposites which must be utterly avoided. The powers of hearing<sup>140</sup> signify the ability to have a knowing share of divine inspiration. [332B] Taste<sup>141</sup> has to do with the fill of conceptual nourishment and their receptiveness to the divine and nourishing streams. Touch<sup>142</sup> is understanding how to distinguish the profitable from the harmful. Eyelids and eyebrows<sup>143</sup> signify the guarding of what the mind has observed of God. Adolescence and youth<sup>144</sup> indicate the perennial vigor of living power. Teeth<sup>145</sup> have to do with the skill which produces divisions in the intake of nourishing perfection, for it is a fact that every intelligent being, having received from one which is more divine the gift of a unified conception, proceeds to divide it and to make provision for its diffusion in order that an inferior may be lifted up as far as possible. [332C] Shoulders, arms,<sup>146</sup> and also the hands<sup>147</sup> signify acting, achieving. The heart symbolizes life lived in conformity to God, benevolently dispensing the life-giving power to those in its care. The breast<sup>148</sup> signifies the indomitable virtue which guards the living outpourings of the heart underneath. The back<sup>149</sup> reveals the bringing together of all life-giving powers. The feet<sup>150</sup> are the nimble movement and speed of that perpetual journey to the divine things. (Hence the

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<sup>138</sup> Ez 1:18 and 10:12; Dn 10:6; Rv 4:6–8.

<sup>139</sup> In Tb 6:17 and 8:3, the demon has a sense of smell. See note 137.

<sup>140</sup> Ps 103:20.

<sup>141</sup> Does the author mean that the angels ate with Abraham (Gn 18:1–8) and with Lot (Gn 19:3)?

<sup>142</sup> An angel touched Jacob's thigh in Gn 32:25.

<sup>143</sup> These terms do not appear in the Bible; see note 137.

<sup>144</sup> Mk 16:5.

<sup>145</sup> See notes 137 and 141.

<sup>146</sup> Dn 10:6; 2 Sm 24:16.

<sup>147</sup> Jg 6:21; Ps 91:12 (cited in Mt 4:6); Ez 1:8, 8:3?, 10:8, 10:21; Dn 10:10, 12:7(cited in Rv 10:5).

<sup>148</sup> On the heart and breast, see note 137.

<sup>149</sup> Ez 1:18, 10:12 (LXX).

<sup>150</sup> Is 6:2; Ez 1:7; Dn 10:5 (LXX); Rv 10:1f.

Word of God has fashioned wings<sup>151</sup> on the feet of intelligent beings, [332D] for wings signify their uplifting swiftness, the climb to heaven, the ever-upward journey whose constantly upward thrust rises above all earthly longing. The lightness of wings symbolizes the freedom from all worldly attraction, their pure and untrammelled uplifting towards the heights.) The bare feet and body<sup>152</sup> signify detachment, freedom, independence, the fact of being untarnished by anything external, the greatest possible conformity to the divine simplicity.

[333A] 4. The simple and yet “manifold wisdom”<sup>153</sup> clothes the naked and speaks of how they are accoutred. So I must therefore try to offer an explication of the sacred vestments and the sacred instruments attributed to the intelligent beings of heaven. I think that the shining and fiery robe<sup>154</sup> symbolizes the divine form. This accords with the imagery of fire. And the power to illuminate is a consequence of the inheritance of heaven which is the abode of light. It makes all things enlightened in the mind and is enlightened in the mind.

The priestly vestment<sup>155</sup> signifies the capacity to guide spiritually to the divine and mysterious sights, and to consecrate one’s whole life. And the cinctures<sup>156</sup> are an indication of the control exercised by these intelligent beings over their generative powers. They signify also their practice of gathering together, their unifying absorption, the harmonious ease with which they tirelessly circle about their own identity. [333B]

5. The sceptres<sup>157</sup> designate the royal power and sovereignty with which they guide the achievement of everything. The spears and the axes<sup>158</sup> represent their discriminating skills amid the unlikeness of things, the sharp clarity and efficacy of their powers of discernment. The geometric and architectural equipment<sup>159</sup> has to do with their activity in founding, building, and

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<sup>151</sup> Note that the wings are considered under the human form, as variations on feet! Is 6:2; Ez 1:6, 22; Ez 10:5–16. See also EH 4 480B 10–484A 11.

<sup>152</sup> Being barefooted may be implied in the washing of feet in Gn 18:4 and 19:2. The term is used in Is 20:2–4 (LXX) but not for angels.

<sup>153</sup> Eph 3:10.

<sup>154</sup> Rv 9:17 and 15:6. See above, 328D 41 (note 131). Instead of exact references to “shining, fiery, or illuminating” garments, the scriptures often call the angelic robes “white”: Mt 28:3; Mk 16:5; Jn 20:12; Acts 1:10; Rv 4:4.

<sup>155</sup> Ez 9:2, 10:6–8; cf. CH 8 241BC 22f. and 35f. (“the holy stole”). Rv 1:13.

<sup>156</sup> Ez 9:2 (LXX); Rv 15:6. See Gandillac, CH, p. 178, n. 3.

<sup>157</sup> Jgs 6:21.

<sup>158</sup> Axes: Ez 9:2 (LXX); see CH 8 241B 23f. On a “sword” see Gn 3:24; Nm 22:23; Jos 5:13; 1 Chr 21:15f.; Rv 19:21 and 20:1. Angels separate the good from the bad in Mt 13:49.

<sup>159</sup> Ez 40:3; Am 7:7; Zec 2:1 (LXX); Rv 21:15.

bringing to completion, in fact they have to do with everything connected with the providence which uplifts and returns their subordinates.

Occasionally the depicted instruments<sup>160</sup> of the holy angels symbolize the judgments of God regarding us, [333C] some representing correcting discipline or punishing righteousness, some pointing to freedom from danger, the completion of discipline, the return to earlier felicity, or else the grant of new gifts great and small, gifts which can be seen or which are of the intellect. To sum up, a discerning mind would not be hard put to find a correlation between visible signs and invisible reality.

6. They are also named “winds”<sup>161</sup> as a sign of the virtually instant speed with which they operate everywhere, [333D] their coming and going from above to below and again from below to above as they raise up their subordinates to the highest peak and as they prevail upon their own superiors to proceed down into fellowship with and concern for those beneath them. One could add that the word “wind” means a spirit of the air and shows how divine and intelligent beings live in conformity with God. [336A] The word is an image and a symbol of the activity of the Deity. It naturally moves and gives life, hurrying forward, direct and unrestrained, and this in virtue of what to us is unknowable and invisible, namely the hiddenness of the sources and the objectives of its movements. “You do not know,” says scripture, “whence it comes and whither it goes.”<sup>162</sup> This was all dealt with in more detail by me in *The Symbolic Theology* when I was explicating the four elements.<sup>163</sup>

The word of God represents them also as clouds.<sup>164</sup> This is to show that the holy and intelligent beings are filled in a transcendent way with hidden light. Directly and without arrogance they have been first to receive this light, and as intermediaries, they have generously passed it on so far as possible to those next to them. They have a generative power, [336B] a life-giving power, a power to give increase and completion, for they rain understanding down and they summon the breast which receives them to give birth to a living tide.

7. The Word of God furthermore attributes to the heavenly beings the form of bronze, of electrum, of multicolored stones, and if it does so the reason lies in the fact that electrum,<sup>165</sup> which contains gold and silver,<sup>166</sup> symbolizes both the incorruptible, priceless, unfailing, and

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<sup>160</sup> Rv 8:6, 14:14–17, 20:1.

<sup>161</sup> Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7; perhaps Ps 18:10 and Dn 7:2.

<sup>162</sup> Jn 3:8.

<sup>163</sup> On *The Symbolic Theology*, see DN 1 597B, note 89.

<sup>164</sup> Ez 1:4, 10:3; Rv 10:1. The biblical symbol for God as a cloud is mentioned in DN 1 596C 30.

<sup>165</sup> Ez 1:4, 1:27, 8:2.

<sup>166</sup> Ez 1:7, 40:3; Dn 10:6.

unpolluted radiance of gold as well as the gleam, the gloss, [336C] the splendor, and the heavenly glow of silver. As for bronze it recalls either fire or gold, for the reasons given. With regard to the multicolored stones,<sup>167</sup> these must be taken to work symbolically as follows: white for light, red for fire, yellow for gold, green for youthful vitality.

Indeed you will find that each form carries an uplifting explanation of the representational images. But since I think I have dealt as much as I can with this matter, I feel we should now move on to the sacred explication of those animal figures attributed by scripture to the intelligent beings of heaven.

[336D] 8. Consider the form of the lion.<sup>168</sup> It must be taken as revealing their powerful indomitable command. And the heavenly beings approximate as much as they can the hiddenness of the unspeakable Deity, by covering the tracks of their own intellects. Humbly and mysteriously they draw a veil over the upward journey of divine enlightenment.

[337A] The figure of the ox<sup>169</sup> is a token of strength and of might, of the capacity to plough deeply the furrows of knowledge on which the fertile rains of heaven will fall. The horns are a mark of the power to guard and to be invincible.

The eagle<sup>170</sup> tells of regal might, of the thrust to the pinnacle, of the speeding wing, of the agility, readiness, speed, and cunning to locate nourishing food, of the contemplation which is freely, directly, and unswervingly turned in stout elevations of the optical powers toward those generously abundant rays of the divine sunshine.

Horses<sup>171</sup> mean obedience and docility. Their whiteness is the gleam of their kinship with the light of God; their blue color is the sign of hiddenness, [337B] the red is the power and sweep of fire; the piebald is the alliance of opposite extremes, and the capacity to move from one to the other, that adaptability of superior to inferior and of inferior to superior which comes of return and providence.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Rv 4:3, 21:19–21.

<sup>168</sup> Ez 1:10, 10:14; Rv 4:7 and 10:3. “Thy footprints were unseen,” Ps 77:19.

<sup>169</sup> Ez 1:10 and Rv 4:7 mention oxen, but with a term different from that of Pseudo Dionysius. Horns are usually depicted in the Bible as malevolent, except for the lamb in Rv 5:6.

<sup>170</sup> Ez 1:10, 10:14; Dn 7:4; Rv 4:7. Ex 19:4? God is depicted as an eagle in Dt 32:11. Looking into the sun is part of the myth of the eagle.

<sup>171</sup> 2 Kgs 2:11 and 6:17; Zec 1:8–10, 6:1–5; Rv 6:1–8, 19:14.

<sup>172</sup> The colors of these horses are not exactly those of Zec 1:8, 6:2f., or Rv 6:3–7. They are closest to Zec 6 insofar as “navy blue” is close to black. See Gandillac, CH, p. 187. The movement from superior to inferior is that of providential “procession,” the movement from inferior “up” to superior is that of the “return” or “reversion” to the divine. See DN 4, note 160.

If I did not have to keep in mind a due sense of proportion in my discourse, I could reflect upon the individual parts and the physical details of those animals mentioned by me. One could rightly apply them, in terms of dissimilar similarities,<sup>173</sup> to the powers of heaven. Thus, their anger is an image of intellectual bravery of which anger is the outermost echo; their desire is that longing felt by the angels in the presence of God;<sup>174</sup> and indeed, to put the matter briefly, all the feelings and all the various parts of the irrational animals uplift us to immaterial conceptions and to the unifying powers of the heavenly beings.

[337C] Not only do these things suffice to the wise but the explanation of one incongruous image suffices for the like-mannered interpretation of comparable ones.<sup>175</sup>

9. I must now look at the reason for applying to heavenly beings the titles of rivers, wheels, and chariots. The rivers of fire<sup>176</sup> signify those divine channels which are forever dispensing their generous and unchecked flow and nourishing with their life-giving fruitfulness. The chariots<sup>177</sup> signify the fellowship binding together beings of the same order. As for the winged wheels<sup>178</sup> which go ahead with neither twist nor swerve, [337D] these have to do with the power to keep right on along the straight road, directly and without wandering off, and all this because the wheel of their intelligence is guided in a way which has nothing in it of this world. Yet it is possible that the iconography of the wheels of the mind be explained by another uplifting [of the mind from perceptible images to intelligent meanings].<sup>179</sup> For, as the theologian has pointed out, they are called “Gelgel,”<sup>180</sup> which in Hebrew signifies both “revolving.” and “revealing.” [340A] Those Godlike wheels of fire “revolve” about themselves in their ceaseless movement around the Good, and they “reveal” since they expose hidden things, and lift up the mind from below and carry the most exalted enlightenments down to the lowliest.

Finally, I must explain something about what scripture intends in the reference to the joy of the heavenly ranks. Now these ranks could never experience the pleasures we draw from the

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<sup>173</sup> For the expression “dissimilar similarities,” see also CH 2 137D 44 to 140A 1, 141C 37, 144A 5, and 145A 14.

<sup>174</sup> See CH 2 141D on courage and desire.

<sup>175</sup> As at the end of *The Divine Names* (DN 13 981C), the author suggests that the method he has presented can be applied to other cases.

<sup>176</sup> Dn 7:10; Ez 47:1 (cited in Rv 22:1). Regarding fire, see above, 328D 36 to 329C 38

<sup>177</sup> 2 Kgs 2:11, 6:17; Ps 104:3; Zec 6:1–8.

<sup>178</sup> Ez 1:15–21, 10:1–13; Dn 7:9 has fiery wheels.

<sup>179</sup> This is a rare use of the term “anagogy” or uplifting to mean “an interpretation.” While the author usually avoids this technical usage of Origen and successors, it also appears in CH 1 121 C 34, CH 2 145B 22f., and EH 473B 16; see also CH 15 336C 32–34.

<sup>180</sup> Gelgel: Ez 10:13 (LXX).

passions. The reference therefore is to the way they participate in the divine joy caused by the finding of the lost.<sup>181</sup> They undergo a truly divine sense of well-being, the good and generous delight at the providence and salvation of those who are returned to God. They are unspeakably happy in the way that, occasionally, sacred men are happy when God arranges for divine enlightenments to visit them.

[340B] This, then, is what I have to say regarding the sacred representations. Perhaps it falls a good deal short of making everything clear. Nevertheless I believe it will keep us from the wretchedness of being stuck in the fictional appearances. Perhaps it may also be objected that I have not mentioned all the powers, all the acts and all the images referred to by scripture in regard to the angels. This is true. But in leaving certain things out, it was in recognition of the fact that I am at a loss when it comes to understanding their transcendent reality. What I really needed was the light of a guide to these. The omission of matters similar to those with which I have been dealing may be explained by a twofold concern of mine, not to overextend my discourse and to honor in respectful silence the hidden things which are beyond me.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> LK 15:7–10; the term is used of human joy in Jn 16:22–24.

<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 143–191.

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# THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY BY DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE

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Pseudo-Dionysius, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 133–141.

## CHAPTER ONE

*What is the divine darkness?*

[997A] 1. Trinity!! Higher than any being,  
any divinity, any goodness!  
Guide of Christians  
in the wisdom of heaven!  
Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,  
up to the farthest, highest peak  
of mystic scripture,  
where the mysteries of God's Word  
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable  
[997B] in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.  
Amid the deepest shadow  
they pour overwhelming light  
on what is most manifest.  
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen  
they completely fill our sightless minds  
with treasures beyond all beauty.

For this I pray; and, Timothy, my friend, my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things,<sup>2</sup> is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and

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<sup>2</sup> The terms "mystic" (see line 7 of poem above) and "mysterious" both translate *mustikos*, with some reservations. The former translation is not meant in the later sense of a "mystical" or extraordinary, private experience of transcending one's self, but rather in the more general sense of something "mysterious" or secret or hidden. See Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, p. 47, and Louis Bouyer, "Mystique, essai sur l'histoire du mot," *Supplement de la Vie spirituelle* 9 (May 15, 1949). Bouyer's excellent discussion of the term "mystical" in Pseudo-Dionysius is more accessible in *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 406–16.



knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, [1000A] shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.<sup>3</sup>

2. But see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninformed,<sup>4</sup> that is to say, to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have a direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place.<sup>5</sup> And if initiation into the divine is beyond such people, what is to be said of those others, still more uninformed, who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being, [1000B] and who claim that it is in no way superior to the godless, multiformed shapes they themselves have made? What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.<sup>6</sup>

3. This, at least, is what was taught by the blessed Bartholomew.<sup>7</sup> He says that the Word of God is vast and minuscule, that the Gospel is wide-ranging and yet restricted. [1000C] To me it seems that in this he is extraordinarily shrewd, for he has grasped that the good cause of all is both eloquent and taciturn, indeed wordless. It has neither word nor act of understanding, since it is on a plane above all this, and it is made manifest only to those who travel through foul and fair, who pass beyond the summit of every holy ascent, who leave behind them every divine light, every voice, every word from heaven, and who plunge into the darkness where, as scripture proclaims, there dwells the One who is beyond all things.<sup>8</sup> It is not for nothing that the blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, [1000D] he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights, pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the

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3 This advice to Timothy introduces both the specific account of Moses' ascent up Mt. Sinai (Vanneste, *Le Mystère de Dieu*, pp. 48f.) and also the general uplifting that goes beyond the perceptible (Chapter 4 and the hierarchical treatises) and even beyond the intelligible (Chapter 5).

4 See Socrates' similar warning in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 155e. On literary secrecy in general, see EH 1, note 4.

5 Ps 18:11.

6 This passage directly contradicts a passage from Aristotle, who used identical terminology to argue that negations are the opposites of affirmations (*On Interpretation* 17a 31–33). Here at the outset and again at its conclusion (MT 5 1048B 16–21), the treatise refutes the impression that negations can capture the transcendent Cause of all.

7 Like the other apostles, the Bartholomew of the New Testament (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13) was later credited with several apocryphal works.

8 Ex 20:21; cf. Ex 19.

summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God himself, but contemplates, not him who is invisible, but rather where he dwells. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. [1001A] Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.<sup>9</sup> Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.<sup>10</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

[1025A] *How one should be united, and attribute praises, to the Cause of all things who is beyond all things.*

I pray we could come to this darkness so far above light! If only we lacked sight and knowledge so as to see, so as to know, unseeing and unknowing, that which lies beyond all vision and knowledge. For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. [1025B] They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside<sup>11</sup> they show up the beauty which is hidden.

Now it seems to me that we should praise the denials quite differently than we do the assertions. When we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through

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<sup>9</sup> This expression is perhaps better known as “the cloud of unknowing” because of the treatise by an anonymous English author of the fourteenth century: *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> The biblical narrative of Moses’ ascent (Ex 19 and 20:18–21) was also the subject of Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses*, especially Part II, #152–170 (PG 44 372C–380A), where many of the Areopagite’s themes are anticipated. As in the accounts of Hierotheus (DN 2 648AB 10–20 and DN 3 681C 41 to 684A 3) and of Carpos (Ep. 8 1097BC 21–26), this passage uses terminology otherwise associated with religious ritual. Here the Sinai events correspond to the liturgical experience of the hierarch, for whom Moses is indeed the prototype (EH 5 501C 33f.). While Gregory made this correspondence more explicit (#160), Dionysius lets his specialized terminology suggest it.

Like Moses, the hierarch is first purified, both with the other worshipers (EH 2 397B 14–21 and EH 3 428B 16) and also in his own ceremonial “purification” (EH 3 440A 11–14). In the liturgical dismissal the hierarch and those who have not yet completed their purification are separated (EH 3 436A 3–5) just as Moses stands apart from the crowds. Like Moses, the hierarch knows how to transcend the bare sounds of the scriptures (DN 4 708C 28) and the material lights of the rite (CH 1 121D 42f.). The hierarch and his “chosen” assistants approach the altar and, like Moses, contemplate the divine things (EH 3 425D 44–46). “Contemplation” is indeed the very name of the liturgical interpretation in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

<sup>11</sup> “Clearing aside” here translates a term (aphairesis) that is otherwise rendered “denial.”

intermediate terms until we reached the last things. But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things<sup>12</sup> so that we may unhiddenly know that unknowing which itself is hidden from all those possessed of knowing amid all beings, so that we may see above being that darkness concealed from all the light among beings.

### CHAPTER THREE

*What are the affirmative theologies and what are the negative?*

[1032D] In my *Theological Representations*,<sup>13</sup> I have praised the notions which are most appropriate to affirmative theology. [1033A] I have shown the sense in which the divine and good nature is said to be one and then triune, how Fatherhood and Sonship are predicated of it, the meaning of the theology of the Spirit, how these core lights of goodness grew from the incorporeal and indivisible good, and how in this sprouting they have remained inseparable from their co-eternal foundation in it, in themselves, and in each other.<sup>14</sup> I have spoken of how Jesus, who is above individual being, became a being with a true human nature. Other revelations of scripture were also praised in *The Theological Representations*.

In *The Divine Names* I have shown the sense in which God is described as good, existent, life, wisdom, power, and whatever other things pertain to the conceptual names for God.<sup>15</sup> In my *Symbolic Theology*<sup>16</sup> I have discussed analogies of God drawn from what we perceive. I have spoken of the images we have of him, of the forms, figures, and instruments proper to him, [1033B] of the places in which he lives and of the ornaments he wears. I have spoken of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking, and indeed of all those images we have of him, images shaped by the workings of the symbolic representations of God. And I feel sure that you have noticed how these latter come much more abundantly than what went before, since *The Theological Representations* and a discussion of the names appropriate to God are inevitably briefer than what can be said in *The Symbolic Theology*. The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speeches less and unknowing. [1033C] In the earlier books my argument traveled downward from the most exalted to the humblest categories, taking in on this

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12 These cryptic references to descending assertions and ascending denials are expanded in the next chapter.

13 This lost or fictitious treatise is mentioned and perhaps summarized in the first chapter of *The Divine Names* (DN 1 585B 10f. and 589D 38 to 592B 17). See DN 1, notes 3 and 10, for additional references.

14 The symbolism of lights and sprouting plants is also used for the Son and the Spirit in DN 2 645B 19–24.

15 These five biblical names for God are the first to be discussed in *The Divine Names* (chapters four through eight).

16 On this lost or fictitious treatise, see DN 1, note 89.

downward path an ever-increasing number of ideas which multiplied with every stage of the descent. But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.

Now you may wonder why it is that, after starting out from the highest category when our method involved assertions, we begin now from the lowest category when it involves a denial. The reason is this. When we assert what is beyond every assertion, we must then proceed from what is most akin to it, and as we do so we make the affirmation on which everything else depends. But when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. Is it not closer to reality to say that God is life and goodness rather than that he is air or stone? Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to him the terms of speech and thought?<sup>17</sup> [1033D]

## CHAPTER FOUR

*That the supreme Cause of every perceptible thing is not itself perceptible.*

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17 Or, “is it not more incorrect to say that God gets drunk or raves than that he is expressed or conceived?”

“Life,” “goodness,” “air,” etc., are all biblical examples and are discussed elsewhere in the corpus (DN 1 596ABC, CH 2 144CD, Ep. 9 1105B; “air” refers to the “still small breeze” of 1 Kings 19:12 in the Septuagint). The point here is that not all affirmations concerning God are equally inappropriate; they are arranged in a descending order of decreasing congruity. Affirmative theology begins with the loftier, more congruous comparisons and then proceeds “down” to the less appropriate ones. Thus, as the author reminds us, The Theological Representations began with God’s oneness and proceeded down into the multiplicity of affirming the Trinity and the incarnation. The Divine Names then affirmed the more numerous designations for God which come from mental concepts, while The Symbolic Theology “descended” into the still more pluralized realm of sense perception and its plethora of symbols for the deity. This pattern of descending affirmations and ascending negations can be interpreted in terms of late Neoplatonism’s “procession” from the One down into plurality and the “return” of all back to the One (CH 1, note 4).

In the “return,” not all negations concerning God are equally appropriate; the attributes to be negated are arranged in an ascending order of decreasing incongruity, first considering and negating the lowest or most obviously false statements about God and then moving up to deny those that may seem more congruous. Thus the first to be denied are the perceptible attributes, starting with The Mystical Theology, Chapter 4, which therefore previews the two subsequent treatises on perceptible symbols, The Celestial Hierarchy and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. Chapter 2 of the former work will continue the theme of negating and transcending symbols, namely, interpreting first the most incongruous of the perceptible symbols attributed to the celestial, whether to the angels or to God. The anagogical or uplifting method of interpretation in these two treatises incorporates into itself the principles of negative theology. Both the spatial, material depictions of the angels in the scriptures and also the temporal, sequential images of God in the liturgy must be transcended in the ascent from the perceptible to the intelligible. Thus, “as we climb higher,” Chapter 5 of The Mystical Theology denies and moves beyond all our concepts or “conceptual” attributes of God and concludes by abandoning all speech and thought, even negations.

On this sequence of treatises, see P. Rorem, “The Place of The Mystical Theology in the Pseudo-Dionysian Corpus,” *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 87–98.

[1040D] So this is what we say. The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. It is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. It is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible. It suffers neither disorder nor disturbance and is overwhelmed by no earthly passion. It is not powerless and subject to the disturbances caused by sense perception. It endures no deprivation of light. It passes through no change, decay, division, loss, no ebb and flow, nothing of which the senses may be aware. None of all this can either be identified with it nor attributed to it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

[1045D] *That the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual.*

Again, as we climb higher we say this. It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, [1048A] equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, [1048B] error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, [\*Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works\*](#), ed. John Farina, trans. Colm Luibheid and Paul Rorem, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 133–141.