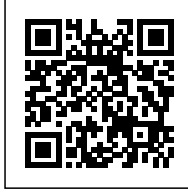




# WHO IS GOD?

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John Climacus, in his [Ladder of Divine Ascent](#), makes the observation that God is love, and whoever seeks to define God further is like a blind man on a seashore trying to count the grains of sand.

And yet God, as both hidden and universal, has occupied the mind of mankind for as long as the time of Socrates, the ancient Hebrews, and the early Christians. These three traditions, rooted in Athens, Jerusalem and Rome, have together provided a robust definition of God over the millennia.

First, the intellectual descendants of Socrates (Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and Philo) created not only the conceptual vocabulary to describe the nature of God, but they also demarcated the broader outlines of how we are to understand who and what God is. This is the [God of the philosophers](#).

*growth of humanity towards perfection is both beauty and truth*

He is the ultimate Cause of all becoming and all motion, the Unmoved Mover, Pure Form, the Idea of good. Because of him, all things strive to realize their true potential, just like an egg must become a chicken. In brief, God is the unifying principle of all creation.

As such, he is one, undivided, and the ultimate guarantor of morality, because he loves mankind, and he is all-knowing because he is the Being of all beings, namely, the logic and the Logos (truth) of all creation.

It was [Philo of Alexandria](#) who successfully integrated Jewish monotheism with the God of Greek philosophy. This interfused God is all-pure but ultimately unknowable by human effort because matter is inherently impure (or fallen) and cannot fully understand, let alone know, the transcendent. Perfection cannot be known by imperfect means.

Philo describes God as all-powerful, all-good, and all-holy (God's holiness is entirely missing in Greek thinking). Power flows from him, like light from the sun, and it fashions and creates matter and, thus, things. These powers, Philo calls God's "Logos," and they comprise various "doers," such as, angels, souls and even demons.

*nothing cannot create something*

Philo derives his understanding of Logos both from Plato's concept of the [realm of Ideas](#) (perfect Forms that are the blueprints of all that exists), as well as from the [Stoical concepts](#) of the *logos spermatikos* (God's wisdom, or word, acting upon matter), and the *logos prophorikos* (the world-soul, the power of God that gives life to all things and flows through all things). Why did God create the world? In order to signify his goodness, which is his love.

Thus, Logos is the begotten of God, even the Son of God, but it is not God. Rather, it stands as the mediator between the Creator and his creation.

However, Philo can only describe the actions of the Logos; he is rather confused about its nature.

The proper explanation will be given later by [St. John](#), where Christ is identified as God's Logos, not simply as an agent – but as God himself, who became matter for love of the world.

*God does not have an origin*

Nevertheless, Philo is the conduit through which the definitions of God, both Greek and Hebrew, flow into Christianity, where they achieve their perfected form, especially through the work of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas.

For [Augustine](#), God is one, unchanging, immaterial and eternal. Drawing upon God's revelation to Moses ("I am what I am), Augustine concludes that the very essence of God is Being itself (an "essence" is a definition that tells us what a thing is).

Since Being lies beyond all beings, God is without change and eternally perfect. Thus he is transcendent and all good, the great Something from whom all things were, and are, created. Truth and God are one; or, truth emanates only from God. As the all-wise Creator, God knows all that will come to pass, which means that history itself unfolds from him.

For [Aquinas](#), God rules his creation through his will and is the source of all energy and movement (Unmoved Mover). He is also the power that brought all things into being, since nothing cannot create something.

Aquinas also set out his famous five proofs of God. The chief among them being the causal argument - that God is the necessary cause of all things, but he himself is not part of the chain of events. He has no cause (no one created him). He is the reason why all of creation keeps going.

But when we speak of God's necessity, we are not talking about logic but metaphysics – we are speaking of God's [aseity](#) (that God does not have an origin – he is an eternal I AM).

Both the Greek and the Hebrew thinkers agree on the inherent unity and oneness of God. But the Christian thinkers also needed to explain Christ, who is God-Man.

*to create is to speak of purpose*

[Peter Abelard](#) summarizes the explanation, when he defines the Trinity. God the Father is one and the good. God the Son is the Logos, who creates with his words. God the Holy Spirit is the world soul. In

other words, the Trinity encloses the power, the will, and the wisdom of God.

This also raises the secondary question that if God is perfect, how can he become a man (Jesus) and therefore become imperfect?

This is where rational explanation must end, and we must move into mysticism, because we cannot know the great complexity of God through our minds. We must only experience him.

This is the [God of revelation](#), the God of the personal, mystical encounter, who is not the same as the God of the philosophers. So, when Nietzsche famously announces the death of God, he is actually only proclaiming the death of the God of the philosophers whose "history" goes back to Socrates - and no further.

The God of the revelation remains unaffected by Nietzsche's announcement, because mystical experience is beyond language.

It is said that the great philosopher of the Church, [Thomas Aquinas](#), had such an experience, which he could not speak of - and he stopped writing theology. "I can write no more. I have seen things which make all that I have written seem like straw," he concluded, and died not long afterwards.

*Perfection cannot be known by imperfect means*

But who is this eternal, enduring, un-Nietzschean, post-Socratic God?

This is the God beyond God, who is beyond all conceptualization, who always transcends all our ideas of transcendence, wrapped forever in the mystery of eternal existence, revealed now and then as by a sudden and brief flash of light. This revelation is in the person of Christ.

In the words of St. Paul: "One God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6).

Thus, in God the Father is found the origin of all creation. In God the Son, the incarnate God, is found the purpose of all things. In God the Spirit, is found both the urge and the necessity of our purpose - our perfected form so that we may dwell in eternity, with God. This growth of humanity towards perfection is both beauty and truth.

[Gregory Nazianzen](#), in his eulogy for Basil of Caesarea, describes this great mystery in this way: "The human being is an animal who has been given the task to become God (*zoon theoumenon*)."

Now, with the death of the God of the philosophers - the God of revelation, the God of truth begins to unfold his mystery and we shall enter into a new phase of holy wisdom, a new experience of the

eternity that lies beyond space and time.

What does this mean? That God is greater than an idea, because language is always inadequate. Whenever we try to speak of God, we at once resort to the limiting language of the philosophers: "Let us leave the elementary doctrines of Christ and go on to maturity..." (Hebrews 6:1a).

This leads us to a greater mystery, for God alone is the answer to the difficult question - why is there something when there could be nothing? Creation as the alignment of the material with truth - to create is to speak of purpose, which is meaning - and which humans imitate when they transform, through consciousness, the earth into the world.

This is why the God of revelation is the God of love, which is not a feeling, but a great mystical experience, an explanation that slips beyond words, like music.

***[Photo credit: J. Struthers]***

