

An Introduction to the Philosophy of Divine Revelation

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Based solely on the etymology of the word, philosophy is simply *love of wisdom*. Though expanded definitions abound, the most succinct way of defining philosophy is to see it as *thinking about right thinking*.¹ The term *revelation* is a translation of the Greek *apokalupsis*, which carries with it the idea of uncovering something; it speaks of disclosure of facts hitherto unseen or unknown.² *Divine* revelation may be thought of as the process, or that which is disclosed by it, whereby the infinite God communicates truth to his finite creatures. *The philosophy of divine revelation*, therefore, is an attempt to think correctly about how God has, and continues to, reveal truth to humankind.

For those who deny the existence of God, let alone the idea of divine revelation, it must be pointed out that the very idea of philosophy entails the existence of an objective rational standard according to which human thought ought to conform. That people are *obligated* to think rationally entails the existence of an objective moral standard as well. The Christian worldview alone, which is based on the teachings of Scripture, is able to account for the objective rational and moral standards that regulate human thought and conduct. On the Christian worldview, God is the exemplar of perfect rationality and morality. Human beings are obligated to think as he does (e.g. in non-contradictory terms) and to obey his moral imperatives. In doing so, they reflect God's own rational and morally perfect character. God not only stands as the metaphysical foundation for rationality and ethics, but he makes this truth known to his creatures by way of divine

¹Lord Quinton, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, New Edition, Ed. Ted Honderich, s.v. "Philosophy" (New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2005).

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Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Second Ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), p.20.

revelation. Before exploring this in greater detail, it is first necessary to examine competing metaphysical claims and show them wanting.

Christianity is essentially dualistic in its metaphysics; reality is made up of two things: the eternal Creator and everything else. *Monism* on the other hand, denies that such a distinction exists. In fact *all* distinctions are said to be either illusory or merely conventional. Certain schools of thought within Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, and more recently, New Age cults, maintain a metaphysical commitment to Monism. In addition, today's favored pagan creation myth, namely, the evolution story, is essentially monistic. This is surprising because those propagating this story often purport to be pro-science and ardently anti-religious. Nevertheless, even its ardent defenders admit that the evolution story has much in common with primitive pagan myth.³ According to this story, the universe came into being for no discernable reason, some 15 billion years ago in a cataclysmic explosion referred to as "the Big Bang." As the intense heat dissipated, the amazing array of ordered structures and systems that adorn the cosmos arose. This process is said to be analogous to the way in which water behaves when it loses heat and the H₂O molecules combine to form crystalline snowflakes. On this view, reality may be described as essentially one being undergoing constant development. Any apparent distinction is only one of degree. Over endless ages of time, amoebas have evolved into fish, fish into amphibians, amphibians into mammals, and finally, certain kinds of mammals—hominoid apes—evolved into people. Darwinism, which stands as the foundational philosophy for the evolution story, is decidedly atheistic in its outlook; God either does not exist or else has nothing whatever to do with historic eventuation. This

³Victor Stenger in Debate with William Lane Craig, *Does God Exist?* Audio <http://www.biblicalcatholic.com/apologetics/audio.htm#WilliamLaneCraig> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

means that the development of the cosmos is not in accordance with any plan or purpose and therefore nothing that exists is, or can be, identified objectively. In other words, there is no *objective* place to draw *any* distinctions. In his signature Darwinist apologetic, Richard Dawkins noted that: “Psychologists studying the development of language tell us that children are natural essentialists.”⁴ He then speculates as to why this might be so: “Maybe they have to be if they are to remain sane while their developing minds divide things into discrete categories each entitled to a unique noun.”⁵ Dawkins’s remark is instructive. It reveals his own belief that in order to remain sane, a person must think in essentialist terms. That is to say, according to Dawkins, the belief that discrete categories actually and objectively exist undergirds rational thought. Nevertheless, he admits that Darwinism is “very anti-essentialist,”⁶ and goes on to suggest that this is the reason “why we historically found evolution so hard to stomach.”⁷ This is an important admission by one of the world’s most ardent defenders of Darwinism: people reject evolution, not because of religious indoctrination, but because it leads to irrationality. Evolution defender P. Z. Myers illustrated this best when he stated of human beings, “We’re still fish.”⁸ Darwinism’s monistic metaphysic, which sees distinctions as apparent and not actual, ends up undercutting the validity of all argumentation, including its own. If all distinctions are illusory or merely conventional, then all viewpoints are equally valid. The

⁴Richard Dawkins, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (New York, NY: Free Press, 2009), p. 23.

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Ibid.

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Ibid.

⁷Ibid, p. 26.

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P.Z. Myers, in interview with Ray Comfort, *Evolution vs. God: Shaking the Foundations of Faith* (Bellflower, CA: Living Waters Publications, 2013), DVD.

distinction between true and false collapses and a rational defense for monism becomes impossible.

At the other end of the spectrum stands atomistic philosophy. Whereas monism sees ultimate reality as *one*, atomism sees it as *many*. On this view, reality is believed to be reducible to an incalculable number of material particular things. While atomists may acknowledge that individuality exists independent of any human apprehension of it, their basic metaphysical commitments are no less damaging to knowledge and argumentation than those of their monistic counterparts. Each individual particular thing that supposedly comprises reality would be, by definition, unlike any other thing. Whereas the monist views distinctions as illusory or merely conventional, the atomist must view *sameness* in the very same way. On this view, sameness is a purely human construct. All rational thought, however, entails predication, which depends upon the actual existence of sameness. It follows that if sameness is a human construct, all predication can, with equal validity, be either affirmed or denied. Obviously this marks the end of rational inquiry, deliberation, and argumentation. Christian theism, on the other hand, does have the explanatory resources to account for both rationality and morality.

On Christian theism, unity and diversity may be described as concepts which have been eternally exemplified by and in the Triune God of the Bible. God is, at once and from all eternity, three distinct Persons who nonetheless share the same eternal and undivided nature. The three Persons of the Trinity are the one God. Distinctions between the Persons of the Trinity are real, not imagined, as are those between the Creator and his creation. Furthermore, at his discretion and by his own authority, God gives identity to

his individual creations, placing them in specific classes of beings. Such classes reflect an individual's place in God's eternal plan. Herman Bavinck observed that:

Unity, true unity, a unity which does not destroy differentiation, but rather includes and enfolds it, may come, and can come, only when the entire world is conceived as the product of the wisdom and power of which reveal God's eternal plan. Only a personal God, who is both will and intelligence, can call a world into existence, which is one and yet differentiated.⁹

Things within the same class share a God-ordained sameness that alone can provide an objective standard according to which truthful predication can proceed. In this way, Christian theism alone provides the pre-conditions for intelligibility. God, as sovereign Creator and objective identifier of all that exists, has knowledge of the world that is original. Man's knowledge, on the other hand, is derivative; it exists only because God has enabled man's mind to apprehend the truth that God reveals to him. God is the original Knower, and man is the derivative re-knower.¹⁰ Revelation is thus the cornerstone of Christian epistemology. It is (or ought to be) used as a lens and a standard through which, and according to which, all experiences are interrelated and interpreted. If God's revelation is rejected, the inevitable result is thoroughgoing skepticism.

According to the Scriptures, which on Christian theism are God's inerrant and infallible revelation, God does not desire that humankind grope around in the darkness of ignorance. God declares that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:3)¹¹ and that Christ is "the true Light, which lighteth every

⁹Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Divine Revelation* (Cambridge University Press, 1909), pp. 94-95.

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Cornelius Van Til, *Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1949, 1952), p. 167.

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All Scripture from *the King James Version* of the Holy Bible.

man that cometh into the world (John 1:9). God gives to man, immediately and without deliberation, knowledge of himself as a distinct individual with a unique identity. Though he recognizes his liberty to think and make choices, man also recognizes both his finitude and his dependence. Self-awareness means awareness of self as a *creature*. The connection between man's freedom, dependence, and knowledge of God is described aptly by Bavinck: "Just as confidently as man is convinced in his self-consciousness of his own existence and the reality of the world, does he believe also in the reality and personality of God. This belief is interwoven with his self-consciousness, more particularly with its double testimony to dependence and freedom."¹² He further observes that:

[Man] does not invent the idea of God nor produce it; it is given to him and he receives it. Atheism is not proper to man by nature, but develops it at a later stage of life, on the ground of philosophic reflection; like skepticism, it is an intellectual and ethical abnormality, which only confirms the rule. By nature, in virtue of this nature, every man believes in god. And this is due in the last analysis to the fact that God, the creator of all nature, has not left himself without a witness, but through all nature, both that of man himself and that of the outside world, speaks to him. Not evolution, but revelation alone accounts for this impressive and incontrovertible fact of the worship of God.¹³

As Bavinck observed, and as the Bible authoritatively declares, atheism is an intellectual and ethical abnormality (Psalm 14:1). This view finds confirmation from modern developmental science as well. Justin Barrett noted that, "children's normally and naturally developing minds make them prone to believe in divine creation and intelligent

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Bavinck, p. 77.

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Ibid, p. 79.

design. In contrast, evolution is unnatural for human minds; relatively difficult to believe."¹⁴ He elsewhere cites the work of Deborah Kelemen, who showed that,

Children naturally interpret features of the natural world as having purpose. Animals, plants, and even rocks and rivers are the way they are for a function external to themselves, and that is why they are here. Kelemen has also shown that this perception of purpose or function is closely related to supposing that the natural thing in question was created by someone. Preschoolers know that function is best explained by an intentional being bringing it about. This link between perceived functionality and intentionality creates a conceptual space for a designer or creator: who did it? Contrary to what Jean Piaget argued in the early 20th century, children do not assume that humans account for the design they perceive. They recognize the need for someone(s) mightier.¹⁵

Avowed atheist Graham Lawton admitted that "Atheism is psychologically impossible because of the way humans think. . . . [Studies show] that even people who claim to be committed atheists tacitly hold religious beliefs, such as the existence of an immortal soul. This shouldn't come as a surprise, since we are born believers, not atheists, scientists say."¹⁶

Man knows that God exists. Furthermore, he is aware of his God-given conscience and the moral standards it reflects; he knows he is obligated to obey the laws God has written in his heart (Romans 2:14-15). This *immediate* revelation of God, however, is not the only way in which God reveals divine truth to man. God's revelation

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Justin Barrett, as quoted by Marin Beckford, "Children are Born Believers in God, Academic Claims," *The Telegraph*, November 24, 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/3512686/Children-are-born-believers-in-God-academic-claims.html> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

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Justin Barrett, "Are We Born Believing in God?" *Big Questions Online*, <https://www.bigquestionsonline.com/content/are-we-born-believing-god> (Accessed February 9, 2015).

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Nuri Vittachi, "Scientists discover that atheists might not exist, and that's not a joke," *Science 2.0*, http://www.science20.com/writer_on_the_edge/blog/scientists_discover_that_atheists_might_not_exist_and_thats_not_a_joke-139982 (Accessed February 9, 2015).

of himself is also *mediated* through the created order. As Barrett and Keleman have pointed out, people normally interpret the world as having been designed for a purpose. Not only does this come naturally to man (by God's enabling to be sure) it is the only rational justification for engaging in scientific investigation in the first place.¹⁷ Both types of revelation, that which comes immediately and that which is mediated through nature, form what is commonly referred to as *general* revelation. This is granted to all men and all men are therefore obligated to respond affirmatively to it. Paul declares:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:18-20).

Though general revelation gives man indubitable knowledge of God's existence, this revelation, even if accepted for what it is, cannot guarantee that man will interpret the world aright. Man is fallible. He draws general conclusions from specific instances (induction), which are only sometimes true. To interpret the world aright, man needs a "God's eye perspective" on things. More importantly, general revelation cannot bring man into a right relationship with God. All religions recognize a rift between the human and the divine. Though they differ on specifics, religion is aimed at giving "to a human being the supreme satisfaction of his life through a vital relationship with what he recognizes as the supreme superhuman Power or powers, in the world."¹⁸ Christianity denies outright that the rift can be bridged through human effort (Galatians 3:11). On

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Bavinck, pp. 91, 307.

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Robert E. Hume, *The World's Living Religions* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959), p. 4.

Christian theism, God alone in Christ accomplished what was necessary for reconciliation between God and man (Ephesians 2:8-9). General revelation, therefore, is insufficient to guarantee man's proper apprehension of the world, or to inform man of God's redemptive work in Christ. For the purpose of instructing and informing man concerning natural and redemptive history, God has given his *special* revelation.

As the name implies, special revelation is a body of truth that God has revealed only to a subset of humanity. Paul states that it was Israel that had the distinct advantage over all other nations in that unto her "were committed the oracles of God" (Romans 3:2). Centuries earlier, the psalmist celebrated the fact that Israel alone was the recipient of God's special revelation: "He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them" (Psalm 147:19-20).

The Bible declares that God made his word known via human authors (e.g. Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Paul, etc.) who recorded precisely what he intended. The process is described by the apostle Peter, who affirmed that, "no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" (2 Peter 1:20-21). Peter's use of the term *interpretation* has led many to understand him as referring here to *hermeneutical* considerations. This is incorrect. As D. T. Young explains, the text, rightly understood,

. . . asserts that Scripture is not human in its ultimate origin. It is God's interpretation, not man's. We often hear of certain statements of Scripture as representing David's opinion, or Paul's opinion, or Peter's opinion. Yet, strictly speaking, we have no man's opinion in those Holy Writings. It is all God's

interpretation of things. No prophecy of the Scripture represents an individual's interpretation: men spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.¹⁹

The fruit of this process is an inscripturated revelation from God, wholly perfect (Psalm 19:7) and inerrant (Proverbs 30:5; Proverbs 12:6-7), which took some 1,600 years to produce. The inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures are not only affirmed by the self-witness of the biblical text itself, but by the unanimous testimony of the early church.²⁰ So convinced was the early church of scriptural inerrancy that many writers, pressured to defend their faith against pagan antagonists, adopted a dictation view of scriptural inspiration.²¹ On this view, which was espoused by such notables as Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Origen, God used human writers as mere recording devices. Though this view may account for scriptural inerrancy, it necessarily denies that the biblical text reflects in any way the human writers' own personalities. This corollary to the dictation view, however, appears forced and artificial.

Clearly the writings of Moses, David, Jeremiah, Paul, and John, though unified in their theology and outlook on historic eventuation, reflect the different educations, vocabularies, temperaments, and objectives of their human writers. Somehow God moved men to record his revelation perfectly, yet without obliterating or obscuring their own personalities. Men wrote what they chose to write, and they did so in their own individual styles. Nevertheless, what they produced was an inerrant revelation from God.

¹⁹D. T. Young as quoted by William MacDonald, *II Peter & Jude: the Christian & Apostasy* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1972), p. 27.

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Thomas J. Nettles, "Inerrancy in History: Something Old, Something New," *Authority and Interpretation: A Baptist Perspective*, Eds. Duane A. Garrett and Richard R. Melick (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987), p. 129.

²¹Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Church Doctrine of Inspiration," *Revelation and the Bible*, Ed. Carl F. Henry (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1958), p. 208.

Complete understanding of how God accomplished this is obviously beyond the grasp of finite human minds. Lest the critic feel this constitutes a logical contradiction, one possible explanation, which rests upon God's great-making attributes of omniscience and omnipotence, ought to be mentioned.

On this view, God's omniscience includes knowledge of what his creatures *would* freely choose to do in any given set of circumstances. By actualizing the circumstances in which men freely wrote what he desired to be written, God may rightly be regarded as the divine author of the resultant text. Some object that, since facts *cause* beliefs to be true, *counterfactual* knowledge of creaturely freedom is actually impossible, even for God. Two rebuttals to this "grounding objection" should suffice. First, this objection is not open to the Christian because the Scriptures state clearly that God *does* possess knowledge of what his creatures would freely choose to do (1 Samuel 23:10-13; Matthew 11:21-23; 1 Corinthians 2:7-8). Secondly, as many philosophers have pointed out, the relationship between knowledge and fact is not causal but *logical*.²² Importantly, philosophers who raise the grounding objection are themselves appealing to an objective standard of reason inexplicable apart from God, who, as just noted, does possess counterfactual knowledge of creaturely freedom. As long as God's existence is at least possible, the critic can have no *logical* problem with the Scripture being the product of both infinite divinity and limited humanity. It is important to note, however, that the very standard according to which propositions are to be judged possible or impossible is itself inexplicable apart from the God of Christian theism.

²²Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons, and Barry Smith, "Truth-Makers," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44 (1984), p. 315.

Some may wonder how Christianity can claim to be the sole justification for rationality, science, or moral absolutes, while Islam, also a monotheistic religion with a claimed inspired body of text, cannot. The answer is that according to Islamic theology, Allah is, in no uncertain terms, completely unlike anything he created.²³ This can only mean that Allah is absolutely unknowable, in which case there is no basis on which to judge whether a revelation is from him. Knowing absolutely nothing about him, a person has no reason to think that Allah has equipped man with reliable rational and cognitive faculties. There is also no reason to assume the uniformity of natural process, or that Allah's own moral values won't change radically in the future. He may, for instance, decide at any time that deceiving his creatures is morally acceptable. In short, Islamic theology is just as bankrupt of metaphysical explanatory resources as every other non-Christian worldview. According the Bible, however, man *can* know about God (Jeremiah 9:24). For instance, God cannot lie (Titus 2:1; Hebrews 6:18). He guarantees natural processes will continue to unfold in a generally uniform way (Genesis 8:22), and ensures that man's rational and cognitive faculties do not systematically mislead him (Psalm 94:8-10). Only by assuming the truthfulness of the Bible as God's special revelation does one have any rational justification for scientific investigation or moral consideration.

Careful analysis of the New Testament books reveal, explicitly or implicitly, that their authors believed they were writing inspired Scripture.²⁴ Furthermore, "more than 10 per cent of the New Testament text is made up of citations or direct allusions to the Old

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Suzanne Haneef, *What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims*, (Library of Islam, 1996), p.14.

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John Feakes, *Given From Above: Defending the Doctrine of New Testament Inspiration* (Xulon Press, 2010).

Testament.”²⁵ That the New Testament writers viewed the Old Testament as the inspired word of God, there can be no doubt.²⁶ The classic Christian position is that all 39 books of the Old Testament and all 27 books of the New comprise the totality of God’s written revelation. Many, however, wonder what rational justification there can be for affirming that these 66 books, *and no others*, are exclusively the word of God.

In response, it must be pointed out that the 66 books of the Bible form an integrated unit that at least give the appearance of totality and completion. For instance, the first book of the Bible, Genesis, gives the most complete exposition of creation while Revelation, the Bible’s last book, gives the most complete description of the end of the age and the eternal state. Genesis describes the entrance of sin and death into the world while Revelation describes their eventual defeat. Revelation also contains the strongest warnings against adding to or taking away from the written word of God.

The New Testament is the real issue. Whereas the Old Testament canon was unanimously recognized by the second century B.C.,²⁷ recognition of the New Testament canon took some 300 years. Apologists have proposed many criteria by which the church is said to have established which books belong in the New Testament canon and which do not. The most commonly suggested criterion is *apostolicity*. That is, the church determined a book canonical if it was written by an apostle, a close associate of an apostle, or if the church determined its message to be apostolic. Any such attempt to explain the establishment of the canon, well-intentioned though it may be, ultimately

²⁵Roger Nicole, “New Testament Use of the Old,” *Revelation and the Bible*, p. 138.

²⁶Ibid, pp. 138-140.

²⁷R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1957), p. 154.

depends upon subjective human reason and therefore ought to be rejected. This point is subtle but crucial. The church did not and could not, on its own authority, establish apostolicity as a criterion for canonicity. Nor did it set about determining criteria according to which a text could be judged apostolic.

God's word must be recognised as self-authenticating and need of no external justification or corroboration; God speaks on his own authority. Though many Christians recognize and appreciate this, they miss the fact that God is not only the author of the individual books of the Bible, *he is also the author of the canon itself*. Men are therefore, in the very nature of the case, not at liberty to establish *any* criterion for canonicity. The canon, in other words, is not simply a human anthology of inspired books. It is a sacred library whose contents and boundaries were, and are, established and protected by God. Simplistic as this position may sound, it is a necessary part of a consistent Christian profession. According to David Johnson, the historical evidence agrees with this position. This evidence suggests that the New Testament books simply came together "by accident." Johnson further stated that there seems to have been a kind of "magnet" at work, "a gravitational pull [which drew] these books together."²⁸ For the consistent Christian there are no genuine accidents. The "magnet" that drew the New Testament books together was God himself.

It's true that the early church did, by the enabling of the Holy Spirit to be sure, *recognise* apostolicity in the New Testament writings. *It did not, however, establish apostolicity as a criterion for canonicity, nor did it establish criteria for determining apostolicity.* To do so would be to establish a standard for judging the very thing that

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David Johnson, *The Birth of the New Testament: Exploring Conspiracy Theories* (Lecture given at McNally-Robinson, Winnipeg, MB: March 2013).

ought to stand as judge over all. Nevertheless, the apostolic message and authority of the New Testament is the key to defending the doctrine of a closed canon. The apostles were a unique group of Christ's representatives, whose testimony and doctrine form the *foundation* of the church (Ephesians 2:11). In the nature of the case there can be no additions to the canon since the church has long been in the superstructure stage; the foundation was laid once for all 2,000 years ago.

In conclusion, revelation is no peripheral doctrine. It is the necessary precondition for making human experience intelligible and that which alone can make a person wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). Revelation informs man of his sin debt and of the redeeming work of Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of God (Hebrews 1:1-3).

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