

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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God Eternal: Transcendent

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Dear Friends,

"Where did it all begin? What happened in that beginning? Although contemporary science has attempted to preempt these questions, historically cultures sensed that philosophy, worldviews, not science, could best address these issues. Generally science textbooks define science to include such required features as observability and repeatability. If it is "true science," it can be observed; you can see it or in some material way affirm its fact. If it is "true science," you can repeat the experiment. The beginning of the material universe, regardless of one's beliefs about it, meets neither of these criteria. Twice in Scripture—once in [Ge 1:1](#) and once in [Joh 1:1](#)—the Bible links the beginning with God, not with a cosmic accident or "big bang." The idea that God, if He exists, is merely a cosmic human, is emphatically rejected by Scripture. The two words that describe God in this chapter both identify God as non-human. He is eternal; humans are time-bound and temporal. God is transcendent; inherently He transcends the material universe that He created. "These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes." ([Ps 50:21](#), KJV) Scripture uses this absurd thought in stern rebuke, not in affirmation. For fallen, flawed mortals to think that God is "altogether such an one" as they is rebuked, not affirmed, by Scripture. Does God need us in order to be God? Is His deity in any way dependent on us or, for that matter, on anyone or anything outside of Himself? Again Scripture echoes back the resounding answer. God is God because He is God! He needs nothing or no one outside Himself to be God. In some Christian circles in our time a cliché has gained a certain sick popularity, "Let go and let God." The idea expressed in this cliché is absurd. You have the power to "let" God do anything or be anything? Does the Bible describe God as a cosmic butler or as the Creator of the universe? In the typical dialogue between Christians who believe in salvation by works and Christians who believe in salvation by God's grace alone, the person who believes in salvation by works will inevitably raise the objection, "But your belief that God saves you all by Himself means that God violates your free will." Advocates of this idea seldom take the time or thought to define their idea of "free will." However, the greater issue that they raise cries out for an answer. Their reasoning implies that even God cannot violate man's, the fallen creature's, will, but man—sinful, fallen man—is free to violate God's will! In this religious system of belief one must rightly ask the question, "Who is God? Who is in control?" And the theological belief that man accomplishes his own salvation must logically wrestle with the implications of its teaching that man, not God, holds the ultimate power of eternity. Both in the natural world of God's material creation and in the spiritual world of His new creation, God reveals Himself and speaks to us of His person and glory. Admittedly the natural creation has certain limits as to how much of the intimate being of God that it can reveal, but it distinctly bears the marks of its Creator and cries out of His existence and power. John likely wrote most of his New Testament letters in a setting in which ancient Gnosticism was attempting to legitimize itself by an alliance with Christianity. John categorically rejected this unholy partnership. His first general epistle (First John) rather specifically considers and rejects the basic tenets of ancient Gnosticism. Clearly by the distinct features of John's gospel, this apostle had a different objective in writing his gospel than the other three gospel accounts of the Incarnation. I suggest that John's gospel, no less that his epistles, all likely written much later in the first century than the other New Testament letters, equally confronts and rejects the basic tenets of Gnosticism. For John, for Old Testament inspired writers, and for other writers of New Testament

Biblical books, the natural creation is not a colossal mistake, but a material masterpiece that stands on a high podium and cries out the glory of God. In the opening verses of John's gospel the apostle first shows us the transcendent existence of God. Then he introduces us to God through both the natural creation and through the Incarnation. While God would be no less God if He never revealed any portion of Himself to mortals, He reveals His social character—His desire and intent to be seen and known by His people—in John's use of "Word" to describe Jesus, fully God and fully man in the Incarnation. He had no beginning. There was no time when He did not exist! His material body had a beginning in Mary's womb—to be sure a supernatural beginning, but a true material beginning. However, He existed eternally and equally with God the Father. What are the profound implications of such a glorious truth? Indeed of such a glorious God? Joe Holder

God Eternal: Transcendent

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." ([Joh 1:1-2](#)) Few philosophical ideas polarize our contemporary culture as distinctly as the question of origins. Where did this material universe begin? How did it begin? Despite an impressive degree of research and sophistication, the scientific community plunges into the philosophical world in its defense of evolution. The Bible offers an alternative view of beginnings—God. Creation inherently involves belief in a Creator who is sufficiently wise and powerful to account for His creation. The evolutionary scientist and the Christian seldom communicate with each other and even less seldom convince each other. The polarity continues. [Genesis 1:1](#) records Moses' account of the creation of the universe. The order in which various plant and life forms appears in the first chapter of Genesis is altogether logical and even compatible with the basic conclusions of the scientific community. However, the science of Moses' time certainly did not enjoy the breadth of research and knowledge of our contemporary scientific community. How did Moses know the precise order of beginnings? A sanctified guess might get some of the items correct, but not all of them. As a Christian, without apology I accept the Genesis account of creation. In dramatic contrast, when the Christian begins a study of the more significant issues of the faith, he/she must confront a far more challenging issue. How do you consider existence apart from time, space, and matter? A basic consideration of [Ge 1:1](#) indicates that God created all three. But both [Ge 1:1](#) and [Joh 1:1](#) begins with a fundamental premise that God existed apart from time, space, and matter. He is eternal. He transcends all three of the basic ingredients of the material universe. The typical systematic theology text develops an extensive list of attributes that belong uniquely to God, and I believe the list is correct. What attributes uniquely define God as God? Without one of these attributes He would be something magnificent, but something less than God. Scholars differ as to John's primary audience. Did he write specifically to Jews, or did he write to God's people of all cultures? In either case one point is clear. As Moses opened his message in [Ge 1:1](#) with the simple declaration of God..., in [Joh 1:1](#) John begins his message with a foundational premise that he is writing to people who not only believe in God, but they believe in the eternity of God. John is confirming what they believe, and he will then add one additional point; Jesus, the Word of God, is in every sense and in every essential attribute equal with God. John will repeatedly affirm precise identity between the Old Testament "I AM" God who revealed Himself to Moses ([Ex 3](#)) and Jesus (Examples include, among others, [Joh 8:28](#) [Notice that the pronoun "he" is italicized, supplied by the translators; the literal statement is "I am...."]; [Joh 8:58](#); [13:19](#) [Again notice the italicized "he".]; [Joh 18:5-6,8](#).). It is likely that John wrote his gospel much later in the first century than the "synoptic" gospels, so there was no need to reaffirm the same message that they contained. However, based on Paul's Colossian letter and John's epistles, especially his first epistle, the dangers of Gnosticism were rising by the end of the first century. John's emphasis on Jesus' full deity, in every way equal with the Father and fully God, is explained if we consider the Gnostic errors of the day. While Gnosticism emphasized its god's unknowable and unapproachable character, in rejecting and refuting Gnosticism John would naturally emphasize the mirror opposite characteristics of the true God. How

do we as time and material bound mortals conceive of an immaterial God who is eternal, and eternally the same? And if that is not enough, how do we conceive of such a God condescending and for a brief time living as a man in literal human flesh? John's gospel leads us through these questions, affirming both God's eternity and Jesus' full equality with the Father, along with God's conscious design to be known and approached by His people. Perhaps the most fundamental of these essential attributes of God that we must consider before broadening our pursuit of God is this concept of eternity. God is not subject to time, space, or matter. The contemporary error of "open theism" rejects God's knowledge of time, making God the victim of the very time element that He created in the beginning. This concept is riddled with error, but it seems to begin with the faulty premise that God is subject to, rather than transcendent to, time. In the last chapter we examined God's love, itself unique in that it primarily consists of social and moral distinction, not mere sentimental affection. From the Christian's perspective everything in nature, not to mention the whole of Biblical revelation, communicates the existence of God ([Ps 19](#); [Ro 1:20](#)). The orderly arrangement of the material universe appeals to our logical minds for an intelligent and orderly Creator. In the scientific world order does not grow out of chaos. The basic rules of science posit that orderly things slowly deteriorate, one of science's delightful contributions to the logical appeal of the Christian for a Creator! As God delighted in the revelation of His beauty and power in creating the universe, so He delights in the fact that it reveals Him to us gloriously. The ancient Gnostic heresy attempted to legitimize itself by attaching itself to Christianity, but Christianity profoundly rejected it. In Colossians Paul confronted early Gnostic thought and rejected it ([Col 2:20-23](#)). Later in the first century John confronted Gnostic error, specifically docetic Gnosticism, more directly in First John. Denial that Jesus, God Incarnate, possessed a literal, material body, according to John, is not of God and is, in fact, the embodiment of the spirit of anti-Christ. The heart of Gnostic thought taught that God is anti-social, that He is unknowable and unapproachable, the mirror opposite of the Biblical description of God's social character. Gnostic error also taught that a lesser "demi-urge," a lesser deity, not able to clearly know the desires of the supreme Gnostic deity, misunderstood the supreme deity's desire, and created the material universe, in Gnostic thought a cosmic mistake of the lesser deity. Gnostic thought defined that lesser, bungling deity as the Jehovah of the Old Testament. Iranaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200) wrote a profound thesis against Gnostic attempts to corrupt the Christian faith, *Against Heresies*. With the resurgence of contemporary Gnostic religion in the New Age Movement and various other relativistic philosophies, informed Christians need to rediscover Iranaeus through his work. It is as contemporary as if written last week. The artist may insert an image of himself into his work of art, but he cannot be the artist unless he transcends his work of art. Likewise, God gloriously inserted Himself in His creation—the Incarnation—but he gloriously transcends it! Both John and Moses begin their message to us with the profound "In the beginning... God." Both in creation and in the revelation of Scripture, God demonstrates His delightful intent to communicate Himself to His creation, specifically to man and—more specifically and intimately—to His chosen people. Our human nature sometimes blurs the distinction between the person and what the person does. Married women with a happy family and children immerse their identity in their family, especially in their children. Married men with families, though devoted to their family, often invest their personal identity into their career. Take away the woman's family, and you take away her intimate personal identity. Take away the man's career, and you take away his identity. Clearly God uses both nature His creation and Scripture to reveal His intimate personal identity to us. However, the parallel between God and man ends at that point. God was no less God before the creation than after. He was uniquely and fully God before creation. Like the artist, He transcends His creation. John does not write that God had a beginning. Rather he writes that God existed as God at the point when the material universe began. Unconditionally, He is God! This profound truth appears on every page of Scripture. When God revealed Himself to Moses, He simply identified Himself as I AM! ([Ex 3](#)) God exists, self-sufficiently. He is not contingently God based on anything or anyone outside of His personal and intimate Self. He does not become God when we profess faith in Him. He does not become the Creator

when we perceive Him and His glorious handiwork in nature. Independent of anyone or anything outside of Himself, God is God—fully and completely. No one, or no thing, fills out His being or makes Him any more God than He is by virtue of His essential Being. In the next chapter we will investigate the significance of God's social character through John's use of "Word" to define God, but, as Christians, we must grasp that amazing truth inherently by the very existence of both nature and Scripture. In vivid contrast to the mystical and unknowable Gnostic deity, the true God of the universe delights to communicate Himself to His creation. His is the only self-glory that is altogether glorious in that in the very act of communicating His glory and commanding worship, He shares in His goodness and His glory with His creation. His demand for exclusive worship is first deserved, but also a glorious act of benevolence that enriches those who know and worship Him. Praise God for God!

Elder Joe Holder