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Monotheism Reframed as Burden, Theophany, and Promise

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Abstract

The God of mainline monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—promised to Abram that 'in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3). This blessing includes a gift of righteous life in relation to God. It thus indicates God's moral burden, including divine suffering, to make people righteous with their voluntary cooperation. This burden, a serious felt responsibility, illuminates monotheisms in relation to God's activity among humans. It includes God creating moral conflicts between good and evil that call for human response. This article explains how God confirms this burden to people with divine moral-character expression. This expression is in the 'fruit of the Spirit' in their experience. Such character expression as evidence can ground human commitment to God. The article explains how it can also counter skepticism about God. In addition, it identifies why religion need not depend on speculative arguments from philosophy or theology. The burden and the privilege from God can bring new life to cooperative people, regardless of their background. Monotheism in the present perspective has unmatched power of human moral renewal, courtesy of divine power. Theology has not given adequate attention to this perspective. We shall correct this deficiency with constructive theology that captures God's felt responsibility.

Keywords: God; religion; monotheisms; promise; down payment; theophany; burden; privilege; righteous love; cooperation; discernment; conflict

What is the burden of the Lord?—Jeremiah 23:33

1. Introduction and Result

Many Biblical narratives suggest that God has not only a plan, purpose, or mission but also a *moral burden* towards humans made in the divine image (see, for instance, Hosea 11:1, 3–4, 8–9, Ezek 36:23). Specifically, God has a felt weighty responsibility to invite and attract people to God, without coercion, in a partnership of righteous love, as some of the Biblical covenants suggest. God accepts and promotes this moral burden, and does not regret it on balance. I shall use 'burden' and 'felt responsibility' interchangeably at times, but I retain use of 'divine burden' because it suggests God's compassionate suffering for the divine cause. This suffering is an indicator of divine compassionate love towards people. Constructive theology benefits from this approach in its capturing the unique moral character of the God of monotheism. Theology has tended to neglect this approach.

The divine burden comes with divine gifts or privileges for humans to receive cooperatively, such as a promise of lasting life for future fulfillment, theophanies as down payments on the promise, an offer of faithful divine dwelling with humans, and even corrective divine judgment of wayward people. Humans have the privilege to partner with God in sharing in the divine burden and privileges for them, thus bringing meaning and purpose to their lives, even though they must wait for ultimate fulfillment at a future time known only to

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God. When we reframe monotheism by such a burden and its corresponding privileges, we can begin to discern the reality and goodness of God and to see the resilience and the value of the key evidence for God. We can see the good news of God.

Why is the God of academic writers typically so unlike the morally passionate and burdened God of the Hebrew prophets? Something seems to be missing. Abraham Heschel called it 'the pathos' of God, and it includes divine compassionate suffering for people (Heschel 1962, pp. 221–31; see Moltmann 1981, pp. 21–60, and Fiddes 1988).

We can write about God and religion with just our rigorous thinking; in contrast, we can write about God and religion with the felt moral burden of God: character-grounded righteous love for people for the sake of moral partnership with them. *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers the following word, among others, to characterize a burden: *responsibility*. We shall see that a God worthy of worship, and thus morally perfect, has a felt moral burden: that is, a serious and weighty moral responsibility to promote and sustain righteous love among all people, without coercion. God's people, we shall see, have the same burden so long as they conform to God and what God cares about. This responsibility is felt by God, and thus involves divine frustration and suffering for people who freely choose not to cooperate. It thus has God passionately engaged, involved, and burdened with people in need of divine power, and the burden is welcomed by God, and not taken grudgingly. On this basis, we can make some good sense of how God acts in human experience and expects people to act.

We humans tend to share in and reflect many features of whatever God we recognize. So, our recognizing a God with a burden of righteous love towards all people can benefit our role in religion and our inquiry about God, owing to our lived sympathy with a God of righteous love. We cannot take a merely academic, intellectual approach to God if God expects us to share in the divine burden of felt responsibility for righteous love. We then must let moral passionate care (compassion), reflective of divine compassion, arise in our own lives and attitudes. Our thinking and talking about God thus will image God's unique compassion in loving all people. This article offers constructive Christian theology through the Jewish scriptures and the New Testament. (For my approach to Jewish and Islamic theology, see Moser 2020, pp. 75–83, 90–99).

2. Divine Burden

God's moral burden of righteous love is expressed clearly through some of the Jewish prophets. The prophet Hosea is unmatched in this regard:

> When Israel was a child, I loved him,
> and out of Egypt I called my son…
> It was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
> I took them up in my arms,
> but they did not know that I healed them.
> I led them with cords of human kindness,
> with bands of love.
> I was to them like those
> who lift infants to their cheeks.
> I bent down to them and fed them…
> How can I give you up, Ephraim?
> How can I hand you over, O Israel?
> My heart recoils within me; …

> My compassion grows warm and tender.
>
> I will not execute my fierce anger. (Hosea 11:1, 3–4, 8–9, NRSVue here and in subsequent Biblical translations, unless otherwise noted)

These verses express a divine burden of righteous love, and not just a plan, purpose, or mission. They express profound compassion as part of a divine felt responsibility to care for Israel with righteous love.

Part of the divine burden is to uphold God's own righteous love in the face of human resistance, even from the people of God. According to the prophet Ezekiel, God says: 'I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations and which you [Israel] have profaned among them, and the nations shall know that I am the Lord, says the Lord God, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes' (Ezek 36:23). The terms 'through you' are central to God's discharging the divine burden. God aims to show divine righteousness through the people of God, and this sets a responsibility for them: to bear and manifest the righteous love of God. The divine burden is thus to be shared, or partnered in, by God and the people of God, despite the unevenness of human righteousness. We shall return to the role of the needed divine–human partnership for righteous love.

God's burden emerges in the 'hallowing of God's name,' the 'holying' of God's name, if we may create a word, where the sense is: to make or keep holy. This is the 'righteousing' of God's name and identity. To hallow God's name is to honor the holy righteousness of God. Jesus taught his followers to pray for it, and God practices it by righteous divine actions, including through people. When Jesus has his followers pray for it, he allows for the hallowing of God by God (see Lohfink 2012, pp. 64–66) and by God's people. Only God can do this perfectly, and we have confirmation of this when God contrasts divine holy righteousness with the inferior moral status of humans.

God demands the holiness of righteousness from the people of God: 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord God am holy' (Lev 19:2). The psalmist famously remarks: 'He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake' (Psalm 23: 3, RSV). God's people, however, fall short of the divine standard of righteousness: 'We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away' (Isa 64:6). As a result, humans need divine help to satisfy God's standard for righteousness. We shall see how such help arises for them.

God will be praiseworthy in the divine burden for righteous love among people if God voluntarily chooses to undertake that burden. In contrast, God will not be praiseworthy if the burden arises involuntarily from the divine character, in a purely causal manner. Some of the Biblical narratives suggest that God struggles to maintain this burden, being tempted at times to let it go, as a result of human disobedience and unrighteousness (see, for instance, Ezek 20:7–9). This consideration supports a voluntary role for God in having the divine burden for righteous love. We should allow for such a role, even if God's character is not fully determined by divine choice. We need not digress, however, to the latter speculative topic.

3. Divine Promise

God discharges the divine burden for righteous love in part with a promise to humans about the future. We noted God's promise to Abram to bless all families of the earth through him. This promise includes a number of related promises, including God's promise to be with the people of God (Exod 25:8, Ezek 37:27, 1 Cor 3:16, Rev 21:3) and God's promise to send the divine Spirit to the people of God (Jer 31:31–34, Ezek 37:14). The apostle Paul links this promise directly to the promise to Abraham. He suggests that it was given 'in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith' (Gal 3:14).

God's promise is an oath that is independent of other authorities. God says to Abraham: 'By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore' (Gen 22:16–17). The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews adds:

> When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise. Humans, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute among them. In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath. (Heb 6:13–17)

God 'had no one greater by whom to swear.' As a result, we have God promising with swearing by *God*.

Günther Bornkamm has offered a reading of God's promise that needs correction: 'God's promise is his sole guarantee' (Bornkamm 1971, p. 144; likewise Käsemann 1971, pp. 92–93, both following Bultmann 1925). Bornkamm's view calls for an answer to this question: What, if anything, distinguishes God's promise from any ungrounded and unreliable promise? Without an answer, we will be open to a charge of arbitrariness in committing to God's promise. In that case, we might have committed to a contrary promised instead. So, the mere promise should not be the 'sole guarantee.'

A number of Biblical writers contradict the view that God's promise is the 'sole guarantee.' The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews points in the right direction when he notes that God 'had no one *greater* by whom to swear.' The idea of 'greatness' in the divine swearing is the key. God's character of 'greatness' guarantees the divine promise to Abraham and others. This greatness is suggested by talk of divine glory, and we see God's understanding of this glory as greatness in his following reply to Moses: 'Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And he [the Lord] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord,' and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy' (Exod 33:18–19). So, God thinks of his glory as greatness in terms of his 'goodness.' We thus have his promise to Abraham and others supported and guaranteed by his goodness, that is, by his moral character of goodness. We shall develop this widely neglected view below.

We should ask why God works with his promise of future fulfillment rather than fulfillment now. Many people argue against God's reality on the assumption that God would have removed certain evils and resolved various problems *by now* if God were real and good (see, for instance, the influential article by Rowe (1979)). Such an argument begs a crucial question about God: What if God has impeccably good plans for the future that need time into the future for their fulfillment? Those plans could include giving many people, including future people, time to turn to God. We seem not to be in a position to exclude this option for a good God (see, for instance, Boyd 2017, chaps. 18, 23). We lack a perspective from which to claim plausibly that a good God could not or even would not plan into the future in the way suggested. If God seeks reparations and resolutions in the future, rather than immediately, we will be hard put to show that God therefore is not good or real.

God is unseen, according to many Biblical writers (see, for instance, Exod 33:20, John 1:18). So, in aiming to build hope in God, God would seek to promote hope in one who is unseen. Paul remarks: 'In hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we

wait for it with patience' (Rom 8:24–25). Paul thinks of faith in God as including hope in one who is unseen (Rom 4:17–18). The one who gives the aforementioned promise to Abraham is thus unseen. This God therefore aims to build human hope in one who is unseen, for the sake of human sharing in the divine burden of partnering in righteous love. The divine promise, as a result, does not have immediate fulfillment. Its fulfillment reaches into the future for the sake of maximal benefit among humans. Inquirers about God should leave room for this in their inquiries, to avoid begging a key question about divine timing.

Claus Westermann has suggested that 'according to the original understanding, [the blessing] cannot be held in prospect for a later time' (Westermann 1963, p. 210). This is misguided. Genesis 12:2–3 speaks of a blessing that is 'held in prospect for a later time,' and it is part of a divine promise. There is no problem with giving both divine promise and divine blessing a future fulfillment; and there definitely is no 'contradiction' here, contrary to Westermann. So, we can proceed with the important relation between promise and blessing as having their fulfillment at a future time selected by God for God's good purposes, even if some of those purposes are now unknown to humans.

4. Theophany as Down Payment

God's promise to Abraham, we have noted, should not be treated as its own sole guarantee. It comes in the context of a theophany as a down payment on it. The heart of that down payment is God's character-expression in the experience of Abraham and others. We noted, in connection with Moses, that this expression self-manifests God's goodness, and this includes moral goodness. We thus may speak of a 'moral theophany' as an underwriting, an initial guarantee, of God's bold promise to Abraham and others.

In his early work on hope in God, Moltmann (1967) missed the crucial relation between theophany and divine promise. He thus promoted a false contrast between a religion of promise and a religion of epiphany (see Moser 2022). In later work, however, he acknowledged this mistake and corrected it (Moltmann 2000, pp. 87–113). In doing so, he moved closer to the teaching of various Biblical writers who point to theophany of some kind as a down payment. I suggest that the central theophany is a moral theophany by God, and that is serves as a down payment on a divine promise.

My approach agrees with the apostle Paul on vital experience of God. He writes: 'Hope [in God] does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Rom 5:5). Paul claims that our hope in God for the future (and in divine victory in goodness) does not let us down regarding evidence, because God has supplied needed evidence with his character-expression of divine righteous love in our experience. God has done this character-expression through his Spirit, the fruit of which Paul lists as follows: 'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control' (Gal 5:22–23). This fruit expresses the moral personality-traits of God and thus shows us who God is as a moral agent. So, when people ask, 'Where is your God?,' Paul's answer is: in the fruit of the Spirit.

When God's fruit of the Spirit is expressed to people, it gives them a down payment of the eventual fulfillment of God's promise of ultimate blessing to Abraham and others. Paul remarks: 'It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, who has put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a down payment' (2 Cor 1:21–22; cf. 2 Cor 5:5, Eph 1:13–14). He thinks of this down payment in terms of the 'witness' from the Spirit:

> All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption. When we cry 'Abba! Father!,' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs: heirs of God and joint

> heirs with Christ, if we in fact suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:14–17)

This 'witness' of God's Spirit does not reduce to an informational exchange. Paul elaborates with appeal to the actual intervention of the Spirit in human experience, with 'groans' that express God's compassion to 'help' us in our 'weakness' (Rom 8:26; see Moser 2026). This is activity of God's Spirit that manifests God's moral character of compassionate love towards us. We thus are reminded of the aforementioned claim of God's love being poured out in our heart by God's Spirit (Rom 5:5), that is, as fruit of the Spirit. So, divine character-manifestation grounds God's promise to bless his people, including in the future. This amounts to a moral theophany, and takes us beyond an informational transaction.

5. Partnership Privilege Through Conflict

God's covenants in the Old Testament show that he wants partnership with people in divine righteous love. The people invited by God are expected to become, in effect, junior partners with God while God is the sole senior partner with full authority. God challenges people to make a voluntary decision, a free choice, to partner with him, without coercion of their wills. Some comply; others do not. It is a life-or-death decision.

The book of Deuteronomy identifies a voluntary and purposive human response and 'agreement' to an offer of a divine covenant: 'Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep all his commandments,... and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised' (Deut 26:17–19; cf. Deut 30:11–20). The ideal human response to God's covenant is a voluntary and purposive 'agreement,' and this agreement commits us to being the holy, or righteous, people of God. The agreement is not coerced by God even though God seeks it persistently. God initiates the covenant partnership with authority, but the actual partnership depends on voluntary and purposive human agreement. (See Nicholson 1986, pp. 191–217, and Brueggemann 1997, pp. 413–91). This voluntary approach to divine covenants continues in the promised new covenant and, afterward, in the New Testament (see Ezek 18:30–32, Mark 1:14–15).

The divine promise in the New Testament comes with spiritual conflict involving God's burden in enabling divine–human partnership. Paul tells the Galatian Christians that 'the flesh resolutely desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit resolutely desires against the flesh' (Gal 5:17). If 'resolutely desiring against' is 'conflicting with' or 'contesting against,' we can speak of the flesh (not to be confused with the body) and the Spirit as conflicting with, or contesting against, each other with their opposed resolute desires within people. Rudolf Bultmann has suggested that we understand Paul's talk of living according to the flesh as valuing the things of the natural world above the Creator, in a way that involves idolatry (Bultmann 1951, I, p. 239). In this perspective, 'fixing the mind on the things of flesh' is to be in conflict with God (Rom 8:7; cf. Rom 7:24).

The 'flesh' is not itself sin but is instead a constant opportunity for sin against God. In his Epistle to the Galatians, Paul identifies the conflict between flesh and Spirit in terms of the 'works of the flesh' in opposition to the 'fruit of the Spirit. This conflict sometimes includes low-key contesting between the flesh and the Spirit, rather than what we typically call 'warfare,' even if 'warring' occurs at other times. The experiential terrain is diverse here, but real conflict is present.

Paul specifies that the 'works of the flesh' include: 'sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these' (Gal 5:19–21). These actions and attitudes conflict with God's actions, attitudes, and character as well as the actions and attitudes

commanded by God for humans. Paul holds that they can prevent a person favoring the flesh from being in the kingdom of God (Gal 5:21). So, the conflict at hand matters. It is a matter of life-or-death.

Paul claims that 'those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires' (Gal 5:24). This reality includes an active role for people in the spiritual conflict under consideration: crucifying the flesh with its anti-God desires. The active role of crucifying the flesh makes room, an opportunity, for our conforming to God's character manifesting the divine personality-traits in the fruit of the Spirit. People thus face a challenge to engage with firm action a conflict for their conforming to God and his kingdom, that is, for their voluntary partnership with God. Paul confirms this lesson to the Roman Christians: 'If you live according to the flesh, you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the [flesh], you will live' (Rom 8:13). We are thus to cooperate, in partnership, with (the power of) God's Spirit to reorient our lives towards God's moral character, contrary to the evil deeds of the flesh.

The divine–human partnership sought by God is a privilege for humans, an unsurpassed gift from God for them. As a result of God's Spirit seeking partnership, Paul says that 'we are debtors' to this Spirit rather than to the flesh (Rom 8:12, RSV). He also refers to the Christians at Philippi as his 'partners in God's grace' (Phil 1:7). Paul tells the Christians at Corinth: 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the partnership [κοινωνίαν] of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Cor 1:9). This is a partnership in God's burden and promise, where humans are junior partners set on bearing and representing God's character of righteous love for the ultimate benefit of all concerned. These humans can rely on God's down payment of a moral theophany in the fruit of the Spirit. It can empower them to partner with God in the divine burden, thereby extending the divine promise to Abraham to bless all families of the earth.

6. Divine Assurance Against Doubt

So far, we have seen the key role for God of divine burden, promise, theophany, and privilege offered to humans. What of human doubt? Does it face any remedy from God's burden? Paul thinks so.

If doubt includes losing heart, Paul has a direct response: 'We do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day' (2 Cor 4:16). Paul claims that God is renewing our 'inner nature' after the model of God in Christ. As we 'turn to the Lord,' we are 'being transformed into the same image [as God's] from one degree of glory to another, for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Cor 3:18). This comes courtesy of God's intervening Spirit in a theophany of the love from the fruit of the Spirit, as suggested in Romans 5:5. On this basis, Paul affirms assurance from God: 'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Jesus Christ' (Phil 1:6). He finds the experience of God's expressed love at the center of assurance from God, as the Letter to the Colossian expresses: 'I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Col 2:2–3). God's expressed moral character in the Spirit's fruit in human experience is the anchor for divine assurance for humans.

We can answer the likely question: Assurance of *what*? The main answer: Assurance of God's favorable presence being with us and for us at God's good timing. A moral theophany from the fruit of the Spirit supplies such presence and thereby gives the assurance fitting for God's burden and promise. A famous statement of the good and assuring presence comes from Psalm 23: 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I

fear no evil; for Thou art with me' (Psalm 23:4, RSV). God's good, favorable presence offers assurance that evil will not prevail but God will.

God, rather than humans, seems to be in the best position to say rightly how God can best give assurance of divine reality and goodness. Some skeptics about God appear to dissent. For current purposes, skepticism affirms that humans lack adequate evidence for reasonable belief in God (see, for instance, the influential position of Dawkins 2006). Many people regard shrewd skepticism as the most threatening position for belief in God.

For any epistemic standard we pick for suitably reasonable belief, shrewd skeptics will question why we should consider satisfaction of *that* standard accurately to indicate God's reality. Suppose, for instance, a standard of explanatory 'simplicity' is proposed (see Swinburne 2004) and a recommended theistic belief satisfies it. Skeptics will ask what can close a potential gap between (a) the belief's satisfying that assumed standard and (b) reality not being featured by God's existence. In the gap, the standard is satisfied but God may or may not exist. An argument for God's existence should face the prospect of such a gap, and shrewd skeptics will exploit this gap with plausible questions. The question arises whether God can self-reveal in a way that avoids the gap in question. It is not enough, according to skeptics, to say that the preferred standard is fallible.

We can benefit from a distinction between *character-grounded assurance* from God and *premise-based support* for God's existence. With premise-based support, skeptics will have questions about the gap between what the premises claim and the alleged reality of God. In contrast, with character-grounded assurance, God's directly expressed character leaves no gap between premises and reality. God offers not premises but instead the divine moral-character itself. Divine *self*-manifestation to humans offers the needed grounding, and Paul points in this direction, alluding to the book of Isaiah: 'I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me' (Rom 10:20). I have suggested that God shows God to various people in the fruit of the Spirit. In this perspective, only a direct experience of God's character will save the day against shrewd skeptics, and this must be by direct self-authentication in self-manifestation by God's doing, with the standard from the divine moral-character, that is, the fruit of the Spirit. We should expect God to work by divine character-expression to humans if God aims to have them partner in that character of righteous love, and not just think or argue about the matter.

Skeptics can allege that direct human experience of God is just illusory experience and that therefore a troublesome gap emerges, if without premises. The charge of mere illusion, however, will be implausible if God's self-authentication gives indications of interpersonal interaction with humans. For instance, if it indicates *intentional guidance* of humans towards a moral goal, such as a partnership in righteous love, the charge of mere illusion will be highly questionable and perhaps even implausible. At least this will be true of the people having the relevant experience of guidance.

The key issue now depends on the kind of divine self-evidence God provides for humans. The Biblical narratives consistently suggest that God offers self-evidence intended to be *life-defining* for humans and not just thought-engaging. This distinction is crucial but often overlooked by inquirers. God seeks the kind of personal 'inward renewal' of humans noted above by Paul, and thus does not settle for matters of mere thought or argument. God is morally profound in the divine burden for human renewal.

We find confirmation of a life-defining goal in what Jesus named as God's top command to humans: 'Jesus answered, "The first [command] is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength' (Mark 12:29–30; cf. Deut 6:5). Loving God with all of your heart, soul, and strength is more than a project for human thought or argument. It is a practice for a whole person and a whole life: for volitions,

affections, and all other personal powers for human life. No part of the person is omitted from what God aims to move, without coercion, towards divine–human partnership in righteous love.

God's burden is for the ultimate benefit of the whole person and a full life, with a central role for the human will. We see the decisive relevance of the human will in Jesus in Gethsemane, with his life-defining prayer to God: 'He said, "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I want but what you want"' (Mark 14:36). Jesus expects his followers to follow suit, as seen in the plea of the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy will be done' (Matt 6:10, RSV). This volitional stance goes beyond any thought-project regarding God. It bears on the moral identity of a person in relation to God.

The divine challenge for skeptics (and others) is to test for divine reality and goodness *with their lives*, including their wills and affections, and not just their thoughts. It is doubtful that skeptics typically accept this challenge. Famously, G.K. Chesterton quipped: 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried' (Chesterton 1910, p. 48). I am now suggesting: The God of monotheism has not been tried and found wanting typically by skeptics. Instead, this God, in offering a life-challenge and no mere thought-project, has been found difficult, and left untried, by typical skeptics. The problem for skeptics is that if they consider a thought-project rather than a life-challenge for whole humans, including human wills, affections, and thoughts, they will not experience firsthand the unique divine power of moral transformation in their lives, including their motives. They will not observe God's moral character and will in action through their own experience. A thought-project about God, even with extensive arguments, does not probe deeply enough to find God at work in the experienced fruit of the Spirit.

Some skeptics will counter that they have found no divine challenge in their lives. I suggest a more careful look. If the fruit of the Spirit in human experience manifests the moral personality-traits of God, we can point to a life-challenge from God through the presence of such fruit. My suggestion to skeptics: Consider the fruit of the Spirit to be the presence and challenge of God in your lives and experience, and then ask if this fruit has received due attention from *your life* in relating to God. If due attention from life has not been given, skeptics have not given God adequate life-testing for reality and goodness. In that case, they fall short of the previous recasting of Chesterton's point about trying or testing God. From God's perspective, this is a matter of life or death for humans, and if skeptics (and others) do not test with their lives, they will not be testing for the true God who is morally perfect, but at best for some lesser figure. I submit, then, that typical skeptics lack a decisive basis for dismissing unique evidence of God's reality and goodness had by many people.

Many theists miss the opportunity suggested here by turning to an *argument* and its premises that do not yield direct self-manifestation and self-authentication by God with God's expressed moral character (see, for instance, the range of arguments presented in Hick 1970, chaps. 1–6). They thus invite shrewd skeptics to allege a gap (between the proposed premise-based evidence and divine reality) as well as resulting question-begging to close the gap. So, I am skeptical about trying to make an argument do the epistemic and cognitive work that only God can do, with direct divine power of self-manifestation and self-authentication through expressed divine character. One result is that only God can get an epistemic foothold against shrewd skeptics, because only God can directly manifest the unique divine character in the fruit of the Sprit. We humans do not have such power on our own; only God does.

Skeptics can invoke Mark's Gospel (15:34) to raise a haunting question: whether we rightly can trust (for our ultimate benefit) a God who brings us to feel abandoned by God,

as Jesus felt, whether in facing death or some other serious loss. The abstract arguments from philosophers do not answer this for us (see, for instance, the arguments presented in Hick 1970, chaps. 1–6). Instead, we need to consider again character-grounded assurance from God. If God has presented the divine character of righteous love to someone, in the fruit of the Spirit, that person has a ground from God to counter felt abandonment by God. Current experience will not be the full story about evidence for God, because a current experience may be one of felt abandonment by God. A person's broader experience of God can include divine self-manifestation expressing love that endures and does not ultimately abandon God's people. On this basis, God still can be 'My God, my God,' and be worthy of human trust for ultimate goodness for humans. The premises of arguments, however sophisticated, will not serve this purpose.

If God works by promise of future fulfillment, skeptics will need caution in this area. God then can give a down payment in human experience, but the future, rather than the present, guided by God, will hold the full evidence bearing on God's reality and goodness. As a result, we should not expect a full theodicy now that offers full evidence or explanation regarding evil from God's point of view. Divine reparations will come later, according to divine promise, but it does not follow that we have or should have a full theodicy now. In any case, self-evidence from God in character expression is not eclipsed by our lacking a full theodicy. The two can co-exist without a threat to either reality.

God's assurance of divine presence and goodness is irreducibly interpersonal: that is, person to person, and not premise to person. It works by divine moral-character expression in human experience. It thus offers moral certitude, not logical certainty. This is not a defect, because it best fits with the moral character of God. An abstract logical standard would fail to do so. God's character, then, is the fitting standard for divine assurance for humans.

The defining 'criterion' for a moral experience as an experience of *God*, and not just a good experience, is this: the worthiness of worship and moral perfection of the character represented in the experience. God is thus self-manifesting and self-authenticating in some human moral experiences. No lesser defining criterion will capture the divine character and purpose. We may have a challenge in *discerning the satisfaction* of the criterion in a particular case, but that would not threaten the defining criterion noted. Instead, it calls for our self-conformity to the divine moral qualities expressed in an experience. We then can experience first-person the unique divine power on offer.

7. Conclusions

We have seen that God has and pursues a moral burden towards humans: to engage them in a cooperative partnership for righteous love towards all concerned. It follows that God is morally active in human lives, seeking to direct people to a divine partnership of righteous love. We have seen that this divine activity includes moral theophanies, where God is self-presenting the divine moral character to humans in order to attract them to the divine–human partnership for righteous love. These theophanies are not just spectacular showings of power; they are morally robust in what they present to people. They present moral personality traits of God, the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, goodness, and so on. They take us beyond mere talk about God to morally powerful divine intervention in human experience.

God seeks to benefit the future as well as the present and therefore works by promise of future fulfillment of the divine purpose for humans. We therefore cannot treat the past and present as the full story of God's work and plan for humans. The future holds opportunities for God's renewal and reparation for humans. We thus need to curb charges of divine failure or indifference based on past and present evidence. The future can secure God's promise to bless all families of the earth. Meanwhile, we have a down payment in God's

self-presenting the divine moral character to us, in the fruit of the Spirit. We thus have a basis in moral experience for grounded hope in God for ultimate goodness in the future.

God's burden, theophany, and promise yield a privilege for us humans: to become partners with God in the ongoing divine burden and promise of righteous love in community. We become co-makers with God of a good society. As we cooperate with God, we bear some of God's moral character and contribute indirectly to the divine theophany of righteous love. By partnering with God in the burden, theophany, and promise, we find robust meaning and purpose for human life, and we find grounded hope for a lasting good future. In this regard, our reframing of monotheism bears fruit, owing to the powerful and renewing fruit of God's Spirit. Religion in this vein now emerges as valuable for human lives, individually and collectively. Indeed, we can see this kind of religion among us and say that it is good, because its God is good and is with us.

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