

WAYS OF THINKING
ABOUT GOD

The Bible, Philosophy, and Science

E. B. Self

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	v
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PART 1

God and the Bible

Chapter 1: Defining Qualities of God	3
Chapter 2: Descriptive Titles of God	15
Chapter 3: Divine Actions	23
Chapter 4: God and Violence	33
Chapter 5: God and Human Destiny	45

PART 2

God and Philosophy

Chapter 6: Trying to Prove God's Existence	65
Chapter 7: The Nature of God	77

PART 3

God and Science

Chapter 8: God and Time	91
Chapter 9: God and Life.....	103
Chapter 10: God and Space.....	119

Author's Views.....	131
---------------------	-----

Bibliography.....	143
-------------------	-----

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago, when I went from being a student at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, to being a student at Yale Divinity School in New Haven, Connecticut, I heard various stories. One story was about a student at a theological seminary in the South and a student at a seminary in the North. The student from the South asked the student from the North if there was not a difference between the seminaries in the two parts of the country. The student from the South was probably thinking of the traditional categories of conservative and liberal. The student from the North somewhat surprisingly agreed that there was a difference. He said, “We talk about God and Christ. You talk about smoking and drinking.”

When I went from being a student at Yale Divinity School to being a student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, there was another story that impressed me. One of the Vanderbilt Divinity School professors, a Methodist minister, had written a book on *Should Christians Drink?* There seemed to be confirmation that I was indeed back in the South, but there is more to the story. Another Vanderbilt Divinity School faculty member reportedly said that he, too, might be writing a book. The title would be *Should Christians Think?*

You may or may not see humor in these stories. Whatever else may be said, they have helped me to consider some of my own beliefs:

1. There are many appropriate subjects for Christians to discuss. Smoking and drinking were not big issues at Yale Divinity School, at least not while I was there. I did hear often angry talk at YDS about the evils of war, poverty, and racial prejudice. I believe it is appropriate for Christians to talk about smoking, drinking, war, poverty, racial prejudice, and many other topics.
2. The most important subjects for Christians to consider are “God and Christ.” Christians vary in which topics they find interesting and even exciting, but no other subjects are greater in importance than God and Christ. There would be no Christianity, at least not in the traditional sense, without them. We cannot make that statement for many other subjects.

3. Christians should not only emphasize talking about God and Christ but should also think carefully about these subjects. Talking, even talking vigorously, without thinking is not a good idea. The apostle Paul wrote about those who had great concern for God but were still lacking. He mentioned those who “have a zeal for God but it is not enlightened” (Rom. 10.2). However zealous we may be, we should all seek enlightenment about God and Christ. One way to gain enlightenment is through careful thinking.

As part of my thinking about Christ, I wrote a book on *What Should We Believe About Jesus?* My purpose was to consider what we should believe about Jesus according to the New Testament. Although I do not believe that every Christian needs to write a book about Jesus, all Christians should think carefully about him.

As part of my thinking about God, I wrote a book on *Loving God with Your Mind*. In the Gospel of Mark, a Jewish scribe asks Jesus the question of which commandment is greatest or “first of all.” Jesus answers, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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’” (12.29-30). All the ways of loving God are important but are not always followed. Loving God with all your mind is one of those ways; it calls for careful thinking.

I wrote a book with attention to thinking about God biblically, philosophically, and personally (in relationship to persons). I would now like to expand that book and adjust the organization. I plan to consider three ways of thinking about God: (1) in relation to the Bible, (2) in relation to philosophy, and (3) in relation to science. I have decided to use the title of *Ways of Thinking about God: The Bible, Philosophy, and Science*.

Thinking about God in relation to the Bible includes numerous beliefs about him. How can the beliefs about God in the Bible be summarized? There are different ways. I have chosen to use the categories of defining qualities, descriptive titles, and divine actions. Among various special considerations about God and the Bible, I have selected God and violence and also God and human destiny.

There are many good translations of the Bible. In order to reduce complications, however, I have used one translation: the New Revised Standard Version as incorporated in the third edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*. No translation is perfect, but the NRSV has a clear style and a high reputation for scholarship. Also, the NRSV provides some alternative translations.

Thinking about God in relation to philosophy involves an emphasis on human reason, usually reason apart from special revelation such as the Bible. While there can be reasoning about God as presented in the Bible, philosophers often reason about God without much reference to the Bible. Philosophers have often tried, for example, to reason about God from the world of nature.

For those who are not familiar with philosophy, there is basic information in such introductory books as *Invitation to Philosophy* by Stanley Honer, Thomas Hunt, and Dennis Okholm. The authors tell us that philosophy in the western part of the world began in ancient Greece (several centuries before the time of Jesus). The original meaning of philosophy was “love of wisdom.” There have come to be additional meanings, including a rigorous, rational attempt to understand. When philosophers attempt to understand anything, including God, they emphasize careful thinking. Their efforts include such basic questions as “What do you mean?” and “Why do you think that?”

While philosophers have written vast amounts about God, I have chosen to concentrate on two important topics. One philosophical topic is trying to prove the existence of God by reason apart from the Bible. Philosophers who have believed in God have disagreed over whether such proof is possible. The other selected topic for God and philosophy is the nature of God. Many philosophers who have believed in God have accepted traditional understandings of God’s nature. Some philosophers have had special views of God’s nature. Also, there have been differences between philosophers over the claimed goodness of God, especially in relation to evil in the world.

Thinking about God in relation to science is another way of thinking about God. Or is it? Is God an appropriate subject for science?

While there can be complicated explanations, science is basically knowledge gained from the senses. The emphasis in the scientific method is on knowing by observation and by reasoning on the basis of what is observed. The observation comes from the five physical senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. The senses may be aided by special instruments such as microscopes, telescopes, spectrometers, and computers. Scientists believe that it is by such observation that we can know reality.

If we think of God as Spirit as Jesus taught, we cannot observe him by the physical senses. How then can scientists use the scientific method to study God? Many scientists have concluded that they cannot observe God, even with special instruments. Thus it seems that God is not a proper subject

for scientific investigation. Although some scientists are persuaded that God is the invisible power behind the visible world, scientists generally regard that view as a religious belief and not a scientific one.

There may still be an appropriate way for thinking about God in relation to science. We can consider some traditional beliefs about God in view of various scientific discoveries and accounts. I wish to follow this approach in three selected areas: time, life, and space. When we think of traditional views about God, what views are there about him in relation to time, life, and space? When we think of science, what views have developed about time, life, and space? To what extent do the views agree or disagree? Since I am not a scientist, I will simply do my best to understand some of the main beliefs of scientists and how those views may influence traditional beliefs about God.

As we become more deeply involved in thinking about God, it would be good to remember that the thinking is about God but is done by humans. We should be careful. We should not have too high an opinion of our own thinking. We might recall the statement of Isaiah 55.8-9: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

With the reminder that human thinking about God has important limitations, we should still try to think about God as carefully as possible.