

Five Books on the Nature of God

or

On the Divine Attributes

Volume I: Preface and Book One



Girolamo Zanchi

Translated and introduced
by Patrick J. O'Banion



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I: Preface and Book One
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Contents

Translator's Preface	ix
Abbreviations	xv
Introduction	xvii

Five Books on the Nature of God or, On the Divine Attributes

The Preface

Letter to Prince Casimir.....	5
Greetings to the Candid Reader	59

Book One: The Divine Names

Chapter 1: <i>The necessity of the divine names</i>	63
Chapter 2: <i>The chapters and quaestiones in the first book</i>	69
Chapter 3: <i>The two orders of divine names</i>	73
Chapter 4: <i>The ten distinct classifications of divine names</i>	79
Chapter 5: <i>The general use of all the divine names</i>	89
Chapter 6: <i>Quaestio 1</i>	93
Chapter 7: <i>Quaestio 2</i>	99
Chapter 8: <i>Quaestiones 3–6</i>	109
Chapter 9: <i>Quaestio 7</i>	121
Chapter 10: <i>Quaestiones 8–9</i>	135
Chapter 11: <i>Various opinions about the meaning and use of God's principal names</i>	147
Chapter 12: <i>The name אֱלֹהִים [Elohim]</i>	159
Chapter 13: <i>The name יְהוָה [Jehovah]</i>	163

Chapter 14: <i>The name</i> אֶהְיֶה [<i>Ehyeh</i>]	195
Chapter 15: <i>The name</i> שְׁדַי [<i>Shaddai</i>]	207
Chapter 16: <i>The name</i> Θεὸς or <i>God</i>	213
Chapter 17: <i>The name</i> Κύριος or <i>Lord</i>	217
Chapter 18: <i>The names in Exodus 34</i>	223
Appendix: Outline of <i>De natura Dei</i>	231
Bibliography.....	241
Index.....	250

Introduction

Zanchi Among the Theologians

In the third volume of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, Richard Muller referred to Girolamo Zanchi as “that great theorist of the divine attributes.”¹ Minimally, we might say that Zanchi’s work on the subject is *expansive*. First published in 1577, his *De natura Dei* was peerless in both length and depth. Spanning 719 double-columned folio pages (plus another hundred pages of apparatus, introductions, and indexes), it outstripped anything produced by his contemporaries or predecessors. The fact that it followed in the wake of an equally compendious treatise on God’s triune essence—*De tribus Elohim* (1572)—places Zanchi’s writings on theology proper high among the most detailed treatments ever written on the subject.

Quantity does not necessarily correspond to quality, of course. And over the last sixty-five years, more than any other of Zanchi’s writings, *De natura Dei* has been criticized as a betrayal of the Reformers’ theology and a return to Aristotelian philosophy and medieval scholasticism. In 1961, German graduate student Otto Gründler submitted a doctoral dissertation to the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary entitled “Thomism and Calvinism in the Theology of Girolamo Zanchi (1516–1590).” Four years later, Gründler published a German translation of the dissertation, a

¹ PRRD, 3:103.

study of *De natura Dei* focusing especially on the doctrine of predestination.² Gründler read Zanchi's doctrine of God as a swift departure from the Christocentric spirit of Luther and Calvin and a return to a "metaphysics of causality" that had characterized medieval scholasticism and which, thanks to theologians like Zanchi, would infect Reformed scholasticism thereafter.³

By all accounts, Zanchi's contemporaries would have been surprised by this assessment. Certainly, among the Reformed orthodox, he was remembered as a profound theologian who was also modest, irenic, pious, and averse to speculation. "Preeminent in genius; second to none in piety" was one representative accolade, offered a decade after his death.⁴ A hundred years later, Pierre Bayle's *Historical and Critical Dictionary* remembered Zanchi not only as "one of the most celebrated Protestant Divines" but also as "a lover of peace" who "hated theological civil wars, which nevertheless he could not avoid."⁵ In 1769, Augustus Toplady lauded Zanchi's *De natura Dei* as "fraught with the most solid Learning and Argument; breathing, at the same time, the amiable spirit of genuine Candor and transparent Piety."⁶

Despite Toplady's appreciation for Zanchi, he was partially responsible for a sea change in the Italian's theological reputation. The work in which Toplady made his comment was a "translation"

² Otto Gründler, *Die Gotteslehre Girolamo Zanchis und ihre Bedeutung für seine Lehre von der Prädestination* (Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1965).

³ Otto Gründler, "Zanchi, Girolamo," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 305–6.

⁴ *Ingenio praestans, nulli pietate secundus*. The phrase accompanied Zanchi's portrait, in Hendrik Hondius, *Icones virorum nostra patrumque memoria illustrium* (The Hague, 1599).

⁵ Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, 2nd ed. (London, 1737), 5:598–99.

⁶ Jerom [sic] Zanchi, *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination Stated and Asserted with a Preliminary Discourse on the Divine Attributes*, trans. Augustus Toplady (Joseph Gurney, 1769), xxix.

of a portion of Zanchi's writings about predestination.⁷ Toplady entitled the work *The Doctrine of Absolute Predestination*, and its publication stoked a contentious print war with the proponents of Arminian Methodism.⁸ Kevin Moss argues that Toplady's initial purpose in producing the work was not to oppose Arminianism per se but to explore the English practical divinity tradition, thereby reconnecting Toplady with "his Anglican roots when seeking to defend the Church of England."⁹ Whatever the initial intentions, given the attention—both positive and negative—that *Absolute Predestination* received, the result of the ensuing controversy was a firm impression in the minds of many that Zanchi's theology was *specifically and primarily* driven by and framed in terms of the doctrine of predestination.¹⁰

In the mid-nineteenth century, this sentiment received support in a German theological context driven by rather different concerns when Alexander Schweizer developed his "central dogma" thesis. In brief, he argued that whereas Lutheran theology was developed according to and driven by a focus upon justification by

⁷ "Translation" in quotation marks because, as Toplady stated, his book includes "Omissions, Variations, and Enlargements" upon the original. He explains: "Excellent as Zanchy's original piece is, I yet have occasionally ventured, both to retrench and to enlarge it, in the Translation. To this Liberty I was induced, by a desire of rendering it as complete a treatise, on the subject, as the allotted compass would allow. I have endeavoured, rather, to enter into the Spirit of the admirable Author; than, with a scrupulous exactness, to retain his very Words." Zanchi, *Absolute Predestination*, vi.

⁸ See Kevin Moss, "Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–78) and the Limits of the Evangelical Enlightenment" (PhD thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2023), 119–31; and Luca Baschera, "Calvinismo italiano e polemica teologica inglese. La ricezione di Girolamo Zanchi nell'opera di A. Montague Toplady," *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, no. 2 (2010): 219–31.

⁹ Moss, "Augustus Montague Toplady (1740–78)," 120.

¹⁰ *Absolute Predestination* is without doubt the best known and most frequently published of all Zanchi's works in any language, despite being at least as much Toplady's as Zanchi's. Although the actual number of stand-alone editions—not accounting for excerpts in anthologies or its inclusion in Toplady's collected works—is unknown, a fair estimate would approach fifty, stretching from the late-eighteenth to the twenty-first century.

faith alone, the driving central dogma of Reformed theology was predestination and that its theological system was characterized by a speculative and deductive method that proceeded from the doctrine of God.¹¹ Not long after Schweizer, Heinrich Heppe argued a similar thesis, but where Schweizer had largely viewed this development as a positive outworking of the internal principles of the Reformation, Heppe viewed it negatively, as a turning of theological focus away from Christ and toward a “philosophical view of providential necessity.”¹²

From the 1930s, this approach took yet another turn. A closer look at the sources led such scholars as Paul Jacobs, Gottfried Locher, Wilhelm Niesel, and Edward Dowey to discern that, contrary to Heppe’s claim, Calvin and Zwingli had formulated theologies that were fundamentally Christocentric and driven by soteriological concerns.¹³ They therefore concluded that a theological shift in Reformed dogmatics had occurred in the generations following the magisterial reformers. It was these successors who had replaced Christ with an increasingly rationalistic and speculative

¹¹ Alexander Schweizer, *Die Glaubenslehre der evangelisch-reformirten Kirche dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt* (Orell Füssli, 1844), 40–52, 96–101.

¹² Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Labyrinth Press, 1986), 8. For Heppe, see *Geschichte des deutschen Protestantismus in den Jahren 1555–1581* (Elwart, 1852). Heppe’s thesis was also communicated through his influential presentation of annotated materials drawn from the writings of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed theologians: *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche* (R.-L. Friderichs, 1861). The subsequent translation of this last source strongly influenced the English-language audience: Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, trans. G. T. Thomson (George Allen & Unwin, 1950).

¹³ Paul Jacobs, *Praedestination und Verantwortlichkeit bei Calvin* (Buchhandlung des Erziehungsvereins, 1937); Gottfried W. Locher, *Die Theologie Huldrych Zwinglis im Lichte seiner Christologie: Die Gotteslehre* (Zwingli-Verlag, 1952); Wilhelm Niesel, *Die Theologie Calvins* (Kaiser, 1938); and Edward A. Dowey, *The Knowledge of God in Calvin’s Theology* (Columbia University Press, 1952). Niesel was published in English as *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (Westminster Press, 1956).

system driven by, derived from, and organized around the logic of predestination.

By the 1960s, Zanchi and others of his theological generation—Theodore Beza, Zacharius Ursinus, William Perkins, and so forth—had been swept up into this paradigm through the development of the so-called “Calvin vs. the Calvinists” thesis.¹⁴ These orthodox heirs of the Reformers had substantially departed from and even betrayed the legacy of the Reformation, exchanging it for a cold, arid scholasticism controlled by Aristotelian logic.

For Zanchi, the primary interpreter was Otto Gründler, who completely inverted his subject’s early modern reputation. In Gründler’s estimation Zanchi’s theology exhibited “a conspicuous absence of Christocentric thinking.” Gründler concluded his study of *De natura Dei* by asserting:

In the theology of Zanchi, at the very point of transition from Reformation to Orthodoxy, the spirit of medieval Scholasticism has thus begun to replace that of the Reformers at a point where it counted most. To the extent to which—under the influence of the Thomistic-Aristotelian tradition—the Christocentric orientation of Calvin’s thinking shifted toward a metaphysics of causality in the thought of his successors, Reformed theology ceased to be a theology of revelation.¹⁵

Now, as it happens, Gründler’s interpretation was, in the main, wrong and based on selective readings of primary sources.¹⁶ Since the 1980s, the scholarship of Richard Muller (and others) has done

¹⁴ See, for example, Basil Hall, “Calvin Against the Calvinists,” in *John Calvin*, Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology 1 (Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966); Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-Century France* (University of Wisconsin, 1969); and R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford University Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Otto Gründler, “Thomism and Calvinism in the Theology of Girolamo Zanchi (1516–1590)” (ThD diss., Princeton Theological Seminary, 1961), 159.

¹⁶ See Norman Shepherd’s critique of Gründler in “Zanchius on Saving Faith,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 36 (1973): 31–47.

much to recover the rich legacy of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy.¹⁷ And, while much work remains to be done, a half century of scholarship has gone a long way toward improving our understanding of Zanchi's life and theology.¹⁸

Throughout this period of recovery and reassessment, *De natura Dei* has continued to draw attention. Not only Gründler but a preponderance of Zanchi scholars—myself included—have focused varying levels of attention on that treatise.¹⁹ To be sure, there is a great deal to explore and reflect upon in its pages. And since forewarned is forearmed, this introduction prepares readers to encounter what is, simply put, one of the most important works of theology proper in the history of the church. For Reformed Protestants, moreover, *De natura Dei* firmly integrated their theological tradition's understanding of the divine nature into the long conversation carried on by Christians since the earliest church, reflecting upon who God is and what He is like.

¹⁷ Muller's bibliography is substantial, but see especially *Christ and the Decree* and his four-volume *PRRD*.

¹⁸ The significant works on Zanchi published in the last half century has expanded to the point where it can no longer easily be placed in a footnote. A comprehensive bibliography of Zanchiana is available at <http://obanionfamily.com/zanchi-bibliography>.

¹⁹ See, for example, John Patrick Donnelly, "Calvinist Thomism," *Viator* 7 (1976): 441–55; Emanuele Fiume, "Decretum Dei, solatium ineffabile: il contributo di Girolamo Zanchi," *Bollettino della Società di studi valdesi* 114, no. 181 (1990): 67–78; Harm Goris, "Thomism in Zanchi's Doctrine of God," in *Reformation and Scholasticism: An Ecumenical Enterprise*, Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought (Baker Academic, 2001); Patrick J. O'Banion, "Jerome Zanchi, the Application of Theology, and the Rise of the English Practical Divinity Tradition," *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 29 (2005): 97–120; Dolf te Velde, "'Soberly and Skillfully': John Calvin and Jerome Zanchi (1516–1590) as Proponents of Reformed Doctrine," *Church History and Religious Culture* 91, nos. 1–2 (2011): 59–71; Dolf te Velde, *The Doctrine of God in Reformed Orthodoxy, Karl Barth, and the Utrecht School: A Study in Method and Content* (Brill, 2013); Stefan Lindholm, "Jerome Zanchi's Use of Thomas Aquinas," in *Aquinas among the Protestants*, ed. Manfred Svensson and David VanDrunen (Wiley Blackwell, 2017); Yi Wang, "Girolamo Zanchi and Divine Names" (PhD diss., Theological University of the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands at Apeldoorn, 2026).

Zanchi in Context

To understand the book, we must understand the author. Although significant gaps remain, we now have a much better sense of both Zanchi's biography and his theological project than we did even a decade ago.²⁰ Briefly put, he was a devout refugee theologian and churchman educated in Renaissance Italy who used the tools of both humanism and scholasticism in service to the Reformed churches of Protestant Europe.

Near the end of his dedicatory letter in *De natura Dei*, written when he was sixty-one, Zanchi divided his life up into the series of movements that have served his biographers over the years as an organizing rubric—Italy, Rhaetia and Geneva, Strasbourg, Chiavenna, and Heidelberg.²¹ He was born in the northern Italian town of Alzano in 1516. He was orphaned by the age of fifteen, which led him to join the Augustinian Order of Lateran Canons Regular. This was a good fit for Zanchi and provided him with a first-rate Renaissance education that culminated in a period of study in Ravenna from 1537–40, after which Zanchi was ordained a preacher (*predicator*), an office that, by papal privilege, granted

²⁰ Critical works for Zanchi's biography include: Giulio Orazio Bravi, "Nuovi Documenti per Girolamo Zanchi in Italia," *Riforma e Movimenti Religiosi* 15 (2024): 177–224; Giulio Orazio Bravi, "Girolamo Zanchi, da Lucca a Strasburgo," *Archivio storico bergamasco* 1 (1981): 35–64; Christopher Burchill, "Girolamo Zanchi in Strasbourg, 1553–1563" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1979); Lukas Vischer, "Girolamo Zanchi, reformierter Prediger in Chiavenna," *Bündnerisches Monatsblatt* 10 (1951): 289–301; Luca Baschera and Christian Moser, "Introduction," in *De Religione Christiana Fides—Confession of Christian Religion*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 135 (Brill, 2007); Wang, "Girolamo Zanchi and Divine Names" (2026), esp. chs. 1–2 (pp. 10–91); and Renato Giuliani's *Introduzione Biographica to Girolamo Zanchi, Commento alla Lettera di Paolo agli Efesini. Parte prima*, ed. Renato Giuliani, trans. Renato Giuliani and Armando Borsini (Passaggio, 2024), 11–106.

²¹ See *TNoG*, 1:57. The city of Neustadt should be added to the end of the list. Although Zanchi appears to have still be residing in Heidelberg when he wrote it in September 1577, he soon moved his family across the Rhine.

him the honors, titles, dignities, and privileges of a university doctor.

In 1541, he transferred to San Frediano in Lucca, where he came under the influence of that house's new prior Peter Martyr Vermigli, an evangelical theologian and preacher. Although he soon fled Italy for Reformation Europe, his exposition of Romans and the Psalms affected Zanchi's understanding of Scripture, and Vermigli directed his attention away from the medieval scholastics and toward a study of the church fathers, especially Augustine. Yet, the extent to which Zanchi could be called a Protestant at this point is difficult to assess. What is clear is that, for about the next decade, he remained in Italy as a member of the Lateran Canons and he seems to have increasingly moved toward Reformation theology, even participating in an underground seminary at Lucca. Finally, in 1551, he fled Italy one step ahead of the Inquisition.

As Zanchi put it, "I came first to Rhaetia, then to Geneva, and then to Strasbourg." "Rhaetia" refers primarily to Chiavenna, an Italian-speaking city in the Confederation of the Three Leagues where he spent most of a year. Next, he moved on to Calvin's Geneva for roughly another year focused on theological study. In 1553, in search of a job, he planned to follow Vermigli—now Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford—to England, but instead he was summoned to the College of St. Thomas at Strasbourg to teach Old Testament. He lectured there "for almost eleven years on the Holy Scriptures and sometimes, by special order, on Aristotle" (57).

At Strasbourg, Zanchi found himself drawn into an extended controversy with his academic superior, Johann Marbach. Marbach, who was also the chief Lutheran preacher in Strasbourg, believed Zanchi to be in serious error in his views on the Lord's Supper, the perseverance of the saints, predestination, and the Last Days. He furthermore believed that Zanchi was not just mistaken but also deceitful. He formally charged him with heresy and questioned his integrity and salvation. For his part, Zanchi believed that the whole thing was a logomachy—a war of words without much substance.

Despite his exoneration in March 1563, Zanchi's days at the College were numbered and, at the prompting of Heinrich Bullinger, he accepted a call to serve a congregation in Chiavenna. The hope was to create a school to train pastors who would be sent to minister in Italy, similar to the way in which Geneva supplied laborers for Huguenot churches. Zanchi served there from 1563–67, somewhat less than the “ten years” that he recalled in his dedicatory letter. But no doubt the years seemed long to him. He and his family faced plague, heresy, and a fractious community. When a majority of the congregation, stirred up by his contentious assistant minister, voted to exclude all foreigners from church office, Zanchi declared it “open schism.” The place of one's birth, he contended, in no way determined suitability for office. In the end, after losing his pulpit, he told Bullinger: “I have never experienced anything more unfair.”²²

In any event, it may have worked out for the best, since this freed Zanchi to accept Elector Frederick III's invitation to succeed Zacharias Ursinus as professor of theology in Heidelberg—“gathering the whole of theology [*summa theologiae*] out of the Holy Scriptures and the fathers into common places and explaining them to the youths in our school” (57). He was paid well, his lectures were a success, and his colleagues appreciated him. At Frederick's request, he embarked upon a massive treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity—*De tribus Elohim, aeterno Patre, Filio, et Spiritu Sancto, uno eodem Iehova* (*On the Three Elohim, Eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, One and the Same Jehovah*)—which was published in 1572 and well received not only in Protestant Europe but also, by permission, in imperial Roman Catholic lands. Five years later he published *De natura Dei, seu de divinis attributis libri quinque* (*Five books on the Nature of God, or on the Divine Attributes*), which continued Zanchi's “labors and lucubration” on the doctrine of God (57).

²² Zanchi to Bullinger, June 23, 1567, in *Bullingers Korrespondenz mit den Graubündnern*, ed. Traugott Schiess, *Quellen zur Schweizer Geschichte* 23–25 (Basler Buch- und Antiquariatshandlung, 1904), 3:14.

When Frederick III died in 1576, his heir, the Lutheran Ludwig VI, dismissed the Reformed faculty of the University of Heidelberg, including the entire theology department. Zanchi and several of colleagues found a safe haven in nearby Neustadt-an-der-Haardt, where Frederick's younger son, John Casimir, established a Reformed academy. Zanchi offered the inaugural oration in May 1578 and took up the chair of New Testament, lecturing through the Pauline epistles from Ephesians through 2 Thessalonians. In 1584, when Ludwig died, Heidelberg once again opened its doors to the Reformed, and Zanchi was invited to resume his chair. But he declined the offer due to failing health and took retirement in the "charming" and "wholesome" city of Neustadt.²³ He remained active in writing and editing despite failing eyesight and other ailments. He died in November 1590 while visiting friends in Heidelberg, where he was interred at the university church.

***De natura Dei* and the *Summa* Project**

At some point during his Heidelberg years, Zanchi set himself to turning his lectures into a massive *summa* of theology. This may have been spurred by the success of his book on the Trinity.²⁴ The clearest description of his plan is found in the opening paragraphs of the second part of *De operibus Dei intra spacium sex dierum creatis* (*On the Works of God Created in the Space of Six Days*), which comprised the third volume of the project. In that passage, Zanchi first defines theology as a discipline, then describes his

²³ Girolamo Zanchi, *Blessed Is the Man: Orations on Theological Education*, trans. Patrick J. O'Banion (Merchant Royal Press, 2025), 142.

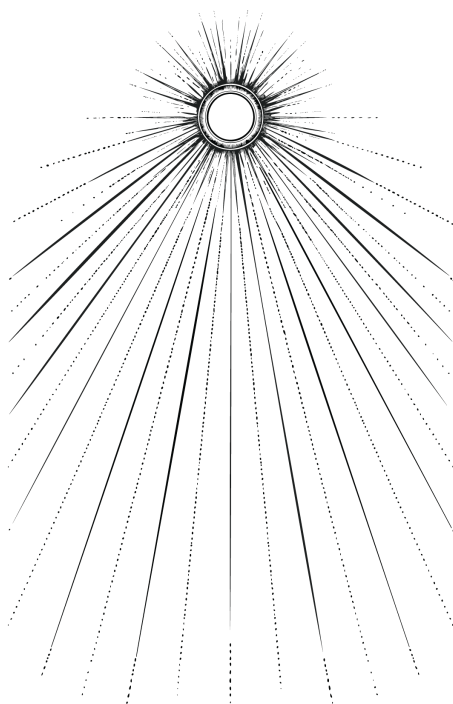
²⁴ According to Burchill, Zanchi saw *On the Three Elohim* (1572) as part of a larger project at least by late 1574. But whether that means that he was contemplating merely a follow-up volume on the divine attributes (that is, *De natura Dei*) or had already conceptualized a four-part *summa theologiae* is unclear. Burchill cites Zanchi's December 10, 1574 letter to Conrad Hubert (Archive of St. Thomas, Strasbourg, 162:68'–686), which I have not been able to consult. Christopher J. Burchill, "Girolamo Zanchi: Portrait of a Reformed Theologian and His Work," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 15, no. 2 (1984): 203.

Five Books on the Nature of God
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By Girolamo Zanchi

BOOK ONE

The Divine Names



Chapter 1

*Those who know who the true God is should also take care to know what He is like, for although it is the case that whatever He is, He is by His essence, nevertheless, various properties are with good reason attributed to Him. On this account, they are properly called the attributes of God. This is the reason why God is sometimes called living and sometimes life, sometimes wise and sometimes wisdom, and so forth. Knowledge of the attributes is necessary. In order to explain their necessity, first we must discuss the divine names.*¹

We believe that we have fully and clearly handled and explained the most difficult question of all—namely, about the one God subsisting in three persons—in the thirteen books we wrote and published.² That, at least, is what we intended and hoped to accomplish. Accordingly, having sufficiently understood and examined who God truly is on the basis of Holy Scripture, the method and true system of teaching demands that we next discuss the nature (or attributes) of this true God, who is eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For in Holy Scripture, we learn what He is like from His attributes.

Indeed, although God is a most simple essence in which clearly no compositeness or accidents exist, nevertheless, for our sake, so that we might better understand what He is like, He is accustomed to attribute many things to Himself, as if they were multiple qualities [*qualitates*]. He does this even though (as is said) there are no distinguishing features in God whereby He might be said to be *this* or *that*. Rather, whatever He is, He is thus according to His most

¹ Zanchi uses “names” (*nomina*) in a Thomistic sense of divine predicates or things predicated of God. That is, by *nomina* he means something broader than “proper names” and more precise than “divine attributes.”

² That is, in Zanchi’s *De tribus Elohim* (Frankfurt, 1572).

simple essence. That is to say, His essence is good; His essence is powerful; His essence is wise, just, and merciful. In short, His essence is all that He is [*Denique sua essentia est, quicquid est*].

Thus, in Exodus 34:6, when God described what He was like to Moses, He first called Himself *Jehovah, Jehovah*. We have frequently said that this name signifies His most simple and eternal essence. But then He subjoined adjectives or attributes to it, saying: *powerful, merciful*, and the others that follow.

But why does He put these things in this order? So as to indicate that He is thus not by virtue of any accidents but by virtue of His most simple essence—because He is Jehovah. It is as if He had actually said: *I am Jehovah, that is, essence; I am from nothing else but only from Myself, existing by means of Myself*. [2] *Therefore, I am of such a character as I declare Myself to be to you—powerful, merciful, good, and so on—not by anything else but only by Myself*.

This can also be applied to what He said through Isaiah: *I, I am He who blots out your iniquities for My own sake* [43:25]. For the meaning is that He blots out iniquities not on account of our merit but on account of His free mercy and goodness. But why does He not simply say *for the sake of My goodness and mercy* rather than *for My own sake*? He does so in order to indicate that His mercy is not something different from Himself, that is, something distinct from His essence (as is the case for us) but rather that He is good and merciful in Himself, that is, by His simple essence.

This is likewise the reason why He simply called Himself *I am*³ in Exodus 3:14 (or: *the One who is*⁴). He clearly indicated by this name that He is the utterly simple and perfect essence, so that whatsoever is predicated of Him is predicated essentially of the whole, that He is according to His essence what He revealed Himself to be and, so, that He is the true God.

³ אהיה.

⁴ τὸν ὄντα. Wisdom of Solomon 13:1 refers to God as τὸν ὄντα. Zanchi here equates τὸν ὄντα with ὁ ὢν, which is the LXX's rendering of אהיה (or more fully, ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν) in Ex. 3:14 (cf. Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8). See Dennis J. McCarthy, "Exod 3:14: History, Philology and Theology," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (1978): 317.

On the basis of those and other similar points, it clearly appears that no features or accidents are in God whereby He can be said to be like *this* or like *that*. Rather, whatever He is, He is according to His most simple essence.

Master Bernard [of Clairvaux] knew this doctrine well. This is why, in his treatise *On Loving God*, when he said that the greatest love is in God, he then added:

Yet no one should imagine that I take love here as a feature or accident of some kind (in which case—and far be it—I would be saying that, in God, there is something that is not God). Rather, it [that is, love] is the divine substance. Certainly, this is neither novel nor unusual. As John says: “God is love” [1 John 4:8]. Therefore, it is rightly said that love is God and the gift of God. Accordingly, love gives love; substantive love gives accidental love. Where it indicates the Giver, it takes the name of substance; where it indicates the gift, it is called a feature.⁵

And this is the reason why God is more truly called *Life* than *living*, *Wisdom* than *wise*, *Light* than *luminous*, and so on for the rest. Why? Because He lives of Himself not by means of life. And He is wise of Himself and by means of His essence, not by means of some other wisdom added to the divine essence. And so, insofar as He is very frequently called *wise*, *powerful*, *good*, and other names of this sort, which theologians calls *attributes*, the Holy Spirit did this [for two reasons]: partly so that we would understand, according to our capacity, what God’s essence is like and partly so that we would understand that this essence signifies a thing [*res*] that truly subsists in three persons rather than some abstract wisdom, goodness, and power.

God is often called by His essence in the abstract—*goodness*, *life*, *wisdom*—in order thereby to teach us that He both *is* [*esse*] and that He *is Being* [*Ens*], not by participation but per se and most perfectly, and that He is wise and good, not by participation (and, hence, imperfectly) but per se and most perfectly. In the same way,

⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, ed. Emero Stiegman, trans. Robert Walton, *Monastic Studies* 20 (Gorgias Press, 2010), 37 (12.35).

God is also repeatedly called in the concrete *the One who is*⁶ righteous, living, wise, and good so we understand that He truly subsists and also that He really is most righteous and that He lives and works righteousness and other such things which would not be suitable if He were not a thing subsisting per se.

This, then, is the reason why He is sometimes called *Life*, sometimes *living*, sometimes *Wisdom*, and sometimes *wise*.

Indeed, the extent to which this is a necessary explanation of God's attributes is evident from their use, which is chiefly twofold. The first [use of God's attributes] is to teach us what our God actually is like. For what would the benefit be of knowing who God is if we were ignorant of what He is like? Likewise, how can He be feared or loved, how can we place trust in Him and call on Him, if we do not know Him to be righteous, good, merciful, and benevolent toward men?⁷ These things also have in view the fact that, by them, we discern the true God from false ones and, hence, are confirmed in the doctrine of the true deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit inasmuch as we see that these attributes are predicated of them in the Holy Scriptures.

The second use [of God's attributes] is to instruct us thoroughly not only about what we *have* received from God but also what we *will* receive from Him. [3] We learn from God that He is Jehovah, that we have our existence [*esse*] from Him, and that He preserves us in it. So also, when we read that God is wisdom, He teaches us both that whatever light, knowledge, or understanding is in us comes entirely from God, the supreme Wisdom, and also that the more wisdom and knowledge we grasp, the more closely we are united to this God. Additionally, we also learn from this that everything God does is altogether wise. And so, we should not complain about the governance of the world but rather receive everything with a cheerful soul, since all things are governed by God's supreme wisdom and goodness. And this is also how we ought to understand the matter with regard to the rest of the attributes.

⁶ ὁ ὢν.

⁷ φιλόανθρωπον.

Still, before we move on to an explanation of the things that are attributed to God in the Holy Scriptures, something must be said concerning the divine names, that is, the many names whereby the Holy Scriptures describe to us who God is and what He is like. We must do this because, once we have explained the divine names, we will more suitably be able to devote our attention to a true explanation of the attributes.

This treatise [on the divine names] will take the form of a very brief compendium in which are summarily described who God is and what He is like. For the Holy Scriptures relate these names of God to us so that, even if we have not heard or understood anything beyond these names, the whole of His nature, which is otherwise set down at length in the prophetic and apostolic books, might (as it were) be put on display before our eyes. This is similar to way in which the Ten Commandments comprehend and teach a summary of all precepts. So, do not ignore this treatise.

Now I will explain what is to be said and in what order.

Chapter 8

Quaestio 3

Are any names spoken of God properly?

The Thesis

Although many names are predicated of God improperly and metaphorically, nevertheless, if we consider the things signified by the names, many are also spoken properly.

Obviously, many names are spoken of God improperly. Such is the case with any names that per se and immediately signify things that cannot exist in God, like bodies and things and bodily actions, as when God is called a *lion*, a *stone*, or a *tower*. But we affirm and teach that many names actually are spoken of God properly. And they are those names that signify such things that are much more perfect in God or are in Him in a more perfect way than they are in things created by Him. Examples of this include *being*, *goodness*, *wisdom*, *righteousness*, and other things of this sort. These signify a certain perfection, and we are accustomed to call them *God's distinctive characteristics* [*proprietates*].

And this is confirmed by the testimony of Ambrose, who commented as follows: *There are some obvious indicators which display the distinctive characteristic* [*proprietatem*] *of divinity, and they are those which express the clear unity of the divine majesty* (*On Faith to Gratian*, bk. 2, prologue [§2]).¹

This twofold division actually embraces all names, which either indicate the subject and teach what it is (as do the names *Jehovah*,

¹ NPNF2, 10:223.

Yah,² and others of this sort) or predicate what God's essence is like (such as the names *righteous*, *good*, and *omnipotent*).

Another distinction should be noted that will shed much light on this question. Although almost all of the names (as was previously stated) are derived from things around us and with which we are familiar, nevertheless, two things must be considered in all of the names attributed to God in the Holy Scriptures. First, we must consider the things and perfections signified by means of the names themselves (such as *life* and *goodness*), and second, we must consider how these names signify those perfections.

As far as the things and perfections themselves are concerned, these were and are in God before being in creatures, and they were and are in Him even more perfectly than in creatures. In this way, they are proper to God. Just so, insofar as the perfections themselves [18] are signified by means of the names, they are more properly attributed to God than to creatures, and they are appropriate for and predicated of Him prior to being appropriate for or predicated of creatures.

This is why we say that nothing is more righteous, better, or more powerful than God. Thus, God was Father before we were. Therefore, He also necessarily had a Son before we did. And so, the name *Son* actually precedes us and is more truly and properly predicated of the Word³ whom the Father begot than it is predicated of us, whence the Son's true deity is confirmed.

The other point pertains to the manner [*modo*] in which names signify. Whichever names are derived from creatures—and as noted previously, almost all of the names are so derived—are predicated of God improperly. For they have a manner of signifying that applies to creatures but not to God. For example, [when applied to creatures,] the name *righteous* signifies righteousness insofar as it is a finite virtue and an accident, really distinct from other virtues. And these names were first contrived to signify virtues of that sort in that manner. But God then willed that these

² יה.

³ Λόγος.

names also be used with regard to Him in order to signify that these virtues are in Him, albeit they are more perfect in Him, and they are in Him in a more perfect manner than they are in us.

Accordingly, as far as manner is concerned, these names are not properly suited both to God and us, since they signify what they signify in an imperfect manner. This is why, when they are attributed to God, they are more properly suited if you add a certain particle that increases the manner of signifying and, thus, establishes a distinction between God and creatures. Thus, you might say: *God is most righteous, most wise, and most powerful*. For in this way God's righteousness is better distinguished from the righteousness of creatures. And so, this *quaestio* is settled.

Quaestio 4

The fourth *quaestio* was: *Do any of the various names spoken of God come into conflict with His unity and simplicity in any way?*

The Thesis

God's many and various names do not come into conflict with His unity or simplicity.

The rationale behind this thesis is the following: Many and varied names of God are to be found signifying many and various perfections in God, nevertheless, multiple virtues do not really exist in God but merely one, which is nothing other than the divine essence itself, which, being one, is whatever it is. In the same way, with respect to the thing [*rem*] itself, the names signify only the one divine essence. For the divine essence is justice itself, goodness itself, and, in sum, all of the names.

Hence, we often say: *The things which are multiple virtues and perfections in us are really one thing in God; they are merely rational*

[ratione] *differences and are only rationally* [ratione] *multiple*.⁴ But what is the *reason* [*ratio*] whereby they differ? It is the concept that our intellect conceives, on the basis of the names, about the perfections signified through the names. For our mind conceives something distinct from the word *mercy* than it does from the word *righteousness*. Hence, this reason conflicts in no way with God's simplicity, since it posits nothing in God but only inheres in our intellect. Indeed, as far as concerns God, all these perfections or properties are one most simple thing, but as far as concerns us, they appear to be diverse.

So then, since this diverse reason [*ratio*] whereby, to our mind, God's many virtues differ from one another is nothing in God but only takes place in us, it is proved that the many and various names do not actually have any kind of conflict with God's unity and simplicity. For God does not intend for these many and various names to signify that many and various virtues are in Him but rather a single one—indeed, such a one as actually has the force of all the other virtues and properties, and infinitely so.

In this, our best Parent has accommodated Himself to our capacity. [19] Perhaps He could have found a single name that was so perfect that it embraced all these and an infinite number of additional perfections. Yet, since we would not have been able to understand them by that one name, for that reason and for our sake, He determined to explain what and of what sort is that singular and most simple thing [*rem*] (namely, the divine essence) with many and various names.

Is it not the case that the sun is the cause of light, heat, the bearing of fruit and animals, liquefying wax, and hardening clay? And that the singular power of all these things is also in the sun? Yes, it

⁴ Petrus van Mastricht writes: "The attributes of God certainly differ among themselves, but not so much on God's part as on the part of our conception. Accordingly, they do not differ really, as one thing from another, but by our reason or thought [*ratione, seu cogitatione nostra*], and yet not only by a reasoning reason [*ratiocinante*] which lacks reasons for distinguishing, but by a reasoned reason [*ratiocinata*] which receives the reasons for distinguishing from God Himself..." (*TPT*, 2:117 [pt. 1, bk. 2, ch. 5, §VII.1]). See also, Aquinas, *ST*, I, q. 13, art. 4; *PRRD*, 2:284–98; and Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 58–60.

is. For by its singular light, the sun causes all these things and a nearly infinite number of others in those inferior things. And because it causes these things, the sun is often said to be of the same force as are its effects, albeit more perfectly. For it is called *shining* and *hot*, not so much because it causes heat and dryness in nature as because it is actually the force behind such things or because the force in the sun is similar to heat and dryness—and so on with regard to the others.

Accordingly, because many and various adjectives are predicated of the sun, do they come into conflict with the singular and simple force of the sun? The same things should be said and thought with regard to God's many and various names.

In summary, our weakness was the reason for the many and various names in God. For they were not imposed in order to signify that many virtues really are in God—for just one is appropriate and sufficient for all—but on account of our capacity. What we would not have been able to perceive with one name, we are able to perceive with many, namely, who our God is and what He is like. For if we could, at a single glance or by a single act of the intellect, perceive God's essence as it is, then many and various names would not have been at all necessary to indicate it. Instead, a single name would have sufficed for us, which God Most High would easily have found and revealed. But the weakness of our nature is such that this would have been useless to us. Therefore, He appointed many names, since one would not do. Hence, the diversity of God's names does not come into conflict with His simplicity.

Quaestio 5

On to the fifth *quaestio*, which arises from the fourth: *If, for that reason, God's many names are said not to come into conflict with His simplicity, since they do not mean that various things are in God but really only one (namely, the divine essence), are these many names, then, all synonymous?* Now, this would be utterly absurd, since they would then be nothing but idle repetition. Therefore, I respond with this thesis.

Chapter 14

The name אהיה [Ehyeh].

There follows the third Old Testament name of God that we are undertaking to explain, namely, the one we have in Exodus 3:14 when Moses asked the Lord His name, which Moses was to relate to the people of Israel in Egypt so as to confirm to them that his mission was from God. [To Moses's question,] God responded with these words: *אהיה אשר אהיה* [*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*]. *And thus shall you say to the children of Israel, Ehyeh¹ sent me to you.* I have undertaken to explain this name, despite having omitted many others, not because it appears frequently in the Scriptures, for I read no repetition of it outside of this passage [in Exodus 3]. Rather, I do so because it is related to the name יהוה (for both derive from the verb *to be*²) and because the name ὁ ὢν (which is how *Ehyeh*³ is translated in the Septuagint) appears not infrequently in the Scriptures, in Revelation and elsewhere. Additionally, [I am explaining this name] in order to interpret the passage in Exodus 3.

I. Accordingly and first of all, there is a twofold translation of this name. As I mentioned, the Septuagint's translators took the future tense as a present tense, which is hardly an innovation among [53] the Hebrews in the Holy Scriptures, and so they render it: *Εγὼ εἰμὶ ὁ ὢν* [*I am the One who is*]. This meaning is secure, as will be clearly evident in what follows, and this interpretation was universally accepted in antiquity. It appears to be proved by Revelation 1[:4], where God is described in such a way that His name is *the One who*

¹ אהיה.

² היה.

³ אהיה.

is, and the One who was.⁴ Indeed, it seems that three words are used in Revelation 1:4 for what Moses expresses with one word in Exodus 3 when God called Himself *Ehyeh*.⁵ This is the first translation.

The second translation is literal in accordance with the Hebrew word [that we translate as] *I will be*. It renders *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*⁶ word for word as *I will be who I will be*. To be sure, the fact that this name is derived from *hayah*⁷ [to be] is so obvious that trying to prove it is a complete waste of time. So, I come to the interpretation of the name insofar as it is translated in the future tense: *I will be who I will be*. Then, I will move onto the translation whereby it is rendered *ὁ ὢν* [the One who is].

As far as the first point is concerned, some interpret this [passage] in such a way as to understand that the Son of God alone is speaking here, He who at the time of Moses was called *the Angel of Jehovah* and *Jehovah* but who was called *Christ* when He took on flesh and who promised the redemption of all His people through His coming in the flesh, bodily suffering, and death. Hence, they conclude that the meaning is: *Moses, do you ask Me, who am sending you to redeem the people from Egypt, what My name is? I reveal it to you in just a few words: "I will be; I will be; I will be."* That is, *I am He who, after much time, will be the Savior of the whole elect people. I will deliver all of the elect, not through you but on My own, and not from Egypt but out of bondage to sin and death. And I will lead them not into the land of Canaan but into a heavenly land. The present deliverance is a type of and an introduction to the other one. In short, I am the Son of God, the Mediator between God the Father and mankind; I am the promised Seed in whom all the nations will be blessed.* They advance many reasons and testimonies from Holy Scripture in an effort to confirm this interpretation.

⁴ ὁ ὢν, καὶ ὁ ἦν.

⁵ אהיה. The "three words" in Rev. 1:4 (and 1:8) are (presumably) the present, past, and future verbs in the title of the Lord Jesus: ὁ ὢν, καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος.

⁶ אהיה אשר אהיה.

⁷ היה.

But while I strongly commend the actual point that they are making as pious and while I do not disregard it as a shrewd interpretation, I nevertheless cannot be persuaded to believe that this is the genuine meaning of the passage. For if they allege the meaning to be that what He says here concerning *Ehyeh*⁸ can only befit the Son, since neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit but only the Son took on flesh, then they will have proven that the name *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*⁹ applies to the Son alone, which to me seems completely and utterly absurd.

Accordingly, others interpret it in this way: *I will be who I will be*. That is, *Why are you asking My true name? No one can express who and what and how I am. Hence, I will be who I will be*. That is, *I will reveal Myself by results, and I will declare My being according to the works that I will accomplish. Thus, you will be able to adduce various names for Me. If the works are of great power, then the name "Most Powerful" will be My name. If of the highest wisdom, I will be called "Most Wise." If of the greatest goodness, I will be "the Greatest Good."* And so forth, such that this is the meaning of the passage: *You ask what My name is? Truly, I will respond with My deeds, and I will reveal My name. Hence, I will be who I will be*.

But this, too, is weak, for it seems inconsistent with what He says next: *Say to the children of Israel, "Ehyeh*¹⁰ *sent me."* For He indicates that His name is *Ehyeh*,¹¹ He who sent Moses into Egypt. But Moses was not sent by the Son alone; He was also sent by the Father and the Holy Spirit.¹²

⁸ אהיה.

⁹ אהיה אשר אהיה.

¹⁰ אהיה.

¹¹ אהיה.

¹² This last sentence of the paragraph is confusing as it does not seem to answer the interpretive option under consideration but, instead, to return to the previous one, which assigned the name only to the Son. We would expect something like: "This interpretation, however, does not view 'I am who I am' as an actual name but rather as a description of what He will do, on the basis of which creatures are invited to name God. It stands at odds, therefore, with the description in Exodus 3 of a God who reveals His proper name."

[A third interpretation:] A certain rabbi by the name of Chizkuni [that is, Hezekiah ben Manoah], whom Fagius cites,¹³ says that the first *Ehyeh*¹⁴ is God's name and the second *Ehyeh*¹⁵ is an exposition of the first.¹⁶ It is as if the Lord were speaking to Moses in this way: *My name is "Ehyeh."*¹⁷ *The reason is: because I will be forever, without end.* Accordingly, the words should be smoothed out in Latin like this: *My name is "Ehyeh."*¹⁸ For, *"I will be who I will truly be forever."* Hence, this name [54] signifies God's eternity. Therefore, the meaning is: *I am He who is eternal, that is, [I am] God.*

The interpretation of another group actually agrees with this third interpretation. This group says (uncontroversially) that the name *Ehyeh*¹⁹ signifies the eternal One (namely, God), He who always was, is, and will be. The reason is that no creature can assert

¹³ Fagius, *Thargum*, fol. K3r.

¹⁴ אֶהְיֶה.

¹⁵ אֶהְיֶה.

¹⁶ Zanchi designates the rabbi as "Hizenai," but Fagius refers to "Hizkuni," that is, the thirteenth-century French rabbi named Hezekiah ben Menoah but often called Chizkuni (or Hizkuni) on the basis of his Torah commentary of that name.

Chizkuni writes: "אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, the first word אֶהְיֶה is the name of G-d; the second is an explanation of why G-d is called אֶהְיֶה. In other words: the reason why My name is אֶהְיֶה is because I am eternal, immutable. I am therefore a most reliable G-d, in the sense of dependable helper and saviour, as I will always be around. My 'lifespan' is not as that word suggests a limited period, but I am not subject to any limitations. I will still be on the side of the Jewish people at the time when I redeem them from the sufferings in Egypt, as already promised by Yaakov to Joseph in Genesis 48,21. In other words, the name revealed to Moses here by G-d was not a new name. Yaakov had already been familiar with it. It is one of the attributes of G-d, Who has many attributes. G-d tells Moses that anyone who legitimizes himself as speaking of the G-d called אֶהְיֶה, will be believed. The fact is that the Israelites did believe Moses when he identified himself as speaking in the name of this G-d, as we read in Exodus 4,31." Hezekiah ben Manoah, "Chizkuni on Exodus 3:14," trans. Eliyahu Munk, Sefaria, accessed November 18, 2025, https://www.sefaria.org/Chizkuni_Exodus.3.14.

¹⁷ אֶהְיֶה.

¹⁸ אֶהְיֶה.

¹⁹ אֶהְיֶה.

that it *will be*, nor can any creature simply and properly say, as is the case here: *I will be*. Much less can it say: *I will be forever*, as is understood to be the case here, since *I will be* is pronounced unrestrictedly.

Galatino offers another rationale [for this interpretation], which he deduces Kabbalistically on the basis of the [verb's] root and voice. For he proves in the following way that the three tenses—past, present, and future—which denote eternity are included in this word. The first letter is א, and this constitutes the first-person future: אהיה [*ehyeh*, which means:] *I will be*. Thus, we have the future. The second letter is ה, and this is the first letter and root of the verb היה [*hayah*]: *It was*. Thus, we have the past tense. Merely changing the same word's vowels to a *cholem* and *tseri* makes a Benoni that indicates the present tense: *being* or *existing*. Fagius reports this as well with regard to the rabbis' opinion on Exodus 3. Therefore, the name *Ehyeh*²⁰ both by its meaning and its explanation signifies *He who is eternal and not subject to time*.

[A fourth interpretation:] Some take *Ehyeh*²¹ in both cases as a verb rather than as a name. Their opinion is that God promised His presence and favor to His people, just as He had also previously promised to Moses, saying: *Surely, I will be with you* (Ex. 3:12). Accordingly, this is the meaning: *I who will be with you will be with them, namely, in order to deliver them from this and every other affliction, for I refuse to give them up, according to the promise I made to Abraham. Therefore, I will be with them, I who will be with you, just as I already promised you*.

Rabbi Solomon [ben Isaac, that is, Rashi] has almost the same interpretation: *I will be* (with them in their present tribulation) *who I will be* (with them also in the affliction [they suffer at the hands] of other kingdoms).²²

²⁰ אהיה.

²¹ אהיה.

²² Rosenbaum and Silberman, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth and Prayers for Sabbath and Rashi's Commentary*, 11 (<https://www.sefaria.org/Exodus.3.14>). As in the previous chapter, Zanchi here is likely accessing Rashi's comments by way of Fagius's *Thargum*, sig. K3r.

[A fifth interpretation:] Others teach that, in this passage, this word indicates nothing less than God's steadfastness to His promises. And this is the meaning: *Why do you ask My name? I will give no response to you other than that I am He who steadfastly wills to keep the promise He made to deliver His people. For I will be who I will be, and who I ought to be.*

[A final interpretation:] Some are of the opinion that it is a confirmation of the promise He just made to Moses (in Exodus 3:12) concerning the freeing of the people from the hands of Pharaoh: *I will be with you.* With these words, God indicated and promised that He would be with Moses in such a way that the people would be altogether snatched out of Pharaoh's hand, in accordance with the promise made to Abraham. Hence, they prefer this to be the meaning: *Do not ask about My name. Instead, be content with this promise and the knowledge of My will whereby I promised that I would be with you in such a way that, against Pharaoh's will, I will deliver the people through you. For in every respect, I will be (namely, with you in delivering the people) who I will be.* That is: *Just as I promised you previously, I am going to be with you, since I told you: "I will be with you."* But with this approach, there is no name of God in Exodus 3:14, which is contrary to the opinion of nearly all learned men.

II. That is why I combine the fifth interpretation with the third opinion, and I say that two of God's essential attributes are indicated, neither of which can belong to any created thing: eternity and immutability.

Eternity is indicated when God says *I will be*. For what creature can truly and properly say *I will be*? And immutability is indicated when He says אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה [*asher Ehyeh*], as if to say: *Not only will I be (namely, forever), but I will also always be as I will be.* Thus, this suits the current context very well—delivering the people out of Egypt according to the promise made to Abraham four hundred years previously. Therefore, the meaning is: *My name is ὁ αἰώνιος, καὶ ὁ ἀτρέπτος: He who is eternal and who is immutable.* Moreover, [55] these [essential attributes] signify God. For every creature is

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