



ASSOCIATION FOR THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION

The 2026 Annual Proceedings of the ASSR

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2026 Annual Meeting

March 6-8, 2026

The Association for the Scientific Study of Religion

Presents

*The Year 2026
Annual Proceedings of the ASSR*

Edited by:

Dennis J. Horton

*Annual Meeting
March 6-8, 2026*

President's Note

I am delighted to bring you the 2026 *Proceedings* of The Association for the Scientific Study of Religion (ASSR).

The *Proceedings* offer an instructive array of papers and presentations from both our perennial authors and presenters as well as a host of new academic talents who bring with them fresh topics and innovative approaches. In addition to our professional academic papers, the ASSR also includes student papers in the *Proceedings* as submitted and presented at the annual meeting, and in addition to the Frank P. Forwood Award for Excellence in Presented Research for professional papers, two student awards are now available—the Harry Hale Prize for Graduate and Undergraduate Research.

The quality of these *Proceedings* discloses the outstanding work that has been accomplished by the efforts of many who participate and promote our meetings through research, writing, attending our sessions, and sponsorship via generous donations and the purchase of this collection. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who helps to make the ASSR what it has been, what it is, and what it hopes to become. Joining the ASSR only costs \$20.00 yearly (or a one-time \$100 lifetime membership), and we value your support and participation in our yearly sessions and helping to make them successful by writing and presenting papers, chairing sessions, contributing to the *Proceedings*, and attending the presentations of others. It is important for our future that every member of the ASSR not only encourages new membership at every opportunity but solicits scholars throughout the colleges, universities, and organizations at which you reside to become involved in our group through chairing sessions, writing and submitting papers, or serving as an officer.

I hope all of you have a productive year and the ASSR will be looking forward to your participation in the ASSR in 2026-2027. Be sure to visit us online at: www.assronline.org, complete with online publications of papers from past meetings (see the **Archives** on the site). Hopefully you will share this site with colleagues and students alike. Thanks.

Appreciatively,

Dennis J. Horton, 2025-2026 ASSR President/Editor

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Beyond Monotheism: the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' on Love

Molly Keesling (Wells), The University of Texas

The Brethren of Purity and Loyal Friends (Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' wa Khullān al-Wafā')¹ were a group of anonymous philosophers who wrote an encyclopedia likely in the tenth century in Iraq.² This work, known as the Epistles of the Brethren of Purity (*Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*) is made up of four volumes containing 51 or 52 treatises. The four volumes cover different categories of sciences: mathematical, corporeal and natural, psychological and rational, and divine. It is comprehensive in nature and perhaps the first encyclopedia of its kind in Arabic.³ Its eclectic nature has continued to fascinate scholars to this day. Drawing from a multitude of theological, philosophical, and cultural traditions, this syncretic approach makes it difficult to glean a clear sense of their religious orientation. This has caused scholars over time to emphasize different aspects of their epistles. Some choose to highlight their incorporation of Neoplatonic frameworks, others their Isma'ili influence, and others still their Sufi attitude.⁴ In this paper, I will not propose a new theory regarding the group's identity or affiliation. Rather, I seek to analyze their relationship with ancient philosophy on the one hand, and monotheistic Islam on the other. Focusing on an under-studied epistle entitled "On the Essence of Love" (*fi Māhiyyat al-'Ishq*), I argue that love (*'ishq*) plays a role in Ikhwānian cosmology that disrupts the group's adherence to a strict monotheistic religion. Taking this approach contributes to a broader understanding of the phenomenon that occurs at the meeting place of a philosophy of a more universal nature and an exclusive religion.

In order to comprehend how the Ikhwānian theory of love complicates their overall thought, some exploration of their worldview throughout the *Rasā'il* is necessary. The first section of this paper addresses their syncretic nature and relations with varying religious traditions. Their pluralistic attitude plays a key role in

¹ I will refer to the group throughout the paper mainly as "Ikhwān," and occasionally as "Brethren."

² There is some debate regarding the date of the encyclopedia and the number of its authors. Janne Mattila has recently shown that the encyclopedia likely underwent a series of redactions that led to the commonly accepted edition we have today. This indicates that there were multiple authors – if not initially, then certainly as the corpus was edited and rearranged. These recent discoveries further complicate the exact dating of the work. See, Janne Mattila, *The Formation of the Ikhwānian Corpus: a Philological Study of the Epistles and Two Summaries Attributed to the Brethren of Purity*, (Leiden: Brill, 2026).

³ Carmela Baffioni has referred to it as "the most complete of mediaeval encyclopedias of science." Carmela Baffioni, "The Scope of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*," in *The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā' and their Rasā'il*, ed. by Nader El-Bizri, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 101.

⁴ See for example: Ian Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982); Abbas Hamdani, "A Critique of Paul Casanova's Dating of the *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*," in *Medieval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. by Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Susanne Diwald, *Arabische Philosophie und Wissenschaft in der Enzyklopädie: Kitāb Iḥwān aṣ-ṣafā' (III) Die Lehre von Seele und Intellekt*, (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975).

their relationship with monotheism. Then, I will specifically address their theory of love and the 37th epistle, “On the Essence of Love,” showing that they present the experience of human love as a catalyst for eventual union with God. Finally, I will engage more deeply with the analytical categories “monotheism” and “Neoplatonism” and explain how these categories can deepen our understanding of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’.

Religious Pluralism in the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*

There has been plenty of scholarship published on the nature of religious diversity in the *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*.⁵ Most scholars agree that the Ikhwān drew from a myriad of sources and did not limit themselves strictly to the Islamic scriptures for truth. This attitude can be derived from various explicit statements given by the Ikhwān:

In general, it is necessary for our brothers, may God almighty support them, to not abandon [any] science/knowledge [*‘ilm*] of the sciences, nor renounce [any] book of the books, nor to take sides against [any] school of thought [*madhhab*] of the schools of thought, because our opinion and our school of thought absorbs all of the schools of thought and unites all the sciences together.⁶ (Epistle 45, “On the Manner/Nature of the Company of the Brethren of Purity,” *fī Kayfiyyat Mu‘āsharat Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*).

Thus, the Ikhwān explicitly claim that their school synthesizes all the other schools and does not exclude any school of thought or science. In fact, the Ikhwān never explicitly condemn any one sect or tradition; the only set of people they outright condemn are those with no religion at all.⁷ The above statement is repeated, almost verbatim in epistle 48, “On the Manner/Nature of the Call to God,” (*fī Kayfiyyat al-Da‘wah ilā Allah*):

Know, oh Brother, that we do not oppose [any] science/knowledge [*‘ilm*] of the sciences, nor do we take sides against [any] school of thought [*madhhab*] of the schools of thought, nor do we renounce [any] book of the books of the wise [*ḥukamā’*] and philosophers [*falāsifah*] from what they put down and composed in the varieties of knowledge/sciences, and what they

⁵ See for example: Liana Saif, “Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’'s Religious Reform and Magic: Beyond the Ismā‘īlī Hypothesis,” *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 30, no. 1 (2018); Janne Mattila, ‘The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ on Religious Diversity’, *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 28/2 (2017); Godefroid de Callatay, “Syncretism,” in *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’: A Brotherhood of Idealists on the Fringe of Orthodox Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2005); Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, particularly chapters four and five.

⁶ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ wa Khullān al-Wafā’*, vol. 4, Ep. 45 (Company of the Brethren), (Beirut: Dār Ṣādar, 1957), 41-42. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁷ Mattila, “The Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ on Religious Diversity,” 14.

discovered/extracted [*istakharaju*] through their intellects [*bi-aqūlihim*] and their examination [*fahṣ*] of subtle meanings.⁸

It is clear that the Ikhwān will seek truth in any source. It should be noted, however, that directly after declaring the above, the authors write that their foundation is upon the books of the prophets (*kutub al-anbiyā'*) and revelation (*al-wahy*).⁹ While they do not overtly mention Islam or the Qur'an here, they do show an elevated respect for divinely revealed scripture. Elaborating on their source material for the *Rasā'il*, they explain they consult four main categories of books:

Our sciences are drawn from four (kinds of) books: first, the books composed by wise men and philosophers on mathematics and natural sciences; secondly, the revealed books brought by the prophets - upon them the grace of God - such as the Torah, the Gospel, the Qur'an (*al-furqān*, literally "the Proof"), and other prophetic books whose meanings come from revelation, including the secrets hidden in them. Thirdly, the books of nature [*kutub al-ṭabī'iyyah*], that is, the forms of existing things as they are now: the structure of the spheres, the divisions of the zodiac, the movements of the stars [*al-kawākib*] and the measures of their bodies, the vicissitudes of time, the transmutation of the elements, the categories of what is produced in terms of minerals, animals and plants, and the varieties of what is manufactured by man. All these are forms and allusions which hint at subtle meanings and delicate secrets. People see what is apparent in them, yet they do not know the inner meanings of the subtleties of the Creator's attribute (praise be upon Him!). Fourthly, the divine books [*kutub al-ilāhiyyah*], which no one touches but the pure angels [*al-muṭahharūn al-malā'ikah*], and which are in the hands of noble and pious scribes. These are the substances of the souls and their genera, species, and particulars, the variations that they (the souls) create in the bodies, the movements they effect in them, their government of them, and their sitting in judgement of them.¹⁰ (Epistle 45; Company of the Brethren).

In summary, the first category are philosophical books (which would include topics such as arithmetic, natural sciences, logic, etc.). It should be noted, however, that ancient philosophy is ultimately thought to have been revealed from God, going back to the first philosopher, Hermes/Ildris, who received his knowledge directly from

⁸ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, vol. 4, Ep. 48 (Call to God), 167. This passage is additionally (and slightly differently) translated in Saif, "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā's Religious Reform and Magic," 8.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Translation from de Callataÿ, *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, 85. I have added the Arabic terms in brackets, excluding the first parenthetical, which was added by de Callataÿ.

God.¹¹ The second category are the revealed scriptures – most importantly the Torah, Bible, and Qur'an. These three scriptures are most often named together throughout the *Rasā'il*. de Callatāy writes that the third and fourth categories make up a “virtual library.”¹² The third category is certainly peculiar as it indicates not only astrological texts, but, in a way, reading “nature” itself. Furthermore, these books contain “subtle meanings and delicate secrets” and are, thus, of an esoteric nature. The fourth category is the most inexplicable. Clearly intangible, perhaps this category is so elusive that it cannot even be described properly in human language.

This hierarchy of sources displays several key points about Ikhwānīan thought. On the one hand, they place the revealed scriptures ahead of the philosophical texts in the hierarchy. On the other hand, the philosophical texts are their starting point – their foundation – and are put in a list with the revelatory texts, indicating their importance. The Ikhwān do not stop at the scriptures. Rather, they have two categories that move beyond and above the scriptures. Whether or not these latter two categories are tangible books or not, they are placed higher in the hierarchy than the Qur'an and other revealed texts; this would certainly have been a controversial move amongst Muslims of the time.

What I have presented above have been only a few instances of explicit declarations from the Ikhwān that indicate their attitude towards religious pluralism. This attitude is further evident in their warnings against those who remain ignorant (a category of people that includes even Muslims, Jews, Christians, philosophers, and theologians),¹³ as well as their encouragement towards their “brothers” to follow whoever has knowledge that they themselves do not have.¹⁴ Therefore, it appears that the Ikhwān are concerned with attaining a type of truth that is not dependent on the revelations of any particular religion. While these revelations are certainly important, the truth the Ikhwān seek transcends beyond them. Furthermore, it is possible for individuals of any religious affiliation to remain ignorant of this truth, just as it is possible for individuals of any orientation to discover this truth.

Love ('Ishq) in Ikhwānīan Cosmology

The main goal for the Ikhwān and their brothers, which is repeated throughout the *Rasā'il*, is to “awaken [the soul] from the sleep of heedlessness and awaken from the slumber of ignorance [*intabahat min nawm al-ghaflah wa-istayqazat min*

¹¹ Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes: From Pagan Sage to Prophet of Science*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

¹² de Callatāy, *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, 85.

¹³ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, vol. 4, Ep. 43 (Path to God), 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., vol. 4, Ep. 48 (Call to God), 167.

raqdat al-jahāla].¹⁵ They posit this as the first step in a journey that concludes in eventual union with God. Once one is able to see the true reality of things, they will long above all to unite with the Universal Soul, which is continually longing for union with God. Thus begins the soul's ascent back to God, from which it initially emanated.¹⁶ The question for the Brethren then becomes how to awaken the soul from its slumberous state. There are multiple steps that can culminate in such an awakening, including "participation in the meetings of your virtuous brothers,"¹⁷ "training in the divine sciences [*al-ʿalūm al-ilāhiyyah*] and godly knowledge [*al-maʿārifah al-rabbāniyyah*],"¹⁸ "purification of the soul [*ṣafāʾ al-nafs*]... and straightness of path [*istiḳāmat al-ṭarīqah*]."¹⁹ Seeking truth is the method that cultivates the correct atmosphere and state of being conducive to the soul's awakening. The actual experience of awakening, however, is just that – an experience. I aim to show that the Ikhwān posit the experience of loving another person as a means to that awakening.

Before directly addressing love's role in the awakening of the soul, I will first provide an overview of the Ikhwān's broader conception of love and its types. There are two main words in Arabic for love: *ʿishq* and *maḥabbah*. The Ikhwān use both terms, but seem more focused on *ʿishq*, which is often translated as "passionate love" or "eros,"²⁰ and is also, at times, considered one type of *maḥabbah*. By the time of twelfth century, *ʿishq* had become the predominant term amongst Sufi discussions of love. It's possible, however, that *maḥabbah* was seen as more acceptable since words of the same root (*ḥ-b-b*) are found within the Qur'an and words of the same root as *ʿishq* (*-sh-q*) are not.²¹ Sometimes it appears that the

¹⁵ Here are a few usages of the phrase: Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 281; vol. 4, Ep. 43 (Path to God), 5; vol. 4, Ep. 48 (Call to God), 168. For more information on the phrase as a shibboleth, see: Godefroid de Callataÿ, "From Ibn Masarra to Ibn ʿArabī: references, shibboleths and other subtle allusions to the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* in the literature of al-Andalus," in *Labor Limæ: Atti in onore di Carmela Baffioni*, ed. by Antonella Straface, Carlo De Angelo, and Andrea Manzo, *Studi Magrebini*, Nuova Serie, vols. XII-XIII (Napoli: Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," 2014-2015), 217-268.

¹⁶ The Ikhwān basically follow a Neoplatonic emanationist scheme with their own additions and modifications. As Plotinus conceived, the Universal Soul emanated from the Universal Intellect which then emanated from the One. The Ikhwān add a fourth category which emanated from the Universal Soul, that is, Prime Matter. Additionally, because the God of the Qur'an and other scriptures is an active creator, the Ikhwān walk a balance between describing their God as Plotinus' transcendent and inactive One and the Qur'anic active Creator. See Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, 34.

¹⁷ Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 4, Ep. 48 (Call to God), 168.

¹⁸ Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 280.

¹⁹ Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ, *Rasāʾil*, vol. 4, Ep. 43 (Path to God), 6.

²⁰ Edward William Lane, *An Arabic-English Lexicon* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1874), s.v. "ishq," book I, part 5, 2054. Also: Kevin Corrigan and Syed Zaidi, "Ibn Sīnā's *Treatise on Love* and the *Theology of Aristotle*," in *I of the Heart*, (Leiden: Brill, 2025), 342.

²¹ Javad Fakhkhar Toosi and Shafique N. Virani, "Love and Brethren of Purity: A Comparative Study of Human Intimacy in Islamic Philosophy," in *Journal of Sufi Studies*, Volume 11, Issue 2 (2022), 152; also, Joseph Lumbard, "From *Ḥubb* to *ʿIshq*: the Development of Love in Early Sufism," in *Journal of*

Ikhwān use *‘ishq* and *maḥabbah* interchangeably, creating confusion around the difference between the two.²² At least in one place, however, they clarify: “and of [the types of love] there is love [*maḥabbah*] of one’s own kind [*abnā’ al-jins*], and this is what is called *‘ishq*.”²³ For the Ikhwān, *‘ishq* seems to be romantic love – primarily between humans.

The Ikhwān adhered to an exoteric/esoteric binary of reality which corresponded similarly, although not exactly, to a Platonic distinction between matter and form. Within this framework, they differentiated between soul and body: the body was something to overcome, and eventually the soul would depart from the body.²⁴ Because Prime Matter emanated ultimately from God, and God is pure good, matter was not thought to be evil in Ikhwānian cosmology. Therefore, while the body was seen as something to eventually vanquish, the body itself was neither useless nor inherently corrupt. This is a significant point, because the Ikhwān draw a distinction between love in the body versus in the soul, but this is not to say that love in the body serves no purpose.

Regarding love in the soul, the Ikhwān write, “Since this [the essence of *‘ishq*] is a matter present in the world, concentrated in the nature of souls, it would certainly never be lacking as long as creation exists.”²⁵ Because it is located in the soul, the definition “love [*‘ishq*] is an intensification of the longing for union [*shaddat al-shawq ilā al-ittiḥad*],” presented by ancient sages,²⁶ is fitting. Although they clarify that union can only occur in “spiritual matters and psychological states” and that only “proximity, mixing, and adjacency [*al-mujāwarah, wa-al-mumāzajah, wa-al-mumāsah*]” are possible in physical matters, they spend considerable space in their epistle on love detailing the nature of mixing in physical matters. They describe how, through a kiss, the lovers exchange saliva. Their saliva then travels to their stomachs and mixes with the liquids there. Those liquids, in turn, journey to the lovers’ livers and mix with the blood found there. Once the mixture containing their saliva reaches the blood, it is then carried through all their veins and will run throughout their bodies.²⁷ They describe the exchange of breath between lovers similarly. The lovers’ breath reaches the other’s brains, lungs, and hearts. Once in their hearts, it then travels through the whole body much like the saliva does.²⁸

Islamic Studies, Volume 18, Issue 3 (2007), 347; The Qur’ān contains 95 instances of the root ḥ-b-b (83 of which mean “love,” “like,” or “prefer”), while no words of the root ‘-sh-q appear.

²² Here is an example where the terms appear interchangeable: “Thus, it has become clear and evident, according to what we have mentioned, that love/affection [*maḥabbah*] and intense love [*‘ishq*] are virtues manifested in creation, exalted wisdom, and precious, wonderful properties,” Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 279.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ See: Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il*, vol. 4, Ep. 43 (Path to God), 6 and 8; Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il*, vol. 4, Ep. 48 (Call to God), 183.

²⁵ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 270.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 272.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 274.

²⁸ This is related to a concept used by Greek and Roman poets who thought of a kiss as being an exchange of souls. See Annemarie Schimmel, “Eros-Heavenly and Not So Heavenly – in Sufi

These corporeal effects are connected to the soul and therefore can impact one's morality and disposition.²⁹ Therefore, the body plays an instrumental role in the cultivation of the soul. For the Ikhwān, the physicality of *'ishq* is central to the experience of union – even if the body is not the central location of a true union.

Throughout their epistle on love, the Ikhwān describe other forms of love (here, *maḥabbah*) such as a mother's love for her children, a craftsman's love for his craft, and a scholar/philosopher's love for discovering knowledge, among others.³⁰ Additionally, they use ample astrological reasoning to explain why one might be predisposed to love certain things and people.³¹ While they do write of God as the "first beloved" (*al-ma' shūq al-awwal*),³² the Ikhwān seem primarily concerned with the human experience of love. When they discuss other cosmological beings such as the planets, the emanationist beings (the Soul and the Intellect), as well as God, it is usually in relation to the human experience. The Ikhwān ensure that the reader will not overlook the importance of the human and bodily experience of love.

How, then, does the experience of human love contribute to the Ikhwān's goal of soul-awakening? This question is most directly answered in their writing,

Then know that the ultimate purpose of the existence of love [*'ishq*] in the nature of souls, their love/affection [*maḥabba*] for bodies... their longing for captivating beloveds [*al-ma' shūqāf*], all of this is to awaken them from the sleep of heedlessness and the sleep of ignorance, training and inclining them to the advancement from physical, tangible matter to spiritual matter...³³

The primary purpose of love, then – specifically *'ishq* – is to enact this awakening. In other words, such an experience of passionate, human love can enable the soul to awaken and transcend the physical realm. *'Ishq*, however, does not stop there. The Ikhwān write that once the soul is awakened, it will experience another form of *'ishq* in its love and longing for God:

If it [the rational soul] awakens from the sleep of heedlessness, wakes from the sleep of ignorance, and the eye of discernment [*'ayn al-baṣīra*] is opened to it, it will recognize its world, know its origin and return, long for its creator, yearn and pine for Him, just as a lover [*al-'āshiq*] yearns for his beloved [*al-ma' shūq*].³⁴

Literature and Life," in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. by Al-Sayyid-Marsot (Malibu, California: Undena Publications, 1979), 135.

²⁹ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 275.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 279.

³¹ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā', *Rasā'il*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 273.

³² *Ibid.*, 285. Here, the word for "beloved" is from the same root as *'ishq*. This could potentially imply that humans are of the same kind/type as God, or that the definition of *'ishq* goes beyond that which the Ikhwān provided above: "love of one's own kind."

³³ *Ibid.*, 282.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 281.

For the Ikhwān, human love acts as a catalyst for the awakening of the soul. Once the soul is awakened, it will once more experience the same type of love, but for God. In fact, the entire universe moves out of longing for God; *‘ishq* is what fuels the revolutions of the planets.³⁵ Ultimately, “all beings long for Him [God], strive for Him, and in all matters return to Him.”³⁶ In sum, the experience of human, bodily love is the first step towards union and return to God – the ultimate and final goal of the Ikhwān.

The Intersection of Monotheism and Neoplatonism

By now, two main points of Ikhwānian thought should be clear: 1) anyone, regardless of religious affiliation, is capable of possessing truth and divine secrets and 2) human love operates as a catalyst for union with God. In this section of the paper, I will show how these two main points are representative of a Neoplatonic worldview and how such a worldview disrupts an allegiance to a strictly monotheistic tradition. In order to do so, I must first clarify what I mean by the terms “Neoplatonism” and “monotheism.”

Neoplatonism usually refers specifically to the branch of philosophy put forth by the self-proclaimed followers of Plato of the third century CE. Plotinus in particular, and his *Enneads*, is considered to be the foundational figure of Neoplatonism. The Ikhwān did not appear to know Plotinus by name, nor were they directly aware of his works. Nonetheless they were exposed to his ideas through a number of intermediaries. Most important was the work known as the *Theology of Aristotle*, which was an Arabic translation and paraphrasing of a version of Plotinus’s *Enneads* (books IV-VI), most likely compiled by Porphyry. There were a series of other Arabic texts circulating at the time to which the Brethren would have been exposed.³⁷ Recently, Kevin Corrigan and Syed Zaidi have hypothesized that there might have been additional texts containing more of the *Enneads* in Arabic that are now lost.³⁸ Regardless, it is no exaggeration to claim that the Ikhwān incorporated Plotinian thought within their *Rasā’il*.

While the Ikhwān certainly engaged with concepts put forth by Plotinus, there were about seven centuries between them and likely multiple series of translations. Thus, by the time the Ikhwān wrote their own encyclopedia, the concepts we refer to as “Neoplatonic,” had shifted and melded with thought from other traditions. To try and decipher the correct origins of all the ideas posited in the *Rasā’il* would be a never-ending project. Rather, I hope to determine a common thread throughout the

³⁵ Ibid., 285.

³⁶ Ibid., 286.

³⁷ For a comprehensive book on this topic see Peter Adamson, *The Arabic Plotinus: A Philosophical Study of the Theology of Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2002).

³⁸ Corrigan and Zaidi, “Ibn Sīnā’s *Treatise on Love* and the *Theology of Aristotle*,” 356.

work that we can confidently call Neoplatonic. Jos Gommans and Said Reza Huseini have done much of the legwork in identifying a Neoplatonic thread throughout the Islamic world. They describe Neoplatonism as a “cosmological framework” writing that it is,

...a metadiscourse, that, as a result of its fluid, layered hierarchical structure, was able to absorb, appropriate, and harmonize creatively the various other philosophical and religious traditions that it encountered... This metadiscourse can be identified by four philosophical-cosmological features: idealism, monism, emanationism, and the human potential for divinization.³⁹

If we take these four components to be the main components of a Neoplatonic perspective, we can safely say the Ikhwān adhere to the main elements of Neoplatonism. As for idealism, Godefroid de Callatāy has dedicated an entire chapter on the matter; it will suffice to say here that the Ikhwān clearly had a mission to establish an intellectually driven group of awake “brothers” aiming for the cultivation of an ideal society.⁴⁰ On the second point, a monist perspective is represented in the Ikhwān writing, “Know, oh brother, that divine wisdom and godly providence have connected the extremities of existence together with each other in a singular bond and arranged them in a singular system.”⁴¹ For the Ikhwān, all things were interconnected. This is represented in their engagement with the body-soul relationship as outlined above. The emanationist quality of the *Rasā’il* should already be clear; the Ikhwān followed Plotinus’s emanationist hierarchy with certain modifications regarding the nature of God/the One as well as matter. Finally, I argue that the Ikhwān present the potential for human divinization. Gommans and Huseini clarify that by “human divinization,” they mean a return to the One.⁴² The Ikhwān use love – specifically human love – to present a path of returning to God. Consequently, the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’ can be called Neoplatonists in every sense of the definition proposed by Gommans and Huseini.⁴³

Using these conceptions of Neoplatonism become productive when placed against a theory of monotheism that asserts the exclusivity of one religion over another and that relies on direct divine intervention for salvation. My aim going forward is not to claim that the Ikhwān were not Muslims; they most certainly hold Islam and the Qur’an in high esteem, providing quotations from the Qur’an more

³⁹ Jos Gommans and Said Reza Huseini, “Neoplatonic Kingship in the Islamic World,” in *Sacred Kingship in World History*, ed. by A. Azfar Moin and Alan Strathern (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), 194.

⁴⁰ See de Callatāy, “Idealism,” in *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’*, 89-106.

⁴¹ Ikhwān al-Ṣafā’, *Rasā’il*, vol. 3, Ep. 37 (Love), 276.

⁴² Gommans and Huseini, “Neoplatonic Kingship in the Islamic World,” 194.

⁴³ This is not to say, however, that the Ikhwān were not also Hermetic, Aristotelian, Pythagorean, or adhering to any other philosophical trends.

than any other text throughout the *Rasā'il*. Rather, I argue that because of their Neoplatonic attitude as described above, they are forced to grapple with certain attributes of their monotheistic faith that might contradict to their outlook. I posit that the two main attributes of monotheism that they must wrestle with are 1) the Mosaic distinction, or the assertion that there is only one God, one truth, and one true and valid religion at the exclusion of all others⁴⁴ and 2) a nature of God that is both immanent and transcendent.

Jan Assmann's conception of the Mosaic distinction rests on the idea that monotheism developed in such a way as not only to propagate the concept that there is only one God, but also to declare that all other religions are false.⁴⁵ In doing so, monotheistic traditions became portable; they were able to be extracted from their cultural and historical contexts and applied to any situation. Primary religions (polytheistic/pre-monotheistic/non-monotheistic), however, were entirely dependent on their contexts and could not be extracted. The Mosaic distinction creates a new binary through which to view religions: exclusive (monotheistic, or those who uphold the Mosaic distinction) and non-exclusive (polytheistic, cosmotheistic, or those who do not uphold the Mosaic distinction).

This theory is concomitant with theories about religion in the axial age. Some have argued that the axial age (middle centuries of the first millennium BCE) saw the development of theoretical thinking as it enabled societal self-awareness and abstract reasoning.⁴⁶ This, in turn, allowed religious traditions to understand conceptual meaning and ask ethical questions of a universal and abstract nature. Thus, there was a shift in focus from the world (through "rituals of cult and sacrifice") towards God, who is outside the world (in studying scriptures which contain revelatory truth).⁴⁷ In other words, the Mosaic distinction also brought about the extraction of God from the cosmos; God, as well as human individuals, were no longer bound to the world.⁴⁸ This has drastic consequences for the relationship between humans and god(s). Within monotheism, individuals express loyalty to the transcendent God first and foremost; the jealousy of the biblical God prevent the same type of oath being made to an earthly king. Both Assmann and Robert Bellah point to the book of Deuteronomy for evidence of the jealous nature of God. For example, Deuteronomy 6:4-6 reads, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is *one* Lord: And thou shalt *love* the Lord thy God with *all* thine heart, with *all* thy soul, and with *all* thy might. And these words, which I *command* thee this day, shall be in thine heart."⁴⁹ Thus, the relationship between God and man took the form of an oath of loyalty; an oath which outlawed the worship (and love) of other gods.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁴ As put forth by Jan Assmann, *The Price of Monotheism*, trans. by Robert Savage, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011), 275-76.

⁴⁷ Assman, *The Price of Monotheism*, 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 42.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 113. I added emphasis in italics.

⁵⁰ Building on the work of Moshe Weinfield, Bellah adds that this oath reflected the Assyrian treaty model between a suzerain and vassal, in which "it was the obligation of the vassal to 'love' his suzerain... love in this case meant loyalty." Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*, 307.

movement towards monotheism brought about two main changes to the category of religion: it created the Mosaic distinction which promoted exclusivity and absolute, revealed truth and it separated God from the world inhabited by mankind.

It is the latter consequence which informs the categories of immanentist and transcendentalist religions. I should note here that categories such as immanentist/transcendentalist, monotheistic/polytheistic/cosmotheistic, etc. are not mutually exclusive binaries. Rather there is often overlap between the categories. Alan Strathern defines “immanentism” as a belief in meta-human beings that are intricately connected to our world. Immanentism implies that the gods are immanent, or present, in the world.⁵¹ Transcendentalism is the aspect of religion that claims access to a higher world and another time, promising salvation and enlightenment for the religion’s adherents.⁵² Whereas all transcendentalist religions (and cultures, in general) maintain aspects of immanentism, immanentist religions, are in part, defined by their lack of theories of transcendence. In this way, Strathern argues that monotheism combines immanentism and transcendentalism by offering a method of salvation which is connected to the “worship of a metaperson.”⁵³ Put differently, for immanentist religions, supernatural beings operate directly in this world. It is the same for transcendentalist religions (angels, demons, jinn, spirits, etc.). What the latter type adds to the former, however, is a belief in a singular God who is completely separated from the world. If the aim for humankind is to unite with God in this higher realm, then monotheism presents a paradox: how is one, living their life in the world, supposed to unite with a divine being outside of the world?⁵⁴

Within the frameworks laid out above, it becomes evident that Neoplatonism is incompatible with monotheism in several different ways. Due to its emanationist cosmology, the One can be wholly transcendent and yet intricately connected to all things that emanated from it. Thus, a human can return to the One by first uniting with the various emanations between him/her and the One. It does not require that the One actively take a role in the human’s life and personally save his/her soul. Furthermore, such a return to the One is not predicated upon following any singular religion. Rather, as long as one seeks truth (a truth that transcends religious boundaries), one may achieve the levels of awareness necessary for the journey back to the One. In these ways, a Neoplatonic cosmology fundamentally differs from a monotheistic one. This has not prevented monotheistic traditions from adopting

⁵¹ Alan Strathern, *Unearthly Powers: Religious and Political Change in World History*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2019, 4.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ This paradox was not ignored by Muslim theologians and came to be thoroughly discussed by the tenth century. The presence of God was described by two main terms: *tanzīh* and *tashbīh*. The former, “declaring incompatibility,”⁵⁴ emphasizes the “otherness” of God; God is beyond comparison with all of creation. The latter term, “affirming similarity,” indicates God’s closeness with his creation. In order to be comprehensible in any sort of way, God must share some things in common with his creation. Therefore, according to classical Islamic theology, God is (paradoxically) both immanent and transcendent. See Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, *The Vision of Islam*, (New York: Paragon House), 1994, 77.

Neoplatonic thought. On the contrary, Neoplatonism has perhaps been one of the most influential philosophies in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic history.

Conclusion

Within the context of the cosmological juxtapositions between monotheism and Neoplatonism, some of the confusing aspects of Ikhwānian thought become clear. In their discussions of God, He is sometimes the transcendent One of Plotinus, and at others the active Creator of the Qur'an.⁵⁵ The Ikhwān must also grapple with the topic of religious pluralism. They are steadfast in their assertion that religious affiliation does not determine one's soul's awakening, yet they occasionally appear to consider Islam as the superior religion.⁵⁶ Furthermore, while they esteem love of God above all, they purport that human love is a catalyst for divine love. Other Muslim philosophers at the time tended to caution against love of anything other than God⁵⁷ – this is radically different than the approach of the Ikhwān. In this way, human love becomes an impetus for the soul-awakening that the Ikhwān desire. This soul-awakening is the key for human divinization, or re-union with God.

The Ikhwān aimed to reconcile ancient philosophy with the religion of Islam.⁵⁸ In order to do so, they had to assess their position on the nature of God and their attitude toward other religions. They wrote a work that walks a balance between the strictures of monotheism and the assertions of ancient philosophy. The friction between these two, often opposing, frameworks is apparent throughout the *Rasā'il* and particularly in the theory of love put forth by the Ikhwān. Later Islamic thinkers would take up the ideas put forth by the Ikhwān, furthering their attempt to reconcile ancient philosophy with Islam.

⁵⁵ Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists*, 42.

⁵⁶ For example, in epistle 31 (Languages and Expressions) they write, "Islam will prevail over all other religions, and Arabic over all other languages, and religion will be one... the Qur'an is the most honored 'recitation' (Qur'an) that God Most-High has revealed..." Translation from de Callatāy, *Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'*, 83. de Callatāy argues that this passage is rather out of place writing, "it is hard to set any store by this statement... Elsewhere, the Brethren's inclination is rather to put the Qur'an on par with the other holy books..."

⁵⁷ For an overview see: Ali Atlatf Mian, "Love in Islamic Philosophy," in *The Routledge Handbook of Love in Philosophy*, ed. Adrienne Martin (London: Routledge, 2018), 395-408.

⁵⁸ Janne Mattila, "The Philosophical Worship of the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'," in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, volume 27, issue 1 (2015), 17.

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Was Jesus Autistic?: Autistic Traits of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke

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Introduction

Contextualization

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be defined as “a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world.”¹ While it is referred to as a “spectrum,” it is increasingly conceptualized not as a linear spectrum from “most” autistic to “least” autistic,² rather as a dynamic circular model that focuses on the individual characteristics.³ It is a complex neurological condition that presents differently in each autistic individual. There are a multitude of factors considered in the diagnosis of autism, however one of the most distinct and often misunderstood categories is social behavior and communication.⁴

Awareness about autism and its diagnostic rates has increased in recent years,⁵ leaving more churches and Christians with much to consider. The Christian church has, in various contexts, served as both a source of support, and, at times, marginalization for autistic individuals— a complexity that cannot be fully addressed here. Scholars have increasingly examined autism in relation to theology, church life, scripture, and other related fields; the scope of this paper will focus primarily on autism in scripture and secondarily the implications for the church.

Autism and Scripture

Attempts to consider autism and scripture in the same context have led to a wide scope of creative approaches, with varying degree of theological and practical usefulness. There have been attempts to retrospectively diagnose biblical figures with autism, problematic interpretations of healing narratives that identify autism as demon-possession, and other unhelpful efforts.⁶ Because autism is not explicitly stated in scripture, it may be difficult to think ‘biblically’ about autism; however, one of the most common practices is to draw from Christian principles in scripture and apply them to how autism is conceptualized and how autistic individuals are treated. However, Jesus and autism has received limited scholarly attention.

The Gospel of Luke may present the actions and behaviors of Jesus as, at times, non-normative or socially distinct. Specifically, the behavior of Jesus when he heals on the Sabbath (Luke 6:6-11), seeks solitude to pray (Luke 5:12-16), weeps

¹ Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2019), 11.

² The words “most” and “least” are used to reference harmful, incorrect language, not my own word choice.

³ Pia Bradshaw et al., “‘Autistic’ or ‘with Autism’? Why the Way General Practitioners View and Talk about Autism Matters,” *Aust. J. Gen. Pract.* 50.3 (2021): 104–8, <https://doi.org/10.31128/AJGP-11-20-5721>. See Appendix for a visual representation of the autism spectral wheel.

⁴ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 18.

⁵ While prevalence of those identified and diagnosed with autism has increased, that does not necessarily imply that the number of autistic people has increased.

⁶ Grant Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions: Regulating Hermeneutics,” *J. Disabil. Relig.* 26.4 (2022): 414–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2021.1881024>.

over Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44), and cleanses the Temple (Luke 19:45-48). The author of Luke presents these narratives as behavioral patterns that are framed in contrast those around Jesus. While the author's purpose in doing so remains curious, the scope of this paper does not permit a full exploration of it. However, these non-normative behaviors may offer insight to a biblical understanding of autism. When considered alongside sociological studies of autism, traits such as nonconformity, a preference for hyper-empathy, solitude, and justice sensitivity—as exhibited by Jesus in Luke 5:12-16; Luke 6:6-11; Luke 19:41-44; and Luke 19:45-48, respectively—may illuminate the value of these characteristics and encourage a more inclusive ecclesiology.

Method

To examine these behaviors of Jesus in comparison to autism, this paper employs a multidisciplinary approach that integrates theological exegesis with sociological and psychological analysis. I conduct a close textual reading of selected passages in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 5:12-16; Luke 6:6-11; and Luke 19:41-48) to examine the behaviors and emotional expressions of Jesus in relation to themes of solitude, nonconformity, hyper-empathy, and justice sensitivity. These traits are then analyzed through the lens of contemporary autism research, using peer-reviewed studies and clinical frameworks that describe and contextualize these same tendencies in autistic individuals. By aligning scriptural observations with academic understandings of autism, the aim is to reveal how these traits—which often may be marginalized or mischaracterized—are not only present in sacred narratives but can also be re-evaluated as spiritually significant. This method is intended to foster a more inclusive theological understanding and contribute to broader conversations about neurodiversity within faith communities.

Scope and Intentions

Due to the nuance surrounding New Testament studies and autism, it is important to clarify the intentions and limitations of this paper. The study intends to highlight actions and behaviors of Jesus that resemble certain autistic traits to redeem how these behaviors are viewed and treated in the Christian church. This is not to assert that Jesus is definitively autistic, neurodivergent, or even neurotypical; I do not desire to comment on the neurotype of Jesus. Furthermore, I do desire to redeem how some Christians and churches may view autism and these autistic behaviors; however, I do not desire to take a “redemptionist approach” to the Lukan texts.⁷ While I aim to counter negative stereotypes surrounding autism and affirm the spiritual value of autistic traits, I do not suggest that autistic individuals are holier, sinless, or exempt from the human need for salvation. The goal is not to idealize neurodivergence, but to correct misunderstandings and challenge ableist frameworks that have historically shaped Christian perceptions of autism. Lastly, I do not intend to be anachronistic in applying modern data on autism to the New

⁷ Louise A. Gosbell, *“The Poor, the Crippled, the Blind, and the Lame”: Physical and Sensory Disability in the Gospels of the New Testament*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament. 2. Reihe 469 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 12 Refer to chapter 1 for a further outline on the approaches to disability studies in scripture.

Testament texts. While it would be valuable to explore how Jesus' behaviors were perceived in antiquity, such inquiry exceeds the scope of this paper. Rather, the focus remains on how these same behaviors—if observed today—might resonate with contemporary understandings of autism.

Because there is significant diversity represented within the autism spectrum, it is important to note that the traits discussed in this paper are not exclusive to autism and can be exhibited by neurotypical individuals as well. However, these are traits that have been linked to autism in a variety of ways, whether that may be that it is commonly associated by clinicians and communities or that it is negatively perceived when exhibited by autistic individuals. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, autism is a spectrum, therefore, any claim made about autism or autistic individuals will not be representative of all autistic individuals. Additionally, many of the behaviors and characteristic described here may not feel representative of autistic individuals who have more substantial support needs; this is not to favor the autistic individuals who may have less support needs, it simply is not an example referenced in this paper. However, that is not to say there is no witness provided by those individuals; further study is needed in this area though it falls beyond the present scope.

Lastly, a note on the language used surrounding autism. With the conversation around autism rapidly developing due to new research and old misunderstandings, I hope to clarify that any language I will use to describe autism, autistic individuals, autistic traits, or other related matters is the most current terminology preferred by the autistic community to the best of my research, education, and ability. Therefore, I will use “identity-first” (i.e. “autistic individual” as opposed to “individual with autism”) throughout this paper to best reflect what the majority of autistic individuals prefer.⁸ Additionally, any discussion regarding disability in reference to autism is done so to frame it within the larger “disability” conversation in the New Testament, not to comment on the ongoing debate on whether autism is a disability, condition, difference, or other classification.

Solitude

A trait that may often be associated with autism is the heightened need for solitude. While autistic people do still need and desire social connection in their own way, autism is linked to an introverted temperament.⁹ A study on the social networks of autistic children has shown that while autistic individuals report lower levels of peer acceptance, friendship reciprocity, and social network centrality, they do not report an increased level of loneliness. The study defines loneliness as “mismatch between the desire for, and the perception of” friendship.¹⁰

One suggestion as for the cause of less loneliness despite lower levels of friendship is that the desire for the quantity of friendship— and thus social

⁸ Bradshaw et al., “‘Autistic’ or ‘with Autism’?”

⁹ Richard Vuijk et al., “Temperament, Character, and Personality Disorders in Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Systematic Literature Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Rev. J. Autism Dev. Disord.* 5.2 (2018): 176–97, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40489-018-0131-y>.

¹⁰ Brandt Chamberlain, Connie Kasari, and Erin Rotheram-Fuller, “Involvement or Isolation? The Social Networks of Children with Autism in Regular Classrooms,” *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* 37.2 (2007): 230–42, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-006-0164-4>.

interaction— is decreased. In other words, the desire for a more limited number of friends would match with the reality of not having a greater number of friends, thus not producing loneliness. Another suggestion as for the cause was that autistic children may experience satisfactory emotional support from—compared to neurotypical children—less friends and reciprocal friendships. Although the motivation or cause for the decreased social interaction may need further study, there does emerge a clear link between autistic individuals participating in less social interactions than neurotypical interactions and not indicating a dissatisfaction or desire to change that. Therefore, it may be said that autistic individuals tend to require, and better demonstrate, an increased amount of solitude compared to neurotypical individuals.

While Jesus healing the man with a skin disease (in Luke 5:12-16, Mark 1:40-45, and Matthew 8:1-4) is not uncommon in disability studies, a focus on the last verse in Luke (5:16) is more uncommon. The healing of the disabled man seems to be the author's primary focus of the story. While the focus may not be shifted in a manner unintended from the author's purpose, there is often a peculiar ending note of the story in Luke (5:16) that most scholars are lacking in study. This comment may have significant implications for viewing and grasping the behavior of Jesus which could provide a further contribution to the disability conversation beyond the mere healing narrative. A focus on Jesus in Luke 5:16 can highlight a repeated pattern of Jesus withdrawing from social interaction in a manner that stands out.

In the context of the Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus healing the man with a skin disease falls amid Jesus' Galilean Ministry situated directly between the calling of the first disciples and another healing narrative about Jesus healing the paralytic. Structurally, the story follows the usual form of miracle stories in a "request—response—result" manner.¹¹ Luke narrates the miracle "with extreme economy";¹² he begins by situating the narrative in "one of the cities" (Luke 5:12). In this city a man with a skin disease bows before Jesus and in a humble, yet bold manner, implores for Jesus to cleanse him. To some extent, the news about Jesus and his miraculous capabilities has spread to even the marginal colonies. In response to the man's statement, Jesus shockingly touches the man, and the man is cleansed from his skin disease. The nature of Jesus touching the man with the skin disease is culturally significant,¹³ in that it violated mosaic cleanliness laws and the social expectations surrounding those afflicted with skin diseases.¹⁴ The man, now instantaneously cleansed from his ailment, is instructed by Jesus to not tell anyone and instead show himself to a priest and make an offering as a testimony (Luke 5:14). Then the author of Luke very curiously wraps up the story with no further commentary on the now cleansed man. Instead, the author notes how the news about this healing spread, which resulted in greater crowds flocking towards Jesus for healing. Then he ends the narrative by noting that Jesus "would slip away to deserted places and pray" (Luke 5:16).

¹¹ McColl and Ascoug, "Jesus and People with Disabilities," 11.

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series 3 (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 102.

¹³ Bock, *Luke*, 102.

¹⁴ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 120.

The note of Jesus slipping away to a place of solitude for prayer is often not the focus of the narrative but remains a curiously included detail. A dive into the Greek texts makes it apparent that the “periphrastic construction with present participles” emphasizes that this was a habitual routine for Jesus to slip away to a place of solitude.¹⁵ Additionally, the author of Luke makes it evident how 5:16 stands in strong parallel to Luke 4:41-42 and 9:10 where Jesus also withdraws to a deserted place. In Luke 5:16 Jesus retreats to “deserted places [ἐρημοῖς, erēmois].”¹⁶ Comparatively, in Luke 4:41-42 Jesus prohibited demons from speaking and then departed to a “deserted place [ἐρημον τοπον, erēmon topon].”¹⁷ This language points to Jesus going to a place of solitude, not a place of merely less social interaction.

Furthermore, Luke 5:16 notes how Jesus would “withdraw [ὑποχωρέω, hupochóréō],” similar to how—upon his return from the mission with the apostles—the author notes that Jesus then would “withdraw [ὑποχωρέω, hupochóréō]” into a city called Bethsaida (Luke 9:10). The language of withdraw highlights how Jesus was willfully choosing to step away from others, he did not merely end up alone by circumstance or because it was customary for the group; Jesus intentionally chose to break the grain of the group and seek solitude. The author seems to have deliberately repeated this language to emphasize a behavioral pattern of Jesus to withdraw to a deserted place. In Luke 5:16, while it will remain the focus here, is clearly not an isolated incident of Jesus’ withdraw to solitude.

This pattern of Jesus withdrawing to solitude seems to be noted as a non-normative behavior, since it is mentioned repeatedly and does not appear to be noted for any other person in the gospel of Luke. This is a distinctive behavior with a multitude of hypotheses for the motivation—beyond the explicitly stated prayer—and what this withdrawing to solitude truly looked like. Regardless of the lack of clarity on specific questions surrounding Jesus’ solitude, it remains clear that Jesus repeatedly would intentionally seek out solitude in a manner not mentioned of the disciples or anyone else. Jesus’ communion with God as he retreats to solitude appears to reinforce the “contemplative, knowledge-enhancing experience” of his ministry,¹⁸ and furthermore, may even be “key to ministering effectively.”¹⁹ Jesus’ solitude appears repeatedly within his ministry and likely was an integral part of his work.

The heightened increase in seeking solitude demonstrated in the behavior of Jesus, seems to mirror the increase in solitude, or decrease in social interactions, mirrored by the previously mentioned study on the social networks of autistic children. Given the repeated reference to Jesus leaving the group to seek solitude, it could be argued that Jesus spent less time in social interactions than most other characters mentioned in the gospel of Luke, especially considering that there is not another mention in Luke of a biblical figure departing from the group, nor is Jesus’

¹⁵ F. Scott Spencer, *Luke*, Two Horizons New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 147.

¹⁶ Spencer, *Luke*, 146.

¹⁷ François Bovon, *Luke: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50: 1*, ed. Helmut Köster, trans. Christine M. Thomas, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 146.

¹⁸ Spencer, *Luke*, 147.

¹⁹ Bock, *Luke*, 103.

solitude portrayed as routine group event. It would seem that “solitude was a dimension of all [Jesus’] experience so much more so than in the case of any other persons”; a distinction with which many autistic individuals may resonate.²⁰ Much like the autistic individuals in the study, solitude is something Jesus sought in a frequency that went against the norm. Considering this, an autistic individual would likely most closely resemble the behavior of Jesus—seeking solitude—whereas a neurotypical individual likely would not.

Additionally, recent studies have shown that alone time for autistic individuals is frequently spent improving their well-being, because the solitude was often deliberate and spent strategically.²¹ Not only is the quantity of alone time increased for some autistic individuals, but there is often a great purpose and benefit of that alone time. Luke 5:16 states that Jesus would withdraw to solitude “and pray.” These moments of solitude provided Jesus with “more than retreating escapes,” they offered him “vital opportunities for reflecting on his mission, for owning and growing into his Messiah role.”²² Many of these moments of solitude preceded moments “Jesus meets with trouble”²³ or following moments Jesus is surrounded and “the press of the crowd prevents him” from his objective.²⁴ Jesus’ solitude is purposeful and beneficial to him. The alone time he sought was intentional and purposeful, similar to the alone time sought for personal benefit by the autistic individuals in the study. Jesus’ habitual seeking of moments of solitude seems to closely mirror the autistic desire for greater amounts of solitude.

In application, the autistic enhanced desire for alone time may often be taken to an extreme and misconstrued conception that autistic people do not desire or cannot be a part of the social world; this statement is unfounded, and many autistic individuals will testify to the opposite of it.²⁵ Autistic people may desire to be alone more than neurotypical individuals do, but that does not necessarily equate to autistic people only desiring to be alone and rarely desiring human connection. This misconception about autistic solitude can often lead to harmful isolation or exclusion of the autistic individual or even be seen as something to be “fixed” rather than celebrated.²⁶ Amongst the Christian church this may express itself in an underlying belief that autistic people are incapable or do not desire faith-based community, discipleship, or ministry. This increased need for solitude may be one of the misconceptions preventing churches from ordaining autistic leadership or affirming a call to ministry from an autistic person. The need for solitude is not frequently

²⁰ Edward Malatesta, “Jesus and Loneliness,” *The Way* 16.4 (1976): 248.

²¹ Florence Neville et al., “Reacting, Retreating, Regulating, and Reconnecting: How Autistic Adults in the United Kingdom Use Time Alone for Well-Being,” *Autism Adulthood* (2024): aut.2024.0148, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2024.0148>.

²² Spencer, *Luke*, 147.

²³ Bock, *Luke*, 103.

²⁴ Bovon, *Luke*, 356.

²⁵ “Being versus Appearing Socially Uninterested: Challenging Assumptions about Social Motivation in Autism | Behavioral and Brain Sciences | Cambridge Core,” n.d., <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/behavioral-and-brain-sciences/article/being-versus-appearing-socially-uninterested-challenging-assumptions-about-social-motivation-in-autism/4E75B5E49CC0061E65A4D78552482AF9>.

²⁶ Macaskill, “The Bible, Autism and Other Profound Developmental Conditions.”

celebrated as an autistic trait, inside and outside of the church, and may even be weaponized against autistic individuals in some cases.

If the increased need for solitude is seen as problematic or even merely tolerated, how would that behavior be received when it is not an autistic churchgoer, but Jesus Christ. Jesus' increase desire to seek solitude for his well-being is celebrated, admired, and viewed as integral to his ministry. Comparatively, an autistic individual's need to seek greater amounts of alone time or decreased amount of social interaction may often be viewed as problematic or self-centered. Neurotypical Christians cannot faithfully celebrate Jesus and his moments of solitude yet simultaneously critique or try to fix autistic individuals for also seeking a great amount of alone time than they, a neurotypical, would desire. Jesus' repeated behavior of seeking solitude is one demonstrated faithfully more frequently by autistic individuals than neurotypical individuals. Furthermore, such moments of solitude "Jesus himself recommended."²⁷ In this sense, neurotypical individuals may find a lesson to learn from autistic individuals, and autistic individuals may be encouraged to participate in new ways in the body of Christ.

Nonconformity

Autistic individuals are often known for their lack of social conformity to the norm. This may often be falsely attributed to a lack of awareness or a false understanding of theory of mind. A study done in 2020 on social behavioral adaptation in autism highlights how autistic individuals were often aware of the social expectations but were not "interested enough to invest the cognitive effort required for improving performance in the social framing condition," so they did not conform to the expectations of the neurotypical social structure.²⁸ The incentives gained by adapting to social framing were not greater than the individual beliefs the autistic individual held; therefore, the autistic individual would behave in a nonconforming manner because they did not value the social reward from conformity. Overall, it may often be a distinct, common trait for many autistic individuals to exhibit nonconformity to the social conventions out of a lack of value for social expectations compared to neurotypical individuals as well as a prioritization of individual values over social structures.

Furthermore, a study on social comparison emotions and group-based morality in autism confirms that autistic individuals "were less likely to endorse binding foundations," meaning that autistic individuals may place less moral weight on group loyalty, obedience to authority, and purity norms than neurotypical individuals.²⁹ This does not mean autistic people lack morality—rather, they may emphasize individual-focused moral foundations more than group-based ones. The study suggests that this may likely be "due to ambiguity aversion" where they have a strong preference for clarity, consistency, and well-defined rules rather than vague,

²⁷ Malatesta, "Jesus and Loneliness," 248, in reference to Matthew 6:5-6.

²⁸ Baudouin Forgeot d'Arc, Marie Devaine, and Jean Daunizeau, "Social Behavioural Adaptation in Autism," *PLoS Comput. Biol.* 16.3 (2020): e1007700, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1007700>.

²⁹ Trystan Loustau, James Dungan, and Liane Young, "Reduced Reporting of Social Comparison Emotions and Valuation of Group-Based Morals in Autistic People," *Soc. Cogn.* 42.4 (2024): 334–53, <https://doi.org/10.1521/soco.2024.42.4.334>.

situational, or culturally dependent foundations of their neurotypical peers.³⁰ In other words, the well-defined, rigid principles or rules of the autistic individual may be the cause for their devaluation of social conformity.

The man with the withered hand, in Luke 6:6-11, Mark 3:1-6, and Matthew 12:9-14, is no stranger to the conversation surrounding disability in scripture. While the disability-focused work on this story primarily focuses on the man with the withered hand himself as the disabled individual who receives healing, the primary “point of the narrative is the confrontation with the Pharisees.”³¹ This is not to say work focused on the man with the withered hand himself should not be erased, ignored, or discontinued, rather a focus on Jesus’ confrontation is likely what the author of Luke intended the focus to be on, so there may be more to Jesus’ behavior that can add to the conversation. A focus on Jesus and his conflict may serve to demonstrate a disregard for social norms in favor of personal principles.

For context, the versions found in Matthew 12:9-14 and Luke 6:6-11 are “clearly derived from Mark” in 3:1-6 with only minute differences, including an extra analogy in Mark’s that was likely derived “from the Sayings Source ‘Q.’”³² While the story is present within all three of these gospels, the primary focus will be on Luke in an effort to connect the broader picture of Jesus painted by the author of Luke throughout the other discussions surrounding solitude and hyper-reactivity as well. The story serves as yet another example of the healing narrative occurring on the Sabbath and serves within the larger narrative to heighten the conflict between Jesus and the authorities. In each of the three Gospels the story follows where Jesus declares himself “Lord of the Sabbath” in Luke 6:6,³³ after the eating of the grain on the Sabbath and thus breaking the social expectations and rules surrounding how the Sabbath should be practiced.

The story follows Jesus as he enters a synagogue on the Sabbath to teach and meets a man with a withered hand, specifically his more important right hand “hand normally used for work, gesturing, and greeting.”³⁴ Tradition holds that “he had been a stonemason, thus underlining the importance of the disability in terms of his ability to earn a livelihood.”³⁵ The scribes and Pharisees kept a watchful, suspicious eye on the scene, eager to accuse Jesus, but Jesus “knew what they were thinking” (Luke 6:8). Yet, Jesus still calls the man forward and provokes the suspicious onlookers with a question to call out the hypocrisy behind their looming accusations. Jesus then after boldly, and almost defiantly, “looking around at all of them” proceeds to “restore” the man’s withered hand (Luke 6:10). In response the scribes and Pharisees are filled with anger and begin their joint plot to stop Jesus. This conflict

³⁰ Loustau, Dungan, and Young, “Reduced Reporting of Social Comparison Emotions and Valuation of Group-Based Morals in Autistic People.”

³¹ Mary Ann McColl and Richard S. Ascough, “Jesus and People with Disabilities: Old Stories, New Approaches,” *J. Pastor. Care Couns. Adv. Theory Prof. Pract. Sch. Reflective Publ.* 63.3–4 (2009): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1177/154230500906300312>.

³² McColl and Ascough, “Jesus and People with Disabilities,” 11.

³³ All scripture references are in NRSVUE, unless otherwise noted.

³⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 3–490, at 134.

³⁵ McColl and Ascough, “Jesus and People with Disabilities,” 11.

represents a larger internal Jewish debate about Sabbath observances, a matter with diverse opinions even among different Jewish teachers and groups.

Jesus' behavior in this scene has been described as unconventional and unexpected by some interpreters.³⁶ While diving into the perspective of Jesus, Culpepper highlights how Jesus was faced with competing priorities to either heal the man or not heal the man to "comply" with the prevailing interpretation of the Sabbath among those watching him and by default, their social expectations for how Jesus, a Jewish man, should behave and act on the Sabbath. However, Jesus not only rejects the scribes and Pharisees' expectations, but does not "try to do something that would escape their notice" and makes his rejection extremely public by calling the man with the withered hand forward.³⁷ Prior to healing the man, the question posed by Jesus serves to "disarm" the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees are left speechless to Jesus' question.³⁸ Furthermore, Culpepper describes Jesus' defiant look as evidence for all present that Jesus "scored a direct hit."³⁹ Concluding the story, Luke describes the effects Jesus had on each party: the disabled man's withered hand was healed, and the Pharisees begin to plot Jesus' death.⁴⁰ As the book of Luke progresses, the author reports two other parallel Sabbath healings that heighten the conflict and demonstrate similar behavior from Jesus.⁴¹

Additionally, Culpepper highlights how the author of Luke utilizes the language of Jesus— the question Jesus poses to the scribes and Pharisees— to "strengthen the parallels" with a prior healing narrative and Sabbath story in Luke 5. The parallel drawn in reference to another Sabbath story is in Luke 5:17-26 where the author intentionally depicts Jesus' use of rhetorical question in response to the accusatory, suspicious scribes and Pharisees. The parallel is drawn between the two stories in that both demonstrate how Jesus "escalated the conflict" rather than complying with the social and behavioral expectations of the religious authorities, choosing instead to prioritize human need over social conformity. This behavioral pattern is intentionally highlighted by the author; therefore, Jesus' behavior is not merely a circumstantial, isolated action of Jesus only in the story of the man with the withered hand — rather it is a demonstration that Jesus possesses a nonconformity similar to many autistic individuals.⁴²

When the disability conversation surrounding the story of the man with the withered hand shifts focus to the behavior of Jesus, it may serve as an example of the faithful witness that autism can have. Not in any effort to erase or diminish the importance of the man with the withered hand, but to highlight something missed if the man with the withered hand is himself the sole focus, a sole focus the author of Luke likely never intended. In this brief narrative, the author of Luke makes it evident that Jesus was fully aware that his opponents were watching him, what their expectations for his behavior was, and that they intended to level accusations

³⁶ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 134.

³⁷ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 134.

³⁸ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 135.

³⁹ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 135.

⁴⁰ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 135.

⁴¹ Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 134.

⁴² Culpepper, "The Gospel of Luke," 134.

against him. In doing so, Jesus demonstrates “a determined spirit [and] intense zeal” in how he responds to the scribes and Pharisees.⁴³ In other words, Jesus was aware of the competing interpretations of Sabbath observance, yet he valued upholding his understanding of the Sabbath over conforming to the expectations of those observing him. This nonconforming behavior of Jesus seems to be mirrored by the autistic individuals as reflected in the two studies discussed prior. Jesus is aware of the social expectations yet boldly denies them because he found more value in upholding truth. In a comparable manner many autistic individuals, rather than neurotypical individuals, tend to demonstrate over neurotypical individuals.⁴⁴

Due to their nonconformity to social norms, autistic individuals may frequently find themselves socially ostracized, including in the Christian church. A study examining churchgoers’ attitudes towards autistic individuals revealed that “‘avoidance’ was reported as a consequence of judging autistic people because they were not ‘socially appropriate.’”⁴⁵ The social behaviors for neurotypical individuals were frequently being translated to autistic individuals resulting in unmet expectations that presented as the autistic individuals being socially marginalized and avoided by the neurotypical individuals. Autistic individuals “may not be easy to ‘like’” because neurotypical likability “is linked to [the individual’s] social skills,”⁴⁶ leading to autistic individuals potentially being marginalized, derided, or viewed as oddities because “they do not fit in.”⁴⁷ Nonconformity in autism typically may not be celebrated and often may result in the autistic individual being tolerated, or at worse, devalued and ostracized.

When the peculiar behavior of Jesus is put into comparison with autistic behaviors, the contribution of autistic individuals in the church may better be celebrated. Rather than focusing on the autistic individuals’ behaviors that do not “fit in,” the focus should shift to the admirable boldness required to go against the social norm and speak out against actions that go against personal principles or strong beliefs. In doing so, autistic individuals will not be falsely stigmatized for their different ways to interact socially, rather seen as an integral part of the Christian body that can evidently speak a—what may be at times unfavorable—necessary and bold truth.

Autistic nonconformity, although it may not frequently be favored by neurotypical Christians, can be utilized as a tool to directly and honestly confront sin, that neurotypical individuals are too fearful to call out, just as Jesus’ nonconformity combated the sin of the Pharisees in favor of the betterment of the man with a withered hand. Furthermore, the daughter of an autistic mother highlighted how her

⁴³ Ludoph of Saxony, *The Life of Jesus Christ: Part One, Volume 2, Chapters 41-92*, Cistercian Studies v. 282 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2019), 509–10.

⁴⁴ It is important to note that this paper does not intend to suggest that Pharisaic Judaism was inherently restrictive or anti-healing. Ancient Jewish tradition, including Pharisaic thought, contains robust discussions about the Sabbath. This passage represents a specific conflict within the diversity of Second Temple Judaism.

⁴⁵ Krysia Emily Waldock and Rachel and Forrester-Jones, “An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom,” *J. Disabil. Relig.* 24.4 (2020): 349–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2020.1776667>.

⁴⁶ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 30.

⁴⁷ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 72.

mother's nonconformity is a "gift" that makes her a "natural evangelist; she doesn't care what they think in a sense"; autistic nonconformity may be seen as a blessing in a gift to the Christian church in a variety of ways.⁴⁸ Nonconformity is a distinct trait common with autistic individuals rather than neurotypical individuals. In the case of the man with the withered hand where Jesus exhibits nonconformity to call out sin, an autistic individual may bear a more faithful representation of Christ-like behavior than a neurotypical individual.

Emotional Reactivity: Hyper-empathy and Justice Sensitivity

Contrary to common misconceptions, studies have shown that autistic individuals tend to demonstrate a greater emotional reaction, particularly regarding empathy and justice. Research has shown that autistic individuals demonstrate empathy in a response more emotionally reactive than neurotypical individuals.⁴⁹ This misconception likely stems from a false understanding and categorization of empathy. Cognitive empathy is "the ability to recognize or infer what another person is thinking or feeling and to predict their behavior" whereas affective empathy is "the drive to respond to another person's mental state with an appropriate emotion."⁵⁰ A 2024 study on moral foundations in autistic individuals concluded that while it does remain true that autistic individuals tend to demonstrate lower cognitive empathy compared to the neurotypical individuals, the autistic group demonstrated intact or even elevated levels of affective empathy compared to the neurotypical group.⁵¹ This heightened sense of empathy in autistic individuals may be linked to emotional dysregulation, and thus more emotional reactions to stimuli that produce empathy.

Furthermore, the increased levels of affective empathy in autistic individuals are also connected to a heightened sensitivity to justice. The study on moral foundations in autistic individuals also found that autistic individuals demonstrated greater "fairness" than neurotypical individuals; the study defines fairness as "treating [people] with justice."⁵² Furthermore, any heightened sense of fairness demonstrated in the neurotypical population with a systemizing cognitive type was linked to low empathizing, whereas a heightened sense of fairness in autism was linked to their systemizing behavior rather than a lack of empathy. It may be concluded that the increased level of affective empathy and justice in autistic individuals may often be linked to more emotionally aroused reactions.

Unlike the prior two passages examined in this work, Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and the subsequent cleansing of the Temple is not commonly found in the disability conversation; however, examining the behavior of Jesus may provide new insights. While Jesus weeping over Jerusalem is unique to Luke— found in 19:41-44— the cleansing of the Temple is also witnessed in Luke 19:45-48, Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-17, and John 2:13-17. While there are a variety of minor differences

⁴⁸ Waldock and Forrester-Jones, "An Exploratory Study of Attitudes toward Autism Amongst Church-Going Christians in the South East of England, United Kingdom."

⁴⁹ Tianbi Li et al., "Empathy in Autistic Children: Emotional Overarousal in Response to Others' Physical Pain," *Autism Res.* 17.8 (2024): 1640–50, <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.3200>.

⁵⁰ Yeshaya David M. Greenberg et al., "Moral Foundations in Autistic People and People with Systemizing Minds," *Mol. Autism* 15 (2024): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13229-024-00591-8>.

⁵¹ Greenberg et al., "Moral Foundations in Autistic People and People with Systemizing Minds."

⁵² Greenberg et al., "Moral Foundations in Autistic People and People with Systemizing Minds."

including dating and other details, the primary focus here will be Luke. In all three Synoptics, the cleansing of the Temple follows the triumphal entry of Jesus. Mark includes the cursing of the fig tree between the triumphal entry and the cleansing of the Temple, whereas Luke includes the Jesus weeping over Jerusalem in place of the cursing of the fig tree.

Prior to the weeping of Jerusalem and the cleansing of the Temple is the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem. For Luke, the entering into Jerusalem was a “crucial and transitional” event because the author has “built up the journey to Jerusalem as full of significance.”⁵³ The author of Luke fills the scene with regal imagery even though “it is a humble messiah who makes the ride.”⁵⁴ As Jesus humbly enters on the colt he requested, the crowds are joyfully celebrating and begin praising God, referencing Psalm 118:26 (Luke 19:37-38); they were “celebrating God’s plan” and greeting Jesus as Messiah.⁵⁵ But the moment is not joyful for all; the Pharisees tell Jesus to rebuke his disciples. “Irony drips from Jesus’ response” as he tells them that silencing the people would not silence the praise,⁵⁶ for “the stones,” creation, would “shout out” in praise anyways (Luke 19:40). This joyful scene is quickly cut off with the rejection of Jesus and there is a dramatic pivot to the crushing lament of Jesus as he begins to weep “with distinct emotional tremors” over Jerusalem⁵⁷ (Luke 19:41) and shares a “searing oracle of doom” for the city.⁵⁸

Jesus’ weeping appears to be a somewhat surprising display of deep emotion rooted in an empathy for the fate Jerusalem would face. Jesus begins to “break down physically and grammatically” here.⁵⁹ In an examination of the Greek texts, Spencer articulates how Jesus, overwhelmed with emotion, begins to stutter his lament in a fractured sentence that throbs with heartache; his brief, broken sentences convey “a vivid sense of spontaneous, emotional outburst.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, the use of the word “weeping [κλαίω, klaíō]” is stronger than the verb “to shed tears [δάκρῡω, dakryō]”⁶¹ and is most often used as a shameful display of emotion typically for women, not a man, let alone a strong king as he was described in his triumphal entry.⁶² This is not the only time the author of Luke depicts Jesus in an abnormally unmasculine manner either; to the Lukan author “Jesus is depicted as a passive, rejected figure who at times betrays emotion” often.⁶³ The author of Luke makes it clear that this weeping was a deep display of emotion. Additionally, Jesus’ lament “evokes echoes of his

⁵³ Bock, *Luke*, 311–12.

⁵⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 312.

⁵⁵ Bock, *Luke*, 313.

⁵⁶ Bock, *Luke*, 313.

⁵⁷ Spencer, *Luke*, 494.

⁵⁸ Bock, *Luke*, 314.

⁵⁹ Spencer, *Luke*, 496.

⁶⁰ Spencer, *Luke*, 496.

⁶¹ François Bovon, *Luke 3: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 19:28-24:53*, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 17.

⁶² Spencer, *Luke*, 496.

⁶³ Brittany E. Wilson, “A Crucified Lord: Jesus on the Way to the Cross (Luke 22–23),” in *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke–Acts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 203–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199325009.003.0007>

earlier lament” in Luke 13:34-35 and is a part of “the theme of lament” over Israel.⁶⁴ Not only was Jesus’ weeping for Jerusalem a powerful display of emotions, but his deep lament was a repeated pattern, not an isolated incident, of Jesus’ behavior.

Jesus’ deep lament and powerful display of emotion was ultimately rooted in a deep empathy for Jerusalem. Jesus is overcome with the “passion of grief” due to the impending outcome for Jerusalem, as evidenced by his speech that follows.⁶⁵ Jesus knows “the awful fate that awaits [...] the entire city of Jerusalem (including children)” as he describes the doom to come.⁶⁶ The description is of a desolate “Hellenistic military siege that will slowly choke the city to death.”⁶⁷ Soon the praise that the people sing to him will instead be a great lament of mourning. It is the rejection that “causes Jesus so much pain that he is weeping” for he knows this rejection will produce tragedy.⁶⁸ He is displaying an “impassioned sympathy” for the pain of Jerusalem.⁶⁹ It would seem here that the great display of emotion that Jesus is demonstrating is not mere sadness, rather a pain rooted in empathy for the pain Jerusalem will endure.

Following the weeping in Luke’s gospel account is Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem. Although a historical-critical reading of the gospels typically favors a timeline of isolation rather than continuity, the “connection between Jesus’ entry and his first public act in the temple should not be ignored” and a timeline of continuity would be more accurately applied to this text.⁷⁰ In other words, the events of the triumphal entry, the weeping over Jerusalem, and the cleansing of the Temple should be read in continuity. In this scene, Jesus drives out “those who were selling things” (Luke 19:45) and rebukes them with a combination of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, saying “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer,’ but you have made it a den of robbers.” (Luke 19:46). The act of driving out the Temple itself was not a palatable one and “in the Lukan context has several implications” one of which would be making enemies out of the religious leaders that would begin to plot Jesus’ own death.⁷¹

Jesus’ cleansing of the Temple may be viewed as an emotional outburst at injustice. Particularly, the authors choice to reference Jeremiah in Jesus’ rebuke “exposed the manipulative, unscrupulous practices” occurring in the temple as the primary motivation for Jesus’ somewhat drastic cleansing of the Temple.⁷² The cleansing of the Temple “was intended as a prophetic act, an expression of zeal from the Lord.”⁷³ Jesus is overwhelmed with the injustice of the religious leaders who have abused the Temple for their own gain and expresses it boldly, in “a rare instance where Jesus’ action is stronger than his words.”⁷⁴ Jesus’ actions were unexpected and the depth of emotion he displayed at this injustice created a spectacle that was “shocking

⁶⁴ Culpepper, “The New Interpreter’s Bible : General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books.,” 372.

⁶⁵ Spencer, *Luke*, 484.

⁶⁶ Spencer, *Luke*, 495.

⁶⁷ Bock, *Luke*, 314.

⁶⁸ Bock, *Luke*, 314.

⁶⁹ Spencer, *Luke*, 496.

⁷⁰ Bock, *Luke*, 317.

⁷¹ Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke,” 374.

⁷² Allison A. Trites and William J. Larkin, *The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Philip Wesley Comfort, vol. 12 of *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary* (Carol Stream, Ill. : Tyndale House Publishers, 2006), 264.

⁷³ Bovon, *Luke* 3, 19.

⁷⁴ Bovon, *Luke* 3, 19.

for spectators.”⁷⁵ Considering this scene follows Jesus weeping at the pain Jerusalem will face because the religious leaders have and will lead them astray, it is not unsurprising that the heightened emotions would be displayed further to those causing this injustice. With a focus on the connection to the events leading up to the cleansing of the temple, Jesus’ outburst at the unfairness may even seem to be rooted in an empathy for those who will face pain and an anger at those who will lead them to that pain. The scene of Jesus cleansing the Temple, is unusual, but seems to stand out as a strong distaste for injustice and may even be rooted in a deep empathy for those who will be hurt by the injustice.

When contrasted to the autistic tendencies of hyper empathy and justice sensitivity, Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem and cleansing of the Temple can provide fresh insight. In comparison with the autistic trait of displaying extreme affective empathy, the emotional outburst of Jesus as he weeps over Jerusalem could be described as mirroring the autistic behaviors discussed previously. Affective empathy, responding with the proper emotion to another’s mental state, appears to be the behavior of Jesus, as he responds to the impending suffering of Jerusalem with deep grief and pain. Additionally, Jesus’ display of heightened distaste for injustice, may be viewed as similar to the increased level of fairness demonstrated by the autistic individuals, which is linked to empathy.⁷⁶ A study done on empathy in autistic children studied the emotional arousal state of autistic children compared to neurotypical children in response to others’ pain by examining pupil dilation.⁷⁷ The study found that autistic children showed a heightened empathetic arousal compared to the neurotypical children. The study was consistent with the results of a previous study done using a similar neuroimaging technique to examine emotional arousal in autistic adolescents and adults. This “heightened empathetic response” mirrors closely with the emotional outburst of Jesus in Luke 19:41-47. In response to pain and injustice, autistic individuals typically present a strong emotional reaction, much like Jesus’ display of deep grief over the forthcoming pain of Jerusalem.

Autistic individuals are commonly described as “lacking empathy” leading them to feel misrepresented and further ostracized from neurotypical individuals.⁷⁸ A concept that has deeply underpinned the research and conversation around autism, may likely be reflected in the church as well. A misrecognition of autistic empathy will lead to the multitude of ways autistic hyper-empathy and justice sensitivity could serve the church—the breadth of which this paper cannot cover—going unused. Furthermore, Christ’s demonstration of the emotional reactivity stemming from a deep empathy and fairness, should serve as a model for the church’s response to any autistic emotional outbursts; might they be viewed as zealous and passionate rather than disruptive and illogical. The false narrative around autism and a lack of empathy needs to be correctly rewritten and then, within the Christian sphere, may be celebrated as a reflection of Jesus’ passion.

⁷⁵ Bovon, *Luke* 3, 21.

⁷⁶ Greenberg et al., “Moral Foundations in Autistic People and People with Systemizing Minds.”

⁷⁷ Li et al., “Empathy in Autistic Children.”

⁷⁸ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, 7.

Conclusion

An examination of the non-normative behaviors of Jesus in Luke can help Christians and churches reframe their view and treatment of autistic individuals. Again, the purpose of this paper is not to retrospectively diagnose Jesus as autistic or even to comment on the neurotype of Jesus at all. Rather, this work seeks to highlight behaviors of Jesus with a sociological autistic lens. Jesus demonstrated traits of solitude, nonconformity, empathy, and justice at a level the Lukan author portrayed as outside the norm. As the Imago Dei par excellence, Jesus' divergent behavior underscores that conformity to social norms is not the measure of faithfully bearing God's image, rather, diverse representations of humanity, including autistic individuals, reflect the multifaceted nature of God's image itself. To view an autistic individual demonstrate an increased level of those same traits through a negative, neurotypical lens would likely be to, unintentionally or hypocritically, comment on those same behaviors of Jesus. Autistic individuals can witness faithful traits and behaviors in ways neurotypical individuals cannot, but this will likely be overlooked if autism is merely viewed as something to fix. There is a theological, biblical, and community richness to be found when autism is rethought not just as a deficit. Ecclesiastically, churches should expand upon this study and apply it to their churches in a multitude of ways to better understand, disciple, witness to, minister to, and minister with autistic individuals. There are a multitude of ways scripture can provide a reflection that uplifts and includes autistic individuals as faithful witnesses, that often go unrecognized. Scripture provides a witness to the ways autism can be a gift; it is now the responsibility of the Christian church to faithfully build-up and steward their autistic congregants.

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Appendix: The Autism Spectral Wheel

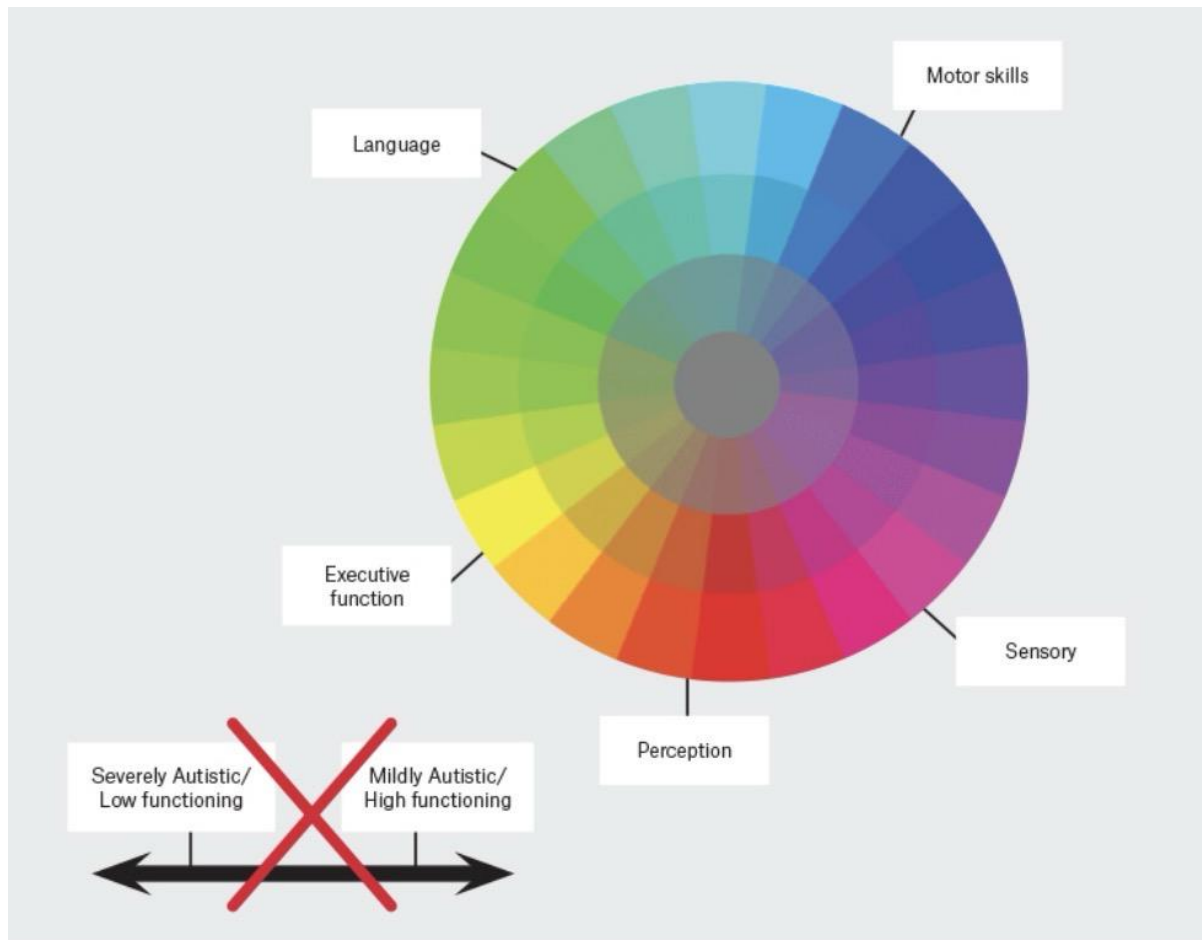


Figure 1. The Autism Spectral Wheel

Source: Bradshaw, Pia, Claire Pickett, Mieke L Van Driel, Katie Brooker, and Anna Urbanowicz. "‘Autistic’ or ‘with Autism’? Why the Way General Practitioners View and Talk about Autism Matters." *Aust. J. Gen. Pract.* 50.3 (2021): 104–8.

***Erōs and Theōsis: Early Christian Reception of Love's
Ascent in the Symposium***
Kyle Barton, Baylor University

Some of the earliest Christians viewed Greek philosophy as a “useful guide towards reverence for God.”¹ Different in form but equal in aim, philosophy shaped Christianity’s views of ethics, metaphysics, and religion. The two are very close in many ways. When Augustine critically surveys philosophy in *City of God* (Books 8-10), he writes: “What need is there to examine the other philosophers? There are none who come nearer to us than the Platonists.”² Two parallel themes in these traditions are *erōs* and *theōsis*—or becoming God. Both traditions view the goal of human existence as becoming gods. Both affirm that becoming gods is an erotic affair. The main difference, for Augustine, is that Plato doesn’t have a proper mediator to bridge the human and divine. In this paper, after showing the deep structural continuities between Platonic ascent and Christian *theōsis*, I argue that Augustine’s claim rests on a misreading of the *Symposium*, for Plato’s *Erōs* performs the role of deifying mediation that Augustine says is absent. While Plato can’t imagine the possibility of a real becoming-human of God, he gives to Christianity a strong account of human-becoming God that has lastingly shaped its imagination and longing. Finally, while Augustine’s critique of Plato is christologically justified, it is philosophically overstated.

¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.5, trans. John Ferguson (The Catholic University of America Press, 1991) 41. Cf. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (OUP, 2004), 52: “What is beyond doubt is Clement’s... debt to Platonism. The definition of likeness to God as the goal of the spiritual life, the concept of participation, the metaphor of the soul’s ascent, and the notion of reaching out to God in ecstasy are all of Platonic origin.”

² Augustine, *civ. Dei* 8.5; see also, *civ. Dei* 8.9: Unless noted otherwise, all quotations from *civ. Dei* are from *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984).

1. The Goal of Creation—*Theōsis*

1.1. Plato

According to both Plato, the reason a god made the world was to give human beings a share in the divine, to make them “like a god.”³ In *Timaeus*, Plato says that this god “wanted everything to become as much like himself as was possible.”⁴ Because the god is good, he is motivated to share his well-being, and because he is not jealous, he feels no need to guard his uniqueness.⁵ Incapable of diminishment through participation, the god seeks to communicate being and goodness rather than hoard it.⁶ It’s a striking thought—divine exceptionality does not prohibit divine repeatability. Plato specifies that “becoming as like God as possible” (ὁμοίωσις θεῷ κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν) means becoming “just and pious, with understanding”—civic virtues.⁷ In other words, this is no mystical retreat from social concern. As Christopher Shields argues, becoming like God is a “complex, rationally virtuous affair” that is not deferred to the afterlife.⁸

1.2. Christianity

Early Christians shared with Plato the conviction that likeness to God is the goal of creation. This was the basic “intellectual framework”⁹ of Christian spirituality. Christians went beyond Plato and spoke not just about becoming *like* God, but about becoming God, and they coined new terms like *theōsis* to up the ante.¹⁰ For instance, Basil of Caesarea says that in our ascent toward the ineffable beauty, the penultimate perfection is “likeness to God” (πρὸς Θεὸν

³ Plato, *Republic* 613a. See also, Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian According to the Greek Fathers*, trans. Paul A. Onica (1938; A&C Press, 2002), 43: “The divinization that [Plato] proposes as the aim of human activity is unquestionably the most sublime ideal ever to have been conceived of outside of Christianity.”

⁴ Plato, *Timaeus* 29e.

⁵ Plato, *Timaeus* 30b.

⁶ Augustine adopts this argument in *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* 4.16.27. If there is anything better than being good myself, it’s enabling others to become as good as me.

⁷ Plato, *Theaetetus* 176b.

⁸ Christopher Shields, “A Fetish for Fixity?,” in *Plato’s Symposium: A Critical Guide*, eds. Pierre Destrée and Zina Giannopoulou (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 173.

⁹ Gross, *Divinization*, 44.

¹⁰ See Norman Russell, *Doctrine of Deification*, 52: “In the development of the idea of deification and its distinctive vocabulary, it was Christianity that led the way.” See also, “Introduction: Theses on Deification,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Deification*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk et al. (OUP, 2024), 3.

ὁμοίωσις), but the ultimate is “becoming God” (Θεὸν γινέσθαι).¹¹ Augustine says: “God wishes not only to vivify, but also to deify (deificare) us.”¹² It turns out that Plato’s “as much as possible” is quite capacious.¹³ While Plato’s language is certainly not just metaphorical, Christianity radicalized his vision in the strongest language possible. Eric Mascall rightly says, “No term less than ‘deification’ is adequate to describe the condition of the human being who has been taken by grace into the supernatural realm.”¹⁴

2. The Way of *Theōsis*—Erotic Ascent

2.1. Plato

If the goal of existence is deifying assimilation to God, the question is how does one go about this? This is just the question in the *Symposium*: if “this, then, is the object of love... how do lovers pursue it?” (206b). Socrates gives the answer in his speech, relaying what Diotima has taught him about the nature, characteristics, and work of *erōs*.¹⁵ *Erōs* lifts mortals up into union with the eternal Forms, by which humans become beautiful, happy, and immortal (212a-b)—in short, they are deified through participation in “the divine Beauty itself” (αὐτὸ τὸ θεῖον καλόν). *Theōsis* then is strikingly erotic, as Socrates says more explicitly in the *Republic*: the soul does not lessen its “erotic love” until it has “intercourse” with that which is and gives birth to virtue.¹⁶ Since the soul is “akin to the divine... we must realize what it would become if it followed this longing with its whole being.”¹⁷

Erōs, then, has a threefold activity: it sets humans in ontological motion toward the divine, it lifts them up into contemplation of the divine, and it brings them into reproductive

¹¹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit* 9.23.

¹² Augustine, s. 23B.1; Hill, *Sermons* (III/11), 37.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa will say that it is a matter of infinite becoming.

¹⁴ Eric Mascall, *The Importance of Being Human: Some Aspects of the Christian Doctrine of Man* (Oxford University Press, 1959), 64.

¹⁵ For seven ‘hallmarks’ of *erōs* in this dialogue, see F.C.C. Sheffield, “*Erōs* and the Pursuit of Form,” in *Plato’s Symposium*, 134-35.

¹⁶ Plato, *Republic* 490b; see also, 611e.

¹⁷ Plato, *Republic* 611e.

union with the divine. First, *Erōs* is the agent through whom divine things can reach humans and vice versa. Its ability to communicate between gods and mortals implies that it is connected and compatible with both parties. This is highlighted by the story of *Erōs*'s birth from two very different parents (Poros and Penia)—love shares the characteristics of both its parents as a dual-natured entity. The mediation it achieves implies that it is fluent in both ontological idioms, since both sides can communicate through this medium. It is not, however, an empty conduit of communication (like speaking through the vents), but a dynamic realm of communion and becoming. Second, this communication bridges the ontological divide, uniting seemingly disparate realms. As Diotima says, *erōs* “round[s] out the whole and bind[s] fast the all to all” (202e). This is *erōs*' unitive role. If I communicate an idea to you, the idea is now shared by us and this binds us together. The more powerful the message, the stronger the bond. Third, since *erōs* is the agent of this communication, it creates a new character in the recipient, for a person's desires shape their life and character.¹⁸ In this way, *erōs* draws the soul into toward greater union with the object it desires (204d). Ultimately, what *erōs* desires is to possess the good forever, which means that, “Love must desire immortality” (207a). Rather than understanding the life of virtue as a dreary struggle or a heroic feat, Plato's genius was to re-conceive it as an erotic affair.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Greek poetic myths before him, where becoming divine was up to the gods' unpredictable smile, Plato outlines a method of deification grounded in human agency.¹⁹ Diotima outlines a five-stage method of deifying ascent that function “like rising stairs” (211b).²⁰ One ascends by moving from loving beautiful bodies (one then many), to beautiful souls and customs, to seeing the beauty of the vast realm of knowledge, to a single study of beauty, to the sudden self-disclosure of Beauty itself. The advances in stages one

¹⁸ See Gary Alan Scott and William A. Welton, *Erotic Wisdom: Philosophy and Intermediacy in Plato's Symposium* (State of New York Press, 2008), 106: “Desire enlivens the idea of the object of desire in one's mind, and the idea becomes a source of guidance... human life becomes quite different depending on which desire moves the psyche.”

¹⁹ See Ivana Petrovic, “Ancient Greek Cultural and Philosophical Background,” in *The Oxford Handbook to Deification*, ed. Paul L. Gavrilyuk et al. (2024), 19-20.

²⁰ See Kevin Corrigan and Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Plato's Dialectic at Play: Argument, Structure, and Myth in the Symposium* (Penn State University Press, 2004), 148-50.

through four are achieved through disciplined pursuit. But at the threshold of the fifth, the lover of beauty reaches the limit beyond which no striving can carry her. The final transition cannot be forced or engineered, though the condition for its possibility requires preparation; it must be waited for, in the way that seeing a shooting star is unexpected and brilliant, though anticipated. Through these steps, a lover ascends “always upwards for the sake of this Beauty” (211c).

2.2. 2 Peter 1

Christianity adopted Plato’s ascent of the soul to union with God.²¹ I will give two examples—the second letter of Peter and Augustine *Confessions*.

The steps of ascent are present in Second Peter. While Paul and John report rapturous flights to visionary realms,²² the author of Second Peter, like Diotima, provides a workable regimen that gives agency to the practitioner. Second Peter chapter one (vv. 3-11) presents a stair-step progression of eight virtues in a literary form known as *gradatio*, that ascends from faith to love (*ἀγάπη*).²³ These steps are linked with *theōsis*, partaking of the divine nature (v. 4). Since *gradatios* like this were often used “to sketch a major part or an entire system of belief or philosophy,”²⁴ this passage shows that Christianity can be conceived in terms very similar to Diotima’s ladder in the *Symposium*. A final similarity is that the author states that those who make this ascent will remain neither “idly barren nor barrenly unfruitful”²⁵ (*ἀργοὺς οὐδὲ ἀκάρπους*, v. 8), and that this birthing of virtue will secure their entrance into the eternal kingdom (v. 11). Ascent stimulates virtuous reproduction, which secures immortality. This passage is a

²¹ Gross, *Divinization*, 270: “The deification obtained through Christian initiation should normally be the starting point of a continuous ascent toward a more and more perfect divinization.”

²² E.g., 2 Corinthians 12:1-4 and Revelation.

²³ The steps in between are virtue, knowledge, self-control, endurance, piety, and kinship affection.

²⁴ Henry A. Fischel, “The Uses of Sorites (Climax, Gradatio) in the Tannaitic Period,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 1973, Vol. 44 (1973), 135, 139.

²⁵ David Bentley Hart’s translation. While Plato does not typically use the word *ἄκαρπος* for ‘barren,’ he does use it with this meaning elsewhere. See *Timaeus* 91c-d, Cooper, *Complete Works*, 1290: “A woman’s womb... is a living thing within her with a desire for childbearing. Now when this remains unfruitful (*ἀκαρπτον*) for an unseasonably long period of time, it is extremely frustrated... until finally the woman’s desire and the man’s love bring them together, and, like plucking the fruit from a tree, they sow the seed into the ploughed field of her womb... Afterwards, they bring them to birth.”

clear, early attempt at transposing Diotima's ladder of love into a Christian key, mirroring her logic, structure, and final aim.

2.3. Augustine

Augustine is the most well-known case of Christianized Platonic ascent. Robin Lane Fox notes that "The *Confessions* cohere round the mystical core of vision and ascent,"²⁶ for in this first Christian autobiography, Augustine narrates three of his own experiences of ascent. Three aspects stand out. First, the role of *erōs* and beauty is central to each of Augustine's attempts, just as in the *Symposium*. In the third attempt,²⁷ he undertakes the ascent with his mother, who mirrors the role of Diotima. They ascend in ardent conversation from discussing bodily pleasures (*carnalium sensuum*) to panting in unison for Being itself (*idipsum*) until reaching its edge with the utmost leap of their hearts they collapse shy of consummation in a sort of *coitus interruptus* and fall back into the arms of clamorous temporality "sighing and unsatisfied... aching for more."²⁸ The description here is provocative, but it points to the primacy of *erōs* in ascent. As Augustine says later, "My weight is my love; wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me."²⁹

A second point that mirrors the *Symposium* is Augustine's description of his ascent "by stages" (*gradatim*) or "step by step" (*gradatium cuncta*).³⁰ Although driven by *erōs*, ascent requires discipline—like securing your foothold up a mountain.³¹ In his narration of his second attempt, these footholds are clearly marked. The account reads like an explorer's field notes:

from [the beauty of] material things to the soul...
 from there to the souls' inner power of sense
 perception... proceed further and came to the power of
 discursive reason... stretched upward to the source of
 its own intelligence...
 [out of the] tyranny of habit...

²⁶ Robin Lane Fox, *Augustine: Conversations to Confessions* (Basic Books, 2015), 255.

²⁷ For the first two attempts, see Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16 ("I trembled with love") and 7.17.23 ("I was drawn toward you by your beauty... to appreciate the beauty of material things").

²⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* 9.10.23-25.

²⁹ Augustine, *Confessions* 13.9.10.

³⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.17.23 and 9.10.24.

³¹ Especially, since Augustine ascends from the "region of unlikeness!" See, Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16.

detaching itself from the swarms of noisy
 phantasms... strove to discover what this light was
 that bedewed it...
 sought the fount whence flowed its concept of the Unchangeable...
 and then my mind attained to That Which Is in the flash of one tremulous
 glance.³²

The third similarity is that the result of the ascent is *theōsis*. This is most clear in the description of his first attempt. Just as he is beaten back by his feebleness, he hears a voice say: “I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: *you will be changed into me*.”³³ In normal eating, the food is transformed into the eater; but here, the eater is transformed into the food. Union with God does not change God, but it does change those who “consume” God into gods—“you will be changed into me.” For Augustine, to love God is to become God.³⁴

3. What Augustine Missed in Plato

Despite these broad similarities, Augustine lobs a major critique against Plato. It comes down to a single line in the *Symposium*: “gods never mix with humans.”³⁵ The problem for Augustine is that without contacting the immortal and happy gods—without a mediator³⁶—humans are stuck in their mortality and misery. What good is it to see the destination but not know the way to get there?³⁷ What humans need is something “*between* blessed immortals and wretched mortals.”³⁸ According to Augustine, Plato doesn’t have what Christians need.

However, this is precisely what Diotima offers in the *Symposium*. She asks, “Haven’t you found out yet that there’s something *in between* wisdom and ignorance... mortal and

³² Augustine, *Confessions* 7.17.23.

³³ Augustine, *Confessions* 7.10.16.

³⁴ See, Augustine, *ep. Jo.* 2.14; Ramsey, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 51. “A person’s love determines the person’s quality. Do you love the earth? You will be earth. Do you love God? What shall I say? That you will be God? I don’t dare to say this on my own. Let us listen to the scriptures: *I have said that you are gods* (Ps 82:6).”

³⁵ Augustine, *civ. Dei* 8.18 and 9.16. The line comes from Plato, *Symposium* 203a.

³⁶ This is the theme of *civ. Dei* 9.13-18 and *Confessions* 7.18.24 after Augustine’s first failed ascent.

³⁷ Augustine says this of the Platonists, see *Confessions* 7.20.26 and 7.21.27. ‘The way’ is a reference to John 14:6.

³⁸ Augustine, *civ. Dei* 9.13 (emphasis added).

immortal?”³⁹ (202a, emphasis added). *Erōs* is a great spirit “*in between*” (203d, emphasis added), not merely “in between” geographically but as an ontological bridge. While Socrates claims that *Erōs* is not a deity, he is clearly a deifier, since he renders the soul virtuous, immortal, happy, and beautiful through union with the divine. Christians themselves would take 300 years and two ecumenical councils to fully affirm that the one who deifies must be deity.⁴⁰ Plato, of course, can’t be faulted for not knowing about a future incarnation of the Son of God. Nevertheless, absent this historical contingency, he neatly articulates the conceptual solution Augustine fusses about. Augustine had asked, “What kind of mediation are we to choose to unite us to immortality and felicity?”⁴¹ But, as we have seen, immortality and happiness are just what *Erōs* accomplishes in a person.⁴²

How does Augustine miss this? Two reasons come to mind. First, Augustine was not reading Plato directly; instead, he gleaned from a loosely related work from the second century

C.E. by Apuleius (*De Deo Socratis*).⁴³ Peter Brown describes him as being acquainted only “with little snippets of these [philosophers’] opinions, picked up, here and there” not with the “philosophical systems as they stand, fully developed, in Greek books.”⁴⁴ This means that he was unaware of Plato’s sophisticated argument in the *Symposium* itself. Second, Augustine took the word ‘demon’ to refer to deceptive and malevolent forces, greedy for human worship. He denied the existence of good demons as a logical impossibility, deducing from their cosmic location and ontological intermediateness that they must be immortal and miserable, and therefore unable to confer happiness.⁴⁵ Yet Plato’s ‘*daemons*’ are not ‘demons’ in the Christian sense—they are good, wise, and knowing.⁴⁶

³⁹ Plato, *Symposium* 202a, 203d. Unless noted otherwise, all quotations of Plato are from *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).

⁴⁰ See Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* 2.70; see also, Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 31.28.

⁴¹ Augustine, *civ. Dei* 9.15 (slightly modified).

⁴² Plato, *Symposium* 212b and 205a, respectively.

⁴³ See Augustine’s remarks at *civ. Dei* 8:18 (“Plato is reported as saying”) and 9.19 (“ascribed to Plato by Apuleius”).

⁴⁴ Peter Brown, *Augustine: A Biography* (University of California Press, 1969), 36

⁴⁵ Augustine, *civ. Dei* 9.13.

⁴⁶ Plato, *Cratylus* 398 a-c.

By critiquing the *Symposium* without actually reading it and by misdefining Plato's terms, Augustine commits two glaring scholarly blunders.

4. Conclusion

In tracing the ascent of *eros* toward *theosis* across Plato's *Symposium* and early Christian thought, this paper has identified a shared aspiration that transcends philosophical and theological boundaries. Both traditions affirm that humans are made for *theōsis* and ascend from the mutable to the immutable through *erōs*.⁴⁷ It has also pointed to a relationship of mutual correlation. Without Plato, Christianity's language of *theōsis* would lack metaphysical sophistication. Without Christianity, Plato's *erōs* would lack historical embodiment. Christianity staked out new territory by affirming God's descent into human flesh. This shift radicalized the ontological status of Plato's mediator and reversed the polarity of his mediation, offering us, in Augustine's words, "a short cut to participation in his own divine nature."⁴⁸ The genius of Christianity was to join Plato's ladder with Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28) and identify Jesus Christ with both (John 1:51) as the mystery of love's ability to lift dust into divinity. Plato could imagine humanity ascending toward divinity, but not divinity descending into humanity. Christianity could imagine both. Yet in teaching Christians how to speak of humanity's ascent into God, Plato remained one of Christianity's most important teachers.

⁴⁷ See, Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 1.5, trans. John Ferguson (The Catholic University of America Press, 1991) 42: "There is only one way of truth, but different paths from different places join it, just like tributaries flowing into a perennial river."

⁴⁸ Augustine, *civ. Dei* 9.15.

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When the Cross Arrived: Christianity, Empire, and the Reimagining of Igbo Faith in Southeast Nigeria

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Introduction

The arrival of Christianity in Igboland in the nineteenth century constitutes one of the most consequential religious transformations in West African history. Yet this transformation cannot be adequately narrated as either missionary triumph or indigenous decline. Rather, it represents a complex encounter situated within expanding structures of European empire. Missionary expansion into southeastern Nigeria unfolded alongside British commercial penetration, political consolidation, and epistemic reordering of African societies. Christian mission therefore functioned within what may be described as a theology of empire in which evangelization and imperial expansion operated as mutually reinforcing processes.¹

Prior to missionary contact, Igbo religious life possessed a sophisticated cosmological architecture structured around *chi* (personal destiny), *ọfọ* (moral authority and truth), communal ritual systems, and ancestral presence. Missionary dismissal of these elements as superstition or idolatry generated not only religious confrontation but epistemological displacement. Conversion frequently entailed cultural rupture, producing generations of Igbo Christians negotiating fractured identities between inherited cosmology and missionary Christianity.²

Yet Igbo engagement with Christianity was never reducible to passive reception. Communities resisted, translated, reinterpreted, and reinvented Christian faith within indigenous symbolic worlds. This paper therefore argues that Christianity in Igboland emerged through negotiation rather than submission, producing a hybrid religious landscape that continues to shape postcolonial identity and diaspora consciousness.

¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 6–12.

² John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), 1–5.

I. Historiography: Mission, Empire, and African Theological Agency

Scholarship on African Christianity has undergone significant methodological transformation. Earlier missionary historiography frequently privileged missionary narratives that framed evangelization as civilizational progress. Postcolonial scholarship, however, has reoriented analysis toward power, translation, and indigenous agency.

Willie James Jennings situates modern missionary expansion within the emergence of racial imagination, arguing that mission participated in cultural reformation aligned with colonial hierarchies.³ His work reframes mission as a spatial and anthropological project embedded within modernity's racial formations.

Conversely, Lamin Sanneh emphasizes Christianity's vernacular translatability, highlighting indigenous appropriation as central to Christian expansion. For Sanneh, mission simultaneously carried imperial assumptions while generating cultural empowerment through linguistic translation.⁴

African theologians further reshaped historiography by foregrounding indigenous continuity. John Mbiti argued that African religious traditions provided fertile theological soil for Christian reception, challenging assumptions of religious absence.⁵ Kwame Bediako extended this insight by drawing parallels between early Christian encounters with Greco-Roman culture and African Christian identity formation.⁶ Meanwhile, Mercy Amba Oduyoye introduced gender-critical analysis demonstrating how missionary Christianity reconfigured African gender relations while evangelizing communities.⁷

³ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 29–45.

⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 51–63.

⁵ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 29.

⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity* (Oxford: Regnum, 1992), 225–230.

⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 15–30.

Together, these historiographical trajectories establish the analytical framework guiding this study: Christianity in Igboland must be interpreted through lenses of empire, translation, indigenous agency, and postcolonial critique.

II. Christianity as Imperial Extension in Igboland

Mbiti argues that the real modern expansion of Christianity hardly touched African peoples, though a few communities, especially at the Congo estuary, seem to have been converted. The real modern expansion of Christianity in Africa started with freed Christian slaves who began to return to western Africa towards the end of the eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Christianity had increasingly large followers along the coast from sierra Leone to Nigeria. This was perceived as a spontaneous expansion and consequent penetration into the western African interior. Many African scholars especially Mbiti agree that this phase is represented by missionary activities, starting in the nineteenth century. That time, Britain, Europe and the United States increased their interest in Africa, as evidenced by the arrival of empire builders, philanthropists, explorers, missionaries, hunters, traders, journalists and others from these countries. Thus, missionaries from Europe and America penetrated the interior of Africa either shortly before, or simultaneously with colonial occupation. The image that Africans received and still largely hold of Christianity is very much colored by colonial rule all that was involved in it.⁸

Missionary entry into Igboland was facilitated by expanding British commercial and political networks along the Niger basin. Expeditions, treaties, and trading infrastructures created logistical pathways for missionary mobility and institutional establishment. Mission societies developed schools, churches, and catechetical systems that functioned as sites of religious formation and colonial cultural production.

The ideological underpinnings of this expansion reflected legacies of civilizing mission discourse that positioned African societies within hierarchical narratives of development. Conversion thus frequently operated within assimilative frameworks intertwining salvation with Westernization.⁹

⁸ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 225.

⁹ Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 245–260.

Educational institutions played particularly significant roles in this process. Literacy training, curricular formation, and disciplinary regimes cultivated Christian subjects aligned with colonial administrative structures, contributing to the emergence of Christian elites mediating between colonial authority and indigenous communities.

Nevertheless, imperial entanglement did not predetermine missionary outcomes. The encounter between missionary Christianity and Igbo religious imagination generated tensions that destabilized missionary assumptions of cultural replacement.

III. Colonial Mission and the Displacement of Igbo Cosmology

Missionary critiques of Igbo religion often employed demonological and primitivist categories that rendered indigenous cosmology illegible within Christian theological frameworks. Sacred objects, ritual specialists, and ancestral practices were interpreted through moral binaries positioning Christianity as enlightenment over against perceived darkness.

This dynamic produced epistemic displacement characterized by delegitimization of indigenous interpretive systems. Mbiti's assertion that Africans are "notoriously religious" challenged such displacement by affirming continuity of divine awareness within African traditions.¹⁰

The consequences extended beyond theology into identity formation. Conversion frequently entailed rejection of indigenous ritual memory and ancestral connection. Bediako identifies this phenomenon as self-alienation generated by missionary translation failures.¹¹

Missionary institutions also reshaped social organization. Ecclesial hierarchies, educational structures, and gender norms introduced European authority patterns intersecting with colonial governance. Oduyoye's work demonstrates how these transformations contributed to women's marginalization within ecclesial spaces despite precolonial patterns of female religious authority.¹²

Collectively, these processes produced enduring layers of religious transformation, cultural fragmentation, and identity negotiation.

¹⁰ Mbiti, *African Religions*, 30.

¹¹ Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 228.

¹² Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands*, 41–58.

IV. Igbo Responses: Resistance, Translation, and Reinvention

Resistance

Igbo communities preserved ritual knowledge and cosmological narratives through strategies of concealment, selective participation, and communal solidarity. Resistance thus functioned as preservation of epistemic continuity rather than simple rejection.

Translation and Adaptation

Igbo converts appropriated Christianity through vernacular hermeneutics. Biblical narratives were interpreted through proverb traditions, hymnody incorporated indigenous musical forms, and ritual symbolism acquired contextual reinterpretation. Sanneh's vernacularization framework illuminates how translation enabled Christianity to become culturally embedded rather than externally imposed.¹³

Reinvention and Indigenous Christian Movements

African Independent Churches and prophetic movements represented further expressions of Igbo agency. Indigenous catechists and prophets integrated healing practices, visionary spirituality, and communal ritual structures into Christian worship, thereby disrupting missionary monopoly over doctrine and ecclesial authority.

V. Postcolonial Memory, Diaspora Identity, and Theological Reconstruction

The legacy of missionary encounter persists within postcolonial and diasporic Igbo experience. Many Christians inherit narratives of cultural incompatibility that generate identity ambivalence and intergenerational silence regarding indigenous heritage. Questions of belonging reflect unresolved theological memory.

Yet this memory also catalyzes theological resistance. African theologians increasingly articulate frameworks decoupling Christianity from imperial identity while affirming African religious experience as locus of divine revelation.

¹³ Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 97–112.

A reconstructed Igbo Christianity requires:

- Cultural affirmation through reclamation of indigenous symbols
- Epistemic justice recognizing Igbo cosmology as knowledge tradition
- Gender liberation dismantling colonial patriarchal residues
- Liturgical remembrance addressing colonial wounds
- Dialogical evangelism reframing mission as encounter

Such reconstruction embodies theological reconciliation integrating gospel commitment with cultural belonging.

Conclusion

Christianity's arrival in Igboland constituted a complex historical event marked by imperial entanglement, cosmological disruption, and indigenous creativity. Missionary Christianity introduced new religious possibilities while simultaneously generating cultural displacement and identity fracture.

Yet Igbo communities were never passive recipients. Through resistance, translation, and reinvention, they reimagined Christian faith within indigenous symbolic worlds. From this history emerges a critical theological insight: Christianity in Africa is not merely received but continually remade.

Decolonizing Igbo Christianity therefore involves confronting imperial complicity, healing cultural memory, and affirming divine presence within Igbo religious history. In this reimagined horizon, the cross is disentangled from conquest and rediscovered as symbol of liberation, reconciliation, and cultural dignity.

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On the Everyday Economics of God(s) in Relation to Questions of Have

Nicholas Elliott, Independent Scholar

“One pertinent question for us today is, can false mental images of God be as dangerous as false metal images?”

Cecil M. Box, *Nowata Daily Star* (1962, p. 1)

“God, originally a symbol for the highest value that we can experience within us, becomes, in the having mode, an idol. In the prophetic concept, an idol is a thing that we ourselves make and project our own powers into, thus impoverishing ourselves.”

Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be* (1976, p. 62)

Abstract

In American English, the verb “have” serves as a common linguistic tool for expressing possession of individuals, animals, places, objects, and more—within an economic framework where language functions as a mechanism for naming and claiming ownership. This perspective, known as “possession,” positions language as a background economic practice often overlooked by the general population, science, and religion. This paper examines the properties and problems of “have” as they intersect with religious discourse, while also exploring three related verbs—“earn,” “spend,” and “invest”—within the same linguistic-economic lens as related to religious discourse and activity. The first section offers an integrated analysis of “have,” addressing its general use and behavior in questions. Subsequent sections will treat each related verb in turn, first outlining their core properties, then exploring their roles in question formation.

Section I: Have - Its Properties and Problems

It is the case that with regard to certain articulated questions, the answer will appear to be imbued with a certain perspective. The question for example, “What did you get your degree in?,” which provokes the recipient to generate new information for the questioner (Freed, 1994), may provoke a response to the following “I have a degree in ____”. The notion found here of what may be classified as the “I have” form, though, is unfortunately not uncommon among answers given every day. This form of “I have” symbolizes two separate items: 1. The principle word “have” separates the item from the recipient, thus forming a user and possessor; 2. “Have” symbolizes the user’s possession featured over the item located in the formed statement.

“Have” can, as mentioned previously, be found in other places as well, including religion, where possession can be seen as negative. One may ask the question, “How can you get through this troubled time?” to which a response possible may include “I have an almighty god to help me,” thus signifying the possession of this entity “god.”

By using the word “have” in “I have,” the speaker or recipient of the question is acknowledging that they have proceeded beyond coveting an item, whether it be physical or abstract, onto the act of possessing in an economic manner, much like one collects and understands rarity from ordinary, marked items from unmarked (i.e., Zerubavel, 2018). The term possession might be defined with regard to a sort of abstract holding accomplished through one’s use of language. So when an individual states in their statement that “I have an almighty god to help me?” it may be assumed that a sort of abstract grasp is placed around that item, which the statement given takes that item to be god.

Though individuals “possess” such a god (or even a selection of gods), it has very limited use as such an item, this is because it is not necessarily capable of being exchanged. Instead, individuals, it seems, compare their god(s) against each other in a sort of one-upmanship, or they attempt to convert within the confines of some religions. It cannot be accounted for in terms of acknowledgement as to whether, when possessing their “god” linguistically, the possessor still remains to care for their “god” without any external compelling need being required. On this note one may hear forms similar in their nature to “I have” such as “Our _____ is _____” or “My _____ is _____”, all of which can in a sense be reverted in their meaning back to the principle form “I have” which includes “have” as the principle word underlying this act of possession. Moreover, such forms, though, are underlain by the action of possession; in their original form, they are, namely, utilized by individuals to, as noted before, compare their own god(s) against others (possibly all others in the case of some mainstream religion).

In terms of questions it can be seen that the phrase “I have” and in turn the word ‘have’ do appear in the case of certain kinds, namely those of the Wh- (Q) typology, of which questions of How and What and Why are notably those that following question typology are logically most likely to produce an answer of the “I have” form. In the case of asking such questions as those starting with (or whose basis is located in) words How or What or Why may in addition to reducing god (or gods) to possessions, limit the amount of possibly usable information to be gained (see Montrell, 2021, for a general discussion of the thought terminating cliché in the contents of religion). Such possessing and exhibition are the direction of the respondent upon the view of their religion’s god when producing a response to a particular question. Though apart from such logics which guide the relationship between question form and function, polar questions may introduce such an answer (or at least answers that contain such derivative forms as mentioned above) even though, in theory such yes/no answers are used for verification.

Often, claims against a particular religion that occupy the form of a particular answer, argument, or question are regulated by members (or other members) present in the composition of this or that group. Professionally, such individuals may be labelled apologists, whether or not they are lay or professional in themselves. Though presently the claims being discussed fail to occupy an explicit form, but instead is more considered latent. In themselves, claims on be half of the verb “have” are in themselves ordinary; therefore attention is not provided (Zerubavel, 2015; 2018), as a result, they maintain the capacity to be passed over.

Have as a Declaration of Truth

This ordinary, invisibleness of “have” presents itself not simply as a problem for members of some select religion, but also for the promotion of “have” as a problem for that religion. It is the fact that the word “have”, which has been borrowed from the secular (see Burke, 1970, p. 7-10), functions in the modern day as previously mentioned: Divine possession and comparison – an antithesis to the ethos held by many of the current major religions. In fact, this status of “have” has grown to that where not simply the followers regurgitate the verb based action, but also the congregations and the pastors as well.

Intertwined with the figureness of God into god through the act of language is this secondary layer which provides value in the face of the vocalizer, “My _____ represents what I consider Truth in terms of _____.” When one references “have,” the referencer is promoting a specific value in comparison to another’s figure, a specific “Truth.”

Although, as it was previously mentioned, one could not engage in other economic activities related to the individual’s possessed god in relation to others. This fact, however does not mean that this constructed god figure does not possess any value to anyone, the value in the present figure is set and constrained in the individual vocalizer – Simmel (2011) noted that such value is located outside the individual, seemingly objective, object rather than being additional quality. The value of one’s possession determines action, or how the possession will be utilized. Such action of one’s possession is under conflation with the prime value of religion, truth – though it would be negligible to state that this “truth,” which conforms to an economic like value that facilitates comparison between such possessions, is never valued as lowercase “[t]ruth” but instead always “[T]ruth” and is placed in strict relation to the ideas provided towards the possession itself. In this state, god as a possession can only act in line with such “Truth,” through in every mind, such “Truth” seems to be found in different forms and contours, such actions in comparison strictly come from the ideas placed upon it, the possession from the one possessing.

This problem not only reorients God to god but also negotiates “Truth” to degrade and diminish the divine from its nature state to one of linguistic artificiality - though the language used to perpetuate this problem is in itself natural, so suspension remains undisturbed as the population is naturally socialized into this type of possessional language (see Montell, 2021). Between possession, value, and action, which are all arranged and managed by “have,” the formation of a naturally sacred but profane trinity has emerged (i.e., Possession → Value → Action). In such a trinity, the wickedness of “value” ultimately gets simplified, gets made more efficient in thought, as “[T]ruth” is not the same as “[t]ruth” even though it may get used as such. Though even if [T]ruth provides value to enact the comparison between the specific differentiated figures separated from the general by possession, Hyde (as cited in lyengar, 2009) wrote: “[For a] thing [. . .] to have market value, it must be detachable or alienable so that it can be put on the scale and compared.” It essentially is the act of possession that “detaches” and “aliena[tes]” so it can be supplied with [T]ruth and compared amongst each other.

Have and The Fragmentary Dismemberment of Truth

In highlighting the nature of such comparative activities taken with regard to a possessed god as a specific item, the fact becomes noticeable, that such Truth is not found to possess a monolithic meaning but is instead polymorphic and fragmentary. “Have” as a verb maintains the ability not simply to possess but also to transform, objects of a general nature to items of a specific and personal nature. The personalization of the object can be seen in a phrase such as “My _____ represents what I consider Truth in terms of _____.” where [T]ruth is again no longer an object of general nature, but is owned privately. This privacy allows [T]ruth to be employed differently by each subject that possesses which fragments it, though in a fragmentary state, ontologically speaking, [T]ruth still maintains conceptualization under the categorical label “[T]ruth” within the span of certain individuals’ mental fields (Zerubavel, 1991; 1996). When using the term [T]ruth, however, one will unconsciously draw an arbitrary divisional line dividing such a concept, after selecting a certain form over others. Though which [T]ruth is prescribed attention to is largely managed by norms of individual thought communities (Zerubavel, 2015), others are ignored. Though shaped by the social (Zerubavel, 1997), the recognition of that certain [T]ruth ultimately falls on this or that specific subject located within a certain membership, and so by extension is subjective. It is by this subjectivity that individuals deconstruct the invisible territory of “[T]ruth” and “re-member” in their own mind’s image the “[T]ruth,” supported by a subjective constellation of evidence, which décors their own possessed god in their own manifest “[T]ruth.” Ultimately, it seems like this subjectivity is blinded from the believer, possibly due to personal biases and religion’s ties to the individual’s core.

Section II: Economic Derivatives of Have - Earn, Spend, and Invest

Earn

The action concerning the verb, earn, though rooted in the verb “have,” motivates an action not rooted solely in the act of possession, nor is such an action constituted strictly of a simple possessive act. To earn, both concerns its root action (possession) as found in the verb “have” but additionally, its inaction adds a concern for cumulative and end results in terms of obtaining a particular item. One might see in the sense of the Abrahamic religions and answer as such that: One could earn one’s way to heaven. In the case of Protestants, individuals thought similarly with hard work and cumulative wealth, one could be noted to earn their way to god and by extension, heaven (Weber, 1958). Though, besides wealth and its possession, one may earn such rewards, though they can be equally be conceived in terms of non-monetary value. For example, one may, earn, heaven as a place of being by following god’s biblical word or following their church and its philosophy and actions.

To earn, concerns the itemization and its eventual cumulation of something by the individual in question. The action “to earn” unlike the verb “have” as located in the phrase “I have”, is rooted more actively in economic reality rather than the simple

naming of an item, obtaining and possessing of that item under the observation of “I”. It is a metaphorical form of addition located, spaced between, the interaction of physical form and space called environment. One cannot earn without a physical (or corporal) form, nor if that form is not located in a recognizable physical space called an environment, any interaction that seeks towards producing the means “to earn” cannot progenerate.

It must be noted that although there is overlap one cannot engage in the verbs “have” and “earn” simultaneously with equal regard. This inability to engage equally with both verbs stems from the logic that one cannot earn what one already possesses, though what one possesses might be something that was earned. For example, one may propose that they had something good come their way, on this or that day, though on this note the “something good” which could depending on the individual come from some supernatural source was not yet possessed, so in turn the “something good” had to depending on the individual’s beliefs be earn – but, both cannot necessarily be equally the case. On the backward relationship present between “have” and “earn” where something that was possessed could have been earned over time, one may utilize what has been accumulated in a manner that depletes the individual’s possessed item acquired through the action, earn.

Earn is a word and verb that induces process and demarcation of individual steps that again ideally results in a certain accumulated possession. Questions often promote discussion related to “earn” when produced in terms of logic similar to that of the action “have” and appear in the form of Wh- (Q) question, specifically those related to How (e.g., How did ____ do ____? or How did ____ get to ____?). Moreover, in cases of “have” which feature answers of the present tense to the question asked (i.e., I have ____.) “earn” by its nature produces natural answers in the past tense (or if a question is asked in the middle of the set of acts by which one is looking to “earn” it may process to future tense), (e.g., They earned a spot in the organization through hard work.). Produced answers differ from their function in terms of “earn”, than looking simply at the term independently, when utilizing answers with “earn”, the answer begins to communicate an overall moralistic narrative that showcases and directs importance for the action present within that particular interaction. In answers, no longer is the main constitution of “earn” merely that of culmination, and by extension, fails to work simply as a form of metaphorical addition, but instead, the answer then becomes a direct form of instructive direction from the respondent.

Spend

While “earn” represents a form of addition, a cumulation, the verb “spend” communicates loss. The action that “spend” produces originates from the verb “have,” though the action differs. To engage in the verb “spend,” a particular amount of loss of a particular possession must occur, not through charity nor incident, but instead individual volition. One, for example, may spend the time they possess with others, such relatives or friends. Or, one might note that they did spend time avoiding god and my duty to him.

Possessions such as time or energy often act as items that individuals can under their own volition, lose selectively – though, times exist where one’s time or

energy may be forcibly taken by another, this is the antithesis of spend in an economic sense utilized here (e.g., prison time, illness, homework, and chores). Furthermore, this loss, although it is voluntary, is regularly situated in some purpose, rather than mere charity. Loss is commonly noted as containing a negative element both in terms of its denotation and connotation, though such a notion does not need to be rooted strictly in negativity. Such a definition of a specific phenomenon is rooted in the individual, as Frankl's quote located in *Man's Search for Meaning* maintains: "Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances" (1963, p. xi).

As fact, if by natural law, when individuals spend such actions are in their nature limited and, by extension, intrinsic to the possession is a particular cost. Indeed, every possession is limited and when the verb "spend" can be engaged, again it is an action that is selective as the cost must be manageable to the individual partaking – in terms of the selectivity of cost and where "spend" is engaged, Milgram (1970, p. 1462) wrote of the "principles of selectivity . . . formulated such that investment of time and energy are reserved for carefully defined inputs." Though it must be said that "things" defy limitation due in part to their generality, where "items" that bear the possessed constitution exhibits the label specific, though the phrase "I have" and its other derivatives. Transformation of things into possessed items impacts the action when individuals spend imparting specific identity on a general "thing," allowing it as an "item" to be used personally as specified in the action "I spend time studying the bible" which suggests that the time utilized in this activity is personalized and specifically set aside linguistically for this individual to pay the cost.

When engaging in the action, to spend, unlike with the verb "earn," the limit of the activity is not strictly addressed at the end of its engagement. First observations might communicate that an item is sustained by a stressed limit based upon the particular cost to be incurred; however, such a possessed item as energy, for example, can increase after depletion – this increase, though, is only temporary. Colloquially, this increase in energy is called one's "second wind." Or, as psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi showed through his research on flow and flow state, being in the flow state made: "The awareness of time [disappears]" (Csikszentmihalyi & Asakawa, 2016, p. 6). So in this case, rather than a temporary increase, the particular limit originally to be set resists existence due in part to one's disappearance of time awareness – this is something that cannot occur with regards to the verb "earn" – which means that one could spend past their usual limits, thus possibly straining existing possible relationships in the process.

Spend is a word and again a verb, that, just like has been discussed in documents, documents a loss of something through a voluntary manner. This action may be demonstrated through a question, such as a youth inquiring whether they could spend time with their friends or, in other cases, doing some activity. Without veering into monetary territory, the verb spend is commonly associated with a category: Polar question. "Can I hang out with my friends?" is a typical question which utilizes and points explicitly to the verb "spend," and requires an answer: Yes or No (see Enfield, 2017, Chap. 2). The question form restricts the amount of information that can be provided (unless one wants to inquire about the action "spend" in the

context of monetary activity), this means that not much can be undertaken as a result, when one does inquire.

Invest

As already seen one can possess a general thing transforming it into a specific possessed item; moreover, certain instances can see the culmination of a particular possessed item. With the verb “invest” the item being possessed is neither centered in the verbs “earn” or “spend,” instead such an action is iteratively produced, not towards a terminal position, but instead towards the incremental encroachment overlying the move towards a certain position.

The phrase “to invest” traditionally is associated with money and the economy. Though one can also “invest” with non-material items including time. One can for example, invest in the reading or studying the scriptures. By engaging in the action “invest” one traditionally has been assumed that the recipient will improve or that the subsequent payment will be larger than when the individual started to invest.

When engaging in the action “invest” one may be continuous or discontinuous in how they invest. A friend may, for example, invest a couple of hours watching a piece of media as research one single time; or, an individual may invest their time repeatedly over time with some religious or secular humanitarian cause or occupation. How much one might invest often involves considering what one might (or is to) do in an event (i.e., the nature of the event). And, again while one might “spend” time or energy it is the intent of the action performed that transforms or will transform one’s transaction of loss to one where the end product can be greater than what was initially possessed.

On another note, when it is discussed in its monetary form, invest can be observed as complicated or sophisticated; this complicated nature can be linked to the action “invest” as it is presently being discussed. On the idea of “invest,” a certain amount of time or energy may be used depending on the event (or activity), though in planning to “invest,” sophistication may follow, creating difficulty when attempting to “invest.”

The word and verb, invest, most often is synergized explicitly with questions such as “How did your organization get to where it is today?” where the blank could symbolize money, if one was talking about financials, or in other terms one might place “time” or possibly “energy,” however, without discussing financials the manners for our question formation are limited, and thus limited in answer.

Biographical Note

Nicholas Elliott (Ph.D) is an independent communication scholar and a recent graduate from the University of Southern Mississippi. He received his bachelor’s degree in multidisciplinary studies from Stephen F. Austin State University and two master’s degrees from the University of St. Thomas in general psychology and international studies. His primary research interest is in question-asking, specifically related to the factors and manners in which questions are formulated, issued, and the individual and social reactions to their issuance.

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