

“Omnipotence”

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om-nip'-o-tens:

1. Terms and Usage:

The noun “omnipotence” is not found in the English Bible, nor any noun exactly corresponding to it in the original Hebrew or Greek.

The adjective “omnipotent” occurs in Revelation 19:6 in the King James Version; the Greek for this, *pantokrator*, occurs also in 2 Corinthians 6:18; Revelation 1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 15:3, 16:7, 14, 19:15, 21:22 (in all of which the King James Version and the Revised Version (British and American) render “almighty”). It is also found frequently in the Septuagint, especially in the rendering of the divine names *Yahweh tsebha'oth* and *'El Shaddai*. In *pantokrator*, the element of “authority,” “sovereignty,” side by side with that of “power,” makes itself more distinctly felt than it does to the modern ear in “omnipotent,” although it is meant to be included in the latter also. Compare further *ho dunatos*, in Luke 1:49.

2. Inherent in Old Testament Names of God:

The formal conception of omnipotence as worked out in theology does not occur in the Old Testament. The substance of the idea is conveyed in various indirect ways. The notion of “strength” is inherent in the Old Testament conception of God from the beginning, being already represented in one of the two divine names inherited by Israel from ancient Semitic religion, the name *'El*. According to one etymology it is also inherent in the other, the name *'Elohim*, and in this case the plural form, by bringing out the fullness of power in God, would mark an approach to the idea of omnipotence. See “God, Names of.”

In the patriarchal religion the conception of “might” occupies a prominent place, as is indicated by the name characteristic of this period, *'El Shaddai*; compare Genesis 17:1, 28:3, 35:11, 43:14, 48:3, 49:24-25; Exodus 6:3. This name, however, designates the divine power as standing in the service of His covenant-relation to the patriarchs, as transcending Nature and overpowering it in the interests of redemption.

Another divine name which signalizes this attribute is *Yahweh tsebha'oth*, Yahweh of Hosts. This name, characteristic of the prophetic period, describes God as the King surrounded and followed by the angelic hosts, and since the might of an oriental king is measured by the splendor of his retinue, as of great, incomparable power, the King Omnipotent (Psalm 24:10; Isaiah 2:12, 6:3, 5, 8:13; Jeremiah 46:18; Malachi 1:14).

Still another name expressive of the same idea is *'Abhir*, “Strong One,” compounded with Jacob or Israel (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 132:2, 5; Isaiah 1:24, 49:26, 60:16). Further, *'El Gibbor*, “God-Hero” (Isaiah 9:6) (of the Messiah; compare for the adjective *gibbor*, Jeremiah 20:11); and the figurative designation of God as *Tsur*, “Rock,” occurring especially in the address to God in the Psalter (Isaiah 30:29, the King James Version “Mighty One”). The specific energy with which the divine nature operates finds expression also in the name *'El Chai*, “Living God,” which God bears over against the

impotent idols (1 Samuel 17:26, 36; 2 Kings 19:4, 16; Psalm 18:46; Jeremiah 23:36; Daniel 6:20, 26). An anthropomorphic description of the power of God is in the figures of “hand,” His “arm,” His “finger.” See “God.”

3. Other Modes of Expression:

Some of the attributes of Yahweh have an intimate connection with His omnipotence. Under this head especially God’s nature as Spirit and His holiness come under consideration. The representation of God as Spirit in the Old Testament does not primarily refer to the incorporeality of the divine nature, but to its inherent energy. The physical element underlying the conception of Spirit is that of air in motion, and in this at first not the invisibility but the force forms the point of comparison. The opposite of “Spirit” in this sense is “flesh,” which expresses the weakness and impotence of the creature over against God (Isaiah 2:22, 31:3).

The holiness of God in its earliest and widest sense (not restricted to the ethical sphere) describes the majestic, specifically divine character of His being, that which evokes in man religious awe. It is not a single attribute coordinated with others, but a peculiar aspect under which all the attributes can be viewed, that which renders them distinct from anything analogous in the creature (1 Samuel 2:2; Hosea 11:9). In this way holiness becomes closely associated with the power of God, indeed sometimes becomes synonymous with divine power equals omnipotence (Exodus 15:11; Numbers 20:12) and especially in Ezekiel, where God’s “holy name” is often equivalent to His renown for power, hence, interchangeable with His “great name” (Ezekiel 36:20-24). The objective Spirit as a distinct hypostasis and the executive of the Godhead on its one side also represents the divine power (Isaiah 32:15; Matthew 12:28; Luke 1:35, 4:14; Acts 10:38; Romans 15:19; 1 Corinthians 2:4).

4. Unlimited Extent of the Divine Power:

In all these forms of expression a great and specifically divine power is predicated of God. Statements in which the absolutely unlimited extent of this power is explicitly affirmed are rare. The reason, however, lies not in any actual restriction placed on this power, but in the concrete practical form of religious thinking which prevents abstract formulation of the principle. The point to be noticed is that no statement is anywhere made exempting aught from the reach of divine power. Nearest to a general formula come such statements as nothing is “too hard for Yahweh” (Genesis 18:14; Jeremiah 32:17); or “I know that thou canst do everything” or “God . . . hath done whatever he pleased” (Psalm 115:3, 135:6), or, negatively, no one “can hinder” God, in carrying out His purpose (Isaiah 43:13), or God’s hand is not “waxed short” (Numbers 11:23); in the New Testament: “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27); “Nothing is impossible with God” [the Revised Version (British and American) “No word from God shall be void of power,” Luke 1:37]. Indirectly the omnipotence of God is implied in the effect ascribed to faith (Matthew 17:20 “Nothing shall be impossible unto you”; Mark 9:23 “All things are possible to him that believeth”), because faith puts the divine power at the disposal of the believer. On its subjective side the principle of inexhaustible power finds expression in Isaiah 40:28: God is not subject to weariness. Because God is conscious of the unlimited extent of His resources nothing is marvelous in His eyes (Zechariah 8:6).

5. Forms of Manifestation:

It is chiefly through its forms of manifestation that the distinctive quality of the divine power which renders it omnipotent becomes apparent. The divine power operates not merely in single concrete

acts, but is comprehensively related to the world as such. Both in Nature and history, in creation and in redemption, it produces and controls and directs everything that comes to pass. Nothing in the realm of actual or conceivable things is withdrawn from it (Amos 9:2-3; Daniel 4:35); even to the minutest and most recondite sequences of cause and effect it extends and masters all details of reality (Matthew 10:30; Luke 12:7). There is no accident (1 Samuel 6:9; compare with 1 Samuel 6:12; Proverbs 16:33). It need not operate through second causes; it itself underlies all second causes and makes them what they are.

It is creative power producing its effect through a mere word (Genesis 1:3; Deuteronomy 8:3; Psalm 33:9; Romans 4:17; Hebrews 1:3, 11:30). Among the prophets, especially Isaiah emphasizes this manner of the working of the divine power in its immediateness and suddenness (Isaiah 9:8, 17:13, 18:4-6, 29:5). All the processes of nature are ascribed to the causation of Yahweh (Job 5:9, 9:5; Isaiah 40:12; Amos 4:13, 5:8-9, 9:5-6). God's control of the sea is named as illustrative of this (Psalm 65:7, 104:9; Isaiah 50:2; Jeremiah 5:22, 31:35). The Old Testament seldom says "it rains" (Amos 4:7), but usually God causes it to rain (Leviticus 26:4; Deuteronomy 11:17; 1 Samuel 12:17; Job 36:27; Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17).

The same is true of the processes of history. God sovereignly disposes, not merely of Israel, but of all other nations, even of the most powerful, e.g. the Assyrians, as His instruments for the accomplishment of His purpose (Amos 1:1-2:3, 9:7; Isaiah 10:5, 15, 28:2, 45:1; Jeremiah 25:9, 27:6, 43:10). The prophets ascribe to Yahweh not merely relatively greater power than to the gods of the nations, but His power extends into the sphere of the nations, and the heathen gods are ignored in the estimate put upon His might (Isaiah 31:3).

Even more than the sphere of Nature and history, that of redemption reveals the divine omnipotence, from the point of view of the supernatural and miraculous. Thus Exodus 15 celebrates the power of Yahweh in the wonders of the exodus. It is God's exclusive prerogative to do wonders (Job 5:9, 9:10; Psalm 72:18); He alone can make "a new thing" (Numbers 16:30; Isaiah 43:19; Jeremiah 31:22). In the New Testament the great embodiment of this redemptive omnipotence is the resurrection of believers (Matthew 22:29; Mark 12:24) and specifically the resurrection of Christ (Romans 4:17, 21, 24; Ephesians 1:19); but it is evidenced in the whole process of redemption (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27; Romans 8:31; Ephesians 3:7, 20; 1 Peter 1:5; Revelation 11:17).

6. Significance for Biblical Religion:

The significance of the idea may be traced along two distinct lines. On the one hand the divine omnipotence appears as a support of faith. On the other hand it is productive of that specifically religious state of consciousness which Scripture calls "the fear of Yahweh." Omnipotence in God is that to which human faith addresses itself. In it lies the ground for assurance that He is able to save, as in His love that He is willing to save (Psalm 65:5-6, 72:18, 118:14-16; Ephesians 3:20).

As to the other aspect of its significance, the divine omnipotence in itself, and not merely for soteriological reasons, evokes a specific religious response. This is true, not only of the Old Testament, where the element of the fear of God stands comparatively in the foreground, but remains true also of the New Testament. Even in our Lord's teaching the prominence given to the fatherhood and love of God does not preclude that the transcendent majesty of the divine nature, including omnipotence,

is kept in full view and made a potent factor in the cultivation of the religious mind (Matthew 6:9). The beauty of Jesus' teaching on the nature of God consists in this, that He keeps the exaltation of God above every creature and His loving condescension toward the creature in perfect equilibrium and makes them mutually fructified by each other. Religion is more than the inclusion of God in the general altruistic movement of the human mind; it is a devotion at every point colored by the consciousness of that divine uniqueness in which God's omnipotence occupies a foremost place.