

“Omniscience”

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om-nish'-ens:

The term does not occur in Scripture, either in its nominal or in its adjectival form.

1. Words and Usage:

In the Old Testament it is expressed in connection with such words as *da'ath*, *binah*, *tebhunah*, *chokhmah*; also “seeing” and “hearing,” “the eye” and “the ear” occur as figures for the knowledge of God, as “arm,” “hand,” “finger” serve to express His power. In the New Testament are found *ginoskein*, *gnosis*, *eidennai*, *sophia*, in the same connections.

2. Tacit Assumption and Explicit Affirmation:

Scripture everywhere teaches the absolute universality of the divine knowledge. In the historical books, although there is no abstract formula, and occasional anthropomorphic references to God's taking knowledge of things occur (Genesis 11:5, 18:21; Deuteronomy 8:3) none the less the principle is everywhere presupposed in what is related about God's cognizance of the doings of man, about the hearing of prayer, the disclosing of the future (1 Samuel 16:7, 23:9-12; 1 Kings 8:39; 2 Chronicles 16:9). Explicit affirmation of the principle is made in the Psalter, the Prophets, the *chokhmah* literature and in the New Testament. This is due to the increased internalizing of religion, by which its hidden side, to which the divine omniscience corresponds, receives greater emphasis (Job 26:6, 28:24, 34:22; Psalm 139:12, 147:4; Proverbs 15:3, 11; Isaiah 40:26; Acts 1:24; Hebrews 4:13; Revelation 2:23).

3. Extends to All Spheres:

This absolute universality is affirmed with reference to the various categories that comprise within themselves all that is possible or actual. It extends to God's own being, as well as to what exists outside of Him in the created world. God has perfect possession in consciousness of His own being. The unconscious finds no place in Him (Acts 15:18; 1 John 1:5). Next to Himself God knows the world in its totality. This knowledge extends to small as well as to great affairs (Matthew 6:8, 32, 10:30); to the hidden heart and mind of man as well as to that which is open and manifest (Job 11:11, 34:21, 23; Psalm 14:2, 17:2, 33:13-18, 102:19, 139:1-4; Proverbs 5:21, 15:13; Isaiah 29:15; Jeremiah 17:10; Amos 4:13; Luke 16:15; Acts 1:24; 1 Thessalonians 2:4; Hebrews 4:13; Revelation 2:23). It extends to all the divisions of time, the past, present and future alike (Job 14:17; Psalm 56:8; Isaiah 41:22-24, 44:6-8; Jeremiah 1:5; Hosea 13:12; Malachi 3:16). It embraces that which is contingent from the human viewpoint as well as that which is certain (1 Samuel 23:9-12; Matthew 11:22-23).

4. Mode of the Divine Knowledge:

Scripture brings God's knowledge into connection with His omnipresence. Psalm 139 is the clearest expression of this. Omniscience is the omnipresence of cognition (Jeremiah 23:23). It is also closely related to God's eternity, for the latter makes Him in His knowledge independent of the limitations of time (Isaiah 43:8-12). God's creative relation to all that exists is represented as underlying His omniscience (Psalm 33:15, 97:9, 139:13; Isaiah 29:15). His all-comprehensive purpose forms the basis of His knowledge of all events and developments (Isaiah 41:22-27; Amos 3:7).

This, however, does not mean that God's knowledge of things is identical with His creation of them, as has been suggested by Augustine and others. The act of creation, while necessarily connected with the knowledge of that which is to be actual, is not identical with such knowledge or with the purpose on which such knowledge rests, for in God, as well as in man, the intellect and the will are distinct faculties. In the last analysis, God's knowledge of the world has its source in His self-knowledge. The world is a revelation of God. All that is actual or possible in it therefore is a reflection in created form of what exists uncreated in God, and thus the knowledge of the one becomes a reproduction of the knowledge of the other (Acts 17:27; Romans 1:20). The divine knowledge of the world also partakes of the quality of the divine self-knowledge in this respect, that it is never dormant. God does not depend for embracing the multitude and complexity of the existing world on such mental processes as abstraction and generalization.

The Bible nowhere represents Him as attaining to knowledge by reasoning, but everywhere as simply knowing. From what has been said about the immanent sources of the divine knowledge, it follows that the latter is not *a posteriori* derived from its objects, as all human knowledge based on experience is, but is exercised without receptivity or dependence. In knowing, as well as in all other activities of His nature, God is sovereign and self-sufficient. In cognizing the reality of all things He needs not wait upon the things, but draws His knowledge directly from the basis of reality as it lies in Himself. While the two are thus closely connected it is nevertheless of importance to distinguish between God's knowledge of Himself and God's knowledge of the world, and also between His knowledge of the actual and His knowledge of the possible. These distinctions mark off theistic conception of omniscience from the pantheistic idea regarding it. God is not bound up in His life with the world in such a sense as to have no scope of activity beyond it.

5. God's Omniscience and Human Freewill:

Since Scripture includes in the objects of the divine knowledge also the issue of the exercise of freewill on the part of man, the problem arises, how the contingent character of such decisions and the certainty of the divine knowledge can coexist. It is true that the knowledge of God and the purposive will of God are distinct, and that not the former but the latter determines the certainty of the outcome. Consequently the divine omniscience in such cases adds or detracts nothing in regard to the certainty of the event. God's omniscience does not produce but presupposes the certainty by which the problem is raised. At the same time, precisely because omniscience presupposes certainty, it appears to exclude every conception of contingency in the free acts of man, such as would render the latter in their very essence undetermined. The knowledge of the issue must have a fixed point of certainty to terminate upon, if it is to be knowledge at all. Those who make the essence of freedom absolute indeterminateness must, therefore, exempt this class of events from the scope of the divine omniscience. But this is contrary to all the testimony of Scripture, which distinctly makes God's absolute knowledge extend to such acts (Acts 2:23). It has been attempted to construe a peculiar form of the divine knowledge, which would relate to this class of acts specifically, the so-called *scientia media*, to be distinguished from the *scientia necessaria*, which has for its object God Himself, and the *scientia libera* which terminates upon the certainties of the world outside of God, as determined by His freewill. This *scientia media* would then be based on God's foresight of the outcome of the free choice of man. It would involve a knowledge of receptivity, a contribution to the sum total of what God knows derived from observation on His part of the world-process. That is to say, it would be knowledge *a posteriori* in essence, although not in point of time. It is, however, difficult to see

how such a knowledge can be possible in God, when the outcome is psychologically undetermined and undeterminable. The knowledge could originate no sooner than the determination originates through the free decision of man. It would, therefore, necessarily become an *a posteriori* knowledge in time as well as in essence. The appeal to God's eternity as bringing Him equally near to the future as to the present and enabling Him to see the future decisions of man's free will as though they were present cannot remove this difficulty, for when once the observation and knowledge of God are made dependent on any temporal issue, the divine eternity itself is thereby virtually denied. Nothing remains but to recognize that God's eternal knowledge of the outcome of the freewill choices of man implies that there enters into these choices, notwithstanding their free character, an element of predetermination, to which the knowledge of God can attach itself.

6. Religious Importance:

The divine omniscience is most important for the religious life. The very essence of religion as communion with God depends on His all-comprehensive cognizance of the life of man at every moment. Hence, it is characteristic of the irreligious to deny the omniscience of God (Psalm 10: 11-12, 94:7-9; Isaiah 29:15; Jeremiah 23:23; Ezekiel 8:12, 9:9). Especially along three lines this fundamental religious importance reveals itself:

- (a) it lends support and comfort when the pious suffer from the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of men;
- (b) it acts as a deterrent to those tempted by sin, especially secret sin, and becomes a judging principle to all hypocrisy and false security;
- (c) it furnishes the source from which man's desire for self-knowledge can obtain satisfaction (Psalm 19:12, 51:6, 139:23-24).