"In *Who Is God?*, John Markey's vast knowledge of the Christian tradition is distilled and explained in clear and simple language. But such clarity and simplicity are in no way a 'dumbing down' of the tradition's richness and complexity. On the contrary, it takes a master teacher to tell this story, and Markey succeeds admirably. Integral to the book as well are the artistic reflections of Greg Zuschlag and Paul Contino. They offer a wonderful context in which this story can come alive in readers' experience."

—Stephen B. Bevans, SVD
Louis J. Luzbetak, SVD, Professor of Mission and Culture
Catholic Theological Union

"Informed by the best of contemporary theology and biblical studies, John Markey's *Who Is God?* is wonderfully concise and surprisingly accessible. Carefully chosen poetry and literature serve as an entryway and invite the reader into a vision of a God of infinite loving compassion whose 'heart' is tuned to the cries of the poor. Remarkably thorough, Markey's narrative deftly surveys the major historical developments and key figures who have honed and plumbed this vision through the centuries and ends by revealing the contemporary relevance of such an understanding of God."

—Wendy M. Wright, PhD
Professor of Theology Creighton University

"John Markey's Who Is God? tackles a big question by telling the compelling story of a loving God who is profoundly interested in us, a God who is profoundly for us. With ample questions for reflection built around classic poetry and contemporary film, Who Is God? will prove a valuable conversation starter in college classrooms, parish programs, and adult study groups. It is a gift from teachers to teachers . . . and to their students."

—Edward P. Hahnenberg, PhD
John Carroll University

"'Who is God?' There is no more central—or highly debated—theological question. Drawing on the riches of the Christian, and specifically Catholic, tradition, as well as contemporary cultural resources, John Markey's Who Is God? is learned and poetic, engaging and accessible. Markey and his colleagues Greg Zuschlag and Paul Contino, master teachers all, have provided an excellent and creative text for a broad readership. Highly recommended for undergraduate students, pastoral ministers, faith-related discussion groups, and all engaged in the quest for ultimate meaning in human life."

—Mary Catherine Hilkert
University of Notre Dame

Author Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Greg Zuschlag for his help and friendship, and both Greg Zuschlag and Paul Contino for their invaluable contribution to this book. I would like to acknowledge the outstanding and dedicated work of my research assistant, Joseph August Higgins, and thank him. I am grateful for the insights and support of my friend Steve Bevans, my associate Theresa Galan-Bruce, my colleagues at Oblate School of Theology, and my Dominican brothers Wayne Cavalier and Ramón González. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Brad Harmon, Jerry Ruff, Paul Peterson, and especially Maura Thompson Hagarty, at Anselm Academic, for their support, advice, companionship, and trust.

Publisher Acknowledgments

Thank you to the following individuals who reviewed this work in progress:

Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Fordham University, Bronx, New York*

Paul F. Lakeland, *Fairfield University, Fairfield, Connecticut*

Who Is God?

Catholic Perspectives through the Ages

John J. Markey

ANSELM
ACADEMIC

Created by the publishing team of Anselm Academic.

Cover image: © Lukas-Art in Flanders VZW / Bridgeman Images

Printed in the United States of America

7074

ISBN 978-1-59982-850-3

Dedication

Thomas F. O'Meara, OP

Contents

Introduction

Enter the word *god* in any internet search engine and you will receive more than one billion results. Where to begin? Which god? How do you begin to sort through the innumerable versions, variations, and competing claims about God that each entry represents? Which God hears prayers, or answers them? Does God have concern for the whole world or only certain members of it? How do you narrow the search and determine which if any of these entries is helpful, interesting, or valuable, let alone true? Ultimately, the search for God depends on the context and reality out of which the searcher comes. The top of the internet list depends on the search engine used and the searcher's country and past search history.

The great question of the contemporary age is not whether God exists, but which God exists. That is, many people in the United States are most interested in asking about what kind of God is being presented first, before considering whether that particular portrait of God is real or not.[1] One cannot talk about God in the abstract. Talking about God ultimately depends on a complex web of history, beliefs, cultural and social conditions, and individual human experience. Narrowing the search ultimately depends upon one's historical context, specific questions, or personal needs or problems, as well as one's connection, by upbringing or choice, to a particular religious tradition. This short book attempts to convey one particular religious tradition's view of God: the Catholic, Christian tradition in the West. Catholics claim knowledge of God that is unique and special but also accessible to other people who will investigate what Catholics are trying to say. Adherents of this tradition have spent thousands of years trying to "make sense" of God.

Given the number of ways of understanding God, it is necessary to ask whether anyone or any tradition can ever be "right" about such a complex

1. See *www.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx* and *www.gallup.com/poll/147887/americans-continue-believe-god.aspx*. See also "American Piety in the 21st Century: New Insights to the Depth and Complexity of Religion in the US" (Selected Findings from The Baylor Religion Survey, Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, September 2006), 4–5.

subject. How do human beings know what is true, let alone what is true about God? To "make sense" of God must in some way follow the same process or rules that determine how humans make sense of anything else. Furthermore, if there is some way to make sense of God, why are there so many different and often competing interpretations of God? Shouldn't human beings be able to come up with some kind of consensus about God in the same way they do about mathematical, chemical, or physical realities? Part of the complexity of understanding God is rooted in the way that human beings know anything at all. If the reality of God pervades all aspects of human experience, then the attempt to make sense of it will require an integrated examination of all the dimensions of human experience.

Ways of Knowing

Those who study human thought and the ways that we make sense of the world recognize that people generally employ two different but interrelated ways of grasping or knowing reality. There are multiple ways to categorize these two dimensions but in general the human mind "knows things" in two ways: the prerational (or nonrational) way and the rational way. Nonrational or prerational does not mean irrational or unreasonable. Prerational knowing involves sensations, perceptions, feelings, intuitions, imagination, memories, creative insights, and random ideas. These are part of people's thinking continually, and they create the conditions for rational, logical reflection. The prerational dimension of knowing sets the stage for the rational dimension, which primarily serves to clarify, interpret, and judge the data it receives from the prerational dimension of the mind. The rational mind makes hypotheses, deduces the implications that would be the case if a hypothesis were true, and sets out to produce, find, investigate, and analyze data to determine whether these deductions and the hypotheses that give rise to them are in fact true. Furthermore, the rational dimension of the mind not only interprets data it receives from the other dimension of the mind, it considers strategies and makes plans to act on or implement these ideas. In this way the human mind continually engages reality, interprets it, acts on it, and then evaluates those actions. The nonrational and rational dimensions of the mind therefore are not in competition with each other; neither is the "true" or "best" way to know reality. Both forms of knowing are always complementary and interacting.

So for instance, imagine that you are driving to school. A thousand different things may call for your attention: the cars in front of and behind you, flashing lights, stop signs, sounds from the radio, a conversation with other people riding with you, the shops that you are passing, people walking along the street,

birds in the trees. Suddenly, a ball rolls into the street in front of you. You react quickly by applying the brakes before hitting the ball. You turn instinctually to look for the child who you presume from past experience will be coming after the ball. The presence of this child makes it evident to you that you are passing an elementary school and playground that you had not noticed before. After the child has picked up the ball, you automatically proceed more slowly and with more caution because you always drive carefully when you are near a school or playground. Noticing the school, you also recall your own childhood and briefly ponder your elementary school days and how you used to play ball at recess. This nostalgic reflection cedes to an immediate concern when you come to a four-way stop sign and have to determine when it is your turn to cross. You suddenly remember that the street ahead is closed for a university event and therefore you must decide upon a different route to get to the campus. After thinking through the possibilities, you go left up two streets to a major road that you usually avoid. After checking to ensure that the way is clear you proceed through the intersection, noticing that one of the cars at the intersection happens to be the exact one that you dream about owning someday.

Most daily experience is filled with nonrational dimensions: noticing passing stores and trees, listening to the radio, being aware of other people in the car, paying attention to the street ahead, remembering the past, feeling happy or content, desiring a new car. Sometimes something will intervene in this ongoing flow of sensations, intuitions, memories, feelings, and perceptions and cause you to make a sudden judgement based on memory, a perceived threat, or practical, learned experience. Occasionally, you will be confronted with rational considerations that require a more sustained process of reflection, like deciding what speed to go in a certain area or adjusting your route to school in response to new information.

Daily life constantly requires human beings to use both dimensions of their minds to experience, make sense of, and make decisions about reality. The jobs or careers that people choose often focus particular attention on one aspect of knowing and interpreting reality. Many jobs in fact require people to "abstract" from their immediate experience to focus on a broader concern or interest in which they specialize and to which they devote much of their lives, becoming experts. In this sense, human knowledge is always both immediate and direct *and* a product of long-term investigation and development. People can literally know more and more as time goes on, as well as constantly learn new things or have new experiences that change or expand what they already know. Human knowledge therefore constantly emerges from personal experience but also from the sharing of these experiences with other human beings. In this sense, human knowing is virtually infinite and can develop from generation to generation, age to age, through both nonrational and rational processes.

Thinking about God

Theology is thinking about God. One can think about or try to understand God through both dimensions of human knowing. Such things as poems, paintings, films, stories, gestures, and prayers can convey human experiences of God as much or more than an essay or an article in a journal. To do theology in an academic sense, however, requires one to think rationally about God, and to employ the same processes and use the same methods as any other kind of rational investigation. One develops a hypothesis about the existence of God or the nature of God based on all kinds of prerational data, including perceptions, intuitions, imagination, memories, stories, visions, and creative insights. Once a person or a group of people develop a hypothesis about God, the theologian sets out to analyze this hypothesis; understand its development and implications; deduce its consequences; identify data that clarifies, confirms, or challenges these deductions; and then consider, judge, and strategize what needs to be done in the light of this analytic process. When one studies a topic as far-reaching and complex as God, one can assume that this process will go on indefinitely and will only occasionally produce final or absolute conclusions. Normally, this process will arrive at tentative decisions and conditional conclusions that allow the process to continue but that may be subject to revision as time goes on and new data emerge. Theology is also such a general term that it often refers to many dimensions of this investigative process.

What Is Theology?

Theology, literally "God-talk," from *theos* ("God") and *logia* ("speech"), refers to the task of critical reflection upon and pastoral application of the meaning of God's message revealed in the Christian Scriptures. Theology asks questions such as, "What does the Bible say about this subject?" "How has the church interpreted this teaching over the centuries?" "How does this teaching apply to today's Christian audience?" The goal of theology is to present the Christian message in an accessible way to the church and to the world.

Sources for Understanding God

Christian theology likewise depends on both the nonrational and the rational dimensions to "paint" a full picture of God because ultimately God is more complex than any single interpretation can convey. The two main sources of the Christian understanding of God are the Bible and the Christian church. The Bible, written over many centuries, has two main parts: the Hebrew and the

Christian Scriptures (sometimes referred to by Christians as the Old and New Testaments). The Hebrew Scriptures, written over hundreds of years, seek to tell the story of how the Hebrew people were established by God, rescued from slavery, and given a land and special relationship with God that was continually challenged by sinfulness and lack of faithfulness of these chosen people. The Hebrew Scriptures are not a history book or even a single narrative story. Rather, these Scriptures include stories, poems, prayers, lists of rules and laws, prophetic monologues, and theological reflections that were drawn together over the centuries to form a text considered to be holy and sacred by Jews, Christians, and Muslims, among others.

The Christian Scriptures, written during a span of fifty to sixty years, are also composed of a variety of kinds of texts. These include stories, letters, hymns, personal memories, and legends. This collection of texts attempts to tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth and the experience of his life, death, and Resurrection, and of a community of followers (eventually called the *church*) that emerged out of his extraordinary life and that began to tell both Jesus' story and their own story of following him. Together the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures form the basis of all subsequent Christian reflection on God and the relationship of God to the world and human persons. Scripture is the foundation upon which all Christian theological reflection is built.

The second source of Christian theology is the church. The church here refers to the community of believers that come out of the historical experience of Jesus Christ and that first proclaimed him and his message and produced the Christian Scriptures that explain his life, message, and meaning to the first and all subsequent generations of Christians. The church is not primarily an organization or institution, but a community of people who hold common beliefs about the unique way that God has worked through the historical person of Christ and continues working through the people that follow him. Over time this community developed ideas, theories, practices, rituals, and lifestyles that aided it in continually interpreting Jesus' life and message for their own lives. This ongoing process of interpretation from generation to generation throughout the centuries can be called a *tradition*. This tradition also forms a foundation that contemporary Christians refer to when they consider how they should understand and interpret God in their own lives. Theology is the process of interpreting both Scripture and the Christian (or church) tradition in any contemporary context or present historical circumstance. Theology seeks to "make sense" of what Christians believe God has revealed through the Scriptures and tradition to those people who are trying to live as Christians in a particular place and time. In this sense, theology represents the ongoing attempt of the Christian community to understand, judge, and act in the present time based on the past experiences of the community.

Overview of This Book

This small book attempts to lay a Western, Catholic, Christian understanding of God. As such, its goal is to do theology through a variety of modes, employing both nonrational and rational means to explore a Christian interpretation of God. This study is synthetic in that it tries to bring together some traditional Christian understandings of God with some nonrational attempts to understand God and God's presence in human history. Contemporary theology has become increasingly interested in the artistic expressions of the human experience of the divine. The visual arts, music, poetry, drama, and literature have all become important for theologians trying to reflect on the profound mystery of God.

This book invites readers to engage both the prerational and rational dimensions of their minds to explore the mystery of God for themselves. This book begins by inviting readers to watch scenes from a movie, *Les Misérables*, which has been adapted from a nineteenth-century French novel. These scenes convey a creative and imaginative reflection on the nature of God's mercy and love for human beings and the need for human beings to share in that love. The second chapter begins with a poem, *God's Grandeur*, by Gerard Manley Hopkins. This poem artistically interprets the understanding of God that its author learned as a young man studying to be a Roman Catholic priest. Again, the hope is that by combining rational theology with a remarkable poem, readers will consider the implications of the rational material in terms of broader, nonrational dimensions of human life. The authors, Greg Zuschlag, Paul Contino, and myself, believe that explorations of the major themes that emerge out of the Christian tradition are best explored through both modes of human knowing.

This study is not exhaustive or complete in that it does not investigate every possible interpretation of God offered in either Scripture or even the Western Catholic tradition. Rather, as described above it uses a rational process to determine a hypothesis, consider its implications, and search for evidence that supports or challenges that hypothesis, with the goal of helping contemporary students of theology to think more clearly about their own experience and interpretation of God. Often you have to begin by choosing something that is known and available, then rationally and intuitively try to determine if this interpretation—this hypothesis—makes sense to you and for you. What follows then is an analysis of one particular hypothesis about God that one specific community developed over more than two thousand years.

1

CHAPTER

God: Scriptural and Cultural Conceptions

Throughout the Western world, and within Christianity and specifically Catholicism, attempts to address the question of God have drawn most heavily upon two distinct but interconnected cultural realities. The first is the ancient Near-Eastern world of the Hebrew people, living in and around modern-day Israel or Palestine. The second is the classical, Greco-Roman world. These two cultural ancestors intertwine in the two major sections of the central sacred text for Christianity, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. The following discussion will trace the main contours of this history.[1]

For Christians, God ultimately reveals Godself through the life and preaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus, as a Jew, inherited the scriptural and cultural conception of God portrayed in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the dynamic Jewish culture in which he lived. Jesus' life and teaching, the interpretation of his message and destiny by his earliest followers, and the Christian Scriptures that followed can only be fully comprehended by understanding the underlying Hebrew tradition. This chapter explores that tradition and its reappropriation by Jesus and his followers.

In addition, this chapter invites readers to consider the nature of God by exploring the film *Les Misérables* in conjunction with learning about the Catholic tradition's understanding of God. First, a sidebar introduces the film and guides readers to view and think about select scenes. Text boxes placed throughout the chapter pose questions for further consideration of the film's messages and their relevance for exploring the nature of God. Finally, the chapter's conclusion presents several viewers' thoughts about the film's theology of God.

---

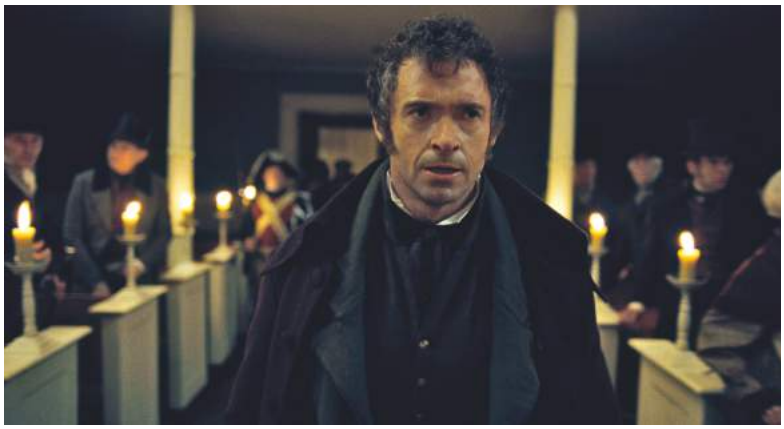
1. See Paul E. Capetz, *God: A Brief History*, Facets (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 1–30, for more information regarding the two cultural and scriptural origins of the Christian conception of God.

GOD IN FILM

Exploring *Les Misérables*

Greg Zuschlag[2]

Many consider Victor Hugo's 1862 *Les Misérables* among the great classic novels. Many who have not read the book know the story from the stage musical or one of the four film adaptations, including director Tom Hooper's 2012 adaptation starring Hugh Jackman and Anne Hathaway.



Hugh Jackman as Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*

While not an explicitly religious work, *Les Mis*—as it is popularly known—is also recognized by many as embodying several theological and spiritual themes, particularly the nature of redemption, forgiveness, and conversion as well as the question of the primacy of mercy or grace over justice and the law. While all of these are appropriate routes for exploring the musical film, *Les Mis* also says much about the nature of God. As one of the key characters says at the close of the film: "To love another person is to see the face of God."

Plot Summary

Les Mis is set in France some twenty-six years after the beginning of the French Revolution. The monarchy has been reestablished to the

Continued

2. Greg Zuschlag is assistant professor of systematic theology at Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas.

GOD IN FILM: EXPLORING *LES MISÉRABLES* *Continued*

disappointment of many of the working class and poor. The story follows a decades-long attempt by a former prisoner, Jean Valjean (Hugh Jackman), to evade arrest by the doggedly determined Police Inspector Javert (Russell Crowe) for breaking the terms of his parole. In the midst of this struggle, Valjean rescues Cosette, the young daughter of a poor factory worker, Fantine, from her caretakers, an innkeeper couple, who are exploiting her as slave labor. Valjean's decision to care for and raise Cosette alters his life forever as she later, as a young woman, falls in love with the student revolutionary leader, Marius. The story reaches its climax as the lives of these characters become further intertwined in the June Rebellion in the streets of Paris. Most scenes take place on the streets (and in the sewers) of Paris; the grit and the grime everywhere and on everyone gives the viewer a sense of the true harshness of life during the period. The story's title doesn't translate so much as "the miserable ones," which is what we think of when we are sick or depressed, but rather as "the dispossessed" or even as "the outsiders,"[3] which brings to mind the incredible poverty and inequality experienced during the time after the French Revolution. In the first scene, Jean Valjean, who has just been released from a nineteen-year prison term for stealing bread for his starving sister, is found sleeping in the doorway of kindly Bishop Bienvenu (French for "welcome"). Instead of throwing him out, the bishop invites Valjean into his residence. Watch the scene "The Bishop" (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhpwV4cwB4o*; time: 0:03:19) and then take a moment to reflect upon the following questions:

- What do you think about Valjean's behavior in the bishop's house? Does it make sense? Does it seem right? Why or why not?
- What is the reaction of the bishop's maids and the gendarme who have caught Valjean? Does their reaction make sense? Why or why not?
- Does the bishop's response to Valjean's theft surprise you? Why or why not? How has he "saved" Valjean's "soul for God"?

In the film's next scene, "Valjean's Soliloquy," Valjean is deeply affected by the bishop's treatment of him. Holding his parole papers, which identify him as an ex-convict, he utters a soliloquy or prayer to God.

Continued

3. Alleyn, Susanne. "No, It's Not Actually the French Revolution: Les Misérables and History." *Historical Fiction eBooks*. Historical Fiction Author's Cooperative. Jan. 7, 2013.

GOD IN FILM: EXPLORING *LES MISÉRABLES* *Continued*

Watch Valjean's Soliloquy (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=JP31L6AhB3M*; time: 0:03:38) and reflect upon the following questions:

- What is Valjean's initial response to the bishop? What happens to him during his "soliloquy"? What kind of "new story must begin"? What does the camera work and the music at the end of the scene seem to be saying?
- Have you seen or experienced anything that you might compare to what happens in the scene? If yes, describe this as best you can.

Following this exchange with the bishop, Valjean starts a new life with a new identity. However, since he has broken his parole, the law is looking for him. In this scene, Valjean discovers that another man has been arrested as him and is to be sent to prison. Here Valjean faces his first real challenge to leading a different life than the one of his past. Watch the scene "Who Am I?" (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2sanq2SM0k*; time: 0:02:47) and reflect upon the following questions:

- What is Valjean's moral dilemma when he sings "Who Am I?" at the end of the scene ?
- What would you have done if you were in his shoes? Could Valjean have chosen any other way? Why? Why not?

Most of the rest of the film chronicles how Valjean goes on to live a life of sacrifice, forgiveness, and love, despite the fact that society and the law still consider him a criminal. In the very last scene in the film, Valjean is in a convent, exhausted and near the end of his life, but undiminished in spirit. Accompanied by his loving adopted daughter, Cosette, and her husband, Valjean is escorted to the afterlife by Cosette's mother, Fantine, who died sacrificing herself for her daughter. As Valjean "passes over" he is reunited with the many people who have died during the course of the film. Watch the film's final scene (*www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dFIz5ZG4DQ*; time: 0:03:45) and reflect upon the following questions:

- What do you make of Valjean's dying words as Fantine begins to sing? How is love understood in the scene? What does this scene call viewers to do in this life?
- What is the significance of the final anthem sung by the dead, who refer to themselves as the "wretched of the earth"? What does it mean when they sing "we will live again in freedom in the garden of

Continued

GOD IN FILM: EXPLORING *LES MISÉRABLES* *Continued*

the Lord" and "somewhere beyond the barricades is there a world you long to see"? What is the "tomorrow" of which they sing?

Below the Surface

Analyzing theological themes in *Les Mis* reveals something about the Catholic view of God, which is the subject of this short book. In the scenes discussed above, two figures stand out for theological consideration: the bishop and Jean Valjean. The bishop seems to eschew the human tendency to turn away from others who are *les misérables*. Instead of throwing out the homeless ex-convict Valjean as a trespasser, the bishop invites him in like an honored guest, feeds him, and gives him a warm bed on which to rest. Moreover, when the down-and-out Valjean steals from him and is brought back to be punished, the bishop, contrary to what many might do, not only forgives him but allows him to keep that which he has stolen and gives him even more. At the close of the scene, the bishop tells him that by doing so, he has "saved [Valjean's] soul for God."

The final scene of the movie shows Valjean near death in the convent, a place of holiness. Valjean hands Cossette what he calls a "confession," which tells the life story of one transformed by God's grace. As he dies, he is joined by Fantine and the bishop. Together they sing, "And remember the truth that once was spoken, to love another person is to see the face of God." This is the key to understanding the film's message about the nature of God. Reflect upon these questions:

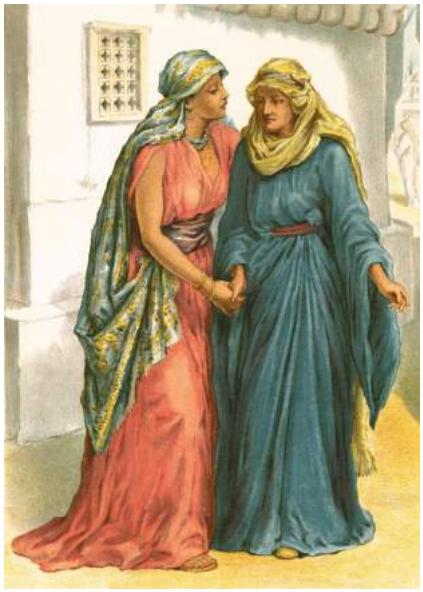
- What does the statement imply about the nature of God?
- As you read this chapter, consider how this statement and the film's message about the nature of God relate to the understanding of God presented in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, as discussed in this chapter.

God in the Hebrew Scriptures

Genesis (Greek for "beginning") is the name given to the first book of the Hebrew Bible. In one sense, the book is so named because it offers an account of God's creation of the world and of human beings. The main subject matter of the book, however, is the long and complex story of God's unique relationship with the Hebrew people and how that relationship began, according to Hebrew tradition.

The Hebrew Scriptures

The Hebrew Scriptures, or *Tanakh* in Hebrew, are essentially the same writings that compose the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The *Tanakh* is composed of three major sections, the *Torah* (or Law), the *Nevi'im* (or Prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (or Writings). The word *Tanakh* is an acronym formed from the first letter of these three parts: *T*orah-*N*evi'im-*K*etuvim =*TNK*. The Torah contains Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and is the source and foundation of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Torah contains the religious, ethical, and moral laws given to the Hebrew people, and tells how God gave the Hebrew people these laws and established his covenant with them. In turn, the Prophets and the Writings represent a retelling of the Torah in new situations and times responding to concerns and issues facing the Hebrew people and serves as a continual reminder for them to remain faithful to the covenant of God and to God himself, who is the source of their life and identity.



Private Collection / © Look and Learn / Bridgeman Images

Ruth, in the book of that name, promises her mother-in-law that she will never leave her or forsake her (Ruth 1:16–17). In so doing, she illustrates the steadfast interpersonal commitment implicit in the biblical concept of covenant.

In most ancient religions, people offered their gods sacrifices, gifts, or promises, expecting that the gods would then grant them safety, good fortune, or specific benefits. In effect, their relationship with their gods was based on a *quid pro quo* (something for something) agreement, like a modern contract. For example, when you buy something from a vendor, say Amazon.com, you enter into a contractual agreement with them in which you "give" them *X* amount of money and they "give" you *Y* product. A contractual relationship is utterly conditional, contingent, short term, and is broken if one of the parties fails to uphold their end of the bargain. That is, if Amazon doesn't deliver the product, the customer isn't obligated to pay. Conversely, if a customer doesn't pay for an item, Amazon isn't obligated to deliver the goods.

The ancient Hebrew concept of "covenant" is like such a contract, only there is much more to it. Covenants function more like treaties, agreements that concern how two parties relate to or treat each other. Covenants bind two parties to one another for the long term by commitment and oath or pledge. If one of the parties fails to live up to the terms of the covenant, not only are there repercussions, but the covenant—unlike a contract—continues to exist.

Reflect and Discuss

Do the scenes from *Les Misérables* shed light on the nature of covenants and contracts? In what ways does the relationship between the bishop and Jean Valjean represent a covenant, or a contract? How might their relationship inform issues such as justice, punishment, and right and wrong when thinking about notions of God and God's relationship to humanity?

In one of the central biblical stories in the book of Genesis, God approaches a man named Abram (later known as Abraham) and offers to make a covenant with him (Gen. 12:1–7, 17:1–22). Abram is an old man with no heirs and therefore his family name and lineage will die out with him. God offers to give Abraham an heir and to create a great nation out of his bloodline. The God that makes this incredible offer to Abraham is the same God who in earlier chapters of the book of Genesis has created the universe and established all the creatures and people in the world. This God is not just one local or tribal god, but is the source of all that exists and has power over the whole of reality. God makes this covenant with Abraham without any conditions or exchanges—there is no contract as such. While Abraham barely seems to comprehend this offer, he accepts it and places his complete trust in God's promise.

In this story, the ordinary pattern and understanding of religion in the ancient Near East is profoundly altered in a way that makes the Hebrew faith—and the Hebrew God—unique. God in the Hebrew Scriptures is always the one who reveals, initiates, invites, and offers the relationship with human beings. God is also revealed as forgiving, re-calling, and willing to reconcile with people when they betray or break off this relationship. God does not place preconditions on God's love or favor. Nor in this case does God require something of Abraham and his descendants in exchange for God's blessings. The God of the Hebrew Scriptures turns ancient expectations on their head.

This remarkable understanding of God is developed in two more books of the Torah: Exodus and Deuteronomy. By the end of the book of Genesis,

Abraham's descendants have become a very large tribal family. Seeking relief from a famine, they go to Egypt. There they grow into a large people, but over time the leadership of Egypt comes to see the Hebrews as an underclass that they can enslave. Exodus tells the story of how God hears the cries of his people suffering in Egypt, rescues them through the leadership of Moses, and promises to give them a land of their own. Again, at no point does God place preconditions on this intervention, nor does God do it in response to some kind of contract or sacrifice: the suffering of the people is sufficient to motivate God's action.[4] Clearly, the image emerging is that of a God of generosity, mercy, and compassion.

The Divine Name

During this story a new aspect of the Hebrew understanding of God emerges: the divine name. God reveals the divine name to Moses when God calls Moses to return to Egypt and rescue the Hebrew people. Moses asks what he should tell the people when they ask him the name of the God that sent him. God's answer is complex.

> God replied to Moses: "I am who I am." Then he added: "This is what you will tell the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God spoke further to Moses: "This is what you will say to the Israelites: The Lord [literally, *Yahweh*] . . . has sent me to you.'" (Exod. 3:14–15)

Yahweh serves as a formal name for God. It is the way that the Hebrew people identify their God as distinct from any other god or deity. This name is used 6,823 times in the Old Testament. Nevertheless, the ancient Hebrew tradition is that this name is so sacred that it is not to be actually spoken in either prayer or teaching. On most occasions the divine name Yahweh is replaced with the formal term "Lord." That the Israelites are given a proper name to call God implies that they have a very special and even personal relationship with God. What does the name reveal about that relationship? Does the name reveal anything about God's nature?

The name "Yahweh" derives from the Hebrew verb "to be" (*hayah*). The divine disclosure that accompanies the giving of the name—"I am who am" (or "I am the one who is")—strongly suggests that God is assuring the Hebrew people that the God who is coming to rescue them is the *only* God that truly and

4. Of course, with God's covenant came expectations that the Israelites would live in fidelity to the covenant; there were promises of blessings if they would do so, and warnings of negative consequences if they proved unfaithful (see Deut. 12–33). The point to note is that, even given such expectations, the covenant cannot be reduced to a simple *quid pro quo* arrangement: God offers the covenant without preconditions, and the covenant cannot be rendered null and void by Israel's infidelity.

fully exists and is the source of all that is, or "be-ing."[5] Some scholars, emphasizing the idea of the covenant as the central defining aspect of the Hebrew peoples' understanding of and relationship to God, have translated the "to be" as something like "I shall be who I am as I am with you." Thus who God is and what God is can only be understood through relationship.

The Mosaic Covenant

In Exodus, this special relationship between God and the Hebrew people is further revealed and clarified by God's gift of the Mosaic covenant to Israel—the covenant God established with the Israelites through Moses, following the Exodus. The Mosaic covenant both formalizes God's relationship with the Hebrew people and reveals to them how God intended for human beings to live in the first place. In many ways, the covenant brings the book of Genesis to its conclusion by beginning a new relationship between God and human beings that enables and empowers the Israelites to understand and live the way that God originally intended all people to live.[6] The covenant sets out the fundamental plan of God that was intended from the beginning for all the earth. The covenant in this way is not just God's gift to Israel but to all human beings.

The covenant given through Moses, like the covenant given to Abraham discussed above, does not fit the traditional religious mode of exchange whereby people establish a "deal" with some god for special treatment or favors. In the book of Deuteronomy, God freely offers Israel the covenant with no preconditions. Furthermore, while there are serious consequences if Israel proves unfaithful to the covenant, God will always remain true to the covenant.

The rest of what Christians refer to as the Old Testament constantly refers back to the gift of the covenant by calling Israel to live according to the covenant and warning of the consequences of failing to do so. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God is the faithful one who remains true to his people even when they break or ignore the covenant. God is often described as reaching out in this way to individual persons. God is the one to whom people can turn whenever they are suffering, lost, or oppressed.

---

5. The divine name itself ("Yahweh") appears to be a *causative* form of "to be," i.e., "he causes to be"; thus, "he creates," "he makes things happen." For further information on the meaning of the divine name, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Chicago: IVP Academic, 2011), 24–25. For an examination of the theological significance of the name of God for the Hebrew people, see Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: An Introduction*, Library of Biblical Theology (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008).

6. Many provisions associated with the Mosaic covenant are specific to Israel alone, including such matters as kosher dietary practices and the offering of sacrifices. The point here is that the "moral and ethical" requirements of the covenant, as they are sometimes termed, reveal how God intends for all people to live. Such requirements include love for one's neighbor and providing for the poor and needy.

The Breath of God

The Hebrew Scriptures present another fascinating dimension of God's relationship with human beings. In the second chapter of Genesis, God formed the first human being (*adam*) out of the fertile soil (*adamah*)—a play on words—and "blew into its nostrils the breath (*ruach*) of life, and so the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7). Human beings receive their life directly from the lips of God, these Scriptures tell us. *Ruach* also means "wind"; in the previous chapter of Genesis, "a mighty wind" (*ruach*) sweeps over the great formless abyss, and the process of creation ensues. Throughout much of the Old Testament the image of the *ruach* or breath of God serves as both a source of life and religious enlightenment. The *ruach* of God inspires the prophets to speak and raises up inspired leaders like Moses, Joshua, the judges, Saul, and David. God's breath descends on both the prominent and the lowly, giving them faith, the gift of prayer, fidelity to the covenant, and sensitivity to God's will and saving acts.

In the later books of the Old Testament the *ruach* of God closely associates divine creativity with human wisdom, so that human beings seek the *ruach* as the greatest source of enlightenment, conscious development, and artistic insight. In this sense, the divine or holy *ruach* functions as the source of faith, holiness, and spiritual illumination. As such, the *ruach* represents God's presence in the world. As the Hebrew understanding of God develops, the *ruach* serves as the ongoing and practical source of God's providential care for human beings in general and for the people of Israel in particular.

God in the Christian Scriptures

The Christian Scriptures, commonly referred to as the New Testament, are a collection of texts written by and for the early Christian communities between approximately 50 to 100 CE. The New Testament is composed of two primary parts: (1) the Gospels and (2) the Epistles.

The Gospels

The four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) all tell the story of the life, teachings, and significant events of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospels are not historical accounts like a newspaper report or even a memoir. The Gospels are rooted in the memory of the community and have many elements that are probably historically accurate, but their primary intention is not to convey an objective report of historical events or persons. Rather, each Gospel narrates its accounts from different perspectives and with different emphases, but all try to convey the central message of Jesus, the way that he embodied his understanding of God, and how this understanding both illuminated the Hebrew Scriptures and transformed them.

The Gospels also all focus upon the central event of Jesus' life and ministry: his betrayal, trial, torture, and death at the hands of both the Jewish and Roman authorities. Likewise, they affirm his Resurrection from the dead, his gift of his own Spirit (*pneuma*, a Greek term that corresponds to *ruach*) upon his followers, his return (ascension) to his place in God's life, and his promise that he will come again to redeem and restore all of creation according to God's plan. The central event of Jesus' suffering, death, Resurrection, and giving of his Spirit to the community is commonly referred to in Christian theology as the Paschal Mystery.

Paschal Mystery

The phrase "Paschal Mystery" has its origins in the Old Testament story of the Passover (*Pesach* in Hebrew) recorded in Exodus 12. The Jewish people celebrate Passover every year as a remembrance of God liberating the Hebrews from slavery. This story is central to the book of Exodus in the Old Testament. In this story, God instructs the Hebrew people being held in slavery in Egypt to sprinkle the blood of a lamb on their doorframes as a sign that Hebrew people (God's people) lived in the house. The Spirit of God passed through the land of Egypt bringing death to all of the firstborn Egyptians and their animals but it "passed over" the houses that were sprinkled with the blood of the lambs. This terrifying sign finally convinced the Egyptians to free their Hebrew slaves. Every year the Jewish people celebrate their liberation from Egypt by gathering together and, among other rituals, eating a young lamb sacrificed specifically to commemorate this event. Jesus' Crucifixion happened during Passover; therefore during the same time of year (usually March or the early part of April) Christians celebrate Easter as a remembrance of Jesus' paschal mystery. For Christians, Jesus, like the lamb in the Exodus Passover story, serves as a sign of God's mercy and salvation.

The Epistles

The second main division of the New Testament is composed of the epistles or letters from apostles and early disciples of the risen Christ to various individuals and Christian communities. These letters usually focus upon the practical application and implementation of Jesus' life and message for ordinary Christians and their communities. They also often reflect theologically on the implications of the paschal mystery for the Christian understanding of Jesus and his unique revelation about the inner life and remarkable nature of God.

The Reign of God

In the Gospels, Jesus announced that his fundamental mission was to bring humanity "good news" (the meaning of the word "gospel," *euangelion* in Greek) by proclaiming and offering an example of the reign of God. "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives" (Luke 4:16–30). This liberating reign of God is a central theme throughout the New Testament. Echoing the Old Testament prophets and their call for justice, mercy, and repentance, Jesus' message of the reign of God is both a continuation of the unfolding story of God's interaction with the Hebrew people and a radical expansion of God's plan to include the Gentiles, or non-Hebrew people. Catholic theology holds that Jesus' ministry inaugurated this new and expansive vision of the reign of God, and it continues historically through the work of the Holy Spirit in the church and in the world.

In many ways Jesus followed in the line of the Old Testament prophets by proclaiming the love and mercy of God. What was new was that Jesus claimed to have a unique relationship to the reign of God, declaring that he was ushering in a new moment of salvation through his unique relationship to God, whom he called his Father. Moreover, Jesus' claim that he was ushering in the reign of God expanded the scope of the Old Testament covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people to embrace the entire world and all people. Jesus' life and ministry on the earth inaugurated this new reign of God. Catholic teaching asserts that the willingness of those who encounter Jesus to follow his example and accept his teaching already serves as a sign of the presence of God's reign. In other words, Jesus was not simply reiterating the covenant, nor proclaiming some future reality that would eventually come to fruition, but he was demonstrating the power of God's presence and the promise of God's salvation through his own life and ministry.

Reflect and Discuss

Does the bishop's treatment of Jean Valjean embody the reign of God as presented in the Gospels? If so, how? Does Valjean's action that freed a wrongly accused man in the scene "Who am I?" embody the reign of God? If so, how? In what ways does contemporary society bring "liberty to the captives"?

Jesus' View of God

The Gospels portray Jesus explaining the reign of God mainly through parables or through the example of his own life. Parables are simple stories or analogies that Jesus tells that have a kind of "twist" to them. In other words, these

stories do not turn out as expected, or characters in the stories act in ways that are unexpected and even shocking. The parables offer a valuable insight into Jesus' understandings of God and God's plan for the world that often contradict the listener's preconceived notions or expectations.[7] Jesus' own life also tended to shock and offend ordinary religious people of his time (Luke 4:16–30). It seems, therefore, that Jesus wanted to challenge people's ordinary understanding of God and God's plan for human beings and human society.

Reflect and Discuss

The Gospels paint a picture of God. Are there parallels between *Les Misérables* and the Gospels, and specifically the God they suggest or reveal? Explain.

The passage known as the Sermon on the Mount offers an exemplary collection of Jesus' teachings and parables (Matt. 5–7).[8] The Sermon on the Mount in a way summarizes Jesus' vision of the reign of God and reveals how Jesus understood his own unique role relative to God and God's plan for the salvation of the world.

The first section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:1–16) is a series of eight short sayings, each beginning with "blessed are . . . ," commonly referred to as the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes reflect the qualities of the reign of God being inaugurated with Jesus. The second section (Matt. 5:17–48) outlines Jesus' teaching concerning the application of the Old Testament laws in light of his declaration of this new reality of the reign of God that radically includes all people, including one's enemies. This section concludes with the seemingly impossible challenge, "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The third section (Matt. 6) is concerned with religious practices and religious devotion in a way that includes Jewish and Gentile people in the reign of God. The fourth and final section (Matt. 7) is concerned with the social ethics of the reign of God in a way that transcends the boundaries of specific religious practices to embrace all people. These teachings also prefigure the establishment of a new covenant from Jesus at the Last Supper before his Crucifixion.

---

7. See further, John R. Donahue, SJ, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 1–27.

8. The Sermon on the Mount can be divided into four parts, each focused on a specific aspect of Jesus' teaching concerning the reign of God. See Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 1st ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 178–80. A closely related collection of teachings known as the Sermon on the Plain is found in Luke 6.

God as Present in the Other

The Beatitudes provide an alternative vision to the values of a society that, both at the time of Jesus and today, prioritizes power, wealth, and self-interest. Instead, the Beatitudes elevate those who are "poor in spirit," those who "mourn," the "meek," those that "hunger and thirst for righteousness," the "merciful," the "clean of heart," and the "peacemakers" as those who reveal the values and therefore the presence of God on earth (Matt. 5:3–12). God is intimately present with the outcasts, those on the margins of society.

In this Gospel passage Jesus repeatedly insists that God is most fully present in and to the world through the lives of other people. Furthermore, Jesus maintains that God is particularly realized in the lives of the poor, the outcasts, the suffering, and all of those whom society (and religion) often deems farthest away from God's love and attention, people whom we see as "the others." Jesus also implies that God can often be best seen as present and most deeply experienced when one finds oneself thrown into or living among these groups of people.

The Compassionate God

Jesus represents God as "suffering with" (the meaning of the word *compassion*) human beings. The Beatitudes reveal that God's compassion is most visible for those who live according to the virtues of the reign of God. Those qualities correspond to the unique and powerful love of God. In one of the clearest examples in the Beatitudes, Jesus tells the pure in heart that they will see God (Matt. 5:8), which is something that even Moses was not able to do.

The peacemakers in this life are boldly called sons and daughters of God (Matt. 5:9). The Beatitudes reveal that God is now present in the world in a new way through Jesus and this presence allows God to experience what human beings experience, even extreme suffering and death. This will be especially and uniquely borne out in the suffering that Jesus will undergo in what Christians refer to as "the Passion." Jesus, God's concrete presence in the world as a human being, is the sign that God, in and through Jesus, practices what God preaches: namely that all are called to love God and love other people with absolute trust in the power of this love to rescue and restore human life.

Reinterpreting the Old Testament Laws

Jesus expands the values of the Beatitudes into a new and dynamic relationship with the Law of the Old Testament. The new message of God's presence on earth through Jesus Christ does not somehow negate or otherwise cancel the revelation of God recorded in the Old Testament. On the contrary, the author of Matthew claims that the promises delivered to Abraham, Moses, Isaac, David, and the prophets are now fulfilled in Jesus' ministry. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. Amen, I say

to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place" (Matt. 5:17–18).

Central to this question of fulfillment is Jesus' claim that he is the Son of God. Jesus refers to God in a very intimate and personal way, as *Abba*, literally as "daddy" or "papa." This implies that God is never distant, impersonal, or unconnected. Jesus insists that God remains intimately close to human beings, closer than the relationship of parent to child. For Jesus, then, one cannot be without God any more than one can be without a biological father and mother (Matt. 6:32–34). Furthermore, the affectionate name implies that God not only loves people in a general way, but loves them personally and intimately. This parental language is most clearly expressed in what is referred to as the Lord's Prayer, the prayer that Jesus teaches his disciples and that Christians continue to recite across denominations worldwide (Matt. 6:9–13):

> Our Father in heaven,
> hallowed be your name,
> your kingdom come,
> your will be done,
> on earth as in heaven.
> Give us today our daily bread;
> and forgive us our debts,
> as we forgive our debtors;
> and do not subject us to the final test,
> but deliver us from the evil one.

The Just God

In this section of the Gospel, God's justice is revealed as something far greater than justice as typically understood in Jesus' time or today. Jesus announces not only a new, more intimate, caring, and merciful understanding of God; in his call for God's justice, or "right relationship," he elevates the status of all people, not just those of the Jewish faith. In the Gospels, Jesus spends a great deal of his time criticizing individuals and institutions (governments, religions, and economic systems) that take advantage of or disregard ordinary people, especially those people who are weak and vulnerable. For Jesus, human beings, not rules and regulations, are absolutes (Matt. 6:25–31). Every human being is a child of God and therefore worthy of infinite dignity and respect. This means that human society and its institutions are here to serve and improve the lives of people, not the other way around (Matt. 6:24). Religious systems, even the Jewish traditions with which Jesus grew up, are meant to serve ordinary people and help them in their daily life; people are not here to serve or be held captive to these institutions (Matt. 7:21–23).

Similarly, governments, social systems, economic structures, and cultural practices are to be judged on how well they serve to protect and promote the infinite dignity and value of each human life. These institutions are especially held accountable for how they treat the "others." All human institutions are meant to serve and protect the most vulnerable members of society: the poor, the elderly, orphans, immigrants, prisoners, and social outcasts. People will ultimately be judged by God on how well they recognize and treat the neediest members of their family, community, and society (Matt. 7:12, 25:31–46). The Torah and its rules for daily and social life are not rejected by Jesus, but they are put in a new context. Even the Torah is to be interpreted through the lens of the reign of God and the life of Jesus. His treatment of people and his elevating them above mere rules or religious doctrines become the new standard for correct understanding of God and God's will for human beings and creation (Matt. 7:24–27).

Reflect and Discuss

How do the bishop's acts toward Valjean compare with the way US society treats the people Hugo calls *les misérables*? Give examples to illustrate.

Religious Practices in the Reign of God

Jesus speaks about the piety, or religious practice and devotion, of the reign of God in Matthew 6. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus highlights the providence, or protection and divine guidance of God, for all of his children, and indeed the whole world. God not only loves human beings (and even likes them), God also knows each one as an individual and is working to make each life as rich and full as possible. Jesus makes it clear that although God gives humans control of the world and their personal lives, God does not abandon people to simply make it or not on their own. God has a plan and intention for each person and is constantly working to help each person realize this plan as fully as possible. For Jesus, life is not an obstacle course with winners and losers, those who make it and those who don't at the end. Jesus asserts that human life is a project, with many possibilities, one of which is the choice to completely trust in the power of God (Matt. 6:19–34). Jesus reveals that God can be trusted completely and unconditionally to bring about the fullest possible life for everyone.

Reflect and Discuss

Do you see a relationship between Valjean's story and the providence of God highlighted in the Sermon on the Mount? Explain.

The Reign of God and Society

Jesus contends that God is not only present in individual persons but expands the notion of God's presence and agency to the world as a whole. This is primarily demonstrated through Jesus' insistence that the ethical principles he espouses have wider, even universal implications (Matt. 5:13–20). Many contemporaries of Jesus thought that God was only "present" in the Temple, or the Torah, or both, in particularly "religious" ways (worship, observances, and rituals) that were unique to Israel. In the Sermon on the Mount and the Gospels as a whole, however, Jesus boldly asserts that God's presence and love is not confined to any one place, people, or religion and even goes so far as to claim that God "dwells" in him and is present in his words and actions, and thus God is accessible to everybody. In this manner, Jesus is saying that God is available or present to all people at all times. While Jesus never denies that God is present to people through traditional religious activities, he insists that God's presence is not limited to such activities. In fact, the *normal* arena of God's activity in the world is the daily life of ordinary people. Human beings primarily experience God's presence and respond to this presence in their daily activities, in their relationships with others, and in the seemingly insignificant events that make up day-to-day life. In another place in the Gospels Jesus makes this clear when some religious leaders ask him where the reign of God is and when it will come. Jesus says some leaders will claim it is here or there but people should know that it is already among them and in their daily lives (Luke 17:23).

The Holy Spirit

In the Gospels, Jesus claims to have a unique and ultimately radical relationship to God. Jesus calls God "*Abba*." Jesus invites his disciples to share in this special filial relationship with *Abba*. In Jesus' Resurrection from the dead, his life and mission are revealed as something fundamentally different from anything that the Hebrew tradition had previously witnessed. In what is called the "Christ event," or more properly the paschal mystery (Jesus' death, Resurrection, and sending of the Spirit), the risen Christ actually shares his own *ruach*/*pneuma* with his disciples, thereby demonstrating that he was not merely one filled with the divine *ruach*/*pneuma*, but that he had the capacity to bestow the divine presence on others.

Furthermore, throughout the Gospel narratives Jesus is seen doing things that, it was believed at the time, only God could do: forgiving sins, effecting and controlling the natural elements like storms, casting out evil, raising the dead, and having power over the Torah and its proper interpretation. And while in the Gospels Jesus only seems to allude to his unique status on a few occasions, even his persecutors presume that he is claiming some kind of special and blasphemous participation in God's own life. So while the Gospels offer no explicit discussion of Jesus' divine nature, they presume it. For the Christian communities

that gave rise to the Gospels, the paschal mystery redefined not just their understanding of God's will but also their understanding of God's life and identity.

The conclusion of the Gospel of Matthew brings this new understanding to its greatest clarity. The final dramatic scene in Matthew is often called the "Great Commission" (Matt. 28:16–20). After his Resurrection from the dead and appearance to Mary Magdalene and the "other Mary," Jesus gathers the disciples one last time on a mountaintop near Galilee. From there he sends them out to continue his mission—to proclaim the reign of God and to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Jesus] commanded" (Matt. 28:19–20). For believers, following Jesus after the paschal mystery entails a transformed understanding of the God who created the world, saved Israel, and made a covenant with them. Through believers, God continues to reach out to all humanity through the action of both the Son and the Spirit.

Reflect and Discuss

Consider again the character of Valjean, particularly as revealed in the first part of Valjean's soliloquy; Valjean is clearly in turmoil over how the bishop has treated him. In tears and on his knees before an altar he asks himself, "What spirit comes to move my life?" The music swells and Valjean shouts, "Another story must begin!" What can the viewer infer about Valjean's personal understanding of God? Consider how Valjean's understanding of God compares to that presented in this chapter.

The Epistles' View of God

In the other primary part of the New Testament, the Epistles, God is usually referred to by a new proper name (or some variation thereof): Father (*Abba*), Son (Jesus Christ), and Spirit (*pneuma*). The Epistles include letters from the Apostle Paul; these letters, actually written earlier than the Gospels, convey the active faith of the Christian communities in which Paul circulated. That is, when the Apostle Paul became a follower of Jesus, he was received into a community of disciples that already referred to God as Father, Son, and Spirit in both normal speech and in the ritual language at the heart of their shared life.[9] They not only assumed that Jesus Christ is part of God's own divine life and identity; they saw Jesus as revealing God in a profoundly new way. Jesus is not only sent by God, he acts as only God can act. This implies both that Jesus is divine and

9. For the story of Paul's call to be an Apostle see Acts 9:1–30.