

## THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IN ROMANS 1:18–23: EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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In Rom 1:18–23 Paul says that all humans stand under the judgment of God because they have forsaken God and worshiped idols. His argument presupposes that somehow they had acquired a knowledge of God for which they are held accountable. This poses several questions. How do humans have this knowledge? When do they have it? And what precisely is this knowledge? The problems are compounded by human sinfulness and divine mystery. How can finite, sinful humanity come to know the infinite, holy God? Kierkegaard says that there is an “infinite qualitative difference” between God and humans.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Paul assumes such knowledge and claims that it is universal.

Three responses have been offered. All three have been referred to as general revelation. Thus to employ the term “general revelation” without qualification would only confuse the issue. (1) Some say that the Creator left behind clues or “tracks” in creation from which all persons can logically reason to a thematic knowledge of God. This is commonly called “natural theology.”<sup>2</sup> (2) Some say that God personally reveals the divine presence through the medium of creation to all persons.<sup>3</sup> Those who take this position usually assert that only God’s personal self-disclosure can rightfully be called “revelation.” If a personal self-disclosure is in view in Romans 1, then it would be indirect; that is, it would be analogous to the episode of Moses

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) 126, 127; idem, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944) 139.

<sup>2</sup> Natural theology is variously understood. Karl Barth defines natural theology as “every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, *i.e.* to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scriptures” (Karl Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” in *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom* [ed. Clifford Green; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991] 154). Van Harvey defines natural theology as “the effort to construct a doctrine of God without appeal to faith or special revelation but on the basis of reason and experience alone” (Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* [New York: Macmillan, 1964] 158). Richard Bell defines natural theology as “knowledge of God gained from the creation independent of God’s special revelation to Israel and independent of the gospel” (Richard H. Bell, *No One Seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18–3.20* [Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1998] 93). The definitions of Barth and Harvey are preferable, as the terms “system” and “doctrine” are much more focused than Bell’s use of “knowledge,” a term that can be variously understood.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949) 105–107; Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959) 18; Bell, *No One Seeks for God* 21–131.

and the burning bush, but on a universal scale.<sup>4</sup> (3) Others say that all persons have a vague, unthematic awareness of God by virtue of recognizing that they are finite creatures living in a contingent world.<sup>5</sup> The recognition of creaturely finitude awakens a faint, intuitive awareness that there is something beyond. It depends on neither ratiocination nor divine self-disclosure.

None of the three views can be established with absolute certainty, since each encounters its own set of difficulties. The purpose of this essay is to help bring unthematic awareness (option 3) back into the conversation as a plausible option.

#### I. EXPLORING PAUL'S SYMBOLIC WORLD

One way of uncovering what Paul could have meant in Rom 1:18–23 is to investigate factors that possibly influenced his thinking. It is commonly assumed that one of the primary influences on Paul's thought is his Jewish heritage. Numerous passages in the OT speak of the ineffability of God (cf. Job 11:7–8; 26:14; 36:26; Ps 145:3; Eccl 11:5; Isa 40:28; 55:8–9). From these texts, it is reasonable to assume that the Jewish mind questioned the idea that one could come to a knowledge of God through reason.

However, the Judaism that influenced Paul was that of middle Judaism, which Gabriele Boccaccini has shown to be a rather diverse phenomena with multiple strands.<sup>6</sup> Within middle Judaism is the Judaism of the Hellenistic Diaspora, which John J. Collins argues also consisted of various strands.<sup>7</sup> Collins says that some strands sought identity through shared ethical values, while another strand sought identity by appealing to revelation and transcendence.<sup>8</sup> However, Collins comments that there were some “persistent tendencies” and common themes amid the diversity, such as monotheism and God as

<sup>4</sup> Barth maintains that revelation is always a direct, unmediated self-disclosure of God. In typical fashion, he writes, “God reveals himself. He reveals himself *through himself*. He reveals *himself*” (*Church Dogmatics* I/1:296). Barth says, “The fact that God takes form [e.g. the burning bush] does not give rise to a medium, a third thing between God and man” (*Church Dogmatics* I/1:321). Revelation is always “a transcendent revelation,” never “an immanent, this worldly revelation” (Karl Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings 1946–1952* [New York: Philosophical Library, 1954] 208). Also, Barth affirms that when the Bible speaks of revelation, it speaks only in terms of “a particular revelation of God as distinct from a general revealedness—or from revelation itself as distinct from the knowledge of man in the cosmos as such” (*Church Dogmatics* II/1:102).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 1:73–118; Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) 32; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 33; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 273–274, 277–281; Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 40–43.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriele Boccaccini, *Middle Judaism: Jewish Thought, 300 B.C.E. to 200 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 7–25. Boccaccini identifies five main branches of middle Judaism: Samaritanism, Karaism, Rabbinism, Falashas, and Christianity (cf. Messianic Judaism).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 1–26.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 155–260.

Creator.<sup>9</sup> But even these unifying themes were expressed in various cultural and religious settings and do not reflect “a single, monolithic normative Judaism.”<sup>10</sup> Despite this complex situation, we can still make some general comments about more or less common themes that may have influenced Paul.

Some strands of Hellenistic Judaism did appeal to natural law to establish a common link with their culture, but it appears that appealing to natural theology was more problematic.<sup>11</sup> This general premise is supported by numerous passages from Hellenistic-Jewish literature. This Jewish reserve stands in sharp contrast to the openness to natural theology in much of the Greco-Roman literature.

1. *Greco-Roman literature.* Plato would agree that the maker of the universe is “a hard task to find.” Nevertheless, he argues that there is a way. The universe is patterned after the eternal, so that with the aid of reason one can discover from the orderly motions of the physical world “that which is abiding and stable” (*Timaeus* 28A–30C). The capacity to think of God is based on the belief that humans have a rational soul that is akin to the soul of the universe (*Timaeus* 32A–35A). This correspondence of minds becomes the basis for Plato to reason inductively to God and to construct a metaphysical system.

Cicero taught that one can gain an awareness of the author of the world through his deeds. “When then we behold all these things and countless others, can we doubt that some being is over them, or some author . . . some governor of so stupendous a work of construction?” (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.28.70). But Cicero, like Plato, moves beyond simple awareness to the idea that the human mind can actually comprehend God. He says the human capacity to comprehend God is based on the belief that the mind of God and the mind of humanity are of the same nature. “And indeed God Himself, who is comprehended by us, can be comprehended in no other way save as a mind unfettered and free, severed from all perishable matter” (*Tusculan Disputations* 1.27.66–67; cf. 1.29.70). Cicero contends that even if our minds are not completely unfettered, we are still able to comprehend much about God by inductive reasoning.

2. *Jewish literature.* Various strands of Jewish literature do talk about humans observing nature and coming to some sort of knowledge, but for the most part it appears to be more of a spontaneous insight than a deliberate inductive process. The literature, even where influenced by Platonic thought, is almost void of the ratiocination of Greco-Roman philosophy.

There is a widespread Jewish tradition that attempts to explain how Abraham came to know the true God. We find versions of the tradition in

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 166, 273.

<sup>10</sup> George W. E. Nickelsburg, “The Jewish Context of the New Testament,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* (vol. 8; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Sib. Or.* 3 and *Wis 13* assume that there is a universal natural law (cf. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem* 162–164).

Philo, *Apocalypse of Abraham*, *Jubilees*, and *Josephus*. Philo says that after Abraham cleared his mind of the idols of the Chaldeans, he was able to perceive (κατανοῆσαι) “the Universal Father” by contemplating his own body. He hopes to crown this perception “with the knowledge of God Himself” (*On the Migration of Abraham* 35 §192–195). This implies that Abraham’s initial perception was not knowledge in Philo’s estimation. For Philo, true knowledge of God comes through God’s direct personal self-disclosure. Moreover, his perception was contingent on clearing his mind of idols. In another place, Philo says that when Abraham forsook the idols of the Chaldeans, “he could not help but know that the world is not sovereign, but dependent, not governing but governed by its maker” (*On Abraham* 17 §77–79). If the mind is not cluttered with idolatry, the awareness of God becomes self-evident; it is not a matter of deliberate logical inference.

The *Apocalypse of Abraham* portrays Abraham as rejecting the gods made by his father Terah. If they could not help themselves when tossed off by an ass or burned in a fire, they cannot help human beings. It then dawned on Abraham that the true God must be the one who created all things. When Abraham was thinking about the possibility of God revealing himself, “the voice of the Mighty One came down from the heavens in a stream of fire, saying . . . ‘You are searching for the God of gods, the Creator, in the understanding of your heart. I am he. Go out from Terah, your father, and go out of the house, that you too may not be slain in the sins of your father’s house’” (*Apoc. Ab.* 8.1–6). As soon as Abraham left the house, it burned to the ground.

According to *Jubilees*, it was Abraham who burned the house of idols. Some time later while Abraham was observing the stars to see when it would rain, he came to an inner awareness that God is the Creator. Abraham was “sitting alone and making observations; and a word came into his heart, saying, ‘All of the signs of the stars and the signs of the sun and the moon are all in the hand of the Lord.’” Abraham then prays and God answers, calling him from his father’s house to go to a new land (*Jub.* 12:16–24). It is clear that Abraham was not engaging in natural theology. He was observing the stars to determine when it would rain, not to determine the character of God. The awareness of the Creator was spontaneous.

Josephus mentions that Abraham came to the conclusion that there is only one God, the Creator, who alone is worthy of worship. Josephus says Abraham inferred (εἰκάζε) these ideas from the irregularities in the heavenly bodies. The text differs from the other examples by depicting an inductive process rather than a simple awareness or clearing the mind of idols. Nevertheless, the inductive process does not go beyond the common belief throughout Hellenistic Judaism of monotheism and God as Creator to create an elaborate system about God (*Ant.* 1.7.1 §154–157).

A similar episode to Abraham’s purging his mind of idols is recounted in the *Testament of Job*. Job lived near an idol’s temple and constantly saw the offerings that were being made. He began to reason whether the god at the idol’s temple was really the God who made the heavens and earth. This questioning opened him to the true God. One night a messenger from God ap-

peared to him and said, “Arise, and I will show you who this is who you wish to know” (*T. Job* 3.2). Job then prays that God will grant him authority to purge the place. The messenger gave permission, but told Job that Satan will rise up against him in retaliation, but that he would not be able to kill him.

The *Sibylline Oracles* say that humans are not able to craft God with their hands (and, by extension, by their minds). Since God is ineffable and invisible, only God is able to reveal God. However, the Oracles assume that humans are able to walk in mindfulness of the “immortal creator” because they have been made in God’s image (*Sib. Or.* 3:8–16).

The Wisdom of Solomon offers a striking parallel to Paul’s argument in Romans 1. Chapter 12 speaks of God’s judging the wicked inhabitants of Canaan for their idolatry. The reason for this judgment is given in the next chapter—their foolishness led them to equate creation with the Creator. Consequently they were unable to know (εἰδέναι) the one who truly exists or recognize the Creator from the creation. They did not “recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works; but they supposed that either fire or wind or swift air . . . or the luminaries of heaven were the gods that rule the world” (Wis 13:1–2). In vv. 3–7 the author says that the beauty and power of creation mislead foolish persons to believe that these things were deities. Therefore, he says in vv. 8–9, “Not even they are to be excused; for since [εἰ] they had power to know [εἰδέναι] that they could investigate the world, how did they fail to find sooner the Lord of these things?” The text assumes that before lapsing into idolatry, the Canaanites had the ability to recognize God through creation. There are many lexical and structural parallels with Rom 1:18–32, including the list of vices.<sup>12</sup>

For Philo, there is a marked contrast between rational inferences about God and the true knowledge of God that comes through direct divine self-disclosure. “Those who thus base their reasoning on what is before their eyes, apprehend God by means of a shadow cast, discerning the Artificer by means of His works” (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.97–99). However, the more perfect mind of Moses “gains its knowledge of the First Cause not from created things, as one may learn the substance from the shadow, but lifting its eyes above and beyond creation obtains a clear vision of the uncreated One, so as from Him to apprehend both Himself and His shadow” (*Allegorical Interpretation* 3.100–101). This points to the qualitative difference between knowledge based on inference and knowledge based on direct divine self-disclosure.<sup>13</sup> Philo believes that knowledge about God derived from the shadow cast is definitely inferior knowledge.

In summary, one might expect that we have found examples of all three of our options in Hellenistic Judaism. However, most of the texts we surveyed have a combination of unthematic awareness (option 3) followed by

<sup>12</sup> For a comparison of Rom 1:18–32 and Wis 13–14, see William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1901) 51–52.

<sup>13</sup> Philo (*On Rewards and Punishments* 44–45) remarks that true knowledge of God comes from God’s direct self-disclosure. He writes, “In their company is he who in the Hebrew is called Israel but in our tongue the God-seer who sees not His real nature, for that, as I said, is impossible—but that

God's direct personal self-disclosure. Our texts always depict God's personal self-disclosure as direct, not indirect through nature as must be the case with option 2. Only Josephus and Philo allow any ratiocination, which is an essential component of natural theology (option 1). For Josephus, this may have been due to his apologetic need to express the Jewish faith in a meaningful way to a pagan audience. Philo does not discount knowledge from nature, but for him it is clearly inferior knowledge. Regarding the Abraham tradition, the majority of writers believed that a certain awareness did pass through Abraham's mind and that it was stimulated by observation, but this does not mean that they thought Abraham was engaging in a deliberate process of rational induction or constructing a natural theology akin to that of the Greco-Roman philosophers. Awareness is a mental activity of another sort. This awareness is often said to have been made possible by clearing the mind of idols (i.e. the idea that the creation was divine).

Thus we find a marked contrast between the Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions regarding innate human capacity to reason to God. In Greco-Roman thought, humans are able to employ deliberate inductive reasoning to arrive at an adequate knowledge of God. In Hellenistic Jewish thought, this is commonly held suspect. Most of the Jewish writers we surveyed would agree that anyone can catch an awareness of the Creator once their minds are cleared from the idea that the creation is divine. In the majority readings of the Abraham tradition, this awareness led to a desire for God to reveal the divine presence. What was universal in Jewish thinking was not a divine self-disclosure, but the potential for a general awareness. If these thoughts represent Paul's symbolic world, then they would have significant implications for the interpretation of Romans 1, to which we now turn.

## II. EXPLORING ROMANS 1:18–23

Many acknowledge the influence of Jewish wisdom literature on Paul's thought. Peter Stuhlmacher says that Paul adopted the view of the Jewish wisdom theology in which God "imprinted all of his creation with a sense of God."<sup>14</sup> James Dunn says that Paul has in mind some sort of natural theology drawn from the "Hellenistic Jewish wisdom theology."<sup>15</sup> Dunn also says that Paul used Stoic linguistic categories to "increase the universal appeal of

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He is. And this knowledge he has gained not from any other source, not from things on earth or things in Heaven, not from the elements or combinations of elements mortal or immortal, but at the summons of Him alone who has willed to reveal His existence as a person to the suppliant. How this access has been obtained may be well seen through an illustration. Do we behold the sun which sense perceives by any other thing than the sun, or the stars by any others than the stars, and in general is not light seen by light? In the same way God too in His own brightness and is discerned through Himself alone, without anything co-operating or being able to co-operate in giving a perfect apprehension of His existence."

<sup>14</sup> Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 44.

<sup>15</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38a; Dallas: Word, 1988) 56.

the argument.”<sup>16</sup> This follows W. D. Davies who says Paul’s thought was Rabbinic, but his expression was Stoic.<sup>17</sup> David Coffey argues that Paul “shared the natural theology of his Jewish background.”<sup>18</sup> All agree on the significance of the parallels with the Jewish wisdom literature. Thus it is plausible to assume that the parallels will shed light on what Paul meant by the “knowledge of God” in Romans 1.

1. *The divine initiative.* Paul says that knowledge of God is evident to all persons because God has made it apparent (v. 19). Paul’s statement lends support to the idea that ultimately “God can be known only by God.”<sup>19</sup> The divine initiative does not eliminate any of the three options. Whatever view is adopted, divine initiative lies in the background. But the way Paul expresses himself does cause problems with the idea of divine self-disclosure through nature (option 2).

Revelation of the divine presence could be questioned in that Paul uses a simple active voice ἐφανερώσεν (God made evident to them, v. 19). Paul does not use an active voice of φανερώω with a reflexive pronoun, as we find in John 21:1, “Jesus made himself known.” Nor does he use the passive voice of φανερώω, as we find in John 21:14, “Jesus appeared.” Instead, Paul uses the simple active voice of the transitive verb, which points toward an object other than a personal manifestation of the actor.

Paul’s use of φανερώω rather than ἀποκαλύπτω may also be significant, in that the former usually pertains to making something evident, whereas the latter pertains to revelation.<sup>20</sup> Fitzmyer argues for the distinction based on their usage in 1:18–19: “God’s wrath is revealed” (ἀποκαλύπτεται) versus “what can be known is made evident” (ἐφανερώσεν).<sup>21</sup> Richard Bell also acknowledges a subtle distinction between φανερώω and ἀποκαλύπτω, but he argues that Markus Bockmuehl (on whom Fitzmyer depends) “has overstated the case in arguing for the empirical nature of the verb φανερώω.”<sup>22</sup> Because of the overlap in meaning between the two words, I am inclined to concur with Bell in not pressing the distinction. However, option 2 still runs into difficulty grammatically.

2. *The human role.* Paul depicts the human role as perceiving (καθορᾶται) by means of mental reflection (νοούμενα) on the things that

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 53. Dunn (p. 57) notes the ἀόρατα/καθορᾶται wordplay is more characteristic of Stoic thought than Jewish or early Christian thought. He suggests that Stoic thought influenced both Jewish wisdom tradition and Philo (cf. Günther Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience* [New York: Harper & Row, 1969] 47–70).

<sup>17</sup> W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1955) 242, 327.

<sup>18</sup> David M. Coffey, “Natural Knowledge of God: Reflections on Romans 1:18–32,” *TS* 31 (1970) 682.

<sup>19</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1:75.

<sup>20</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* 279–280. On the basis of a comparison between Rom 1:17 and 3:21, Rudolf Bultmann and Dieter Lührmann say that Paul uses the words synonymously (*TDNT* 9:3).

<sup>21</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* 273.

<sup>22</sup> Bell, *No One Seeks for God* 38, 39 (cf. Markus Bockmuehl, “Das Verb φανερώω im Neuen Testament,” *BZ* 32 [1988] 87–99).

God made (v. 20). All three options require some sort of mental activity. Most agree that Paul does not depict the process of ratiocination, which is integral to natural theology.<sup>23</sup> A problem with both natural theology and revelation of the divine presence through nature is whether humans have an innate capacity for the divine apart from grace. The notion of unthematic awareness (option 3) avoids the problem of natural human capacity to apprehend God, since it does not lead to positive knowledge or involve union with the divine.

Emil Brunner accepts a natural theology for Christians, but not for non-Christians. He maintains that natural theology is impossible as long as the relationship with God remains broken. However, he says there is a knowledge of God for which all humans are accountable. This knowledge is due to a general revelation in which God discloses the divine self to all persons through creation (option 2). Because the formal likeness (or *analogia entis*) remains, every human can know “his majesty as Creator and therefore also the fact that he belongs to God.”<sup>24</sup> Brunner follows the Reformers in saying this knowledge is based on a “relic” of the *imago Dei*.<sup>25</sup> However, this knowledge is distorted by sin so that the unregenerate cannot see this revelation correctly. As a result humans go off into idolatry.<sup>26</sup>

Karl Barth rejects natural theology for both Christians and non-Christians.<sup>27</sup> Like Brunner, Barth accepts revelation of God’s presence outside the church (in society and nature). But Barth differs from Brunner on three essential points. (1) Revelation is always direct, never indirect and mediated. (2) Revelation is always particular, never universal or general. (3) The point of contact that enables any revelation to take place is created by grace in the revelatory moment.<sup>28</sup> Thus Barth rejects both our first and second options. He calls revelation that takes place outside the church “secular parables,” “alien witnesses,” “free communications” or “worldly lights.”

<sup>23</sup> E.g. Thomas Schreiner says Paul is not “suggesting that knowledge of God’s existence and power is the result of careful deduction and reasoning, so that the text can be used to encourage sophisticated rational argumentation as an apologetic for God’s existence. . . . To understand that Paul does not refer to a long process of reasoning by which people come to a knowledge of God’s existence and power is critical” (Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998] 86).

<sup>24</sup> Brunner, *Romans* 18. Brunner maintains that a *formal* likeness remained in humans, untouched by sin, which provided the point of contact between humans and God and gave them a capacity to receive words from God. Brunner would say that the *material* likeness (the content of the image of God) is totally corrupt. Humans are sinners through and through. Brunner wants to agree with Barth that humans are corrupt, but he wants to limit the corruption to the material, not to the formal image, so that humans retain a capacity for the divine and are responsible. The formal image constitutes the *analogia entis* and is the point at which humans can be addressed by God.

<sup>25</sup> The “formal structure of human existence, which cannot be lost, contains a relation to God. . . . It is that which points back to the Origin [i.e. Creator and creation], even in sinful being of man” (Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947] 532–533).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 530.

<sup>27</sup> Barth argues that allowing a formal likeness or *analogia entis* opens the door to natural theology and the accommodational theology of nineteenth-century liberalism (*Church Dogmatics II* 1:85–128, esp. 125–126).

<sup>28</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics I*1:29.

Their voices are limited and distorted and are not sufficient to construct a proper theology.<sup>29</sup>

Bell modifies Brunner's view by saying the divine self-disclosure to all persons through nature is based on the indwelling mind of Christ, not on the *analogia entis*. The mental activity (νοούμενα) in v. 20 is based on the renewed mind in Christ, not on the disapproved mind of v. 28. It is only after rejecting the divine self-disclosure that the mind becomes disapproved. He bases his argument on a verbal correspondence with the renewed mind of Rom 12:1.<sup>30</sup> Bell says that the knowledge Paul is talking about does not come about by logical inference and does not presume an *analogia entis*.<sup>31</sup> By this Bell distances himself from Brunner and draws a bit closer to Barth. The problem Bell now faces is how knowledge of God can be universal if it is based in the indwelling mind of Christ, instead of on the *analogia entis*. He opts for the idea that God revealed himself to all persons corporately on the basis of the graced and pristine mind of Adam before the fall. To summarize this section, we find that natural theology (option 1) presents serious problems for Barth, Brunner, and Bell and that divine self-disclosure through nature (option 2) presents a challenge that Brunner and Bell in different ways are trying to circumvent.

3. *Time of the knowledge.* Most agree that the phrase ἀπό κτίσεως κόσμου “from the creation of the world” (1:20) conveys time rather than source; otherwise it would introduce a redundancy. The passage could be paraphrased, “Ever since the time of creation, humans have mentally perceived something about the invisible God by means of observing things that are made.” However, interpreting it temporally presents a problem for Bell's version of option 2, since ἀπό normally conveys duration of time from a previous event, not a specific point in time. It would imply that God has personally revealed himself to every person born since the time of creation. Nevertheless, Bell follows M. D. Hooker who locates this universal human knowing in Adam. “Paul is describing man's sin in relation to its true Biblical setting—the Genesis narrative of the Creation and Fall.”<sup>32</sup> Since all persons are “in Adam,” Paul can say that all Gentiles know God. Coffey follows Hooker in saying that this knowledge pertains to the distant past when they participated in the revelation God made to Adam by faith.<sup>33</sup> Dunn also says there is a “deliberate echo of the Adam narratives” in Paul's argument.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3:115, 117. These “other words” say nothing about Jesus Christ, salvation, the covenant of grace, or the kingdom of God (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3:142–143, 151, 153).

<sup>30</sup> Bell, *No One Seeks for God* 41–42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 46.

<sup>32</sup> M. D. Hooker, “Adam in Romans I,” *NTS* 6 (1960) 300. She bases her argument mostly on lexical parallels between Romans 1 and Psalm 66, and between Romans 1 and Genesis 1. For example, ἐν ὁμοιώματι (Ps 66:20) parallels ἐν ὁμοιώματι (Rom 1:23). Also, ἄορατα and ἐσκότισθη (Rom 1:20, 21) parallel the wording of Gen 1:2.

<sup>33</sup> Coffey, “Natural Knowledge of God” 691.

<sup>34</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 53.

Placing the time of knowledge in primeval history allows for a universal general revelation of the divine presence in Christ (option 2).

But is Hooker's argument viable? (1) Paul implies that this knowledge and the fall from knowledge are directly experienced by everyone in their own lifetimes; they are not done by proxy.<sup>35</sup> (2) Paul also says that the revelation is indirect, whereas the revelation to Adam in the garden is direct (cf. Gen 3:8). (3) Hooker does not draw lexical parallels between Romans 1 and Genesis 2–3, which would have been critical for her argument.<sup>36</sup> (4) Another problem mentioned earlier is that ἀπό normally refers to duration of time. If Hooker's theory fails, it would eliminate a major variation of option 2. Time is not a problem for natural theology and only a minor problem for unthematic awareness.<sup>37</sup>

4. *The nature of the knowledge.* What is this knowledge of God for which all humans are accountable? Paul paradoxically says that humans perceive certain invisible things of God (τὰ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ). He identifies these as God's eternal power and deity (v. 20). These expressions are usually taken to refer to specific divine attributes or the sum of divine attributes. But if the expressions are interpreted in view of the central Creator/creation/idolatry motif that runs throughout the passage, a different picture emerges. God's eternal power would then pertain to God's creative energy, and God's deity would pertain to the idea that the creator, not creation, is sovereign and deserving of worship. Thus what is manifest throughout creation is simply that God is the Creator who should be worshiped.<sup>38</sup> From a human perspective, however, there remains a distinct obscurity. There may be an awareness that the power that created the universe is worthy of worship, but who or what is this power? The awareness of something beyond does not fully disclose the Creator; nevertheless, it is sufficient to move one to pray for the Creator to reveal the divine presence. Thus humans are culpable.

<sup>35</sup> The present tense of verbs in this section, especially καθορᾶται, suggests that the observing and knowing are aspects of every age. This corresponds with the normal sense of ἀπό (cf. John J. O'Rourke, "Romans 1,20 and Natural Revelation," *CBQ* 23 [1961] 305). Bell modifies his argument in an attempt to alleviate these problems. He begins by saying a person's "fall" from knowledge to idolatry "is not so much in his own history but rather in the history of Adam." But then he finds allusions to other "falls" in Rom 1:18ff., such as the fall of Israel and the fall of every generation (*No One Seeks for God* 24–25, 94, 97).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Fitzmyer, *Romans* 274.

<sup>37</sup> The question of time raises the problem of whether the knowing is actual or potential. Unthematic awareness diminishes but does not escape this problem. Does the awareness potentially depend on clearing the mind of idols? Paul suggests the awareness is actual (1:21). Perhaps a child's mind, uncluttered by idolatry, has an intuitive awareness that idolatrous adults have lost. Or perhaps a subconscious awareness persists in idolaters for which they are culpable. Advocates of option 2 differ regarding potentiality. Bell says revelatory knowledge of God is potential through faith; it is not commonly realized because all are fallen in Adam (*No One Seeks for God* 101). Bornkamm says the revelatory knowledge is actual, not potential (*Early Christian Experience* 54). He can only say this if he is following Brunner's idea of formal likeness.

<sup>38</sup> This corresponds to the idea that the knowledge under discussion is incomplete. Paul's τὸ γνωστόν τοῦ θεοῦ is normally rendered "that which can be known about God." If τὸ γνωστόν is rendered in its normal sense, "what is known," it creates a tautology: "what is known is evident." Thus it appears better to understand it as "God in his knowability," meaning knowledge of God in

Paul, however, focuses more on the lack of knowledge. He talks about what people should have known and acted upon. Eugene Rogers summarizes the view of Thomas Aquinas by saying that the cognition in Romans 1 “exists in order to show what is being denied. It does not show what people possess, but what they lack. Their cognition amounts, in Preller’s words, to ‘a felt ignorance,’ and it is in that sense alone a cognition rather than a failure of cognition.”<sup>39</sup> A “felt ignorance” is an awareness that never attains to the level of knowledge as understanding. People are aware they do not know, but they have no understanding of what exactly it is they do not know. It is an awareness of “a felt ignorance.”

Barth agrees with Aquinas that what Paul is talking about is not true knowledge at all. It is simply an awareness of ignorance. It is an awareness of our finitude that is ignorant of what limits us.<sup>40</sup> Barth says, “We know that God is He whom we do not know, and that our ignorance is precisely the problem and the source of our knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Barth is saying that some sort of knowledge is involved, but it is a negative, not a positive knowledge. He is contesting natural theology by saying a negation must precede affirmation. That is, humanity’s idolatrous worship of self (along with the idea that humans have a natural capacity for the divine) must be negated before one can come to true knowledge of God by faith. Thus the rejection of idolatry is the precondition of revelation. Barth correctly sees that there is no hint in the text of any human capacity to climb the ladder of logical reasoning to God and to construct a system of natural theology.

### III. A MODEST PROPOSAL

According to Fitzmyer, Paul admits that pagans have some kind of “vague, unformulated knowledge or experience of God. . . . In this quasi-philosophical discussion the word *gnontes* connotes an inceptive, theoretical sort of information about God, which Paul thinks that pagans could not help but have.”<sup>42</sup> However, this vague awareness did not cause them to seek

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so far as God can be known by finite humans. Fitzmyer (*Romans* 279) notes that γνωστός is used twice in the LXX as meaning “knowable” (Gen 2:9; Sir 21:7). This reflects the Jewish belief that humans are unable to fully know God even though God has revealed himself (cf. Exod 33:20; Deut 4:12; Job 11:7; 23:9; Ps 145:3; Eccl 3:11; Sir 43:31). Also, the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ is probably partitive, suggesting that only a certain aspect of God could be known, such as God’s being the creator who should be worshiped. Bell, who views revelation as God’s self-disclosure, rejects the partitive idea. If God discloses self, the whole person is involved. “Simply knowing certain attributes of God is as good as knowing nothing about God” (*No One Seeks for God* 36).

<sup>39</sup> Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995) 128–129; cf. Victor Preller, *Divine Science and the Science of God: A Reformulation of Thomas Aquinas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967) 29, n. 41.

<sup>40</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968) 45; cf. Gordon Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historical Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968) 109.

<sup>41</sup> Barth, *Romans* 45.

<sup>42</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* 281, cf. 273. Also, cf. Philo, *On Abraham* 17.

an effective knowledge of God through revelation. Instead humans became foolish in their reasonings, and their unperceptive hearts were darkened.

Fitzmyer is cautious about reading Paul through the lens of ancient natural theology, but he comments that Dunn is more plausibly correct in saying that “*some sort of natural theology is involved here.*”<sup>43</sup> He says Paul’s natural theology differs from that of the Enlightenment and that it amounts to “a certain awareness.”<sup>44</sup> Fitzmyer also rejects the idea that Paul is talking about revelation of the divine presence (which he calls natural revelation). Both Fitzmyer and Dunn reject a strong version of natural theology and are searching for categories to explain what Paul is saying. Our modern categories of natural theology and general revelation do not seem to work.

I propose that the category that Fitzmyer and Dunn are searching for is “unthematic awareness.” Awareness is a passive and spontaneous mental activity based on observation. It is not a deliberate rational process. When one is thrown into a den of lions, there is an immediate awareness that this is a dangerous situation from which one must escape. In a similar way, when one is “thrown” into the created world, one becomes aware of his or her creaturely finitude and, as Wolfhart Pannenberg says, becomes aware of “a vague sense of infinitude.”<sup>45</sup> The human mind perceives that whatever lies beyond must be the Creator, who alone should be worshiped.

This unthematic awareness is similar to, yet different from, natural theology. Pannenberg comments, “What is at issue here is a *cognitio Dei naturalis insita* as distinct from a *cognitio Dei naturalis acquisita* such as that of the natural theology of antiquity or of the natural theology and religion of the Enlightenment.”<sup>46</sup> He thus distinguishes between natural knowledge of God and natural theology. Pannenberg argues that “to understand the complex issue, we need to separate the natural human knowledge of God, no matter how it be described in detail, very sharply from the phenomenon of natural theology, which may be related to it in some way but which must not be equated with it. The lack of clear differentiation in this matter is partly responsible for the hopeless confusion in the modern discussion of natural theology.”<sup>47</sup> Pannenberg explains that the confusion arose when older Protestants included natural knowledge under the rubric of natural theology. This inclusion was partially due to their combining natural knowledge of Rom 1:18–20 with natural morality of Rom 2:14. He notes that Christian theology has held from its beginning that a natural knowledge of God is self-evident by virtue of being part of the created realm.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* 273; cf. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 56. Italics mine.

<sup>44</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans* 274.

<sup>45</sup> Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1:73, 107–108, 117. A feeling of creatureliness or contingency does not necessarily lead to a vague sense of infinitude. It also could lead into nihilism. However, Paul shares with his culture the assumption of some sort of deity (whether the Creator God or pagan idols). He does not consider nihilism.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 1:107.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 1:76.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 1:95.

Pannenberg also comments that natural knowledge of God was not linked to revelation through Jesus Christ until the twentieth century.<sup>49</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

It would appear from exegetical and theological reflections on Rom 1:18–23 that the most reasonable explanation of what Paul is calling “knowledge” is a natural knowledge of God, or better a vague, unthematic awareness. It would not be real knowledge of God according to most strands of Hellenistic Judaism, as that would entail God’s direct personal self-disclosure. Nor would it necessitate a point of contact, require special human capacity, or presume revelation or faith; that is, unthematic awareness avoids many of the problems encountered by options 1 and 2. Moreover, it would correspond to themes common across various branches of Hellenistic Judaism that could lie behind Paul’s symbolic world. The awareness would be sufficient to lead one to seek true knowledge, as in the case of Abraham, and thus it would be sufficient to hold all persons accountable. But because the minds of most people are darkened by idolatry, the awareness would remain “a felt ignorance.”

Modern concerns arising out of natural theology or neo-orthodoxy too often become the lens to interpret what Paul is saying.<sup>50</sup> Paul would have regarded this vague awareness as an inescapable fact of human existence by virtue of living as creatures in a created world. Such pre-knowledge awareness does not involve ratiocination and thus is not natural theology. However, it could lead to natural theology, if one seeks to excavate this felt ignorance and construct a metaphysical or theological system. Such constructions, however, cannot result in true knowledge of God. True knowledge of God can only come through God’s personal self-disclosure. It is always a divine act of grace through faith.

<sup>49</sup> *Contra* Bell, who, following Barth, argues that any revelation of the presence of God involves the presence of Jesus Christ (*No One Seeks for God* 91).

<sup>50</sup> Fitzmyer comments, “To import into this passage the idea of a primitive or natural revelation” of the divine presence is to miss the point Paul is making (*Romans* 273).