

THEOLOGY PROPER

I. The Knowability of God

A. Historical Background to the Doctrine

Herman Bavinck, in Chapter 1 of *The Doctrine of God*, a translation of the first part of Volume 2 of his magnum opus, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), pp. 13-37, discusses the views of various philosophers and theologians on the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility. This discussion is excerpted as follows:

Greek philosophy... frequently taught... unknowability with respect to deity. According to a well-known story, the philosopher Simonides to whom the tyrant Hiero had put the question, "Who is God?" kept on asking for more and more time to frame an answer. According to Diogenes, the treatise of *Protagoras On the Gods* began as follows: "Concerning the gods I am not able to know whether they exist or whether they do not exist. For there are many things which prevent one from knowing; for example, the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of human life." Camaedes of Cyrene not only subjected belief in the gods to a severe criticism but even denied the possibility of forming a conception of God. Plato rejected all anthropomorphic and anthropopathic descriptions of the Deity and declared in *Timaeus*, par. 28: "Now to discover the Maker and Father of this Universe were a task indeed; and having discovered him, to declare him to all men were a thing impossible." And similarly he declares in *The Republic* VI, 19 that the godhead or the idea of the good transcends not only whatever exists but "even essence itself." Philo connected this Platonic philosophy with the teaching of the O. T. and held that the name Jehovah was itself an expression of God's unknowableness. According to him God is not only exalted above the imperfections present in finite, changeable, dependent creatures, but also above their perfections. He is better than virtue, knowledge, beauty; purer than unity, more blessed than blessedness. In reality he is without attributes, "bare of quality," and without names. He cannot be described. He is unknowable as to his being. We can know that he is, not what he is. Existence is all that can be ascribed to him; the name Jehovah is the only one that indicates his being.

Plotinus is even more radical. Plato ascribed many attributes to God. Philo complemented his negative theology with a positive in which he defines God as a personal, perfect, omnipotent Being. But according to Plotinus nothing can be said of God which is not negative. God is an absolute unity, raised above all plurality. Accordingly, he cannot be defined in terms of thought, goodness, or being, for all these descriptive terms imply a certain plurality. God, as pure unity, is indeed the cause of thought, being, goodness, etc., but is himself distinct from any of these and transcends them all. He is unlimited, infinite, without form and so entirely different from every creature that even activity, life, thought, consciousness, and being cannot be ascribed to him. Our thought and language cannot attain to him. We cannot say what he is, but we can only say what he