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God is 'greater than'...



...whom or what?



Introduction

The graphic here is known as an illustration for 'God is greater than our ups and downs'. I don't know whether it makes sense to you, but, I do know that the Bible has seven *God-is-greater-than* comparisons of much more significance than these, which are the topic of this *Scriptus Paper*.



God is greater than all

*My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is **greater than all**, and no one is able to seize them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one* (John 10:27-30).

The occasion for this text required that the Lord be quite blunt with the Jewish leadership, telling them that they were not believers, and were not His sheep. For His sheep, however, their security is hermetic, sealed off in the hand of Christ, and the hand of the Father. It is in this sense of equality of power that we would understand the Lord's words: *I and the Father are one*.

Just to reinforce how impervious the sheep's security is, the Lord adds that no-one, or nothing can penetrate this watertight security. The verb (*arpazo*) means to seize, snatch up and take away, used mostly of desirable goods that are stolen, but also of persons who are abducted; both instances emphasising violence and transgression of law or propriety. In these acts, there is a dark undertone of violence, abuse, transgression and degradation ([Abarim Publications](#)).

The reason that the security is impenetrable is because the Father is **greater than all**, "all of them" or "every one" or "all kinds of" beings that would attempt to break the security barrier. Thankfully, for believers, it is unassailable.

God is greater than Christ

*You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for **the Father is greater than I*** (John 14:28).

At first blush, it would appear that the expression **the Father is greater than I**, contradicts the Lord's statement above (John 10:30), that **I and the Father are one** (John 10:27-30). However, these two statements are qualitatively different. The latter is about **essentiality**, a quality (the power of security in this case) possessed equally by both Father and Son. That is, in terms of their essence, the power of security is indispensable, vital, or necessary to both Father and Son. It is the same with deity: Jesus is essentially God (John 1:1, 18; 5:16-18; 10:30; 20:28).

On the other hand, the statement that the Father is greater than I, occurs in the context of the Father being in heaven and the Son on earth. Coming to earth, Christ Jesus existed in the form of God but "emptied" himself into the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7). In this form He did nothing on his own, but only what he saw the Father doing (John 5:19), sought not to do His own will but the will of him who sent Him (John 5:30), always did what was pleasing to the Father (John 8:29), and did not speak on His own, but only what the Father told Him to say (John 12:49). So, these subordinate expressions do not concern essentiality, but rather **functionality**, which is about the purpose that something is designed for or expected to perform.

Also, when I read that *the head of Christ is God* (1 Corinthians 11:3) in a passage that deals with functions, then I take it that this is an expression of **functionality**, not **essentiality**. Interestingly, Paul's other statement that *according to the flesh, is the Messiah who is over all, God blessed forever* (Romans 9:5), seems to combine both functionality, and essentiality.



God is greater than all gods

Jethro said, “Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh and has delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians. Now I know that the Lord is **greater than all gods**, because in this affair they dealt arrogantly with the people (Exodus 18:10-11).

In this text, ‘gods’ is *elohim*, which probably means something like powers, the powers that be; the many powered ([Abarim Publications](#)). God had already promised to judge the gods of Egypt (Exodus 12:12), and with the judgment on Pharaoh and the deliverance of Israel from bondage, Yahweh showed himself to be the most powerful *elohim*.

Of course, when Israel celebrated in song their victory at the Red Sea, they asked the question: *Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand; the earth swallowed them* (Exodus 15:11-12).

The answer to this rhetorical question was obvious: no *elohim* could be compared with the Lord God of Israel who demonstrated himself to be the most powerful *elohim*.

God is greater than man

*Behold, in this you are not right. I will answer you, for **God is greater than man*** (Job 33:12).

Job has been asserting that he is without transgression, clean and has no iniquity, but God finds some breach of promise by Job. Elihu has no time for Job’s wrangling with God and being controversial with. No, Elihu says, God is far above Job’s petty problems.

*But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him. For whenever our heart condemns us, **God is greater than our heart**, and he knows everything* (1John 3:17-20).

The meaning of this text is plain enough although there is debate about what John meant by ‘heart’. Generally ‘heart’ refers to the center of the inner life, the source of thinking, feeling, the will and its decisions, the emotions, wishes, and desires (Net Bible). We would then understand **God is greater than our heart** as God speaking to us through our conscience.

The next three ‘greater than’ comparisons concern Christ, which were made as He battled with His severest critics and opponents, the Jewish leadership - the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees.

Pharisees were members of one of the most important and influential religious and political parties of Judaism in the time of Jesus numbering more than 6,000. They were strict and zealous adherents to the laws of the Hebrew Bible and to numerous additional traditions.

“Scribes” (*grammateus*) were recognised experts in the law of Moses and in traditional laws and regulations. The Sadducees controlled the official political structures of Judaism being the majority members of the Sanhedrin. They were known as extremely strict on law and order issues.

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Christ is greater than the temple

At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, "Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath."

He said to them, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests.

*Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? I tell you, that in this place is one **greater than the temple.***

But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8).

The argument of the Pharisees was that the Lord's disciples broke the Law of Moses, for what they did was work, which when done on the Sabbath was a violation of the fourth commandment (Exodus 20:8-11). In reply, Jesus referenced the action of David taking holy bread from the temple when he and his men were hungry (1 Samuel 21:1-6). His interpretation showed that human need took priority over the law, and in this case Israel's king was greater than the temple.

The Lord's second challenge to the Jewish leaders concerned their biblical ignorance of the story about sabbath priests working in the temple breaking the sabbath and yet are guiltless. The law was very clear about reverencing the Sabbath (Exodus 31:14-15, 35:2), but the priests worked on the Sabbath making sacrifices (Numbers 28:9, 10) and doing other ceremonial rites (Exodus 25:30, Lev 24:7, 8). Those tasks were their jobs, but the Law held them guiltless because they were doing what God commanded them to do. What looks to be contradictory on the surface was not because such work was in the will of God.

So, the Lord indicated that His importance outranks the importance of the Temple, and that He thus has the right to interpret the Law as it applies to His followers, just as the Temple could interpret the Law for its ministrants. Indeed as the Temple is the repository for the Law, it has authority over the Law. As He is greater than the Temple He has more right to interpret the Law than any other living person. It was in fact to be one of the duties of the Messianic King to interpret the Law so as to ensure that he and the nation lived by it (Deuteronomy 17:19-20).

'Is here.' In other words let them note that the time has come. For long centuries the Temple and its priesthood has represented God on earth. But now it has been superseded as God's primary means of being revealed to His people, by Another, the One Who can reveal the Father to whom He will (Matthew 11:27),. Thus the Tabernacle and the Temple as the place around which God's 'congregation' would gather is being replaced by Another around which His people will gather.

The Lord then makes two remarkable assertions. The first, quoting Hosea 6:6, says 'I desire mercy (*faithfulness, chesed*) and not sacrifice'. So, who is the "I" in this text? From Hosea 1:1 onwards the Lord has been speaking, and Jesus claims that this is He. Moreover, He asserted there that Israel's faithfulness was fleeting as the morning mist while they continued to offer their sacrifices to God, an attitude that He appalled.

David and the sabbath the priests, in contrast, were faithful to God for Whom compassion superseded ritual. They would in that case have interpreted the Law compassionately and not harshly, and would have allowed the hungry poor to gather for their own need on the Sabbath. They would not have condemned those who in fact had done no wrong. Jesus did not see His disciples as having committed a minor sin, He considered that they had actually had the right to do what they had done, thus specifically setting Himself against the ideas of the Pharisees ([Pett](#)).



Christ is greater than the temple continued

The objective of God's law to Israel was to establish and maintain His authority, and mercy (*chesed*) is extended by an authority toward a subject who has failed to meet expectations. That means that mercy will only be issued when it confirms the authority, and not when it challenges it as the Pharisees, Scribes, and Sadducees did.

When a subject fails to abide by the law, the authority may select to resort to mercy when the failure is due to some kind of inability of the subject (ignorance, illiteracy, deafness, lack of intelligence), and the act of mercy has the same result as the objective of the law, namely to establish and confirm the authority. That means that mercy can only exist where law fails to support authority (where law fails to successfully instruct subjects on how to fulfil their own desire to exist in harmony with the authority), and authority must outrank the law to compensate for this failure. Chesed, God's steadfast love expresses how his standard as revealed in the Law is executed, with the Jewish leaders failed to recognise ([Abarim Publications](#)).

The remarkable assertion is that Jesus went on to claim to be the Son of Man, the lord of the sabbath. For Daniel, the Son of Man was given everlasting dominion, glory, and unending kingship (Daniel 7:13-14). Daniel was written in two languages; Daniel 2:4–7:28 is in Aramaic, and the remainder in Hebrew. Also, the expression 'son of man' occurs in both the Aramaic and Hebrew sections. So, in Daniel 7:13 (in the Aramaic section), 'son of man' (*bar enasha*), the only time that it appears in the Hebrew Bible, refers to a man-like but divine figure in the heavens. However, in 8:17 (in the Hebrew section), 'son of man' (*ben adam*) refers to Daniel. So, a distinction is made between an ordinary man and the man-like, divine one.

It is this man-like but divine figure who gave the Sabbath, and is therefore Lord of it.

Christ is greater than Jonah

*Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, **a greater than Jonah** is here* (Matthew 12:38-41).

The Jewish leaders were saying that the miracles that Jesus performed were insufficient proof that He was the Son of God. Their request for a sign (*semeion*) something bigger and spectacular was insulting. In the Greek classics *semeion* could describe anything from a marker on a border, grave or monument to a signalling flag in battle, a figurehead on shields, even a password or secret handshake. The medical profession used this word to describe representative symptoms of a certain disease ([Abarim Publications](#)).

So, He calls them an evil generation, that is, they antagonised, hindered and impeded Him, and an adulterous generation, spiritually unfaithful to God. Accordingly no sign will be given but the sign of the prophet Jonah.



The parallels

“For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

So, what is the sign here? Notice the parallels:

Jonah: ‘three days and three nights’. Son of man: ‘three days and three nights

Jonah: ‘in the whale’s belly’/(heart of the seas, Jonah 2:3). Son of man: ‘in the heart of the earth’.

Let’s deal with Jonah first.

Heart of the seas

Jonah’s reference to the deep, and the heart of the seas is clear. He equated it with Sheol (2:2), and its synonym, the Pit (2:6). The scholarly “Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament” sees “sheol,” meaning “make into nothing,” “belonging to nothingness” or “place of nothingness.”

Biblically, Sheol occurs mostly in poetical texts, as a poetic designation of the grave, the place of the dead, but never associated with the existence of the dead person’s soul or spirit ([Galenieks](#)). If so, Jonah in the belly of Sheol, experienced the distress of imminent mortal danger as so overwhelming that he felt as if he was already dead in the grave.

Heart of the earth

But, what is *the heart of the earth*? There’s no consensus about this, but "heart of the earth" seems to correspond in Jesus' words to "heart of the sea" in the story of Jonah to which He is directing His audience. That is, Jonah for-all-intents-and-purposes died while buried in the heart of the sea, while Jesus was buried in the depths of the earth, namely, in the tomb. So, heart of the earth means "underground," just as heart of the seas means "underwater." "In the heart of the earth," then, was a Hebrew metaphor signifying being dead and buried.

Three days and three nights

“Three days and three nights” was a Hebraism meaning that any part of such a period is counted as the whole. Here are two biblical examples that support that Hebrew meaning:

1. Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for **three days**, night or day. After that I will go to the king (4:16). On the **third day** Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, opposite the king’s hall (Esther 5:1).
2. The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and **three days** after being killed, he will rise again (Mark 8:31, 9:31). Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the **third day** (Luke 24:46).

[Waters](#), however, has offered another interpretation of both the three days and nights, and ‘the heart of the earth’. He suggests that Matthew’s reference to “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” is a summation of events involving Jesus in Jerusalem from Thursday evening to Sunday morning. As Jonah spent three days and three nights of suffering inside the great fish, so Jesus spent a final three days and three nights of suffering in Jerusalem, that place known in biblical and extra-biblical tradition as the “middle,” “center,” “navel,” or “heart” of the earth.



Jewish prophet v Gentile empire

Jonah was the servant of the God of Israel, from Gath-hepher (2 Kings 14:25). This was a Galilean village of the tribe of Zebulun, near Sepphoris (Joshua 19:10-13). Jonah prophesied the success of king Jeroboam II son of Joash, in his war with Syria, by which he would restore the territory that other nations had wrested from Israel. Jonah's next prophetic task was Nineveh (see Jonah 1-2).

The Lord urged Jonah to go immediately to Nineveh, which was the last capital city of ancient Assyria, located on the east bank of the Tigris River. It was the most powerful city in the ancient Near East as the capital of the mighty Neo-Assyrian Empire. But its size was not the reason for the urgency of God's command, but rather its sin. Nineveh was big but broken before God physically, socially or morally. But, Jonah didn't quite have God's sense of urgency and ran away.

Jonah had good reason to be prejudiced against the Ninevites and Assyrians, for it was an idolatrous, proud, and ruthless nation and had long been a threat to Israel. For Shalmaneser the king of Assyria captured Samaria having besieged it for three years. Then he carried the Israelites away to Assyria (2 Kings 17:5). Further, because Israel was unfaithful to God and worshiped the gods of the native peoples, God stirred up the spirit of King Tilgath-pilneser of Assyria, and he carried away the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh (1 Chronicles 5:25-26).

It would seem that Jonah was happy that he prophesied the success of king Jeroboam II in his war with Syria, but he had no appetite to take a return trip of thousands of kilometres to warn the Assyrian enemy of impending judgment. As far as he was concerned, they deserved the wrath of God. So, Jonah was happy to cherry pick in the service of God. He would help his nation, but not his nation's enemies (Jonah 1:3, 10). To avoid what he felt was a distasteful task of service to God and men, He walks 100kms from his home town south west to Joppa and takes a ship to Tarshish.

However, he did change his mind and preached God's message to Nineveh. The people of Nineveh were Gentiles outside the commonwealth of Israel. They were ignorant of God, pagan, evil, and violent. God spoke to them through the Jonah and they repented of their sin and turned to God.

What a contrast to God's people Israel. Her leaders, the Pharisees and Scribes charged Jesus with being in league with Satan for healing the demoniac. These leaders were responsible to lead the Jewish people into godliness: holiness of character and righteousness of conduct. These were men whose lineage boasted of a personal relationship with God Most High. They were the repository of the commandments, statutes, and ordinances of YHWH. They were custodians of the covenant of faith. They were to be the example to the nations of a God fearing, God honoring, God serving people. Yet they called God's Son a servant of Satan, hated Him, condemned Him, and had Him crucified. Why? Because He exposed their godless corruption.

Accordingly, the Lord said that on the day of judgment the Ninevites, who repented of their sin, would be called by the Lord of Glory to testify against these unrepentant Jewish apostates, spiritual adulterers, and idolaters.

... see, *a greater than Jonah* is here.

Jonah was a successful prophet, and the Lord commanded that with Himself, the Pharisees and Scribes see (imperative, a command) more of Jonah here. Christ shows them all of what Jonah said and did, and more, and the command was to see it and believe.

In that sense of 'more', He was greater than Jonah.



Christ is greater than the Solomon

*The queen of the south shall rise up in the judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it: for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon; and, behold, **a greater than Solomon** is here* (Matthew 12:42).

Solomon prayed for wisdom in order to make sound judicial decisions for God's people and to distinguish right from wrong. The Lord was pleased that Solomon made this request and gave him a wise and discerning mind superior to that of anyone who has preceded or will succeed him (1 Kings 3:9-12). God also gave Solomon very great discernment; the breadth of his understanding was as infinite as the sand on the seashore. Solomon was wiser than all the men of the east and all the sages of Egypt. He was wiser than any man. From all nations people came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom." (1 Kings 4:29-34).

Queen of the South

Who might this be? Various conjectures have been made about the identity of the Queen of the South. As "king of the South" was a reference to the Egyptian monarch, so "Queen of the South" was a reference to a queen of Egypt. According to Josephus (Ant. 8.6.5-6, 8:165-175), the queen of Sheba was the queen of Egypt and Ethiopia.

The Queen of Sheba is only mentioned twice in the Bible, in 1 Kings 10:1-12 and 2 Chronicles 9:1-13. The story is that she hears reports of King Solomon's fame and comes to visit him with gold and precious jewels and more spices than had ever been seen in Israel. Solomon was able to answer all her hard questions.

Many kings ascended the throne of Israel from the time of Saul to the dissolution of both the Northern Kingdom and the Southern Kingdom. None of these kings, however, obtained the power and prestige that Solomon did. Nearly a thousand years before Solomon, Abraham had been promised that his seed would receive the land of Canaan for their inheritance, including territory as far north as the Euphrates River (see Genesis 12:7; 13:15; 15:18). But not until Solomon's time was this promise fully realized. Solomon extended the domain of Israel from the Red Sea in the south to the Euphrates River on the north. The golden age of Israel, started under King David, continued under Solomon. During the forty years that Solomon ruled as king of Israel, there was peace and unity throughout his vast domain.

At this high point of Israel's influence in the ancient Near East, people from all nations were sent by all the kings of the world as their representatives, to listen to Solomon's wisdom (1 Kings 4:29-34). However, the Queen was a person of significant social-political power demonstrated by the nature of her visit, and by the fact that she was received into the court of the king. Her journey had both theological and political aims. Theologically, she searched out Solomon's wisdom and its source, and was attuned to God's work and made right theological judgments with respect to the Lord. She was better able to comprehend the work of Yahweh than the generation of Jewish leaders who were being rebuked by Jesus ([Forbes and Harrower](#)).

... see, **a greater than Solomon** is here.

Solomon was a successful king, and the Lord commanded that with Himself, the Pharisees and Scribes see (imperative, a command) more of Solomon here. Christ shows them all of what Solomon said and did, and more, and the command was to see it and believe. In that sense of 'more', He was greater than Solomon.



Queen of the South continued

So, the Queen of the South alongside the Ninevites will stand to testify against the elders of Israel for their sin. Solomon was great and so was Jonah. But Jesus is greater than them. And though he is standing right in front of those who should know best, they do not recognise him. Even the ignorant, unbelieving foreigners understood a true representative of God! In the judgment, these ignorant foreigners will put this "evil and adulterous generation" to shame with their belief.

The gentile Queen of the South and the Ninevites are the example of faith. Unexpectedly, the Gentiles, who should not have recognised Jesus, did. They stand in contrast to the Israelites who should have recognised Jesus, and did not, and they will be judged for it.

Conclusion

We have looked at seven 'greater than' comparisons made about God and Christ. God is greater than all, than Christ, than all gods, than man. Christ is greater the temple, than Jonah, and Solomon.

When the text says that God is greater than Christ, and others say that they are one, it's important to distinguish statements that are qualitatively different. Some texts express **essentiality**, that is who they are, and others **functionality**, that is what they do according to a divinely given function and purpose.

Christ is greater the temple, than Jonah, and Solomon. These three represent the Hebrew systems of priest, prophet and king. Christ at various times fills all three functions, something that Israel's officers could not. Christ for this reason, and the reasons that He was all that the temple, Jonah, Solomon were, and a whole lot more, was proof that He was greater than each of them.

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