



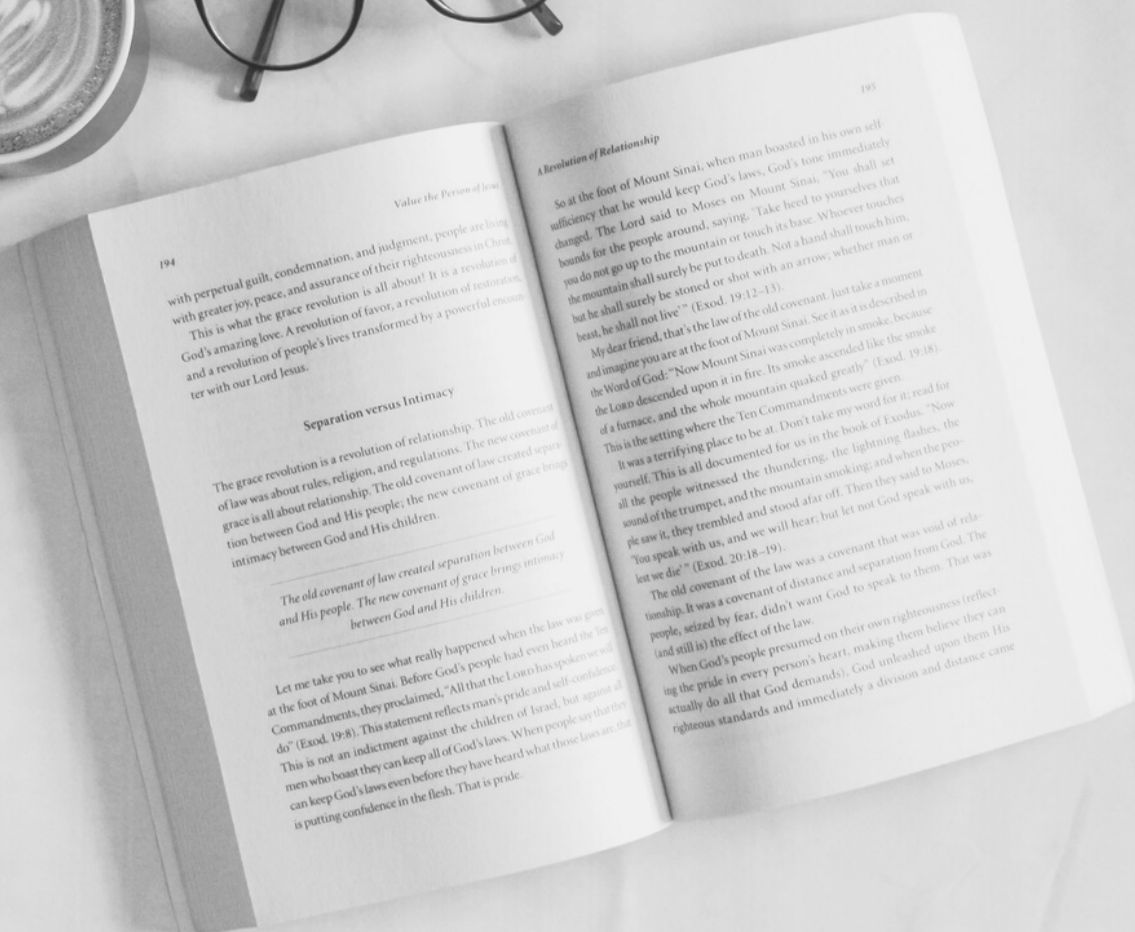
The Paideia Center

FOR WHOLE LIFE DISCIPLESHIP

DISCUSSION LEADER GUIDE



MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR,
ON THE COSMIC MYSTERY
OF JESUS CHRIST



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MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR
On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ



INTRODUCTION

As we explore the doctrine of Christology this year, we want to consider both Christ in and of himself and also the way that Christ relates to all other things. The varied writings of Maximus the Confessor help prompt both lines of thought as he was a chief respondent to the monothelite heresy as well as a contemplative who sought to perceive how scripture speaks of Christ renewing all things.

Who was Maximus? Maximus lived from 580-662. He was raised in a wealthy family in Constantinople, by then the well-established seat of imperial power. In fact, he was appointed to the imperial court by the emperor Heraclitus, though he would leave that post to pursue a monastic calling. He moved during this period from Asia Minor to North Africa, specifically to Carthage. He was mentored then by Sophronius, the patriarch of Jerusalem. He was allied with the Bishop of Rome during this period, participating in the Lateran Council in Rome in 649. He also sought to offer an alternative to the Origenist theologies that had been condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 553 and which had frequently laid claim to be the rightful heirs of some of Maximus's favored teachers (such as Gregory of Nazianzus).

Walter Kaegi says that "the empire's fortunes gyrated violently during Maximus the Confessor's lifetime" ("Byzantium in the Seventh Century," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, 92). These changes matched shifting imperial postures toward Maximus. His final years involved a tragic return to Constantinople, albeit no longer as a new recruit for the court but instead in custody of the imperial forces. He was thrice exiled and repeatedly put on trial. Eventually he died after his hands and tongue were cut off. Maximus died as confessor of the true faith at the hands of monothelite powers (as did Martin, the Bishop of Rome, in 654). However, theological tides were soon to change after his death, as the Sixth Ecumenical Council, convened in Constantinople in 680-681, would affirm his dyothelite position as the orthodox faith.

How did Maximus respond to the Monothelites? The monothelites believed that Christ exercised one activity and, therefore, one will throughout his earthly life. In so doing, they believed they were honoring the earlier emphasis upon the single subject of the incarnation as taught by Cyril of Alexandria and the Definition of Chalcedon. Maximus argued the dyothelite

position that the single subject, Christ Jesus, nonetheless truly exercised both a divine and a human will.

Brian Daley summarizes his campaign against the monothelites: “Maximus’s point, in the campaign of letters and personal interventions he waged over the next decade against the Christology of ‘one activity and one will,’ was that it is precisely in the preservation of all that belongs to the human nature of Christ—of all his human ‘operations’ or ‘activities,’ including the central psychological activity of self-determination—that his human nature is able to be fully conformed, in a human way, to the will and action of God, and so to be transformed and divinized precisely *as humanity*” (*God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* [Changing Paradigms in Historical and Systematic Theology; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018], 218 [italics original]). And does that mean that the divine overrules the human? No, not with respect to will or energy or activity. Paul Blowers says that “to those who argued that the divine *energeia* effectively overruled the human one in Christ, Maximus countered, on the basis of the Aristotelian category of relation, that such would merely lead to the diminution of *both*, since whatever rules is invariably subject to the thing ruled in order to rule it” (*Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*, 47). That would be irony, and Maximus sees fit to avoid it.

What did Maximus model regarding a Christ-Centered view of the person and of the cosmos? Paul Blowers says that, for Maximus, “both the cosmos and the Bible tell the same glorious story, as it were: the story of the Logos who, in his historical incarnation and in his gradual eschatological epiphany ‘in all things’ (cf. 1 Cor. 15:28), discloses through the *logoi*, the providential ‘principles’ of creation and Scripture, the magnificent intricacy and beauty of the transfigured cosmos” (17). Just as much as he focused on our metaphysical understanding of Christ’s person, so he also probed the nature of Christ’s relevance to all things by considering their union with him and participation in him. Elsewhere Blowers says: “For Maximus, the Christian Gospel gave witness to a universe being transfigured, to an emerging cosmic and eschatological *politeia* embracing all of spiritual and material creation, of which Jesus Christ was both the pioneer and the perfecter in his incarnation” (*Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*, 101).

Maximus left a smattering of texts behind. His most significant texts are *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, which responded to queries from a fellow monk, and the *Ambigua*, which was addressed to the abbot named Thomas. That latter text relates to ambiguous or difficult passages found in the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus. He also wrote volumes on love, on the ascetical life, on the divine liturgy or mystagogy, on the monothelite error regarding Christ, and on the Lord’s prayer.

FURTHER BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Polycarp Sherwood; Westminster, MD: Newman, 1957).

For a sketch of his thought, see especially Paul Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Christian Theology in Context; New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Aidan Nichols, *Byzantine Gospel: Maximus the Confessor in Modern Scholarship* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993).

The best single source on the full range of his thought is Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). Other significant monographs include Melchisedec Törönen, *Union and Distinction in the Thought of St Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Torstein Tollefsen, *The Christocentric Cosmology of St. Maximus the Confessor: A Study of His Metaphysical Principles* (Acta Humaniora 72; Oslo: Unipub Forlag, 2000); Demetrios Bathrellos, *The Byzantine Christ: Person, Nature, and Will in the Christology of St. Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Adam Cooper, *The Body of St. Maximus the Confessor: Holy Flesh, Wholly Deified* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor* (Lund, 1965); Paul Blowers, *Exegesis and Spiritual Pedagogy in Maximus the Confessor: An Investigation of the Quaestiones ad Thalassium* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991); Johannes Zachhuber, *The Rise of Christian Theology and the End of Ancient Metaphysics: Patristic Philosophy from the Cappadocian Fathers to John of Damascus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pages 275-287; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (trans. Brian Daley; San Francisco: Ignatius, 2003).



1ST MONTH

Pages 45-96

This first month will introduce matters of cosmology, creatureliness, and Christ. *Ambiguum* 7 is a manifesto of sorts, to which both 8 and 42 follow up with respect to some details. In every case, Maximus is distinguishing his way of reading scripture from that of sixth century Origenists (who believed in the eternal preexistence of human souls).

AMBIGUUM 7: ON THE BEGINNING AND END OF RATIONAL CREATURES (PAGES 45-74)

Adam G. Cooper introduces this *Ambiguum* by observing that “it is sometimes forgotten that the whole work is occasioned by an old question—in this instance raised by Gregory Nazianzen—concerning the purpose of the body and especially physical suffering in God’s plan for human life, and unfolds therefore as a wide-ranging discussion on questions concerning spiritual progress and Maximus’s vision for creaturely human existence” (“Spiritual Anthropology in *Ambiguum* 7,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, 360).

A quotation from Nazianzen’s Oration 14 might be taken to suggest an Origenist view of humanity, namely, that we are “a portion of God” and “have slipped down from above” to be united with bodies as a punishment for previous sin (45-46). They take a wrong view of movement, believing that we moved away from a previous, preincarnate union with God when assuming our bodies. Maximus says such a movement could always be repeated, leading us to reasonable despair (47). Blowers offers an editorial summary here: “In response Maximus turns Origen’s scheme on its head. Instead of ‘rest,’ ‘movement,’ and ‘becoming’ (coming to be), he proposes ‘becoming’ followed by ‘movement’ that has as its goal ‘rest’” (24).

In the first section, he reiterates the distinction of creature and Creator: “Nothing that came into being is perfect in itself and complete” (49). This shapes our understanding of creaturely movement: “If then rational beings come into being, surely they are also moved, since they move from a natural beginning in ‘being’ toward a voluntary end in ‘well-being’” (50). Further, “from him come both our moving in whatever way from a beginning and our moving in a certain way toward him as the end” (50-51). In the second section, he turns to consider Nazianzen’s language of “slipping down from God.” The Logos is the key: “Surely then, if someone is moved according to the Logos, he will come to be in God, in whom the logos of his being preexists as his beginning and cause ... the *logoi* of all things known by God before their creation are securely fixed in God” (56). Again, the danger is to assume that we have slipped down because of previous sin toward embodiment (58); by contrast, Maximus views the move “to slip down” as someone exchanging devotion to God for “what is worse, non-being,” though it in no way involves the assumption of embodiment (61). In the third section, he considers the language of calling ourselves a “portion of God” and uses the term *logoi* to explain that language. In the fourth section he points out that “portion” actually means “member” (of the body) and talks about participation and renewal in

in Christ (71). Torstein T. Tollefsen says that “the *logoi* are the divine principles of creatures in accordance with which the difference and variety of things are secured” (“Christocentric Cosmology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, 312).

“In the passage under discussion our teacher is not explaining the reason for the creation of mankind, but the reason for the misery that sin brought into our life after we were created” (68). But his focus is not only on rightly understanding that error; Maximus turns more to depict renewal. “But this renewal did not come about through the normal course of things, it was only realized when a wholly new way of being human appeared. God had made us like himself, and allowed us to participate in the very things that are most characteristic of his goodness” (70). Earlier he likens this divinization of God in all of us to the presence of the soul to all of the body (63).

AMBIGUUM 8: ON HOW THE CREATOR BRINGS ORDER OUT OF THE CHAOS OF BODILY EXISTENCE (PAGES 75-78)

Whereas Origenists believed the disparity of bodies was owing to preincarnate sins, Maximus argued that humans were created glorious and incorruptible but have fallen owing to original sin (76).

Blowers says that “*Ambiguum 8* is largely an extended footnote to *Ambiguum 7*, revisiting the dilemma of how divine providence can be operative amid the weakness and suffering of corporeal existence, and with that the question of why human beings find themselves in such disparate bodily conditions” (27).

AMBIGUUM 42: ON JESUS CHRIST AND THE “THREE BIRTHS” (PAGES 79-96)

Nazianzen appears to mention three births of Christ but then to add a fourth one. What is to be made of this seeming inconsistency? Maximus says: “Insofar as I understand him, in the weakness of my meager intelligence, I do not think that he is superfluously adding a fourth birth; rather, this birth is complementary of the aforementioned bodily birth and explains the divine principles (*logoi*) and modes (*tropoi*) pertaining thereto” (80). Again he tackles the Origenist notion of the preexistence of human souls (86-87).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- How do we understand the genre of *Ambigua*? What values are transmitted by teaching theology in this sort of manner? How does this theological genre invoke certain notions of intellectual virtue and vice?
- What are key principles for Maximus’s view of humanity?
- Is it helpful to speak of the four states of humanity in this section (using the categories of creation, fall, redemption, and glory)? How might each category help us see more of what Maximus finds in scripture?

- Why does Maximus think the Origenists don't merely misunderstand human origins, but that they also commit Christological error?
- Birth, baptism, and resurrection are likened to three births by Maximus: what's the value in making sure we emphasize each of these births in our understanding of Christian existence? What's lost when we underappreciate one or more of them?

KEY QUOTES

- “Do not be disturbed by what I have said. I have no intention of denying free will. Rather I am speaking of a firm and steadfast disposition, a willing surrender, so that from the one from whom we have received being we long to receive being moved as well” (52). On his awareness of and relationship to Augustine on the will, see Johannes Börjesson, “Augustine on the Will,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, 212-234.
- “By his gracious condescension God became man and is called man for the sake of man and by exchanging his condition for ours revealed the power that elevates man to God through his love for God and brings God down to man because of his love for man. By this blessed inversion, man is made God by divinization and God is made man by hominization” (60).
- “He remains wholly man in soul and body by nature, and becomes wholly God in body and soul by grace and by the unparalleled divine radiance of blessed glory appropriate to him” (63).
- “What could be more amazing than the fact that, being God by nature, and seeing fit to become man by nature, he did not defy the limits of either one of the natures in relation to the other, but instead remained wholly God while becoming wholly human?” (84)

2ND MONTH

Pages 97-130



In this second month we turn to consider Christ and the experience of Christian salvation. Maximus discusses moral psychology and the passions, Christ's experience of that suffering, and the life of virtue.

AD THALASSIUM 1: ON THE UTILITY OF THE PASSIONS (PAGES 97-98)

This section addresses the nature of passions: are they evil in and of themselves or only when experienced in an evil way? He argues that these passions aren't original but followed the fall and attached themselves to the irrational element of the sinful human. That said, they can be used for good when they involve the desire for virtue and knowledge.

Demetrios Bathrellos maps a range of statements made by Maximus regarding passions, sometimes speaking of it as being opposed to nature though sometimes instead speaking in a neutral register of passions ("Passions, Ascesis, and the Virtues," in *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor*, 291).

Be alert for both sorts of statements about passion given his semantic dexterity here (which may map onto a similar semantic range for related terms in Holy Scripture).

AD THALASSIUM 2: ON GOD'S PRESERVATION AND INTEGRATION OF THE UNIVERSE (PAGES 99-102)

What is God doing after he makes all things in the six days? "He is still at work, not only preserving these creatures in their very existence but effecting the formation, progress, and sustenance of the individual parts that are potential within them" (99).

AD THALASSIUM 6: ON THE GRACE OF HOLY BAPTISM (PAGES 103-104)

In light of promises about grace and baptism, how is it that baptized Christians still sin? In answering, he describes a twofold grace or gift: adoption and a reorientation of "the entire free choice." It is a fascinating precursor to the language later used by Calvin to speak of a double grace: forgiveness and regeneration (more often known as justification and sanctification).

AD THALASSIUM 17: ON SPIRITUAL PROGRESS IN VIRTUE (PAGES 105-108)

Why does Exod 4:19-26 speak of God sending an angel after Moses in judgment? "On the moral

racecourse, weakness in performing the virtues can result in just such a death” (107), and Moses hadn’t tended to the need to circumcise his son.

AD THALASSIUM 21: ON CHRIST’S CONQUEST OF THE HUMAN PASSIONS (PAGES 109-114)

How did Christ “put off the powers and principalities” (Col 2:15)? If he was sinless, how did he engage them? “So the Lord *put off the principalities and powers* at the time of his first experience of temptation in the desert, thereby healing the whole of human nature of the passion connected with pleasure” (113). How? “These evil powers hoped to use natural possibility to induce even the Lord himself to fantasize unnatural passion and to do what suited them” (111).

AD THALASSIUM 22: ON JESUS CHRIST AND THE END OF THE AGES (PAGES 115-118)

How have the “end of the ages” come upon us already? “According to this plan, it is clear that God wisely divided ‘the ages’ between those intended for God to become human, and those intended for humanity to become divine” (115).

Maximus describes what we would now call inaugurated eschatology in saying both that the end of the ages has come and has yet to be fulfilled. “Since our Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning, middle, and end of all the ages, past and future, it would be fair to say that the end of the ages—specifically that end which will actually come about by grace for the deification of those who are worthy—has come upon us in potency through faith ... But in the ages to come we shall undergo by grace the transformation unto deification and no longer be active but passive; and for this reason we shall not cease from being deified” (117). Blowers clarifies: “It may be epistemologically helpful to distinguish *consecutive* ages of incarnation and deification, but Maximus is actually suggesting that the incarnation of Christ, far from putting a chronological end to a series of ages that are now destined simply to give way to a new series, is the final goal of the totality of time, since he is *simultaneously* the ‘beginning, middle, and end of all the ages, past and future,’ and now we only know him as the end-come-upon us ‘in potency through faith’” (*Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World*, 140).

AD THALASSIUM 42: ON JESUS CHRIST, THE NEW ADAM WHO “BECAME SIN” (PAGES 119-122)

Maximus here unpacks the meaning of Christ becoming sin in 2 Cor 5:21; “he *became* the ‘sin that I caused’; in other words, he assumed the corruption of human nature that was a consequence of the mutability of my free choice” (120).

AD THALASSIUM 60: ON THE COSMIC MYSTERY OF JESUS CHRIST (PAGES 123-130)

By whom was Christ foreknown (as per 1 Pet 1:20)? “This mystery was known solely to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit before all the ages. It was known to the Father by his approval, to the Son by his carrying it out, and to the Holy Spirit by his cooperation in it” (127).

He wraps up his answer by talking of the relationship of nature to grace, of God the creator to

God the redeemer. “For truly he who is the Creator of the essence of created beings by nature had also to become the very Author of the deification of creatures by grace, in order that the Giver of well-being might appear also as the gracious Giver of eternal well-being” (128).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- What are the passions? How do they relate to emotions and affections? Why does Maximus say they enter because of the fall? And how do they become productive and good?
- What stands out about the way Maximus talks about Scripture? What about how he reads particular passages and phrases?
- What seem to be his main concerns in talking about the person of Christ (metaphysically)? How does that relate to Athanasius? to the language of the Nicene Creed? to the Definition of Chalcedon?
- Maximus talks about sin-bearing, triumphing over powers, and a whole range of images crucial to his saving work. In what ways does Maximus expand or reorient the images and terms we use to describe the atoning work of Christ? Which are familiar and which are unfamiliar? Which seem to mean what we take them today to mean and which may have slightly or significantly different meanings?

KEY QUOTES

- “Even now in his providence he is bringing about the assimilation of particulars to universals until he might unite creatures’ own voluntary inclination to the more universal natural principle of rational being through the movement of these particular creatures toward well-being, and make them harmonious and self-moving in relation to one another and to the whole universe” (99-100).
- “Whoever intelligently examines the enigmas of the Scriptures with a fear of God and for the sake of the divine glory alone, and removes the letter as though it were a curtain around the spirit, shall discover everything face to face, as the wise proverb says (Prov 8:9). No impediment will be found to the perfect motion of the mind toward divine things. Therefore we shall let stand the literal meaning that has already been corporeally fulfilled in Moses’s time and consider, with spiritual eyes, the power of the literal meaning in the Spirit, since this power is constantly being realized and abounding into its fullness” (104).
- “We shall become that which in no way results from our natural ability, since our human nature has no faculty for grasping what transcends nature ... Intrinsically it is only by the grace of God that deification is bestowed proportionately on created beings. Grace alone illuminates human nature with supernatural light, and, by the superiority of its glory, elevates our nature above its proper limits in excess of glory” (118).
- “And so, to repeat, there is one hypostasis realized from the two natures and the difference between the natures remains immutable. In view of this difference, moreover, the natures

remain undiminished, and the quantity of each of the united natures is preserved, even after the union. For, whereas by the union no change or alteration at all was suffered by either of the united natures, the essential principle of each of the united natures endured without being compromised” (123-124).



3RD MONTH

Pages 131-176

In this third and final month, we consider ways in which Maximus will contemplate three scriptural episodes: Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden, Jonah's call to Ninevah, and Jesus's prayerful night in Gethsemane.

AD THALASSIUM 61: ON THE LEGACY OF ADAM'S TRANSGRESSION (PAGES 131-144)

A range of questions regarding judgment. He winds up talking about not only pain and pleasure, and sin and death, but also about Christ and transformation of our human existence.

"In my judgment, then, the scriptural text before us has rightly distinguished between, on the one hand, how human conception on the basis of pleasure, inherited from Adam, tyrannizes our nature, and feeds the death caused by pleasure, and, on the other hand, how the birth of our Lord in the flesh, based on his love of humanity, has done away both with the pleasure inherited from Adam and the death that he caused, and so erased Adam's punishment along with his sin" (136).

AD THALASSIUM 64: ON THE PROPHET JONAH AND THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION (PAGES 145-172)

Maximus here explores a text that may seem perplexing or odd at the literal level: what adult cannot know their right or left hand? (Jon 4:11) Maximus conveys a basic hermeneutical principle that "none of the persons, places, times, or other things recorded in Scripture—animate and inanimate, sensible and intelligible—has its concurrent literal or spiritual meanings rendered always according to the same interpretative mode" (145). Here Jonah signifies Adam (148).

"Therefore it is the wholly blessed Church of God that contains more than twelve myriads of men who do not know their right hand or their left—those, namely, who in their virtue and knowledge have gone beyond the principles of time and nature and passed over to the magnificence of eternal and noetic realities" (156). A three day journey marks out this transformation of Jonah from Adam in sin to this new and wholly blessed Church of God (167). Now, in speaking of transformation, Maximus doesn't mean that they cease to think naturally in every sense though it does transform the natural; "The law of grace consists in a supernatural reason, and transforms nature, without violating it, unto deification" (169).

OPUSCULUM 6: ON THE TWO WILLS OF CHRIST IN THE AGONY OF GETHSEMANE (PAGES 173-176)

What do we make of the statement by Christ, “not my will, but yours be done”? Is it a “matter of perfect harmony and concurrence”? If so, who’s the subject?

“Clearly the negation here—*Not what I will*—absolutely precludes opposition and instead demonstrates harmony between the human will of the Savior and the divine will shared by him and his Father, given that the Logos assumed our nature in its entirety and deified his human will in the assumption. It follows, then, that having become like us for our sake, he was calling on his God and Father in a human manner when he said, *Let not what I will, but what you will prevail*, inasmuch as, being God by nature, he also in his humanity has, as his human volition, the fulfillment of the will of the Father” (176).

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Are pain and pleasure good and bad in and of themselves? Or are they harmful or beneficial based on something beyond them? How do they relate to the language of passion employed earlier by Maximus?
- What does Maximus suggest makes for eternal happiness and life with God? And what does that imply for judgment and punishment?
- Sometimes he talks of eternal happiness as rest and sometimes as “ever-moving repose” (as in *Ambiguum* 67). In what ways is heavenly happiness static or stable and in what ways is it dynamic and developing?
- As we sum up our study of Maximus, two matters warrant consideration:
 - How does Maximus challenge or help us to think better about who Jesus Christ is?
 - How does Maximus call us to think about the relevance of Jesus Christ to all of reality (God, self, and world)?

KEY QUOTES

- “Clearly he suffered, and converted the use of death so that in him it would be a condemnation not of our nature but manifestly only of sin itself” (137-138).
- “This, it seems to me, is the *gospel of God*: that the incarnate Son is God’s ambassador and advocate for humanity, and has earned reconciliation to the Father for those who yield to him for the deification that is without origin” (141).
- “the entire orderly arrangement of the Church is encompassed in these three laws, having its length defined in virtue, its width in knowledge, and its depth in the wisdom of mystical theology” (170).