

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### The divine essence of 'Good' – a comprehensive exploration of 'ἄγαθος' in Coptic Orthodox theology and worship

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#### Abstract

مصطلح 'صالح' أو 'ἄγαθος' هو مصطلح يستخدم بشكل متكرر في طقوس عبادة الكنيسة القبطية الأرثوذكسية، من قبل كل من الكهنة والمصلين. ومن الجدير بالذكر أن كل خدمة طقسية ضمن هذا التقليد تصف صلاح الله الأب. وهذا يسلط الضوء على أهمية فهم المعنى الحقيقي لهذا المصطلح وأهميته. وقد أكد الرب يسوع نفسه هذه الصفة عندما خاطب القائد قائلاً: 'لماذا تدعوني صالحاً؟ ليس أحد صالحاً إلا الله'. إن تصوير الله على أنه صالح بطبيعته يجد أساسه في كل من العهدين القديم والجديد. ومع ذلك، فإن الفحص النقدي الشامل لمصطلح 'ἄγαθος' في اللغات الأخرى، مثل الإنجليزية والفرنسية وما إلى ذلك، يفشل في فهم أهميته العميقة بشكل كامل. ينشأ هذا القيد من حقيقة أن هذه الصفة تتعلق بطبيعة الله غير المخلوقة وغير المحدودة، والتي تتجاوز الفهم البشري. ونتيجة لذلك، أصبحت القيود اللغوية واضحة. وتواجهنا تحديات مماثلة عند محاولة وصف صفات أخرى مميزة لله، مثل المحبة والرحمة. على الرغم من هذه التحديات اللغوية، فإن الله، من منطلق محبته للبشرية، يمنحنا بعض صفاته المميزة من خلال العمل التحويلي الذي يقوم به الروح القدس، وإن كان إلى حد محدود. تتعمق هذه المقالة في الطبيعة المتعددة الأوجه لمصطلح 'ἄγαθος' (وأثارها اللاهوتية، وتسلط الضوء على تعقيدات وصف الصفات الإلهية المتأصلة في الله).

**Dutch:** De term 'goed' oftewel 'ἄγαθος' is een frequent gebruikte term in gebedsrituelen door zowel priesters als de algemene kerkelijke gemeenschap van de Koptisch Orthodoxe Kerk. Elke liturgische dienst van de betreffende stroming beschrijft de goedheid van God de Vader. Dit benadrukt de relevantie om de werkelijke betekenis en waarde achter deze term te begrijpen. De Here Jezus Hemzelf bekrachtigde deze eigenschap toen Hij de hooggeplaatste man aansprak: 'Waarom noemt gij Mij goed? Niemand is goed dan God alleen'.

Het beeld van God als zijnde goed vindt zijn oorsprong in zowel het Oude als het Nieuwe Testament. Een uitgebreide kritische bestudering van de term 'ἄγαθος' in andere talen, waaronder het Engels en het Frans, slaagt er echter niet in om de diepgaande waarde ervan algeheel te omvatten. Deze beperking wordt veroorzaakt door het feit dat dit eigenschap betrekking heeft op de ongeschapen en grenzeloze aard van God die het menselijk begrip overtreft. Soortgelijke uitdagingen worden tevens getroffen in pogingen om andere kenmerkende kwaliteiten van God, zoals liefde en mededogen, te omschrijven.

Ondanks deze taalkundige uitdagingen schenkt God uit liefde voor de mensheid, alhoewel tot een bepaalde mate, een aantal van Zijn kenmerkende eigenschappen aan ons via het transformatieve werk van de Heilige Geest. Dit artikel bestudeert de veelzijdige aard van de term 'ἄγαθος' en diens theologische implicaties om zodoende verheldering te verkrijgen over de complexiteit met betrekking tot het beschrijven van goddelijke kwaliteiten die alleen tot God zelf behoren.

**English:** The term 'Good' or 'ἄγαθος' is a frequently used term in the Coptic Orthodox Church worship rites, by both priests and the congregation. Notably, every liturgical service within this tradition describes the goodness of God the Father. This highlights the importance of

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understanding the real meaning and relevance of such term. The Lord Jesus Himself affirmed this attribute when addressing the ruler and said, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God'. This depiction of God as inherently good finds its foundation in both the Old and New Testaments. Nevertheless, a comprehensive critical examination of the term 'ἀγαθός' in other languages, such as English and French and so forth, fails to entirely capture its profound significance. This limitation arises from the fact that this attribute pertains to the uncreated, boundless nature of God, which surpasses human comprehension. Consequently, language constraints become apparent. Similar challenges are encountered when trying to describe other distinctive qualities of God, such as love and compassion. Despite these linguistic challenges, God out of His love for humanity bestows some of His distinctive attributes upon us through the transformative work of the Holy Spirit, albeit to a limited extent. This article delves into the multifaceted nature of the term 'ἀγαθός' and its theological implications, shedding light on the intricacies of describing the divine qualities inherent to God.

**French:** Le terme « Bon » ou 'ἀγαθός', mot grec, est un terme fréquemment utilisé dans les rites d'adoration de l'Église copte orthodoxe, tant par les prêtres que par la congrégation. Chaque service liturgique au sein de cette tradition décrit de manière notable la bonté de Dieu le Père. D'où l'importance de comprendre le sens réel et la pertinence de ce terme. Le Seigneur Jésus Lui-même a affirmé cet attribut en s'adressant au notable en disant : « Pourquoi m'appelles-tu bon? Il n'y a de bon que Dieu seul. » Cette représentation de Dieu comme étant essentiellement bon trouve son fondement dans l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament. Néanmoins, un examen critique complet du terme 'ἀγαθός' dans d'autres langues, comme l'anglais et le français, etc., ne parvient pas à saisir pleinement sa signification profonde. Cette limitation vient du fait que cet attribut concerne la nature incréée et illimitée de Dieu, qui dépasse la compréhension humaine. C'est la raison pour laquelle les contraintes linguistiques apparaissent. Des défis similaires surviennent lorsqu'on essaie de décrire d'autres qualités distinctives de Dieu, telles que l'amour et la compassion. Malgré ces défis linguistiques, Dieu, par amour pour l'humanité, nous confère certains de Ses attributs distinctifs à travers l'œuvre formatrice du Saint-Esprit, quoique dans une mesure limitée. Cet article explore la nature multiforme du terme 'ἀγαθός' et ses implications théologiques, mettant en lumière les subtilités de la description des qualités divines inhérentes à Dieu.

**Greek:** Ο όρος 'Καλός' ή 'ἀγαθός' είναι ένας συχνά χρησιμοποιούμενος όρος στις λειτουργίες λατρειας της Κοπτικής Ορθόδοξης Εκκλησίας, τόσο από ιερείς όσο και από τους πιστούς. Είναι ενδεικτικό το γεγονός ότι κάθε λειτουργική υπηρεσία στην παράδοση αυτή περιγράφει την αγαθότητα του Θεού του Πατρός. Αυτό υπογραμμίζει τη σημασία της κατανόησης της πραγματικής σημασίας και σημαντικότητας τέτοιου όρου. Ο Κύριος Ιησούς Προσωπικά επιβεβαίωσε αυτήν την ιδιότητα όταν απευθυνόμενος στον άρχοντα είπε: 'Γιατί με αποκαλείς αγαθός; Κανένας δεν είναι αγαθός, παρά μόνο ένας, ο Θεός'. Αυτή η απεικόνιση του Θεού ως ενσωματωμένα αγαθού βρίσκει τις ρίζες της τόσο στην Παλαιά όσο και στη Κοινή Διαθήκη. Παρόλα αυτά, μια σφαιρική κριτική εξέταση του όρου 'ἀγαθός' σε άλλες γλώσσες, όπως τα Αγγλικά και τα Γαλλικά και ούτω καθεξής, αποτυγχάνει να αποκτήσει πλήρως τη βαθύτητα της σημασίας του. Αυτό το όριο πηγάζει από το γεγονός ότι αυτή η ιδιότητα αφορά την αδημιουργεί, απεριόριστη φύση του Θεού, η οποία υπερβαίνει κάθε.

**German:** Der Begriff 'gut' oder 'ἀγαθός' ist ein häufig verwendeter Begriff in den Gottesdiensten der koptisch-orthodoxen Kirche, sowohl von Priestern als auch von der Gemeinde. Insbesondere beschreibt jeder liturgische Gottesdienst innerhalb dieser Tradition die Güte Gottes des Vaters. Dies bestärkt, was wichtig es ist, die wahre Bedeutung und Relevanz eines solchen Begriffs zu verstehen. Der Herr Jesus selbst bekräftigte diese Eigenschaft, als er sich an den Herrscher wandte und sagte: 'Warum nennst du mich gut? Niemand ist gut außer Gott'. Diese Darstellung Gottes, als von Natur aus gut, findet ihre Grundlage sowohl im Alten als auch im Neuen Testament. Dennoch versagt eine umfassende kritische Untersuchung des Begriffs 'ἀγαθός' in anderen Sprachen wie Englisch und Französisch usw. darin, seine tiefgreifende Bedeutung vollständig zu erfassen. Diese Einschränkung ergibt sich aus der Tatsache, dass sich dieses Attribut auf die ungeschaffene, grenzenlose Natur Gottes bezieht, die das menschliche Verständnis übersteigt. Dadurch werden sprachliche Einschränkungen deutlich. Ähnlichen Herausforderungen begegnet man, wenn man versucht, andere charakteristische Eigenschaften Gottes zu beschreiben, wie zum Beispiel Liebe und Mitgefühl. Trotz dieser sprachlichen Herausforderungen schenkt Gott uns, aus Liebe zur Menschheit, einige seiner

besonderen Eigenschaften durch das transformative Wirken des Heiligen Geistes, wenn auch in begrenztem Umfang. Dieser Artikel geht auf die vielschichtige Natur des Begriffs ‘**ἀγαθός**’ und seine theologischen Implikationen ein und beleuchtet die Komplexität der Beschreibung der göttlichen Eigenschaften, die Gott innewohnen.

**Italian:** Il termine ‘Buono’ o ‘**ἀγαθός**’ è un termine usato spesso nelle preghiere nella Chiesa Copta Ortodossa sia dai preti sia dai fedeli. In particolare, ogni servizio liturgico in questa tradizione descrive la bontà di Dio il Padre. Questo sottolinea l’importanza della comprensione del vero significato e la rilevanza di questo termine. Il Signore Gesù stesso affermò questo attributo quando si rivolse a un capo dicendo: ‘Perché mi chiami buono? Nessuno è buono tranne Dio’. Questa descrizione di Dio per natura buono trova le sue radici sia nell’antico sia nel nuovo testamento. Tuttavia un’analisi critica del termine ‘**ἀγαθός**’ in altre lingue, come l’inglese e il francese e altre, non trasmette interamente il suo significato profondo. Questa limitazione sorge dal fatto che questo attributo si riferisce alla natura di Dio non creata e illimitata, la quale oltrepassa la comprensione umana. Di conseguenza, la lingua si manifesta nei suoi limiti. Sfide simili si incontrano quando si tenta di descrivere altre qualità distintive di Dio, come l’amore e la compassione. Nonostante queste sfide linguistiche, Dio per mezzo del Suo amore per l’umanità ci dona alcune dei suoi distinti attributi attraverso l’opera trasformativa dello Spirito Santo, sebbene in misura limitata. Questo articolo esplora la natura sfaccettata del termine ‘**ἀγαθός**’ e le sue implicazioni teologiche, facendo luce sulla complessità della descrizione delle divine qualità di Dio.

It may be intriguing to consider the assertion regarding the description of our Lord as Good – **ἀγαθός**. This provokes questions concerning the precise meaning of the word ‘**Good**’ and its significance within a theological context. To address this question, we revisit the interaction between the Lord Jesus and the ruler who approached Him and asked, ‘O Good Lord, what should I do to inherit eternal life?’ In response, the Lord Jesus answered him and said, ‘Why you call me “**Good**”? No one is **Good** but God’. This is a strong affirmation and emphatically reaffirms the uniqueness of goodness or ‘**ἀγαθός**’ as an attribute intrinsic to God. The Lord Jesus perceptively discerned the ruler’s thoughts and answered him with what he should have known from the synagogue and from the books of the Old Testament and the psalms about the nature of God being **good**. Here are some verses supporting that portrayal:

**Good** and upright is the Lord; therefore, he instructs sinners in the way. *Psalm 25;8*

I believe that I shall look upon the **goodness** of the Lord in the land of the living.  
*Psalm 27;13*

How abundant is your **goodness**, which you have stored up for those who fear you;  
*Psalm 31;18*

Taste and see that the Lord is **good!** Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!  
*Psalm 34;8*

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is **good!** For His mercy *endures* forever.  
*Psalm 118; 1*

You are good and do **good**; teach me your statutes. *Psalm 119;68*

The LORD is **good** to all; he has compassion on all he has made. *Psalm 145;9*

Other prophets in the Old Testament also described God’s **goodness**

The Lord is **good**, a stronghold in the day of trouble; *Nahum 1;7*

The Lord is **good** to those who wait for him, *Lamentation; 3;25*

And the apostles in the New Testament talked about the Lord’s **goodness**

Now that you have tasted that the Lord is **good**. *1 Peter 3*

It is therefore clear that **goodness** is one of the unique features of God, being the source of all goodness exactly as He is the source of love ‘God is love’ and the source of all blessing: ‘Blessed are you God of our fathers and Your mercy endures forever’ (prayer of Azaria and the praise of the three youths. *Daniel 3;23*).

Based on the above well-established fact, the Coptic Orthodox Church incorporates such a unique feature at the beginning of all its litanies, ‘we ask and appeal to your **goodness** O lover of mankind – **ΤΕΝΤΩΟ ΟΥΟΖ ΤΕΝΤΩΒΖ ΝΤΕΚΜΕΤΑΣΑΘΟC ΠΜΑΙΡΩΜ**’. This feature is also made it part of the priests and congregations worship rite when they pray at the gate of the sanctuary and in each liturgy before the Pauline epistle. Additionally, it is invoked when the priest raises incense at the door of the sanctuary articulating ‘**ΤΕΝΟΥΤ ΨΜΟΚ Ω ΠΙΧΡΙCΤΟC ΝΕΜ ΠΕΚΙΩΤ `ΝΑΣΑΘΟC ΝΕΜ ΠΙΠΝΕΥΜΑ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ** — we worship you O Christ with your **good** Father and the Holy Spirit’.

Similarly, during the distribution of the Holy Communion, the congregation chants the famous hymn of the Holy Trinity, which is also chanted when the Patriarch or the Bishop enters the church ‘**ΚCΜΑΡΩΟΥΤ ΔΛΗΘΟC ΝΕΜ ΠΕΚΙΩΤ `ΝΑΣΑΘΟC` ΝΕΜ ΠΙΠΝΕΥΜΑ ΕΘΟΥΑΒ** – You are blessed with your **Good** Father and the Holy Spirit’.

Moreover, in the church rites and prayers, we pray daily in the ninth hour litanies and say ‘You who was born from the virgin for our sake and tolerated the crucifixion O **good** One and in the Holy week praises we say ‘Our Lord Jesus Christ, Our **good** Saviour’. The story does not stop at God declaring His good nature to the pharisee but goes further. Part of what He has taken from us and has given to us through His mystical incarnation, He granted mankind His own goodness through the work of the Holy Spirit, as a sign of His love for mankind. This is clearly stated in the New Testament ‘but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, **goodness**, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. (*Galatians* 5:22–23.). Having received the fruits of the Holy Spirit, we are transformed into goodness in the eyes of the Lord’s as He said ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the **good**’. *Mat* 5:44–45

The word **ΔΣΑΘΟΝ** finds its origin in the Greek language and has been adopted in the Coptic language. Irrespective of the liturgical language employed, whether it be English (good), French (Bon), Italian (Buon), or others, the word **ΔΣΑΘΟΝ** serves as a symbol of God’s distinctive quality of **goodness**. Given the boundless and immeasurable nature of God, His attributes also-inherently transcend limitations. Similarly, all divine features of God’s nature are uncreated, mirroring His own uncreated nature, out of which all His attributes derive, including His **Goodness**. The inherent challenge arises from the limitations of human languages to fully capture the profound essence of the true meaning of such a divine attribute of God ‘**ΔΣΑΘΟC**’.