

## **Rebellion, Authenticity, and the True Self:**

### **Teresa of Ávila's Prophetic Disobedience as Faithful Pursuit of Identity and Social Change**

Religious traditions often present obedience as the highest expression of faithfulness, while disobedience is associated with rebellion, pride, or error. Yet the Christian tradition also preserves figures whose **fidelity to God** required **resistance to prevailing authorities**. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582) stands as one of the most striking examples of this paradox.

The dialectic of rebellion and obedience stands at the heart of biblical revelation and Christian spiritual theology. Yet obedience is frequently misconstrued as passive submission, while rebellion is simplistically equated with disloyalty or sin. This paper offers a constructive theological rereading of rebellion and obedience through an integrated dialogue between Scripture, the Church Fathers, and the spiritual theology of St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). Drawing upon key biblical narratives—from Genesis to the Gospels—alongside patristic witnesses such as Augustine, Gregory the Great, Irenaeus, and John Chrysostom, the study argues that rebellion is fundamentally resistance to truth and communion, whereas obedience is the pathway to freedom, love, and authentic selfhood. Teresa's life and reforming activity reveal how prophetic obedience may appear as rebellion while remaining deeply ecclesial. This synthesis offers a rich framework for contemporary reflection on authority, conscience, and discipleship.

#### **Introduction**

The biblical witness consistently presents obedience as the proper human response to divine initiative and rebellion as the tragic distortion of freedom. Yet in both ecclesial practice and popular discourse, obedience has often been reduced to external compliance, while rebellion has been narrowly interpreted as overt disobedience to authority. Such reductions obscure the relational and anthropological depth of these categories.

St. Teresa of Ávila emerges as a privileged interlocutor for re-examining this tension. A woman deeply obedient to the Church yet repeatedly accused of disobedience, Teresa lived at the intersection of institutional authority, personal conscience, and prophetic reform. Her writings articulate a theology of obedience rooted in truth (*verdad*), love, and interior freedom rather than fear or coercion.

This paper proceeds in three movements.

- a) First, it briefly revises the biblical, magisterial, and patristic and Teresian narratives of obedience.
- b) Secondly, it examines biblical, and Teresian narratives of obedience and rebellion as communion and prophetic resistance to truth engaging it with patristic interpretations that deepen these scriptural insights.
- c) Third, it attempts to combine the Scriptural and Patristic models of obedience as relational trust and self-gift and interprets these traditions through the spiritual theology and lived experience of St. Teresa of Ávila, arguing that obedience is the recovery of the true self before God.

Teresa herself was acutely aware of the danger of her position. Reflecting on her mystical experiences, she writes with disarming honesty: “I was very much afraid... for I knew well enough what sort of person I was”<sup>1</sup>. And yet, despite fear, Teresa persisted. This paper argues that Teresa’s life and writings exemplify prophetic disobedience—**a form of resistance grounded not in rejection of faith, but in radical faithfulness to God**. Through her insistence on interior authority, Teresa articulated a vision of authentic identity, the true self, and social transformation that continues to challenge religious and institutional structures today.

Before we begin the exposition of the central theme it is opportune that we refresh our memories of the idea of obedience in the Sacred Scripture and the magisterium. Since we don’t have time and space to make an elaborate presentation here, I shall make a very brief presentation just to begin the discussion.

## **1. A Biblical–Patristic Reading of Obedience through the Spiritual Theology of St. Teresa of Ávila**

### **1.1. Obedience in the Biblical context**

The Bible presents obedience not as blind submission, but as a loving, trusting response to God that leads to life, freedom, and transformation.

#### 1.1.1. Obedience flows from love, not fear

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Life*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, 2001, 28.9.

At the heart of biblical faith, obedience is relational. “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Obedience is the fruit of love and faith, not merely rule-keeping. It is a response to who God is, not just to what God commands.

#### 1.1.2. Obedience is listening before acting

In the Bible, “to obey” often means to hear attentively. “To obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22). True obedience begins with attentive listening to God’s word—through Scripture, conscience, prayer, and discernment.

#### 1.1.3. Obedience brings life and blessing

Biblical obedience is life-giving, not life-denying. “Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20). Obedience aligns human life with God’s will, leading to *shalom* (wholeness).

#### 1.1.4. Jesus models perfect obedience

Jesus’ life shows that obedience can involve suffering—but it leads to salvation. “He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). Christ’s obedience is trustful surrender, not passive resignation.

#### 1.1.5. Obedience is guided by conscience and the Spirit

The New Testament emphasizes inner freedom, not mere external conformity. “Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17). Christian obedience is Spirit-led, discerning what is truly of God.

#### 1.1.6. Obedience to God comes before human authority

The Bible is clear: human authority is not absolute. “We must obey God rather than human beings” (Acts 5:29). When human commands contradict God’s justice and truth, faithful disobedience may become necessary.

#### 1.1.7. Obedience expresses itself in love and justice

Biblical obedience is ethical and social, not merely personal. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8). True obedience shows itself in compassion, justice, and humility.

**In short, the Bible teaches that obedience is relational (rooted in love), reflective (grounded in listening and discernment), liberating (not enslaving), Christ-centered, Ethical and prophetic.**

## **1.2. Obedience according the Documents of the Church**

1.2.1. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that obedience begins with the "**obedience of faith**," a free submission to God's word, exemplified by Abraham and Mary, rooted in trust. It's not blind submission but a response to God's truth, leading to a life of following Christ, who perfectly obeyed the Father. While obedience to legitimate human authorities (parents, civil leaders) is a duty for the common good, it is always limited by God's higher law, requiring conscience to refuse directives contrary to the Gospel. (CCC 144-149). **"To obey (from the Latin ob-audire, to "hear or listen to") in faith is to submit freely to the word that has been heard, because its truth is guaranteed by God, who is Truth itself. Abraham is the model of such obedience offered us by Sacred Scripture. The Virgin Mary is its most perfect embodiment"( CCC 144).** The Catechism of the Catholic Church underlines that legitimate authority is established by God and that obedience is owed insofar as the command is just and oriented toward the common good. Obedience remains subordinate to divine law; the faithful must never obey commands that contradict God's will.

**Definition:** To obey in faith means to freely listen to and submit to God's word because He is Truth.

### 1.2.2. Lumen Gentium: Obedience to the Magisterium: *Obsequium Religiosum*

Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* teaches that the faithful owe a religious submission of mind and will (*obsequium religiosum*) to the authentic teaching authority of the Pope and Bishops, especially when teaching matters of faith and morals. (*Lumen Gentium* 25). This submission is not blind obedience, but rooted in faithful assent and reverence, grounded in the authority given by Christ to the Church.

“In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff, even when he is not speaking *ex cathedra*; that is, it must be shown in such a way that his supreme magisterium is acknowledged with reverence, the judgments made by him are sincerely adhered to, according to his manifest mind and will. His mind and will in the matter

may be known either from the character of the documents, from his frequent repetition of the same doctrine, or from his manner of speaking”. (*Lumen Gentium* 25)

1.2.3. Another document that I wish to refer is the document titled *The serviced of authority and obedience* published by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and societies of apostolic life which emphasizes obedience as enlightened listening, drawing sinners into conformity with God’s plan and deepening freedom. Obedience in the Church is oriented toward God’s will, not merely human command, and is a path to spiritual freedom. This document speaks:

“Therefore, for the consecrated person it might also come to having “to learn obedience” through suffering or from some very specific and difficult situations: when, for example, one is asked to leave certain personal projects or ideas, to give up the pretext of managing one's life and mission by oneself; or all the times in which what is asked (or who asks it) does not seem to be very humanly convincing. Those who find themselves in such situations now should not forget that mediation by its nature is limited and inferior to that to which it refers, even more so if it deals with human mediation in relation to the divine will; but one should remember that every time one finds oneself faced with a command given legitimately that the Lord requests obedience to the person in authority who, at that moment, represents him and that Christ also “learned obedience from what he suffered” (*Heb 5:8*)”. (n.10)

While speaking of obedience to God through human mediation the document says that “Mediations that exteriorly communicate the will of God must be recognized in the events of life and in the specific requirements of a particular vocation, but they are expressed as well in the laws that give order to the life of groups of people and in the dispositions of those who are called to lead such groupings. In the ecclesial context, laws and dispositions, legitimately given, provide an insight into the will of God, becoming the concrete and ordered realization of the demands of the Gospel from which they are formulated and perceived”. (n.9)

St. John Climacus, in *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, (Chapter 4) defines **obedience as the death of self-will, a "freely chosen death" and "burial of the will" for the "resurrection of humility,"** leading to profound spiritual growth, safety, and union with God, often through submission to a spiritual father or wise direction, not blind servitude. It's a path of non-resistance, overcoming pride and self-judgment, allowing God's love to flow, and is likened to a corpse that doesn't argue, ensuring spiritual safety by trusting guidance.

There are many other sources and references that can be put together for a serious work on the teaching of the Magisterium on Obedience. My intention was only to introduce the theme of obedience as and a revision and as an introduction to this presentation. Let me now come to the topic.

### **1.3. Obedience According to St. Teresa of Ávila**

For St. Teresa of Ávila, obedience is not blind submission to authority but a living, discerning relationship with the will of God. While she consistently affirms obedience as a central Christian virtue, she radically redefines its meaning and locus, placing it within the interior life rather than mere external compliance.

### 1.3.1. Historical and Ecclesial Context

Teresa lived in sixteenth-century Spain, a context marked by the Counter-Reformation, the Spanish Inquisition, and deep suspicion of mystical experience—particularly when articulated by women<sup>2</sup>. Women were expected to remain silent, obedient, and dependent on male clerical authority. Teresa directly names this structural injustice when she writes: “The world is on fire. Men want to condemn us women for daring to do anything worthwhile”<sup>3</sup>. Such a statement is remarkable not only for its clarity but for its courage. Teresa recognized that the distrust of women’s voices was systemic, not merely personal<sup>4</sup>. Yet rather than retreating into silence, she developed a carefully discerned path of reform that both navigated and resisted these limitations.

### 1.3.2. Obedience as Discernment of God’s Will

Teresa understands obedience primarily as obedience to God, not simply to human superiors. Human authority is respected insofar as it mediates God’s will, but it is not absolute. She writes: “The important thing is not to think much but to love much”<sup>5</sup>. Here, obedience flows from love rather than fear. Teresa insists that authentic obedience arises from prayerful discernment, where the soul listens attentively to God’s guidance within.

### 1.3.3. Interior Obedience vs. Exterior Compliance

A key distinction in Teresa’s thought is between interior obedience (obedience of the heart and conscience) and exterior obedience (following commands). For Teresa, the former is primary. She warns against obedience that lacks interior conviction: “Perfection does not consist in great penances, but in doing the will of God.” (Foundations, 5.2). If external obedience contradicts one’s discerned sense of God’s call, Teresa encourages deeper discernment rather than automatic submission.

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<sup>2</sup> Alison Weber, *Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Femininity*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1990, 3–25.

<sup>3</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 33.5.

<sup>4</sup> Gillian T. W. Ahlgren, *Politics of Sanctity: Teresa of Ávila and the Rhetoric of Reform*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996, 41–63

<sup>5</sup> Interior Castle, IV.1.7

#### 1.3.4. Obedience in Community Life

In religious community, Teresa emphasizes obedience that is reasonable, compassionate, and dialogical. Superiors are not absolute rulers but servants of communal discernment. She insists: “Let superiors be loved rather than feared”<sup>6</sup>. Authority exists to foster prayer, charity, and freedom, not control.

#### 1.3.5. Obedience and Freedom

Far from limiting freedom, obedience liberates the soul. Teresa views obedience as a path to interior freedom, because it frees a person from ego, fear, and the need for human approval. She states: “When one lives in obedience, one lives without anxiety.” (paraphrased from *Way of Perfection*). This freedom enables courage and initiative, which explains how Teresa could be obedient and yet reform convents, write theology, and challenge unjust structures.

#### 1.3.6. Authenticity and the True Self

At the heart of Teresa’s spirituality lies a theology of interiority. In *The Interior Castle*, she presents the soul as the dwelling place of God: “I began to consider the soul as if it were a castle made of a single diamond or of very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms”<sup>7</sup>. The journey inward is not escapist but revelatory. Teresa insists that self-knowledge is essential to spiritual maturity, famously declaring: “Humility is truth”<sup>8</sup>. Obedience, therefore, is truthful living—acknowledging who one is before God, recognizing one’s gifts and limits, and acting accordingly. False humility that suppresses God-given vocation is not obedience but distortion. For Teresa, the true self emerges when one lives truthfully before God—acknowledging both weakness and dignity. Authenticity, therefore, is not autonomy from God but deeper dependence on divine grace”<sup>9</sup>. This interior authority becomes the foundation for discernment, even when external commands conflict with conscience. Teresa’s understanding

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase “It is better to be loved than feared” is more famously associated with Machiavelli, but St. Teresa applied a similar concept within a spiritual, loving, and communal context.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001 I.1.1.

<sup>8</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, VI.10.7.

<sup>9</sup> Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Ávila*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, 86–102.

of obedience is thus fundamentally relational and theological rather than merely institutional<sup>10</sup>.

### **1.3.7. Prophetic Disobedience and Faithful Rebellion**

In the life of St. Teresa, there is a visible element of a “Prophetic Resistance” in the practice of obedience and she always followed the principle of discerning and respecting the will of God rather than the mediated human authority when they both came into conflict. Teresa’s life shows that obedience may sometimes require resistance to human authority. When commands hinder prayer, reform, or the good of souls, obedience to God takes precedence. She boldly affirms: “We must obey God rather than men.” This is the implicit biblical principle guiding her teaching and practice of obedience ( Acts 5:29). Her founding of the Discalced Carmelites—often against opposition—embodies obedience as faithful resistance, not rebellion for its own sake.

Teresa’s interior authority inevitably led to conflict with ecclesial structures. Her decision to found reformed Carmelite convents emphasizing poverty, enclosure, and contemplative prayer was met with resistance from both civic and religious leaders<sup>11</sup>. Despite this, Teresa remained resolute: “I am not afraid that God will abandon those who trust in Him alone”<sup>12</sup>. Her disobedience was not impulsive but discerned through prayer. She insists: “When one does what lies in one’s power, God never fails to give help”<sup>13</sup>.

This pattern aligns Teresa with the biblical prophetic tradition, in which obedience to God sometimes requires resistance to unjust or spiritually stifling authority<sup>14</sup>. Teresa’s rebellion, therefore, was an expression of faithfulness—not its negation.

### **1.3.8. Identity Formation Through Resistance**

Teresa’s resistance shaped not only her personal identity but also the communal identities of the women she led. Her reformed convents rejected social hierarchy, wealth, and privilege. She articulates an egalitarian vision of community life: “All must be friends, all

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<sup>10</sup> Carlos Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995, 119–132.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Foundations*, (The Collected Works Vol. 3) trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, 1–3.

<sup>12</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 11.3.

<sup>13</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, 11.14.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, Harper & Row, New York, 1962, 3–24.

must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped”<sup>15</sup>. Such practices directly challenged the class-based structures of early modern Spanish society<sup>16</sup>. Teresa understood identity as grounded in shared vocation rather than social status, thereby linking personal authenticity with communal transformation.

### 1.3.9. Gender, Authority, and Voice

Teresa’s prophetic disobedience was profoundly gendered. As a woman, her claim to spiritual authority was inherently suspect. Yet she repeatedly affirms that holiness—not gender—grounds authority: “The Lord does not look so much at the greatness of our works as at the love with which they are done”<sup>17</sup>. Without explicitly articulating feminist theory, Teresa embodied a proto-feminist theology of practice, asserting women’s capacity for discernment, leadership, and theological insight<sup>18</sup>. Her extensive writings stand as an enduring challenge to gendered exclusions in religious authority.

### 1.3.10. Contemporary Relevance

Teresa’s prophetic disobedience remains relevant in contexts where individuals experience tension between conscience and institution. Her spirituality offers resources for navigating resistance without abandoning faith. Her well-known prayer captures this interior freedom: “Let nothing trouble you, let nothing scare you... God alone suffices”<sup>19</sup>. This confidence in God’s sufficiency enables courage in the face of opposition and sustains commitment to truth-driven transformation.

We shall summarise Teresa’s Vision of Obedience:

- Rooted in love, not fear
- Guided by discernment, not blind compliance
- Ordered toward freedom, not suppression
- Faithful to God first, not structures alone
- Capable of prophetic resistance

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<sup>15</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, (The Collected Works Vol. 2) trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, 4.7.

<sup>16</sup> Ahlgren, Politics of Sanctity, 112–140.

<sup>17</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle*, (The Collected Works Vol. 2) trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, VII.4.15.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth A. Dreyer, *Passionate Spirituality*, Paulist Press, New York, 2005, 67–84.

<sup>19</sup> Teresa of Ávila, Poems, “Nada te turbe,” in *The Collected Poems of St. Teresa of Ávila*, trans. Adrian J. Cooney OCD, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram 2001, Vol. 3, p. 386.

- Grounded in truth and humility

## 2. Rebellion and Obedience in the Bible through the Spiritual Theology of St. Teresa of Ávila

The biblical tension between rebellion and obedience has often been framed in moralistic or juridical terms. This paper proposes a theological rereading of these categories through the spiritual and reforming vision of St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582). Drawing upon key biblical narratives—ranging from Genesis to the Gospels—and Teresa’s major works (*Life*, *Way of Perfection*, *Interior Castle*), the study argues that Teresa offers a relational, truth-centered understanding of obedience rooted in freedom, love, and discernment. **Conversely, rebellion is interpreted not primarily as institutional defiance but as resistance to truth and self-surrender before God.** Teresa’s own reforming activity demonstrates how prophetic obedience may appear as rebellion while remaining deeply ecclesial. This synthesis offers a constructive framework for contemporary theological reflection on authority, conscience, and authentic discipleship.

### Introduction

The Bible presents obedience as a defining mark of covenantal faithfulness and rebellion as a rupture in humanity’s relationship with God. From Adam and Eve’s transgression in Genesis to Christ’s obedient self-offering in Gethsemane, Scripture consistently portrays obedience not as servile compliance but as a relational response to divine love. Yet within ecclesial history, obedience has frequently been reduced to external conformity, while rebellion has been simplistically equated with disloyalty. St. Teresa of Ávila provides a crucial corrective to such reductions. Living amid the religious tensions of sixteenth-century Spain, Teresa articulated a vision of obedience rooted in interior truthfulness, freedom, and love. Her writings reveal a profound consonance with biblical theology, especially regarding the dynamics of self-will, discernment, and surrender to God. This paper examines selected biblical examples of rebellion and obedience and interprets them through Teresa’s spiritual theology, arguing that Teresa offers a biblically faithful and pastorally relevant synthesis.

### 2.1. Rebellion Against God in the Bible

Rebellion in Scripture is not merely moral failure but a refusal to trust and submit to God’s will, often rooted in pride, fear, or self-reliance.

### 2.1.1. Adam and Eve (Genesis 3)

Nature of rebellion: Distrust of God's word and desire to "be like God."

Theological significance: The archetypal act of disobedience introducing sin and rupture in creation.

Key verse: "You will be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5).

### 2.1.2. The Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1–9)

Nature of rebellion: Collective pride and self-exaltation.

Key theme: Human unity apart from God becomes idolatrous self-sufficiency.

### 2.1.3. Israel and the Golden Calf (Exodus 32)

Nature of rebellion: Idolatry immediately after covenant formation.

Irony: Rebellion occurs while Moses communes with God on Sinai.

### 2.1.4. King Saul (1 Samuel 15)

Nature of rebellion: Selective obedience.

Prophetic judgment:

"To obey is better than sacrifice... Rebellion is like the sin of divination" (1 Sam 15:22–23).

### 2.1.5. Jonah (Jonah 1–4)

Nature of rebellion: Refusal of God's mercy toward enemies.

Insight: One can be religious yet resistant to God's compassion.

## **2.2. Obedience to God in the Bible**

Biblical obedience is relational and faith-driven, not blind submission but trustful responsiveness to God's call.

### 2.2.1. Abraham (Genesis 12; 22)

Nature of obedience: Radical trust without full knowledge.

Key verse: "Abraham believed the Lord, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

### 2.2.2. Moses (Exodus 3–4)

Nature of obedience: Reluctant yet faithful acceptance of mission.

Theme: God works through imperfect but willing servants.

### 2.2.3. Mary, the Mother of Jesus (Luke 1:38)

Nature of obedience: Total surrender amid uncertainty.

Model of discipleship:

“Let it be to me according to your word.”

### 2.2.4. Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:6–11; Matthew 26:39)

Nature of obedience: Perfect, filial obedience to the Father.

Climax: “Not my will, but yours be done.”

### 2.2.5. Daniel (Daniel 6)

Nature of obedience: Faithfulness despite political and mortal threat.

Key insight: Obedience to God may require civil disobedience.

## **Theological Contrast: Rebellion vs Obedience**

### **Rebellion**

Rooted in pride and fear

Seeks autonomy from God

Leads to fragmentation and exile

### **Obedience**

Rooted in faith and trust

Seeks communion with God

Leads to life, mission, and blessing

## **2.3. Patristic Theology of Rebellion and Obedience**

### **2.3.1. Augustine: Ordered Love and the Will**

For Augustine, obedience restores *ordo amoris*—the right ordering of love. Sin is not simply disobedience to law but disordered love that turns the will inward<sup>20</sup>. Obedience reorients the will toward God, enabling true freedom.

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<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XV.22.

Teresa's insistence that obedience leads to interior freedom echoes this Augustinian vision. The more the soul conforms to God's will, the more expansive and liberated it becomes.

### **2.3.2. Gregory the Great: Humility and Authority**

Gregory the Great interprets obedience within a pastoral framework. "True authority", he argues, "serves humility and charity rather than domination"<sup>21</sup>. Rebellion arises when authority or obedience is severed from love.

Teresa's reform exemplifies this principle. Though critical of laxity and worldliness, she never rejects authority itself. Instead, she insists on obedience that is intelligent, discerning, and ordered toward God.

### **2.3.3. Irenaeus: Obedience and Maturity**

Irenaeus interprets human history as a pedagogy of growth. Adam's disobedience reflects immaturity rather than sheer malice. "Obedience, therefore, is the pathway to maturation in likeness to God"<sup>22</sup>.

This developmental vision aligns closely with Teresa's Interior Castle, where obedience deepens as the soul progresses toward union with God.

## **3. Analysis and convergence: Prophetic obedience and rebellion through the Lens of St. Teresa of Avila**

### **3.1. Biblical Rebellion: Autonomy and the Loss of Truth**

#### **3.1.1. Adam and Eve: Rebellion as Distrust**

Genesis 3 depicts rebellion not primarily as legal transgression but as a breakdown of trust. Adam and Eve's desire to "be like God" (Gen 3:5) reflects an attempt to seize autonomy apart from divine relationship. The act represents a refusal to receive life as gift and truth as mediated through God's word<sup>23</sup>. Teresa echoes this anthropology when she identifies the root of sin in self-will. For her, rebellion emerges when the soul constructs a false self, grounded

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<sup>21</sup> Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule*, I.2.

<sup>22</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.38.1.

<sup>23</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1972, 86–90.

in illusion rather than truth. Her oft-cited definition of humility—“walking in truth”<sup>24</sup> — directly parallels the Genesis narrative: rebellion is living outside reality as God reveals it.

Genesis 3 portrays rebellion not primarily as moral failure but as epistemological and relational rupture. The serpent’s temptation invites humanity to redefine reality apart from God: “You will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen 3:5). Rebellion thus begins with mistrust—an attempt to seize autonomy rather than receive life as gift<sup>25</sup>. St. Augustine interprets this primal rebellion as *superbia*, the inward turning of the will upon itself<sup>26</sup>. Pride fractures the rightly ordered relationship between Creator and creature, resulting in disintegration of the self. Gregory the Great similarly insists that pride is the root of all sin because it resists dependence upon God<sup>27</sup>.

Teresa of Ávila’s anthropology mirrors this patristic insight. She defines humility as “walking in truth,<sup>28</sup>” a phrase that resonates profoundly with the Genesis narrative. For Teresa, rebellion is not merely breaking rules but inhabiting illusion—constructing a false self grounded in self-will rather than divine truth.

### **3.1.2. The Tower of Babel: Collective Rebellion**

The Tower of Babel (Gen 11:1–9) represents rebellion on a communal scale. Humanity seeks unity and security apart from God, desiring to “make a name” for itself. Patristic commentators frequently interpret Babel as the birth of disordered social pride. Irenaeus contrasts Babel with Pentecost, where unity is restored through obedience to the Spirit rather than human self-exaltation<sup>29</sup>.

Teresa implicitly critiques such collective rebellion when she warns against religious communities that value reputation, comfort, or numbers over fidelity to God. Her reform sought not innovation for its own sake but a return to evangelical simplicity and truth.

### **3.1.3. Saul and Jonah: Selective Obedience**

King Saul’s downfall (1 Sam 15) illustrates the danger of partial obedience. Saul obeys externally but retains control over the outcome, prompting Samuel’s severe judgment

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<sup>24</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001 VI.10.7.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1972, 86–90.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Augustine, *Confessions*, II.6.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, XXXI.45.

<sup>28</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001 VI.10.7.

<sup>29</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.17.1.

that rebellion is akin to idolatry<sup>30</sup>. Similarly, Jonah's flight from God reveals a refusal to align with divine mercy, particularly when God's will disrupts personal or national preferences.

King Saul's rejection (1 Sam 15) offers a paradigmatic example of partial obedience. Saul obeys externally but retains control over outcomes, prompting Samuel's severe declaration: "Rebellion is like the sin of divination" (1 Sam 15:23). The prophet exposes the illusion that ritual performance can substitute for surrender of the will. John Chrysostom interprets Saul's failure as self-deception masked by religious language<sup>31</sup>. Jonah, likewise, obeys only reluctantly, revealing how resentment can coexist with external compliance.

Teresa's Life contains a striking confession of such selective obedience. Teresa's Life offers a striking autobiographical parallel. She confesses that for years she practiced prayer while clinging to social approval and personal comfort<sup>32</sup>. For nearly twenty years, she practiced prayer while resisting total surrender<sup>33</sup>. Such selective obedience, she argues, is spiritually corrosive because it deceives the subject into believing that surrender has occurred when it has not. Teresa thus stands firmly within the biblical prophetic tradition that condemns half-measures and divided hearts.

### **3.2. Biblical Obedience: Trust, Risk, and Relationship**

#### **3.2.1. Abraham: Obedience Beyond Understanding**

Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22) stands as one of Scripture's most radical portrayals of obedience. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac (Gen 22) exemplifies obedience grounded in trust rather than comprehension. His response to God's command lacks full rational clarity but manifests radical reliance on God's faithfulness<sup>34</sup> trusting God's promise even when it appears threatened. Hebrews later interprets this obedience as faith in God's power to give life beyond death (Heb 11:19). Augustine emphasizes that Abraham's obedience was grounded not in cruelty but in love and trust<sup>35</sup>. Obedience, here, is not blind submission but radical reliance on God's fidelity.

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<sup>30</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, 1990, 121–24.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Samuel*, Hom. 5.

<sup>32</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Book of Her Life, (The Collected Works Vol.1)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, ch. 7

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, ch. 7.

<sup>34</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1985), 54–60.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.32.

Teresa echoes this stance in her insistence on *determinada determinación*—a resolute commitment to follow God regardless of fear or uncertainty<sup>36</sup>. Obedience, for her, is perseverance in love rather than emotional certainty. Authentic obedience, she contends, requires perseverance in fidelity even amid fear, dryness, and uncertainty. Like Abraham, the obedient soul entrusts outcomes to God rather than demanding guarantees.

### 3.2.2. Mary's Fiat: Receptive Obedience

Mary's response to the angel — “Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38)—stands as the New Testament's paradigmatic act of obedience. Mary neither fully understands the implications nor negotiates conditions; instead, she consents in freedom and trust. The Fathers repeatedly contrast Mary's obedience with Eve's disobedience. Irenaeus famously writes, “The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary”<sup>37</sup>. This obedience is neither passive nor naïve. Mary questions, discerns, and freely consents. Teresa frequently presents Mary as the model of contemplative availability—obedience as openness to divine initiative rather than suppression of agency.

Teresa frequently presents Mary as the model of contemplative receptivity. Obedience, in this Marian key, is not self-erasure but openness to God's creative action<sup>38</sup>. Teresa's spirituality thus resists interpretations of obedience that suppress agency or interior freedom.

### 3.2.3. Christ in Gethsemane: Obedience as Loving Surrender

Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane — “Not my will, but yours be done” (Matt 26:39)—reveals obedience as filial trust rather than stoic resignation. The Christological hymn of Philippians 2 further situates obedience at the heart of redemptive self-gift<sup>39</sup>. Gregory of Nazianzus insists that what Christ assumes, he heals—including the human will<sup>40</sup>. Obedience, therefore, restores human freedom rather than negating it.

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<sup>36</sup> Cfr. Teresa of Ávila, *Way of Perfection, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, 21.2.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, III.22.4.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. Rowan Williams, *Teresa of Avila*, Bloomsbury, London, 2014, 67–71.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1991, 83–97.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 101.

Teresa’s spirituality is profoundly Christocentric. She insists that obedience divorced from friendship with Christ becomes inhuman and unsustainable<sup>41</sup>. True obedience flows from love, mirroring Christ’s relationship with the Father.

### 3.2.4. Teresa’s Final Synthesis: Rebellion vs Obedience

<b>Biblical Pattern</b>	<b>Teresa of Ávila</b>
Rebellion = autonomy	Self-will and illusion
Obedience = trust	Walking in truth
Fear-based control	Love-based surrender
External compliance	Interior freedom

### 3.3. Prophetic Obedience: When Fidelity Appears as Rebellion

#### 3.3.1. Daniel: The Primacy of Conscience and Civil and institutional Resistance

Daniel’s refusal to obey unjust decrees (Dan 6) illustrates a biblical hierarchy of loyalties. Obedience to God may require resistance to unjust human authority when commands contradict divine truth. Scripture here affirms a hierarchy of loyalties grounded in covenant fidelity. The Fathers consistently affirm this principle. Chrysostom praises martyrs who disobey unjust laws, insisting that obedience to God constitutes the highest loyalty<sup>42</sup>. Teresa reveals that faithful obedience to God may appear as rebellion to institutions—yet remains ecclesial and humble.

#### 3.3.2. Teresa of Ávila and Ecclesial Reform

Teresa’s reform of the Carmelite Order embodies prophetic obedience. Teresa consistently submitted her work to theological scrutiny while maintaining fidelity to what she discerned as God’s call. Though deeply loyal to the Church, she faced suspicion, opposition, and investigation. Jodi Bilinkoff notes that Teresa carefully navigated institutional obedience while remaining faithful to her divine call. Though profoundly submissive to ecclesial obedience, she faced accusations of disobedience, impropriety, and even heresy<sup>43</sup>.

Teresa’s life reveals a critical distinction: rebellion rejects communion; prophetic obedience risks misunderstanding for the sake of truth and renewal. This paradox—obedience

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<sup>41</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *Life*, ch. 22.

<sup>42</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts*, Hom. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Jodi Bilinkoff, *The Avila of Saint Teresa*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1989, 154–70.

that appears rebellious—places Teresa alongside biblical prophets who challenged institutional complacency while remaining within the covenant community. Her example demonstrates that true obedience may disrupt structures precisely in order to renew them.

### **3.3.3. Obedience, Freedom, and the True Self**

In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa presents obedience as the pathway to authentic selfhood. As the soul advances inward, self-will diminishes, but personality is not erased; rather, it is transfigured<sup>44</sup>. This vision resonates with the biblical conviction that “obedience leads to life” (Deut 30:15–20) and rebellion as the road to exile. Rebellion promises autonomy but yields fragmentation; obedience appears costly but yields freedom. Teresa’s most enduring contribution lies in her integration of obedience with personal authenticity. In *The Interior Castle*, spiritual maturity is marked not by conformity but by increasing freedom, love, and truthfulness<sup>45</sup>. Rebellion, by contrast, enslaves the soul to illusion and fear. Teresa thus offers a theological anthropology in which obedience is the recovery of the true self in God.

### **Conclusion**

A dialogue between Scripture, the Church Fathers, and St. Teresa of Ávila reveals that rebellion and obedience are not merely moral categories but existential orientations. Rebellion resists truth, communion, and love; obedience restores freedom, relationship, and authenticity. Teresa’s life and theology demonstrate that obedience is not servility but courageous fidelity. In a contemporary context marked by suspicion of authority and longing for authenticity, her synthesis offers a compelling vision: obedience as freedom, rebellion as illusion, and truth as the measure of both. Teresa of Ávila demonstrates that rebellion and faithfulness are not opposites. Through prophetic disobedience, she discovered an authentic self, rooted in God and enacted reforms that reshaped religious life. Her legacy challenges contemporary understandings of obedience, authority, and identity, reminding us that true faithfulness may demand resistance. As Teresa herself teaches: “The important thing is not to think much but to love much”<sup>46</sup>. It is within this love that rebellion becomes fidelity—and authenticity becomes transformative.

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<sup>44</sup> Cfr. Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, VII.2–3.

<sup>45</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, VII.2–3.

<sup>46</sup> Teresa of Ávila, *The Interior Castle, (The Collected Works Vol. 2)* trans. Kavanaugh and Rodriguez, Carmel International Publishing House, Thiruvananthapuram, 2001, IV.1.7.

Teresa of Ávila offers a deeply relevant vision of obedience for today's Church and society. In contexts where obedience is often confused with silence or passivity, Teresa reminds us that true obedience may require courage, discernment, and even resistance, when such resistance is demanded by faithfulness to God. St. Teresa of Ávila stands within the biblical tradition that teaches: **Rebellion is not freedom from God, but captivity to the false self. Obedience is not loss of self, but the discovery of the true self in God.** This makes Teresa profoundly relevant for modern struggles with authority, authenticity, and freedom.