

Visions of God

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The notion that one cannot see God was established early in the Jewish tradition. The idea that the vision of Naples is so magnificent that there is nothing further to live for: "See Naples and die", is taken one stage further in the Bible: see God and you *will* die. "But", God said to Moses, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live" (Ex. 33.20).

In fact God is said in the Bible to have put in a number of appearances to the Patriarchs. To Abraham: "Then the Lord (Yahweh) appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land'" (Gen 12.7); "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him 'I am God Almighty (El Shaddai); walk before me and be blameless and I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous'" (Gen 17.1–2). To Isaac: "The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt, settle in the land that I shall show you . . . for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to Abraham your father'" (Gen 26.2–3); at Beersheba "And that very night the Lord appeared to him and said, 'I am the God of Abraham your father; do not be afraid, for I am with you and will bless you and make your offspring numerous for my servant Abraham's sake'" (Gen 26.24). To Jacob at Bethel: "God (Elohim) appeared to Jacob again . . . and he blessed him. God said to him, 'Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name . . . be fruitful and multiply . . . the land that I gave to Abraham and Isaac I will give to you, and I will give the land to your offspring after you'" (Gen 35.9–12). Exactly how God "appeared" is not made clear except in the second appearance to Isaac which was in a dream (Gen 26.24) and this may be true of all of them. It is not clear that *anything* was *seen* in any of these stories but in each case something was heard (or at any rate the recipient woke up with the conviction that God had communicated and this, of course, was expressed in certain words). All these five appearances to the patriarchs were covenant-making events relating to land and descendants.

God also appeared twice in dreams to Solomon in the Book of Kings: first to offer a gift to Solomon on the occasion Solomon chose wisdom (“an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil”, 1 Kings 3.5–9); on the second occasion, after the temple had been built, to promise to “establish your royal throne over Israel forever, as I promised your father David, saying ‘There shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel’”. This, however, is dependent upon Solomon and his successors walking before God, like David, “with integrity of heart and uprightness, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances”, for if they were to turn aside from his commandments and follow other gods then Israel would be cut off from the land and the temple would become a heap of ruins (1 Kings 9.1–9). This was obviously written with hindsight by the Deuteronomist, and the latter verses were an important proviso because men had ascended to the throne of Israel after Solomon who had failed.

Yet there were men who saw God and lived, namely: Jacob and Moses. When Jacob late in his life went out to meet his brother Esau, Jacob was scared to death, scared that Esau would exact revenge for having been defrauded of his inheritance so many years before and would kill him. Jacob behaved pretty despicably by sending his wives, concubines and children across the river ahead of him and in the end it was Esau who emerged the better man. But during his night alone Jacob wrestled with an unnamed man. Jacob prevailed, despite having his thigh put out of joint, and demanded a blessing of the man, but then became convinced that he had wrestled with God: “So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face and yet my life is preserved’” (Gen 32.30). Seen God face to face? It looks as though Jacob spent the night wrestling with what we would call his conscience.

Here dreams are left behind. You can hardly have a more physical encounter than a wrestling bout and here we begin the tradition of God being represented by someone in human form, which is why we often speak of Jacob wrestling with an angel. There is an ambiguity about angels in the Bible. Sometimes they are presented as individual creatures, messengers of God, and are named (Michael, Gabriel, etc), while in other places “the angel of the Lord” is simply a periphrastic way of talking about God. As Jewish writers became increasingly nervous about naming God so they became reluctant to write about God directly and used indirect ways of speaking about God. In this context “the angel of the Lord” is God him(her)self. In the same way, in some intertestamental books, the Wisdom of God *is* God. To

encounter an angel is to encounter God.

The other man to meet with God, of course, was Moses on the holy mountain. On the first occasion he heard God's voice and what he saw was fire in the bush which burnt but was not burnt up (Ex 3). There he received the Hebrew name for God, the name which Jews no longer utter, and he received a commission to lead his people out of Egypt. When Moses returned to Mount Sinai after the crossing of the sea, God again presented him(her)self as fire,

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, while the whole mountain shook violently. When the Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain, the Lord summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up. (Ex 19.16–18, 20)

And Moses received the commandments on two tablets of stone written by God.

In Exodus 24 where the Priestly Author wanted to introduce lengthy regulations from God about how to build the ark of the covenant and various other priestly artefacts, he tells us that Moses went up to the mountain when it was covered in cloud. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai and God called Moses onto the mountain to God's presence, "Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel" (Ex 24.17). This is also the image that Luke used to represent the presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, God's own being as fire (Acts 2.3). It is in the light of this tradition of being unable to see God and live that the passage from the Elohist in Exodus 24.9–11 seems quite inappropriate where not only Moses but Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy of the elders see God and eat and drink with God and live to tell the tale!

The Yahwist's account, in Exodus 34, of Moses meeting with God on the mountain is very odd because the commandments written on the stone tablets (34.10–26) are almost entirely different from the conventional ten commandments of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5; the one that everyone remembers from chapter 34 is the injunction not to boil a kid in its mother's milk (34.26). To get these commandments which are peculiar to the Yahwist into the narrative, some later editor

has had to explain that Moses had broken the first pair of tablets and had forgotten their contents, and the pretext for breaking the tablets was Moses's anger at the Israelites moulding and worshipping the golden calf during his absence on the mountain. Artificial as this narrative might be, the worship of the golden calf might still represent an authentic historical reminiscence from the Sinai wilderness. But for us the important part of the story is how Moses met with God. On the mountain Moses said,

'Show me your glory, I pray.' And he said, 'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name "The Lord" (Yahweh); and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But', he said, 'you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' And the Lord continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.' (Ex 33.18–23)

So the closest God gets to being seen in the Old Testament is in human form when Jacob wrestled in the night, or as fire, or as an angel. Eventually Moses got close to an encounter with God in his glory but even he was not allowed a face to face meeting or he would have died.

He does, however, pick up the reflection of God's glory, like a divine sunburn, enough for the Israelites to have to turn away their faces until Moses has put a veil over his head (Ex 34.29–35). Numbers 12.6–8 is clear that Moses's encounter with God is of a different kind from the visions the prophets had later. Some prophetic visions are no more than meditations on natural objects such as a basket of fruit, a plumb-line, locusts (Amos 7 & 8) or an almond twig (Jeremiah 1.11); others claim to be visions of God (Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1) but are no doubt dreams expressed in vivid metaphors; but with Moses "I speak face to face — clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the Lord" (Num 12.8).

The New Testament is even more reticent about visions of God. Visions are reported but they are largely confined to Acts and, because of the author's interest, they are experienced by Paul and they take place in dreams. In Acts 16. 9ff. Paul dreamt that he saw a man of Macedonia who asked him to "Come over to Macedonia and help us". However, the passage rather implies that Paul or his companions had had other visions on their travels, through which they had received instructions from "the Holy Spirit" or "the spirit of Jesus" not to preach

in various locations before going to Macedonia. Later, in Corinth, when Paul was having a hard time with his audience in the synagogue and had decided to lodge with Titius Justus, a gentile God-fearer, the Lord (and in context this means Jesus) appeared in a dream to encourage Paul in his mission (18.9f.). Similarly when Paul was on trial before the Jewish council in Jerusalem a little later, the Lord appeared in a dream to tell Paul to take courage and to promise (or warn) him that “just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome” (23.11).

With the exception of the first of these visions of the man from Macedonia, the vision was of the Lord Jesus. Whereas Old Testament visions had been, albeit indirectly, of God, now in these Christian writings the visions of God are mediated by the form of Jesus and this, coupled with the use of the title Lord (*kurios*), an ambiguous title but the one used of God in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, shows that to be in the presence of the glorified Jesus is to be in the presence of God. Just as in Christian worship the Christians at a very early stage addressed their prayers to Jesus, so in religious experience it was the presence of the risen and glorified Jesus that put them in the presence of God, and it was from these twin roots that the doctrine of the incarnation eventually developed at the end of the first century (the introduction to John’s Gospel) and into the second century.

Paul’s final vision recorded in Acts was on board the ship that foundered on its way to Italy for his final trial. Paul assured the crew that although the ship would be lost, there would be no loss of life “For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said ‘Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you’” (Acts 27.23f.). Visions were never reported for their own sake; there was always some communication. In all of Paul’s recorded dreams he received encouragement at a difficult time and a message about the future of his evangelical mission. Here in ch.27 the message came from an angel, an Old Testament tradition that would presumably also have made sense to Paul’s sailors. But angels in visions were representations of God’s own presence, as was Jesus in the dreams of Acts chapters 18 and 23. It is reasonable enough to suppose that this “angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship” is actually Jesus to whom he belongs and whom he worships. How far these dreams/visions are accurate accounts by Luke of Paul’s actual experiences is anyone’s guess but they do show how the second generation of Christians understood God to present himself (unequivocally *himself* now because God appears in the form of Jesus)

and how they saw the relation between Jesus and God.

What of the angels who appear at the beginning of Luke's Gospel? The first appearance was to Zechariah at the altar of incense in the Jerusalem temple and not in a dream. The vision was of an angel, not as a representation of God himself, but a distinct created angelic person named Gabriel who is said to "stand in the presence of God" and who has brought news of the birth of a son in Zechariah's old age who will be in "the spirit and power of Elijah" and who will "turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God" (Lk 1.11–17). Six months later Gabriel appeared before Mary in Nazareth with the message which requires no repetition here, though it is worth noting that the message contains a well-developed christology that is typical of Luke (Lk 21.28–35). The last appearance of an angel in Luke is to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus: "an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified" (Lk 2.9), as well they might have been because the glory of the Lord is the shekinah, the numinous presence of God that made Moses's face shine on the mountain, that struck down Uzzah who tried to steady the ark of the covenant as it was carried to Jerusalem (1 Sam 6.1–11), where it eventually came to reside in the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary of the Temple, where only the high priest might go. This angel in Luke is unnamed and clearly represents the divine presence. It also calls to mind the other occasion when God appeared to a shepherd on a mountain, to Moses at Sinai to give him the divine name, Yahweh. Now the shepherds are directed to the town below, to the baby whose name had been sent to his mother through an angel, Gabriel, in Hebrew Yashua, God saves. But it was God him(her)self whom the shepherds met on the hillside at Bethlehem.

The only other angels to appear in the Gospels were at the empty tomb. There they do not seem to stand directly for God and they are certainly not equivalent to Jesus because they bring a message about him. Moreover, their appearance is too realistic for this to count as a vision. The angels are young men with a message from God about the future of Jesus.

The other visions of the Gospels are the transfiguration and the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Each is presented as a realistic event (not dreams or trances) and they are appearances of Jesus and not angels. The appearances at the beginning of Luke had to be of an angel because Jesus had not yet or had only just been born. Each of those appearances was concerned with a naming. Thirty years later, appearances could be of Jesus himself and were concerned with identifying him; hence the appearance of Jesus in the company of

Moses and Elijah on a mountain, glowing with divine splendour (Mk 9.2–8). After his entombment, the appearances identify Jesus as the risen and glorified one, though these visions, if that is the correct word, are also about the mission of the Church to preach and baptize (Mt 28.17–20), the eucharist (Lk 24.30f.) and the virtue of believing without direct empirical evidence (Jn 20.29).

Paul's vision of what he insisted was the risen Jesus did not involve Jesus appearing in angelic or bodily form. He saw the light of divine glory which blinded him for three days and he received a message and commission, though the precise nature of the words is not clear because they differ in the three versions we have from Luke's hand of Paul's conversion experience (Acts 9.4–6; 22.7f.; 26.14–18), and Paul in his letters did not speak of the specific circumstances of the experience (Gal 1.15f.; 1 Cor 15.8). Interestingly Paul did not list having visions as one of the gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12 & 14) so, although one cannot assert that something did not happen because it is not mentioned in the New Testament, it does not look as though there was a tradition of seeing divine visions in the early Church. Prophecy is listed as one of the spiritual gifts but we do not know what this consisted of, though the Old Testament prophets started out as visionaries (*nebi'im*). All the same, Paul said that he knew a man, in the context presumably himself, "who was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person . . . was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Cor 12.2–4). A tantalising glimpse of a rare experience that he said no more about, for fear of being accused of boasting, a charge he was scarcely able to fight off anyway, in Corinth at least.

Paul did not go so far as to say that he had seen God in that last passage in 2 Corinthians and the dominant theme of the New Testament is the Jewish one that no one may see God and live. That no one has seen God is found predominantly in Johannine literature: in Jn 1.18 where Jesus is said to be the one who has made God known; 1 Jn 3.2 where we do not yet know what our future state will be, but we shall be like God when we see him as he is; 1 Jn 4.12 & 20 where we are said not to have seen God but God abides in us as love (*agape*). The same general theme is occasionally found in Pauline literature: in 1 Tim 6.16 where it is said God cannot be seen because God dwells in unapproachable light; and 1 Cor 13.12 where "now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face".

However, a distinctly Christian attitude to seeing God emerges in the New Testament which makes ecstatic visions inappropriate and

unnecessary; this is the idea that when we see Jesus we see God: “whoever sees me sees him who sent me” (Jn 12.45); “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14.9). John states simply what some other writers had been building up to. The author of Hebrews says that the Son “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” where “exact imprint” is *karakter*, like the emperor’s image stamped on a coin (Hbs 1.3). The author of Colossians (Paul?) speaks of Christ as “the image (*ikon*) of the invisible God”; here is a paradox: God is invisible but Christ is God’s image (Col 1.15). This is by no means a developed doctrine but here we have the nascent idea of the incarnation. And nowhere so markedly than in an easily missed line in Paul where he says that God “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 4.6).

In the previous chapter Paul refers back to Moses coming off the mountain in Exodus 34 and dazzling the Jews who could not look on the reflected glory of God, so they put a veil over his face when they met him until the glory had faded. Paul tendentiously attributed this to their lack of faith and suggested that Moses had veiled his face so that the Israelites did not have watch the divine splendour fading away. Paul then shifts the image to say that their minds were hardened so that a veil still covers their face when they read the old covenant. But “when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed”.

The old covenant indeed came with splendour and Paul tells us that the new covenant has come with even greater splendour “and all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3.18). Note that we are now speaking of the glory of the Lord who is Jesus, not the glory of God known as Yahweh. Yet the two are equivalent because we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ”. In the face of Christ we see God; but why all the qualifications? Well, when we look on that face we do not exactly see God, we see the glory of God. And not exactly the glory of God, we have the knowledge of the glory of God. And not exactly the knowledge of the glory of God, but we see the light of the knowledge of the glory of God. Nonetheless, despite this series of qualifications, when we look on the face of Christ we see God or as much of God as we can see in this lifetime — and that is why icons are so significant.