

Some Remarkable Physical Manifestations of God

I. Introductory Matters and Questions

- A. The Bible plainly informs us that God is spirit and invisible, meaning that God is not composed of matter. God has no geographical or spatial location. Matter, in contrast, is finite, subject to change. Jn. 4:24: *God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.* I Tim 1:17: *Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.* Many other passages confirm this.
- B. When Scripture notes that God has hands or feet this is an anthropomorphism which attributes human features to God. This is only a rhetorical device used to communicate thoughts about God to finite, material creatures like us.
- C. When God is manifested in the physical world, theologians call this a *theophany*. It is a term that some interpret rather broadly to include *any kind* of physical manifestation, i.e., a voice, fire, glory cloud, light, etc. Others only use the term to apply to presumed bodily appearances of the second person of the Trinity. In this case, they are sometimes called *Christophanies*.
- D. For us, being material bound and subject to physical laws, the spiritual realm is very difficult to comprehend. It is also one of the major problems in philosophy: just exactly how can the spiritual realm interact with the physical? What is even more difficult, and what the Bible teaches, is when we die, we will be in the presence of the Lord and will somehow be fully conscious beings without a physical brain! While we are physical beings, we also have a spiritual dimension as God and angels.
- E. God, in both the OT and the NT, repeatedly warns against idolatry because God cannot be represented by anything material, i.e., images. Ex. 20:4: *You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.*
- F. Though God is spirit, somehow He can and does take on physical form to reveal Himself to finite creatures. In the OT, these manifestations are in the form of the Glory Cloud (*Shekinah*), the form of a man whereby He is indistinguishable from a mere man, and sometimes in the form of a man, but where there is some characteristic indicating he is not a mere man (see the 4th man in the fiery furnace in Dan. 3). In some cases, there is an audible voice, or He appears in a dream or vision.
- G. The supreme example of the invisible God entering the material realm is the Incarnation, i.e., *Immanuel, God with us.*

II. Some Examples of Physical Manifestations of God

- A. Genesis 2:7-8: *Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. The LORD God planted a garden toward the east, in Eden; and there He placed the man whom He had formed. And: vs.21-22: So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.*

In this very intriguing passage we see Deity *forming* and *breathing*. These actions are physical actions! So, naturally the question is: Is this just an anthropomorphism, or did God literally take on a physical body to perform these tasks? He is here forming a human body out of matter that He created. The breathing into his nostrils is an intimate picture of God giving mouth to nose resuscitation! In doing so, He is apparently creating Adam's spiritual dimension (he becomes *a living soul*). In the rest of the passage God is depicted

as *planting* a garden, another physical activity. In creating Eve *He is portrayed as doing surgery!* Then, He brings her to Adam. *Just how did He bring her to Adam?* The simple reading here suggests He performed these tasks with some kind of human form!

- B. In the following Chapter of Genesis (3), we find God speaking audibly as He gives instructions to Adam and Eve. In verse 8, *They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

Adam and Eve hear the sound of God *walking* in the cool of the day (evening, I presume), then they hid. *If God were not present in the physical sense why hide?* Then they hear God calling them: *Where are you?* in an audible voice which involves physical sound waves. The picture the author seems to communicate from this vignette is God at this time had a physical form and regularly appeared with Adam and Eve *for fellowship*. Was this a pre-incarnate form of the second person of the Trinity?

- C. In Genesis 12, God commands Abraham to pack up and leave for Canaan. In 12:7, He appears to him and promises again to bless him and give him a land. In 15:1-5 it says: *After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be.*

Here the Lord appeared Abraham in a vision. Heiser (p.129) thinks the rendering: *word of the Lord* in 15:1 is a reference to the second person of the Trinity as in John 1:1, i.e., *the Logos*. Was Jesus referring to this instance when he declared in Jn 8:56 that He was before Abraham? Note also, another physical action where it says: *He took him outside...* Was this in the vision, or did Abraham actually go outside and look at the stars? This is the first of numerous appearances of God to Abraham. It is notable because it is the first promise of the Abrahamic Covenant (see 15:18). In appearing to Abraham (Abram at that time), how did God appear? And how did Abraham know that it was God. We can only speculate.

- D. In Genesis 16, Hagar runs away from her mistress (Sarah) and God finds her and promises to make a great nation from her offspring. In verse 13, She makes this comment: *Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees "; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?"* What is interesting here is that she was surprised that she remained alive after her encounter! This is not an uncommon response.
- E. Genesis 18:1-5: *Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, "My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass your servant by. "Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant." And they said, "So do, as you have said."*

In this passage Abraham encounters three men, one who is obviously the Lord (from vs.1) who is in embodied form. The implication from Genesis 19 is that the other two *men* are angelic beings. Nothing in the text indicates that these three beings look anything other than ordinary men, yet somehow Abraham knows that one is the Lord! From later on in the passage (vs. 25), Abraham knows that one of the beings is *the Judge of all the earth*. As in the preceding cases, how does Abraham make his identification? Heiser speculates that from Abraham's previous encounters with God He recognizes His voice (p.132).

- F. In Genesis 28, we have one of the most well-known encounters with God, the story of Jacob and the ladder which reaches into heaven at Bethel. **And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants. "Your descendants will also be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and in you and in your descendants shall all the families of the earth be blessed. "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it." He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Emphasis mine)**

What is noteworthy about this Biblical story is the fact that this encounter with God was through a dream. God informs Jacob the Abrahamic Covenant will continue through him. God here is depicted as a man standing beside him. Later on Jacob has another encounter with God where they have a night-long wrestling match in Chapter 32. When neither prevailed, God put Jacob's hip out of joint. In this passage Jacob makes this startling comment in vs. 29-30: *Then Jacob asked him and said, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And he blessed him there. So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, "I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved."*

- G. Another OT personality that had multiple encounters with God was Moses. We all are acquainted with Moses and the story of the Burning Bush. He was tending the flock of his father-in-law when he spotted a bush that seemed to be aflame but was not consumed. *Ex. 3:2-6: The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, "I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up." When the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said also, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.*
- H. In *Ex. 24:9-11: Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank.*

Here God appears, presumably in human form to a large group, and from the previous verses, God instituted the Mosaic Covenant, after which they ate and drank a covenantal meal together which sealed the covenant. Did God eat? It appears so.

- I. Joshua, the commander of the Israeli army had an unique encounter with a theophany: He not only appeared as man, but as a warrior ready for combat! *...he looked and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in His hand. (Jos. 5:13).* The response of Joshua is indicative: he bowed in worship.
- J. While Gideon was sitting under the shade of an oak tree an Angel of the Lord came and sat down next to him (vs.11). Gideon, well aware that the Angel was God, addresses Him as *Lord*. Here, the Angel performs a miracle to convince *the mighty warrior* (not) to authenticate his calling. After the encounter, here is Gideon's response 6:22: *When Gideon realized that it was the angel of the LORD, he exclaimed, "Alas, Sovereign LORD! I have seen the angel of the LORD face to face!"* How do we know this is Deity and not an angel? In the next vs. 23, God had to calm the timid Gideon as he thought he was going to die from seeing the Lord. God promises that he will not.
- K. When Samuel was a child God called to him in an audible voice (I Sam 3:1ff.), but the young Samuel did

not recognize God's voice and thought it was the prophet, Eli! Note, that after God called Samuel three times it says in the text in vs. 10, **The LORD came and stood there, calling as at the other times, "Samuel! Samuel!"**

- L. In II Chron. 7:13 we have the spectacular event of the Glory of God filling the temple after Solomon's dedication: *When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the LORD filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the LORD because the glory of the LORD filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the LORD above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshiped and gave thanks to the LORD, saying, "He is good; his love endures forever."*
- M. The prophet Isaiah saw one of the most unusual theophanies in Isa. 6:1-5. Here he has a glimpse into the very throne room of God. He gives a classic response of a sinner seeing a holy God: *"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*
- N. One of the saddest events in the OT is found in Ezekiel 10, when the Glory of God reluctantly leaves the Temple. Vss. 3-5: *Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and a cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the LORD rose from above the cherubim and moved to the threshold of the temple. The cloud filled the temple, and the court was full of the radiance of the glory of the LORD. The sound of the wings of the cherubim could be heard as far away as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks.* Finally, the Glory departs: vss. 18-19: *Then the glory of the LORD departed from over the threshold of the temple and stopped above the cherubim. While I watched, the cherubim spread their wings and rose from the ground, and as they went, the wheels went with them. They stopped at the entrance of the east gate of the LORD's house, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them.*
- O. Dan. 3:24-25 *"Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire?" They replied, "Certainly, Your Majesty." He said, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.* The pagan King recognizes something different about the 4th man walking around in the furnace. What was it that differentiated that 4th person? Maybe His garments!

III. Conclusion

Actual physical manifestations of the Creator-God were more commonplace in the OT since it was a time when God was revealing Himself. Now that we have the written revelation (The bible), seeing a physical manifestation of God, or hearing his audible voice, is unusual today. However, all believers are promised a *beatific vision*. While we may never experience God face to face in this life, the Bible promises there will be a time when we all see God. The Apostle John tells us in his first Epistle (3:2): *We know that when He appears, we will be like Him because we will see Him as He is.*

References and for further study

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