



**Bible-study: 2020/10/18 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Exodus 33:12-23**

As according to the Lectionary, this is our last session working with *Exodus*, (the second book of the Bible). Next week we'll have one session of *Deuteronomy* and then, after that, some *Joshua* and *Judges*, which will bring us up to Advent, when we will take the usual break in Sunday School until the New Year.

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

Excepting, perhaps, Adam and Eve, and more so even than Abraham, Moses was given peculiar and unprecedented access to God; peculiar and unprecedented *proof* of God's existence – an existence made abundantly clear by strange and terrifying manifestations of the LORD's power, such as at the “burning bush” and on the peak of Mount Sinai – *wherever it was*.

Now, some of these encounters were public; *visible* to others. But for the bystanders on those occasions – “occasions” which were only a subset of the total theophanies in (the Book of) *Exodus* – there would always remain some ambiguity: Had they really seen what they thought they saw? Was it an actual voice from Heaven they heard or rather an unusual series of overlapping noises from multiple *natural* sources – a thunder “clap” as a volcano erupted and my stomach “growled” (from hunger) which, together, “in symphony,” produced word-like sounds? – We discussed just last week about the ambiguity of the spectacle in the wilderness; about whether the smoke and the quaking and so on, described in the text, could be attributed to a volcano or to a brush-fire during a storm.<sup>1</sup> And as time passed, and the pressures of the wilderness trek to Canaan mounted – such as attacks from Amalekites, early convictions would waver; doubts emerge. “Perhaps we're deluded?,” some might begin to question – question Moses' leadership; question the sanity of fighting fierce pagan tribes to wrest control of a land that none of them had ever seen. Maybe he had conned them? After all, some of his “tricks” – with his staff – were reproduceable by Pharaoh's ‘magicians’: [Ex. 9:11. And at Sinai, after all, the Israelites, we were told, ‘stood at a distance’ (to listen to the Ten Commandments”): [Ex.20:18]. Indeed, God Himself had “warn[ed] the people not to break through [a shield of black smoke that ‘wrapped’ the mountain] to the LORD to look; otherwise many of them will perish.” [19:18,21]

Thus, we find, this morning, Moses makes an appeal for God to assist the Israelites in coming to ‘know’ Him with more certainty. That word – *know* –

<sup>1</sup> See: Randall, Benjamin T. (11<sup>th</sup> of October, 2020), “Back to Sunday School” Bible-study: 2020/10/11 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – *Exodus* 32:1-14', 2-3, available at [http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Bible-Study-20201011-St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Exodus-32v1-14\\_BTR.pdf](http://www.saintmatthewschurch.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Bible-Study-20201011-St.-Matthews-Episcopal-Church-McMinnville-Exodus-32v1-14_BTR.pdf), (accessed October 14, 2020).

is used five times in what's quite a short passage: [33:12,13,16,17]. *Specifically*, for God to provide a way for the people to 'know' Him in an ongoing fashion as Moses was, more-or-less witnessing Him on Sinai's summit, *even* as the nation journeyed forward (and away from that place). – For God, in other words, to 'go with us' – the Israelites – in such a way that His presence could be *permanently* attested: [v.16]. This He graciously does by supplying an eerie, glowing 'cloud', which 'filled the tabernacle' – the "Tent of Meeting" – and hovered over the "Ark of the Covenant" when the Levites carried it at the head of the migrating column: [Ex. 40:34f. See also: Numb 9:15-18]. These things had already been commissioned, so it isn't clear that they were to have been originally complimented by this phenomenon.

In the meantime, however, God makes an extra effort of allowing Moses to "know" Him by 'passing by' as he hid in a 'cleft' in the rock: [Ex. 33:22]. 'It is a [personal] boost of God's presence for the task that lies ahead.'<sup>2</sup> ← Remember how reluctant Moses had been to be the Israelites' general? 'One would expect Israel's deliverer to have more resolve and less hesitation. Nevertheless, such a human presentation of Moses is one that even God's people today can readily understand.'<sup>3</sup> Consider, whatever the original reason for Moses' reluctance, it 'was [further] complicated by the vivid evidence of the [recently transpired incident of the "Golden Calf"] idolatry.'<sup>4</sup>

But let's talk about what is said about this moment. What *exactly* happened? What *exactly* was Moses shown? The text – and he is its author – makes mention of God's 'face', His 'hand' and His 'back': [Ex. 33:20-23]. *Wait!* Does God have a body? It seems important to begin our investigation with Rabbi Arthur Marmorstein's observation that there is in Judaism a school of thought of 'immense influence', which 'believed in a God who accompanies man in human form and shape.'<sup>5</sup> This is not surprising given the fact that – as Ludwig Koehler points out – '[t]he language which ascribes to God the attributes of man [in the Old Testament] is neither restrained nor incidental'<sup>6</sup> – *as we see*.

According to the scholar Jacob Neusner, these "materials" reveal 'a kind of gospel of God incarnate, walking among human beings, talking with them, teaching them, acting among them, just as...Jesus Christ' (but already long before the Incarnation).<sup>7</sup> This 'corporeal conception of God'<sup>8</sup> is particularly pronounced in the "Babylonian Talmud" – composed in Iran in late antiquity,

<sup>2</sup> Enns, Peter (2000), *The N.I.V. Application Commentary: Volume 2 - Exodus*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 583.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>4</sup> Stuart, Douglas K. (2006), *Exodus (The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Volume 2)*, Nashville, T. N.: B. & H. Publishing Group, 700.

<sup>5</sup> Marmorstein, A. (1937), *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, Volume II: Essays in Anthropomorphism, London: Oxford University Press, 52. See also: Stroumsa, Gedaliahu G. (July 1983), 'Forms of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ', *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 76, Number 3, pp. 269-288; Schmidt, Werner H. (1983), *The Faith of the Old Testament*, translated by John Sturdy, Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher, Ltd., 196; and, Stead, Christopher (1994), *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 100-101.

<sup>6</sup> Koehler, Ludwig (1957), *Old Testament Theology*, Translated by Todd, A. S., London: Lutterworth Press, 22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Neusner, Jacob (2001), *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism*, New York: Global Publications, 17-18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

where '[He]' – God – 'is [even] portrayed as wearing phylacteries'.<sup>9</sup> (That's those small, black, square leather boxes containing slips inscribed with scriptural passages and traditionally worn on the left arm and on the head by observant Jewish men.<sup>10</sup>) This is to say, there is in "strands" of historical, Orthodox Judaism thinking an idea of God that He looks like a wizened, wrinkly rabbi – that He Himself models their idea of saintliness.

Many early Christians also believed God to be 'materially bodied'.<sup>11</sup> Adolph Harnack records that 'God was naturally conceived and represented as corporeal by...Christians... In the case of the cultured, the idea of a corporeality of God may be traced back to Stoic influences;<sup>[12]</sup> in the case of the uncultured, popular ideas co-operated with the sayings of the Old Testament literally understood, and the impression of the Apocalyptic images.'<sup>13</sup> The reference here is surely to the mysterious figure who speaks with John in *Revelation*, whose 'hairs...were white, like white wool, like snow. ...[etc.]' [Rev. 1:14] (And of course: 'Mormons' – quasi-Christians – 'do not hesitate to speak of God as having a body. ... not apologetically so, but proudly, even militantly.'<sup>14</sup>)

And yet, such a vision of God soon became peripheral in Christianity – though it may have lasted in some circles until as late as the fourth century<sup>15</sup> – likely, *mercifully(!)* due to 'the pervasive influence of Platonism – with its insistence on the total immateriality of God [which] permitted the development of a theology free from anthropomorphic representations.'<sup>16</sup> Consequently, it is now taken for granted that – as Swinburne frames it – 'God is essentially bodiless'.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, according to Charles Taliaferro, '[t]he concept of the incorporeality of God is...at the intersection of many divine attributes and it plays a central role for theistic conceptions of God's relation to the cosmos. Its place is so embedded in theistic philosophical literature that incorporeality is sometimes cast as a defining characteristic of God, such that the proposition "God is incorporeal" is treated as analytically true rather than as a proposition

<sup>9</sup> Neusner, *The Incarnation of God*, 169.

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/phylactery>.

<sup>11</sup> Griffin, Carl W. and Paulsen, David L. (January, 2002), 'Augustine and the Corporeality of God', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 95, No. 1, pp. 97-118, 97.

<sup>12</sup> 'Stoicism was a monism teaching that God or Logos is a finer matter immanent in the material universe.' (Kelly, J. N. D. (1968), *Early Christian Doctrines*, Fourth Edition, London: Adam & Charles Black, 13.)

<sup>13</sup> Harnack, Adolph (1895), *History of Dogma*, Volume 1, 3rd Edition, Translated by Neil Buchanan, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 180, n. 1. See also: Harnack, Adolph (1895), *History of Dogma, Volume II & Volume III, 3rd Edition*, translated by Neil Buchanan, New York, N. Y.: Dover Publications, Inc., 255, n. 5; and Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 101-102.

<sup>14</sup> Cherbonnier, Edmond LaB. (1978), 'In Defense of Anthropomorphism', in Madsen, Truman G. (Ed.), *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels*, Provo, U. T.: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, pp. 155-74, available at <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/reflections-mormonism-judaeo-christian-parallels/9-defense-anthropomorphism>, (accessed May 3, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Paulsen, David L. (April, 1990), 'Early Christian Belief in a Corporeal Deity: Origen and Augustine as Reluctant Witnesses', *The Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 83, No. 2, pp. 105-116, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Stroumsa, 'Forms of God: Some Notes on Metatron and Christ', 270.

<sup>17</sup> Swinburne, Richard (1998), *The Christian God*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 125 & 127.

entailed by other...theistic claims.’<sup>18</sup> That is to say, you and I say *of course* it is true, and not it *must* be true *because*...

Are the Scriptures misleading us, then? By using anthropomorphisms about God is it “putting stumbling blocks before little ones” as it shouldn’t? [Mt. 18:6; Rm. 14:3; 1 Cor. 18:9] No. Firstly, in regard to today’s episode, it could be that – as the commentator Douglas Stuart suggests: ‘[W]hat happened...was not that Moses actually saw God in the same way believers will see Him in Heaven but that God [merely] manifest Himself by producing for Moses’ benefit *some sort of shape* that was visible [and about which one could say they saw it had “hands” or a “back”].’<sup>19</sup> (Without meaning those things literally.) In other words, in regard to this single incident, Moses – the author – describes what he saw matter-of-factly, but did not mean to imply that God had a body such as ours. Because, after all, a human body – a body such as ours – has more than just those parts. Furthermore, on a sunny day, I might cast a shadow onto the ground, and you could say, looking at it, that it had “hands,” “legs” and so on, and we would understand what you meant, and know that you hadn’t claimed about my shadow that it had *real* hands or *real* legs – hands that could be held by yours – as by a parent to assist their child across a road, or that it had legs that could kick a football.

Alternatively, speaking more generally now, it may be that the text by-and-large – which is inspired by a divine mind – Christians believe – is constrained to use such language because the *actual* truth about God eludes what creatures like us can express. This is called the theory of “accommodationism”. John Calvin – the 16<sup>th</sup> century theologian and one of the supreme minds of the Reformation (Protestant) tradition, put it like this: ‘The Anthropomorphites also, who imagined God to be corporeal, because the Scripture frequently ascribes to him a mouth, ears, eyes, hands, and feet, are easily refuted. For who, even of the meanest capacity, understands not, that God lisps, as it were, with us, just as nurses are accustomed to speak to infants? Wherefore, such forms of expression do not clearly explain the nature of God, *but accommodate* the knowledge of him to our narrow capacity; to accomplish which, the Scripture must necessarily descend far below the height of his majesty.’<sup>20</sup> Does that make sense to you? His argument is simply this: the Bible must use ‘metaphors and other figures of speech to describe the God who is truly and really otherwise.’<sup>21</sup> And Calvin, of course, wasn’t the first to make such a case: Origen of Alexandria [c.184-254 A.D.] – one of the so-called “Church Fathers,” who ‘was by far the most important and the most influential in the development of early Christian interpretation of the Scriptures’,<sup>22</sup> taught something very similar: the proper way to understand language that appeared

<sup>18</sup> Taliaferro, Charles (1999), ‘Incorporeality’, in Quinn, Philip L. & Taliaferro, Charles (Eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 271-278, 272.

<sup>19</sup> Stuart (2006), 700.

<sup>20</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume I* (1845), translated by Henry Beveridge, Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 116. (Book 1, chapter 13, para. 1)

<sup>21</sup> Wedgworth, Steven (4<sup>th</sup> of February, 2015), ‘Theories of Accommodation in the Theology of John Calvin’, available at <https://calvinistinternational.com/2015/02/04/theories-accommodation-theology-john-calvin/>, (accessed October 17, 2020).

<sup>22</sup> Sheridan, Mark (2015), *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 110.

to imply bodyliness should be in a manner “worthy of God,” which would render it figuratively.<sup>23</sup> And this suggested strategy is lent weight by Jesus’ unambiguous statement that ‘God is Spirit’: [Jn. 4:24]. Indeed, reflecting on the *New Testament* evidence, we might conclude – as one author – that: ‘The battle against anthropomorphisms is long since over... The NT writers do not waste words on it.’<sup>24</sup> But this is rather mistaken. ‘In portraying the birth and early life of John the Baptist, Luke writes: “...the hand of the Lord was with him” (*Luke* 1:66), and in the Magnificat Mary declares that God “hath shewed strength with his arm” (*Luke* 1:51; cf. Ps. 98:1). In belabouring the Sanhedrin for the unbelief of Israel, Stephen [the Martyr] recalls that some of Moses’s contemporaries lacked spiritual understanding that “God by His hand” would deliver the children of Israel (*Acts* 7:25). [etc., etc.]’<sup>25</sup> Clearly, ‘the New Testament retains anthropomorphic reference to deity per se.’<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-114.

<sup>24</sup> Bromiley, Geoffrey William (2015), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume III*, Grand Rapids, M. I: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 110.

<sup>25</sup> Henry, Carl F. (1999), *God Who Stands and Stays*, Wheaton, I. L.: Crossway, 298.

<sup>26</sup> *Supra*.