

Genesis 18:1 and 2

(1) The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day.

(2) Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground. (NIV)

1. These verses pose a problem for Christians who have been taught that no one has ever seen God. The Hebrew text clearly says that *Yahweh* appeared to Abraham in the form of a man, and He was with two angels, who also took on human appearance. This is not a problem. God created mankind so He could intimately fellowship with us. It is reasonable that He would occasionally become visible and take on human form to be intimate with His creation. In fact, Scripture records a number of people to whom God appeared: Adam and Eve (they heard His footsteps, Gen. 3:8), Abraham (Gen. 12:7;15:1;17:1;18:1), Jacob (Gen. 28:13), Moses and the elders of Israel (Ex. 24:9-11), Samuel (1 Sam. 3:10), Solomon twice (1 Kings 3:5;9:2;11:9), Micaiah (1 Kings 22:19-22), Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5), Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:26-28), Daniel (Dan. 7:9-14), Amos (Amos 7:7), Stephen (Acts 7:56) and the Apostle John (Rev. 5:1-8).

2. A study of Genesis 18:1 in Christian commentaries reveals that most theologians do not believe that *Yahweh* can appear in the form of a man. Before we examine why they say that, we must remember that, difficult to believe or not, that is *exactly* what the text says. Many theologians who do not believe that the text can be literal have postulated other explanations. The standard explanations of the verse are: it was actually a dream and not real; it was the pre-incarnate Christ who appeared; it was an angel that appeared carrying the name of *Yahweh*.

Some theologians teach that the record of Genesis 18:1ff was a dream because of the circumstances, *i.e.*, it was the heat of the day and the time for naps. However, the Bible never says it was a dream, and there certainly was no time when Abraham “woke up.” The record of Sodom and Gomorrah is certainly not a dream. The angels left Abraham and went to the city of Sodom where they rescued Lot and his daughters from God’s judgment. There is just no solid Scriptural evidence that *Yahweh’s* appearance was a dream. Neither would this account for the many other times *Yahweh* appears.

Many Trinitarian theologians say that Genesis 18:1 is an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ. The evidence they give for their conclusion is twofold: *Yahweh* is invisible and no one has or can see Him, so it cannot be He; and the record clearly says it is *Yahweh*, so it must be the pre-incarnate Christ since “Christ is a member of the Godhead.” However, if it could be shown that *Yahweh* does indeed occasionally appear in the form of a man, then there would be no reason not to take the Bible literally. Furthermore, the fact that Scripture never says that the one appearing is Christ is strong evidence that this is not Christ. And there are at least two occasions where *Yahweh* and Christ appear together (Dan. 7 and Rev. 5). This seems to us to force the conclusion that *Yahweh* cannot be Christ.

The major reason to make the “*Yahweh*” of this record into an angel is the same as the reason to make the record a dream or to make *Yahweh* into the pre-incarnate Christ. It comes from the preconceived idea that *Yahweh* just cannot appear in human form. Therefore, the temptation here is to make *Yahweh* of necessity a dream, an angel or Christ. Even though in other records angels are called God, this record is different. We have seen from other verses that angels are occasionally called “God” (see the notes on Gen. 16:7-13). However, a study of the records where the angel of the Lord is called “God” shows that he was always clearly identified as an angel, and it was clear that he was bringing a message from God. This record, and the others mentioned above in which *Yahweh* appears, are decidedly different. The “man” identified as *Yahweh* is among other angels, and the entire record identifies Him as *Yahweh*. And while other records show the angel of the Lord carefully avoiding the use of the first person, “I,” “me” and “my,” referring to God, the “*Yahweh*” in this record uses the first person over and over.

3. Most Christians have not been taught that God can appear in a form resembling a person. They have always heard, “no one has seen God at any time.” In *Don’t Blame God!*, the language of that phrase is examined and explained. John 1:17 and 18 states: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God...” We write:

Please note that truth, in its fullness, came not with Moses, but with Jesus Christ. It was he who for the first time in history made God truly understandable. It is not that the Old Testament believers knew nothing of God, but rather that their knowledge and understanding of Him were quite limited (“veiled”). Since truth came by Jesus Christ (“For the law was given through Moses; grace and **truth** came through Jesus,”), we believe that the first part of John 1:18—“no man hath seen God at anytime”—means that no man had “known” God [as He truly is] at any previous time. It is Jesus Christ who reveals, or makes known, God to man.

In many languages, “to see” is a common idiom for “to know.” In the Hebrew language, one of the definitions for “see” (Hebrew = *ra’ ah*) is “see, so as to learn, to know.” Similarly, the Greek word translated “see” in verse 18 (*horao*) can be “to see with the eyes” or “to see with the mind, to perceive, know.” Even in English, one of the definitions for “see” is “to know or understand.” For example, when two people are discussing something, one might say to the other, “I see what you mean.”

The usage of “see” as it pertains to knowing is found in many places in the New Testament. Jesus said to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). Here again the word “see” is used to indicate knowing. Anyone who *knew* Christ (not just those who “saw” him) would know the Father. In fact, Christ had made that plain two verses earlier when he said to Philip, “If you really knew me you would know my Father as well” (John 14:7).¹

Further evidence that “see” means “know” in John 1:18 is that the phrase “no man has seen God” is contrasted with the phrase “has made Him known.” The verse is not talking

about “seeing” God with one’s eyes, it is saying that the truth about God came by Jesus Christ. Before Jesus Christ came, no one really knew God as He truly is, a loving heavenly Father. Jesus Christ made that known in its fullness. Our study has led us to conclude that verses seeming to say that no one has ever “seen” God are either using the word “seen” as meaning “to know,” and thus referring to knowing Him fully, or they are referring to seeing Him in all His fullness as God, which would be impossible. We agree with the text note on John 1:18 in the *NIV Study Bible*, which says, “Since no human being can see God as He really is, those who saw God saw Him in a form He took on Himself temporarily for the occasion.”

Another point should be made about the word “seen” in John 1:18. If Trinitarians are correct in that Jesus is “God incarnate,” “God the Son” and “fully God,” then it seems to us that they would be anxious to realize that “seen” means “known” because it makes no sense to say that no man has seen God with his eyes and then say Jesus is God. Theologians on both sides of the Trinitarian debate should realize the idiom of “seen” meaning “known” in John 1:18.

The Bible also calls God “the invisible God.” This is true, and God’s natural state is invisible to us. However, that does not prevent Him from occasionally becoming visible. Angels and demons are also naturally invisible, but they can and do become visible at certain times. If angels and demons can sometimes become visible, then God certainly can too. We remind the reader that the Bible plainly says, “*Yahweh* appeared to Abraham,” and to others as well.

It is often stated that the people could not have really seen *Yahweh* because a person will die if he sees God. This idea comes mainly from the conversation Moses had with God. Moses asked to see the glory of God, and God responded, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Ex. 33:20). It is clear from the context that the “face” of God was the “glory” of God, because that is what Moses asked to see. We would concur that human beings are not equipped to comprehend God in all His fullness, and exposure to all that God is would be lethal. However, we know that God did create mankind so He could fellowship with us, and we assert that the human-like form that He has sometimes assumed in order to be near us is not His fullness in any way.

There are two records very important to this subject because they describe God and also show Jesus Christ with Him. The first is a revelation vision of the future that Daniel the prophet had.

Daniel 7:9,10,13 and 14

(9) As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.

(10) A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him. The court was seated, and the books were opened.

(13) In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence.

(14) He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

The “Ancient of Days” is *Yahweh*. Note his description as a man. Into his presence comes “a son of man” who is given authority and dominion. It is quite universally agreed among Christians that the “Ancient of Days” is God the Father, and the “son of man” is Jesus Christ, who receives his authority from God. Note that in this passage there is no hint of the Trinity. There is no “Holy Spirit” and no indication that the “son of man” is co-equal or co-eternal with the Father. On the contrary, while God is called the “Ancient of Days,” a title befitting His eternal nature, Christ is called “a son of man,” meaning one who is born from human parents. This prophecy is one of many that shaped the Jewish belief about their Messiah: he was not foretold as “God in the flesh,” but rather a man like themselves who would receive special honor and authority from God. For our purposes in understanding Genesis 18:1, these verses in Daniel demonstrate very clearly that God can and does appear in human form. And because in Daniel’s vision He is with the Messiah when He does so, there is no reason to assume that the other times He appears it is actually Jesus Christ.

The other very clear record is Revelation 4 and 5. The length of the record prohibits us from printing it here, but the reader is encouraged to read those two chapters. They portray God sitting on a throne surrounded by elders and creatures who repeat, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.” God is holding in His right hand a scroll that is written on both sides but sealed shut with seven seals. An angel calls out to summon those who could open the scroll, but no one was worthy. As John began to weep, an angel comforted him with the words, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll.” Then “a Lamb” (the context makes it clear it is Jesus Christ) “came and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.” At that point the creatures and the elders fell down before the Lamb and started singing a “new song.”

The record is clear. God is described as sitting on a throne and even holding in His hand a scroll that Jesus comes and takes from Him. This record again shows that God can and does occasionally take on human form so that we can better identify with Him.

4. This record and the others like it show a glimpse of what Christians have to look forward to. God loves us and created us to have a deep and abiding relationship with Him. He will not always remain as distant as He now sometimes seems. The Bible tells of a time when “the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3).

Endnotes:

1. Don't Blame God! (CES, fourth edition, 1994) pp. 59 and 60.

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