

ANYONE ROUND HERE SEEN GOD?

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As one who takes the Bible seriously I have to confess that I have been exercised by a conundrum. It's one all lovers of the Scriptures face. It may be stated like this: The Bible says "no man has seen God at any time, nor indeed can see Him" (I Tim. 6: 16). Yet on the other hand the Bible tells us that at certain times and to certain people God Himself was directly "seen" and directly "heard".

So has anybody round here really "seen" God and directly "heard" God or is the Bible, after all, full of unresolvable 'mysteries' that we must just 'accept on faith' regardless of how they jar any honest seeker after harmonious truth? Do we just put it in the too-hard-basket and let the theologians argue amongst themselves in circles? Or perhaps we agree with the sceptics that the Bible is after all just full of contradictions (euphemistically called 'paradoxes') that in any other scientific endeavour would be laughed out of court?

For me this is not only a serious intellectual challenge. It deeply affects my heart. How so? Well, if I understand Jesus' prophecy correctly, his Second Coming waits for the day when national Israel will invite him back to earth ...

Behold, your house is left to you desolate. Truly I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord (Matt. 23: 38-39).

If somehow the Jews can be kept from accepting Jesus as their Messiah, then the probability of them ever calling on him to come back is nil. A modern Jewish joke is that when finally their Messiah does arrive, they are going to ask him, "Have you been here before? Is this your first or second coming?"

But on a serious note, I wonder whether we in the Church really get the gravity of this. How will the Jews ever call on Jesus, inviting him back "in the Name of the LORD" if we keep insisting they must believe Jesus is (as one preacher I recently heard put it) "God in human skin"? And we threaten that if they don't believe Jesus *is* God, they will be forever lost! Putting their case bluntly, those Jews who love the Old Testament Scriptures are looking for a human Messiah who is *not* God; a Messiah who comes with the full authority and power invested in him as God's Son and human King, as promised in their Writings.

[Dr Michael Brown](#) is a well-respected Messianic Jew (i.e. a Jew by birth and one who believes that Jesus is the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures). Dr Brown is convinced he has resolved this conundrum. In his book, *The Real Kosher Jesus: Revealing The Mysteries of the Hidden Messiah* Dr. Brown asks the question. "Can Jews believe that 'Jesus is God?' **(1)**.

He asks, "...if by the question is meant could God, who is complex in his unity, sit enthroned in heaven, filling the universe with his presence, infinite and uncontainable in his majesty, and yet at one and the same time manifest his glory among us in the tent of a human body, then the answer is categorically yes, and there is nothing idolatrous about this belief at all. It is in harmony with the Hebrew Scriptures --- it even explains some of the mysteries found on the pages of the Tanakh [i.e. the Old Testament] ..." (p. 125-126).

Later Brown correctly notes the New Testament writers "never said, God became a human

being” (p. 136).

If Dr Brown had left it there I might have been able to rest pretty much in agreement with him, and so would most Jews. For there is no doubt that Jesus the Messiah perfectly reveals the glory and the character of God Almighty to us. He is the Son of God, the “**radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature ...**” (Heb. 1: 3). Jesus is the “**image of God**” and as such we know that when we see him we see the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; John 14: 6). And because Jesus is the Messianic Lord, when he speaks we hear God speaking. And when Jesus works and acts, we see God working and acting. But does this agreement in word and work prove Jesus himself *is* God? Or to put it in a slightly more complex form, does identification mean identity?

THE ELDERS SEE GOD

Dr Brown launches his discussion into this apparent difficulty in the following manner. Since the Scriptures teach “**no man has ever seen God**” (John 1:18; I John 4:12; I Tim. 6:16) how come other texts seem to say that certain people did “see God”? After all, the God of the Old Testament emphatically reminded the Israelites at Mt Sinai that when He spoke to them, “**they saw no form or image**” and that “**no man can see Me and live**” (Ex. 33:20). But immediately after the Sinai revelation we read,

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 (Ex. 24: 9-11).

So the problem stated is this: God Himself says, “**You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!**” (Exodus 33: 20). The apostle John agrees with this testimony of the LORD God, when he also says, “**No man has seen God at any time ...**” (John 1:18). The apostle Paul who also wrote *after* the crucifixion and resurrection and exaltation of Jesus to the Right Hand of God on High is equally clear in the belief that God is “**invisible**” and that, “**... no man has seen or can see**” the One Who is “**the only God**” (I Tim. 1: 17 and 6: 16). So, did Moses and Aaron and the nobles of Israel see God or not? Do John and Paul contradict what is written in the OT as God’s very statement, “**no man can see My face and live**”? May it never be!

Brown then quotes a Messianic Jewish leader, Asher Intrater, “**This is an unprecedented event. The elders see God in a bodily human form but also in glorified power**” (p. 127). And the elders were aware of the danger because they took special note of the fact that God did not “lay His Hand upon them” (and kill them)! More of this conundrum soon. But first let’s see Brown’s solution in another incident from the Tanakh (O.T.).

ABRAHAM EATS LUNCH WITH GOD

The second OT incident Brown addresses to prove that God was *physically* seen by men is when Abraham “had lunch” with God as recorded in Genesis 18. Brown writes,

Genesis 18 provides a fascinating narrative, telling us that Yahweh --- meaning the God of Israel --- literally appeared to Abraham, engaging in a conversation with him and with his wife Sarah, and eating and drinking with them. The text begins: “The LORD [Hebrew, YHWH]

appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot. Looking up, he saw three men standing near him” (Gen. 18:1-2, NJV).” (p. 128).

Who were these “three men”? Brown answers by alleging the text makes clear that one of these three men was *God Himself* (italics his), visiting with two angels. His rationale is that we should “notice carefully” that one of the angels promises to return next year so that Sarah will have a son. Sarah laughs. And the Lord then asks Abraham why Sarah laughed doubting the promise. Sarah denies laughing. Then the Lord replied to her. “There is absolutely no way around it. Abraham, Sarah, and the Lord were all there together (p. 128).

But before answering Brown’s assurance on this point, (we will see there is a reasonable solution) let’s first give his remaining treatment of Genesis 18, so we fairly represent his total position. He writes ...

But things get even clearer. Verse 16 states that, “The men set out from there and looked down from Sodom, Abraham walking with them to see them off” (NJV) explaining in the next verses that the Lord then filled Abraham in on what he was about to do. This brings us to verse 22, “The men went on from there to Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD” (NJV), to whom he intercedes on behalf of Sodom through verse 32. So, the men went on to Sodom while the LORD remained with Abraham.

Now let’s look at the last verse of chapter 18 and the first verse of chapter 19: “When the LORD had finished speaking to Abraham, he departed: and Abraham returned to his place. The two angels arrived in Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom” (NJV).

There you have it! The Scripture tells us that the Lord appeared to Abraham, then it says that Abraham saw three men by his tent, then it identifies one of those three as the Lord, who holds a conversation with Abraham and Sarah. The Bible then says that Abraham walked with the men as they went on their way to Sodom, that the Lord then informed Abraham of his intentions to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, that the men (i.e. the other two men) continued on to Sodom while Abraham stayed and talked with the Lord, and that when they were done, the Lord left and Abraham went home, and that two angels then arrived in Sodom. I’ll say it again: one of those three men was YHWH, the Lord.

The awesome and exciting thing about this text is that it explicitly tells us that Abraham and Sarah talked with the Lord, that he appeared in human form to them, dusty feet and all (Gen. 18:4) and that he even sat down and ate their food. Yet all the while He remained God in heaven.

An honest and straightforward reading of the text indicates clearly that God can come to earth in human form for a period of time if he so desires. And notice I have not quoted the New Testament to support this but instead have simply looked at the Torah. Are we willing to receive what is written there?”

Brown believes he has an open and shut case based on the Old Testament Scriptures alone. But has he? Hmm, let’s investigate with prayerful hearts and honest minds. At the beginning in **Genesis 18:1** we read that Abraham was sitting in the door of his tent in the heat of the day. Then these astonishing words, “Now the LORD appeared to him ...” Brown jumps to the conclusion that the method by which “the LORD appeared” to Abraham was in the form of one of the “three men” who stood before him. However, Brown fails to note there is a break between verse 1 and verse 2.

Exactly how God appeared to Abraham in **verse 1** we are not told, but it was probably in a vision or a dream as was common throughout the OT. And exactly how long this Divine appearance went before the sudden appearance of the "three men" we also are not told.

Wonderful as this Divine encounter was, in the middle of his experience with God (YHWH), that is, between verse 1 and verse 2, Abraham "**lifted up his eyes and looked, (and) behold three men were standing opposite him ... (v. 2).**"

Who are these three visitors who seem to appear suddenly out of the desert? Brown insists two are angels and one is YHWH God Himself "**who came to earth in human form for a period of time ...dusty feet and all!**" Other commentators go a lot further and say the three men are the Three Persons in the Blessed Trinity. Others allege one of the "men" was God Himself in the form of the pre-incarnate 'God the Son', that is, Jesus. But this is to read back into the text later Church tradition, as I shall now show. There is not a word in the account itself to substantiate any of this conjecture. At this stage in the story, we are only informed they are "three men".

PUTTING GOD 'ON HOLD'

Next, Abraham is startled by these "three men" and (can you believe this?) actually puts on hold his encounter with YHWH God who has already appeared to him earlier whilst he was sitting in the tent door. His attention is diverted away from YHWH God with whom he has been fellowshiping and he runs from the tent to greet the "three men". He bows himself "to the earth" before the "three men" as was the customary gesture to honour visitors in the Middle East, and invites them to refresh themselves with food and drink.

Have I stretched and strained all credibility to suggest Abraham in the middle of an "appearance" of the Eternal God breaks off this Divine encounter --- effectively asking God to wait --- to run and greet three strangers, "three men"? The very suggestion seems preposterous! But since I have fairly presented Brown's reading of the text, at least give me a fair hearing and wait until you have all the facts.

In **verse 3** we come to an interpretive fact that makes all the difference. The difficulty comes over how to translate the Hebrew word *Adonai*, which in this instance is in the plural. Some translations read Abraham said, "**Sirs**" or "**My lords**, if now I have found favour in your eyes, please do not pass your servant by." But other translations take the Hebrew *Adonai* as a reference to the title of the Almighty Himself, such as we have in **verse 1**, "**The LORD appeared ...**" So, which way do we settle this dispute? Is it "Sirs" / "My lords" on the one side or is it "LORD" as in God on the other side?

Indeed, is there any way to settle this dispute? It's critical to our conundrum. Well, yes there is a way to arbitrate. Unknown to many Bible readers (but not unknown to a well-instructed Hebrew scholar like Dr Brown!) there are 134 places in the Old Testament where the Personal Name of God (YHWH) in the original Hebrew text was subsequently changed by the Masoretic scribes between the Seventh and Tenth Centuries A.D. to the title *Adonai* which is now translated into our English Bibles as LORD. So, the Personal *Name* of God, Yahweh (sometimes printed and pronounced as Jehovah) has been switched to a *title* because of the Jewish practice of not pronouncing God's Personal Name lest they unwittingly blaspheme it. (By the way, these four letters Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh --- YHWH --- are called the Tetragrammaton meaning the Four Letters.)

Genesis 18:3 is one of those places where the change has occurred ... that is, God's Personal Name Yahweh has been switched for a title *Adonai*. And this change makes a huge difference to what is happening in our story when "Abraham eats lunch with God". There is absolutely no disputing that

the Personal Name of God (YHWH) was in the original Hebrew text here and not the plural title *Adonai*, because the verse reads, “If it is pleasing in your (Hebrew is singular) eyes ...” Abraham was not addressing the “three men” as “Sirs” or “My lords” in **verse 3**, but YHWH Himself. To this very day Jewish law has ruled verse 3 be read as “God”. (see Footnote **2**).

This is an extraordinary fact because it suggests that Abraham interrupted God as He was about to speak, and asked YHWH to wait (in the tent so to speak) while he attended to his newly arrived guests. Abraham puts God on hold! When all these facts are taken into consideration, this is how the passage should be read and understood (and to this day is read by the Hebrew readers of the passage):

The LORD appeared to Abraham ... he looked up and saw three men standing opposite him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them, and bowed down. [Turning back to God] He said, “My God (Heb. YHWH) if I have found favour in your eyes, do not leave your servant [i.e. please wait until I have given hospitality to these men.] [He then turned to the men and said:] ‘Let me send for some water so that you may bathe your feet and rest under this tree ...’ (3).

This interpretation became the basis for a principle in Judaism: “Greater is hospitality than receiving the Divine Presence.” Faced with a choice between listening to God who has appeared to him in verse 1, and offering hospitality to the “three men” in **verses 2-3** --- who subsequently proved to be angels --- Abraham chose the latter, attending to men above immediately continuing to fellowship with God back in the tent!

Amazingly, YHWH God acceded to Abraham’s request and waited while Abraham brought the visitors food and drink, before engaging Him in dialogue over the fate of Sodom.

When understood and read this way this story is profound. It tells us Abraham, the friend of God, has learned something incredibly insightful about the character of God. It is this: If we too would be on intimate terms with God and be His friends, we must learn to see every human being as someone who is in the image of the Creator God. Every man and every woman and every child stands before us as the face of God Himself! Perhaps God is more interested in the way we are treating each other than even in our acts of worship? (If this is reading is valid, we would expect to find this principle throughout the rest of the Bible, and we do, but this brief article cannot explore this evidence for now.)

But to continue the story... In **verses 4-5** Abraham then turns to his guests, the three men and says, “Shalom gentlemen. What can I get you (plural)?” Abraham offers to fetch them water and food and they agree to his hospitable offer.

In **verse 8** after the food is prepared Abraham stands under the tree with the three men while they eat. In **verse 9** they (plural) all ask, “**Where is Sarah?**” In **verse 10** a voice (singular) is heard. No one can see who is talking, even Sarah who is hidden from view inside the tent. But she does hear the voice, along with Abraham. The speaker is God Who never withdrew His presence from Abraham. God (singular) says, “**I’m coming back to you next year, and Sarah will bear a son.**”

After this little exchange **verse 16** informs us the three men then get up (plural) and gaze (plural) towards Sodom. Abraham also gets up to see them off.

In **verse 17** the LORD (originally YHWH) asks Himself, “Should I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” **Verses 20-21** the LORD (YHWH) (singular) continues, “**I am going to go down to see if what I heard about Sodom is true.**”

Verse 22 says the (three) men turned (plural) on their way to Sodom. But Abraham remained standing before the LORD (YHWH) (singular). The bargaining ends and the LORD (YHWH) (singular) leaves.

Chapter 19 (remember there are no chapter breaks in the original text) informs us that “the two angels” (here not referred to as men) arrive at Sodom to carry out their mission on behalf of Lot.

Now it is right here that a big challenge arises for my reading and interpretation. Doesn't it seem more logical, more in keeping with the text to take it that as the three men (or angels) get up to leave Abraham and start for Sodom, and as Abraham “**stood yet before the Lord**” (v.22) to intercede for Lot, and as we are specifically told “**the two angels came to Sodom**”, that the third man (angel) left bargaining on the plains of Mamre, should be (as Michael Brown insists) God in human form? Three minus 1 equals 2 after all. It's hard to argue with **Genesis 18: 22**.

Now, since Brown cites the Old Testament Scriptures as his authority for claiming that God Himself, “**this infinite Spirit walk[ed] among us in fleshly form for a season**”, and this is in the Torah, and since he challenges us that we must be “**willing to receive what is written here**”, let us see what the rest of the Tanakh (O.T. Scriptures) teaches about those “**who stood before the Lord.**”

STANDING BEFORE THE LORD

Are there any other places in the Old Testament where men are said “to stand before the LORD”? Indeed there are a number, and they throw a bright spotlight on our story...

And they brought that which Moses had commanded before the tabernacle of the congregation; and all the congregation drew near and stood before the LORD (Lev. 9:5).

All Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children (2 Chron. 20:13).

At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister to him, and to bless in His Name, unto this day (Deut. 10:8).

Then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges, which shall be in those days ...” (Deut. 19:17).

Look at these examples carefully. They make it quite clear that none of these people were standing before the LORD *literally* even though it is plainly said, “**they stood before the LORD**”. For instance, **Deuteronomy 19:17** teaches that two disputants when they bring their case before God's human representatives are standing before the LORD! To argue for a literal interpretation is to make the human “priests and judges” to be themselves *literally* Yahweh God Himself!

The same applies to the other cited examples of “standing before the LORD.” Nobody in any of

these instances was literally standing before God or literally seeing God. No. They were seeing His representatives, standing before those invested with His authority. To “stand before the LORD” is not to be taken literally. Could Mr Brown be guilty of forcing onto the text in Genesis 18: 22 a literal reading not intended? Could it just be possible that Abraham was standing before one of the “three men”, that is, one of the angels who had been sent by God and who represented His interests perfectly?

To stand before such an august angel would be to “stand before the LORD” in the same sense all the people mentioned in our sample texts “stood before the LORD.” It was not *literally* Yahweh Himself in human form with dusty feet (sic), but an angel commissioned by the God of Heaven to represent His affairs perfectly on earth, who conversed with father Abraham.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AGREES!

Is this drawing too long a bow? Let’s add another important piece of the puzzle before coming to any conclusion. I refer to clear unambiguous teaching on the subject by the NT apostles. The NT witness is that whenever anybody in Israel saw YHWH God, they saw an angelic emissary and not Dr Brown’s YHWH Himself in human form. Note some of the NT verses that teach this...

And when forty years had passed, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire in a bush, in the wilderness of Mount Sinai. This Moses whom they rejected, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge?’ is the one God sent to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel who appeared to him in the bush ... This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the angel who appeared to him in the bush ... This is he who was in the wilderness with the angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received the living oracles to give to us, who have received the law by the direction of angels ... (Acts 7: 30f).

Observe carefully ... in the Exodus stories of “the burning bush” and later when the elders of Israel saw God and ate with him but did not die, they did not see YHWH God Himself in literal, physical form. Rather the plain explanation is that Moses and the Israelites saw “an angel”. Oh yes, it is God Himself Who appears and Who speaks in the first person through His representative emissary. Yet in the Divinely inspired N.T. commentary we are told the one speaking was “an angel”, a Divinely appointed emissary. Moses encountered YHWH God through an angel! Israel saw God in the form of a Divinely appointed emissary.

Here is another NT commentary that verifies this truth,

*What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgression, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed *through angels* by the hand of a mediator (Gal. 3:19).*

And again,

*For if the word spoken *through angels* proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward ... (Hebrews 2:2).*

There are no areas of Scripture that more strongly imply YHWH God Himself spoke to or was seen by either Abraham in **Genesis 18** or by Moses in the wilderness at the burning bush and during the giving of the law. However, these stories notwithstanding, neither Abraham nor Moses directly saw or spoke with God, except through the mediation of Divinely appointed angels. What reads to us as direct communication and direct seeing were in fact not direct but through angelic emissaries.

Accordingly, I will ask Dr Michael Brown if he is prepared to accept his own strong and uncompromising advice. Will he accept “an honest and straightforward reading of the text”? He even goes out of his way to *avoid the NT commentary* when he writes, “**And notice: I have not quoted the New Testament to support this but instead have simply looked at the Torah. Are we willing to receive what is written there?**”

Well Dr Brown, will you ignore the clearest Scriptural evidence of all, that not Abraham, not Moses, nor the elders of Israel, actually saw YHWH in human form with “dusty feet and all”, but that YHWH was dealing with them and appearing to them in the form of an emissary, an angel? Dr Brown, with both the Old and the New Testaments in front of you will you continue to repeat, “ I’ll say it again: one of those three men was YHWH, the Lord”?

The Biblical principle all the way consistently through from Old to New Testaments is that God has always communicated with, always appeared to men on earth, through His agents. This principle holds good also with our understanding of who Jesus the Christ is. Those of us who bow to the authority of the Scriptural testimony accept Jesus as the ultimate and the primary Divinely appointed emissary of the One Who alone is the True YHWH God (**John 17: 3**). And YHWH the LORD God has told us, “**This is My Son, hear him!**”

Conclusion: The apostles who knew their Old Testament Scriptures and Jesus himself better than anybody were well aware of this basic fact. No man has seen, nor can see God. And they wrote this *after* they had seen with their own eyes, and touched with their own hands, Jesus the Christ (**1 John 1:1 and 4: 12**). And Paul *twice* wrote his affirmation *after* he had met the resurrected Jesus (**1 Tim. 1: 17 and 6: 16**)!

As I wrote in the beginning, this question for me is not just an academic one. It weighs heavy on my heart because its truth has the power to affect my Jewish friends who choose to remain loyal to their inspired Scriptures, and for good reason will not therefore believe Jesus is YHWH God. Oh how I pray for and yearn for the day when these dear and loyal believers in the LORD God of Abraham and Moses will receive God’s accredited Messiah, the Lord Jesus, as their own. May God hasten the day when they will as a nation, invite Jesus to be their Lord Messiah, and cry unto him, “**Blessed is he who comes in the Name of YHWH**”! Only then will we all enjoy his presence and the glory of God his Father that he brings with him! Amen.

1. Michael L. Drown, PhD., *The Real Kosher Jesus: Revealing the Mysteries of the Hidden Messiah*. Front Line, Lake Mary, Florida 32746. 2012. All quotes taken from the chapter titled, *The Secret of the Invisible God Who Can Be Seen*.
2. For grammatical precision note that in **Genesis 18:3** the word in the Hebrew is ADONAI which is Lord God. It is exactly the same in meaning as YHVH so the

change from YHVH alters nothing in sense.

The word in Hebrew is ADONAI (with Qametz), the word for Lord God. Not ADONAI with a short vowel (PATACH) which is sirs in ch 19.)

So **one** of the angels in Genesis 18:22ff is addressed as GOD, i.e. His representative.

Adonai is not a plural but THE Lord. Affirmative intensive.

3. I am indebted for this exegetical reading from the book, *If? The End of a Messianic Lie* by a Hebrew-speaking Jewish believer in Messiah Jesus by the name of Uriel ben-Mordechai who lives in Jerusalem and printed the book there in the Holy Land.