

How Does God Make Himself and His Ways Known?



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How Does God Make Himself and His Ways Known?

Some Biblical reflections on the Incarnation alongside a brief engagement with the teaching of Maimonides and some aspects of Jewish Kabbalistic Mysticism.

By
Rev. Alex Jacob

The question, 'How does God make Himself and His ways Known?' is a huge one, both in scope and importance. In fact, it would be hard to imagine any question which has greater urgency or significance. I am sure if this question were to be discussed among this OPRP readership we would soon have a long list of answers, backed up with testimonies, texts, and teaching. Clearly if such a question was to be discussed in other contexts, for example within a rabbinical Jewish setting, an Islamic context or in a 'New-Age' gathering, the answers presented would reflect different presuppositions, experiences, and convictions.

This important question has been at the forefront of my thinking recently - for three main reasons: firstly, I was preparing to preach on Acts 2 at my home church on Pentecost Sunday and was reflecting upon the reality of 'baptism in' (or 'of') the Holy Spirit in our lives and within our church communities. Secondly, I have listened to an excellent online training course (Endnote 1) on reaching out to the Hasidic Jews and have re-read some of the writings of Maimonides (Endnote 2) and revisited issues of epistemology (Endnote 3) within some sections of Jewish spirituality and Kabbalistic practice. Thirdly, I re-read the writing project which was published back in 2016, in which I focused upon the importance of the Incarnation as the pinnacle of God's revelation to the world, namely how God chooses to make Himself and His ways known.

In terms of his teaching, Maimonides (1138-1204) presented the understanding that God has no multiplicity whatsoever, lacking anything corporeal or humanly intelligible, even attributes. By this understanding, God cannot be described positively. For Maimonides, God can only be spoken of (or known) in terms of what 'he' is not, or better still when speaking about God it is best (and devotionally appropriate) to simply offer reverential silence. For Maimonides, the Incarnation of the Son of God is irrational, contradictory, illogical, and impossible. The God of Israel cannot

become incarnate just like 'he' cannot make himself stop existing. This impossibility charge is rooted in much modern Jewish thought and rests upon Maimonidean rationalist philosophy and theology. These views of Maimonides are only as strong as his presuppositions, these presuppositions are clearly dependent upon his metaphysical and cosmological systems of belief.

It can be argued that Maimonidean theology is comprehensive, explanatory (it seeks to account for the "why" of all known experience), logical, noncontradictory, intellectually stimulating, hermeneutically consistent, and ethical in the sense that it encourages and resources moral and halakhic lifestyles and personal choices. However, all of this does not mean that the theology is true!

In terms of the thinking rooted in Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism, there is an equally robust rejection of the Incarnation - not as a philosophical or theological impossibility (as in the teaching of Maimonides) but as an irrelevancy and therefore one must reject such ideas as being at best redundant. Within the Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism, the incarnation has no significance because all of us are united with the divine, nor does the Incarnation of Ein Sof (God - the infinite one, prior to any self-manifestation or revelation) have any redemptive purposes, because what we all truly need is freedom from multiplicity, not atonement (forgiveness) for sin. This line of thinking is well expressed by Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal when he states:

The Zohar teaches that every mitzvah we perform has cosmic importance so that when we study Torah or observe the Shabbat or say our prayers, we help unite the sefirot, the ten emanations of the Divine, and restore the world to its pristine state, ending all divisions so that all existence is united with God. Our act of tikkun brings down the Divine flow from heaven to earth radiating bliss throughout the sefirot and all areas of existence even to the lowest creation.... It is the

human task and mission to redeem those holy sparks and lift them on high to restore them to their source. This is achieved through observance of mitzvot and righteous actions so that the ultimate messianic redemption depends on human performance.

According to this approach salvation is seen as based upon some form of metaphysical reunification. Again, this approach may have an internal logic, traditional coherence, and mystical appeal, but again this does not necessarily make it true!

For me, as a Christian, I also have presuppositions shaped by reason, tradition, and experience. I believe God reveals Himself and His actions through Scripture. I do not believe that humanity can determine what is impossible or irrelevant for God to do. God reveals to humanity what He can and cannot do through Scripture. Many people may think it is impossible for God to make a 90-year-old woman give birth, or bring down fire from heaven, or make a donkey speak, or any number of other things. Many may also think it is impossible for God to take up life as a human being. Such things are not to be judged based upon a priori philosophical



reasoning, but by whether there is good evidence that God has, in fact done such things in history. A priori reasoning, be it based in Greek philosophy, Hasidic mysticism, liberal 'negative' theology, or any other framework, must take a backseat to a posteriori reasoning. As Athanasius taught: "God demonstrates as possible what men mistake, thinking impossible".

So then, what do the Scriptures say about how God makes Himself and His ways known? I think Biblical Judaism and Christianity would teach that God makes Himself known in or through three main 'events' in the Old Testament.

- Creation

God makes Himself known through the created order. At the pinnacle of creation is the creation of human beings made uniquely in the image of God (see Genesis 1:26). There are many layers of what it means to be made in the "image of God" but one key component is that we are made for relationships. We can love and be loved. We can know and be known. We can discover, learn, share, forgive, and grow. Each life has a God-given dignity, from conception to the grave, each life has key 'rights' and is worthy of care and respect. We understand that the 'image' is marred and is distorted to some degree by the reality of the Fall (human sin) yet the image is never destroyed, it is never lost. No one is beyond the redemptive reach of God.

The revelation of God through the created order is declared throughout Scripture (see for example Psalm 8, 19, 24, 93, 95, 121, 136, 148,) and this truth provides an important starting point in the presentation of the Gospel in many different contexts, see for example, Paul's teaching in Romans 1:20 and Acts 14:15-17.

- Through the covenants

God makes relationships with the Patriarchs, beginning with

Abraham (see Genesis 12-25 and Romans 4). It is through the outworking of these covenantal relationships that we begin to know more about God and how we are called to respond to God (and to each other) through faith, trust, and obedience.

- Through the Exodus and the gift of Torah

The Exodus event declares God's justice, power, and purposes. It is through the Torah that Israel learns to live in covenant with God. This is more than simply external obedience, but God speaks to Moses 'face to face' as one speaks to a friend and promises His 'presence' and His 'rest' (see Exodus 33:11-14). Here we have a picture of intimacy, of knowing and of being known.

This reality is spoken about throughout Scripture; several verses leap out to me which show and celebrate this 'intimacy of knowing', this 'fellowship of love'. Let me simply share two of these verses, firstly Zephaniah 3:17 which reads:

The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves.
He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.

Secondly, Hosea 11:1-4 which reads:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more they were called the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realise it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.

This text speaks powerfully, yet tenderly, of God's longing for His

people to return to Him, and to know Him more fully. Also, this text has echoes of the encounter between God and Adam and Eve in the Garden, as God searches for them, following the initial consequence of The Fall (see Genesis 3:8ff).

The creation, the covenants and the reality of the Exodus are the key building blocks of God's revelation. These building blocks are equally shared and honoured by Biblical Judaism and Christianity. However, the revelation purposes of God continue to unfold and



to deepen. The Scriptures teach that God continues to 'show-up' in physical space and time. We can use Biblical insights to speak of a 'Holy Land' and a 'Holy Temple'. God's presence is frequently linked to a place. This begins within the Exodus event with the Tabernacle. This is the place of meeting (see Exodus 36-40) and God gives specific instructions for the setting up and maintaining this place (tent) of meeting.

Later the mobile Tabernacle becomes the permanent Temple. God reaffirms His presence (His Name) as the Temple is dedicated (see 1 Kings 9). God's presence will not be fleeting or temporary but is to be present forever. In this sense the Temple becomes the very centre of life for Israel. Therefore, there are regular festival 'pilgrimages' to the Temple for all faithful Jewish people. Also, many 'God-fearers' from other nations are also drawn to the 'spiritual life' of the Temple.



Model of Tabernacle, tent of meeting in Timna Park, Negev desert

When the people are exiled and therefore cut off from the Temple there is a profound sense of loss, dislocation, and separation. It is as if God is now beyond reach for those exiled. The singing of praise is almost now redundant - perhaps viewed as an impossibility or an irrelevance (see Psalm 137:4). Therefore, when the people return from exile, the rebuilding of the Temple becomes more than an act of 'nation building' or physical restoration; it marks a time of renewal and spiritual restoration (see Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai).



The CMJ UK Bible Comes to Life temple model

Engaging with the New Testament

As we enter the New Testament, we see that Jesus had a deep connection with the Temple. The Temple provides the context for some of the birth stories (see Luke 1:11, 2:22, 2:36), and Luke tells a unique account of Jesus at the Temple as a child (see Luke 2:41-50). It is at this time, and in this place, that Jesus seems to know of His unique relationship with His Father and the significance of the Temple. Luke also concludes his Gospel account with the early believers praising God within the Temple courts (Luke 24:53), and this practice appears to have continued into the life of the early 'Church' (Acts 2:46). Also, in His wider teaching ministry, Jesus often teaches within the context of the Temple courts and the three pilgrim festivals (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). For example, in John 7, Jesus is teaching at the festival of Tabernacles and links His teaching with the traditions and hopes embedded within this festival.

Much has been written and debated regarding the exact connections Jesus had with the Temple, but what is clear is that Jesus redefines the significance and meaning of the Temple. This

is seen primarily in the encounter which takes place in the Temple at Passover (see John 2:19-21). Here, Jesus speaks of the Temple not as the grand building in Jerusalem but as His own body. The true significance of this only occurs fully to His disciples after the resurrection. I think a strong case can be made for stating that it was this new way of understanding the Temple which Jesus proclaimed, more than any other statement or action of Jesus, which led some two years later to His arrest, trial, and crucifixion. This connection is embedded in the opposition to the early 'Church' as shown in the deliberations of the Sanhedrin (Acts 6:14), leading up to Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin and his martyrdom (Acts 7).

The New Testament makes clear that Jesus becomes the 'place of meeting'. The incarnation is the pinnacle of Israel's revelation of God and of their experiences rooted as the people of the covenants. The emphasis on the incarnation (and Incarnational Theology) places a premium on embodied experience. The use of metaphorical language is at one level based upon non-literal thinking yet in my view it is never opposed to empirical realities. For me, I accept the Incarnation over the systems of belief advanced by Maimonides and the Kabbalah because of my own experience and because of my belief in the following seven key assertions:

1. God's omnipotence and omnipresence transcend human logic. If we determine that there is a priori that God could not appear in human form, and that there could not be a being who is both fully human and fully God, then we are substituting a philosophical scheme for the sovereignty of God.
2. The cosmologies and the associated 'world-views' of Maimonides and Kabbalah while having some positive elements are fundamentally false.
3. Scripture must have epistemological priority over Greek



A statue of Maimonides

philosophy and all other systems or traditions of belief. It seems to me that Maimonides and the Kabbalah must first root people in the metaphysics of Greek thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, and only when this is clearly established can people move forward and become disciples of the Torah and the Prophets.

4. The metaphysics of the New Testament are well attested by Scripture, Philosophy, and Science. The Biblical teaching on creation affirms the act of creation as Ex Nihilo (see Hebrews 11:3, Romans 1:17 and Colossians 1:16-17) and rejects other creational cosmologies such as creation as Ex Matria, (Endnote 5) and creation as Ex Deo (Endnote 6). The Bible also teaches that God created the material world as “very good” (see Genesis 1:31), and God’s good design brings about metaphysical multiplicity. Within God there are no flaws, errors, or evil intent.
5. The illegitimacy of exclusive negative theology. As it is impossible to make accurate statements about something or somebody using only negative language without having some positive understanding/knowledge of that thing or body.
6. Divine embodiment was acceptable within Biblical Jewish thought. See for example the writings of Jewish scholars (Endnote 7) such as Paul Levertoff, Daniel Boyarin, and Alan Segal. I understand that there is a clear line between New Testament Christology and Biblical Jewish thinking such as binitarianism or trinitarianism within a robust monotheism. This does not automatically affirm “or necessarily always lead towards” New Testament Christology or Christian teaching on the Trinity, but it does, in my view, make such teaching and understanding a legitimate Jewish option in keeping with the unfolding of Biblical revelation.
7. The theological continuity of Incarnational Theology. We

cannot have, from a Biblical understanding, an unmerited relationship with Holy God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: the mediator for this relationship is Jesus, God's Son, and Messiah. God rescues us and redeems us not by displacing anything human, but by restoring by grace and redeeming by His atoning death. Through this all of humanity can be adopted as Children of God and know what it is to be 'in Messiah'. As Paul states in a verse which is sometimes spoken of as the 'New Testament Shema': "...yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came, and through whom we live." (1 Corinthians 8:6).

In the Genesis text God gave animal skins to cover one immediate consequence of sin (Genesis 3:21), this covering is at the cost of life-blood (see Leviticus 17:11), and this points to the atoning work of the Messiah on the cross. Later God's presence dwelled in a tent covered in animal (goat) skin and hair (Exodus 36:14) to provide a 'place of meeting' in order to make Himself and His ways known to His people. Yet now in the Messiah, He enters humanity; He takes upon Himself human life and is covered in human skin and hair to bring about His redemptive purposes for all people. John 1:14 proclaims that the eternal Word became flesh and made His dwelling (he tabernacled) with us. John 1:18 reads: "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God, and is in the closet relationship with the Father, has made him known." Also, John 14:6-7 reads: "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him."

Other key New Testament texts which will help illustrate and explore this truth would include Hebrews 1:1-4, Colossians 1: 15-20, and Philippians 2:6-11. I have reflected on these key texts in my book, *Walking an Ancient Path* (Endnote 4). In these texts

we see the unique New Testament revelation that God is incorporeal, but the Son unites His divine nature (substance, essence) with a created human nature in time. In Jesus, the Messiah we see in perfect harmony both the divine nature and the human nature. We see the divine nature displayed through divine attributes such as omniscience, immutability, omnipresence, and eternity. We see the human nature displayed through human attributes, namely that Jesus grew and developed, He experienced emotions and passions, He was born in time and localised in space, He had limited knowledge.

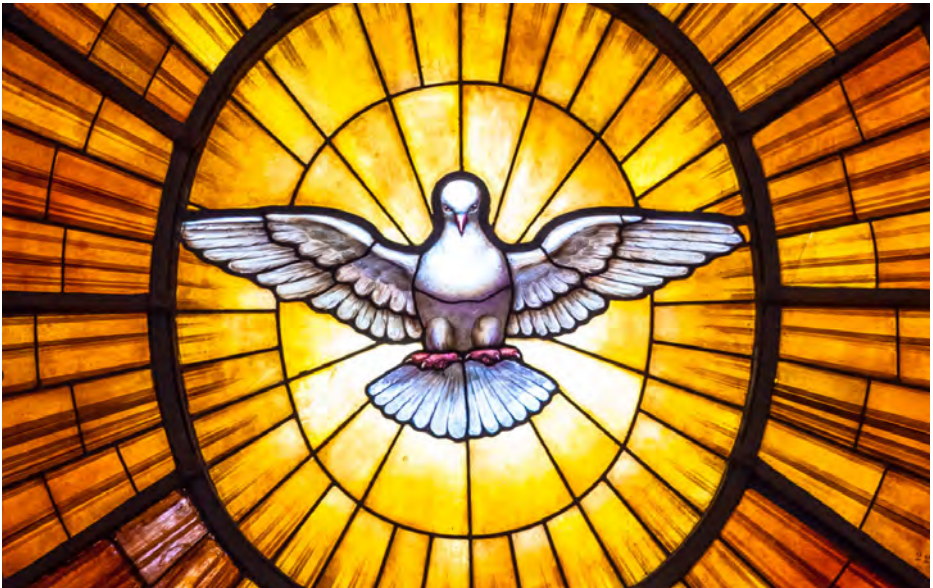


Jesus in the Temple

In reflecting on this New Testament revelation, we affirm two positive ascriptions; Jesus is fully God and Jesus is fully human. We can also affirm a negative ascription; Jesus is not the Father (and not the Holy Spirit), and finally we can affirm a unifying concept - namely that there is only one God.

As we explore the New Testament picture of Jesus, we see there is also an associated New Testament redefinition of the Temple. The Temple is not simply the body of Jesus (see John 2:19-21), but all believers in Jesus are now the “Temple of the living God” (see 2 Corinthians 6:16.) In Acts 2 Jesus had ascended into heaven. His physical body is no longer present. Yet in the shadow of the

Temple, 3000 people encounter the baptism in (or 'of') the Holy Spirit. They mark this by baptism, by being 'baptised' in the Temple mikvah pools. A new reality is taking shape. God is now especially present through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit within the lives of all who have put their trust in Jesus and His atoning death and life-giving resurrection. The Holy Spirit indwelling the believer and working within the wider 'Church' community is the central message of the events of Pentecost as told in Acts 2 and this reality is explicit in Acts 15 (the ruling of the Jerusalem Council) and throughout much of the teaching of the New Testament.



The Holy Spirit, as depicted as a dove in St Peter's Basilica in Rome

The New Testament makes clear and celebrates the reality that the Holy Spirit is not given as a sort of 'consolation prize' to make up for the absence of the recently ascended Jesus, but rather the Holy Spirit confirms His risen presence and power in individuals and within the church community. The Holy Spirit is not a gift from God but is the gift of God. In the New Testament the emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit is inseparable from the message of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit is active in transforming

lives, in giving inspired speech and praise, in establishing patterns of holy living, and in enabling effective and empowered witness to the glory of Jesus - the one who is risen and ascended and the one who will return to reign.

How does God make Himself and His ways known? This remains a big question, yet our answers must always point clearly, carefully, and boldly to the incarnation of Jesus, His ministry (especially His atoning death and glorious resurrection and ascension) and the subsequent indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all those, who have (and will) put their trust in Him.

Glimpsing into the future

This, however, is not the final word from Scripture. We have a glimpse of what is still yet to be fully revealed. For example, Revelation 21:22-27 gives a picture of a time and a place when the old order of things has passed away. In this new reality we will know and be known in even greater ways, as God dwells amongst us, and all His creation is renewed and restored in ways we cannot ever fully even begin to imagine (see Psalm 40:5 and Ephesians 3:20). In addition to this there are many other key texts which provide us with a glimpse into this new reality, texts such as Isaiah 11:6-9, Habakkuk 2:14, 1 Corinthians 15:51-44 and Colossians 3:4. However, I want to emphasise 1 Corinthians 13:12 as the concluding text in this OPRP, for here we have the promise of knowing 'face to face'. This 'face to face' reality is rooted in a rich vein of Torah texts (see Genesis 32:30, Exodus 20:35, 33:11, Numbers 12:8, 14:14 and Deuteronomy 5:4 and 34:10) and should not be 'spiritualised' away as often is the case in many areas of Jewish Biblical interpretation, but rather should be affirmed as the literal promise of God- for as we read in 1 Corinthians 13:12: "... now we see only a reflection in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

EndNotes

1. Led by Brian Crawford – Director of Digital Evangelism with Chosen People Ministries.
2. Maimonides is Moses Ben Maimon (1138-1204). He is generally known as Maimonides but is also referred to by the acronym RAMBAM. Maimonides is best known for two works – the Mishneh Torah (Halakah) and The Guide of the Perplexed. His thirteen principles of faith are seen by many Jewish People as the work which codifies the Torah and provides a systematic bedrock of Jewish revelation. In some circles he is celebrated as the “Second Moses”. He is often studied as the key Medieval Jewish philosopher/theologian who shaped many future developments within Torah interpretation. He was also the personal physician of the Sultan of Egypt - Saladin (1138-1193). For an excellent introduction to the teaching and life of Maimonides I warmly recommend a book by my LCJE colleague Dr Amy Downey - Maimonides's Yahweh - Rabbinic Judaism's Attempt to Answer the Incarnation Question (Wipf & Stock, 2019).
3. Epistemology relates to the study and examination of what we know and how we know what we know, especially within the field of philosophy and theology regarding the methodology, scope and validity of belief, faith, and opinion.
4. This project was published as a book - Walking an Ancient Path - Exploring four key New Testament Texts about Jesus (Glory to Glory Publications, 2016). This book along with several other helpful study resources can be purchased from the CMJ UK website www.cmj.org.uk/shop
5. This view holds that God brings order to existing eternal matter. This was the position of Plato's Timaeus. In this view God gives shape and form to matter, but God is not sovereign over it.
6. This view is firmly held in Neoplatonism and speaks of God emanating the universe from within Himself- a bit like heat and light radiating from the sun. This is not the view of the Bible in which there is always a distinction between the creation and the creator – see for example Psalm 8 and Ecclesiastes 5:2.
7. See bibliography for details.

Bibliography

Listed in this bibliography are the books cited in this paper, along with other books which the reader may find helpful for further study, reflection, and group discussion.

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