

§ 3. Doctrine of God

Lecture 11

Understanding Scriptural Descriptions of God vis-a-vis Incorporeality

In our lesson we have been thinking about the attribute of God's incorporeality, or God's not being or having a body. In our survey of the scriptural data concerning God's incorporeality we saw that God is a spirit, that God is omnipresent, that God is invisible, and that images of God as corporeal objects are forbidden. In all of these ways the Bible goes to support the idea that God is an incorporeal being, not a material or physical being.

Nevertheless, we also saw that the Scriptures are filled with anthropomorphic descriptions of God. God is described frequently in corporeal terms. The Scriptures speak of God's arms, hands, eyes, ears, and so forth. These are pervasive in Scripture. It is not simply that these bodily parts are attributed to God, but even activities like God's seeing the distress of his people or God's hearing their cry are anthropomorphic descriptions since God doesn't literally have eyeballs that receive photons and so give him visual images of things to see nor does he have eardrums on which sound waves can impinge so that he could hear things in that literal sense. The Scripture is replete with these sorts of anthropomorphic descriptions of God.

Moreover, we also saw that people sometimes experienced visions of God which are corporeal in nature. These are called theophanies. They are visions of God. In these, God is usually seen in some sort of corporeal form, perhaps sitting on a throne for example.

So we've got scriptural data that on the one hand clearly implies and says that God is a spiritual being – an incorporeal being. Yet you have these corporeal descriptions of God in the Bible, and you also have these visionary experiences of God as a corporeal being. So how should we make sense of this material?

I think that the data that we surveyed demand that we think of God as incorporeal, as immaterial, non-physical. There is simply no way of getting around those clear biblical passages that indicate that God transcends matter and energy and has created all the material things there are. So he is not himself a material object that has a body. How do we understand then these anthropomorphic descriptions of God and these theophanies of God in corporeal terms? I would say that the corporeal descriptions of God in the Bible are metaphorical, not literal. They are metaphors. They are not to be taken literally. I would give two arguments in support of this interpretation.

1. *These descriptions serve a clear literary purpose.* For example, when the Scriptures speak of the arm of the Lord, they are talking about God's power. When they speak of God's eyes, they are talking about God's being all-knowing. When the Scriptures speak of God's ears, it is talking about his attentiveness to certain persons. All of these corporeal descriptions have a literary purpose. In the *New Bible Dictionary* article on the

word “face” this is especially well-described. This is how the *New Bible Dictionary* treats the term “face” when it is ascribed to God.

The Hebrew word is used in many English senses. The face of a person became synonymous with his presence.

So it didn't necessarily mean the physical face – the nose, and the lips, and the eyes.¹ Rather, it became synonymous with that person's presence.

Metaphorically, determination could be shown by “setting one's face.” Determined opposition was made by “withstanding someone to his face.” Intimacy and understanding were conveyed by the phrase “face-to-face.” This phrase has, of course, passed into English, as has also the expression “his face fell.”

Obviously, such expressions are not to be understood literally. It would be inept to think that the expression “his face fell” meant that his face dropped to the ground somehow. Rather, it expressed his being disheartened or disappointed in something.

The *Unger's Bible Dictionary* also says with respect to God's face:

Applied to God, it denotes his presence. In such phrases as “seeing the face of the Lord” or “the face of the Lord is set against them that do evil” or “their cry came before the face of the Lord” it is evidently all one with God's manifested presence.

So a correct reading of the Scriptures to understand these expressions I think makes clear their literary purpose and hence their metaphorical rather than literal nature.

A good example of this is in 1 Peter 3:12: “The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil.” Clearly, it would be inept to try to interpret those passages literally; that somehow the eyeballs of God are sitting on top of the righteous people or that the face of the Lord is up against those that do evil. Clearly the eyes and the ears and the face of the Lord here are meant as literary figures of speech.

2. The second reason I think that we should understand these expressions to be metaphorical is that *if you take them literally then they would be inconsistent with each other because God is differently described in these anthropomorphic categories*. In some passages, God would be a fire-breathing winged monster which is surely not the way we are to understand God.

Moreover, we could ask the question, if we take them literally, then where is God? If God is a physical body, where is he? According to the Scriptures God fills heaven and Earth.

¹ 5:00

Therefore he cannot be in any physical place. He cannot be somewhere. He cannot be a physical body.

Therefore I think it is obvious that we should understand these anthropomorphic descriptions of God in a metaphorical way rather than a literal way.

What then about the theophanies – the visions of God in corporeal terms? I think that we should understand these visions to be mental projections of the percipient's mind. It is not as though he is seeing something external to his mind. Rather, God, in giving him a vision, has caused him to project a mental image. It is a projection of his own mind and therefore not something that is to be taken literally as real.

Visions of this sort are very common in the Bible. Let's just look at the book of Acts to see several examples of New Testament visions of this sort. First, Acts 10:10-16. What we have described here is Peter's vision of a sheet being lowered from heaven that is filled with various kinds of animals. It says in Acts 10:10:

And he became hungry and desired something to eat; but while they were preparing it, he fell into a trance [so this was an entranced state²] and saw the heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of animals and reptiles and birds of the air. And there came a voice to him, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." But Peter said, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean." And the voice came to him again a second time, "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." This happened three times, and the thing was taken up at once to heaven.

Here I think it is very evident again that this is not a literal seeing of a sheet full of animals in the external world that other people passing by Peter's house would have seen coming down from heaven. Peter was in a trance, it says, when he saw this. Therefore, we should not think that this is a huge tarpaulin of some sort filled with all of these clean and unclean animals bumping into each other and trying to maintain their balance in this sheet being raised up and down. This is a mental projection that God has caused Peter to have to teach him a lesson about clean and unclean, preparing him for proclaiming the Gospel to Cornelius and his household who would be regarded as unclean (as non-Jewish, as Gentile) and therefore not worthy to receive the Gospel. So God is giving him this vision to prepare for his proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Turn back to Acts 7 for another example. Acts 7:55-57. This is Stephen's vision of the exalted Christ as the Son of Man at his stoning. It says in Acts 7:55:

² 9:52

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God.” But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together upon him. [And he was stoned.]

Again, this was a purely private vision that Stephen alone had. The people standing around saw nothing. Stephen had this himself. Its non-literal nature is also evident in that he sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, which is itself an anthropomorphic description of God that serves a literary purpose. That is why this vision is not counted among the resurrection appearances of Christ. This was not a resurrection appearance story. This was a visionary story. It was a vision of the exalted Christ that Stephen had that God caused Stephen to project.

Another example in the book of Acts comes in chapter 16. Acts 16:9-10. This is Paul’s famous Macedonian call to come and preach the Gospel in Macedonia. It says in Acts 16:9:

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Here, again, God causes Paul to have this vision of a man in Macedonia inviting them to come and preach the Gospel there. It is a visionary seeing.

Finally, Acts 22:17-18. Here Paul is recounting his experience of coming to faith in Christ. After his baptism he says in Acts 22:17: “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get quickly out of Jerusalem, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’” Here Paul is, again, in an entranced state, and he has a vision of Jesus warning him to get out of the city.³ This is not a resurrection appearance again. This is not a bodily corporeal appearance of Christ. This is an entranced vision of Christ which Paul has that serves the purpose of warning him to get out of Jerusalem.

These kinds of visions are well known, I think, in the Bible. When we read these stories of theophanies – seeing God – these are visionary experiences, mental projections of the percipient, that God causes them to have in order to teach them some significant lesson.

These theophanies of God serve the purpose of manifesting God’s glory. Look at Exodus 33:18. This is the story we read in our last lesson of Moses’ asking to see God and God granting him a sort of diminished vision of God’s glory and goodness. This is in Exodus

³ 15:05

33:18: “Moses said, ‘I pray thee, show me thy glory.’” Then God says, *I will do so but you shall not see my face; you will only see my back.* And he gives him a diminished vision of the glory of God. This serves the purpose of manifesting God’s glory to the percipient. Compare what the author of the book of Hebrews says about Moses’ experience in Hebrews 11:27. Speaking of Moses it says, “By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible.” That is an interesting expression, isn’t it? God is invisible, the author of Hebrews affirms. He cannot be seen. But Moses endured as seeing him who is invisible. He had had this vision of God. He was strengthened and was therefore able to endure as though he had seen God himself who cannot be seen because he is invisible.

Another example would be Isaiah 6:1-3 where Isaiah sees God in his glory in the temple:

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and his train filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim; each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

Here, again, God’s holiness is manifested in this corporeal vision of God upon a throne that Isaiah receives. It is a manifestation of God’s holiness that causes then, of course, Isaiah to feel conviction of his own sin and inadequacy.

Finally, for a New Testament example, look at Revelation 4. The whole chapter here is a vivid vision of God in the throne room. We won’t read the whole chapter but as you look at Revelation 4 you see that he sees a throne in heaven and he sees someone sitting on the throne. This person, he says, appeared like jasper and carnelian and around the throne was a rainbow that looked like an emerald. So this person looked like a sort of mineral object as though it were a person that was made out of some kind of precious mineral that reflected the light. “From the throne issue flashes of lightning, and voices and peals of thunder” and so forth. Then around the throne are these creatures full of eyes in front and behind. They had these strange appearances.⁴ These living creatures then fall down before the throne and they cry “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!” Then they describe how the elders cast their crowns before the throne singing “Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for thou didst create all things, and by thy will they existed and were created.” Here you have a vision that John has of God on his throne described in corporeal terms, very vivid with all of these strange creatures and so forth. This serves to declare the glory of God – his holiness and his greatness as the creator of all things. These theophanies serve the

purpose of manifesting God's glory and holiness and greatness to those who receive them.

So I think that we are not to understand these visions literally. The whole book of Revelation in particular is just full of these sorts of images. Think of the lamb that is full of eyes all over him slain before the foundation of the world. These other sorts of creatures and monsters and so forth. The whole book is just replete with rich imagery that shouldn't be understood in a literal way. Particularly, the idea of God's throne is not something that should be thought of as a physical object upon which a humanoid being sits. The *New Bible Dictionary* says that the throne of God symbolizes dignity and authority. The one who sits upon the throne is the one who is invested with dignity and divine authority. Similarly, to be at the right hand of the person on the throne doesn't mean to be seated literally at this person's hand, but that is a position also of authority and dignity. Again we see the literary purpose that is served in these visions of God.

START DISCUSSION

Student: All of those examples you gave are pretty obvious it seems to be acceptable as a vision type of situation in one person's observation. But as we look at Genesis 18 starting in verse 1, "And the Lord appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men stood in front of him." It goes on to say that he wanted to bring food to them. Sarah, obviously viewed this. There were other people involved in seeing this. He is called the Lord. At least in the commentaries that I've read seem to think that that is Jehovah God. That is what is claimed in some of the commentaries.

Dr. Craig: I would not call this a theophany. I think you are right. It seems to me that here you have a corporeal manifestation of God or the angel of the Lord to Abraham. You are right. This is an example that I would not see as being some sort of visionary experience. But in some way God has manifested himself in a physical way to Abraham.

Student: Just a follow up on that, some people see that as the preincarnate Christ. Could that be?

Dr. Craig: That is often said, and I think perhaps the motivation there is that we know that the second person of the Trinity does acquire a human body at some point. So seeing these corporeal descriptions of God earlier on makes them infer that this could be Christ in some sort of preincarnate state becoming incarnate. I am uncomfortable with that. I don't see any textual ground for saying that. A Jew reading this passage wouldn't have understood it that way. That is not the way the author would have understood it. It also would mean that Christ doesn't become incarnate then in virtue of the virginal conception by Mary which, it seems to me, we want to hold on to. That is when the second person of

the Trinity assumes a human nature – at the virginal conception, and not earlier.⁵ I am more inclined to say that these were either angelic beings like the angel of the Lord which is so closely identified with God that he stands in God's place or, as I said, perhaps as some kind of corporeal manifestation of God, but not literally Christ in his human nature. I would feel uncomfortable about that.

Student: You may be right about the throne of God being a totally fictional representation for the benefit of the beholder, however, there are five throne chapters – Revelation 4, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and 10, and Daniel 7. We must realize that these are over a wide period of time and widely different observers, and yet the descriptions are very, very similar. I think there is maybe a non-trivial probability that this may actually (when we get up there) we may see something like that.

Dr. Craig: Ah! Now, I wouldn't want to exclude that – that we might have visual theophanies ourselves in heaven. But what I am wanting to suggest is that these passages are, in fact, what I said – they are visionary experiences and not to be taken as literal, that there is a kind of literal chair having dimensions and so forth that God sits on. Certainly the idea of God's throne is common because that is God's authority and where the sovereign king sits. I haven't looked at the other passages you mentioned. We looked at the Isaiah passage and the one in Revelation 4. In both of those it does seem to be visionary in nature and not literal. But I wouldn't exclude that we could have visions ourselves in heaven.

Student: I am just saying that these almost outrageous creatures that are described by various observers – in other words, if it is purely a vision, he has given almost exactly the same vision to these individuals over a period of time. I am just saying it is a possibility that may represent something that actually is in heaven.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, I think we'd have to say that is a possibility.

Student: Inspired from that last question, I would be really interested to hear what you would think in terms of what our experience with God will be in relation to when we are in heaven with him in relation to the fact that we will have heavenly bodies that are physical and that our experience of God will be it seems like we have these metaphors of experiencing God in a physical way like the throne of what you are talking about. How that would sort of change the way that we relate to God and what his purpose behind that would be.

Dr. Craig: This is a really difficult question because so little is said about it in the Bible. The one verse says, "Eye has not seen nor is the mind of man conceived what God has in store for those who love him, for those who are his." But we do know it will be a corporeal existence for us and that Christ will be there in a corporeal way, too. He takes

⁵ 25:07

his resurrection body with him on the ascension. It will be a corporeal existence. A new heavens and a new Earth. I take it that our hope for immortality is going to be one that will be a physical existence, but with superhuman powers such as we saw in Christ's resurrection body that we can't even imagine yet. So we don't really know. How will God be manifested in the new heavens and the new Earth? It is difficult to say. Will there be, as someone said earlier, perhaps some sort of visionary seeing of God? Or will Christ be present among us and that will be enough? I don't know. We just know that it will be a wonderful, blissful state of communion with God free from sin and evil and every sort of deficit of finite existence, and so a wonderful hope but far beyond probably anything that we can hope to imagine ourselves.

Student: I know that is a tough question.

Dr. Craig: Yeah, but a good one, and it is one to contemplate in the sense of thinking how wonderful it will be.

END DISCUSSION

That brings us to the end of our lesson.⁶

⁶ Total Running Time: 30:59 (Copyright © 2015 William Lane Craig)