
VOICE
AN INDEPENDENT CHURCH JOURNAL • JANUARY|FEBRUARY 2025
the Angel of the Lord
Angelic Messengers • The Transcendent • Angel of Yahweh



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Seeing the Invisible Transcendent God



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After leading the wayward children of Jacob away from Sinai, Moses experienced a kind of fellowship with God that hadn't been known since Abraham. Exodus recounts that the living God spoke to Moses *"face to face, as a man speaks to his friend"* (33:11). Indeed, the pillar of smoke was present every time Moses entered the Tent of Meeting. Yet, even after imploring to see God's glory, Moses was only granted a glimpse of God's back, for no one can see God's face (that is his immediate and unfettered glory) and live. The prophet Ezekiel was only able to record God's glory by describing the chariot-like, anthropomorphic creatures who accompanied a fiery storm descending from the north. In praising God for victories over his many enemies, David described God's glory through earthquakes, storms, lightning, darkness, and clouds (2Sa 22). Even in John's Apocalypse, the beloved disciple could only describe God through his surroundings, whether a throne, jewel-like radiance, elders, or creatures. Everything seen and known about God must be mediated by metaphor or analogy. The eternal God exists in, as Paul describes, *"unapproachable light"* (1Ti 6:16). Elihu reminded his troubled friend that no one dares stare into the sun, and the Almighty is entirely beyond his reach (Job 37:21, 23). In Isaiah, God gave his people an analogy to describe the chasm between Himself and His creation; *"as high as the heavens are from the earth"* (55:9). The Divine is transcendent in every way, completely ontologically distinct from His creation. To know Him without reservation is to enter His very being, a realm in which no creature has claim.

Although God's glory is entirely transcendent, God also revealed Himself in human form in the Old Testament. Examples include three men appearing to Abraham under the trees at Mamre (Ge 18), Jacob's mysterious wrestler (Ge 32), the commander of the Lord's armies (Jos 5), the fourth man in Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (Da 3), and of course, the Angel of the Lord. Any revelation of God through a physical appearance, especially in human form, is called a "theophany." Theologians have often wondered as to the exact nature of theophanies, particularly their implications with a trinitarian God. Are all theophanies a revelation of God as the second Person of the Triune Godhead? Or does the Person of the Father ever reveal Himself as Himself?

> ***Everything seen and known about God must be mediated by metaphor or analogy.***

The apostle John said that Logos reveals God and that no one has ever seen God but the "I" has revealed Him (Jn 1:18). These revelations are often referred to as "Christophanies" or "huiophanies," meaning appearances of the Son. Many early Church Fathers believed that whenever God was revealed in the Old Testament, it must have been the Person of the Son. Early in the second century, Justin Martyr desired to clearly distinguish the Father and Son by showing that theophanies are manifestations of the Son. In his *Dialogue* with the imaginary Jewish foil Trypho, Justin sought to show that Old Testament examples, especially those appearing to Moses, must have been revelations of God the Son. In chapter 56, Justin explained that the same God who appeared to Moses in human form (e.g., Ge 18) "remains ever in the supercelestial places, invisible to all men, holding personal intercourse with none." Yet, he reveals himself through the one who is "called an Angel." Later, in chapter 61, Justin used the idea of Wisdom found in Proverbs 8 to show that manifestations can only be the Logos. Thus, every theophany must ultimately be a Christophany. These Christophanies, as Justin thought, allowed the Triune God to be both utterly transcendent and yet intimately revealed.

Later in the second century, Theophilus of Antioch wrote against a heretic named Autolycus (literally "the wolf itself"). In answering the charge that a transcendent God could not walk among his creation in the Garden of Eden, Theophilus answered, "Indeed the God and Father of the universe is unconfined and is not present in a place, for there is no place of his rest. But his Logos, through whom he made all things, who is his Power and Wisdom, assuming the role of the Father and Lord of the universe, was present in paradise in the role of God and conversed with Adam."[1] As with Justin, Theophilus desired to protect the Father's otherness while emphasizing the Son's immanence.

Tertullian wondered how God could be both visible and invisible. The only possibility is for Christ to be both "Himself the Father and the Son."[2] That is, Christ and the Father are one in essence but distinguished in person. Yet, Tertullian also believed that examples like Moses in Exodus 33 showed a distinction in the persons of the Godhead. The Father hides his true face, and the Son reveals it "by reason of his derived existence."[3] Tertullian wasn't espousing an early form of Arianism. On the contrary, he used Old Testament theophanies to explain what would later be described in orthodox language as the "begottenness" of the Son. Any theophany, whether in physical or human form, must be God the Son, for only the Son can perfectly reflect the Father.

While most early Church Fathers believed theophanies to be pre-incarnate manifestations of God the Son, the great doctor of the Church, Augustine, disagreed. Augustine felt that distinction blurred the transcendent/immanent barrier and came too close to trinitarian subordination (the belief that the Son is somehow less than or eternally subordinate to the Father). Though Arianism was formally condemned decades before Augustine, he lived well within its dark shadow. For Augustine, Old Testament theophanies could not represent God as he is, even in the Person of the Son. Adam talking with God is a perfect example. Augustine asked, "Was it the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit? Or did God indiscriminately, the Trinity Himself, speak to man under the form of a man? Certainly the context of Scripture itself nowhere gives any indication of a transition from one person to another."[4] Unless Scripture indicates otherwise, Augustine believed that theophanies were revelations of the Triune God. Additionally, all Old Testament theophanies were not simply revelations of God but were created signs meant to represent rather than encapsulate God. The signs themselves were not God, only artifacts meant to reveal God. This makes sense with theophanies like a bush, fire, or cloud, but what about anthropological manifestations like the Angel of the Lord?

Augustine thought that the eternal could never be grasped or seen but must be mediated "by the means of temporal things with which we had already been tempered and held fast."[5] Humanity, being immanent, can only imagine or see temporal things. God must reveal Himself as something with temporal referent, as seen in Ezekiel's description of the Cherubim using similes. To Augustine, God is entirely other, outside of His created realm. Old Testament theophanies were temporal, immanent signs which pointed to the Creator. Theophanies were not pre-incarnate appearances of God the Son, but rather the Godhead creating a specific temporal sign. Even in the incarnation, Augustine believed that the human nature of Christ, though seen through the Person, was itself an instrument. In summarizing Augustine's view of theophanies, Michel Barnes said, "True existence or being of God could not be known, for it has never been available to any kind of sight, material or noetic: the theophanies did not make God available to be seen. In Old Testament times, as in all periods of salvation history, neither the Son of God nor the Father could be seen; only a created mark or instrument of Their presence could be seen."[6]

The early Fathers sought to protect the deity of the Son by demonstrating that the Logos of God always reveals the invisible and incomprehensible. Old Testament inanimate theophanies only acted as vessels for God's glory, while human appearances were Christophanies, actual pre-incarnate appearances of God the Son. Augustine reacted against this, seeking instead to protect the deity of the Son by insisting that God acts in essence, not in distinguished persons in Old Testament theophanies. In this way, the quality of God the Son's divinity could never be questioned as He remained, even in manifestations, entirely transcendent. Ironically, both views had the same goal and saw theophanies as divine manifestations. Are Old Testament theophanies always manifestations of the Logos? Is the Angel of the Lord an actual appearance of God the Son? Or is every physical revelation a created sign, pointing to the invisible and incomprehensible while protecting His transcendence? Which is it?

The answer is found in Scripture and consistent, orthodox theology. Like the Angel of the Lord, New Testament accounts and authors shed light on how we should understand Old Testament theophanies, particularly anthropomorphic theophanies. All three synoptic Gospels describe the story of Jesus's baptism (Mt 3:16–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22). John's Gospel doesn't narrate the event, but John records John the Baptist's understanding of the event (Jn 1:29–34). Although this deals with the incarnation, this event helps us understand the theological nature of Old Testament theophanies. This story reveals a person-oriented trinitarian revelation. All three Persons were revealed: the Son was incarnate, the Spirit descended "like a dove," and the Father's voice could be audibly heard. On one hand, this event supports Augustine's view that the Trinity revealed Himself. On the other hand, the distinguishing of the Persons within the manifestation is quite clear; the Son was seen, the Spirit visualized and analogized, and the Father's voice was present.

Another synoptic event that helps us understand the nature of Old Testament theophanies is the transfiguration of Christ. The Gospel writers describe Jesus revealing His glory (Mt 7:1–8; Mk 9:2–8; Lk 9:28–36). First, all three accounts describe Jesus's appearance using theophanic language. His face shined *"like the sun,"* and His clothes became dazzlingly *"bright."* Matthew adds the phrase, *"white as light."* This language directly reflects the Old

Testament examples of God appearing. Second, in His glory, Jesus is talking with Elijah and Moses, two of the handful of prophets who witnessed incredible theophanic visions and revelations (e.g., Ex 20, 33; 1Ki 19). Theologically, this conversational familiarity among the three implies, at least tacitly, that there were previous encounters.

The transfiguration of Christ did not add to the incarnation but only proved that Jesus can be revealed in His glory along with His human nature. Even so, the three disciples recognized Jesus as Jesus. Third, after the disciples missed the point of the experience, desiring to honor Jesus along with Elijah and Moses, a *"bright cloud"* encompassed them to the point that they were afraid. This is no accident. The cloud experience points to the presence of God in the Old Testament, specifically the awesome and terrifying theophanies on Sinai, in the Tabernacle, and by the banks of the Chebar. The disciples knew they were in the presence of the revealed Creator. As with Christ's baptism, the Father's voice, coming from the cloud, directed attention to His Son. Though the Spirit isn't mentioned in the transfiguration, a trinitarian revelation is unavoidable. God was manifested and revealed directly through Jesus and indirectly through the cloud.

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Another text that helps us understand the nature of Old Testament theophanies is found in Jude's epistle. Verse five, describing the coming damnation of false teachers based on God's past judgment, has been the subject of much textual controversy. For many years, translators preferred that it was the *"Lord"* who saved his people out of Egypt. Many ancient manuscripts, however, have the word *"Jesus"* as the one who saved his people out of Egypt. Even with a few difficulties, many newer textual scholars and versions are including the ancient rendering. This means that Jude, as a first-century believer, interpreted Old Testament manifestations and theophanies as pre-incarnate manifestations of God the Son.

Theological ramifications abound. Jesus's baptism and transfiguration show that the trinitarian Persons can reveal Themselves at the same time and in distinct ways. At the same time, John states that only the Begotten Son, the Logos of God, can reveal God (Jn 1:18). Jude's use of the incarnate Christ to describe Old Testament theophanies only further complicates the controversy.

What if, however, the answer is in both options? What if Old Testament theophanies are manifestations of God the Son *and* also manifestations of the transcendent Triune God? Interestingly, Augustine himself provides the trinitarian theology that helps to understand the nature of theophanies, emphasizing *both* the transcendence and immanence of God. In his work *On the Trinity*, Augustine articulates what theologians call the "inseparability of operations." Commenting on Jesus's baptism, Augustine said, "he was the word of the Father only, spoken to the Son; although the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as they are inseparable, so they work inseparably" (Book 1.4). This is evident in John 5: *"Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise."* The external actions of the Persons of the Trinity are inseparable because the Persons of the Trinity inter-dwell one another. As Jesus said, *"Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me"* (Jn 14:11). This protects the essential unity of the Trinity and guards against the very thing that concerned Augustine–the unnecessary separation of the Persons.

Good theology rightly holds the tension of Scripture. God the Son is the eternal Logos and always manifests the invisible and transcendent Father. The Persons of the Trinity are distinguished, though only through their relation (unbegottenness, begottenness, and spiration), never in their external operations. God is one, and He reveals Himself as one. God is *both* transcendent and immanent. He is separate from His creation but manifests within it. Theophanies are manifestations of the transcendent Divine, visiting His creation to save His people. The one true God reveals Himself as Triune, even in a bush. The Logos of the Invisible can be not only seen but also held and grasped. Philip learned this when he, like all of us, asked to see the Father. Jesus's response continues to astound, *"Whoever has seen me has seen the Father"* (Jn 14:10).

ENDNOTES

1. Theophilus of Antioch, *Against Autolycus*, II.22 trans. Robert Grant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 63.
2. Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 14.
3. Ibid.
4. St. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 2.10, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 71.
5. Ibid., 4.18.
6. Michel René Barnes, "The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity," *Modern Theology* 19 no. 3 (July 2003), 343–44.

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