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The invisibility of God: a survey of a misunderstood phenomenon

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The problem

Much modern theology and Christology is built on the notion that God is invisible. God is incorporeal spirit (John 4:24) and 'no one has ever seen God' (John 1:18; 1 John 4:12). God is 'invisible' (Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27), 'whom no one has seen or is able to see' (1 Tim. 6:16). Jesus clarifies that such verses are particularly concerned with the Father (John 6:46). These negative statements about God's visibility are complemented by those passages which speak more positively about the Son as the image or exclusive representative of the Father.[1]

The problem, of course, arises when we consider the many passages in the Old Testament where 'God appeared to' someone. The point is sufficiently made by looking at a single Hebrew verb (*r'h*). Yahweh appeared to each of Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and perhaps Jeremiah.[2] The active stem of the same verb claims that Jacob, Micaiah, Isaiah and Amos 'saw Yahweh'. The more verbs we add (e.g. God 'came', *bô'*), the more encounters we enumerate.

So we find an apparent disparity between the Old and New Testaments on this matter.

As we review some of the solutions offered throughout history, we find that sensible resolutions of this tension do exist. We are not reinventing the wheel. But much of the data has been buried in disparate components in specialist works. The few syntheses which have been offered tend to be in systematic theologies, perhaps lost amongst many other considerations. Already, we might promote the sensible conclusion of some like Grudem:

> This sequence of verses [in Exodus 33] and others like it in the Old Testament indicate that there was a sense in which God could not be seen at all, but that there was also some outward form or manifestation of God which

1 E.g. Matt. 11:27//Luke 10:22; John 1:18; 12:45; 14:9; 2 Cor. 4:4, 6; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3.

2 Marianne Meye Thompson, '"God's Voice You Have Never Heard, God's Form You Have Never Seen": The Characterization of God in the Gospel of John', *Semeia* 63 (1993), 177-204, at 194 n.113, notes the literal translation of Niphal *r'h*: 'God was seen'. On the possibility of theophany to Jeremiah, see now George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (JSOTSup 420; London: T&T Clark, 2005), e.g. 81-83.

at least in part was able to be seen by man.[3]

However, these syntheses do not seem to have dissuaded the academy or the church from the entrenched tradition that God is utterly invisible. This may well be because the New Testament data, which I propose is the sticking point, is rarely engaged as a whole. This article seeks to advance the existing syntheses in that direction, offering a combination of sensible systematics and brief exegesis of the difficult passages.

Solution 1

The first solution has an ancient heritage. It supposes that the language of 'seeing God' refers to the act of physical sight and concludes from the New Testament that God the Father is invisible. The Old Testament aspect of the problem is then often expressed as what we might label 'the christophanist argument':

(1) God the Father is invisible
(2) Old Testament figures are said to see God
therefore (3) Old Testament figures see the Son, not the Father

This conclusion accords well with the New Testament emphasis on the Son as the one who uniquely reveals the Father, and is tacitly reliant upon it. Apart from the New Testament texts cited above, the argument is found forcefully in the second-century polemical works of Justin Martyr (especially *Dial.* 56-60, 126-129). Justin's influence on subsequent theologians like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen and Eusebius is well known.[4]

The christophanist argument also appears to be endorsed by Calvin (*Inst.* 4.8.5):

> Therefore, holy men of old knew God only by beholding him in his Son as in a mirror (cf. II Cor. 3:18). When I say this, I mean that God has never manifested himself to men in any other way than through the Son, that is, his sole wisdom, light, and truth. From this fountain Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and others drank all that they had of heavenly teaching. From the same fountain, all the prophets have also drawn every heavenly oracle that they have given forth.

So it is little surprise to find the notion still promoted by modern theologians.[5]

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3 Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 188.

4 E.g. Willis A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr* (London: SPCK, 1965), 117. For the argument in some of the early fathers, especially Irenaeus and Eusebius, see Angela R. Christman, 'What Did Ezekiel See?', *ProEccl* 8.3 (1999), 338-363. The tacit reliance on the revelation of the Son, rather than of the Spirit, might also be challenged, but is not pursued here.

5 E.g. Anthony T. Hanson, 'John i. 14-18 and Exodus xxxiv', *NTS* 23 (1976), 90-101, at 95-97; Jerome H. Neyrey, 'The Jacob Allusions in John 1:51', *CBQ* 44 (1982), 586-605, at 590-591; James A. Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament: Old Testament Appearances of Christ in Human Form* (2nd ed.; Fearn: Mentor, 1999), 62-63.

The idea of the Father being invisible has become commonplace in theology, shaped as much by the Platonistic ideals of early authors like Justin – indeed, by the whole influence of Greek philosophy at the major turning points of church history – as by the biblical text itself. Few readers are surprised, then, when a commentary like Kruse's addition to the Tyndale series regularly explains Johannine passages from the premise that 'It is a fundamental teaching of the OT that no human being has seen God.'[6] It is not hard to find the invisibility of the Father both present and encouraged in the thinking of the everyday Christian.

While this idea concords readily with New Testament expressions, it would seem to sell short the many Old Testament passages that speak of God being seen. Hence the proliferation of explanations promoting the idea that visible manifestations of God in the Old Testament, often including the ubiquitous Angel of Yahweh, were appearances of the pre-incarnate Son.[7]

There are various shortcomings with this solution. First, it often hinges on a particular understanding of the Angel. While many have been willing to find similarities between the Old Testament Angel and the New Testament Son, many others have been unwilling to commit to equating the two.[8] Despite some claims to consensus (cited shortly), there is little agreement on this matter. On its own it remains an uncertain foundation upon which to build an important aspect of theology/Christology.

A second weakness concerns the hermeneutics involved. An evangelical view of scripture readily allows the clarity of the New Testament to inform any haziness of the Old. But we ought still to be cautious with how the results of this method are presented. With the Old Testament pronouncing that God was seen and the New Testament equally adamant that he was not, at the least we must be gentle in any explanation. One symptom of the problem at hand is that scholars tie themselves in knots attempting to delineate when the name *YHWH* applies

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6 Colin G. Kruse, *The Gospel According to John* (TNTC 4; Leicester: IVP, 2003), 173 on 6:46; cf. 73 on 1:18; 157 on 5:37; Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1-11* (NAC 25A; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 124.

7 So Borland, *Christ in the Old Testament*; J. Macartney Wilson, 'Angel', *ISBE* 1:124-127, at 125: 'It is obvious that these [theophanic] apparitions cannot be the Almighty Himself, whom no man has seen, or can see.' Borland's first appendix (123-137) surveys the many proponents of the view throughout history. It is important to note the many popular (American) teachers, study Bibles, and introductory commentaries which he enumerates (133-135). See also the contemporary (British) Bible studies of Jonathan Stephen, *Theophany: Close encounters with the Son of God* (Epsom: Day One, 1998) and Paul Blackham, *A Study Guide to the Book of Genesis* (Carlisle: Authentic Lifestyle, 2003).

8 A range of opinions can be found in recent surveys including Stephen L. White, 'Angel of the Lord: Messenger or Euphemism?' *TynBul* 50.2 (1999), 299-305; Günther H. Juncker, 'Jesus and the Angel of the Lord' (unpublished PhD thesis; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2001); John H. Walton, *Genesis* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 462-466.

to the Father, when to the Son, and when to the Trinity as a whole.[9] A New Testament explication of the Old is also awkward when the result is then attributed to Old Testament figures, as if they enjoyed the full revelation that we now possess.[10]

That these first two objections are not always given due consideration is demonstrated by a short summary from a popular theological dictionary:

> Many, if not most, evangelical scholars believe that the angel of the Lord is a pre-incarnation appearance of the second person of the Trinity. This is true as well of other theophanies in human form. Occasionally, these theophanies are more specifically referred to as 'christophanies'. Neither the OT nor the NT directly identifies Jesus Christ with the angel of the Lord. Scholars, though, reason backward from the teaching of the NT (Jn. 1:18) that no-one has seen God the Father.[11]

This demonstrates a third weakness in this solution. It is entirely reliant on the presumption that the Father is utterly invisible. This is precisely how the christophanist argument is constructed. If the Old Testament data, where God *is* seen, is allowed priority over the New Testament data, the whole argument evaporates. We turn shortly to consider that solution.

A fourth consequence is that this view of God's invisibility can impinge negatively on the exegesis of Old Testament texts. It is not unwise to be cautious about interpreting the various theophanies. But an over-reliance upon God's invisibility can lead to careless presumptions. The obvious example, already noted, is when (Johannine) scholars simply treat Exodus 33:20 as further evidence that God is invisible.[12] If anything, that text suggests quite the opposite – a point to which we return later.

A fifth shortcoming with the first, christophanist solution is that it raises a number of other questions about the nature of God. If the essence of God is invisible, what makes the Son visible? Claiming that his human nature offers

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9 E.g. Anthony T. Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965), 171.

10 This is a particular problem with Robert Reymond's treatment of the salvific faith of OT figures (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [2nd ed.; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002], 528-537). Note the especially helpful comments, on reading the Old Testament on its own merits versus in the light of the New Testament, made by Peter Enns, 'Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture', *WTJ* 65.2 (2003), 263-287, esp. 275-279.

11 Tremper Longman III, 'Theophany', *NDT* 681; cf. Guy B. Funderburk, 'Angel', *ZPEB* 1:160-166, esp. 162-163; John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 219. Different surveys reach different evaluations of quantitative terms like 'many, if not most'. This merely highlights the subjective nature of the question and the lack of any emerging consensus.

12 E.g. John H. Bernard, *The Gospel According to St. John* (ICC; 2 vols.; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 1:30; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (BECNT 4; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 214 (though he clarifies, elsewhere, that his concern is with 'seeing God *directly*' [192, italics added]).

visibility to the invisible both flirts with heresy and fails to explain the *pre*-incarnate appearances with which we are concerned. We might also note that the Spirit can be physically manifest, as at Jesus' baptism and at Pentecost. Why is the Father alone constrained to remain unseen? And why is it that the Father can interact with creation in an audible manner (at Jesus' baptism, at the transfiguration, and in John 12:28) but not in a visible one? Moreover, if we promote invisibility to be an essential attribute of deity, what heresies do we induce if we allow the Son (or Spirit) to divest himself of it?

Solution 2

So many uncertainties, and their weighty consequences, invite us to consider the polar solution. Rather than expecting the Old Testament to conform to New Testament thinking, is it possible to interpret the New Testament passages consistently with the Old Testament data? This is not as hard as it may seem, if we bring together a number of ideas which have often been separated by the increasing specialisation of biblical and theological studies.

The result is a theology wherein we *can* allow the visibility of God – Father, Son and Spirit. This is not to insist that the Godhead possesses any corporeal substance, or has a default anthropomorphic form, or makes regularly visible appearances in creation. (Such points are each debated in extensive detail by scholars ancient and modern.) It certainly does not insist that humans have witnessed the full glory of God's radiance, though more of that has now been seen in the incarnate Son than had previously. The solution does, however, allow God at all times to interact with the created order as he wishes.

This accommodates the Old Testament passages which allow that, in some way, God was seen. The difficult aspect of this solution is the apparent emphasis of the New Testament on God being invisible. I submit that this remains the reason why this solution, though often the conclusion of detailed systematicians (see below), still has only limited currency. This survey takes some tentative steps forward, investigating biblical language and its application in particular texts.

The adjective 'invisible'

The first step is taken when we understand that the adjective 'invisible' is better understood as 'unseen'. It refers to things which *are* not seen, not necessarily to things which *can*not be seen.

The Greek term (ἀόρατος) did not develop until the fifth century B.C.[13] There are three significant corollaries of this. First, while alert to the traps of etymology, we ought not to be surprised that the adjective (and its antonym, ὁρατός) bears a semantic range similar to the verb from which it was derived. We see below that ὁράω applies to much more than physical sight. Second, the relatively late arrival

13 The history is well documented in the standard dictionaries, especially the massive article of Wilhelm Michaelis, 'ὁράω, κτλ.', *TDNT* 5:315-382.

of ἀόρατος means that the term is barely found in the Old Testament, in either Hebrew or Greek.[14] Third, its initial popularity amongst Greek philosophers – primarily Aristotle, Isocrates and Plato himself – should make us alert to the contexts in which it is employed in the NT. Like other alpha privatives, the term was used in Platonic ways to highlight the transcendence of deity. 'God's uniqueness ... is expressed in the flood of negative predicates removing from him the physical and temporal weaknesses to which all other beings are subject.'[15] Given the authority of sight in Hellenism – we still affirm that 'seeing is believing' – ἀόρατος communicates as much about God's otherness as about his (in)visibility.[16]

The adjective does not in itself explain why something is unseen. It merely attests that something is unavailable to human sight. A study of Josephus is particularly illustrative. Of seven uses of ἀόρατος, at least five refer to things which '*are* not seen' as opposed to things which '*can*not be seen'. These include the off-limits interior of the Jewish temple, a city hidden in the mountains, a cave at the bottom of a well, and the deep valleys around the fortress mesa of Masada.[17] Only once does ἀόρατος refer to something intrinsically invisible.[18]

This line of thought is briefly explored by Barth and Blanke.[19] They demonstrate that alpha privatives regularly carry such a 'pragmatic sense' rather than an ontological one. They offer Acts 17:23 where ἄγνωστος θεός is regularly understood as 'a god *who is unknown*' rather than one who is unknowable, and Matthew 15:20 where ἄνιπτοι χεῖρες are 'hands *which are unwashed*' rather than those which are unwashable![20]

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14 'The Greek ἀόρατος has no Hebraic equivalent' (Rudolf Bultmann, 'Untersuchungen zum Johannesevangelium, Part B', *ZNW* 29 [1930], 169-192, at 178, my translation). Michaelis adds that 'ὁρατός, too, has no Heb. equivalent' (*TDNT* 5:368 n.4). This discussion of terminological paucity is matched by a corresponding lack of Hebraic mindset. It is regularly presumed that Hebrew thought emphasised hearing over sight; see Michaelis's discussion of the Hellenistic priority given to sight (5:319-323) and his later contrast with an Old Testament emphasis on hearing (5:329; cf. Jackie A. Naudé, ראה (8011)', *NIDOTTE* 3:1007-1015, at 1014; Savran, *Encountering the Divine*, 17; though see the challenge of Hans F. Fuhs, 'ראה; *rā'â*', *TDOT* 13:208-242, at 216).

15 Jerome H. Neyrey, '"First", "Only", "One of a Few", and "No One Else": The Rhetoric of Uniqueness and the Doxologies in 1 Timothy', *Bib* 86.1 (2005), 59-87, esp. 74-77 (quote 77).

16 Cf. Neyrey, 'Rhetoric of Uniqueness', 83: 'Thus God's "inaccessibility" (ἀπρόσιτος) and "invisibility" (ἀόρατος, 1 Tim 1,17; 6,16) speak to the superiority of God to humans, especially in terms of mortals' greatest power.'

17 Respectively *J.W.* 1.7.6 §152 and *Ant.* 14.6.4 §71; *J.W.* 3.7.7 §160; 3.8.1 §341; 7.8.3 §280; cf. Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:338, 369.

18 Josephus is adamant that the soul 'remains invisible to human eyes, just as God himself' (*J.W.* 7.8.7 §346, my translation). The remaining example (*Ant.* 12.2.9 §76) could be argued either way.

19 Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians* (AB 34B; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 195-196.

20 Other studies of negative ('apophatic') theological language also confirm this. Darryl Palmer's study of such terms in the second-century apologists – whence they were cemented into the wider Christian lexicon – avers these were used 'occasionally and

This is found in Old Testament usage of ἀόρατος. Isaiah 45:3 promises Cyrus treasures which are hidden, but hardly invisible.[21]

It is in this light that we ask how the term is used in the New Testament. It *is* used of things which are commonly invisible to human sight (e.g. Rom. 1:20; Col. 1:16). So when God is described as ἀόρατος (Col. 1:15; 1Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27), 'invisible' is not an unreasonable interpretation. But while physical sight is not irrelevant in each of the three passages, the term may more emphasise God's transcendence than define his (in)visibility. When we return to each of these passages below, we regularly find such an emphasis.

'No one has ever seen God'

Regardless of what we make of the adjective, the nearly identical statements of John 1:18 and 1 John 4:12 are somewhat emphatic. Whether or not God *can* be seen, these suggest that no one has ever availed themselves of the opportunity.

We must be cautious in placing too much emphasis on the perfect tense of the verbs (ὁράω, θεάομαι). In the present tense, the former occurs rarely in the New Testament, and the latter never in either Greek testament. Granted, John is regularly concerned with the ongoing impact of the events surrounding Jesus and the persistent validity of the apostolic witness. But the emphatic sense of the perfect tense may not apply, or apply so strongly, to these verbs; 'in the main ἑώρακα is simply used for εἶδον in Jn.'[22]

The semantics of these verbs is as ambiguous as their grammar. As does 'to see' in English and *r'h* in Hebrew (see below), ὁράω connotes not only physical sight but also intellectual comprehension, spiritual insight, personal experience, and so on. John uses a number of verbs of seeing with a broad range of meanings, but does not have any pattern of correlation. His intention must be determined on a case-by-case basis.[23]

And so we turn to such a case-by-case survey, starting with these and other Johannine texts.

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incidentally' and with 'no concern for the *theory* of negative attributes' ('Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century', *VC* 37.3 [1983], 234-259, at 234). We must note, of course, that alpha privatives may bear a more ontological meaning; see the balanced comments by Raoul Mortley, 'What is negative theology?', in *The Via Negativa* (eds. R. Mortley & D. W. Dockrill; Auckland: University of Auckland, 1981), 5-12, at 9-10.

21 The other two Septuagint uses (Gen. 1:2; 2 Macc. 9:5) are inconclusive.

22 Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:340. Jacob Kremer, 'ὁράω *horaō* see, κτλ.', *EDNT* 2:526-529, at 529, prefers a present sense, which still weakens the emphasis regularly expected of the perfect.

23 Famously, Raymond Brown's Appendix I.3, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (AB 29; New York: Doubleday, 1966), 501-503. Compare the apparently independent conclusion of Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John* (2 vols.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 251. See also the discussion in note 35 below.

New Testament passages: God is not seen

John 1:18 ≈ 1 John 4:12

These two verses can be studied together. The correspondence between the two verses is universally recognised.[24]

It is easily demonstrated that John's verbs of seeing often connote more than physical sight. We merely have to compare John 1:18 (θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε) with 14:9 (ὁ ἑωρακὼς ἐμὲ ἑώρακεν τὸν πατέρα).[25] If we maintain that 'God' in 1:18 denotes the Father, the two verses with the identical verb and tense cannot make the same claim (unless we accept them as contradictory). The problem, and its obvious solution, has been identified at least since Origen:

> "he who sees the Son," he says, "sees also the Father." This certainly would press us very hard, were the expression not understood by us more correctly of understanding, and not of seeing. For he who has understood the Son will understand the Father also.[26]

That John is concerned with more than physical sight can be further demonstrated by several lines of argument. Firstly, we find that verbs of seeing are regularly collocated with verbs of knowing or understanding.[27] The parallels between 14:7, 9 are significant. Each verse presents much the same structure, the latter with ὁράω and the former with γινώσκω. Moreover, the two verbs are coordinated later in 14:7.[28] Seeing – or not seeing – God is primarily about understanding and accepting each of Father and Son. Plenty lay eyes on Jesus without getting the point. 'In John, God is not so much invisible as unrecognized.'[29]

Secondly, John's contexts are concerned with the revelation and certitude of

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24 E.g. Wendy E. Sproston, 'Witnesses to what was ἀπ' ἀρχῆς', *JSNT* 48 (1992), 43-65, esp. 50. Evangelical commentators typically presume the epistle's dependence on the gospel (e.g. I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 216; Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000], 161-162), but the order is not crucial for our present purposes.

25 Compare the similar construction with a different verb at 12:45: ὁ θεωρῶν ἐμὲ θεωρεῖ τὸν πέμψαντά με.

26 Origen, *Princ.* 2.4.3 (*ANF* 4:277). Origen also asks how the Son can 'see' the Father if the Father cannot be 'seen'.

27 See especially Marianne Meye Thompson, *The God of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), chap. 3.

28 Cf. Oscar Cullmann, 'Εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν', in *Aux sources de la tradition chrétienne* (eds. O. Cullmann & P. H. Menoud; Neuchatel: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1950), 52-61, at 54-55; Craig R. Koester, 'Hearing, Seeing, and Believing in the Gospel of John', *Bib* 70.3 (1989), 327-348, at 346. The same parallelism can be shown in 12:44, 45; e.g. Ferdinand Hahn, 'Sehen und Glauben im Johannesevangelium', in *Neues Testament und Geschichte* (eds. H. Baltensweiler & B. Reicke; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972), 125-141, at 129.

29 Thompson, 'Characterization of God', 194 ≈ her 'Thinking about God: Wisdom and Theology in John 6', in *Critical Readings of John 6* (ed. R. A. Culpepper; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 221-246, at 241. Compare her *God*, 117, 142-143.

knowing God. John 1:18 pairs 'seeing' and 'explaining'.[30] First John 4 is similarly concerned with the evidence of knowing God (e.g. 4:7-8, 13, 16). Thirdly, exclusivity is often seen in the claim that 'no one' else has seen God. Neyrey has demonstrated that οὐδείς is used rhetorically to proclaim uniqueness.[31] We might then ask whether John's primary concern is to exalt the Son rather than to exhaustively enumerate all those who have not seen God; is the statement more qualitative than quantitative?

Fourthly, the parallels between John 1:14-18 and Exodus 33–34 are widely acknowledged.[32] Whether John intends a (positive) comparison or a (negative) contrast between Moses and Jesus, he is clearly proclaiming the superiority of the glory, grace and revelation now made available through the Son. Once more this encourages us to affirm that John is promoting the inestimable value of the Son's revelation, without denying what Moses revealed – and may have seen. It once more affirms that John's concern is with understanding God, rather than with mere physical interaction (important though that is to the evangelist).

Michaelis's extensive study of 'seeing' reaches precisely this conclusion:

> If according to Jn. 12:45; 14:9 God is to be seen only in His revelation in Christ, Jn. 1:18 is not in the first instance aimed polemically against other assertions that God has been seen in theophanies or visions or ecstatic journeys to heaven... [I]n 1:18 the whole emphasis is on the uniqueness of the revelation in Jesus Christ, which is also stressed in 6:46. In so far as the concept of revelation is not orientated to the category of visibility/invisibility, the issue in these passages is not whether the intrinsically invisible God is in some way visible, but whether the God who is completely beyond man's grasp reveals Himself to them.[33]

As Calvin puts it even more succinctly, 'When he says that none has seen God, it is not to be understood of the outward seeing of the physical eye.'[34] The point is conceded, to one degree or another, by many Johannine scholars.[35]

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30 Various scholars note the similar pairing in Sirach 43:31; e.g. Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (IVPNTC 4; Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 61; Bernard, *John*, 1:30; Friedrich Büchsel, 'ἡγέομαι, κτλ.', *TDNT* 2:907-909, at 908.

31 Neyrey, 'Rhetoric of Uniqueness', 72-73, 83.

32 In addition to commentaries, see the focused articles of Hanson, 'John i. 14-18 and Exodus xxxiv', and Henry Mowvley, 'John 1:14-18 in the light of Exodus 33:7–34:35', *ExpTim* 95.5 (1984), 135-137.

33 Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:364-365.

34 Calvin, *Comm.* John 1:18 (*The Gospel according to St John 1-10* [trans. T. H. L. Parker; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959], 25).

35 Calvin's point is developed or echoed particularly by C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John* (2nd ed.; London: SPCK, 1978), 169; Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 100; Tord Larsson, *God in the Fourth Gospel* (ConBNT 35; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell Int., 2001), 244 n.245; Keener, *John*, 422, 424. Many other commentators give at least a nod in this direction. Helpfully, those who insist on a distinction in the verbs of seeing (esp. for θεάομαι in 1 John 4:12) argue in favour of 'a spiritual, contemplative tone' (so Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 156).

John 5:37

The claim that 'you have never heard [the Father's] voice nor seen his form' has often been pressed too literally. Hanson demands that 'God has never been either audible or visible', and Dodd even denies God any audible voice.[36] But this is to make a mockery of the regular auditory encounters with God in the Old Testament, the tangibility of which few would dispute. A study of the Sinai encounter alone (Exod. 19–20; Deut. 4–5) yields abundant demonstration of the people *hearing* God.[37]

We must thus carefully consider the denial: 'you have never heard his voice'. The construction here (οὔτε φωνὴν αὐτοῦ πώποτε ἀκηκόατε) is barely different to that of 1:18, with a negated verb in the perfect tense and the inclusion of πώποτε. Commentators rightly understand that the construction is aimed at Jesus' opponents. This is not because they were absent at Sinai, but because they have failed to believe the one sent by the Father (5:38, with its emphatic pronouns).

If we determine that Jesus is speaking only of a contemporary encounter, i.e. 'you have not heard/seen the Father *as present in me*', the verse determines nothing about God's visibility in the Old Testament. And if we allow a connection with the theophanic heritage of Jesus' interlocutors, i.e. 'you have not experienced the Father *as your ancestors did*', Jesus is denying their inclusion within that heritage rather than denying the events of that heritage. Either way, John 5:37 clearly does not negate the abundant Old Testament witness that people heard God. Neither then can it be pressed to contradict any claims that they saw him.[38]

John 6:46

This verse is harder to accommodate. It certainly affirms that the unparalleled experience of the Father is enjoyed by, and is now available through, the Son (cf. 12:45; 14:9).

Here a disjunction is made between '(all who) hear' and '(he who) sees' (6:45, 46). It would seem to be a statement about different degrees of access to God. At Sinai the people progressively relinquished sight in favour of hearing in favour of second-hand report (e.g. Deut. 5:23-27). Now, conversely, the Son is the epitome of being 'taught of God'. And as elsewhere, this is not a discussion of sighting God as an end in itself. It is once again a demand that true seeing/experiencing of God, through the one who has most perfectly seen/experienced God, leads to obedient belief (6:47). A mere 'seeing' of Jesus is not the point. Many saw him, but this did not automatically accord a salvific seeing of God (as a simplistic reading of 14:9 might imply). It is not enough to encounter the Son; one must also 'ingest' him (6:48-58). Consequently, 'seeing' God describes an experience

36 Hanson, 'John i. 14-18 and Exodus xxxiv', 96; C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: CUP, 1970), 267.

37 Most commentators either explicitly affirm or otherwise echo the work of Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* (NovTSup 42; Leiden: Brill, 1975), esp. 220-224.

38 Cf. Morris, *John*, 291.

beyond the simple matter of physical sight. Thus Jesus' claim is not concerned to deny any visual Old Testament encounters.

These interpretations of John's texts are hardly new; many commentators have rightly understood the nuances outlined therein. But this nuanced understanding of John's theology and language is often not extended to the few other New Testament passages that appear to speak of God's invisibility.

Colossians 1:15

This pericope has generated endless discussion.[39] Regardless of the origins of the text, it clearly has a contemporary concern. Words like 'icon' and 'invisible' are addressed to a specific audience. It is agreed that εἰκών (and related epithets like ἀπαύγασμα, Heb. 1:3) was adopted from existing categories like Wisdom and Logos, from passages like Proverbs 8:22 and Wisdom 7:25-26.[40] But the term has been adapted to and coloured by its contemporary connotations and contextual use. (The same is easily and regularly demonstrated for 'firstborn'; we must understand πρωτότοκος as it is used here, rather than reverting to some quaint notion of a literal etymology or a plain, dictionary meaning.) The emphasis on εἰκών here is not merely on visible representation but on the 'substantial participation' of deity in the incarnate Son.[41]

This in turn suggests that ἀόρατος is less concerned with God's visibility than with his substantial presence and comprehensibility. As with the verbs of seeing in John, the adjective here concerns 'the cognisance of the inward eye also.'[42] We wrongly emphasise the verse if we demand a definition of God's strict invisibility. Few do.[43] Rather, we do well to follow translations which recognise here nothing more than that God is otherwise distant: Jesus 'is the image of God, who is not seen.'[44]

> [W]e are not dealing primarily with the "invisibility" of God and therefore

39 Much of the vast literature is listed and briefly surveyed by Robert McL. Wilson, *Colossians and Philemon* (ICC; London: T&T Clark, 2005), 123-127.

40 Most echo Charles F. Burney, 'Christ as the APXH of Creation (Prov. viii 22, Col. i 15-18, Rev. iii 14)', *JTS* 27 (1926), 160-177, recently defended by N. T. Wright, 'Poetry and Theology in Colossians 1.15-20', *NTS* 36.3 (1990), 444-468, at 451-458.

41 E.g. Hermann Kleinknecht, 'The Greek Use of εἰκών', *TDNT* 2:388-390, at 389. Commentators concur, with varying degrees of vigour, some helpfully showing the sharp contrast of εἰκών with σκιά in Heb. 10:1. We must thus reject translations which emphasise 'he is the *visible* image' (e.g. TEV, NLT).

42 J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 143-144; cf. Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 46-47; Gerhard Kittel, 'The Metaphorical Use of Image in the NT', *TDNT* 2:395-397, at 395.

43 Notable exceptions include Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco: Word, 1982), 43, and James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 87.

44 Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 193, 194 (unfortunately the German original is unpublished); cf. H. C. G. Moule, *Colossian Studies* (2nd ed.; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1900), 75; JB/NJB, CEV, MOFFATT.

not with the attempt to make him visible. Rather, the emphasis lies on the glory including the power of God which no human eye and no living person could withstand unless God himself provided special protection.[45]

1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16

These are the other traditionally-Pauline claims to God's utter invisibility. Commentators are unanimous that the two doxologies emphasise the sovereignty and transcendence of the Father.[46] A distinctly Hellenistic flavour is widely recognised, though debate continues as to whether the primary influence is the Jewish synagogue or the pagan shrine.

Despite the spectrum of opinions, scholars at both extremes are comfortable understanding ἀόρατος as 'unseen' (1:17).[47]

What, then, of the expanded parallel in 6:16, 'whom no person has seen nor is able to see'?[48] But this constrains neither the word ἀόρατος nor God himself to remain permanently invisible. If we have to do with Greek philosophy, then the idea of God's inaccessibility is generalised here; we know precisely from Old Testament studies that the Jewish deity (whether Father, Son or Spirit) can attenuate this expectation. If however the doxologies develop Jewish ideas, as perhaps a majority of conservatives favours, then it is quite likely that the language here (... οὐδὲ ἰδεῖν δύναται) echoes Exodus 33:20 (οὐ δυνήσῃ ἰδεῖν).[49] Again, as we are yet to inspect in any detail, Exodus does not proscribe some form of visibility for God.

What we can affirm within the immediate context is that these doxologies bear a degree of polemic. This is particularly clear in the comparison 'the Ruler of those ruling and the Lord of those lording' (6:15) and the adjective μόνος (1:17; 6:15, 16).[50] In both doxologies the contrast is primarily with false *human* teach-

45 Barth and Blanke, *Colossians*, 250; cf. Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians* (London: SPCK, 1982), 64. Note, too, that most ancient commentators cited in Peter Gorday (ed.), *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (ACCS 9; Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 10-12, move in this nuanced direction.

46 William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (WBC 46; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 60, is a rare voice entertaining the possibility that the praised βασιλεύς of 1:17 is the Son rather than the Father.

47 E.g. George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 105; Raymond F. Collins, *I & II Timothy and Titus* (NTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002), 46; cf. Frances M. Young, *The Theology of the Pastoral Letters* (NTT; Cambridge: CUP, 1994), 48; Neyrey, 'Rhetoric of Uniqueness', 75. Neyrey (85) attempts to unify the synagogue/pagan factions.

48 The parallels are widely attested. For the specific doxologies: e.g. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 352, 361-362; for their wider contexts: Greg A. Couser, 'God and Christian Existence in the Pastoral Epistles', *NovT* 42.3 (2000), 262-283, at 271-275.

49 A verbal connection is suggested by Knight, *Pastoral Epistles*, 270; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (AB 35A; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 309.

50 Hence the detailed study of Neyrey, 'Rhetoric of Uniqueness', focused on these doxologies.

ings or behaviours. Paul 'affirms four truths about God's sovereign power, four ways in which he is altogether beyond human control or manipulation.'[51] It is in this *comparative* sense that God is immutable. We ought not to argue that God is always-and-only invisible if Paul's concern is simply that God is incomparable, that God cannot be reduced to a viewable image. Thus we ought not to press either ἀόρατος or the longer phrase to be any more certain than 'unseen'.[52]

There are further confirmations that Paul is not making absolute statements here. Firstly, if he is deliberately alluding to the Exodus 33–34 theophany, he is unlikely to be claiming more than that passage does.[53] Secondly, if these doxologies were absolute statements applied only to the Father, we must then ask in what ways the Son and Spirit are excused from such claims. If the Son (or Spirit) does not qualify as 'invisible', is he also disqualified from immortality? The latter doxology is adamant: ὁ μόνος δυνάστης ... ὁ μόνος ἔχων ἀθανασίαν. The alternative is to claim that these doxologies are praise of the Son or of the entire Trinity – which immediately euthanises the argument that the Son is the visible agent of the invisible Father. Thirdly, commentators are often quick to note that the attribute 'the only one having immortality' is hardly absolute. Both doxologies are a response to the hope of eternal life. The New Testament elsewhere speaks of 'mortal'/'perishable' bodies putting on 'immortality'/'imperishability' (1 Cor. 15:53-54, using precisely the two Timothy adjectives). Thus the claim here must be attenuated to mean that God alone *controls* immortality.[54] This synergises well with the better systematic studies of God's visibility, which conclude that God 'sovereignly chooses when, where, and to whom to make himself visible.'[55]

A final confirmation that we are on the right track is that the lengthier definition in 6:16 is a further description of the previous phrase: φῶς οἰκῶν ἀπρόσιτον. As is the case in the Old Testament, and particularly in the Pentateuch, the

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51 John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus* (BST; Leicester: IVP, 1996), 159; cf. J. N. D. Kelly, *A Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1963), 146.

52 Jerome D. Quinn and William C. Wacker, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy* (ECC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 138, dabble with the attractive suggestion that ἀόρατος has a pragmatic/imperatival sense: '*Invisible* summarizes in a manner congenial to Greek ears that central concern of Israel which permitted no representation of Yahweh with a visible, man-made image.' Others would confirm that this is precisely the message required by the church in idol-filled Ephesus. This purpose for negative terminology is further affirmed by Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition* (LTPM 19; Louvain: Peeters, 1995), e.g. 197-202.

53 In addition to those who see a specific verbal connection (at note 49), Hanson demonstrates wider parallels between the doxology of 1 Tim. 1:13-16 and the formula of Exod. 34:6 (*The Pastoral Epistles* [NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982], 62-63).

54 E.g. Kelly, *Pastoral Epistles*, 146; Thomas C. Oden, *First and Second Timothy and Titus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1989), 85 (citing Calvin); Stott, *1 Timothy & Titus*, 159; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 362.

55 John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 590.

question is much more about approachability than ontological visibility. Neyrey confirms that 'predicates such as ἀόρατος and ἀπρόσιτος have to do with God's *unknowability*, indicating that the most noble faculty of humans cannot approach, much less *comprehend* the deity.' Such Greek terms are applied to God as testimony 'to the inability of the human mind to grasp or circumscribe him.'[56] Hanson can take this interpretation so far as to say, 'There is no suggestion that God is naturally and essentially invisible.'[57]

Hebrews 11:27

Moses' perseverance is predicated on 'seeing the invisible One' (τὸν ἀόρατον ὁρῶν).[58] Although God is here called invisible, we cannot be dogmatic one way or another. We are impeded on several grounds.

Firstly, the whole clause is softened by ὡς. Though some allow a causal connection ('*because* he saw'),[59] the overwhelming majority of commentators and translators recognise an analogical use ('*as if* he saw'). This does not negate the predicate ἀόρατος, but it does generalise the action.[60] This further suggests, secondly, that ὁράω unlikely describes physical sight. The author is speaking of Moses' 'spiritual perception'.[61] Many note the connection of verse 27 with verses 26, 6 and 1; Moses is one exemplar of persisting towards a future, unseen reward.[62] Verse 6 emphasises the verb πιστεύω, and the whole chapter expounds belief in 'things which are not seen' (11:1). The parenetic purpose is clear: just as Moses (and others) abandoned earthly comforts for a future reward, so too should the Hebrews (e.g. 10:32-39; 12:1-13). The particular contrast of 11:27 is Moses' 'focus'

56 Neyrey, 'Rhetoric of Uniqueness', 83, 84, italics added.

57 Hanson, *Pastoral Epistles*, 113. Hanson presumes a Jewish provenance to the terms and ideas here.

58 The precise relationship of the verbs is debated; compare William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9–13* (WBC 47B; Dallas: Word, 1991), 368, 375-376, with others like Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 616-617; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews* (AB 36; New York: Doubleday, 2001), 504. For our purposes, this merely questions which of Moses' actions is motivated by his 'seeing'.

59 E.g. NIV; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 307.

60 This generalisation is further strengthened if Lane's idiomatic reading is correct, where 'the function of καρτερεῖν is to stress the continuation' of the seeing (*Hebrews 9–13*, 368).

61 Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 376; also David A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 412; Bruce, *Hebrews*, 314. Compare 11:13, with the patriarchs 'seeing' (ὁράω) the promises.

62 E.g. Koester, *Hebrews*, 506-510; Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 374. The link between v. 6 and v. 26 is obvious. For the parallels adding v. 27b to v. 26b, see C. K. Barrett, 'The Eschatology of the Epistle to the Hebrews', in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology* (eds. W. D. Davies & D. Daube; Cambridge: CUP, 1956), 363-393, at 380; Ronald Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews* (ALGHJ 4; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 475; Lane, 376; for v. 27b with v. 1, Williamson, 478.

on the heavenly God in preference to the earthly Pharaoh. Thus, thirdly, ἀόρατος is used to narrate a particular contrast; we cannot insist that the author is doing any more than using a common Hellenistic shorthand to highlight this disparity. It is hardly a declarative definition of God's permanent state. Thus some regularly translate the adjective here as 'unseen',[63] and virtually all say such occasionally. Williamson is especially precise, describing how Moses 'could not *at present* see God'.[64]

In all these respects, Moses' experience is here reduced to nothing more (and nothing less) than can be experienced by any believer; 'the author of Hebrews is interested in Moses as a paradigm for imitation, not in those aspects of Moses' life that are inimitable.'[65]

In all these New Testament references the obvious context is the event of the incarnation, and not least the authors' own experiences, first- or second-hand, of the Son. Their comments concern relative access to God, now so much greater than Judaism could formerly afford. It is in this context that comparative language may sometimes sound absolute. So it is neither surprising nor unimportant that Paul elsewhere hints at the possibility of seeing God, albeit under exceptional or eschatological circumstances (1 Cor. 13:12; perhaps the ὀπτασίαι of 2 Cor. 12:1). Other authors confirm unequivocally that it will be possible to 'see God' (e.g. Matt. 5:8; Heb. 12:14; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 22:4). God is not *permanently* invisible. This is certainly in keeping with the Old Testament passages, to which we turn briefly.

Old Testament passages: God is seen, however limitedly

Space precludes a detailed study of the pertinent Old Testament passages alluded to in the introduction. Not that there is much to dissect: many passages speak simply of God 'being seen' by people.

The fulcrum remains Exodus 33:20: 'you are not able to see my face, for no one shall see me and live.' It is the only explicit biblical articulation of this principle and, as we have seen, often the rationalisation of the traditional reading of the New Testament invisibility texts. But a closer, albeit brief, survey of pertinent issues demonstrates that this is a misapplication of Exodus.

Firstly, this language of 'seeing God' expresses the central concern of the wider section, chapters 32–34.[66] The concern here is with the experience and revela-

63 E.g. Mary Rose D'Angelo, *Moses in the Letter to the Hebrews* (SBLDS 42; Missoula: Scholars, 1979), 53; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), 338.

64 Williamson, *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 475, italics added; cf. Hugh W. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (BNTC; London: A&C Black, 1964), 204.

65 deSilva, *Perseverance*, 412.

66 E.g. Christoph Dohmen, '»Nicht sieht mich der Mensch und lebt« (Ex 33,20): Aspekte der Gottesschau im Alten Testament', in *Die Macht der Bilder* (JBTh 13; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999), 31-51, at 32, 48.

tion of God, of which visual sight is only one aspect.

Secondly, the prohibition of 33:20 is precisely that. It is a statement that Moses is not *permitted* to look on God, not that he is physically *unable* to do so. Granted, the verbs involved (*ykl*/δύναμαι) could be taken either way. But the permissive sense, rather than the possible, is demonstrated by the fact that God immediately makes arrangements whereby Moses can, and does, see something of God (33:21-23). The ensuing text talks unashamedly of Moses being with and speaking with Yahweh – an encounter which altered Moses' visible countenance (e.g. 34:1-9, 27-35). This is also consistent with the striking parallel in 10:28, where Pharaoh warns Moses: 'the day you see my face you will die.' While this pronounces Pharaoh 'unseeable', it does not extend to a claim about his corporeality.

Thirdly, this invites us to ask what is meant by God's 'face' being unseeable. The word *pānîm* has a broad range of uses. In the context here it refers to God's very self. The preceding part of the present interaction between Yahweh and Moses (33:14-16) makes this equation clearly. Both Yahweh and Moses speak of Yahweh's *pānîm* going with the people. Moses then confirms the need for '*you* [Yahweh] to go'. Even the very prohibition of 33:20 against seeing 'my face' is explicated as 'no one may see *me*'. The NJPSV translates *pānîm* with personal pronouns in 33:14-15.

Fourthly, all this presupposes that the verb of seeing concerns physical sight. The breadth of *r'h* (like ὁράω) is well attested in the standard dictionaries. Fuhs's detailed analysis argues that the verb emphasises the cognitive, rather than physical, component of the act of seeing. So much so, he judges that *r'h* is really 'the polar opposite of sensation'.[67]

Finally, the verb and noun are regularly combined together. In court language, 'to see the face' of a ruler is formulaic for entering his presence.[68] Thus, while no one doubts that in Exodus 33 something is happening with Moses' eyes, God's response is in no way a statement of ontological (in)visibility. 'Reflecting everyday usage, the expression "see (the face of) God/Yahweh" denotes an encounter

67 Fuhs, *TDOT* 13:214. The language of 'seeing God' in non-narrative portions of the Old Testament is more easily demonstrably figurative. On such language in the Psalms, for example, see the discussions of Mark S. Smith, '"Seeing God" in the Psalms', *CBQ* 50.2 (1988), 171-183, and Deryck C. T. Sheriffs, *The Friendship of the Lord* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), chap. 5, esp. 139-149.

68 E.g. Gen. 43:3, 5; 44:23, 26; Exod. 10:28-29; 2 Sam. 3:13; 14:24, 28, 32; 2 Kgs. 25:19; Esth. 1:14; Job 33:26; Ps. 42:2 [MT 42:3]; Jer. 52:25. Many scholars would add the compulsory thrice-yearly pilgrimages (e.g. Exod. 34:24+20 // Deut. 16:16 = Deut. 31:11; Isa. 1:12), repointing the infinitive construct from Niphal to Qal, yielding: 'come/go *to see* my face'. So Charles T. Fritsch, 'A Study of the Greek Translation of the Hebrew Verbs "to see", with Deity as Subject or Object', *ErIsr* 16 (1982), (English) 51-56, at 51, 55; *HALOT* 3:1160; Adam S. van der Woude, 'פָּנִים; *pānîm* face', *TLOT* 2:995-1014, at 1009; Horacio Simian-Yofre, 'פָּנִים; *pānîm*', *TDOT* 11:589-615, at 605; though see the clear Niphal in 1 Sam. 1:22 (Harry F. van Rooy, 'פָּנִים; (7156)', *NIDOTTE* 3:637-640, at 639).

with God that emphasizes the immediacy and personal character of the encounter.'[69]

We must conclude that Moses is forbidden from seeing God, not because a physical sighting is forever impossible, but because a full, unmediated exposure to the intimacy of God's essence (or being or glory, or however we choose to describe this) is fatal. While some might also want to maintain, from New Testament passages, that it is also impossible without the mediation of the (incarnate?) Son, Exodus is silent.

That God *can* be seen – with the threat of fatal consequences – is the consistent message of the Old Testament. Many theophanies are accompanied by a note of surprise that humans have apparently sighted God and *not* perished instantaneously. These include Hagar (Gen. 16:13, though textually difficult), Jacob (32:30 [MT 32:31]), Moses and Aaron and 72 other leaders (Exod. 24:9-11), Moses (implicit in Num. 12:8), the parents of Samson (Judg. 13:22-23), and Isaiah (Isa. 6:5). On each occasion the surprise is substantial. But it is not surprise at seeing God, but at enduring the experience. 'The issue is always a matter of life for the human beings involved, not God's visibility.'[70]

The converse is also true. That God *could* be seen underpins the extensive Yom Kippur directives (Lev. 16:2, 13).[71] The prophylactic measures at Sinai are expressly to prevent the people from trying to see Yahweh (Exod. 19:21). Moses hides his face before the burning bush, fearing that he might succeed in seeing God (3:6). It is the likely explanation of Elijah's self-concealment at Sinai (1 Kgs. 19:13).[72] And it is the traditional understanding why even the seraphim cover their faces (Isa. 6:2).

It is this convincing and unanimous array of Old Testament data which presents the problem addressed in this article. For the Old Testament's part, there is nothing intrinsically invisible about God. Bultmann makes the point emphatically: '*The thought of the invisibility of God in the strict sense is in no way an Old Testament one.* ... In the OT the notion is pervasive, that one *can* see God with human eyes'.[73]

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69 Fuhs, *TDOT* 13:229; cf. Simian-Yofre, *TDOT* 11:607. Note J. H. Hertz's explanation of this verse: 'no living being can see God's face, i.e. penetrate His eternal essence' (*The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Exodus* [London: OUP, 1930], 389).

70 Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 300, who summarises well the relevant data. Depending on interpretation, we may likely add to our list of theophany survivors Gideon (Judg. 6:22) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:28).

71 Such instructions challenge the suggestion that 'Yahweh resides, *invisible*, between the Cherubim' (Georges A. Barrois, *The Face of Christ in the Old Testament* [New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974], 99, italics added).

72 The parallels between Moses and Elijah are well documented; e.g. Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1996), 284-289; Brian Britt, 'Prophetic Concealment in a Biblical Type Scene', *CBQ* 64.1 (2002), 37-58.

73 Bultmann, 'Untersuchungen', 177-178, my translation, italics original.

Systematic theologies

A final part of this survey demonstrates that, when time and space is available, systematicians reach precisely this conclusion: that the Bible does not claim God to be completely invisible, but that he is inaccessible (hence the significance of the incarnation). We may also note the converse, that more superficial studies remain prone to the tradition of God's invisibility.

Examples of the latter are easy to find. Often starting with a text like John 4:24 ('God is spirit'), scholars can quickly resolve that God 'has none of the properties belonging to matter, and that He cannot be discerned by the bodily senses.'[74] Others reach a similar conclusion, often without demonstrating much working.[75]

Others do not disagree that God is incorporeal. But neither do they accept the simple conclusion that God *must* remain unseen, unable to interact with his created sphere. Calvin argues that God may be spirit, but even (the) Spirit can be physically manifest.[76] Bavinck notes that God can be partially revealed by names and nouns, even though no word is adequate to encapsulate him.[77] Indeed, Bavinck later offers a helpful survey of how Christian scholarship became increasingly influenced by negative (apophatic) definitions – an imbalance which is still being redressed. He is careful to promote a careful balance, so crucial to the message of the Bible, of God's transcendence *and* immanence. His survey culminates with the essential observation that 'God is invisible but is able to make himself visible and to reveal himself to man. "It is not in our power to see him but it is in his power to reveal himself."'[78]

Others reach a similar conclusion, though with less detail.[79] Bavinck's careful balance has, however, been re-presented in Frame's recent *Doctrine of God.*

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74 Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (4th ed.; London: Banner of Truth, 1939), 66; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols.; 1871–1873; reprint Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 1:378-379; Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 167.

75 E.g. J. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Academie, 1988–1992), 1:53; Gerald L. Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 103. With other different, philosophical starting points, Leonardo Boff, 'Trinity', in *Systematic Theology* (eds. J. Sobrino & I. Ellacuría; Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 75-89, at 86-87; perhaps Karl Barth, *CD* II/1:190.

76 Calvin, *Comm.* Isa. 6:1.

77 Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 17-19, esp. 18.

78 Bavinck, *Doctrine of God*, 180-183 (quote 181). The final citation can be traced to Ambrose, *Exp. Luc.* 1.26 (CSEL 32.4.27); cf. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 4.20.5 (*ANF* 1:489): 'For man does not see God by his own powers; but when He pleases He is seen by men, by whom He wills, and when He wills, and as He wills.'

79 E.g. Shirley C. Guthrie Jr, *Christian Doctrine* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1968), 122-123; Adrio König, *Here Am I!* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 80-83; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 188-190; Richard G. Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 127, 150; Donald G. Bloesch, *God the Almighty* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), 85-91.

Frame's conclusions, already sampled above, judiciously keep the various biblical texts in a viable tension:

1. God is *essentially invisible.* This means, not that he can never be seen under any circumstances, but rather that, as Lord, he sovereignly chooses when, where, and to whom to make himself visible....
2. God has often made himself visible, in theophany and in the incarnate Christ, so that human beings may on occasion truly say that they have "seen God."...
3. "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18a) means that no one has ever seen God apart from his voluntary theophanic-incarnational revelation....
4. It is right to be terrified in the presence of theophany.... But, as we have seen, some people do see God without losing their lives.[80]

Frame's conclusions neatly complement my own. We have seen that the evidence for *not* seeing God is slim indeed. It is concentrated in a limited number of New Testament texts, where the idea of invisibility may be little more than a Hellenistic shorthand for 'beyond earthly experience'. Christian tradition, clearly aided by Greek philosophy, has allowed these few texts to dominate and to direct biblical interpretation. But even a limited survey of these passages suggests that it may be the New Testament words and phrases, rather than their Old Testament agitators, which need to be reconsidered.

Abstract

The Old and New Testaments appear to offer contradictory evidence as to whether God *can* be seen. The usual resolution is to defend the New Testament statements that God is invisible, and to somehow accommodate the Old Testament passages. This article brings together sometimes-overlooked data to suggest that such an approach is unhelpful. We do better to allow the Old Testament statements that God can be seen, and to reconsider what the New Testament passages are trying to claim.

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80 Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 590; cf. Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 214-224, esp. 220; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), chap. 12, esp. 359-367.