

Can a mortal man see God?

Introduction

This is an important question because it involves a number of important doctrines that often get overlooked when answering it. Some people say that fleshly men did see God because the OT appears to say so; but this ignores these very important doctrines. Over-literalistic interpretations are dangerous; students must be wiser and consider the greater Biblical context, which includes axiomatic doctrines.

So we have to evaluate what we mean by God and what we mean by seeing. This matters.

OT passages to be considered

And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: 'For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.' Gen 32:30

Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And *there was* under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in *its* clarity. Exod 24:9-10

And you said: 'Surely the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives'. Deut 5:24

And Manoah said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, because we have seen God!' Jud 13:22

So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts'. Isa 6:5

I will not extensively analyse the Angel of the Lord theophanies, which I will briefly cover in the section on the incarnation.

The incarnation

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh. Rm 8:3

Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself. Phil 2:5-8

God was manifested in the flesh. 1 Tim 3:14

Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity, is the manifestation of God to men; the one who declares God to those in the covenant (Jn 1:18). The Father does not appear to men neither does the Holy Spirit. Only Jesus declares God to men.

This is possible because, although Jesus is God, the glory of God was hidden by his flesh. Jesus withheld his glory during the incarnation; it was not removed but hidden. For a brief moment a glimpse of his glory was seen by three disciples at the Mount of Transfiguration, but even this was not the complete glory.

This is why the flesh of Jesus, his form as a man, is said to be a veil that hides his divine glory:

The veil, that is, His flesh. Heb 10:20

OT theophanies

Most of the theophanies involve the 'Angel of the Lord' as opposed to just an angel. There are occasions when this phrase is used of an ordinary angel, but in most cases the context is clear that this is a meeting with God.

It is generally accepted that these appearances are of the pre-incarnate Christ, the Second Person. This is because Jesus explains to us that only he can declare God to men.

For example, Manoah and his wife:

And the Angel of the LORD appeared to the woman. Jud 13:3

And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the Angel of God came to the woman again as she was sitting in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her. Then the woman ran in haste and told her husband, and said to him, 'Look, the Man who came to me the other day has just now appeared to me!' So Manoah arose and followed his wife. When he came to the Man, he said to Him, 'Are You the Man who spoke to this woman?' And He said, 'I am.' Manoah said, 'Now let Your words come to pass! What will be the boy's rule of life, and his work?' So the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, 'Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful.' Jud 13:9-13

And Manoah said to his wife, 'We shall surely die, because we have seen God!' Jud 13:22

In this passage we are told that the messenger was first the Angel of the Lord; then that he was a man; then that he was God. This is a theophany of the Second Person.

So, the theophanies of the OT are not seeing God in his divine glory but seeing a man, or an angel that were manifestations of the Second Person before the incarnation. The Second Person was clothed in flesh (e.g. conversing with Abraham) or appearing as the Angel of the Lord. This is not seeing the Father in all his awesome, majestic glory.

Doctrines to be considered

Jesus tells us that no human being has seen God

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. Jn 1:18

Not that anyone has seen the Father, except He who is from God; He has seen the Father. Jn 6:46

These statements were made in the full knowledge that the OT occasionally said that a man had seen God. Whatever such men saw, they did not see the Father in his glory. Jesus is explicit in this.

The apostles tell us that no human being has seen God

He who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. 1 Tim 6:15-16

No one has seen God at any time. 1 Jn 4:12

The OT prophets tell us that no one has seen God

But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live'. Exod 33:20

And the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of the words, but saw no form; *you only heard* a voice. Deut 4:12

First conclusion

Scripture is clear that no man has ever seen God.

For a man to see God is instant death

But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live'. Exod 33:20

This is unequivocal. The majestic glory of God utterly consumes anything sinful in its presence. No man can stand in the awesome glory of God and survive.

I am not generally a fan of Jewish apologetics, but this quote is very apposite.

Of that divine glory mentioned in the scripture, there is one degree which the eyes of the prophets were able to explore; another which all the Israelites saw, as the cloud and consuming fire; the third is so bright, and so dazzling, that no mortal is able to comprehend it; but should anyone venture to look on it, his whole frame would be dissolved.' In such inconceivable splendour is the Divine Majesty revealed to the inhabitants of the celestial world, where he is said to 'dwell in the light which no man can approach unto.' By the 'face of God,' therefore, we are to understand that light inaccessible before which angels may stand, but which would be so insufferable to mortal eyes, that no man could see it and live.

Rabbi Jehudah, in Sepher Cosri.¹

¹ Or Sefer ha-Kuzar (Book of Refutation and proof on behalf of the despised religion), Judah Halevi.

Second conclusion

For a man to see God is instant death and utter destruction.

The old nature cannot communicate with God in any form

For what is the hope of the hypocrite, though he may gain *much*, If God takes away his life? Will God hear his cry when trouble comes upon him? Job 27:8-9

They cry out, but He does not answer, because of the pride of evil men. Surely God will not listen to empty *talk*, nor will the Almighty regard it. Job 35:12-13

They cried out, but *there was* none to save; *even* to the LORD, but He did not answer them. Ps 18:41

The face of the LORD *is* against those who do evil. Ps 34:16

They will call on me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently, but they will not find me. Prov 1:28

The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is His delight. Prov 15:8

The LORD is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayer of the righteous. Prov 15:29

Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Isa 1:15

Though they cry out to Me, I will not listen to them. Jer 11:11

Though they cry in My ears with a loud voice, I will not hear them. Ezek 8:18

Then they will cry to the LORD, but He will not hear them; He will even hide His face from them at that time, because they have been evil in their deeds. Mic 3:4

'They called out and I would not listen', says the LORD of hosts. Zech 7:13

In order to communicate with God one must first be touched by God. This is done by regeneration which enables us to have faith and repent and then communicate with God. In the OT, before regeneration could be effected by the cross, petitioners had to be in the covenant and thus had certain rights of blessing that would be ratified in the future. Their faith was in the future deliverer, as ours is in the past deliverer.

The old nature is under the curse of God and is full of sin. No sin can communicate with God.

Third conclusion

Since fleshly men cannot communicate with God then they cannot see him face to face. Jacob was a sinner when he 'saw' God. The elders were sinners when they 'saw' God; in fact they included Nadab and Abihu. Isaiah admitted that he was a sinner when he 'saw' God and was symbolically cleansed afterwards not before. Therefore, they did not actually see God in his glory.

Summary of doctrines

- No human being has seen God.
- For a man to see God is instant death and utter destruction.
- Fleshly men cannot communicate with God.

The passages explained

Jacob

Then Jacob was left alone; and a Man wrestled with him until the breaking of day. Now when He saw that He did not prevail against him, He touched the socket of his hip; and the socket of Jacob's hip was out of joint as He wrestled with him. And He said, 'Let Me go, for the day breaks.' But he said, 'I will not let You go unless You bless me!' So He said to him, 'What is your name?' He said, 'Jacob.' And He said, 'Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel; for you have struggled with God and with men, and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked, saying, 'Tell me Your name, I pray.' And He said, 'Why is it that you ask about My name?' And He blessed him there. And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: 'For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved.' Gen 32:30-30

The explanation is simple; the text plainly says that a man wrestled with him, not God. This is a theophany of the Second Person who came in the flesh in order to test and bless Jacob. This is not an actual revelation of the glory of God the Father.

Moses

But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.' And the LORD said, 'Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.' Exod 33:19-23

Here we are categorically told that Moses did not see God face to face but only saw his back; that is, God's full glory was hidden from him.

The elders of Israel

Then Moses went up, also Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel. And *there was* under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in *its* clarity. Exod 24:9-10

Again, the explanation is simple. This was a vision. They saw the God of Israel in a vision. The paved work like sapphires represents heavenly glory. God does not walk around on sapphires.

Compare Rev 4:6, 'Before the throne there was a sea of glass, like crystal'. This is also a vision of heaven.

These words the LORD spoke to all your assembly, in the mountain from the midst of the fire, the cloud, and the thick darkness, with a loud voice; and He added no more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me. So it was, when you heard the voice from the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire, that you came near to me, all the heads of your tribes and your elders. And you said: 'Surely the LORD our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire. We have seen this day that God speaks with man; yet he still lives'. Deut 5:22-24

Here Moses confirms that what the elders saw was a vision only because they only heard God but did not see him but only saw fire.

Isaiah

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!' And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: 'Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.' Isa 6:1-7

Again this is a vision. God does not have a robe; he is Spirit. There is not a material temple in heaven. There isn't smoke in heaven. Sin is not purged by hot coals. There isn't an altar in heaven; the altar is Christ.

Conclusion

There is no OT passage which categorically states that a man (NB a man in sin, in the old nature) ever saw God in his glory. We must not use an over-literal interpretation of texts.

What about saints that did not die but saw God in heaven?

This involves Enoch and Elijah only.

So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years. And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. Gen 5:23-24

Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire *appeared* with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. 2 Kg 2:11

All that can be said with certainty is that God took these saints to Abraham's Bosom (Lk 16:22-23). The details of this translation are not given to us. Therefore, we have to rely upon doctrine and Biblical greater context to understand what happened.

Of this we are certain; all men die:

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment. Heb 9:27

For we will surely die and *become* like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again. 2 Sam 14:14

For I know *that* You will bring me *to* death. Job 30:23

What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave? Selah Ps 89:48

For the living know that they will die. Eccles 9:5

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. Eccles 12:7

Death spread to all men, because all sinned. Rm 5:12

All men die because all men were born in sin. No man has ever escaped his birth into total depravity. Enoch and Elijah were men, therefore they were born in sin and had to die because of that sin.

When a man dies his soul and spirit are separated and taken by God. In the case of saints the soul and spirit go to be with God in heaven. Before the cross the saints had to wait in Abraham's Bosom, a separate blessed place in Hades away from the torment of sinners.

Since Enoch and Elijah were taken by God then they had to die in this process. The miracle was not that they didn't die; Scripture tells us that they had to die. They were spared the pains of a normal death and in the process of being taken they would have died and their soul and spirit taken by God to blessing.

Making conjectures that contradict very clear scriptural doctrines is a dangerous game. We cannot ignore Biblical statements that all men die or we blaspheme God. Enoch and Elijah did not fellowship with God in his glory and majesty as mere men; they were changed.

In fact, these translations are a type of the translation that will occur on the last day when the saints present on Earth meet the Lord in the heaven when he comes in glory (1 Thess 4:17).

Conclusion

All this is conclusive; men cannot see God in his glory and no man ever has.

This makes the glorious future of saints in the restoration even more wonderful. In that day on a restored Earth saints will fellowship with God in glory and will not be destroyed because they then have a spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44) like the Lord (Phil 3:21).

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. 1 Jn 3:2

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