

PART 1: CONCEPT OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

For Christians, a correct concept of God puts the rest of life in perspective. It is the anchor for stabilizing the practical realities of daily life. Many have also noted that people become like the God they serve. The answers to questions like, “What kind of a world do we want to live in? How do we want people to treat each other? What is right and what is wrong? in the end come to be based on the view of God that we hold, or lack of one. This is one of the truly fundamental issues of life that each of us ought to consider carefully.

One man has wisely said,¹

Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfold(ed), as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.

Also, knowing about God is not enough. That same scholar said:

Our concern must be to enlarge our acquaintance, not simply with the doctrine of God’s attributes, but with the living God whose attributes they are. ...We must seek, in studying God, to be led to God.²

I am here to present a Christian view of God from the Bible, with the hope that it will bring you closer to God.

A Biblical View of God

The Bible is a collection of 66 individual books, written by God over 2000 years through more than 40 authors. It is assembled in a roughly chronological order, and its view of God unfolds as a progressive revelation as God chose to reveal Himself in actions, words, and even visits to specific people and places in history.

In this revelation God demonstrates a deep concern; to not only reveal His will, but to also reveal Himself, and to do that in relationships with people. I’d like to present an overview of these things and the aspects of God’s nature and character that are emphasized.

A. Creation:

The Bible begins with these words:³

¹ Packer, J. I., *Knowing God*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973, 14-15.

² Packer, *Knowing God*, 18.

³ Genesis 1:1-3 NIV(All references NIV or NASB).

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light...

This is the first of eight declarative statements of creation with God calling things into being through His word. God, as the creator of a beautiful and useful world is also separate from that creation, ruling over it, so to speak. Yet there are also enigmatic statements. The Spirit of God is mentioned- this is not an angel in the Bible, but is spoken of as a distinct personal manifestation of God’s own being. Also, God’s word, or speech, is mentioned, and later in the Bible that Word is treated as an eternal person in its own right.⁴

In the 7th declarative statement of creation,⁵ the words are used: ‘Let *us* make man in *our* image...’ This is one of only three times in the Bible that God speaks in the first person plural.⁶ Ancient Hebrew did not use the grammatical convention of ‘plural of majesty’ in this way, as many ancient and modern languages do, so these statements carry a special significance.⁷ While the God of the Bible can be distinguished as unique and separate from creation, from the outset there is an unexplained but revealed allowance for His inner identity to somehow be plural.

B. The Garden and the Fall

Genesis 1:26 states that mankind was made in the image of God with a unique capacity to relate to Him. In the Bible, the story of Adam and Eve before their fall is a picture of them ruling the Garden and enjoying intimacy with God. The account even describes God walking in the Garden with them and speaking directly to them. Their direct disobedience to God broke the harmony of their relationship. They were punished justly, put out of the Garden, made subject to death and Satan’s temptations, and separated from God’s presence. This story sets out a basic principle that the rest of the Bible develops, that the primary effect of our sins is relational separation from God. One Hebrew prophet was given these words:⁸

Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear.
But your sins have separated you from your God;
your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear.

C. Abraham

Moving forward we come to Abraham. God generously gave him children when he was childless and made him the progenitor of nations. God gave him Ishmael through Hagar, and miraculously gave him Isaac through his elderly wife, Sarah. Through Abraham we learn that God makes and keeps promises to people. Through a covenant with Abraham and His descendents in the ancient nation of Israel, God revealed His trustworthy, *covenant-keeping* character.

⁴ John 1:1-3.

⁵ Genesis 1:26-27.

⁶ The others are Gen. 3:22 and 11:7.

⁷ Gleason L. Archer, *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, Grand Rapids: Regency, 1982, 359.

⁸ Isaiah 59:1,2

D. Moses

Moving forward we come to Moses. Listen to the Shema, the creed of the Jews found in the Torah, Deut. 6:4,5:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.⁹

Oneness here has the emphasis of identity; the only Lord in contrast to others. It is, however, a oneness that allows unity with internal diversity, similar to the cryptic statements in Genesis, but made more explicit because the Hebrew word for “one” here, “*echad*,” emphasizes a unity of components as opposed to strict numerical oneness. There was an explicit Hebrew word for expressing strict numerical oneness- “*yachid*” which God used in telling Abraham to sacrifice his son, “your only son.”¹⁰ That word, *yachid*, though, is never used of the ontological oneness of God in the Hebrew Bible. *Echad* is used, and it is used in other places, like for man and wife that “The two shall become one flesh.”¹¹ ‘One’ here is a unity that allows internal personal distinctions.

Then, the command to “Love the Lord” speaks strongly of the importance of a relationship with God. In this covenant context God had made promises of love to the Israelites. They were to return that love. Though submission was implied, love is what God emphasized. He wants a loving relationship with people.

Then there is the Law of Moses itself, and at the centre of that law was a sacrificial system for maintaining both personal and national relationships with God. In the Torah, Leviticus 17:11- it says:

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.

There were laws to maintain ritual purity and national identity. There was also a strict moral component to the law summarized in the 10 Commandments.¹² The Law provided a basis on which the morally perfect and exalted God could dwell with a sinful people. Through the sacrificial system, the death of a substitute met the just demand for God’s judgement on sin.¹³

E. Visits by God

There were also personal visits by God to people, to Adam and Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Hagar and Ishmael, and Moses, to name a few. Then after the law was given to Moses, and the priesthood and sacrifices were in use, God’s presence manifested itself

⁹ Deuteronomy 6 :4,5

¹⁰ Genesis 22:2

¹¹ Genesis 2:24

¹² Exodus 20 :1-17 ; Deuteronomy 5 :1-21.

¹³ This is one of the Bible’s great differences to the Qur’an. The Qur’an omits all mention of this enormous and foundational part of the Law of Moses. Yet it is the foundation for a person having a relationship with God, according to the Bible.

in the Temple built by Solomon. These were personal manifestations of God in this world.

These visits demonstrate that the nature of the God of the Bible is different from the Greek, Roman, and other ancient near Eastern conceptions of gods. God is a living God who is not far off and distant. God has the ability to enter time and space personally and to interact with people directly in various ways, as well as sending angels and prophets.

F. The Messiah

Many of the Old Testament prophets predicted a mysterious person who would come and bring God's plans to their ultimate completion. Their predictions revolved around three roles- the ultimate prophet, the universal King, and the one high priest over the entire human race. These three came to be united under the single title, Messiah.

It was revealed that this Messiah would somehow also be a divine figure. The Prophet Daniel, 400 years before Christ, was given the following revelation: ¹⁴ (Daniel 7:13-14, emphasis mine)

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like *a son of man*, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into His presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations, and men of every language *worshipped* him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

G. Jesus Christ:

Jesus claimed to be this Messiah explicitly and implicitly. The Jews understood completely that His miracles and teaching were claims to His being this promised Messiah. But they tended to fix on just one facet of His role- that of the universal King- and they wanted Him to start ruling and lead them militarily against the Romans. Jesus, though, deferred taking up the role of King, and focused on fulfilling the roles of Prophet and Priest.

As sacrifices to cover the sins of the people were necessary in the Jewish religion so Jesus as the Messiah was the ultimate sacrifice, at the cross taking on Himself the sins of all people, acting as both sacrifice, and then after His resurrection, as High Priest over mankind.

Also, he claimed to be God in human flesh as the divine Messiah. This is the significance of the title He constantly used of Himself "Son of Man", taken from that passage I read earlier. ¹⁵ He also claimed deity by taking to Himself the most holy personal name of God- *Yahweh*, the very name God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. ¹⁶ Jesus did this when he said to the Jewish leaders, "Before Abraham was, *I*

¹⁴ Daniel 7:13-14

¹⁵ Daniel 7:13-14.

¹⁶ Exodus 3:14.

Am” in Hebrew, *Yahweh*.¹⁷ The leaders knew exactly what He was claiming and in their unbelief they picked up stones to stone him for blasphemy.

In the centuries immediately following the first generation of Christians, the early church found it had to protect the Jewish and Biblical conception of God’s unique nature and ability to enter time and space against pagan Greek categories of a distant deity who works only through semi-divine intermediaries.¹⁸ It was in this context that the word Trinity, for the revealed tri-unity of God, was reverently coined to describe the entire Bible’s revelation of three eternal persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, the three persons sharing one spiritual essence from all eternity.

The hope given to every Christian is that in this life they can know God through Jesus Christ, and after death, they will live in God’s presence forever. Listen to this revelation recorded in the last book of the Bible:¹⁹

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away...I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the **Lamb** are its temple...Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the **Lamb’s** book of life.

H. The Lamb

The title, “Lamb of God”, brings us to our closing thoughts. In this title we have the Bible’s greatest single picture of the character of God. One Hebrew prophet was given these words about God:²⁰

Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.

How can an absolutely pure God have a loving relationship with people who constantly defile themselves? The Bible reveals that God took the initiative and provided the only effective way.

When Jesus came to the prophet John to be baptised, John said, “Look, **the** Lamb of God, who **takes away** the sin of the world!”²¹ proclaiming Jesus’ superiority to all the lambs that had been sacrificed at the Temple to cover sin throughout Israel’s history. Jesus, as the only perfect, sinless man, could bear our sins, because he had none of his

¹⁷ John 8:58-59.

¹⁸ Wright, *Challenge*, 74.

¹⁹ Revelation 21:1-4, 21-27.

²⁰ Habakkuk 1:13.

²¹ John 1:29 (emphasis mine).

own to bear. Since He was also the Divine Son of Man, God dwelling in human flesh, he could bear the sins of the entire human race. No other prophet or human in history could bear the world's sin and shame and thus effectually intercede for us. Jesus said of Himself:²²

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

It was said at the beginning that just to know about God is not really the goal. The goal should be to actually know God personally. By dying on the cross and rising from the dead, Jesus conquered every barrier of sin, shame, death, and even Satan himself. He offers that victory to all of us if we will only confess our sins and repent to God, and believe in Christ as our personal Messiah, Saviour and Lord. I ask you to consider doing that tonight. If you do, the promise from the Bible is that you will enter a loving and pure relationship with God where your knowledge of Him will not only be academic, but personal and real. To my mind, this is the most relevant aspect concerning the Christian view of God, but I will mention some others when we come to the next part of our dialogue. Thank you very much for listening so carefully. May God bless you as you seek to know Him.

PART 2: RELEVANCE OF FAITH IN A SECULAR SOCIETY/WORLD

CHRISTIANITY, SCIENCE AND THE ARTS: BEING A CHRISTIAN IN A SECULAR SOCIETY

I briefly mentioned earlier that our view of God (or lack of one) informs our behaviour and the way we construct societies. Christians believe Jesus' teaching and example are the authoritative sources for making the link between our view of God and how we are to live in societies. Since Jesus had no specific political agenda except for his final return to complete his own eternal kingdom, until then Christians are allowed a tremendous flexibility to craft Christian responses in the midst of all kinds of human political systems. Since the West has largely abandoned a faith based political model in favour of a secular one, Christians have adjusted to participating and responding as co-citizens instead of seeking to impose a new model.

Earlier I also mentioned the statement the Bible makes of people being made in the image of God. Even though this image gets marred by sin, we nonetheless recognize that beauty, creativity, and scientific discovery are all marks of this image and are general gifts of providence from God to mankind.

Western science, in and after the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, was built on the recognition that the universe is God's creation and it is mankind's privilege to explore and discover this creation an act of worship. Today, even in a place like Oxford that celebrates the views of Darwin and non-theistic explanations of origins, one will find that some of the finest philosophers and scientists are firm believers in Christ as Lord and the Bible as God's revealed Word, and they integrate their faith and science in profound and articulate ways using the full measure of academic rigour.

²² John 3:16.

In the midst of all societies, Christians are to be as salt in food, or leaven to bread, a permeating influence to witness to God's standards of morality, to the reality of His judgment, and to His offer of salvation in Christ. This life is not all there is and the next life will be the long one spent with God Himself. Also, the Bible presents human sinfulness as being the core problem underlying the world's problems. It presents that the only way people can really be changed is through an inner transformation that comes through personally experiencing God's forgiveness through Christ, and through God sending His Holy Spirit to live within the Christian believer. Though laws and political systems can moderate behaviour through external constraints, actual change in the human heart to make it better can only come from a transforming experience of the grace of God.

At its best, Christianity has sought to liberate human thought and life and direct it toward eternal realities. At times, it has been misused as a tool of political repression, as is a common misuse of religion. The proper attitudes and focus are best seen in Jesus Christ. As the eternal Word of God it is said that in Him 'is hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge'. He is the source of all approaches to life that are truly liberating, and truth from His teachings and example can be integrated into all areas of our lives and all areas of academic study. One of His many titles which attest to this is that he claimed to be the Bread of Life as the one who can uniquely satisfy the eternal hunger within each of us.²³ Jesus said concerning people, 'I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly'.²⁴ The eternal life He promises to give is a quality of life marked by peace, joy, love, and contentment, which starts in this world and continues into the next. May you be blessed as you consider the God of the Bible and the relevance of His claims.

Thank you for listening.

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²³ John 6:35.

²⁴ Colossians 2:3 and John 10:10, respectively.