

John 1:18 Commentary

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JESUS' RISE FROM OBSCURITY FOLLOWED BY OPPOSITION IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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THE LIFE OF JESUS AS COVERED BY GOSPEL OF JOHN (shaded area)

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John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. ([NASB: Lockman](#))

Greek: theon oudeis eoraken (3SRAI) popote; monogenes theos o on (PAPMSN) eis ton kolpon tou patros ekeinos exegesato (3SAMI)

Amplified: No man has ever seen God at any time; the only unique Son, or the only begotten God, Who is in the bosom [in the intimate presence] of the Father, He has declared Him [He has revealed Him and brought Him out where He can be seen; He has interpreted Him and He has made Him known]. [Prov. 8:30.]

ESV: No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

KJV: No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*.

NLT: No one has ever seen God. But his only Son, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart; he has told us about him. ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: it is true that no one has ever seen God at any time. Yet the divine and only Son, who lives in the closest intimacy with the Father, has made him known.

Wuest: Absolute deity in its essence no one has ever yet seen. God uniquely-begotten, He who is in the bosom of the Father, that One fully explained deity.

Young's Literal: God no one hath ever seen; the only begotten Son, who is on the bosom of the Father -- he did declare.

- **Seen:** Jn 6:46 Ex 33:20 Dt 4:12 Mt 11:27 Lk 10:22 Col 1:15 1Ti 1:17 1Ti 6:16 1Jn 4:12,20
- **The only:** Jn 1:14 Jn 3:16-18 1Jn 4:9
- **In the bosom:** Jn 13:23 Pr 8:30 Isa 40:11 La 2:12 Lk 16:22,23
- **He has explained Him:** Jn 12:41 Jn 14:9 Jn 17:6,26 Ge 16:13 Ge 18:33 Ge 32:28-30 Ge 48:15,16 Ex 3:4-6 Ex 23:21 Ex 33:18-23 Ex 34:5-7 Nu 12:8 Jos 5:13-15 6:1,2 Jdg 6:12-26 Jdg 13:20-23 Isa 6:1-3 Eze 1:26-28 Ho 12:3-5 Mt 11:27 Lk 10:22 1Jn 5:20

JESUS EXEGETES THE INVISIBLE GOD

No one has seen God at any time - No one is absolute negation = "absolutely no one." The point is that no one has ever seen God, in His full and complete way (cf. Jn 6:46), but some people did see partial revelations of God in the OT. However, most commentators feel that the One Who was seen in the OT was Christ, presenting Himself in a so-called pre-incarnate Theophany (or

"Christophany") (See study of **Angel of the LORD**, almost certainly a **Christophany**). Later, John records under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit that the prophet Isaiah "saw His (Jesus') glory, and he spoke of Him." (Jn 12:41; cp Isa 6:1-5 = Isaiah declared "my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.")

Even Moses did not see God but only His glory (Ex 33:20).

Numerous passages emphasize that no one has seen the Father...

1John 4:12 **No one has seen God at any time**; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.

John 5:37 "And the Father who sent Me, He has borne witness of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time, **nor seen His form**."

John 6:46 "**Not that anyone has seen the Father**, except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father."

John 8:19 And so they were saying to Him, "Where is Your Father?" Jesus answered, "You know neither Me, nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also."

John 14:9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father'? 10 "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works."

John 15:24 "If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well."

One reason no one had seen the essence of God was that to do so would have brought instant death (Ex. 33:20; cf. Ge. 32:30; Dt. 5:26; Jdg. 13:22)

Paul writes that the essence of God is **invisible** = "Now to the King eternal, immortal, **invisible**, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen." (1Tim 1:17), "Who Alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, **Whom no man has seen or can see**. To Him be honor and eternal dominion! Amen." (1Ti 6:16) What Paul is saying is that no man has ever seen the very essence of God, or God in His essential nature. John is saying that the only way to see the inner nature of God is to see Jesus. Jesus Himself was asked by Philip "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." (John 14:8) Jesus responded "Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? **He who has seen Me has seen the Father**; how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" (John 14:9) Let us fix our eyes on Jesus (Heb 12:2)!

Uteley - Some say that this (**No one has seen God at any time**) contradicts Ex. 33:20–23. However, the Hebrew term in the Exodus passage refers to "afterglow," not physical sight of God Himself. The thrust of this passage is that only Jesus fully reveals God (cf. Jn 14:8ff). This verse emphasizes the unique revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth. He is the full and only divine self-disclosure. To know Jesus is to know God. Jesus is the Father's ultimate revelation of Himself. There is no clear understanding of deity apart from Him (cf. Col. 1:15–19; Heb. 1:2–3). ([John 1 Commentary](#))

Boice - No one in the ancient world would have disagreed with the first part of that statement—"No one has ever seen God"—for, as William Barclay notes in his commentary, "In the ancient world men were fascinated and depressed and frustrated by what they regarded as the infinite distance and the utter unknowability of God. ... Xenophanes had said, 'Guesswork is over all.' Plato had said, 'Never man and God can meet.' Celsus had laughed at the way that the Christians called God 'Father,' because 'God is away beyond everything.' At the best, Apuleius said, men could catch a glimpse of God as a lightning flash lights up a dark night—one split second of illumination, and then the dark." Even the Jews would have thought this way, for they knew that God had spoken to Moses in the Old Testament, saying, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live" (Exod. 33:20). There would have been no disagreement at all when John the Baptist declared that no one could see God. (The Gospel of John : An expository commentary)

The only begotten God ("God the One and Only" NIV) - Some versions read "only begotten Son." (e.g., KJV, NKJV, RSV, HCSB, NLT, NAB, NJB) - The NET Note says "The textual problem 'the only God' versus 'the only son' is a notoriously difficult one. Only one letter would have differentiated the readings in the manuscripts." (**For more detailed discussion see full [NET Note on John 1:18](#)**)

Steven Cole sums the arguments up by noting that "The earliest and best manuscripts favor the reading 'only begotten God.' Since it is a unique phrase and is more difficult to explain than 'only begotten Son,' a scribe probably changed the original to 'only begotten Son' to correspond to John 3:16 & 18. Thus translated literally, the verse in the original probably read, 'the unique Son, God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.' As Jesus will later say (6:46), 'Not that anyone has seen the Father,

except the One who is from God; He has seen the Father." And (14:9), "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

In the bosom of the Father - Steven Cole explains that "**in the bosom of the Father**" corresponds to "the Word was with God" (1:1) and points to the close and unbroken fellowship that Jesus enjoyed with the Father, as seen in His prayer in chapter 17. It also shows us the horror of the cross for Jesus, when as He bore our sins He cried out (Mt. 27:46), "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**" This shows that as horrible as Jesus being the Bearer of all mankind's sins was, even worse was the momentary separation from His Father (a mystery no man can explain, certainly not this writer!). It is interesting that Paul in his description of the judgment of unbelievers does not emphasize the fiery torment but the separation from God (2Th 1:6-10 = "These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, **away from the presence of the Lord** and from the glory of His power.").

D A Carson - A similar expression is found elsewhere: Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom (Lk. 16:22-23), and John rests on Jesus' bosom at the last supper (Jn 13:23). It apparently conveys an aura of intimacy, mutual love and knowledge. (The Gospel according to John).

Vincent - The phrase, in the bosom of the Father, depicts this eternal relation as essentially a relation of love; the figure being used of the relation of husband and wife (Deut. 13:6); of a father to an infant child (Num. 11:12), and of the affectionate protection and rest afforded to Lazarus in Paradise (Luke 16:23). ([John 1 - Vincent's Word Studies](#))

He - "**He** is strongly emphatic, and pointing to the eternal Son. This pronoun is used by John more frequently than by any other writer. It occurs seventy-two times, and not only as denoting the more distant subject, but as denoting and laying special stress on the person or thing immediately at hand, or possessing pre-eminently the quality which is immediately in question. Thus Jesus applies it to Himself as the person for whom the healed blind man is inquiring: "It is **He** that talketh with thee" (John 9:37). So here, "the only-be-gotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father — **He** hath declared Him." ([John 1 - Vincent's Word Studies](#))

Has explained Him (God) - "From His eternal, infinite, spiritual self-existence, He came out into the open for humans to see with their physical eyes. He came in human flesh, a bodily representation of the fullness of the Godhead." (Zodhiates)

Jesus alone could "exegete God" for only Jesus "is the image of the invisible God." (Col 1:15) Only Jesus "is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature." (Heb 1:3)

MacArthur - Jesus is the only one qualified to exegete or interpret God to man, since "no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matt. 11:27).

Explained ([1834](#))(**exegeomai** from ek = out or as an intensifier + **hegeomai** = tell, lead means literally to lead out, then to unfold, declare by making plain, or tell the meaning of something, especially to tell it fully. To make known or thoroughly explain. Figuratively the idea is to "bring out" the meaning. To "draw out" in narrative form and so to relate (Luke 24:35; Acts 10:8; 15:12, 14; 21:19). In English **relate** means to give an account of.

In Jn 1:18, John says that the life of Jesus provides detailed information in a systematic manner regarding the character of God. In a sense, Jesus is the "exegesis" of God! He "narrates" or "relates" the full story about God! He is the Word of God and the Word about God! "As Jesus gives life and is life, raises the dead and is the resurrection, gives bread and is bread, speaks truth and is the truth, so as he speaks the word he is the Word." (D A Carson quoting C H Dodd).

Exegeomai is used of a man relating his dream (Jdg 7:13), of describing a miracle (2 Ki. 8:5), and of declaring the Lord's glory among the nations (1Chr. 16:24). The closely related noun **exegetes** (also in Ge 41:8) is used in Pr 29:18 (**see commentary**) which says "Where there is no **vision** (no expounder, on one who leads on, no interpreter), the people are unrestrained, But happy is he who keeps the law." The clear application to pastors is to "**Preach** (every verb in red is aorist imperative = command to do so even with a sense of urgency) the word; **be ready** in season and out of season; **reprove, rebuke, exhort**, with great patience and instruction." (2Ti 4:2-note) How few pastors are exegetes and thus their sheep are not fed.

Explain (Webster's definitions - Ponder Jesus' incarnation as you read these definitions! Interesting!) - To make known or clear by providing more detail, to make plain or understandable, to give the reason for or cause of, to show the logical development or relationships of, to explain implies a making plain or intelligible what is not immediately obvious or entirely known; to make (something) comprehensible, esp. by giving a clear and detailed account of the relevant structure, operation, surrounding circumstances, etc; **Synonyms** = clarify, clear up, define, demonstrate, describe, disclose, elucidate, explicate (formal), expound, illustrate, interpret, make clear or plain, resolve, solve, teach, unfold. **Webster's 1828** = To make plain, manifest or intelligible; to clear of obscurity; to expound; to illustrate by discourse, or by notes. The first business of a preacher is to explain his text. Notes and comments are intended to explain the scriptures.

Relate (Webster) - to give an account of; To tell; to recite; to narrate the particulars of an event; to tell or narrate (a story, information, etc.). To tell orally or in writing the details or circumstances of a situation

Vincent - Originally meant to lead or govern. Hence, like the Latin *praeire verbis*, to go before with words, to prescribe or dictate a form of words. To draw out in narrative, to recount or rehearse (see Acts 15:14, and on Luke 24:35). To relate in full; to interpret, or translate. Therefore, **exegesis**, is interpretation or explanation. The word **exegetes** was used by the Greeks of an expounder of oracles, dreams, omens, or sacred rites. Thus Croesus, finding the suburbs of Sardis alive with serpents, sent to the soothsayers (exegetas) of Telmessus (Herodotus, i. 78). The word thus comes to mean a spiritual director. Plato calls Apollo the tutelary director (patroos exegetes) of religion ("Republic," 427), and says, "Let the priests be interpreters for life" ("Laws," 759). In the Septuagint the word is used of the magicians of Pharaoh's court (Gen 41:8, 41:24), and the kindred verb of teaching or interpreting concerning leprosy (Lev 14:57). John's meaning is that the Word revealed or manifested and interpreted the Father to men. The word occurs only here in John's writings. Wyc. renders, He hath told out.

These words conclude the Prologue. The Historical Narrative now begins, and falls into two general divisions:

I. The Self-Revelation of Christ to the World (Jn 1:19-12:50)

II. The Self-Revelation of Christ to the Disciples (Jn 13:1-21:23)

In secular use **exegeomai** was used to describe the disclosure or description of a document, statement, or incident. In Josephus **exegeomai** is a "technical term for the interpretation of the law as practiced by the rabbinate.

TDNT - Exegeomai "is a technical one for the exposition of poetry, law, oracles, etc."

The English derivative is **exegesis** which refers to the unfolding. explanation or critical interpretation of a text. **Exegesis** is when a person interprets a text based solely on what it says. That is, he extracts out of the text what is there as opposed to reading into it what is not there (eisegesis). There are rules to proper exegesis: read the immediate context, related themes, word definitions, etc., that all play a part in properly understanding what something says and does not say." ([Exegesis - CARM Theological Dictionary](#)) ([See a very long article on "Bible Exegesis in the 1901 Jewish Encyclopedia](#)) Some interpreters feel that exegesis is a term interchangeable with hermeneutics ([Bible, Hermeneutics - Holman Bible Dictionary](#)).

Bryant - Exegeomai seems to have been more of a Hellenistic than a biblical term. The word meant (1) to recount facts or relate a narrative. This was the main Greek use of the term. The word also meant (2) to make known or explain divine secrets. This latter is its meaning here, and has to do with Hellenistic notions of revelation as well as biblical. It seems important that the prologue closes with such a term. To Jew and Hellenist, Jesus is the revelation of God's glory, grace, and truth. (College Press NIV commentary).

Exegesis - It usually refers more specifically to a verse-by-verse or phrase-by-phrase explanation. The goal in exegesis is to analyze passages carefully so that the words and intent of the passage are as clear as possible. Speculation is not prized, but attention to word meaning, form, structure, context (historical and biblical) and theology is usually addressed. Exegesis tends to be descriptive more than prescriptive; however, many readers engage in exegesis of the Bible for the ultimate purpose of finding guidance on spiritual matters, and thus relevance becomes part of the task of interpreting a passage. (Pocket dictionary of biblical studies).

Exegeomai - 6x in 6v - NAS Usage: explained(2), relate(2), related(1), relating(1).

Luke 24:35 They *began* to **relate** their experiences on the road and how He was recognized by them in the breaking of the bread.

Comment: The disciples who met the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus exegeted the events to the other disciples. A T Robertson "Their story was now confirmatory, not revolutionary. The women were right then after all."

John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has **explained** Him.

Acts 10:8 and after he (Cornelius) had **explained** (had exegeted) everything to them, he sent them to Joppa.

Acts 15:12 All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were **relating** (to go through or lead out a narrative of events) what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

A T Robertson - Three times (Acts 14:27; 15:4, 12) Paul is described as telling the facts about their mission work, facts more eloquent than argument (Page). One of the crying needs in the churches is fuller knowledge of the facts of mission work and progress with enough detail to give life and interest.

Acts 15:14 "Simeon has **related** how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name.

Acts 21:19 After he had greeted them, he *began* to **relate** one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.

A T Robertson - Imperfect middle of exegeomai, old verb to lead out, to draw out in narrative, to recount. So Paul is pictured (by

use of the imperfect tense = over and over) as taking his time for he had a great story to tell of what had happened since they saw him last.

G Campbell Morgan - "**Declared**" is a beautiful word. ..."**He hath exegeted Him.**" What is **exegesis**? The word means bringing out from into visibility; to bring forth authoritatively into visibility. Exegesis is the authoritative bringing forth into visibility of that which was there all the time, but which was not seen until brought forth. Jesus is the Exegesis of God. He is the One through Whom there is brought forth authoritatively into visibility the things men had not seen." ([The Gospel According to John](#))

A T Robertson - Exegeomai means to lead out, to draw out in narrative, to recount. Here only in John....This word fitly closes the Prologue in which the Logos is pictured in marvelous fashion as the Word of God in human flesh, the Son of God with the Glory of God in Him, showing men who God is and what He is.

Steven Cole - The word "**explained**" is the Greek word from which we get our word "**Exegete**." It is parallel to "the Word" in Jn 1:1. Just as a word explains an unseen thought, so Jesus, the Word, explains the unseen God to us. The only way that you can know the Father is through Jesus His Son (Luke 10:22; Jn 14:6). Elsewhere John writes (1John 2:23), "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also." In John 5:23 Jesus states, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." This means that the cults, which all deny the deity of Jesus, cannot bring anyone to God. It also means that the Insider Movement, which has changed the terms "Father" and "Son" because they are offensive to Muslims has perverted the core of the gospel. It's fine to explain what the terms mean, but it's not fine to change the terms that God has used to reveal Himself to us in His Son. ([Why You Should Believe in Jesus John 1:15-18](#))

Boice has a wonderful application of these passages: "What is your reaction to these things? Do you know the truth of them personally? One of the most memorable sermons that I have ever come across was preached by the late Emil Brunner at the Fraumünster Kirche in Zurich, Switzerland. It was based on the phrase "faith, hope, and love." The points were these. Every man has a past, a present, and a future. Every man has a problem in his past, a problem in his present, and a problem in his future. The problem in our past is sin, but God has an answer to that problem. The answer is faith, faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The problem in our future is death, but God has an answer to that problem also. The answer to that problem is hope, hope in Christ's return based on the fact of his historical resurrection and his promises. The problem in our present is hate, and God's answer to that problem is love. It is the love of Christ lived out in the lives of those who trust him. Brunner was entirely right. And he was right not only in highlighting the three great problems; he was right in pointing to the unique Christ as the answer. Has Christ become the answer to the problems in your life? He is the only One who will ever answer them completely." (The Gospel of John : An expositional commentary)

Illustration - Throughout church history Christianity has struggled against heresies that declare that the spiritual world is pure while the material world is either evil or illusory. For example, the second-century philosopher **Celsus** (an anti-Christian Greek philosopher) argued against Christianity in part by stating, "If you shut your eyes to the world of sense . . . only then will you see God." Scripture consistently denies this premise of Greek philosophy. When speaking of knowing God the Bible rarely mentions personal insight or illumination. God created the material world and called it good. The Son of God became fully human with human flesh and blood. Our story today shows that God can be known through the senses, even in a man born blind. John says Jesus "**has explained Him**," the invisible God!

Thou art the everlasting Word,
The Father's only Son;
God manifestly seen and heard,
And Heaven's beloved One.
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.

In Thee most perfectly expressed
The Father's glories shine;
Of the full Deity possessed,
Eternally divine:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.

True image of the Infinite,
Whose essence is concealed;
Brightness of uncreated light;
The heart of God revealed:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou

That every knee to Thee should bow.

But the high mysteries of Thy name
An angel's grasp transcend;
The Father only—glorious claim!—
The Son can comprehend:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow.

Throughout the universe of bliss,
The centre Thou, and sun;
The eternal theme of praise is this,
To Heaven's beloved One:
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou
That every knee to Thee should bow .
--Josiah Conder (1789–1855):

The Masterpiece Revealed - In an article in Moody Monthly, Frank M. Fairchild told of a beautiful fresco on the ceiling of a Roman palace. Painted by Guido Reni in 1614, it was one of the most impressive works of its day. But visitors couldn't fully appreciate the masterpiece because they had to crane their necks to see it. To solve the problem, palace officials placed a large mirror on the floor beneath the painting, enabling viewers to study its reflection and more fully appreciate its beauty.

Fairchild made this observation: "Jesus Christ does precisely that for us when we try to get some notion of God. . . . He interprets God to our dull hearts. In Him, God becomes visible and intelligible to us. We cannot by any amount of searching find out God. The more we try, the more we are bewildered. Then Jesus Christ appears. He is God stooping down to our level, and He enables our feeble thoughts to get some real hold on God Himself."

Christ came to reveal God to us. But He is more than a reflection of the Father. He is God in human flesh. Hebrews tells us that He is "the express image" of God (1:3). And Jesus Himself said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

As we meditate on the wonder of "the Word made flesh," we will say with the hymnwriter, "O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord."—R W DeHaan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. — Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

Christ's birth brings the infinite God within the finite reach of man.

What Message Does Your Life Preach? - Jesus is God in human form. In coming into our world, He revealed the heavenly Father to us (He **explained** God to us). That's what John meant when he said that "the Word became flesh." We call this the doctrine of the **incarnation**.

F. W. Boreham applied this truth in his book *Faces in the Fire*. He wrote, "The Christian man must accompany the Christian message. The Word must be presented in its proper human setting. . . . The Word made flesh is thus pronounced with an accent and an eloquence which are simply irresistible. . . . The words of men become [filled] with passion and with power only when they are made flesh. And in the same way, the thoughts of God to men are only eloquent when they are so expressed."

To emphasize the importance of putting actions behind our words, Boreham quoted English writer George Eliot (pen name for Mary Ann Evans). Speaking of how people's lives convey the meaning of ideas, Eliot said, "Sometimes [words] are made flesh; they breathe upon us with warm breath, they touch us with soft responsive hands, they look at us with sad, sincere eyes, and they speak to us in appealing tones; they are clothed in a living human soul."

Likewise, if people are to "hear" the Word of God, they must "see" it demonstrated in our lives. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

Christians who live what they believe give flesh to the Word. —R W DeHaan ([Our Daily Bread, Copyright RBC Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI. — Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved](#))

**WHAT DOES
"NO ONE HAS SEEN GOD" MEAN?**

Has no man ever seen the uncreated God? This fascinating question is answered with three excerpts taken from [Hard Sayings](#) (edited by Walter Kaiser, et al)

(1) Exodus 24:9–11

Did Moses and the Elders See God?

(go to page 126 in [Hard Sayings](#))

The claim that Moses and his company “saw the God of Israel” appears to contradict the flat denials of such a possibility in texts such as Exodus 33:20. John 1:18 affirms that “no one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [the only Son], who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” Similarly, 1 Timothy 6:16 teaches that God is the one “who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see.”

What are we to believe? Did some see God who is spirit and without form, or did they not? These passages surely look as if they contradict each other.

The translators who compiled the Greek version of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, were so concerned about any wrong connotations in Exodus 24:9 that they added “in the place where he stood” to the words “they saw the God of Israel.” There is no basis for such an addition, however, except the tendency of this translation to avoid any descriptions of God in terms that are used of human beings (the so-called antianthropomorphic trend of the LXX).

Even though Ex 24:10 clearly says that the leaders “saw the God of Israel,” the text does not go on to describe him, any more than did Isaiah when he saw Adonai exalted in the (heavenly) temple (Isaiah 6). The verb used in Ex 24:10 is used of seeing with one’s eyes. Only when we get to verse 11 is there a qualification, for it uses another verb that means “to see in a vision.”

Moreover, despite the assertion that Moses and the leaders saw God, the description of what they saw is of what was at his feet, not the appearance of God himself. It could well be that the group was not given permission to lift their faces toward God, but saw only the pavement beneath his feet. Maybe that is what the Greek translators were attempting to get at when they added the above-mentioned phrase.

When Moses asked to be shown the glory of God, he was refused on the grounds that humans cannot see the face of God and live (Ex 33:18–20). In the earlier text, since no request to see God’s glory is cited, we must assume that what Moses and his companions experienced was a theophany of the presence of God.

Even what little they saw of the setting of God’s presence so humbled and awed them that they apparently flung themselves down in an act of obeisance. Hence, what they saw and reported was no higher than the level of the pavement. In spite of the uniqueness and unnaturalness of this experience, Moses and his companions were not harmed or disciplined by God; he “did not raise his hand” against them (Ex 24:11). But they did experience a special nearness to God as they partook together of a covenantal meal.

We conclude that no one has ever seen God except the Son. What Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders experienced was the real presence of God and the place where he stood. When God is said to have shown his “back” or his “face” to anyone, it is an anthropomorphic usage—a description of God in terms used of humans so as to point to a definite reality, but only in ways that approximate that reality. God’s “back” suggests his disapproval, and his “face” suggests his blessing and smile of approval. In no sense can these terms be used to denote any shape or form of God. God remains unseen but mightily able to manifest the reality and majesty of his presence.

(2) Exodus 33:18–23

Did Moses See God’s Back?

(go to page 128 in [Hard Sayings](#))

Is it possible to see God? On the one hand some texts indicate that God was seen. Genesis 32:30 says, “So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, ‘It is because I saw God face to face.’”

Exodus 24:9–10 likewise teaches that “Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel ... saw the God of Israel.”

Exodus 33:11 strikes another intimate note: “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend.”

Judges 13:22 states that Manoah said to his wife, “We are doomed to die! ... We have seen God!”

Again, in Isaiah 6:1, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.”

Finally, Daniel 7:9 affirms, “As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His

clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire.” All these texts appear to claim that at times God can be seen and was seen.

However, there are other passages that appear to argue that it is impossible to see God. Foremost among them is Exodus 33:20.

Likewise, Deuteronomy 4:15 warns, “You saw no form of any kind the day the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire.”

Even more to the point is John 1:18, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.”

And again in John 5:37, “You have never heard his voice nor seen his form.”

Indeed, God is described in 1 Timothy 1:17 as “the King eternal, immortal, invisible,” the one “whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16).

To resolve this dilemma, note first that some of these sightings are visions, such as the cases of Isaiah and Daniel. In others the terms for sight stress the directness of access. For instance, in Exodus 24:9–11, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the seventy elders eat and drink in God’s presence, but they describe only his feet and what he stood on. They were apparently not permitted to look on God’s face. In another instance, Jacob’s access to God is described as being “face to face,” (See discussion of question ["With Whom Did Jacob Wrestle?" on page 103](#)) similar to Moses’ later friendship with God. (The difference may arise from the way the term face of God was used in various contexts. In one, it expressed familiarity beyond previous visions or divine appearances; in others, it referred to knowledge of God which exceeds our abilities and hopes.) Others, such as Manoah and his wife, experienced a christophany or a theophany, which means an appearance of Christ or God through a vision or a preincarnate appearance.

What Moses requests in Exodus 33:18, “Now show me your glory,” was more than the Lord would grant for Moses’ own good. Even so, God allowed his “goodness” to pass in front of Moses and proclaimed his “name” in Moses’ presence.

Thus, instead of showing Moses his person or describing his appearance, the Lord gave Moses a description of who he is. The “name” of God included his nature, character (Ps 20:1; Lk 24:47; Jn 1:12), doctrine (Ps 22:22; Jn 17:6, 26) and standards for living righteously (Mic 4:5). Romans 9:15 quotes Exodus 33:19 and applies it to God’s sovereignty.

After God proclaims his name and sovereignty, he promises Moses a look at certain of his divine aspects. What these aspects were is still debated—needlessly, when one considers the range of meaning for the word back or the context in which it is used.

God placed Moses in a cleft in the rock, apparently a cavelike crevice, and he then caused his glory to pass by. The glory of God refers first and foremost to the sheer weight of the reality of his presence. The presence of God would come near Moses in spatial terms.

But Moses would not be able to endure the spectacular purity, luminosity and reality of staring at the raw glory of God himself. Instead, God would protect Moses from accidental (and apparently fatal) sight of that glory. Therefore, in a striking anthropomorphism (a description of the reality of God in terms or analogies understandable to mortals), God would protect Moses from the full effects of looking directly at the glory of God by placing his hand over Moses’ face until all his glory had passed by.

That this is a figure of speech is clear from the double effect of God passing by while simultaneously protecting Moses with the divine “hand.” Only after his glory, or presence, had passed by would God remove his gracious, protecting “hand.” Then Moses would view what God had permitted.

But what was left for Moses to see? The translators say God’s “back.” But since God is spirit (Is 31:3; Jn 4:24) and formless, what would this refer to? The word back can as easily be rendered the “after effects” of the glory that had passed by.

This would fit the context as well as the range of meanings for the Hebrew word used. Moses did not see the glory of God directly, but once it had gone past, God did allow him to view the results, the afterglow, that his presence had produced.

(3) John 1:18

No One Has Ever Seen God?

(go to page 458 in [Hard Sayings](#))

This verse is clearly saying that no one has ever seen God, but in Exodus 33:20 we read, “You cannot see my face ... and live,” and in Exodus 24:11, “They saw God, and they ate and drank.” How can John claim that no one has ever seen God when the Old Testament text indicates that people did see God on at least two occasions?

First, notice that even the Old Testament indicates that no one has seen the face of God: “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live” (Ex 33:20). It is in this context that the two theophanies occur. In the earlier theophany it appears that what the elders see is “a pavement made of sapphire” (which will appear again in the early chapters of Ezekiel as the floor of the divine

chariot). No form is seen, although they may have had some awareness of a Being above the pavement. In this sense they “saw God” but apparently did not see his “face.” In the later theophany Moses asks to see God’s “glory” (Ex 33:18). In the view of the author of Exodus, he is asking for more than what he saw along with the elders of Israel. God grants more, but not all that Moses asks for. The only experience God will allow is for Moses to be hidden while God passes by and declares his character audibly; then Moses will get to see God’s “back,” which some commentators identify with an “afterglow,” but which could mean the back side of a retreating form (in Near Eastern fashion this would be shrouded with clothing so only an outline would be visible). Even this experience is so powerful that Moses’ face glows afterward (Ex 34:29).

John is clearly contrasting Jesus with Moses (Jn 1:17; Moses’ theophany was at the giving of the law), but even later theophanies in the Old Testament do not contradict our observation. Isaiah has some awareness of a throne and a being on it, but the only things that he can describe are the hem of God’s “robe” and the seraphim who are associated with him (Is 6:1–5). Ezekiel in a vision sees a form on a throne (Ezek 1:26–28), but there is no face and no features, only burning fire in a vaguely human shape. The face of God is never seen.

Now we can understand what John is saying. The Word is with God (Jn 1:1), and the image implied in the preposition is the face-to-face position of equals. What is more, the Word is what God is (as we noted in the previous chapter). Now the Word becomes a human being (“flesh,” Jn 1:14), and he has a “glory” or character or reputation which is that of one who is exactly like his Father, full of grace and truth (which are Greek equivalents of “love and faithfulness” of Ex 34:6). So Moses brought law from God (Jn 1:17), but Jesus brought the very character of the Father to us. Thus while no one has ever seen God, Jesus makes him known with an accuracy brought about by his being in the most intimate contact with him (“at the Father’s side” in the NIV or, better, “in the bosom of the Father” [RSV]). They may have seen a form or outline in the Old Testament, but Jesus, the Word incarnate, has not only seen the Father face to face, but has also looked into his soul and contains within himself his very character.

This is an important theological point. Ever since [Marcion](#) in the second century there have been those who contrast the distant and harsh Father with the gracious and kind Son. The Father seems to be law and the Son grace. The Father seems to be difficult or impossible to relate to, apparently existing without feeling, and the Son seems to be caring and even warm and friendly. **This contrast is entirely false.** What John is saying is that if we want to find out what the Father is like, we only have to look at the Son. The “love and faithfulness” we see in Jesus is the “love and faithfulness” of the Father. The kindness we see in Jesus is the kindness of the Father. The healing we seen in Jesus is his doing the works of the Father (Jn 5:19). In sum, Jesus is the place where we get our best view of the face of the Father; in Jesus we can see what the Father’s heart is really like. When this truth sinks into our heart, many of us will receive a renewed vision of the Father and thus develop a new love for and intimacy with God.

QUESTION - [Did Moses see God?](#)

ANSWER - In Exodus 33:20, God tells [Moses](#), “You cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live.” However, earlier, in Exodus 33:11, we read, “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses [face to face](#), as a man speaks to his friend.” So, did Moses see God, and if so, how did he live? Also, how does this agree with John 1:18, which says, “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son”?

In Exodus 33:18, Moses asks God, “Please show me your [glory](#).” God responds, “I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.’ Then the Lord said, ‘There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen.’” (Exodus 33:19–23). So, clearly, Moses never truly or fully saw God.

What, then, does Exodus 33:11 mean by saying God and Moses spoke “face to face”? Since [God is spirit](#) (John 4:24), He does not truly have a “face.” Exodus 33:11 is simply saying that God and Moses had a close relationship. They were in harmony with each other, just as close friends are. God and Moses were not literally face to face, but their relationship and communication was very much like two people who spoke to one another as close friends would.

While God can appear in human form (or in other physical form) if He wants to, He is, in His essence, not a physical being. Many people in the Bible witnessed [theophanies](#), or appearances of God. No one, though, other than Jesus Christ (John 1:18), has seen God in all of His glory. Even the [seraphim](#) in heaven cover their eyes as they worship God (Isaiah 6:1–4). [GotQuestions.org](#)

QUESTION - [Has anyone ever seen God?](#)

ANSWER - The Bible tells us that no one has ever seen God (John 1:18) except the Lord Jesus Christ. In Exodus 33:20, God declares, “You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live.” These Scriptures seem to contradict other Scriptures which

describe various people “seeing” God. For example, Exodus 33:11 describes Moses speaking to God “face to face.” How could Moses speak with God “face to face” if no one can see God’s face and live? In this instance, the phrase “face to face” is a figure of speech indicating they were in very close communion. God and Moses were speaking to each other as if they were two human beings having a close conversation.

In Genesis 32:30, Jacob saw God appearing as a man; he did not truly see God. Samson’s parents were terrified when they realized they had seen God (Judges 13:22), but they had only seen Him appearing as an angel. Jesus was God in the flesh (John 1:1, 14) so when people saw Him, they were seeing God. So, yes, God can be “seen” and many people have “seen” God. At the same time, no one has ever seen God revealed in all His glory. In our fallen human condition, if God were to fully reveal Himself to us, we would be consumed and destroyed. Therefore, God veils Himself and appears in forms in which we can “see” Him. However, this is different than seeing God with all His glory and holiness displayed. People have seen visions of God, images of God, and appearances of God, but no one has ever seen God in all His fullness (Exodus 33:20). GotQuestions.org

Related Resources:

- [If Moses met face to face with God, why, later, was he not allowed to see God’s face? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)
- [What does it mean that God is spirit? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)
- [Why was God so evident in the Bible, and seems so hidden today? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)
- [What is an epiphany? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)
- [What is a theophany? What is a Christophany? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)
- [Who were the three men who visited Abraham in Genesis 18? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)
- [Did God literally and visibly walk in the garden \(Genesis 3:8\)? | GotQuestions.org](http://GotQuestions.org)