

Lesson 4: Belief in the Name

Beliefs of the Earliest Christians

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"God is and he has spoken" is an expression made popular by the late Francis Schaeffer in his two books: *The God Who Is There*, and *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. In the previous lesson we discussed the reasons for believing that "God is." Our existence and the existence of our universe demand that there be a cause standing behind it adequate enough to have produced it. The evidence is adequate to lead to the conclusion that the cause lying behind man's existence and the existence of his world must be a Supreme Being, whose nature is such that he could have created that which we know as the universe or "creation."

All of this may be concluded from reason. If, however, man desires to know more of this Creator than the fact that he is and he is capable of having created the universe, he must learn it from the Creator himself. Reason can take him no further than the conclusion that "God is" and he is a Supreme Being of adequate cause to have produced the universe. This is the very argument the Apostle Paul made in Romans 1:18-23 and in Acts 17:22-31. What man knows and believes about God beyond the fact of his existence is what God has revealed to him. God is, but just as important is the fact that, "he has spoken!"

God has spoken and what he has told us of himself identifies him with the Creator to whom we were led by reason. He is the Creator of all existence and transcends (stand beyond) all that has been created (i.e., he is the absolute Creator). He is all-powerful, all knowing, he is eternal (not limited to time) and universal (not limited by space). He is also a morally perfect being - he is holy and good and has placed something of these attributes within the human being he created in his own image.

All of what reason demands a Supreme Being to be, God has revealed to man that he is. This revelation of God is found in the ancient writings of

the Hebrews called "Scripture." It is in the old Hebrew Scriptures that we find the earliest record of God's communication with man. The means by which he identified himself to ancient man was through the revelation of descriptive designations in titles or names, specifically his divine name. His revelation of his identity was intrinsic within the various names or titles by which he identified himself. To the ancient patriarchs and sages of Israel he was *the God who made his name known*.

The Significance of a Name in the Ancient World

The term "name" (Hebrew-*shem*) occurs over 800 times in the Old Testament and 180 times (Greek-*onoma*) in the New Testament; almost 1,000 occurrences in all. The reason for this is that names in ancient times carried far greater significance than they do in our culture. In fact, in the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world, especially in the Semitic culture, the name of a thing was one and the same with the thing itself, even more so with the name of a person. A person's name contained the essence of who he or she was. In Hebrew thought, a name was inextricably bound up with existence. Nothing existed unless it had a name (Eccl 6:10). A person's existence was regarded as continuing on after his death in the descendants who bore his name. This is why all men desired a son to carry on their name in Israel (cf. the Levirate marriage law in Deut 25:5-10). To cut off or remove a man's name was to end his existence (cf. 1 Sam 24:21; 1 K 14:27; Job 18:17; Psalms 83:4; Isa 14:22).

One's name represented the presence of that person. The name of someone could be used as a substitute for the person himself. The power and authority of a person were associated with his name. To pronounce someone's name over a thing was to put it under that person's authority (2 Sam 12:28; Isa 4:1). The one who wrote *Yahweh's* name on his hand became his servant (Isa 44:5). When the priest put *Yahweh's* name upon the people, he placed them under *Yahweh's* authority and his protection (Num 6:27; also Prov 18:10). To do something in the name of someone is to do it by that one's authority (1 Sam 17:45; 25:5, 9; 1 K 21:8; Esther 3:12; 8:8, 10; Jer 29:25; cf. also in New Testament). Similarly, to believe in one's name (or to believe "on

the name of") is to believe in what that one is claiming about himself by the name he wears (Cf. *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 3:501-08).

God's Presence Is Intrinsic in the Names

In the Old Testament, "the Name" (*HaShem*) is used as the synonym of God himself (Lev 24:11). In fact, wherever his name is found there is his presence and power. Although God is omnipresent and thus transcends the space-time dimension of existence into which we are locked, he yet may be said to dwell with his people. He dwells in the inner sanctuary of the ancient temple in Jerusalem because his name dwells there (Exod 20:24; Deut 12:5, 11; 26:2). Concerning this concept, one scholar's comments:

For the Hebrew, God is both transcendent and immanent. He is the hidden God, dwelling in the high and lofty place in light unapproachable; nevertheless, he comes into saving relations with men. The gap between the Deity as ontologically remote and as dynamically near is bridged in the OT thought by various related conceptions of the manifestation of God - his ANGEL; his FACE; his GLORY; his "NAME." Of these the name is the most comprehensive and significant. As expressing essential nature, it implies the most complete divine self-disclosure . . . (*Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 3:502).

His presence and power are within his ANGEL because his name is in him (Exod 23:20-21). An "angel of the *Yahweh*" is a messenger from God who comes in the name of God and represents the very presence of God. In some texts an angel of *Yahweh* is so identical to God that the text actually refers to the angel as God. One such text is Exod 3:2-5 where God appears to Moses in the burning bush:

And the angel of Yahweh appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will turn aside now, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when Yahweh saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

In the Gen 22:11-18 account of Abraham's sacrifice of his son, it is the **angel of Yahweh** who calls out to Abraham to stay his hand. But in v 12 it is **God** who says to Abraham: "Now I know that you fear **God**, because you have not withheld from **me** your son, your only son," (cf. also vv 15-18). Similarly, in Gen 31:11, an **angel of God** speaks to Jacob in a dream; but in v 13 he identifies himself as the **God of Bethel**. In Gen 32:24-30, Jacob wrestles all night with what he thinks is a man only to learn that he has struggled with **God**; in v 30 he says, "I saw **God** face to face, and yet my life was spared." In Judges 6:11-24 Gideon is confronted with the **angel of Yahweh** but throughout the narrative it appears that it is **God** himself who is speaking to Gideon. So also with Manoah, the father of Sampson, in Judges 13:2-22. It is **the angel of Yahweh** who appears to him in v 3 but in v 22 Manoah declares, "We shall surely die, for we have seen **God**." In all of these narratives it is the angel of *Yahweh* who appears as God - the angel who bears *Yahweh's* name and stands in the presence of men as the very presence of God.

A similar phenomenon is present in the expression "**the face of God**," which is often translated as "**the presence of God**." The Hebrew word, however, is literally "face." In Gen 3:8, Adam and Eve hid themselves from the face of *Yahweh Elohim*. In Isa 63:9 we read the expression, "the angel of his presence/face." One of the most intriguing texts on this theme is Exod 33:12-34:7 where Moses asked to see God. In 33:14, God promised Moses that his presence/face would go with him and his people. Then in v 18 Moses asked God, "Show me your glory." God replied to him, "I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, *Yahweh*, in your presence." The following morning Moses ascended the mountain and God revealed himself to him:

Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, Yahweh. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "Yahweh, Yahweh, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness . . . (Exod 34:5-6).

Conclusion

It is worthy of note that when God manifests his presence among men, that manifestation always, in some way, involves his name. Even the worship of God and the place of his presence in the midst of Israel were mysteriously linked to his name (cf. Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 26:2; 1 Kings 11:36; 14:21). To invoke his presence for communion one was to "call upon his name" (cf. Gen 4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; Deut 4:7; 1 Sam 12:17; 2 Sam 22:4; 1 Kings 18:24-27; Psalms 4:3; 18:3; 28:1; 55:16; 80:18; 105:1; 116:2, 13, 17).

In the faith of ancient Israel, God's name, being filled with his very presence, was nothing less than a manifestation of his presence in the midst of his people. Here we are confronted with a concept fully fit for faith in that it is filled with wonder. Belief in God is full of wonder in the sense of awe, in that it takes our breath away. It is also full of wonder in the sense of mystery, in that it fills us with fascination and a longing to see and understand more. To those with whom God first spoke, it was "his name" he revealed to them, and it was by calling upon his name that they communicated with him. Belief in God, the one true God who is the Creator, means knowing his name, calling upon him by name, and believing in him by name. For this reason, God instructed Israel, "You shall not take the name YHWH [*Yahweh*] your God (*Elohim*) in vain (*shava* – empty, worthless, or useless, without meaning, value, or significance), (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11).

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Questions For Discussion

1. Why is it important that God has spoken to us? What if he had not and all we could know was that he exists?
2. How does the harmony between what reason demands of a Creator and what revelation reveals about our Creator strengthen the case for inspiration of the Bible?
3. How is the meaning of a name in such ancient cultures as the Mediterranean world different from the meaning and value of a name in our culture?

4. Why was a man's name important to him after he died? How did having a son continue his existence? Why was cutting off his name from the society of men so feared? Is this important to our culture?
5. Discuss the concept that nothing existed in ancient cultures unless it had a name. How is this true today?
6. How does an understanding of the meaning of names in ancient cultures help us understand the significance of such biblical expressions as doing something "in the name of" someone, etc. Are there similar expressions that are more understandable in light of this fact? Does this carry over into Christianity?
7. What is the significance of God placing his name in the temple in Jerusalem? What did this mean to the Jewish world?
8. How could someone seeing and/or talking with an angel of Yahweh be considered by biblical personalities as seeing and talking with God himself?
9. Discuss the expression "calling upon his name" in light of the role the name of a deity played in the ancient Mediterranean world?
10. Why is it important that our Creator is a God who has made his name known?