
Does God represent Himself in physical form?

'We are to create no physical representation of God'

There can be little doubt about the accuracy of this statement, it condenses the first part of the second commandment:

'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth' Exod. 20.4a

It is addressed to the nation as one person, and to each individual member of the nation, as his or her own solemn personal responsibility.

Yet the issue at hand between Messianic Jews and Christians on the one hand and Rabbinic Jews and for that matter Muslims too on the other is distinct.

Does God choose to represent Himself in physical form?

The answer for all lovers of the Torah is clear, but the nature of the answer also provides important insights into Divine manifestations.

After the apostasy of the golden calf, an apostasy characterised above all by a breach of this command, God chooses to withdraw Himself from His own people.

'And the LORD said unto Moses, Depart, and go up hence, thou and the people which thou hast brought up out of the land of Egypt, unto the land which I swear... I will send an angel before thee...for I will not go up in the midst of thee.' Fragments from Exod.33.1,2,3

As an expression of this displeasure, a visible sign is employed.

'Moses took the tabernacle, and pitched it without the camp, afar off from the camp, and called it the Tabernacle of the congregation.

And it came to pass, that every one which sought the LORD went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp.' Exod.33.7

This proto-Tabernacle, presumably still empty, stands as an emblem of the immediacy of God's physical favour and blessing.

Now instead of being sited in the middle of the camp, it stands aloof, afar off, outside the company.

Might we then say that the Tabernacle is a manifestation of God Himself?

There seem to be occasions in Israel's history, where the Tabernacle of the Congregation, and later the Temple are indeed regarded as equivalent to God's very favour and presence.

Like the phone on which a beloved speaks to and hears from his love, the Tabernacle, as the place of revelation, might enjoy singular attention and affection.

The people watched Moses coming and going from the Tabernacle with such awe they rose and stood as he passed. (Exod.33.8)

Yet just as phone might in and of itself, during or after a breach in a relationship, assume an inappropriate place in the lover's affection.

So it transpires occurred in the case of Eli's sons.

Whilst they may been consecrated priests offering sacrifices, Hophni and Phineas, despite the righteous and honourable heritage of the latter's name, put sexual and sensual pleasure before God's commands (1Sa 2:22). In the time of crisis they put more faith in the physical presence of the Tabernacle's heart, the Ark, than in obedience to His voice, revealed through the prophets, their father, and even their small companion Samuel.

True offering was now accompanied with great evil, **'Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the LORD: for men abhorred the offering of the LORD'** 1 Sam.2.17. Eli reproved them strongly, but without acting **'Wherefore kick ye at my sacrifice and at mine offering,'** v.29. Samuel was commanded to tell his own master that **'his sons made themselves vile'** 1 Sam.3.13.

They had turned outwardly legitimate means into a kind of idol.

They may have repudiated Baal and Dagon in the Philistine camp, but in effect they were worshipping these fertility gods in their own hearts, in the true Tabernacle.

The people too seemed to share in a carnal trust in the external presence of the symbols of God's favour, whilst neglecting its meaning.

'And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said, Wherefore hath the LORD smitten us to day before the Philistines? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of Shiloh unto us, that, when it cometh among us, it may save us out of the hand of our enemies.' 1 Sam.4.3

Ps.78 echoes the strong suggestion that a confidence in the substance of the sign, not what it signified, had led to ruin.

'But turned back, and dealt unfaithfully like their fathers: they were turned aside like a deceitful bow. For they provoked him to anger with their high places, and moved him to jealousy with their graven images.

When God heard this, he was wroth, and greatly abhorred Israel:

So that he forsook the tabernacle of Shiloh, the tent which he placed among men.' (vv.57-60)

We can see a similar example, where a dramatic, physical token of God's power to heal in the wilderness, was also abused centuries later as an idol.

The Nehushtan, which Hezekiah zealously destroyed, had once been a means of life from the dead, but now was the occasion of death for the living. (2Ki 18:4)

The lover's phone can easily become a curse.

Perhaps the most chilling examples of this transformation are given for the Temple itself.

'Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Trust ye not in lying words, saying, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, The temple of the LORD, are these.' Jer.7.3,4.

The very house of God had now become a dangerous cause of complacency.

The violation of this strong affection no doubt explains the explosive and murderous reaction, when Jeremiah warns that the House itself faces the same fate as Shiloh. (Jer.26.6-8)

This sets an important backdrop to the dangers implicit in symbols associated with God's blessing and intervention.

However, would anyone argue that the Tabernacle or the Temple were *themselves* manifestations of God's own being?

They represent God's dwelling (2Sa.7.3), His footstool (1 Chr.28.2), His house (2Ch 6.7), not His own Being. How could they?

'But will God in very deed dwell with men on the earth?

Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house which I have built!' 2 Ch 6:18

It is a different case with clearer indications of God's real and immediate presence in the Smoke, the Cloud and the Fire of His presence.

Even before the Tabernacle proper, the Ark or the proto-Tabernacle of the Assembly, from the time of their journey from the place called Succoth, tokens of God Himself appeared:

'And they took their journey from Succoth, and encamped in Etham, in the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night:

He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.'
Exod.13.20-2

God Himself led and guided His people, **'In the daytime also he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a light of fire.'** Ps 78:14

There is at least one direct reference to angelic involvement in this manifestation, and without entering into argument about his identity, and if we concede he is a created archangel, like Michael, does this not suggest this manifestation might simply be mediated by Divine servants?

'And the angel of God, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of the cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.' Ex 14.19

Fire, which often accompanied the cloud, also reflects a demonstration of God's power or as a manifestation of His judgement, and similarly indicates God's very presence.

'And the sight of the glory of the LORD was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel.' Ex. 24.17

'And there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.' Lev.9.24

Or much more terribly,

'And Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took either of them his censer, and put fire therein, and put incense thereon, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not. And there went out fire from the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.' Lev.10.1-2

Similarly there are many examples of supernatural fire being used to demonstrate God's direct approbation or judgement and indicate His direct intervention.

'And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called upon the LORD; and he answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering.' 1Ch. 21.26

'Then the fire of the LORD fell, and consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench.' 1Ki. 18.38

'Then the angel of the LORD put forth the end of the staff that was in his hand, and touched the flesh and the unleavened cakes; and there rose up fire out of the rock, and consumed the flesh and the unleavened cakes. Then the angel of the LORD departed out of his sight.' Jud. 6.21

'So Manoah took a kid with a meat offering, and offered it upon a rock unto the LORD: and the angel did wondrously; and Manoah and his wife looked on. For it came to pass, when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar' Jud. 13.19-20

Again, these last two instances implicate the additional agency of angels, though in the last Manoah's wife wisely attributes the ultimate work wholly to God,

'But his wife said unto him, If the LORD were pleased to kill us, he would not have received a burnt offering and a meat offering at our hands, neither would he have shewed us all these things, nor would as at this time have told us such things as these.' Jud. 13.23

It was within the Temple however that these Divine manifestations spoke most directly from God Himself.

'And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the vail before the mercy seat, which is upon the ark; that he die not: for I will appear in the cloud upon the mercy seat.' Lev.16.2

This was not merely a voice speaking for God, but a representation of God's *immediate presence*.

'And when Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubim: and he spake unto him.' Num.7.89

Which one of the angels dare speak from *between* the cherubim? Only One dwells in that sacred throne, adored by His hosts.

'Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth.' Ps 80.1

'And Hezekiah prayed before the LORD, and said, O LORD God of Israel, which dwellest between the cherubim, thou art the God, even thou alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; thou hast made heaven and earth.' 2 Ki 19:15

'The ark of the covenant of the LORD of hosts, which dwelleth between the cherubim:' 1 Sam. 4.4

At the conclusion of the grand offerings of the 12 tribes to consecrate the Tabernacle, God speaks:

'And when Moses was gone into the tabernacle of the congregation to speak with him, then he heard the voice of one speaking unto him from off the mercy seat that was upon the ark of testimony, from between the two cherubim: and he spake unto him.' Num. 7.89

So we might ask what is so different from a telephone, in what way is this arrangement different from an instrument

utilised by the Almighty for the purposes of communication?

As we have seen, given the intense danger of idolising the visible, it is noteworthy first that a subtle distinction seems to be twice drawn between the cloud and the glory of God's immediate presence:

'Then a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter into the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.'

Exod. 40.34-5

Just as it would be perverse to kiss and embrace the phone through which a beloved spoke, as though the phone were itself the lover, it would have been idolatry to have bowed and adored the fabric of the Tabernacle or the material of the Ark itself. It would have been just as much idolatry as to bow to a statue of Baal.

Glory of God worshipped and adored.

However there is an unequivocal, clear and direct worship of God Himself in the manifestation of His glory.

'And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of the congregation, and came out, and blessed the people: and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the people.

And there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces.' Lev. 9.23-4

'And when all the children of Israel saw how the fire came down, and the glory of the LORD upon the house, they bowed themselves with their faces to the ground upon the pavement, and worshipped, and praised the LORD, saying, For he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.' 2 Ch 7.3

Moses leads by example by combining intercession with worship of the Shekinah manifestation of God.
'And Korah gathered all the congregation against them unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation:
and the glory of the LORD appeared unto all the congregation. And the LORD spake unto Moses and unto
Aaron, saying, Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them in a moment.

And they fell upon their faces, and said, O God, the God of the spirits of all flesh,
shall one man sin, and wilt thou be wroth with all the congregation?' Num. 16.19-22

God Himself confirms the propriety of such worship by appearing after it begins.

'And Moses and Aaron went from the presence of the assembly unto the door of the tabernacle of the
congregation, and they fell upon their faces: and the glory of the LORD appeared unto them.

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying...' Num.20.6-7a

Can there now be any doubt at all that God does manifest Himself physically and visibly, and expects and
receives the worship of this manifestation as lawful?

We dare not manufacture such manifestations, and we must use discernment to recognise God's true
presence, but we also dare not deny their reality.

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