Q&A: How should I understand (theophanies and) christophanies?

Sarah asks:

Hi Will,

How should I understand Christophanies? I've been pondering Jesus appearing bodily in the Old Testament and his incarnation in the New Testament

In the OT is he:

1. *God appearing in the form of a (sometimes glorified human body?) but not human in any way other than physical;*
2. *Not appearing as a man in these Christophanies anyway, but something else we can't define;*
3. *Appearing as fully God and fully man before the incarnation;*
4. *Or something else!*

I'm asking this question to better understand how Christophanies relate to / contrast with the uniqueness, cosmic significance and humility of the incarnation where Jesus became forever the man who is God.

What can I understand about God and what can I understand about the Bible being all about Jesus, through Jesus walking on our planet before Bethlehem?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/]

Thanks for the question, Sarah. There's a lot in here.



Firstly, to clarify some language. "Christophany" means "appearances of Christ" and my understanding of that term is that it is about post-incarnation post-ascension appearances of Jesus. Paul on the road to Damascus appears to have had a christophany. The account of John in Revelation can be thought of as a christophany, depending on how you take the narrative and the genre; simple visions or dreams of Jesus don't usually count as a full-bodied appearance!

In my mind, manifestations of God *before* the incarnation are more properly described as "theophanies" – i.e. "appearances of *God*." Some people would still use the word "christophany", arguing that they are manifestations of the Son of God, the Divine "Word" or "Logos" (referencing John 1). I'm unconvinced. In my mind, the word "Christ", meaning "Anointed One", is entirely adhered to Jesus' messiahship; it is a *human* title and therefore makes no sense apart from (or before) the incarnation.

Similarly, while our understanding of the Trinity can be unearthed in the Old Testament, that understanding is grounded in our understanding of Jesus in the New Testament. The thrust of the Hebrew Scriptures is that "the Lord our God, the Lord is *one*." Whatever we see in the Old Testament should firstly be taken as a manifestation of the one true God.

So "theophany" is, I think, the better term. And I'm not just quibbling about terminology. I hope I have also begun to

answer your question about the unique significance of the incarnation; let's not use incarnational language to describe pre-incarnational phenomena. The Son of God (fully divine) may have appeared to his people in some form, but *Jesus* (fully divine, fully human) never walked on our planet before Bethlehem.

But what are we actually talking about? By way of example, some events that are considered to be theophanies are:

1. God "walking and talking" with Adam & Eve at creation (see Genesis 3 in particular).
2. The Lord "appears" to Abram (later called Abraham) in Genesis 12 and then later as a covenant-making "smoking fire pot" in Genesis 15.
3. Abraham famously had three divine visitors (Genesis 18)
4. Jacob wrestles all night with a man (Genesis 32) and is then told that he has wrestling with God.
5. The Burning Bush of Moses (Exodus 3).

Clarity does not quickly come:

Even in compiling this list I was running into ambiguity of category. Should the "pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night" (Exodus 13:21) be considered a manifestation of God, or simply a manifestation of his *glory*, a physical *symbol* of his presence? If so, would Abraham's smoking fire pot and Moses' burning bush also be in the same category? Where do we draw the line?

There are also literary questions to ask. Old Testament imagery is full of anthropomorphisms of God. e.g God has a "mighty arm," or "comes down to see" etc. These are appropriately considered to be metaphors. Is that what's happening with Adam & Eve? Perhaps. I don't think we could argue that Jacob's wrestling was merely metaphorical; metaphor usually doesn't lead to a limp!

And so there's some ambiguity, but I think it's an ambiguity

of our own making. In all these cases, the *story* is clear, and doesn't depend on who or what is appearing and how. e.g. in Abraham's encounter with his visitors, the point of the story, the essence of Abraham's experience revolves around his conversation… and it makes sense irrespective of whether or not the visitors were divine, human, or angelic. **But when it comes to Jesus there is no ambiguity.** In the birth narratives, the gospels, and all that follows, **the *incarnation* of God** as fully human and fully divine **is entirely the point**.

So I'll stand firm on the incarnation, but I'll allow some ambiguity about the exact nature of the OT theophanies, *because the Bible allows it*. And so my answer to the first part of your question is to allow all of your suggestions, except for 3); God is not incarnate before Jesus.

This is my take on it: in pre-incarnation theophanies, we are seeing God taking a *form,* but not taking *on* the essence of that form. e.g. The most we can say for Moses' experience is that God took the *form* of a burning bush, he certainly did not *become* one. It is likely that this was a ministry of God the Son, the Word of God. After all, these forms are aspects of God's *communication*, his *revelation* of himself and his purposes.

God spoke "in many different ways", we read in Hebrews 1:1-3, and these manifestations were some of those ways. But the point Hebrews makes is the point we should end with: Now God has "spoken through his son", he has revealed himself ultimately by becoming *one* of us. He has not just taken on the form, but the substance of who we are.

Hope that helps. Thanks for the question.

Q&A: Does God need us?

Anonymous asks: *Does God need us?*



The short answer is, “No.”

The long answer is, “It depends what you mean by ‘need.'”

God does not need us ontologically, that is in order to be himself. This is actually a key component of how we conceived of God as Trinity. God, by definition, is perfect. But it is impossible for a unitarian God to have relationship until that God creates something – the creature can then be seen to add/complete/perfect that God in some way. But if God is Father who eternally and perfectly pours himself out in perfect love into a perfect and complementary reflection of himself you have the basis of the “God in three persons” which in some sense is to understand “God as relationship.” A Trinitarian God does not *need* his creatures in order to perfectly incorporate relationship. His creation of us is therefore an act of grace, a gift, not an act of necessity or self-exploration on his part.

God does not need us practically, that is in order to do what he wants to do. This is pretty clear. God, being God, can do whatever he likes. He can create the heavens and the earth and doesn’t need our help. He can reveal himself to patriarchs and prophets, and doesn’t need our help. He can move mountains and quicken and harden hearts, and doesn’t need our help. All these actions speak of a God who graciously choose to create, sustain, and even *intervene* in his creation. This is a grace, a gift to us, and not an act of obligation on his part.

There’s a pattern here – it’s not about “need”, it’s about grace.

And one of the aspects of that grace is that God chooses to no only relate to us, but to lead us, guide us, and, yes, to work *through* us. So much so that he binds himself to us which not only affirms his humility, but also affirms that we are indeed made in the image of God, through whom divine works can occur. And so God achieves his project through a human. He even achieves salvation through a human. That perfect and creative outpouring of God the Father – i.e. God the Son – became, is and will ever more be a human being. He is a human being through whom God has worked his most magnificent work, and through whom we are called to also be, like Jesus, obedient to God, empowered by his Spirit, and achieving the works of his kingdom.

Are we *needed* for that task? In some sense, yes, but not out of necessity, only because God is both gracious and sovereign.