

DO YOU BELIEVE?
A BOOK SERIES FROM RATIO CHRISTI

WHY DOES GOD HIDE FROM US?

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 RATIO
CHRISTI

FAITH & REASON are at odds in our culture. For many, faith has come to mean little more than wishful thinking and blind belief. Such a concept is completely foreign to the pages of Scripture and historical Christianity. As Edward Feser notes, “In short, reason tells us that there is a God and that he has revealed such-and-such a truth; faith is then a matter of believing what reason has shown God to have revealed. In that sense faith is not only not at odds with reason but is grounded in reason.”

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People say to me continually, “Where is your God?”

PSALM 42:3, NRSV

When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord.

JEREMIAH 29:13-14, NRSV

INTRODUCTION

Norwood Russell Hanson, a philosopher of science, argued that “there is no single natural happening, nor any constellation of such happenings, which establishes God’s existence....If the heavens cracked open and [a] Zeus-like figure ... made his presence and nature known to the world, *that* would establish such a happening.”¹ In the absence of such a “Zeus-event,” Hanson concluded that theism lacked sufficient evidence for reasonable belief.

The absence of a definitive Zeus-event serves many inquirers as an argument against God’s existence. Being akin to the problem of evil, it is often referred to as the problem of God’s hiddenness. Hanson is not the first to rely on this problem, nor is he alone in his assumption that a “Zeus-event” is the sort of evidence we should expect if God is real. According to many inquirers, that’s the kind of evidence we would provide if we were God, and therein lies the bold assumption that undergirds the objection—it is based on creaturely expectations. Hanson’s expectations of God are of a God who reflects Hanson’s own tendencies, but perhaps that is not the true God.

While affirming that God, for God’s good reasons, hides at times from human perception, we shall see that every sincere seeker of God has available adequate evidence for God’s existence in a manner consistent with God’s perfectly good character, redemptive purposes, and good timing. We shall see that the evidence many people seek, such as a Zeus-event, is unlike the evidence God makes available to humans.

Let’s use “God” as a supreme title that requires of any possible titleholder: (a) worthiness of worship, trust, and full life-commitment and thus (b) a perfectly good and loving character. Lacking a better candidate for titleholder, let’s consider the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. This is the God of “traditional monotheism,” specifically the perfectly good and loving personal God of Jewish-Christian theism. Does this God—the God of Jewish-Christian theism—provide adequate evidence for God’s existence?

In rushing to an answer, many inquirers overlook this question: *what sort of evidence* should we be looking for? Without a correct answer, we will likely wind up where Hanson did: imagining the evidence we would provide, if we were God. We are not God, of course, and so our search for signs often misleads us. More appropriately, we should be looking

¹ Norwood Russell Hanson, *What I Do Not Believe and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1971), p. 322.

for indicators of God's existence that fit with *God's* distinctive character and purposes, not our own. We should ask what God is like before presuming how God should act.

Being human, how can we find God's expectations? The answer is obvious but inconvenient: God would need to tell us or show us what God is like. This leads to the Jewish-Christian scriptures and why they merit attention from inquirers about Jewish-Christian theism. In them, God informs humans what God is like. As we search the Jewish-Christian scriptures, we should keep this question in mind: are they giving us a unique, unexpected, but challenging portrait of God's character and the nature of evidence for God? If so, we may have a window to God's answer to the problem of God's hiddenness.

We shall consider a number of passages from the Jewish-Christian scriptures that relate directly to the sort of evidence God provides to confirm God's existence to humans. We shall consider these scriptures in three parts: the Hebrew Bible, the Christian New Testament, and a more detailed consideration of the Gospel of John.

GOD'S HIDDENNESS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

In the Hebrew Bible, it is striking that God's "hiding" or "hiddenness" (including the lack of decisive evidence for many) is neither side-stepped nor glossed over. In fact, it is a recurring subject of inquiry. Even more striking: God's hiddenness is a more vexing problem for the "faithful" than for the "godless."

Psalm 10 complains about God's hiding. "Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (Psalm 10:1, NRSV; cf. Job 13:24). Psalm 30 laments God's hiding after times of the psalmist's confident security. "When I felt secure, I said, 'I will never be shaken.' O Lord, when you favored me, you made my mountain stand firm; but when you hid your face, I was dismayed" (Psalm 30:7, NIV; cf. Psalm 104:27–29). Psalm 44 expresses outright annoyance at God's hiding, suggesting that God's hiding is actually morally negligent. "Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Awake, do not cast us off forever! Why do you hide your face? Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?" (Psalm 44:23–24, NRSV). For the authors of the Psalms, God's hiding is not a philosophical quandary, but a dire reality, reflective of the very nature of God, and a source of consternation and lament.

The reality of God's elusiveness, reflected in the Psalms and permeating the Hebrew scriptures, is put succinctly in the book of Isaiah: "Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior" (Isaiah 45:15). The complaint is not that God *always* hides or that we have no evidence of God's reality. Rather, divine hiding occurs at times that serve God's redemptive purposes toward humans. These purposes may be unclear, even impenetrable to us, at times but they are not always completely hidden from us.

Some Reasons for God's Hiddenness

In a number of places in the Hebrew Bible, it is clear why God's presence is hidden from Israel: it is a response to disobedience and moral indifference (Deuteronomy 31:16–19, 32:19–20; Psalm 89:46; Isaiah 59:2; Micah 3:4). Other reasons for divine hiding include (a) to teach people to yearn for, and so eventually to value above all else, personal

volitional fellowship with God, (b) to strengthen grateful trust in God even when times seem bleak, (c) to remove human complacency toward God and God's redemptive purposes, (d) to shatter prideful human self-reliance, and (e) to prevent people who are not ready for fellowship with God from rejecting God. This list is not exhaustive; nor should we assume that an exhaustive list is available to humans. While God's ways are beyond us in various ways, however, they are not so entirely foreign that we cannot detect the contours of some divine loving purposes.

God's Revelation Fits God's Character and Purposes

The reasons (a–e) above for divine hiding share a common feature: they fit with God's loving character; that is, they emerge from divine loving intentions and purposes. They also serve to advance God's redemptive purposes for humans and the growth of God's good kingdom. God's hiding is always in the context of God's main desire: to have people lovingly know God and thereby to become loving as God is loving. As Isaiah 65:2 reports, "I [God] held out my hands all day long to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good" (cf. Romans 10:21). God desires that people, *for their own good*, turn to God in filial love, communion, and obedience.

Filial means *family*: family intimacy, family commitment, family trust, loyalty, connectedness, accountability, service, etc. God's primary aim is not to hide but rather to include all people in God's *family* as beloved *children* under God's *parental* love. Such love is not just sentimental but is self-sacrificing for the good of others, as God's redemptive work in Jesus shows.² A loving family relationship with God is God's main goal for every human. This means that God wants us to love, and to value above all else, God as our true Father, not just to believe that God exists (Deut. 6:5). This is important, because if this is God's goal, mere evidence for God's existence does not facilitate this goal; in fact, it can obscure it. For our own good, God is after something more profound and more life-transforming than simple reasonable belief that God exists.

The desire of God for a loving familial relationship with every human is affirmed by another theme in the Hebrew scriptures: God takes no pleasure in staying away from humans or being rejected by them (Ezekiel 18:23, 32; 33:11). As all-loving, God seeks friendship with all humans under God's parental love, but such a relationship is only possible if we come to it, not our terms, but on God's terms. The manner in which God reveals himself, or remains hidden, is inseparable from the type of loving relationship God seeks to establish with humans. One might imagine, for example, what sort of relationship would be established, if God revealed himself in a "Zeus-event." Awe? Yes. Fear? Probably. Familial love? Doubtful.

² For discussion of this important theme, see Paul K. Moser, *Paul's Gospel of Divine Self-Sacrifice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, forthcoming).

Human Receptivity to God's Revelation

To the human intellect, evidence for God's existence appears as the pressing problem, but from the divine point of view, the problem lies with human receptivity and response to the available evidence. In light of this, God's hiddenness in the Hebrew scriptures often correlates to the need for human self-reflection and repentance, which benefits human cooperative receptivity to God. God's distance can prompt self-evaluation: raising the question, "in words, actions, or attitudes, have I wandered or hidden from God?" In the book of Isaiah, Israel accuses God of abandoning them, of having "fallen asleep." God responds, "You awake, oh Israel, you rouse yourself from slumber" (Isaiah 52:1). In other words, "I'm not the one who fell asleep, Israel, you are." God had not gone anywhere; Israel had drifted through disobedience and unbelief, resulting in their inability to perceive God's voice or presence.

Exposing Hubris

In the book of Job, the Hebrew Bible shows God's hiddenness to be purposefully designed to expose attitudes latent in human presumption: presumption about how God should act, about whom God should bless or judge, or about comprehending God's hidden purposes in the world and the lives of others. Job learns, in the face of God's hiddenness, the humility befitting a human unqualified to assess the workings of God (Job, chapters 38–42). If God does not conform to human purposes or expectations, as in the book of Job, we are left with two choices: either disbelieve in God or re-examine our own attitudes and presumptions about God.

The kind of human presumption toward God on display in the book of Job captures much of the hubris of our 21st century, with many humans presuming to know how a loving God should intervene in the world. What we learn from Job, or at least what Job learned from God, is humility: that our independent apprehension of God's character, workings, and purposes is wholly inadequate to judge reliably.

Taking Stock

We have looked briefly at a number of passages and books in the Hebrew Bible to see what they relate about God's character and purposes in providing humans with evidence of God's existence. Some noteworthy findings are: 1) God gives evidence of God's existence in keeping with God's loving character. 2) What God reveals about God is filtered through what is best for humans. 3) God gives evidence of God's existence in keeping with

God's desire to establish a personal, loving, familial relationship with every human; this means evidence for God's existence requiring no commitment or desire for relationship is counter to God's purposes. 4) Instances of God's hiddenness are often purposefully designed to cultivate self-reflection, repentance, receptivity, and responsiveness to God's available evidence.

We turn now to the Christian New Testament to see how it affirms, expands, and illuminates the understanding of divine hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible.

GOD'S HIDDENNESS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A distinctive claim of the New Testament regarding God's self-disclosure and available evidence for God's existence, is captured in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to [Israel] by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.... [The Son] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Hebrews 1:1–3).

Whereas the Hebrew prophets and scriptures were from God and revealed true things about God, the ultimate disclosure of God's character and purposes comes through Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God. Jesus is the perfect image and Son of God, even as the Old Testament predicted that God's coming One would be called *Immanuel*, which means "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14).

To witness the manner in which Jesus manifests God's reality is to witness the culminating way God manifests God's reality. So, we will look at Jesus' ministry and teaching, viewing them as a template of divine self-disclosure—a paradigmatic example of how God discloses God to humans. We shall consider the data in two phases, the first examining the ministry of Jesus broadly, and the second offering a more detailed consideration of the Gospel of John.

The Ministry of Jesus in General

Jesus amplifies and elucidates the Hebrew scriptures, demonstrating how they find their fulfillment in him as the Son of God and Israel's Messiah. It is therefore unsurprising that Jesus affirms the reality of God's elusiveness and hiddenness observed in the Hebrew Bible. In the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Jesus prays:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for

such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him (Matthew 11:25–26, NRSV; cf. Luke 10:21–22).

According to Jesus, God’s hiddenness is not just a matter of perception but a matter of fact. For God’s good, loving reasons, God is discriminating in self-disclosure. As Jesus is endorsing divine hiddenness publicly, there is added irony—God hides in plain sight.

Jesus’ Teaching in Parables

A distinctive feature of Jesus’ teaching is that he spoke to the crowds in parables: “he did not say anything to them without using a parable” (Matt. 13:34). One might try to explain this as Jesus attempting to make his message simpler for a broader audience, but this is not the case. When Jesus’ disciples ask him to explain the reason for the parables, he tells them:

Knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God has been granted to you; but to the rest, they are made known through parables so that “they may look but not see, and hear but not understand” (Luke 8:10, NRSV).

The answer is striking: Jesus does not intend for everyone to understand his teaching without certain conditions. We would not have anticipated this answer; the disciples clearly did not.

A parable can be like a poem in one respect: where most forms of communication seek to simplify and clarify for the broadest possible audience, a poem can discriminate; it can winnow the audience. Consider the following lines from T.S. Elliot’s *Little Gidding*:

*Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.*

A poem can be, in a matter of speaking, encrypted, and thus typically only those pursuing its message, with some sympathy, will sacrifice the time and effort to unravel it. There can be a price for admission, and not everyone is willing to pay it. Such a poem selects for a certain audience, and its meaning remains hidden from those who would

disregard or trivialize its truth. To a sympathetic inquirer, the poem can open like a flower, revealing its beauty and truth, but to the cynic it can be barred and gated.

A poem can “disguise” something, and the same is true of Jesus and his parables. To a certain audience— those willing to follow Jesus—the parables were divine disclosure; to others they were inscrutable— apparent gibberish. God’s occasional hiding is God’s love obscured, owing to a deficiency on our part, namely, our not being ready to receive it aright. This obscuring seeks to uphold the supreme value of God’s love while God tries to bring us deeper into that love with our due receptivity toward it and God.

The parables of Jesus illustrate that the reception of some important evidence for God can be conditioned on the moral and spiritual receptivity of a listener. For this reason, Jesus cautioned the crowds to “be careful how you listen” (Luke 8:18) and “let him who has ears, let him hear” (Matt. 11:15).³ One’s attitude toward handling available evidence concerning God can have decisive consequences for one’s understanding and receiving that evidence. The relevant evidence must be handled with utter moral seriousness, as one’s very life is at stake.

If, as the New Testament represents, Jesus is the embodied human disclosure of the unseen God, it is significant to the matter of “available evidence” that his words and works were suitably veiled, particularly to the willfully obstinate. His words and works were hidden in their deeper meaning from his critics, and the same was true of his unique identity as the Son of God.

Non-Coercive Self-Display of God

The Parable of the Tenants affords an opportunity to see how Jesus viewed and explained the uniqueness of his identity. In the parable, the tenants are Israel, the messengers are prophets, and Jesus is the beloved son:

A man planted a vineyard and let it out to tenants and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, so that they would give him some of the fruit of the vineyard. But the tenants beat him and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant. But they also beat and treated him shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third. This one also they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; perhaps they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir. Let us kill him, so that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they threw him out of the vineyard and killed him (Luke 20:9–15).

³ For discussion of this theme, in connection with the parables of Jesus, see Paul K. Moser, *The Divine Goodness of Jesus: Impact and Response* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), chapter 5.

Jesus claims to be greater than the Hebrew prophets—greater even than Moses. He claims that he is the unique beloved Son and representative of God, and that acceptance (or rejection) of him amounts to acceptance (or rejection) of God (Matt. 10:40). No other human can make such a claim with any credibility.

How Jesus made exalted claims about himself bears on the question of God’s manner of dispensing evidence. Jesus is subtle, discreet, veiled, or ambiguous, often showing his identity in a subtle manner rather than proclaiming it. Jesus’ self-designations, such as “the Son,” “the Son of Man,” “one greater than Solomon,” and “the Good Shepherd,” walk the line between opaqueness and transparency. That Jesus was elusive, and intentionally so, is brought out in the gospels: “How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly” (John 10:24).

Jesus’ method of disclosure provided deniability for some of his listeners. It is non-coercive persuasion that maintains the integrity of human volitional freedom. As with viewing a glass half-full, viewers choose what they suppose that they are looking at. If God desires humans to enter a loving, familial relationship with God, entering into that relationship cannot be coerced; if the essence of love is “self-giving,” then the self must be freely given, and not coerced.

Jesus’ ministry shows an exquisite balance of self-disclosure: wooing and not coercing worship of God; inviting in a way that could be rejected as well as accepted; and manifesting God’s goodness in a manner that could be explained alternatively, as in Luke’s gospel: “Some of them said, ‘By the power of Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he drives out demons’” (Luke 11:15).

Jesus on Knowing God

Through Jesus we learn a lot about how, why, and to whom, God self-reveals himself, and likewise to whom God remains hidden. Looking deeper at Jesus’ teaching, we find clarification of the kind of relationship God desires to have with humans, and it is different from the relationship God has with the cosmos, nature, or any other species.

As noted in Matthew 11: 25–27, Jesus prays:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

Jesus’ prayer reveals the type of relationship God seeks to establish with humans, and thus who would be in a good position to receive individual self-disclosure from God.

Jesus' prayer addresses God as "Abba" (best translated as "Father"). The Greek New Testament's retention of this Aramaic term (Mark 14:36; Galatians 4:5; Rom. 8:15) offers support for treating "Abba" as part of the customary vocabulary of Jesus in praying to God. According to Jesus, God as Abba desires a familial relationship with us.

Proper knowledge of God, according to Jesus, requires our standing in a humble, faithful, and loving child-parent, or filial, relationship to God as our righteously gracious Father. What Jesus means, then, by "believing in God" includes resolving to love God in response to God's intervening goodness in our experience. This differs from intellectual acknowledgment that God exists. If God desired just the later, he might indeed write his name in the sky. As the New Testament notes, however, even Satan believes that God exists (James 2:19). So, God seeks more than that.

James Dunn notes that Jesus' awareness of being God's beloved son was an "existential conviction," and not a matter of merely intellectual assent: "He experienced a relation of sonship — felt such an intimacy with God, such an approval by God, dependence on God, responsibility to God, that the only words adequate to express it were 'Father' and 'son'."⁴ In keeping with the Hebrew Bible, Jesus offers a Jewish conception of knowledge with an interpersonal volitional component. Such knowledge of God requires that one know God not as a mere object but as the supreme personal subject who is Lord of all, including of one's own life. Such knowledge requires that we enter into it and commit to it, in a manner akin to a faithful marriage.

C.H. Dodd has helpfully contrasted Greek and Hebraic conceptions of knowledge.

... for the Greek, to know God means to contemplate the ultimate reality in its changeless essence. For the Hebrew, to know God is to acknowledge Him in His works and to respond to His claims. While for the Greek knowledge of God is the most highly abstract form of pure contemplation, for the Hebrew it is essentially ... to experience His dealings with men in time, and to bear and obey His commands.⁵

Similarly, Bernhard Anderson characterizes Hebraic knowledge of God as "the kind of personal relationship with God that is manifest in social responsibility."⁶ Being inherently personal, God properly reveals himself personally, not merely as an impersonal power, sign, argument, or proof.

In his prayer in Matthew 11:25–27, Jesus thanks his Father for hiding his ways from people unwilling to enter a humble filial relationship with God. God's occasional hiding does not entail that God is resistant, grudging, or deceptive toward humans (cf. Luke

⁴ James Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1975), p. 38. For detailed treatment of this theme, see Bernard Cooke, *God's Beloved: Jesus' Experience of the Transcendent* (Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1992), pp. 1–24, 103–9. See also Moser, *The Divine Goodness of Jesus*, chapter 3.

⁵ C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), p. 152

⁶ Bernhard Anderson, *The Eighth Century Prophets* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978), pp. 56–57.

12:32; Isaiah 65:1-2). Rather, God's hiding aims for our valuing, our treasuring, God above all else, if after our regretting God's absence in our experience. Divine hiding stems from God's upholding the value of God's perfectly good and loving ways. So, God must be careful, and at times subtle, with the goal that a self-manifestation of God elicits a freely given response of humble love rather than fear, indifference, arrogance, or hate. God cares mainly about what and how we love, not just what we believe. God wants us to be holy and good as God is holy and good.

Jesus and Moral Knowing

In John 5, Jesus heals a paralytic at “the pool called Bethesda.” The miracle is distinctive, because the person in question is, so far as we know, unwilling to engage in moral transformation in response. There seems to be no change in the paralytic's spiritual and moral condition after his healing.

The paralytic's healing is parallel to the healing of a blind man in John 9. In both cases, circumstances require Jesus to find the person and to identify himself as the healer. The difference is striking.

The paralytic at the pool in John 5: “Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, ‘See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse may happen to you.’ The man went away and told the Jews [religious leaders] that it was Jesus who had healed him” (John 5:14–15).

The blind man in John 9: “Jesus heard that they had cast him out, and having found him he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ He answered, ‘And who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and it is he who is speaking to you.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe,’ and he worshiped him” (John 9:35–38).

As Jesus approaches the paralytic at the pool, he asks, “do you want to be healed?” The question draws attention to the man's *willingness* to participate in God's process of moral transformation, including his willingness to be made well. Being “well” has requirements; it calls for a dramatic change of identity and lifestyle: the man would be expected to work, to care and provide for his family, to join the religious community, to pay the Temple tax, and to take on community responsibility. “Do you want to be well?” asks a question about willingness: are you willing to participate in all of the interpersonal commitments of someone made well?

The passage draws out the “unwillingness” of the paralytic, pointing to the absence of repentance. Jesus asks, “do you want to be healed?” but the man does not respond to the question or acknowledge his condition. Instead, he blames others for his circumstances,

“I have *no one* to put me into the pool, while I am going [to the water] *another* steps down before me” (John 5:7). After the miracle, when confronted by the religious leaders for “carrying his mat on the Sabbath,” the man blames Jesus: “The man who healed me, that man said to me, ‘Take up your bed, and walk.’”

The paralytic is sensitive to the “sins” of others, but blind to his own condition. So, he fundamentally misunderstands what will heal him. As a result, he directs his faith to the healing properties of the pool, not to Jesus. He is like the religious leaders: focused on the failings of others, spiritually and morally infirm, and under the misguided belief that ritual washing by the Law is what will save them. For both the paralytic and the religious leaders, miracles did nothing to change their posture toward God, because they were unwilling to change in response to Jesus as God’s representative.

In John 7:17, Jesus says, “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.” In this statement, Jesus bases the receiving of compelling, authoritative evidence from God on one’s willingness to obey and engage in transformation toward God’s perfect will. Jesus displayed the needed attitude in Gethsemane, with his signature prayer to God: “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (Mark 14:36). Jesus thus resolved to put God’s will first, even when his own life was at stake, and this is central to his faithful obedience to God as God’s beloved Son. He expected his disciples to follow suit, and thereby to receive guidance from God toward righteous interpersonal relationships.⁷

In his *Pensées* of 1670, Blaise Pascal wrote on God’s hiddenness, providing a fitting commentary on the paralytic in John 5 and on John 7.

God wishes to move the will rather than the mind. Perfect clarity would help the mind and harm the will. Humble their pride (§234).

If there were no obscurity man would not feel his corruption; if there were no light man could not hope for a cure. Thus it is not only right but useful for us that God should be partly concealed and partly revealed, since it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God (§446).⁸

God desires our moral and spiritual transformation, and our willing participation in the process is typically a crucial factor in God’s self-disclosure and the evidence God provides. The goal of God’s redemptive plan is not to get people to believe that God exists, but to find those who would willingly love, trust, and obey their divine father. Entering into

⁷ On the importance of divine guidance, including in connection with the problem of evil, see Paul K. Moser, *Divine Guidance: Moral Attraction in Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, forthcoming). On the importance of Gethsemane for Jesus and his disciples, see Moser, *The Divine Goodness of Jesus*, chapters 3 and 4.

⁸ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, revised ed., trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (London: Penguin, 1995 [1670]).

this loving, familial relationship is, from our human standpoint, an active commitment to a morally transforming relationship with God. We come to know God only as God becomes our God, as God's kingdom becomes our kingdom, and God's will becomes our will.

Willingness to love and obey God is typically accompanied by awareness of having failed to do so, but this is not always the case. In Jesus' exchange with a rich young man, in Mark's Gospel, the latter's eagerness to serve God did not translate into repentance:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have kept from my youth." And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions (Mark 10:17-22).

Repentance is a definite act, a necessary step in the process of moral transformation in response to God. *Repentance* and *belief* may be two sides of the same coin, but they are separate sides. Repentance plays a vital role in human receptivity to God. It properly situates the heart to receive both evidence and an invitation from God. Apart from this heart response, divine revelation can be twisted to become corrosive, fostering human pride rather than gratitude and love toward God and others.

Repentance entails an acknowledgement of our moral failure before God, including our failure to love as God loves and to obey God's will. Repentance entails the humble acknowledgment of our incapacity to rectify our souls, reverse their corruption, and so save and transform ourselves. This awareness of our needing God displaces us from the prideful center of our universe, making room for God in divine lordship and redemption.

Knowing God in John's Gospel

God's hiddenness, self-revelation, and the role of volitional freedom in the awareness and apprehension of God are important themes in John's Gospel. We will identify some of their significance in John's Gospel. Spiritual perception problems, according to John's Gospel, are heart problems: an unwillingness to believe, obey, repent, love, or forgive. Such unwillingness compromises one's perceiving and comprehending spiritual matters regarding God. It thus bears on one's receiving available evidence of God aright.

The important connection between human volition and receiving evidence from

God stems from God's good purpose for the evidence. The central purpose is to have people who receive the evidence willingly become righteous and loving as God is for the sake of God's family. This purpose seeks to have the power of God's self-manifestation of righteous love in human experience come to fruition for what it is intended by God to be. It is intended to be an interpersonal power received cooperatively by humans for their transformation toward God's perfect moral character, individually and collectively.

If we treat the available evidence of God on our own terms, such as a purely intellectual matter, we trivialize its main purpose and obstruct its intended divine purpose. Such mishandling of the evidence can prompt divine hiding, with God waiting for us to come to our moral senses in relation to God. Presentation of further divine evidence to us will often prompt more resistance or neglect from us, but God would seek a cooperative response rather than our resistance or neglect. So, divine patience and occasional hiding in self-manifestation are trademarks of God.

In John 7, Jesus faces a problem of hiding raised by his own brothers (who, according to John 7:5, did not believe in him). His brothers tell him that nobody works in hiding while seeking to be known openly. Their challenge is straightforward: "Manifest yourself to the world" (John 7:4; cf. John 10:24). Jesus replies that the world hates him because he testifies that its works are evil. He suggests that the world has the wrong attitude toward him. This does not mean, however, that Jesus has no plan to reveal himself and his identity as the Son of God. Instead, it means that he must be selective and careful in his disclosure; he must choose the right times, places, and people. Jesus did not consider declaring his identity to the masses to be a good opportunity if the masses were uncooperative.

John 11 portrays Jesus as raising Lazarus from the dead, and one might consider the context to include incontrovertible evidence for God. The evidence is powerful and persuasive for some observers, as John relates: "many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him" (John 11:45). Even so, John also records the following:

Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and believing in him (John 12:9-10).

Typically, a miracle can be explained away, and relevant evidence can be actively suppressed, as demonstrated by the religious leaders who sought to kill Lazarus and suppress his evidence. Choosing not to believe in God-given evidence is harmful, but seeking to expunge such evidence is evil, indicative of a heart hardened toward God.

After predicting his death, Jesus cautions his listeners to walk while they have the light, "unless the darkness overtake them."

You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the

light, before darkness overtakes you...Believe in the light while you have the light, so that you may become children of light (John 12:35–36).

Jesus suggests that adequately understanding the things of God requires trust in God (12:36). Such trust is not, however, an ungrounded response to inadequate evidence for God. It is not a “leap of faith.” Instead, it is a familial attitude of obediently entrusting oneself to a faithful God who reveals God as a righteously gracious Father. Note this connection: “Believe in the light...so that you may become children of light.” This is faith with a view toward inclusion in God’s family. Jesus is speaking of belief *in* God, not mere belief *about* God.

While announcing his departure from his disciples (John 13:33), Jesus comforts them with the news that God’s Spirit will stay with them: “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (John 14:25–26). Human knowledge of God has its ultimate source in the Spirit of God. God’s Spirit convicts receptive people of their unloving ways and calls them into a loving relationship with God (John 16:8). Upon entering that relationship with God, a person is indwelt by God’s Spirit as the personal power behind divine transformation of humans. The power for us to love unselfishly comes from God’s intervening Spirit, not from ourselves; we are wholly incapable of mustering or mimicking God’s perfect love. Human love is untainted by selfishness only as it is supplied and mediated by God.

Through the Holy Spirit, God’s love is presented internally to receptive humans. As Paul states: “Hope [in God] does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). This experience of divine love is distinctive evidence of God’s reality, and it does not depend on speculation or advanced theorizing. It can emerge in the conscience of a human who has a receptive attitude toward God and a willingness to surrender to and cooperate with God’s will. Dunn writes, “The Spirit is that power which operates on the heart of man – the ‘heart’ being the centre of thought, feeling, and willing, the centre of personal consciousness...The Spirit is that power which transforms a man [or a woman] from the inside out, so that metaphors of cleansing and consecration become matters of actual experience in daily living (1 Corinthians 6:9–11). The Spirit is the source of that wave of love and upsurge of joy which overwhelms the forces that oppose from without (Rom. 5:5; 1 Thesalonians 1:5f).”⁹ We do well to attend to our conscience for important evidence from God’s Spirit, including a manifestation of divine love as love of our enemies.

In cooperating with God’s empowering Spirit, we put ourselves in a position to acquire (a) otherwise unavailable power to love unselfishly and thereby (b) otherwise unavailable salient evidence and even knowledge of God’s powerful reality in relating to us. In other words, our first-hand experience of Spirit-empowered moral transformation

⁹ Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit*, p. 201.

toward God's unique moral character is salient evidence of God's reality. This evidence, including "assurance" from God, is more beneficial to an interpersonal relationship than any kind of theoretical certainty offered by philosophers or theologians. It yields a firm, grounded confidence in God unavailable elsewhere.

Jesus highlights the interpersonal character of the relevant evidence with a promise and an implicit invitation: "The person having my commandments and keeping them, that is the one who loves me; the person loving me will be loved by my Father, and I will love that person and manifest myself to him" (John 14:21). Note the importance of obedience and love; such factors go beyond mere reasonable belief that God exists. The promise and the implicit invitation have crucial volitional conditions stemming from God's perfect moral character.

One of Jesus' disciples restates the challenge from Jesus' brothers in John 7:4, asking why he will not manifest himself to the world (John 14:22). The disciple's thinking is familiar: why hide from the world if you have miraculous powers? Jesus' reply highlights the importance of freely chosen attitudes of love and obedience toward God: "If a person loves me, that person will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (14:23). Jesus portrays God as desiring not mere acknowledgment or intellectual affirmation, but an attitude of filial, loving obedience from humans.

Jesus captures the relationship to which he invites all sincere seekers:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other (John 15:9–17).

While Jesus performs a number of miraculous "signs" in John's gospel, Jesus himself is God's ultimate sign: evidencing God's reality, manifesting God's self-giving love, and exemplifying the loving, familial relationship God offers to every sincerely seeking individual. According to John's Gospel, the ultimate answer to the problem of God's hiddenness is Jesus, God's perfect representative and Son.

If God's answer to our problem includes Jesus, then a *personal agent* is included in the answer, and this agent is not reducible to information about God. God seeks human

trust in a personal agent, God in Christ, and not just human assent to information, such as the conclusion of an argument. We make the problem overly intellectual if we center it on assent to information, including conclusions to arguments. We then miss out on the interpersonal features and actions from God that disclose the uniqueness of God in Christ.

God's self-disclosure to us is inherently interpersonal and thus calls for our attention to person-revealing indicators of God in our experience. These indicators focus on what Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit" of God. He remarks on the turbulence that can arise in moral experience as a result of God's intervening Spirit:

What the flesh desires [ἐπιθυμεί] is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed [ἀντίκειται] to each other.... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh [ἔργα τῆς σαρκός] are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.... By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit [καρπὸς τοῦ πνεύματός] is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal. 5:17–23)

"Flesh," in Paul's thinking, is the part of the world that *can* go against God (but need not do so), whereas the "Spirit" represents God's morally perfect character. Flesh, then, can create a conflict with God's moral perspective.

James D.G. Dunn has rightly noted that "the quality of character" indicated by the fruit of the Spirit, in Paul's perspective, shows "the nature of God's Spirit" and thus the moral character of God.¹⁰ The relevant moral qualities in Paul's list of fruit are best understood as God's filial moral values, as they represent God's moral character in relation to God as divine Father. In Paul's perspective, as Dunn notes, God's moral character is "Christlike," and "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9–11) perfectly represents the Spirit of God. Christ's moral character in relation to God as God's perfectly obedient and beloved Son brings clarity to Paul's talk of the Spirit of God. It thus saves it from being abstract and obscure, and it gives it moral definiteness, even as a basis for moral challenges to humans. Jesus represents a definite life with God to be imitated, in its moral substance in relation to God, by his followers.

Paul, as noted, speaks of what the Spirit of God actively "desires," and this includes what God's Spirit intends to bring about among humans. In this perspective, the relevant fruit is borne by the Spirit of God, courtesy of divine intentions corresponding to God's moral character. As this fruit includes God's moral values, those values are borne by God's Spirit on the basis of God's moral character, and they are directed toward human moral experience, including in human conscience (Rom. 9:1). Paul thus holds of the children of God, as indicated, that "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy

¹⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (London: A & C Black, 1993), p. 308.

Spirit that has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). This is part of a divine intentional effort to guide cooperative humans toward character formation (Gal. 5:18, 25, Rom. 5:4, 8:14), whereby they (eventually) become “holy” or morally “perfect” as God is, in fellowship with God in Christ. They thus become worthy of being called “children of God,” their righteous Father.

The role of divine intentions in moral values helps to explain the typical volitional pull with morally relevant pressure from those values. This pull with pressure arises from the uncoercive influence of God’s will on a human will for directed motivation toward something good. We thus should ask: Why are values motivating at all, in the empowering way they are, at least for many people?

A role for divine will or intention with its uncoercive volitional influence aids in a needed explanation. Moral values typically have an uncoercive attractive power because God’s accompanying goal-directed will has uncoercive power to attract and influence in moral interaction, such as in conscience. Paul thus thinks of our conscience as something that “bears witness” to the moral values in God’s law, resulting in “conflicting thoughts [that] will accuse or perhaps excuse” people in due course (Rom. 2:15).

We need not consider God to be a moral value by, for instance, identifying God with “the good.” I doubt that there is such a singular thing as “the good,” let alone God as that singular thing. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes familiar talk of “worth or worthiness (of a person) in respect of rank or personal qualities.” If values are powerful qualities regarding the improvement of something, we have good reason for caution toward talk of God as a value. Personal agents are not reducible to qualities, however powerful. Their having self-directed wills makes them irreducible to the powerful qualities counting as values. As a result, I recommend against an inference from “God is good” to “God is the good.” I also recommend against talk of God as “the origin” of goodness, because if God is good and has no beginning, goodness does not have a temporal origin.

We should think of God’s self-presentation of divine goodness to humans as God’s gambit for the redemption of humans. It is a gambit because God takes a risk of human rejection of the goodness on offer and thus of God. Paul thus worries about humans’ “frustrating the grace of God” (Gal. 2:21). The risk at hand is required by God’s desire to redeem *responsible persons who have their own wills*, and not just extensions of God’s own will. We have good reason, then, to take seriously Paul’s aforementioned remark, following Isaiah, that God holds out God’s hands all day long to rebellious people (Rom. 10:21). God is not playacting in this regard. This divine effort is part of God’s patience and mercy toward people who voluntarily rebel against God, and that may include all people at times. It manifests God’s preference for lasting life over death among humans.

CONCLUSION

We now can summarize what Jewish-Christian theism tells us about God's hiddenness and salient evidence for God's existence.

- God hides from human perception on occasion. Divine hiding occurs at times that serve God's redemptive purposes. These purposes may be unclear to humans for some cases, but they are not always unclear. Among discernible purposes are a) to teach people to yearn for, and to value supremely, personal volitional fellowship with God, (b) to strengthen grateful trust in God, (c) to remove human complacency toward God, (d) to challenge destructively prideful human self-reliance, and (e) to prevent people who are not ready for fellowship with God from rejecting God. God's hiding is always in the context of God's main desire: to have people lovingly know God and thereby to become loving as God is loving.
- God gives evidence of God in keeping with human freedom, providing uncoercive evidence that can be freely rejected or alternatively explained, and so preserving the integrity of human volition. God desires that everyone would enter into a loving, familial relationship with God, but in the context of human freedom, some people resist. While divine empowerment is necessary for both human repentance and faith, that empowerment is in accord with human choice.
- God provides, in God's good time, sufficient evidence of God's existence and character to every individual sincerely seeking after God: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord" (Jer. 29:13).
- God discloses evidence for God's reality for the purpose of establishing a loving, trusting, familial relationship with humans. Spectacular evidence or merely intellectual evidence for God's existence requiring no human commitment to a cooperative relationship is counter to God's redemptive purposes.

- Our willingness to love and serve God forms our receptivity to the available evidence God provides. As Jesus states in John 7:17, “Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”
- Our willingness to repent of acts and attitudes displeasing to God as contrary to God’s perfectly good character figures in our receptivity to the available evidence God provides. Humble repentance and faith toward God rightly situate the human heart to receive evidence and an unearned invitation from God for the sake of lasting life with God.
- Our positive response to God’s evidence and invitation does not give us by itself the power to live and love unselfishly as God does. The power to “love as God loves” comes through the God’s Holy Spirit.
- Salient evidence for God’s reality and goodness comes from personal experience of God, through God’s Spirit. This evidence becomes decisive for us as we cooperatively experience the Spirit-empowered and Spirit-guided transformation of our lives toward God’s unique moral character.
- Jesus is God’s ultimate sign: evidencing God’s reality, manifesting God’s self-giving love, and exemplifying the loving, familial relationship God offers to every receptive individual.

We now can see the inadequacy of Hanson’s proposal, noted above, that a spectacular “Zeus event” would be needed and fitting for reasonable belief that God exists. In contrast to the main teachings of the Jewish-Christian Scriptures, Hanson’s proposal seems morally superficial in a way that contradicts God’s perfect moral character. We should not expect a being as morally profound as God to perform for us in the crass manner suggested by Hanson.

Many people lament a shortage of available evidence for God’s existence, but perhaps this lament is misplaced. Perhaps the needed evidence is available at God’s good time, but we tend to approach it in ways contrary to its divine intent. Upon Peter’s recognition of Jesus’ status as God’s Son and Messiah, Jesus remarked: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” God self-reveals to us from divine grace as a gift, not from our earning, but we need to be willing to surrender to and cooperate with God’s vital evidence in our experience, including the evidence that is Jesus, who, according to Paul, has become a life-giving Spirit in divine redemption (1 Cor. 15:45).

A crucial question for us is: do we *want* a loving, familial relationship with God that requires trust, obedience, a forsaking of selfish and unloving ways, and a willingness to participate in the process of moral and spiritual transformation toward God’s unique character as represented in Jesus? Each of us must face this question with candor and

moral courage. In that context, we will be able to assess evidence for God aright, including divine hiding, after the trustworthy model set by Jesus. We also may be able to see how that evidence offers us genuinely good news from God in Christ and fits with our deepest need as humans.¹¹

¹¹ Thanks to Rick James for very helpful suggestions.

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