



Christ before Christmas

Leaders Notes



Divine Appearances in the Old Testament

Think of someone who lived a long time ago. If one of your friends claimed to have met them, what reaction would you have? Jesus did just that. He made a comment about Abraham one day and the Pharisees said 'You're not yet 50, how can you have seen Abraham?' John 8:56-58

So when exactly did Jesus make his first appearance here on earth? Was it as a new born babe in Bethlehem? Or much earlier?

True, the name 'Jesus' is not used of God the Son in the Old Testament. Also spelt Yeshua or Joshua, it means 'the LORD saves'. He took that name when he was born as a human baby. But the person behind that name has many other names and he had made previous appearances on earth.

None of us existed before we were born, but Jesus did. He appears in some of the Old Testament stories but he is not called Jesus in them. Sometime he is called the Angel of the Lord. 'Angel' simply means messenger. In John 6:46 Jesus said 'No one has seen the Father. Divine appearances of God were therefore either Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

Although God is separate from his creation, he has never been distant from it. Yes, he sends angels as messengers but he is intimately involved with his creation and likes to visit in person at times.

Old Testament appearances of Jesus?

Jesus was present at creation but as the creative Word of God. There is no clue as to what he looked like here. John 1:1-4, 14, 18; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:2, 10

➤ So how about a visible presence?

Garden of Eden: If we start in the Garden of Eden, we read that Adam and Eve heard the sound of God walking around the garden in the cool of the day.

➤ Did he do this every day?

As they were in a close relationship, we can suppose that he did. Presumably they chatted to him, told him about their day, asked searching questions and learnt from him.

➤ So were they relating to some kind of disembodied spirit or perhaps to God appearing in a similar form to themselves so that he could relate to them more easily. And which member of the Trinity was this?

Throughout the Old Testament, there are a number of supernatural appearances. At first glance some of these would appear to be angels. Although angels do act as God's messengers, the term 'the angel of the LORD' deserves close inspection.

Hagar: Take the example of Hagar for example. Hagar was a young Egyptian slave girl. Her owners had mistreated her so she ran away. God could easily have sent an angel to speak to Hagar who had put herself at risk and needed reassuring and redirecting. And maybe he did. Yet Hagar herself felt that she had had a divine encounter.

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen ^(the back of) the One who sees me." Genesis 16:13

Or as the Jews write it "Thou art God, visible to me".¹

Being Egyptian Hagar believed in many remote deities. She saw that this one was different. It would be so characteristic of Jesus' compassionate nature, especially for the vulnerable, for him to go in person to speak to this young pregnant woman, sitting by a well in the middle of nowhere.

Or was Hagar mistaken? Genesis 16:7-14

Abraham: Then there are Abraham's 3 visitors. They appear to be ordinary men when they first arrive at Abraham's encampment. As the story unfolds it becomes clear that 2 of the men are angels who then go down to Sodom to rescue Lot and his family.

The third remains and the conversation turns into a dialogue between Abraham and God himself. So is this a member of the Trinity in human form and if so, which one? Genesis 18

Joshua: Just before the Battle of Jericho, Joshua challenges a stranger wielding a sword who claims to be the Commander (Prince) of the LORD's army. Joshua acknowledges his superior rank by bowing before him but he is also told to remove his sandals, due to being in the presence of deity. Joshua 5:13-15

Jacob: Much less formal was the earlier encounter with Jacob. On his journey back to Canaan, Jacob had already been met by angels. This had been a huge encouragement but it wasn't enough. Jacob needed a major turning point in his relationship with God, as well as with Esau.

Jacob had always been a fighter, wrestling with his faith, his father-in-law and his twin. He was in turmoil over the prospect of meeting Esau and his 400 men the next day, fearing that his brother would attack his family. The man with whom Jacob wrestled that night was no spirit or vision – he was solid. Jacob was left with a real limp afterwards. It really does look as though God's way of dealing with Jacob on this occasion was to take on a human form that enabled them to wrestle on equal terms. Jacob appears unaware of his identity until their parting conversation.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."... So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Genesis 32:30

¹ Christ in all the Scriptures: A M Hodgkin

Gideon was called to lead his nation in an attack against the Midianites who had been plundering them for 7 years and taken all the food. (The Biblical version of Bug's Life except it's more miraculous.)

Gideon was polite to his visitor calling him 'lord'² or 'sir' as he would to someone of a higher rank. When the man claimed to have the power to help him in battle, he may have begun to wonder about his identity.

When Gideon realized that it was the 'angel of the LORD', he exclaimed, "Alas, Sovereign Lord! I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face!" But the Lord said to him, "Peace! Do not be afraid. You are not going to die." Judges 6:22-23

It's a good story you could encourage the group to read in full at home. Judges Chapters 6-7

²The English word 'Lord' covers a number of titles and meanings in Hebrew and Greek. Sometimes it just means sir or master and refers to social rank. Sometimes it is one of the many names used for God in the original text. Wherever the word LORD is written in capital in the Bible it is because it is translated from the word Yahweh in the original Hebrew (or Jehovah in Latin). Other titles are used for God but this was regarded as God's most holy name.

Samson's parents: The account of Samson's parents meeting the 'angel of the LORD' is a warming one because they were such ordinary down-to-earth people. Although Samson's mother described him as "A man from God ...who looked like an angel from God; his appearance was frightening" neither she nor Manoah realized the true identity of the visitor until after he had gone. Here is the vital clip.

"The angel of the Lord said, "Why do you ask my name? It is too amazing for you to understand." ... As the fire burned, the angel of the Lord went up to heaven in the flame. When Manoah and his wife saw that, they bowed facedown ... Manoah said, "We have seen God, so we will surely die." But his wife said to him, "If the Lord wanted to kill us, he would not have accepted our ... offering... shown us all these things or told us all this." Judges 13

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego: When King Nebuchadnezzar threw Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego into a blazing furnace, not only did they survive but the king was forced to exclaim, "Look! I see four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods." Were these 3 men perhaps joined by Jesus or another member of the Trinity? Daniel 3:21-25

Of course angels can look very impressive too as we see in descriptions of them in Ezekiel 1.

Sometimes God appeared in a non-human form such as fire. The most dramatic occasion was when God descended on Mount Sinai in front of the whole nation of Israel.

Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently.

Exodus 19:18

The most famous occasion was when the 'Angel of the LORD' appeared to Moses in a blazing fire from the middle of a bush, without destroying the bush. Exodus 3:1-6

The most mysterious occasion was when God made a covenant with Abraham in the tradition of his culture. Abraham had killed some animals as was the custom when making a treaty at this time.

After the sun went down, it was very dark. Suddenly a smoking firepot and a blazing torch passed between the halves of the dead animals. So on that day the Lord made an agreement with Abram. Genesis 15:17-18 NCV

With all of these appearances, there is the mystery of whether people were actually seeing God and if so, then which person of the Trinity? These people were either mistaking an angel as something much more or they were encountering a member of the Trinity in human form. It was certainly not God the Father, for Jesus himself said that no man had ever seen the Father except for himself. It was therefore either Jesus or the Holy Spirit.

Further reading

Christ in all the Scriptures: A M Hodgkin

Systematic Theology: Wayne Grudem

www.revelationillustrated.com for helpful images for this topic

Credits

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NCV = New Century Version (Youth Bible)