

Chapter 5

Where is God?

Where is God? This question may seem to be one we expect from young children, but the question is one that has probed humanity for all of recorded civilization. Some believe they can conjure God and make him appear. Whether shaman and spiritists, some believe that through the right incantation, spell, magic words, or formula, God can be brought into the moment for insight or power.

This quest for God's appearing goes back in the Bible to the earliest times. This is the storyline behind the Tower of Babel. After the flood story, the story of the tower of Babel is the last major event before the stories of Abraham. The tower story takes place in the plain of Shinar, an area most scholars reckon to be near Sumer in southern Mesopotamia (think modern Iraq near Bagdad). It was near what would later be called "Babylon" in the Old Testament.

The story gives building details that are foreign to buildings in Israel or Egypt, but right at home in the culture and language of Southern Mesopotamia in the era that predates Christ by several thousand years. Using burned bricks for stone and bitumen for mortar, the people decide to,

build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens (Gen. 11:4).

In this way the people planned on making "a name" for themselves.

The Lord's response was to "go down" and disperse the people and confuse their language. From that time on, the area was named "Babel."

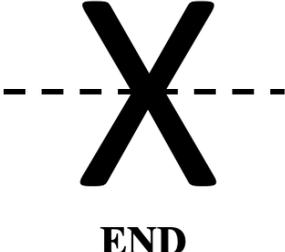
Old Testament scholar John Walton presents compelling evidence that the tower in question was what is now called a *ziggurat*. These buildings were part of a temple complex that, in Mesopotamian literature, was described as having their "head touch heaven," phrasing that echoes Genesis 11:4.¹

The important thing about these ziggurats was that they were not built for the people to go up to heaven and access God. Rather they were built as staircases for the gods

¹ Walton, John H., *Ancient Israelite Literature in its Cultural Context: a Survey of Parallels Between Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Literature*, (Zondervan 1989), at 120-121.

to descend. At the top of the ziggurats were gates/rest stops which were to entice the gods down to earth.

This importance is magnified when we see the structure of the Hebrew story. It is set out in what scholars call a “chiasm.” A “chiasm” references a mirroring of a passage. It is as if one says the same things forward then backwards and forward.

<p>START</p>  <p>END</p>	<p>If you look at the X (Greek “chi”) to the left and you start at the top and work down, you see that the top half is mirrored by the bottom half. If you fold the X over at the midpoint, signified by the dotted line, you would have the very end mirror the very beginning, and ditto for each point in between. In this sense the X (Greek “chi”) gives meaning to a “chiasm,” or piece of writing that folds in the middle with the various points mirroring each other.</p>
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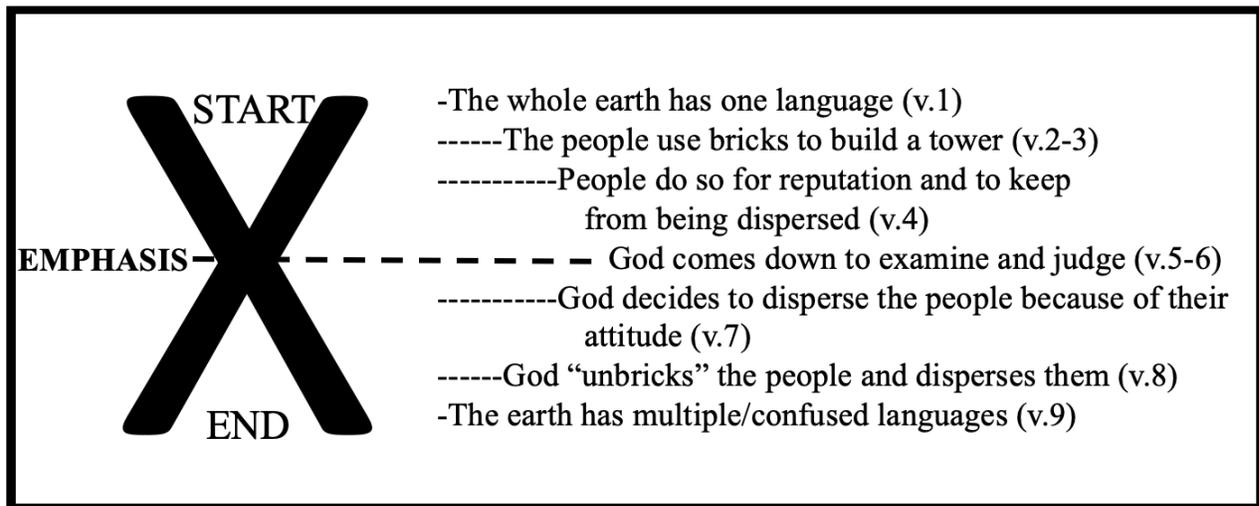
The chiasm as a literary device served to put the emphasis on the middle, that point represented by the dotted line above. Western writing is almost the precise opposite. In western writing, the points of emphasis are generally at the beginning (“Don’t bury your lead” is the adage given to journalists) and at the end where conclusions summarize and emphasize points.

Understanding how a chiasm puts the emphasis in the middle, unfold the Tower of Babel story to see what it signifies. First see the text itself:

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built. And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be

impossible for them. Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth (Gen. 11:1-9).

Now look at the story broken out to better indicate its chiastic structure:



The people sought to entice God into their midst, enhancing their reputation in the process. (Can you imagine the tourist spot and money draw such a tower would have? A place where God was enticed to descend and make his presence known?)

God wasn't a genie to appear at the rubbing of a lamp, must less a God would could be enticed to show up by some attraction built by human hands for human pride and reputation. Instead, the chiasm's emphatic point is clear: God judged the people, for it was never their place to command or coax God into their midst, to get the desire of their heart.

God descended, but not on the people's command or pursuant to their goals. God descended with his own plans. God "unbricked"² the people's language, dispersing them.

² The Hebrew word for "brick" in verse 3 is *nbl*. In verse 7, the Hebrew word for God "confusing" their language is the mirror reverse, *lbn*. Like the chiastic passage, even the word play contains a chiasm.

After reading the story, it might make one a bit nervous about trying to conjure God. Fortunately, no one need be concerned. God doesn't need to be conjured. God is both "transcendent" and "immanent" (two words worthy of explanation below).

The Transcendence of God

Examining God's C.V., we read of him as the world's creator. The Bible begins with the bold proclamation,

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1).

This verse is woven into humanity's historical thinking so often that it is often misunderstood. Genesis was written to an ancient people in an ancient culture as a revelation of God and his role in the world. This passage revealed God to be quite different from what Israel's neighbors thought.

God as creator was never a part of creation. God existed before the creation of the material universe. God called the material universe into being. God explained through the mouth of Isaiah his prophet,

I form light and create darkness (Isa. 45:7).

If the term "nature" is defined as the "cosmos" or as "all material things," then the Biblical revelation asserts that God has a separate and distinct existence from nature. Theologians often use the term "transcendent" to speak of God existing independent of the cosmos. To use a more common-place term, God is "beyond nature" and in that sense, "super" nature, or "supernatural."

This makes God responsible for the machinery of nature. God set up the laws of physics, God determined the velocity of light within the confines of the universe. The tug of war that exists between gravitational pull of matter and the tendency of electrons to flee from the nucleus of an atom are all settings of the dials of nature that issued forth from God's decree.

Yet as we look at God's world, we are remiss if we consider God only the author of the machine. The full Biblical revelation denies the view that God built a watch (the cosmos), wound it up, and then let it run only on its own. This view, historically termed "deism," is contrary to Scripture. It embraces the transcendence of God but fails to see his immanence.

The Immanence of God

God's transcendence explains that God created everything, but his immanence references that all things continue to exist because of God. Paul explained it this way,

For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and *in him all things hold together* (Col. 1:16-17).

God is not only outside the universe, but God is the reason the universe continues to exist. God is ever-present within the universe. He is not the God of the Tower of Babel conception, one that needs to be enticed to journey to earth. He is the force that is currently keeping the entire cosmos in existence.

In this sense, it is no wonder that the Psalmist rightfully asks,

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. (Ps. 139:7-12).

The idea of God being everywhere must be distinguished from the thoughts of the animists and the pantheist, those who believe God is a "part" of everything material (the animist) or of everything that is alive (the pantheist). God is present and God holds things together (or would cease to exist apart from him), yet God is not captive within a rock or a badger. Hence, we should never be worshipping the rock or badger as God, yet we do see that God is the reason the rock and badger exist.

God Does "Descend" to Earth

In the paradox of history and existence, even as God is everywhere at once, in another sense, God has truly descended to earth in a unique and noteworthy form. This is the miracle of the incarnation.

In Jesus, God the Son chose to inhabit a human form, coming to live among humanity. In a passage used in the last chapter, Paul explained it bluntly and poetically in his letter to the church at Philippi,

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Phil. 2:5-7).

John explained it with a slightly different emphasis, calling Jesus the “Word” of God,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (Jn. 1:1-3; 14).

In this way, Jesus was truly, “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). This made Jesus the most important or preeminent being in all of the created cosmos. This is the meaning behind Jesus being termed by Paul, the “firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15). Paul didn’t mean “first” in a time sense. He meant “first” in importance!

This sense of Jesus coming to earth was contrasted even in the Genesis accounts, beyond that of the Tower of Babel. The Babblers wanted God to come on their terms for their fame and reputation. God’s descent to earth was more accurately suggested with the dream that Jacob had while on the run from his brother Esau.

The story is told in Genesis 28. Jacob had left home, fleeing his brother before Esau could execute his wrath upon Jacob, and seeking a wife from his family back in Mesopotamia. At nightfall, Jacob stopped and slept having a most peculiar dream:

And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to

the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gen. 28:12-15).

This was an important dream coming at an important time in Jacob's life. Jacob is over 40 years old. He had wrangled from his brother, schemed with his mother, lied to his father, and stole the family inheritance/blessing, all for his own enrichment.

He then did the opposite of his grandfather Abraham. In faith, Abraham had left Haran for Canaan. In fear, Jacob fled Canaan for Haran. No doubt this was a time of great crisis for Jacob. He was traditionally a tent dweller, not a hunter living on the ground. He had fled for his life and went from being a mama's boy to life on the run, headed to impose on unknown relatives.

In the midst of this faith walk (or lack thereof), Jacob has a dream of the Lord. In this dream, God identifies himself as "the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac." God identified himself as God of the first generation of promise (Abraham) and God of the second generation of promise (Isaac). But God was *not* the God of Jacob at that time, at least not in what we see from Jacob's life or God's self-identification.

Yet, God still proclaimed his choice of blessing through Jacob. God explained that the promises made to Abraham and Isaac will find fulfillment through Jacob. These promises of land, innumerable descendants, and the offspring through whom all the fallen earth will be blessed, will flow from Jacob and his seed. All of this is tightly wound up in a dream where the angels of God descended to earth on a ladder.

No doubt, the events that brought Jacob to this point in time where he fled for his life reacted in his mind with his dream. The text says that Jacob was "afraid," and that he suddenly considered the previously unassuming place to be "none other than the house of God...the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17).

Jacob named the place "Bethel" which meant "house" (*beth*) of God (*El*). He erected the stone pillar where he had dreamed of the ramp to heaven and then poured oil on it. When this event is retold in Genesis 31:13, the word used for anointing the pillar with oil is the Hebrew root *m-sh-h*, the root also for "messiah" or anointed.

This story finds an echoing fulfillment and explanation in the New Testament gospel of John. John 1:43-51 reads,

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ... Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to him, "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered him, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered him, "Because I said to you, 'I saw you under the fig tree,' do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

At first blush, this account of Nathanael's calling seems far removed from Jacob, but the stories are clearly connected. The context is consistent with the idea that Nathanael, before hearing the call of Jesus through Philip, was sitting under a tree likely studying or thinking about the episodes of Jacob, especially those at Bethel.

Jesus clearly knew these thoughts of Nathanael as Jesus greets him with the declaration, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit." This language is especially important because while Jacob was born "Jacob," a name that can mean "one of deceit," God changed Jacob's name to "Israel," the father of all Israelites. For Jesus, to speak of an "Israel-ite" in whom is "no deceit" is to use phrases and words laden with meaning from Jacob.

Nathanael is stunned that Jesus could have known what was on his mind and he asks, "How do you know me?" Jesus explained that he saw what was in Nathanael's mind even before the call, when Nathanael was "under the fig tree." In his amazement, Nathanael readily proclaims Jesus as "the Son of God! The King of Israel!" Jesus then returns to the Jacob narrative proclaiming a true prophetic reading of the dream,

Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

In this vignette, one sees the real "Bethel," the real "house of God," the real ladder where God descends to meet his people, the nexus between heaven and earth, was

to be the cross of Christ. The “anointing,” the “Messiah” would not be Jacob’s stone, but the “stone the builders rejected” (Acts 4:11).

This storyline connection is beautifully expressed in the old hymn, “Beneath the Cross of Jesus.”

O safe and happy shelter!
O refuge tried and sweet!
O trysting place where heaven's love
And heaven's justice meet!
As to the holy patriarch
That wondrous dream was given,
So seems my Saviour's cross to me
A ladder up to heaven.

God’s Indwelling Presence

Even beyond the presence of God in Jesus, God has a particular presence in the life of his children. Jesus promised that God the Holy Spirit would indwell his followers in ways that would bring help, aid, and more to the believers. Jesus’ teaching on this was preserved by John in his gospel, detailing what Jesus promised about the Holy Spirit in the last full discourse Jesus had with his apostles.

The Spirit is a “helper” who would be in them (Jn. 14:16-17).

The first expressed promise of Jesus on the Spirit is found in John 14:16-17.

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.

To best understand this promise, one must carefully consider several words used. First, Jesus says that the Father *will give* the Holy Spirit. This is a future tense verb. It is something that would happen, but had not yet happened as of that point of time. Second, Jesus calls the Spirit “another Helper.” To understand why he says “another” one should first understand what a “Helper” is.

The Greek word used for “Helper” is *parakletos* (παράκλητος). It is a composite of two words meaning, “one called alongside.” This is an unusual Biblical word. No

other New Testament writer uses it but John. Similarly, it is not found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the “Septuagint”). A very similar and related word is found once in Job 16:2 (*parakletor* – παρακλήτωρ). There it is generally translated “comforters.”³

An Egyptian Jewish writer contemporary with John (Philo) consistently used *parakletos* to refer to an advocate, or someone who spoke before rulers on behalf of an accused.⁴ This same sense seems to permeate the other contemporary usage. When the Latin writers translated this passage into Latin, they often used the noun *advocatus*, from which we get “advocate,”⁵ for *parakletos*. They also would use the Latin for “consolatory” (*consolatorium*).

All of this makes it quite difficult to tie down precisely what John means. Is Jesus speaking of one who would comfort and console? (King James Version, American Standard Version). Does he mean a Helper? (English Standard Version, New American Standard Version, New King James Version). Does he mean a counselor? (Revised Standard Version). Or does he mean an “advocate”? (New International Version).

All of these words carry the core idea behind the composite *parakletos* in the sense that all these are ones “called alongside” to aide, comfort, advocate for, and counsel. I like best leaving John’s word to mean all of that, found in translating the word “Helper” like the ESV/NASB/NKJV do. (The New Jerusalem Bible simply uses the Greek word instead of translating it: “I shall ask the Father, and he will give you another Paraclete to be with you forever.”) A helper comes along in life and can fill the role necessary, be it advocate, counselor, comforter, or simply friend.

One interesting thing about Jesus’ statement is that the Holy Spirit would be “another” Helper. Why “another”? Because Jesus himself was a *parakletos* to the apostles, and indeed to all believers! This is clearly implied in John’s Gospel and expressly affirmed in John’s first epistle where he wrote,

³ This is where the King James Version, Luther, and Wycliffe get their translation of “comforter.”

⁴ “Παρακαλέω,” Kittel, Gerhard, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Eerdmans 1965), Vol. _____, at 773.

⁵ This is true in some copies of Jerome’s Vulgate. In other copies, the Vulgate simply transposed the Greek *parakletos* into Latin letters as *paracletum*.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate [*parakletos* - παράκλητος] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

After this assurance that another Helper would be sent, Jesus specified that the coming Helper would be with them “forever.” This was not a situation where the Holy Spirit was coming for an occasion or event. As a Helper, he was coming to stay!

John then adds that the Helper is the “Spirit of Truth.” This expression might mean the “Spirit who communicates truth” or the “Spirit that proceeds from truth” or even the “Spirit that is truth.” It is noteworthy that John inserts this in his Gospel when he has carefully recalled and told Jesus’ claim just verses earlier to be “the truth” (Jn. 14:6). Jesus is also “full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14), and the giver of “grace and truth” (Jn. 1:17). When talking to the woman at the well, Jesus predicted the coming hour when people would worship “in spirit and truth” (Jn. 4:23). As John recorded this discourse by Jesus, it is clear that the Spirit is wrapped up in Jesus as both are wrapped up in truth.

Next John notes an exclusive aspect of the coming Spirit. The world that neither sees nor knows him cannot receive him. Even at that stage, however, the apostles *knew* the Spirit, even though they were unaware of it! They *knew* the Spirit because they knew Jesus. Jesus, full of the Spirit, was their companion and Helper, and because of that, Jesus could confirm that the Spirit dwelt “with” the apostles. The important difference was in the preposition Jesus used. The difference was that the Spirit would soon be *in* them, not simply *with* them through the person of Jesus.⁶

This point of Jesus and John was indicative of another way that God would be found and present in the world – in the life of the believer.

⁶ Before we leave this section of John and this first informative promise of the Spirit, we note what happens a few verses later. In John 14:18, Jesus notes that the apostles would not be left “as orphans,” but that he would “come” to them. Looking back through the lens of history, we can readily understand this as some time between his departure (crucifixion) and the giving of the other Helper, the Holy Spirit (Pentecost). In this sense, Jesus notes that after that, the day would come when the apostles would “know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you” (Jn. 14:20). If that is a reference to the coming Spirit, then we can add to the checklist that the Spirit would unlock knowledge about the relationship of God the Father, the Son, and the believer. While scholars debate whether Jesus is referencing the day the Spirit comes, one thing is certain. The apostles did not understand that relationship at the time Jesus spoke these words! The text shows the exact opposite!

Conclusion

Life is full of twists and turns. Everyone needs and looks for consistency and consolation in life. Everyone needs help. The beauty of the presence of God is that he is that consistency, consolation and help.

What worries does the universe have? None. What worries do people have? Plenty. Yet the creator of the universe is the one who holds his children in his hands. He is the one who holds the universe together, and it is reasonable to expect he holds the lives of his children together too. God is the one who redeems the universe. God is the rightful ruler of the universe. God is indwelling his children. In this there is a peace that passes understanding.