

THE UNVEILING OF YHVH

Introduction

A reading from the Book of Exodus:

(NAB Ex 33:12-34:9 with YHVH substituted for the LORD in verses 33:19 and 34:5-6)

The Hiddenness of God

God the Father is an ineffable mystery, yet as we are commanded to love Him with all our heart and soul and strength, it is imperative that we come to know Him as He is. As the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed:

Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, nor the strong man
glory in his strength, nor the rich man glory in his riches;
but let him who glories glory in this, that in his prudence
he knows me, knows that I, the LORD, bring about kindness,
justice, and uprightness on the earth; for with such am I pleased,
says the LORD.

-Jer 9:23-24

It was with great earnestness that Moses prayed to God: "Do let me know your ways, so that in knowing you I may continue to find favor with you (Ex 33: 13)." But man cannot know God as easily as he knows his neighbor, for not only is God hidden to our eyes, but also our sins and personal unworthiness stand as a barrier between ourselves and Him. For the Lord had said to Moses:

Tell the Israelites, "You are a stiff-necked people.
Were I to go up in your company even for a moment
I would exterminate you. "

-Ex 33:5

The LORD, being infinitely just and holy, cannot accept even a single blemish or sin into His company, thus the ancient Israelites believed that for a man to see the face of God, he had to suffer judgment and die. In the same way, the Israelites believed that to utter the very name of God was a blasphemy which merited death by stoning.

In those days, a name was far more than just a label, for by knowing how to pronounce someone's name, a man could exercise power over the name-bearer, and in the case of an idol could invoke its presence. A man's name was his dual- it revealed something of his character and essence.

When God confronted Moses at the burning bush, Moses said to Him:

When I go to the Israelites and say to them,
"The God of your fathers has sent me to you,"
if they ask me, "What is His name?," what am I
to tell them?

-Ex 3:13

To which God replied: "Eyeh asher eyeh," which means, "I am who I am." Furthermore He added,

Thus you shall say to the Israelites:
"I AM sent me to you."

-Ex 3:14

In one sense, God in answering Moses evaded his question by giving a name that must, at the time, have meant little to him. In effect God was saying, "You have no power over me. I am not like those Egyptian idols whom you knew and could invoke whenever you please. I shall be present as I shall be present." In other words, God proclaimed His hiddenness from men.

The Mercy of God

God, however, being infinitely merciful is not content to remain hidden from His creatures. Though He recognizes their sin, He nevertheless seeks to bridge the gap that separates them from Himself, for He says:

"Is Ephraim not my favored son, the child in whom I delight?
Often as I threaten him, I still remember him with favor.
My heart stirs for him, I must show him mercy..."

-Jer 31:20

And again, God reminds us:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me.
They kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, who took them in my arms.
I drew them with human cords, with the bands of love.
I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks.
Yet, though I stooped to feed my child, they did not know
that I was their healer."

-Hos 11:1-4

In essence, God desires to be our intimate friend. Moreover, He desires us to come to a full knowledge of His ways, for in instructing Moses to cut two new tablets of stone, He foreshadowed the promise that He made through the prophet Jeremiah:

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant which I made with their fathers the day I took them by the hand to lead them forth from the land of Egypt; for they broke my covenant and I had to show myself their master. But this is the covenant which I will make

with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD.
I will place my laws within them, and write it upon their hearts;
I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer will
they have need to teach their friends and kinsmen how to know
the LORD. All, from the least to the greatest shall know Me; for
I will forgive their evildoing, and I will remember their sin no more.
-Jer 31:31-34

Moses, being God's intimate friend, found favor in His eyes and saw God's glory.
The Lord, in being merciful to Moses, did not set His face against him, but rather set him
upon a rock and covered him with His hands until His justice had passed by and Moses
could only see His mercy, which God revealed by pronouncing His name:

YHVH, YHVH, a merciful and gracious God,
slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity,
continuing His kindness for a thousand generations
and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin...
-Ex 34:6-7

The Name of God

For us Christians, the rock in which we find protection from God's just wrath in
none other than Jesus, our Lord, whose name means "God saves," and in whom all sin
was condemned as He hung on the cross for three dreadful hours atop the hill of
Golgotha. As the Gospel according to Mathew preaches:

Everyone who hears my words and keeps them will be
like a wise man who built his house upon the rock;
and the rains fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew
and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had
been founded on the rock.
-Mt 7:24-25

Moreover, by accepting Jesus as our personal Savior, we become intimate friends
with the Father so that as His children, we might look upon His face and live, no longer
fearing His judgment that already fell upon the Son, for as Christ Himself said: "He who
has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9)."

We believe that Christ is God, as He undeniably asserted three times to those who
would not put their faith in Him:

You will die in your sins unless you come to believe that I AM.
-John 8:24

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I AM.
-John 8:27

Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.
-John 8:58

What Jesus said was so unmistakable, that those who heard it took up stones to throw at Him, for He had uttered the very name of God.

In the story of Moses quoted earlier, God promised, as a result of His intimate friendship with the leader of the Israelites, that "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest (Ex 33:14)." Now the name YHVH means not just I AM but connotes an active presence that is better translated by the phrase, "I am there," hence in proclaiming His name God also proclaimed His fidelity to His promise "up to the thousandth generation." This promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, for

His name shall be called Emmanuel,
which means, God with us.

-Mt 1:23

Hence in calling upon the name of Jesus we can now invoke God's presence, for He said:

Whenever two or three are gathered in my name,
there am I in the midst of them."

-Mt 18:20

The name of God is so utterly holy and by itself indicates love that is an integral part of God's own existence even apart from His creatures. We see this especially in the Gospel according to John, wherein is recorded this exchange between Jesus and His Heavenly Father:

"Father, glorify your name,"
Then a voice came from heaven saying,
"I have glorified it, and will glorify it again."

-John 12:28

Here the Father refers both to Jesus' future resurrection and His earlier transfiguration at which both Moses and Elijah were present, each of whom had witnessed the glory of God- one in the cleft of rock, the other in a cave.

In the passage just quoted from John, Jesus' mention of God's name refers to the Father, while the Father's reference is to the Son, hence God's name is the verbal expression of the oneness of the Trinity, for the exchange of love between the Father and the Son is itself a Divine Person, represented by the dove that descended upon Jesus' head during His baptism, at which the Father exclaimed: "You are my beloved Son on whom My favor rests (Mk 1:11)." Jesus proffered this life of love to all men on the eve of His death, when He prayed to the Father:

I made known to them Your name, and I will make it known,
that the love with which You have loved Me may be in them,
and I in them."

-John 17:26

The name given to Jesus, which means “God is Salvation,” is a completion of the name of God, and expresses the symbiosis of God and man. The ancient Israelites themselves used to attach part of the divine name to their children's names as an indication of how man was made in the LORD 's image and thus reflected an aspect of His nature. Jesus' name conveys to us the most essential feature of our relation to God, which is that He is so merciful and compassionate that He redeems us who are so stiff-necked and undeserving of salvation. Even though we do not necessarily attach the name of God to our own names today, we as Christians have the opportunity to affirm our lives in God, for unlike Rene Descartes, who had to prove his own existence by the formula, "I think, therefore I am," we as sons and daughters of God need only say I AM to be sure of the ground of our own being. Together with Moses we bow down in worship of the One Triune God as we pray,

If we find favor with You, LORD, do go in the midst of us,
although we are a stiff-necked people; and pardon our evildoing
and sin, and take us for Your inheritance.

-Ex 34:9

Doxology

Glory be to the Father, the ineffable,
holy, and compassionate One;
to the Son, in Whom He manifests
His justice and mercy;
and to the Holy Spirit, by Whose power
He reveals Himself in His most holy name!

--Eduardo P. Olaguer