Contents

Preface vii

Introduction 1

1. The Revelation of the Divine Presence 5
2. The Revelation of the Divine Name 35
3. The Revelation of the Divine Character 61
4. The Revelation of the Trinity 89

Scripture and Ancient Writings Index 115
Introduction

In our ever more secular age many people pose the question “Does God exist?” or “Is there a God?” But to consider this question seriously we must also ask the question “Who is God?” The content that people give to the word “god” has varied and still varies enormously, and so one has to ask, “What kind of God are you actually talking about?” “What God?” or “Who is God?” In biblical times this was the obvious question. Very few people thought there was nothing to which one could apply the term “god” or “the gods” or “the divine.” But which god was truly God? Who is the God you are talking about? This was the key question and I think still is.

Even though all notions of the divine have something in common, and some more than others, Christians give priority to those key events and experiences that the Bible relates and expounds as the revelation of God. We can answer the question “Who is God?” only by attending to who God has revealed himself to be. To this the whole biblical revelation is relevant. Asked what the whole Bible is about, I would say it is most centrally about the identity of God, while at the same time it tells the story of God and his creation, that all-encompassing…
story that extends from creation in the beginning to new creation at the end. Intensively the Bible is about the identity of God; extensively it tells the story of God and the world.

Within that all-encompassing story, there are key moments of revelation that could be said to define who God is for us—or, it would be better to say, moments in which God defines who God is for us. These are not merely moments that are narrated once within the biblical story; they are more like reference points to which the rest of Scripture constantly refers back. They are moments that reverberate through the whole story. Moreover, like all events of great significance, their significance is not grasped all at once and forever. They are moments whose meaning is never exhausted. So we should read them as events pregnant with meaning, pointing us finite creatures of God to God’s in-exhaustible and mysterious identity. They should challenge our own understanding of God and our own relationship with God, for, as J. B. Phillips famously said, “Your God is too small.”

The key moments of divine disclosure we shall reflect on in this book are by no means the only such moments in the Bible. Others could have been chosen. But those we consider here are undoubtedly among the most significant. They are Jacob’s dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–22), the revelation to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3), the revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod. 33:17–34:8), and the three key moments of revelation in the Gospel of Mark (1:9–11; 9:2–8; 15:37–39). In all these cases our exploration of biblical theology will range more widely than these moments of disclosure themselves, but they will be our guiding stars by which to travel through related territory.

My approach in this book is to treat the Bible as a canonical whole. Here I do not engage in historical reconstruction

behind and around the texts, though that is a task that greatly interests me and that I pursue elsewhere. Here I am interested in the texts as we have them and as belonging to the canon of Scripture—a collection of sacred writings that witness to God through the divine disclosures they contain.

I hope to show readers that the Bible’s account of the identity of God is consistent both within and across the two testaments. I have no wish to discount the diversity of the various parts of Scripture, but I think that a theological interpretation of Scripture should seek the unity in the diversity. The approach is necessarily broad brush, but detailed exegesis is at its heart. The exegesis aims to do justice to particular passages in their own literary contexts, while at the same time highlighting those themes that play an important role in the canon as a whole.

This is a small book on a vast and vastly important topic. Nevertheless, I dare to hope that, by God’s grace, it may help some readers to know God better.
The first key moment of revelation that we shall consider is the dream of the patriarch Jacob, ancestor of the people of Israel, at Bethel:

10Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran. 11He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. 12And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. 13And the LORD stood beside him 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; 14and 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 all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. 15Know that 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.”

16 Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” 17 And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.” (Gen. 28:10–22)

The story is well known, but it is not usually seen to have the pivotal role in the whole biblical story that I shall suggest in this chapter. Of course, God had appeared and spoken many times to Jacob’s grandfather Abraham and on occasion to his father, Isaac, also. God had promised to give the land to their descendants, that they would have innumerable descendants, and that through their descendants blessing would come to all the nations. But only to Isaac did God reveal that God was “with” him (Gen. 26:24, cf. 26:28). This promise of personal presence then comes to much fuller expression in Jacob’s dream at Bethel. On this occasion God repeats the promises made to Abraham and Isaac, personalizing them as promises to Jacob and his descendants (28:13–14), but the focus of both what

1. All Scripture quotations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.
2. According to Gen. 21:20, “God was with” Ishmael, while according to Gen. 21:22, “God is with” Abraham, but in neither case is this a revelation of God’s presence made to that person.

Richard Bauckham, Who Is God?
Jacob sees and what he hears God say is the revelation of God’s presence with him. It is a revelation that, as we shall see, anticipates much that the rest of the Bible has to say about the presence of God with humans.
When Jacob arrived at Bethel, he was in flight from his family home and the anger of his brother, Esau. Jacob had tricked Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob rather than to Esau, and his mother, Rebekah, had sent him away, for his own safety, on a very long journey to the home of her relatives, some five hundred miles away as the crow flies. It was a daunting journey to an unknown future, and Jacob was for the first time in his life truly on his own. It was a situation that required a change in his relationship with God, whom he had known hitherto as the family God, the God of Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 28:13). If Jacob is now to find himself apart from his family, if he is to find who he can be in this newly uncertain world in which he is alone, he must also now find God as his own God. Not that he thinks of this for himself. It is not Jacob who turns to God but God who turns to Jacob.

The image Jacob sees in his dream is probably not, as most of the translations have it, a ladder but a staircase (which the Hebrew word can equally well mean). Probably it is a broad stone staircase running up the stepped side of one of the artificial mountains—known as ziggurats—that the people of ancient Mesopotamia built. There was a famous ziggurat in the city of Ur, from which Jacob’s ancestors came. The gods were thought to live at the top of the cosmic mountain that touches heaven. So, in order to worship them, the Sumerians would build a great mound on which to place a temple, so that the gods could dwell there and the people could worship the gods by ascending the steps to the summit of the mountain.

What is remarkable about Jacob’s dream is that he sees God not, as one would expect, at the top of the stairway but at the bottom. This is the most likely meaning of the words that could be translated “the LORD stood above it” (i.e., the staircase) but most probably mean “the LORD stood beside him” (i.e., Jacob;
Gen. 28:13). This is the translation that coheres with what the Lord says to Jacob: “I am with you” (28:15). Jacob does not have to make the arduous ascent up the staircase to meet with God at the top. Nor does God’s communication with Jacob have to be mediated by the angels who are passing up and down the staircase. They are the divine messengers (“angel” means “messenger”) who are sent from heaven to do God’s will on earth. They symbolize communication between heaven and earth. But in Jacob’s dream God has, as it were, bypassed them. He himself has come down the staircase and stands looking at Jacob sleeping beside him. He is not remote in heaven but down on earth “with” Jacob.

So when Jacob wakes in wonder, the dream still filling his consciousness, he says, “This is none other than the house of God” (Gen. 28:17). He means that where God is to be found is not only in heaven but on the very spot where he has been sleeping: “Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!” (28:16). So the stone on which his head had rested while he dreamed he stands upright as a pillar and consecrates it as a memorial of God’s presence there. He names the place Bethel, which means “the house of God.” But even this recognition of God’s presence there at Bethel does not reach the deepest meaning of Jacob’s dream. What he has discovered is not so much that God is in that particular place as that God is where Jacob is. God is with Jacob and will be with him wherever he goes: “Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go” (28:15). God’s revelation to Jacob is not for a man who is going to settle down at Bethel with a temple close at hand in which to worship God. Rather it is for a man on a journey. From now on every place where Jacob sleeps will be a Bethel. The leitmotif of Jacob’s life will be God’s presence with him (see Gen. 31:3; 35:3; 46:4).
We can see this in the rest of Jacob’s story as Genesis tells it. When Jacob eventually returned to the land of promise, after fourteen years in the household of his uncle Laban, he reflected that God, as he had promised him at Bethel, truly “has been with me wherever I have gone” (Gen. 35:3). Jacob must have thought that that was the end of his travels outside the land of Canaan, but much later in his life he found he must make another long journey, this time to join his sons and their families in Egypt. For an old man such a journey would be more daunting than for a young man. Perhaps more importantly, it would be difficult for Jacob to understand how it could be part of God’s purposes for him and his descendants. God had promised them this land. How could it be right for the whole family to settle in another country? And so once more God spoke to him “in visions of the night,” assuring him that settling in Egypt really was a step on the way to God’s promised future (46:3), and adding: “I myself will go down with you to Egypt” (46:4).

Finally, at the end of his very long life, Jacob looked back on God’s unfailing and protective presence through all those years, speaking of “the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day” (Gen. 48:15). The image harks back to Jacob’s earlier life, when he had worked as a shepherd, looking after the flocks of his father-in-law, Laban (30:29–43). Jacob knew well what it meant to be a shepherd. The shepherd must lead his flock to pasture and water, but most fundamentally he must be with the flock at all times. He must be there with them in order to protect and care for them. Jacob’s comparison of God with a shepherd inevitably reminds us of Psalm 23. At the heart of this psalm and of its image of God the shepherd are the words “for you are with me” (Ps. 23:4). In fact, they are literally the central words of this exquisitely composed poem. In a life with God, his guidance, provision, and protection are important,
as Jacob and the psalmist knew, but in all such experiences the center and source is God’s presence “with” us. The psalm helps make Jacob’s experience available to all who pray it, and this must be the reason it has proved the most popular of all the psalms. To discover that God is “with” us is probably the most important discovery anyone can make, for, once made, it colors all of life’s experiences.

So in the Bible, the little word “with,” when it links God and humans, is a powerful word. In the Hebrew Bible, individual persons God promises to be “with” include Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Saul, David, Solomon, Jeroboam, Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Jeremiah. God is also frequently said to be “with” the people of Israel when they are faithful to him. Moreover, it appears that “The LORD be with you!” was a standard greeting in use in Israel. It was how life should be, what one wished for oneself and for others. (This biblical usage has often been imitated in later history, not only in Christian liturgy but also in colloquial usage. Most English speakers who use the word “goodbye” as a signal of parting from someone are not aware that in its origins it meant “God be with you.” A recent variation on it is the well-known phrase from Star Wars, “May the Force be with you!”)

As the examples I have just listed will show, in the Old Testament God’s presence “with” people is never a neutral or inactive presence that makes no difference. Sometimes it refers to


4. E.g., Deut. 2:7; 31:6, 8; 1 Kings 8:57; Pss. 46:7, 11; 91:15; Isa. 41:10; 43:2, 5; 45:14; Jer. 30:11; 42:11; 46:28; Amos 5:14; Hag. 1:13; 2:4; Zech. 8:23; 10:5.

5. Ruth 2:4; cf. Exod. 18:19; Judg. 6:12; 1 Sam. 17:37; 2 Sam. 14:17; 2 Chron. 36:23; Ezra 1:3; also Rom. 15:33; Phil. 4:9; 2 Thess. 3:16b; 2 Tim. 4:22.
protection and success in war. Always it refers to God’s favor and care for those he chooses to be “with.” It makes all the difference to their lives.

Understanding the Presence of God

In the Christian theological tradition, God’s “omnipresence” has regularly featured as one of the metaphysical attributes of God, and it is not uncommon for Christians to say or to think “God is everywhere.” This is not untrue, but we must be careful how we think about it. Because God is the Creator and Sustainer of the whole creation, God is immediately present to all his creatures, upholding their existence, and intimately involved in every event, enabling it to occur. This is God’s universal presence as Creator. It does not mean that God is spatially extended throughout the world, as some people doubtless picture it. Nor is it merely a static “being there.” God’s presence is personal and active. He wills and acts to be present to every creature and at every moment. But this fundamental sense in which God is present to all creatures at all times in the same way is not the focus of concern in the Bible because, while it underlies our relationship with God, like everything else, we become conscious of it only when God engages with us as specific persons, whether individuals or groups. Even Psalm 139:7–10, which is often cited as biblical testimony to God’s “omnipresence,” is not concerned to affirm simply that “God is everywhere.” What matters to the psalmist is that wherever he may go—even to the furthest reaches of the cosmos—God will find him there:

Even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast. (v. 10)
It is a matter of God’s fully personal and active presence to the psalmist in particular. The divine presence of which we can be aware is always particular.

The particularity of God’s presence means that God may be present in many different ways. He may be present “with” individuals in their ongoing life, as he was with Jacob. He may be present in the pillar of cloud and fire that accompanied the Israelites after the exodus, guiding and protecting them. He may be present in the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple in Jerusalem, where sacrifices enabled his people to enter his holy presence. God may appear in special theophanies, dreams, and visions, or even in the “sheer silence” in which he met with Elijah (1 Kings 19:12). All these are modes of God’s gracious and succoring presence, but God may also be present in wrath and judgment against evil. Many of the varied forms of God’s presence that we find in the Old Testament continue or have equivalents in the New Testament, but many of them also find their culmination in a new form of divine presence that surpasses them: incarnation, God’s presence as the human Jesus Christ. Thereafter, the enduring form of God’s presence with his people is as the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, present and active within believers.

Divine Presence—Accompanying and Static

The Bethel revelation has two aspects. So far I have stressed that for Jacob the experience of God’s presence with him in one place provided the prospect of God’s presence with him wherever he went. This is a pattern that others too may experience. A special experience of God’s presence may inaugurate a life of living in the presence of God. After the initial experience, God may not usually be with the believer in the same evident way,
but the believer may now be confident of God’s accompanying presence in all the events of their life and open to the felt sense of that presence at least from time to time.

However, we should not neglect the fact that Jacob does call the place “the house of God.” This term, which is otherwise used for a temple, suggests that God resides in that place. So, Jacob evidently thinks his dream revealed a continuous presence of God at Bethel, as well as the divine presence with Jacob wherever he goes. The stone Jacob set up marks that place as a shrine where God may be found. In fact, on Jacob’s return to the land of Canaan, he also returns to Bethel and settles there for a time (Gen. 35:1, 6–7, 16). This time God actually instructs Jacob to build an altar at Bethel in order to worship (35:1, 14). This is the first time in the biblical narrative that God explicitly tells anyone to erect an altar (though such a command is implicit in 22:2). Later, Bethel was one of the shrines where Israelites worshiped in the period before the Jerusalem temple was established (Judg. 20:18, 26–27; 21:2) and then one of the two main shrines of the northern kingdom of Israel (1 Kings 12:26–33; 2 Kings 23:15–17; Hosea 10:15; Amos 3:14; 4:4; 7:13).

In using the phrase “the house of God,” Jacob was adopting a common feature of ancient Near Eastern religion, which may also have been suggested in his dream: It was thought that a god could have an earthly house that corresponded to their house in heaven. The connection between the earthly house and the heavenly house ensured the presence of the god on earth. The temple was thus a place where people could be sure that they would come into the divine presence. The temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem conforms to this pattern.

But before there was an Israelite temple in Jerusalem, a permanent residence for God in a particular place, there was the
tabernacle in the wilderness, created as part of God’s covenant at Mount Sinai, when Israel became his special people. There is a significant parallel between the revelation of God to Jacob at Bethel and the two places where God resided “with” his people Israel: tabernacle and temple. The tabernacle corresponds to the ongoing, accompanying presence of God with Jacob wherever he went. The temple corresponds to the more permanent residence of God in his “house” at Bethel.

The English word “tabernacle” (from the Latin tabernaculum, “tent”) is used in most English versions of the Hebrew Bible to translate a Hebrew word that means “dwelling” (miškān). It was given to Israel by God as a place where God would “dwell among them” (Exod. 29:46). Accordingly, in the wilderness it was situated in the middle of the Israelite encampment. But the tabernacle is also called a “sanctuary” or “holy place” (miqdāš; e.g., 25:8). This marks a major change from the period of the patriarchs in Genesis. In the accounts of the many encounters of the patriarchs and matriarchs with God, the words “holy” and “holiness” are never used. But once God, at Mount Sinai, has established a nation dedicated to him, holiness becomes a key feature of his presence among them. It means that impurity and sin cannot be tolerated in the divine presence. A system of “graded holiness”—whereby God’s presence in the most holy place is separated from the profane space outside the tabernacle by less holy spaces—now serves to protect the people from the danger of the divine presence and, at the same time, to make God accessible to them. Through priestly mediation and sacrifices, God can be approached and his favor requested.

These features would apply also to the Jerusalem temple, but the distinguishing feature of the tabernacle, by comparison with the temple, is its mobility (see 2 Sam. 7:5–7). While God’s people lived in tents and moved from place to place, so
did God. Like God accompanying Jacob on his travels, so the tabernacle accompanied Israel. In fact, the movement of the cloud that manifested God’s presence in the tabernacle not only accompanied but also guided the journey of the people through the wilderness (Num. 9:15–23).

Owing to its nomadic character, the tabernacle was not a “house” of God, still less a palace (though its rich adornment made it a tent fit for a king). The temple in Jerusalem, however, conceived by King David and built by his son Solomon, was both. The common word for “temple” (hêkāl) means a king’s palace. In Jerusalem God’s royal palace and the king’s palace, God’s rule over Israel and the king’s rule on his behalf, were closely associated. Now that Israel was settled in the land, God’s central presence with them no longer moved but found a “resting place” (Ps. 132:8) on Mount Zion, the place he chose for his dwelling (Deut. 12:5; Ps. 132:13). The Hebrew Bible as a whole leaves no doubt that this was God’s intention.6

Some scholars writing biblical theology are inclined to denigrate the temple, comparing the idea of a static dwelling place for God unfavorably with the mobile tent. It ties God down, domesticates him, and puts him into the hands of the priests and their rituals, seen as means of controlling his presence and his grace. This view is probably influenced by a Protestant suspicion of holy places and sacerdotal rituals. But it is not true to the way the Bible itself views the temple. The plan of the temple and its system of priesthood and rituals are not fundamentally different from those of the tabernacle, though everything is on a grander scale. God “settles” on Mount Zion, not because the king and the priests wanted his presence under their control but because his people were now settled in the land. (When Solomon’s temple was destroyed and God’s people were exiled

from the land, God’s presence once more traveled in a mobile sanctuary, at least in metaphor [Ezek. 11:16].) The temple, like the tabernacle, was a physical space where God in his grace promised to be accessible to people. We could compare Jesus’s promise that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:20). Because God’s presence in this world is most often not evident, his people need such assurances. The temple was a tangible sign of God’s gracious accessibility, the earthly footstool of the God who infinitely exceeded it. Of course, like all the ways that God gives us for approaching him, the temple was open to abuse, which the prophets denounced. It could not be a guarantee of divine protection regardless of people’s unfaithfulness and disobedience (see Jer. 7:1–11; Mic. 3:9–11). When people did not take seriously, in their behavior, the presence of the holy God among them, God ceased his residence and the palace they had built for him was destroyed.

God’s presence was never supposed to be confined to the temple. The image of the temple as God’s footstool was one way of making that point. Solomon’s prayer at the dedication of the temple made the point emphatically: “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27). Another way of specifying the limited nature of God’s presence in the temple was to speak of it as the place where the Lord’s Name dwelled (e.g., Deut. 12:5, 11, 21; 1 Kings 8:29; 14:21). His Name is his personal name, revealed to his people so that they could call him by name (see chap. 2). For God’s Name to dwell in the temple means that he is personally present there, specifically in such a way as to

7. 1 Chron. 28:2; Pss. 99:5; 132:7; Lam. 2:1; cf. Isa. 66:1.
8. Similarly, in Isaiah’s vision of God in the temple, the mere hem of God’s garment fills the temple and his glory fills the whole earth (Isa. 6:1–3).
be accessible to his people’s prayers. Thus he says that he has “put [his] name there forever; [his] eyes and [his] heart will be there for all time” (1 Kings 9:3). As the tangible sign of God’s accessibility, the temple was not only a place for people to visit but also the place toward which they prayed, wherever they were (1 Kings 8:29–30, 35, 44, 48; Dan. 6:10). The temple enabled all Israelites, however lowly their social status, and even non-Israelites (1 Kings 8:41–43) to meet the God who made and governs the heavens and the earth. Like the descent of the LORD from heaven to be beside Jacob on earth, the temple was a signal form of gracious solidarity with God’s people.

The book of Psalms was compiled as the hymnbook of the Second Temple. The individual psalms were composed at many different times and in various circumstances, but many of them were written to be sung or prayed within the temple and some of these evince a strong sense of the nearness of God that the psalmists desired or experienced in the temple. Psalm 84 is an eminent example. It speaks with the voice of someone who presumably lives far from Jerusalem but who makes a pilgrimage to the festivals in the temple whenever possible. He looks forward eagerly to the joy of those times in the near presence of the LORD. He wishes he could be one of those who spend all their time there. Yet he is well aware that it is not mere physical presence in the temple that ensures the LORD’s favor and protection. It is on “those who walk uprightly” and “trust in” the LORD that these blessings are bestowed (vv. 11–12). Because the psalmist is one of those people, his intense experience of God in the temple spills over into the rest of his life. He draws strength from God long before he arrives in Jerusalem every few months (vv. 5–7). The psalm is a passionate expression of how the whole of life could be shaped by the divine presence experienced in the temple.