

## John 1:1-18; 14:5-14      How can we know God?

Most Christians have heard testimonies of how Jesus has changed a person's life: *Before I met Jesus, my life was in a mess, but now I know Jesus personally, I know my sins are forgiven, and He has given me His peace.* But how can we know God? According to John there is a lot hanging on knowing God: *Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent* (John 17:3). John is St. John the Evangelist, and he is evangelising anyone who might happen to read his gospel so that they may know God. John begins his task in the prologue: the Word, who was with God and who was God (John 1:1) has become a human being (John 1:14). No-one has ever seen God, but the One and Only (i.e. the Son, who is the Word) has made Him known (John 1:18). The Word (the Logos) who was the Agent of Creation is also the Agent by which God makes Himself known to human beings.

If it were possible to know God with our rational minds someone like Albert Einstein would be up there in front of us all! But in 1954 he said, *I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.* (Albert Einstein, 1954). There are many today in a similar place to Einstein. They appreciate ascetic beauty, and the grandeur of a building like Kings College Chapel. These things appeal to the religious instinct in us. But there is a difference between that and belief in a personal God. Einstein was being truthful when he said he did not believe in a personal God. His admiration for the beauty of the Universe only went so far as science can reveal it. But the Bible goes further than science can reveal it: the Word, the One and Only, reveals the Father.

In John 14 Jesus had a conversation with two of His disciples, Thomas and Philip. Jesus said, *you know the way to where I am going* (John 14:4). Thomas the skeptic doesn't know, so he says, *Lord, we do not know the way to where you are going. How can we know the way?* (John 14:5). Jesus answers Thomas the Doubter with his most famous I AM saying, *I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me* (John 14:6). That gives Thomas something to think about ... and it may give us something to think about as well. Philip then joins the conversation, *Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us* (John 14:8). Jesus replied, *Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?* (John 14:9). Then Jesus challenged Philip, *Don't you believe?* Einstein's answer was, *No, I don't believe.* What about you?

John wrote his gospel, *that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name* (John 20:31). The Word was made flesh, to make God known, that we may believe.

We often call the Bible the 'word of God', and we hold it in high esteem, believing it to be *God breathed* (2Timothy 3:16). But our Bibles are perishable. The Word of God John is speaking about is not perishable, eternal in the heavens, at the Father's side. We call the Bible the 'word of God' because it bears witness to the Eternal Word.

John says something surprising in John 1:18, *no one has ever seen God.* This is surprising because we read about many people in the Bible who did see God, for example, Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1) and Abraham (Genesis 18). Sometimes these encounters seem strange because they are an encounter with a human like figure who is also identified as *the LORD*, or, *the Angel of the Lord*. Gideon had such an encounter: *Now Gideon perceived that He was the Angel of the Lord. So, Gideon said, "Alas, O*

*Lord God! For I have seen the Angel of the Lord face to face." Then the Lord said to him, "Peace be with you; do not fear, you shall not die" (Judges 6:22-23).* In quite a few of these encounters, as with Gideon, there was considerable anxiety in the individual that he may die, and this anxiety was well founded. God had said to Moses, *You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live (Exodus 33:20).* The Jews knew that you could not see God and expect to survive the experience. Our God is a consuming fire. If we were really to see God, the radiance of His glory would be too much for us sinners to bear, like a fly getting too close to a fire and being frazzled. This thought should I think invoke a wholesome fear of God in us.

But how can it be that on the one hand no-one has seen God, indeed is unable to see God and survive. And on the other hand for individuals to encounter God, to believe they have seen Him, and survive? The Jews recognised this contradiction. They developed the idea of an intermediary, called the Memra. 'Memra' is an Aramaic word, which is translated into Greek as 'Logos', and then 'Logos' is translated into English as 'Word'.

In the synagogues in the time of Jesus the Scriptures would be read in Hebrew from the Torah Scrolls. But the main language was Aramaic, not dissimilar to Hebrew, but different. In order for most people to understand, someone would recite the passage in Aramaic. The Aramaic version was called the Targum. We have the Targums today. The Targums expressed well the idea of the Memra, or Word of God. For example,

The Hebrew Bible says, *God created man in His own image (Genesis 1:27).*

The Targum says, *The Word (Memra) of God created man in His own image (Genesis 1:27).*

The Jewish Encyclopaedia says, *the Memra is the manifestation of God.*<sup>1</sup> Gideon's Angel (=messenger) was the Memra of God. The Memra of God was understood to be God's Agent of creation, God's Agent of Revelation, and God's Agent of Redemption, all ideas we find in John 1. According to the Jewish Encyclopaedia the theological idea of the Memra fell out of use in Judaism because of its close association with Christian doctrine: *Possibly on account of the Christian dogma, rabbinic theology, outside of the Targum literature, made little use of the term "Memra."* In other words, the idea of the Trinity is not so foreign to Judaism as modern rabbinic Judaism would like us to think!

If John had been writing in Aramaic he would have written, *In the beginning was the Memra, and the Memra was with God, and the Memra was God.* John's Jewish readers would have immediately understood. John was not coming up with something completely new. In order to introduce Jesus as the Divine Son he started at a place they would have understood. John was not in my view drawing on the ideas of the (pagan) Greek philosophers to try and make connections with the Greek speaking world. He was saying that the manifestation of God who appeared to Abraham, and who wrestled all night with Jacob, and who walked in the fiery furnace with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego was now manifest in the Person of Jesus Christ! *The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world (John 1:9). No-one has ever seen God, and if we did we would die. But God the One and only, at the Father's side, has made him known.* Somehow, Christ as intermediary not only reveals the Father to us, but He also protects us from the Father. The person who says, *I have met Jesus and I know my sins are forgiven,* has met the same God, the same Word of God as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We can know God by knowing Jesus and confessing Him as Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/10618-memra>