# 13

# Who Is God? What Is He Like?

*Steven Thompson*

## Is this question important?

We know the probability is very high that God exists; but is it important to know the truth about *who* God is? Yes, it is! The question of God's identity is just as important as the question of his existence because it hugely impacts our quest for meaning. Our answer to the question of who God is determines the answer to so many follow-on questions about who we are, what life is about and what our place is in the universe.

The term 'worldview' has come to express our set of answers to these big questions of existence. A worldview is comprehensive and satisfactory only when it answers questions arising from all four of life's dimensions: the personal, social, spiritual and cosmic. A worldview that leaves out one or more of these dimensions is unsatisfactory because it can cause a fragmented sense of the world, and a sense of alienation.

The missing spiritual dimension in the worldview of a large number of contemporary people is often related to abandoning

belief in a God who is involved with his creatures. Early in my career as a pastor I met a gracious and hospitable retired scientist whom I visited several times. He enjoyed my visits and told me about his work on a top-secret project of World War II, the development of radar. However, whenever we discussed the spiritual dimension of life, or if I cited a Bible passage which referred to anything divine or supernatural, he would smile courteously but condescendingly and chant, 'Fairies at the foot of the garden!' By this he reminded me of his lifetime commitment to a worldview that ruthlessly eliminated God by subjecting any claims about spiritual reality to a strictly materialistic, scientific scrutiny. The result was predictable—such scrutiny convinced him there was no God, and that claims of the existence of spiritual truth were not believable, since to him they could not be tested using 'scientific' methods.

Scientific method on its own contributes little or nothing to our knowledge of God. So how else can we learn who God is? Are there other sources for such knowledge?

## The Bible as source of knowledge about God

Arguably the best knowledge about God would be that which he himself provides, rather than speculation or guesswork about him. Has God ever introduced himself to humans, so to speak, in a way which provides such knowledge? Has a reliable record of any such introductions been preserved? If so, they would seem to be the best source of first-hand knowledge of who God is.

Before answering this question, it is important to further define which sort of 'introduction' qualifies for our purpose.

Many people are convinced they have encountered God, that God has met and communicated with them. However, not all such claims should be believed. Direct human encounters with God are powerful and often result in long-term life turn-arounds. They are also rare. Therefore, a good test for the reliability of a person's claim to have met God is the resulting changed life.

The Bible, consisting of the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the Christian Scriptures (New Testament), contains the largest and richest collection of testimonies by individuals and people groups to whom God has 'introduced' himself, and who experienced consequent life changes. These stories have collectively served as the sourcebook for beliefs about God, and have provided the spiritual dimension for two world religions, Judaism and Christianity. The Bible's approximately 775,000 words recount a range of such divine 'introductions' to people living at various times in different parts of the ancient world. Its stories focus especially on the Hebrew people, beginning with their founder, Abraham, who lived about 2000 BC, and ending with accounts of the actions of the followers of Jesus Christ, who during the first century of our era spread the Christian faith the length and breadth of the Roman Empire and beyond.

A couple of features set these accounts apart from other collections of stories about encounters with God.

First, they provide unvarnished, very human glimpses into the lives of the people who encountered God. Even Hebrew heroes such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his twelve sons, and the shepherd king David have their weak and foolish sides

exposed, along with their struggles to trust God. This adds to the authenticity and believability of these stories as they depict real people, some of them experiencing struggles very much like our own.

The second feature of the Bible's accounts is that they present a consistent picture of God. Even though the stories take place in diverse ancient cultures spread across the Near Eastern world, and are written by different authors over a time span of thousands of years, they present a consistent and believable picture of God. The Bible is thus an extremely valuable source concerning the experiences of individuals and groups who encountered God.

## God according to the Bible

The Bible consistently attributes a set of divine characteristics to God in its episodes of divine interaction. The following four especially are foundational: creator, person, ruler, judge.

*Creator.* First, the Bible presents God as creator of the world, including humans. The first and most notable identifying mark of the God of the Bible is his separation from, and ultimate authority over, creation. God is not *in* nature, and even the most impressive natural phenomena are but reflections of God's greatness. The technical term for this divine separateness from creation is 'transcendence'.

God's transcendence, however, does not cut him off from his creation. Rather than remaining in splendid isolation, God balances transcendence with a special form of 'immanence' that allows him to relate to creation. From the absolute otherness of his transcendence, the Bible describes God's encounters with

creation, which clearly have as their purpose establishing a relationship.

God has not abandoned creation, leaving it to look after itself. Ongoing personal involvement is part of his plan. He possesses ultimate insight into creation's design, function and purpose. God knows why we are here, and where we are headed. The universe has not escaped from its creator's control, despite appearances to the contrary. After a period of conflict, God will remove the source of conflict and elevate his universe to a state of complete harmony and peace.

*Person.* Second, the God of the Bible is a person. It is significant that the title of this chapter asks 'Who is God?' rather than 'What is God?' There is vast difference of meaning between the terms. If while sitting inside at night I hear scratching on the front door, I ask myself, 'What is that?' But if I hear a knock, my question is different: 'Who is that?' In other words, *who* implies a person, with the potential for a relationship.

God, according to the Bible, possesses personhood and is the source of all personhood, including my own. Key attributes of human personhood include the will, individuality, a sense of differentiation, and the capacity to form relationships. The Bible attributes these to God, and repeatedly records human interaction with him in relational terms. No part of the Bible is free from the language of relationship; it dominates the books of Moses, the Psalms, the prophets, the New Testament letters and especially the teaching of Jesus. The God of the Bible intends to relate.

Furthermore, God takes the initiative in establishing life-

changing relationships. Bible accounts depict him approaching people to provoke a relationship. He does not overwhelm or neutralise the personhood of those with whom he relates, reducing them from subjects to objects. They retain their identity, their individuality and, most importantly, their freedom to enter, continue or end the relationship.

*Ruler.* Third, God is presented in the Bible as ruler of this world—an absolute ruler, yet one 'big enough' and tolerant enough to embrace and contain this world's plurality, rebellion, suffering and evil, as well as its beauty and goodness. The Bible makes clear that regardless of determined resistance and rebellion against him, God maintains sovereignty over creation. No force in the universe can separate his creatures from his rule against their will.

On the other hand, he is only content to rule subjects who freely choose to be ruled by him. He never employs coercion. Finally, after repeatedly seeking the allegiance of every creature, his rule will lead through a process of cleansing and removal of evil to a state of perfect unity and harmony through all creation.

*Judge.* Fourth, the God of the Bible is judge. The task of judges is to decide whether the conduct of free humans is lawful. Judges are only needed where there is law, and where subjects have both freedom and choice.

According to the Bible, God is both lawgiver and judge. This unusual combination signals that there is a moral centre to the universe, a universal standard of right and wrong, the knowledge of which is communicated to creation. As free creatures with some power of choice we are held responsible,

within limits, for our conduct. According to the Bible, God will judge us for the use we make of our freedom to choose good conduct and reject evil—in other words, to relate to him.

Unlike human judges, whose knowledge of both the law and human conduct is incomplete, the God of the Bible has complete knowledge of both spheres. He has no need for eye-witness testimony or high-tech forensic evidence in helping him reach a judgment, nor is there the possibility for error, since he knows all. Finally, he is not subject to bias or corruption. He is therefore the only judge whose judgments are completely true and just, and for which there is no higher court of appeal.

## Why is Jesus so important?

The Bible ends with a set of accounts which provide the ultimate example of how God relates to humans. These accounts concern the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life was a series of largely public events witnessed by considerable numbers of people.

The amazing events in the life of Jesus and those around him, especially his resurrection, convinced many of his contemporaries that through Jesus God began to relate to people in a new and unique way. In the light of Jesus' resurrection, even the pain and suffering of the crucifixion came to be seen as central to God's plan for this world.

So to answer the question 'Who is God?' the Bible directs us to look to Jesus, God's ultimate revelation of himself and his plan for his creation.