

GOD THE SON IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

A RESPONSE TO ANDREW MALONE

AUGUST 12, 2017 · SPENCER STEWART

I had completed the manuscript draft for *The Preeminence of Christ: Part Two, The I AM*¹ when I ran across Dr. James Hamilton's recommendation² of Dr. Andrew Malone's book, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament? A Fresh Look at Christophanies*.³ A *theophany* is a manifestation of God. *Christophany* normally refers to the theological belief that manifestations of God in the Old Testament were specifically manifestations of God the Son, not the Father or the Spirit.⁴ That has been the view of many respectable theologians from the earliest days of the Church, and I shared it. So I didn't like the sound of Malone's book, but I respect Dr. Hamilton so much and want always to remain humble and teachable, so I knew I had to read Malone's book before publishing mine. And I knew I had to pray for an open mind, for God to correct me if I needed it.⁵ The Lord will judge if I succeeded in reading it well, but I was not convinced of its main arguments.

I don't have the time or skill to attempt a full review of Malone's book. (I encourage you to read it, if the Lord so leads. I'm glad that I did. I learned some things and was sharpened even in areas of disagreement.) I do, though, desire to address⁶ two of Malone's main points, which oppose the traditional view of christophanies that I espoused in Chapter Five, "Jesus As God in the Old Testament."

Malone's main argument is that we have erred to believe that God the Father is invisible and thus the Son is the one who made all of God's appearances in the Old Testament;⁷ rather, theophanies are manifestations of all three members of the Godhead in unity. Secondly, he argues that "the Angel of the LORD" is not the Son distinctly, but the LORD in Trinity, "God Unspecified."⁸

¹ Spencer Stewart, *The Preeminence of Christ: Part Two, the I AM* (Lawrence, KS: Project one28, 2017), available on Amazon, iBooks, Nook, and also as a free PDF at ProjectOne28.com/IAM.

² [Twitter.com/DrJimHamilton/status/603289055233716225](https://twitter.com/DrJimHamilton/status/603289055233716225) (26 May 2015).

³ Andrew Malone, *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament? A Fresh Look at Christophanies* (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015).

⁴ It's an acknowledged anachronism, since God the Son had not yet become human and received the name *Jesus* or the title *Christ*. It would've been better if they had started calling them "*huiophanies*" (*huios* = "son") or some such thing.

⁵ In the middle of it, I tweeted: "Cognitive dissonance is so unpleasant - it's a wonder that we ever learn from opponents and change our minds" (twitter.com/ProjectOne28/status/626798239929528321 [30 Jul 2015]). I recently re-read Malone's book with the same experience.

⁶ I am grateful to several anonymous readers of an earlier draft of this response, who offered helpful critiques.

⁷ His Part 1 is titled, "Is God the Father Invisible?" (beginning at Kindle Location 359).

GOD'S "INVISIBILITY"

Several verses have been translated such that God is invisible (Col. 1:15; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 11:27), and traditionally, they have been applied to the Father distinctly. That may be because the NT usually reserves the title "God" for the Father, in distinction from the Son and Spirit.⁹ However, we should say that the Son and Spirit are just as "invisible" as the Father, since they share the same essence. Therefore, it may be that these verses teach only that no one has seen the *Triune God in His fullness*, even though some OT saints indeed saw the Triune God in a filtered manner.¹⁰ And yet other NT verses add that no one has ever seen God, even specifying that no one has seen "the Father" (Jn. 1:18, 6:46; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 Jn. 4:12).¹¹ Therefore, it has been taught that everyone who "saw God"¹² in the OT was actually seeing the Son.

I welcomed Malone's correction of simplistic thinking about the "invisibility" of God. It is not that He cannot be seen *at all*, because we *will see* Him, the Father Himself in all His glory, on the New Earth (e.g., Mt. 5:8, Rev. 22:4). *Aoratos*, it seems, would better be translated as "unseen," that is, not naturally seen (like idols and the things of the world are naturally seen).¹³ God is not naturally seen, and no one is able to see Him by human initiative. But God is able to reveal Himself in visible manifestations whenever and however He wants (His sovereign initiative is key).¹⁴ The OT is full of those manifestations of God, accompanied by the shock of (sinful) eyewitnesses that they were not consumed by His holiness.

⁸ His Part 2 is titled, "Is Jesus the Angel of the Lord?" (beginning at Kindle Location 1050). "God Unspecified" comes from the title of his Chapter 6 (beginning at Kindle Location 1179).

⁹ Malone suggests that this view stems from the Greek philosophy imbibed by early writers, such as philosopher-turned-apologist Justin Martyr (Kindle Locations 284-86, 715-16, 1007-08). Rob Lister compellingly demonstrates that the early church fathers have often been given an unfair hearing, as though captive to Greek philosophy, when in fact they were submitted to Scripture as their supreme authority (*God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013]). Günther Juncker claims this is the case with Justin ("Christ As Angel: The Reclamation of a Primitive Title," *Trinity Journal* 15:2 [Fall 1994]: 221-250). I haven't read widely enough to make a truly informed judgment at this point, but I'm inclined to follow Juncker.

¹⁰ Even though Jesus' disciples "saw His glory" at the wedding in Cana (Jn. 2:11), Malone rightly points out, "Jesus himself confirmed that his disciples had not yet 'seen' his full glory (John 17:24). We can certainly understand the Bible's expectation that there's more to experience of God one day" (Kindle Locations 914-16).

¹¹ Malone teaches that "see" in these passages is being used metaphorically as "understand" or "comprehend" (Kindle Locations 619-720, 801-4). He might be correct, but it strikes me as going too far to say something like "language of 'seeing' in [John] 6:46 does not concern one's eyes" (705-6). The contexts of many seem too connected to the issue of presence. That is, to be in one's presence and see is to know. Yes, it concerns more than physical sight, but that is not the same as having nothing to do with physical sight. E.g., "The one having seen Me has seen the Father" (14:9) surely has something to do with physical sight in Jesus' presence; cf. "Happy are the ones not having seen, but having believed" (20:29). Malone seems inconsistent when he describes our future (literal) "seeing" God the Father with "human eyes" on the New Earth (838-42).

¹² E.g., Ex. 24:10-11. The point in Ex. 33:20 is *not* that God is unseeable, but that He *can* be seen, and that would be bad for those who are unholy. So also Malone, Kindle Locations 437-43. Malone footnotes: "You can explore encounters for 'appeared' in Gen. 12:7; 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 48:3; Exod. 3:16; 4:1, 5; Deut. 31:15; 2 Chr. 3:1; 1 Sam. 3:21; Jer. 31:3; and for 'saw' in Gen. 16:13; 32:30; Judg. 13:22; 1 Kgs 22:19 = 2 Chr. 18:18; Isa. 6:1, 5; Amos 9:1" (2666-68).

¹³ Malone: "Josephus [AD 37-100] uses *aoratos* to depict things that 'are not seen' more than things that strictly 'cannot be seen'. At least five of his seven uses mean this.... Plutarch [AD 46-120] also uses the word for tangible items hidden from view.... The Greek word *aoratos* has this broader sense, and the English translation 'invisible' may be too narrow or misunderstood" (581-92).

¹⁴ So also Malone, quoting Bavinck, Ambrose, Irenaeus (Kindle Locations 890-907), and Frame (937-43).

However, I believe Malone is incorrect to go on to say that the OT appearances of God were not distinctly God the Son. First, though, I would clarify that I do not believe the Three can be separated absolutely. Mysteriously, the Three Persons equal One God. Each Person is not *part of* God; rather, the fullness of the divine essence indwells each Person, and each Person inter-penetrates the others. That is, the Father and Spirit fully indwell the Son, and the Son and Spirit fully indwell the Father, and the Father and Son fully indwell the Spirit. Three Persons in one essence. One God in tri-unity. Therefore, one Person does not act apart from the other Persons. When I teach that an OT theophany was a manifestation of the Son, I do not mean the Son *apart from* the Father and Spirit. And yet, even though the fullness of the Trinity dwells in (the Son eternally and) Christ bodily,¹⁵ Scripture does not hesitate to teach us that the Son, in particular, was incarnated and crucified. The Father was not incarnated and crucified, nor the Spirit. Therefore, it is not out of bounds to interpret a manifestation of God in the OT or NT to be one particular Member of the Trinity in distinction from the others (regardless of what distinction the observers grasped or did not grasp at that stage of God's progressive revelation, Prov. 25:2). Malone is concerned that we could portray the Father as so transcendent that He doesn't bother to relate to us, remaining aloof and unloving. I agree that those thoughts are unworthy of the Father; they never crossed my mind in the development of my doctrine of christophanies. These are merely defensive clarifications, but there is a positive case for christophanies to be made from Scripture.

THE SON'S UNIQUE HONOR

Malone believes that after mistaken notions of the Father's invisibility are corrected, no reason remains to identify OT theophanies (manifestations of God) as christophanies (manifestations of God the Son before His Incarnation as the God-Man). Yet my faith in so-called christophanies is not based on the supposed "invisibility" of the Father, but upon the Biblical revelation of how the Trinity exists eternally and relates to us creatures in time. The Son – in His eternal Person – proceeds from the Father¹⁶ as the *radiant glory* of God and the *Word* of God (e.g., Heb. 1:3 and Jn. 1:1). God's *glory* is the manifestation of His nature, the shining of who God is.¹⁷ A *word* is an articulation of an invisible thought. Taken together, we may say that the unique honor of the Son is to be the *beautiful self-expression* of God. Therefore, it just makes sense that the manifestations of God in the OT were manifestations of God the Son. That is who He is. That is what He does.

Malone acts as though the NT Scriptures that teach us this should all be understood only in terms of the Incarnation – as though the Son did *not* fulfill that role before the Incarnation.¹⁸ However, these Scriptures clearly speak of the Godhood of the Son, which is eternal and unchanging. For example, Colossians 1:13-17 calls God's "beloved Son" "the image of the unseen God" in the same breath as

¹⁵ Col. 1:19, 2:9 (cf. Isa. 9:6).

¹⁶ I, along with theologians such as John Calvin and John Frame, have some concerns about the language of the doctrine of the Son's "eternal generation," even while affirming the point it was devised to convey. I try to explain this at ProjectOne28.com/generation.

¹⁷ This is the subject of my *The Preeminence of Christ: Part One, To the Glory of God the Father* (Lawrence, KS: Project one28, 2017), also available on Amazon, iBooks, Nook, or as a free PDF at ProjectOne28.com/glory.

extolling the Son as the pre-temporal Creator and Sustainer of all things. There is no equivocation, as though the Son was Creator and Sustainer *before* the Incarnation, but “the image” *only after* the Incarnation. “Image” is inherent in His very name as “Son.” Like Father, like Son. The Son *eternally* proceeds from the Father in His image. Likewise, Hebrews 1:3 speaks of the Son as the radiance of God’s glory in the same breath as extolling the Son as Creator and Carrier of all things, sharing the Father’s “nature” (obviously not in His manhood). And John 1:1 honors the Son as the Father’s explanatory Word, not just since Incarnation, but “in the beginning.” So, yes, the Incarnation was an unspeakably special development in salvation history. And, we should add, the Incarnation *accorded with* the Son’s *eternal* subsistence and role as the beautiful self-expression of God the Father. He did the same ancient task in an astounding new way: He manifested God (theophany’d), not as God only, but as God-Man.¹⁹

Malone concluded his Part 1:

For those who would champion christophanies, the heart of the matter can be distilled to a single question with many doctrinal consequences. What is the difference between God the Father and the preincarnate Son that supposedly renders one of them impervious to human sight while the other makes regular appearances? An answer is not nearly as forthcoming as some would suggest.²⁰

However, Malone admits, “It’s possible that the members of the Trinity might *choose* for the Son to be their visual representative. This, however, is a line of argument not often pursued to support christophanies.”²¹ That has been my line of argument, with this focus on the eternal nature of God the Son and the correction to Malone’s improperly narrow exegesis of the Son’s role as limited to His incarnational ministry. Moreover, I believe Scripture reveals *why* the Father would *choose* for the Son to be the visual representative of the Trinity: because the Father loves the Son and desires the Son’s preeminence in all things, for all to marvel and honor the Son just as they honor the Father (e.g., Jn. 17:24, Col. 1:18, Jn. 5:20-23, respectively).

¹⁸ E.g., on Colossians 1:15 (“the image of the unseen God”), “He’s rejoicing that the tangibility of the incarnate Son is orders of magnitude more intimate and permanent than any prior fleeting encounter with God” (Kindle Locations 724-25). More generally, in “summary”: “The New Testament authors are excited to praise the incarnation of God the Son as Jesus the Messiah. They rightly celebrate that access to God is now so much greater than the old covenant formerly afforded” (834-35; see also 865-66).

¹⁹ Fred Sanders writes that Augustine’s “more substantive reason for rejecting the idea that these are appearances of the Son (not the Father or the Spirit) has to do with the uniqueness of the visible mission of the Son in the incarnation. If the Father sent the Son repeatedly during the old covenant, it derogates in some way from the uniqueness of the incarnational sending.... With Augustine, we might admit that the Son, based on his inner-Trinitarian status as the one who is eternally from the Father and expresses the Father, might be the appropriate messenger of God even in the old covenant” (*The Triune God*, New Studies in Dogmatics, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016], 225). That last sentence is exactly my sentiment, and I wish Sanders had stopped there and let that argument win the day. But he went on to complete a section he headed as “No to Christophanies.” As much as I appreciated the book as a whole, I’m convinced he’s wrong on this. Augustine should have let the in-flesh-ness of the Incarnation be what is so gloriously unprecedented and essential, without thinking the Son’s OT missions in any way diminish that.

²⁰ Kindle Locations 982-85

²¹ Kindle Locations 987-88, emphasis his.

THE “ANGEL” OF YAHWEH

Malone also teaches that “the Angel of Yahweh” is the Triune “God Unspecified,” not any one member in distinction.²² He raises doubts and then dismisses that the Angel is sent from God or relates to God distinctly. I agree with Malone that the Angel referring to God in the third person is not sufficient evidence of distinct personhood (because God can do that about Himself).²³ However, I do believe there are compelling reasons to believe the Angel of Yahweh is Yahweh in relationship with Yahweh, the Word “with” God the Father (as in Jn. 1:1).

First, the very title *Angel* means “messenger.” In my book, I explain that the Hebrew *mal’ak* and Greek *angelos* are frequently used of human messengers, so the word denotes function more than form.²⁴ Human messengers aren’t created angels, and neither is “the Angel of Yahweh” a created angel; He is regularly regarded as a *divine* messenger.²⁵ My point here is that a messenger is *one who is sent with a message*.²⁶ Therefore, “messenger” is considered to be in the Hebrew construct state and “Yahweh” its head noun, with the most natural understanding of the words’ relationship being “the messenger *sent by* Yahweh.” However, Malone argues that “Yahweh” is in apposition to “messenger,” meaning “the messenger, *that is*, Yahweh” (the messenger = Yahweh),²⁷ much like the compound title *Adonai Yahweh*. I find his reasons unpersuasive.²⁸ They don’t outweigh the meaning of “messenger” as one who is sent. And it doesn’t make sense that the whole Trinity was sending the whole Trinity. But it does make sense that the Father was sending the Son to manifest His glory and speak for Him – because that is who the Son is and that is what He does, according to the NT revelation of the Son’s eternal role, as we saw above. Thus Jesus loved to refer to the Father as “the one who sent Me.”²⁹

Secondly, some passages are so clear that they can only be rightly interpreted that Yahweh *sent* the Angel of Yahweh. For example, Yahweh promised the Exodus generation, “Behold, I send a Messenger before

²² “God Unspecified” comes from the title of his Chapter 6 (beginning at Kindle Location 1179). He also employs the phrase “the full undistinguished Trinity” (1866).

²³ Malone, Kindle Locations 1538-41.

²⁴ *The Preeminence of Christ: Part Two, The I AM*, 65-66 (ProjectOne28.com/IAM).

²⁵ See pp. 65-80.

²⁶ Malone makes it a big deal that “sent” is not used with “the Messenger of the Lord” (Kindle Locations 1410, 1435-36, 1794-95, dismissing Ex. 23:20-23 [see my n. 27 below]), which is quite strange since he admits that “sent” is part of the very meaning of “messenger”: “It’s uncontested that a *mal’ak* is someone sent with a message” (1269-70, cf. 1893-94). And yet, throughout, Malone accuses that we merely “assume,” while failing to prove, that the Messenger is sent by Yahweh (e.g., 1273-75, 1730-44, 1763, 1798, 1870). Rather than assuming, I’d say we’re just reading well, letting the words mean what they typically mean. The burden of proof is on him to overturn the natural sense of “messenger” – and n. 26 (below) argues that he has not succeeded.

²⁷ Kindle Locations 1279-80.

²⁸ He offers “at least three.” First, Hebrew does this (Kindle Location 1281), a point I don’t deny, but possible doesn’t mean probable, so it’s not really a “reason.” Second, “the Bible seems attached to the full title. If the phrase means an ‘angel sent by the Lord’, we might expect subsequent mentions within the same story to refer back to ‘the angel’ already introduced. We would not need to keep hearing who had sent him” (1295-97). But, Malone admits this “Messenger” is unique in His divinity, so the repetition of the full title could simply be a way of marking off that uniqueness and the reverence due Him. Third: “Biblical texts commonly interchange ‘Angel of the Lord’ with ‘Lord’ or ‘God’” (1301). But this is part of the argument for the traditional view, which better affirms the natural understanding of “messenger”: God sent God; the Father sent the Son.

you... My Name is in Him” (23:20-23; cf. 14:19, Judg. 2:1, Isa. 63:9). In my book I explain the ways in which this passage ascribes divinity to this messenger.³⁰ My point here is that it doesn’t make sense that the Messenger is the Trinity, as if to say, “Behold, I send *Myself* before you... My Name is in *Me*.” But it does make sense that the Father was sending the Son, in His pre-incarnate Being. As another example, Zechariah 1:12-13 records a conversation between Yahweh and the Messenger of Yahweh: “Then the Messenger of Yahweh said, ‘Yahweh of armies, how long will You have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which You have been angry these seventy years?’ And Yahweh answered gracious and comforting words to the Messenger who talked with me.” Again, we must get more specific than the triune God talking to Himself without distinctions of Persons: the Son is the Messenger praying to the Father (for the sake of His audience, in the same manner than Jesus prayed in John 11, acknowledging, “Yet I *Myself* had known that You always hear Me, but on account of the crowd standing around, I said that, in order that they may believe that You Yourself *sent Me*” [v. 42]).³¹

Additionally, there are other passages, such as Joshua 5:13-15 (cf. Ex. 3:1-5, Num. 22:22-23, 31), which also establish a distinction between Yahweh and the Messenger/Commander of Yahweh’s army (who is nevertheless worshiped as Yahweh).³² And let us not forget that several NT passages place the pre-incarnate Christ in the OT: Jesus claimed that Abraham saw Him (Jn. 8:56-58); John said that Isaiah saw His glory (12:41); Paul and Jude say Jesus delivered and punished the Exodus generation (1 Cor. 10:4, 9; Jude 5).³³ *And*, Jesus repeatedly claimed to be the I AM of Exodus 3:14, *which is a claim to be the Messenger of Yahweh who spoke Exodus 3:14*.³⁴

So, we can believe the traditional view because of the very concept of a messenger and the distinct, *interpersonal* relationship between Yahweh and the Messenger of Yahweh, both of which accord with NT revelation of the Son’s eternal role in the Godhead.³⁵ Therefore, after prayerfully considering Malone’s arguments, I still believe that the Messenger of Yahweh in the Old Testament, who is called Yahweh Himself, is specifically Yahweh the Son. I went on to publish that in Chapter 5, “Jesus as God in the

²⁹ E.g., e.g., Jn. 4:34; 5:24, 30; 6:38, 39; 7:16, 29, 33; 9:4; 12:44, 45; 13:20; 15:21; 16:5.

³⁰ Malone dismisses this passage at Kindle Locations 1437-41, believing there is no reason to equate “my angel” with “the Angel of Yahweh” (since he rejects its straightforward reading as a genitive construct). My case is in *Part Two*, 69-70, where I also connect this passage with “the Angel of Yahweh” in Exodus 3:2-15, 14:19, and Judges 2:1 – “the Angel of Yahweh” promised to go before them, He did, and then He reminded them of it. And if Exodus 23:20-23 accords divinity to the Messenger, as I there quote other commentators asserting, then it definitely is one and the same Messenger.

³¹ Emphasis added. On Zechariah 1:12-13, Malone writes, “If we can find the Angel and God speaking to each other, we have good grounds for considering them to be separate individuals. We do indeed find this – to an extremely limited extent... Even scholars who might prefer elsewhere to conflate the Angel and God recognize that here there’s a distinction drawn between them” (Kindle Locations 1481-1482, 1489-1490). He could have ended his book right there. Instead, he thinks this is not the same Angel elsewhere accorded divinity, but a different, created being (1492-1523).

³² See my *Part Two*, 72-73.

³³ See *Part Two*, 62-63, on John 12-Isaiah 6, and 70-71 (and n. 23), for commentary and text critical issues on Jude 5 and 1 Corinthians 10. Malone acknowledges these verses at Kindle Locations 320-321 and treats them in Chapter 11 (beginning at 2150). To be clear, Malone affirms the preincarnational presence of the Son in the OT; what he denies is the teaching that theophanies were *exclusively* the Son. I maintain that it was His unique honor as the Son, to image forth the Father.

³⁴ See *Part Two*, Chapter Four, “Jesus Is the I AM,” 43-60, as well as pp. 65-67 (on “the Messenger of Yahweh” in Ex. 3).

Old Testament,” where I included:

We have seen that the Angel of Yahweh was a major character in the Old Testament. Yet He is never delineated as such in the New Testament. What happened? Did He retire? No, He was even more present and active than ever – in the Person of Jesus Christ!³⁶

Malone’s title was *Knowing Jesus in the Old Testament?* With a coy question mark. My answer is yes, we can come to better know the NT *Man* Christ Jesus by following that NT revelation in order to find Him alive and well in the OT as the Glory of God and the Messenger of God. Let us all bow our hearts and worship!

³⁵ Malone treats it as a defeater to ask why the Holy Spirit could not be the Messenger of God in the OT (e.g., *Kindle Locations 1770-83*). True, the Spirit is the breath of God who proceeds from the Father to execute His will. But Scripture does not describe the Holy Spirit as the Father’s image, His beautiful self-expression, in the way that it does the Son (e.g., Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4; Heb. 1:3; Jn. 1:1, 14, 18). I’m just trying to submit to that revelation.

³⁶ *The Preeminence of Christ: Part Two, The I AM*, 79-80. In the book, this quote includes n. 31 on the argument over the absence of the definite article (“the”) in the NT “angel of the Lord,” except when anaphoric.