

2

Summary

All through the Bible, from the Garden of Eden forward, God communicates with people. Sometimes this is straightforward: *the LORD said*. Sometimes messengers, dreams, and visions are employed. Other times the circumstances are quite unusual. (There are a large number of Old Testament passages to read.)

Basic Bible References

Genesis 18:1-19:1; 32:22-32; 41:15, 16

Exodus 3:1-17

Numbers 12:6-8

Judges 6:11-29

1 Samuel 3:1-11

1 Kings 19:1-15

Isaiah 6:1-9

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Word List

Angel

Baal

Pillar of Cloud/Fire

KNOWING GOD

2

GOD AS COMMUNICATOR

Our texts assume that God easily communicates with people. We have already noted how God talked with Adam and Eve in the garden on a person-to-person basis. At least six times God speaks to Noah telling him what to do and assuring him of the future. In 8:21, 22 the text tells us that *the LORD said in his heart*. The story of the tower of Babel includes the curious words of the LORD, *let us go down*—which we have already noted. This implied knowledge of the heavenly decisions of the LORD is clearly primitive tradition.

In Genesis 12:1 the LORD tells Abram to migrate from Chaldea to Canaan. Throughout the record of his life this communication continues, not only with Abram/Abraham but also with members of his family. In 16:8 the LORD speaks with Hagar, Abram's wife's slave-girl. Again such information must come from ancient oral family tradition.

Read **Genesis 18:1-19:1**. At first Abraham is dealing with three *men*. Without any notice, 18:20, the LORD is speaking. Then there are two men—was the LORD the third? Then Abraham has a kind of bargaining session with the LORD. In 19:1 the two men are two angels. Later in the chapter they are again men and still later the LORD takes over.

We are not told just how God spoke in such instances, and we do not know just how the earliest readers of these texts understood the way God spoke. The language is anthropomorphic. Perhaps people thought that a voice spoke from an invisible source, but there is never a doubt that it is indeed the LORD who is speaking with them. Such communication continues with Abraham's son Isaac (26:24) and his grandson Jacob (35:1).

Sometimes God communicates through messengers. The episode about Sodom in chapters 18 and 19 seems to involve this. The word for angels can be translated “messengers.” Read **32:22-32**. Jacob believed that his wrestling match with *a man* actually brought him *face to face* with God. Read **Judges 6:11-27**. *The angel of the LORD* called Gideon to be the judge of Israel, but then it became the LORD who spoke directly with Gideon.

Moses seems to present a special case. Several times it is remarked that the LORD spoke with him *face to face*. Read **Numbers 12:6-8**; also note Exodus 33:11. In Exodus 33:7-11 Moses meets Yahweh *face to face, as one speaks to a friend*, but in verses 17-23 Moses is permitted to see only Yahweh’s back.¹ Read **1 Samuel 3:1-11**. Here is another story of a very unique call by God.

In many instances God communicated through dreams and visions. In **Genesis 41:15, 16** Joseph declares that he will give God’s interpretation of Pharaoh’s dream. Two wonderful stories of visions occur in the prophets. Read **Isaiah 6:1-9**. The prophet experiences God’s glory and receives his call to service. **Ezekiel 37:1-14** records the prophet’s vision of the dry bones by which the LORD gives an assurance of hope to the people in captivity.

God’s communication may employ quite unusual means. Read **Exodus 3:1-17**. The angel/messenger of the LORD gets Moses’ attention, and then the *LORD* speaks to Moses and reveals the divine name, *Yahweh/the LORD*.² In Exodus 19:7-25 Yahweh makes a spectacular appearance at Mount Sinai including natural fireworks. A kind of taboo is attached to the mountain, and Yahweh reaches the people only through special persons. In Deuteronomy 5:22 Yahweh *spoke with a loud voice to your whole assembly*. In Israel’s wilderness wanderings the presence and protection of the LORD was manifest *in a pillar of cloud by day . . . and in a pillar of fire by night* (Exodus 13:21, 22; 14:19, 20; Numbers 14:14). We must admit that it is difficult to relate these stories to each other. The traditions seem to have been collected and edited without being completely homogenized.

1 Eventually the Hebrews became convinced that humans really could not see God. The Gospel of John declares, *No one has ever seen God* (John 1:18). We shall return to this matter in Session 3.

2 In Hebrew the name has four consonants, which are usually given the form “Yahweh” in English. By long tradition this is rendered LORD (caps and small caps).

The prophet Elijah is prominent in the early history of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. He often brought God's messages to the kings, some of whom were evil. In a famous confrontation with the prophets of the pagan god Baal, Elijah directed a victory for Yahweh and had to flee from the wrath of King Ahab's wife, pagan Jezebel. Read **1 Kings 19:1-15**. Elijah has quite a unique encounter with Yahweh. The communication after *sheer silence*³ is in marked contrast to the experiences at Mount Sinai.

This is only a sampling of the Old Testament texts that speak about God's communication with people. We shall meet other instances in other circumstances in the following parts of this course.

For Further Study and Reflection

Memory Bank

1. Stories you should be able to retell:

Moses and the burning bush

Elijah on the run

Isaiah's vision of the LORD

Ezekiel and the dry bones

2. Tell about the call of:

Gideon

Samuel

Research

1. In a Bible dictionary or other resource learn more about the name "Yahweh."
2. Read the whole story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal, 1 Kings 18.

Reflection

1. Have you ever been conscious of God speaking to you? How would you describe the experience? If you have not had such an experience, do you think it is possible? Why or why not?
2. How does your answer to #1 relate to the biblical material in this Session?

³ The KJV translated this *a still small voice*.