

Jesus Embodies Everything God Men's CRHP Formation Meeting Sunday,
April 15, 2012 (Old and New Testament ideas)

The topic is God, and **I am starting with the Old Testament** because we are Christians, and **Jesus came from Judaism** and the Jewish way of life and the Jewish culture; and the Jewish religion was important to him, although he may have disagreed with quite a bit of it. I think **the more we know about it the more we understand his dilemmas** and so on.

So when we go back to the beginning of the people of God's experience, we see that they believed that there were many gods. The idea of one single God was not originally in place, but rather there were many gods, but they were not equal. **The supreme God, the Lord**, chose for reasons that are not explained, **chose a people for himself**, that is, the people of Israel, **who came to be in bondage in the land of Egypt**. So God chose them, and **some believe that there was an earlier history with God and the people of Abraham**, but some dispute whether that is really before or after. It's pictured as before in the Bible. But some say, well, maybe not; maybe the Lord's choice really started with Moses, and Abraham is a projection backwards.

So that's part of what is disputed today in biblical history and biblical studies. How much do you take literally in the **Old Testament? Or how much do you take historically?** There is every opinion you can think of: none of it is historical, all of it is historical, and something in between. But the Jews, the Jewish people, the Jewish rabbis, the scholars, the scribes, never took anything literally. And that's a basic principle we have to keep in mind, that **never was anything taken literally in the Jewish Scriptures, nor was it taken literally in the early Christian Church either, nor did the Fathers take things literally**. They always were looking for hidden meanings, the hidden meaning, the cryptic meaning. And this idea that the literal meaning is "the" meaning didn't even come into the Church until the Reformation; it was a Protestant idea. People assumed that there was a historical background to everything that was said. They assumed there was an Abraham; they talk about Abraham; they assumed there was an Isaac; they talk about an Isaac, and so on. But that wasn't ever the meaning. **The meaning was always hidden.**

So we start off with this idea that **there are many gods, but the one supreme God**, the Lord, chooses this people and **calls them out of Egypt**. And this was **the great event that formed them as a people**. Now there are other gods, although they are not as powerful, and they are assigned—and the Lord assigned them—to various nations. The Lord assigned the various gods to the various nations. That was one of the basic arrangements, you might say. For whatever reason, God chose this Israel—for no reason, but he did, and **that's their story**.

The Lord also had a property; the Lord also chose **property**, and the property is the land of Israel. And therefore he said, well, you are my people, and I have some property, and I am going to send you there. And you will find people there, but they don't belong there because they are not my people. So I am going to drive them out. So that's the

story. And when it comes to our understanding of God, **we are understanding everything through the stories of the people.** That's where it all starts. Now we can have our own stories. We can have our own experiences—true. But **part of what we carry, the tradition we carry, is this whole background, as we have to understand where we are coming from.**

So there are many gods, but one **God is supreme.** Later on we will see that God, the Lord, **calls to account all the various gods** and he finds them all corrupt and incompetent, and so he **fires them.** So after that point then there is only one God. And God, **the Lord, assumes all authority,** all divine authority for the whole world. But that's only at a certain point. Again, **we are only looking at things through the lens of the stories that we find in our Scripture.** That's how they looked at it. And if you want to look at **Psalm 82,** that is what scholars say is the place where this demoting of all the other gods is recorded.

Now another thing that's important to realize is that **in the Old Testament there are two different models of God. The first model is a man-like being—**does not mean actually physical, but is capable of appearing physical. However, his appearance is so horrifying that to see God would cause your death. So you really don't want this to happen. However, there are some exceptions. From time to time God does appear. For example, he appeared to Moses. In fact, he appears to Moses quite often. But **he appeared to Moses, and Moses did not die.** Later on there is an incident where the people were told that they could see God, only his backside. He would pass through them. They couldn't see his front. That would be kind of like glory, light—blinding. But as he passed through they could turn around and see his back, and they did not die, and then they marveled that they saw God but did not die. So that's one model.

This model is found in many of the early stories. **In the Book of Genesis,** for example, **God walks with Adam and Eve** in the cool of the evening. He walks with them—chatting like a man, like a person. **God in this model is not omnipotent and is not omniscient.** “Where are you?” God asks. It's a sincere question. I can't find you; where are you? He is not omniscient. This God appears from time to time out of the blue, so to speak. It's as if there is **a thin veil separating the reality of God, the divine world, from the world of the senses.** And from time to time God just goes right through the veil, and there he is! And usually people don't know it's God though. And sometimes they use words like *Malak*, which means angel, to say, well, an angel appeared. But if you remember the story in Genesis about **Jacob wrestling,** it does talk about wrestling with an angel. After it is all over he says, “I have contended with God and prevailed.” So one interpretation of that in the Jewish way of thinking was that actually that was God. Why? Because God can often look like a man.

Also there are three men that appear once to Abraham. Again, Jewish authorities themselves aren't clear whether the Abraham stories are historical or not. A lot of modern historians think, oh, no, these are just stories, but that's another matter. In the story of **Abraham** all of a sudden he is visited in the afternoon and there are three men. Well, later on it's really God. That was a visitation from God. **Even if this idea of an angel is taken as a means, it is a means for God to actually visit.** We also have the stories in

the Book of Judges. **Gideon**, for example: this being appears and then more or less goes up in the smoke. So do you want to call that an angel? Do you want to call it God? There are different interpretations. So it's not all black and white nor is it simple. Another very famous case is **Sodom and Gomorrah**. The people are complaining—Sodom and Gomorrah—the people are terrible; these are awful people. What are you going to do about this? God says, “I am going to go down and find out what is going on here.” So he's not omniscient at all. He has to go down, physically go down, and see for himself. So that's one model.

But then gradually that model tends to be pushed away and **a second model is developed that is much more common to Christianity**, although Christianity is actually distinct, but it's more common to think of God as more of **an invisible, distant, omniscient, spiritual, all-powerful, all-wise being**. Gradually in the development of Israel that idea tends to become more dominant. But it is possible that both were together for a lot of the times. And so the priests, the priestly school—there are different schools—**the priestly school will see God more in this distance sense**. And the only place God really present is **in the temple**. There are **different schools, and they present different models of God**. But they are always presented as stories in the past. It's not like, well, you can actually see God now if you want to. No, **it's always like at God's behest he will suddenly appear if he needs to**.

Now there is the issue of images. **Images are forbidden for the Lord**. Now the pagans, so to speak, the nations—they are called nations, actually *goyim*—the nations are permitted to have idols. They are permitted to have idols; those are images of various things, snakes or whatever. They are permitted to have them. And their gods actually do reside in the idols. They are in a concentrated form in the idol. And the idols are in the various temples. And that's okay. God doesn't mind that, but not for him. The Lord is not to have any images. **So that is a distinct law for Israel only**. So when Israel later then is defying the Lord and worshipping at the high places, there is nothing wrong with the high places for the Canaanites, although they actually don't belong there; it's not their land, but nonetheless that's okay for them. It's not okay for the Israelites.

So this is a specific law and **the ten commandments are specific laws given to them**. They are not just general laws of morality. They are specific laws for them. And in the tablets **God actually does exist** in a way similar to in idols for the pagans. So in a sense, if you want to think of it this way, **what idols were for pagans the tablets of the Law were for the Israelites**. And they were put in the Ark of the Covenant. And the Ark of the Covenant becomes the mobile sanctuary, the mobile temple, for Israel until such time as Solomon builds a temple, and then the ark is in the holy of holies, until through some form of carelessness it is lost. Actually for a while the Philistines steal it, but when they steal it then a plague breaks out and they figured that's punishment, so they give it back. So images are always forbidden for the Lord, but they are permitted for others.

Now after the time when God fires all the other gods, **when the Lord fires all the other gods, then from then on, the idols do not have any power**; they are merely silver and gold and stone, and so on. So at that time then some of the prophets and some of the

poets will ridicule idols. They are merely stone and merely silver, merely gold, and so on. Prior to that they actually had a purpose.

So the Lord is present in the *Torah*, and the original meaning of *Torah* is “the ten words,” ten commandments, which forbid idolatry of the Lord, which **forbid the misuse of his name and his name is also unknown actually**. It’s spelled this way: *YHWH*, but no one actually knows how to pronounce it. Some say it’s pronounced *Yahweh*; some say *Yahveh*. Actually real scholars, the best of them, say no one actually knows, nor do they know what it really means. That was translated into Latin as *EGO SUM QUI SUM*, literally “I AM WHO AM.” So then St. Thomas Aquinas says that’s God revealing himself as the ground of being. Well, that’s Aquinas and that’s philosophy. But Jewish scholars say, well, that’s too philosophical; that’s too sophisticated. They didn’t have that kind of idea. Well, you can take your choice, whatever you want to think. No one knows. So that’s *Torah*.

Torah* is the tablets first.** Then the word ***Torah* itself expands in meaning**, and it starts to mean **all of the teachings that God gives in the Book of Exodus**. If you remember Exodus, there is the story of Sinai, and then there is the giving the Law, and then there are several chapters where God keeps talking about all the things they should do and avoid. So then that all becomes part of *Torah*. But then later on, they keep adding, adding, **adding, and pretty soon you have six hundred thirteen different laws, so then that becomes *Torah. That’s the third meaning of *Torah*. And then *Torah* can mean **the entire Pentateuch**. And then much later it becomes a word that means **everything that God told Moses, which later on is known only by the rabbis and is passed on orally**. That’s called the **oral *Torah***. At the time of Jesus, that was equal to the written *Torah* or even more important, but not for **Jesus**. He **did not follow that at all or accept its authority**. That later on becomes the *Talmud*, especially the *Aggadah* and the *Halakhah*, which together is called the *Mishna*. But Jesus did not go along with that. But that is part of the Jewish background and part of where he came from.

Now there are many names of God, and thank goodness Joe is going to tell you all about that—twenty-one. But as I said, the main one is this: *YHWH*, **his name which is sacred**. Now “sacred” means that it has power. So they did think in a way that it was similar to what we might call magic. That is, that a name, a sound, **was imbued with power**. So it was forbidden to use it precisely because it had power. But that didn’t mean no one could use it. Yes, the priest could use it; **those authorized could use it**. And they were authorized either to use it **for blessing or cursing**, according to the laws and stipulations which they had, which they knew. Ordinary people could not use it because that would be abusing it. So that’s the idea not to take the name of the Lord in vain.

Since they never pronounced it actually—that’s why no one really knows how it sounds—instead they substituted the word *Adonai*, which means Lord. That’s why I called the main God, the big God, the largest God, as the “Lord,” *Adonai*. Technically *Adonai* could be used in ordinary Hebrew for Mister as well. But that’s the idea. It’s like *Kyrios* is Greek, the same thing. *Kyri* is Sir in Modern Greek from *Kyrios*. We say *Kyrie*; that’s a vocative form.

Now **in the New Testament we really have a profound shift in understanding God.** In a way it's backwards. From the Old Testament we have a very anthropomorphic image of God, a man-like God, who is pushed away and made more and more abstract, more and more distant, more and more untouchable. In the New Testament it's the other way around. **You start with this incredible abstraction, which is this idea of being that actually comes into human life and literally tents himself among us in the mystery of what we call the Incarnation.** So the New Testament then has this deep mystical sense of God.

Now theologically the most important book in the New Testament is the Gospel of John. **The Gospel of John begins with a new creation story.** The prologue is a new creation story. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." So that's a new story because in the beginning in the Book of Genesis you also had: "In the beginning," and you have the voice of the Lord hovering. Now you have the Word "In the beginning." **Nothing comes to be apart from the Word.** So the Word is the total cause of being and meaning of everything that exists, so that nothing can exist apart from the Word. Now this is what could be called "**mysticism**" in the sense that discrete differences are not totally real. In reality there is only one being; that's how Aquinas explains it. He says in reality there is one Being. One Being must be. **Only one Being must be. Only one Being cannot not be. That Being is God.**

Now when you have people thinking about, well, where does everything come from, and they say this came from that, and **you have scientists say**, well, this evolved from that, which evolved from this, which evolved from that, and eventually you get back to—what? You get back to a big question. Now some scientists are materialists and they are happy to say, well, energy just is. But even there they can't just say that, they have to say, well, not only is energy just is, but then there are also just these laws that tell energy what to do because we live in an orderly universe and energy does behave in certain ways, and there are all these suns and galaxies and so on that form. Well, how do they know how to form? Well, the laws of nature tell them. So **there are just these laws and there is just this energy.**

Well, **from a point of view of the New Testament, no, there just is this Spirit of God that is not energy but creates energy, that is not law but creates law, and this Spirit is the cause of everything and is the only being.** And everything that exists exists by participating in this being and nothing can be apart from this being. And Aquinas says—I personally believe he explains well John's Gospel; now someone else will come and say he doesn't know anything about John's Gospel. **So Aquinas says that all being participates in the Being of God.** Aquinas says it's wrong to think that God created in the past tense. Creation is a present reality. **God is now creating the earth as it is now.** He began creating thirteen billion years ago, but at every moment he is creating, so that **creating and sustaining are really part of the same thing.** And nothing can exist, nothing can be, nothing can come to be, without God willing it. So we are all then connected to God in this sense that **our existence totally depends upon God.**

On the other hand, at the mystery of his creation **he has endowed human beings with free will and actually the creation itself with a kind of autonomy.** So God is not

directly controlling everything that goes on at all, but rather **indirectly created the laws that govern physical activities: gravity**, and so on. But in regard to ourselves we have freedom to do as we choose. So we are totally dependent upon God in our existence, but **in terms of our inner life, our wills, we are free**. It is God's will that we freely choose to be bound in a second way into his inner life. We have to be connected to him for existence, but **he would like us to be sharing in his love** as well, his inner life, **the inner life of the Trinity**. That is his will for all human beings and that is something that he cannot actually force upon us. But through the Incarnation he has made it desirable and he has made it visible and he has made it something that we can see. And so that's the emphasis on **we have seen God in Christ**—yes, we have.

So human beings originally in the Book of Genesis were **made in the image and likeness of God**. That means that they have **a capacity for self-awareness**, as God is self-aware. God is self-awareness. And we have that capacity as well for self-consciousness **and for creative intelligence**; that is, we can, based on our own freedom and our own originality, create, although we cannot create out of nothing. **We create out of the stuff around us and out of our own imagination, which itself is created**. But we share in the creation of God.

Now it is actually remarkable in the long run **how little we actually know about God. What we know is what we see in Christ**. He reveals to us God's nature. But actually when it comes down to it, we don't really know that much. We know very little. There are very few facts. **We know that God is one. We know God subsists in Fatherhood, in Sonship, and in Spirit**. We know that because there is no other way to explain the Scriptures, in particular the Fourth Gospel. So we know that, but what does it mean? That's not so simple. **God's nature can be called *agape***. *Agape* means love, but it's not just any love. *Eros* means love too, romantic love, sexual love. It doesn't mean that. *Philia* is also love; that's the love of friendship, but it doesn't mean that. *Agape* is a different kind of love. **It's a love that has no conditions**. So when we say that God is love or **when John says, "God is love," that is really something new that we could never figure out ourselves**. We couldn't know that. That is a revelation. It means that **God loves for no reason except that he chooses to**. And he chooses to because it is his own nature and he is always in harmony with himself. But **the true nature of God in its fullness and the true nature of creation is really hidden from us**.

Now a very interesting image in the New Testament is **the vine and the branches**. This has two meanings. It has to do with necessity; **by necessity we are connected, each branch connected to the vine, the vine being God**—by necessity, our existence. But it could also refer to **the communion of love that God wants us to have. So we could say there is a necessary vine and a voluntary vine**, if you like. So the necessary vine you could say is all about our existence and the voluntary vine is about grace or the life of love or our relationship with God, however you would like to say it.

Now Jesus himself does approve of certain images for God, but not all—not necessarily all the ones that Joe will show you—Jesus wouldn't necessarily like them all. But what he really did like was ***Abba*, the image of Daddy**. Now I have had the experience of traveling both in New York and in Tel Aviv and in Jerusalem and I have

heard Jewish children running after their daddies saying, “*Abba, Abba, Abba.*” And it tends to be the way Jews operate, at least the more orthodox ones, is in the home Mama takes care of everything, but outside the home Daddy takes care of everything. So Daddy is a **caregiver**. So when Jesus says, “*Abba,*” God is *Abba*, he is talking about someone who is **dependable but not controlling**. And *Abba* is **not judgmental**. Jesus does talk about the judgment; he talks about a judgment coming, but it’s at the end of time, and ultimately who is in charge of this is the Son of Man, which everyone believes is an oblique reference to himself, but you couldn’t prove that. You couldn’t prove that from Scripture, but that’s the general belief that he is referring to himself in his Second Coming, so to speak.

When we talk about the Old Testament we will talk about how Jewish thinking was influenced by this idea that the present moment is all in God’s hands, and God effects things as they are, and that the way things work out is God’s will. That is not what **Jesus taught**. He taught that the **present time, the present era, the present age, is an age and an era of testing**. It’s an **era of opportunity**. When he taught his disciples to pray he said pray this way: “**Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.**” **Obviously it is not done on earth**. But that went against what the Jews believed. **It goes against the teachings of Wisdom**. And Wisdom is really the school that collected the whole Jewish Scriptures. So it’s really imbued with that; the whole Old Testament as it came to us as the Old Testament is imbued with that. Jesus didn’t buy it. He said no. So this is a time for opportunity. The **blessed and the wicked will be sorted out at the end of time**, but right now they are all growing together, so he tells the parable of the Wheat and the Weeds.

Jesus himself is actually, although he doesn’t say this, but he **is actually the most perfect image of God**. And this will be said of him by Paul and John—both. “He is the image of the invisible God,” St. Paul says. In John it says, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” So in that way **he is a perfect reflection of the nature of God**, not the looks of God, but the nature of God.

Now this leads to the last part on the will of God. The will of God, as I just mentioned a moment ago, is not done on earth as it is in heaven. **The will of God is something God has proposed; this is what God wants, but God has allowed freedom and he has allowed hazard—both**. Hazard and freedom—two separate things. Hazard comes in the story of the tower in Siloam that fell on some people. Jesus said, “Do you think those people were more evil than anyone else?” See, because the Jews thought, following the Wisdom school, they were being punished for something. And Jesus said, “Do you think they were more evil than anyone else? By no means.” No, no, that’s hazard; things happen; **accidents take place**. That’s hazard. That happens.

There is also freedom of will, including for the wicked. The wicked have freedom too. A lot of people don’t get this, but obviously the wicked have to have freedom because if God took away the freedom from the wicked, then there would be no freedom, because every time you stepped out of line, well, then you would lose your freedom—then that’s not freedom! So this is a time for testing. So the wicked also have to have freedom. So that’s the prayer: “Thy will be done.”

Life on earth is subject to hazard: the tower of Siloam. Life is also subject to ill will; that's represented by Pilate mixing blood with the sacrifices, and that was such a disgrace because of blood being sacred in Judaism. So they were just, "Oh, how terrible!" And he said, "Well, do you think that happened to those people because they were worse than other people? No." Pilate has free will, and that's what he did. Bad people do bad things. And also in Scripture **there are references to demons, that is, evil spirits that also wreak havoc and disorder and are against the will of God.** So Jesus goes about delivering people from the power of evil demons.

But ultimately **Jesus himself embodies what God really wants and desires.** So for the Christian all we have to do is look to Jesus. We don't even need the law. **All we need is Jesus, who embodies everything: what God wants, his will, his law, his love—everything.** It's all embodied in Christ.