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FALL 2022

# **CHHOWA SIA LI, I AM GOD:**

## **GOD'S SELF-REVELATION AS TRANSFORMATIVE GRACE**

### **THE STORY OF SELF-REVELATION**

The Bible, from the first page to the last is God's story of self-revelation. The Divine Community purposed, before the foundations of the world were laid, according to Ephesians 1:3- 5, that we should be in harmonious relationship with God. Any relationship requires a back and forth between the parties involved, and that communication forms the basis upon which the connection stands. In the Garden of Eden, this meant that God spent time walking and talking with Adam and Eve. In the Choctaw story of creation, it meant that God gave direction of where to live to the peoples he created as he ushered them out of hiding in Nanih Waiya, showing them a new world.(1)

In both stories, God says "here am I, let me show you." The concept of the Divine self-revelation cannot be truncated by saying there is one revelation, and everyone must adapt to it, for this is woefully ethnocentric and contrary to the pattern that God laid out in his own story. It will be my intent, in this paper, to illuminate a few places in the Bible where Creator reveals himself in ways that the creation could understand. The first case for God revealing himself in contextualized ways is in the story of Noah. Any quick study of near Eastern literature will quickly find that the story of Noah very closely follows the Epic of Gilgamesh.(2)

Most people from that area would be familiar with this story of a world-wide deluge to wash away sinful humankind, save for a select few. However, the assembly of the gods in the Epic is capricious and vengeful, causing Utnapishtim to have to outwit them by building an ark. In contrast, when the Israelites heard the story of Noah, they would have noticed a glaring difference.

This God demonstrated love toward Noah and his family. The sign of the rainbow, in the fashion of a Hittite covenant, had God taking responsibility if the covenant was broken by showing the bow, a weapon of destruction, pointing upwards. This would have been expected of a "god." This God seemed to exhibit love for humankind. Yahweh used the narratives of the culture around the Israelites, which they would have understood, to reveal a distinctive aspect of his nature. God is love.

For another example, take the Hebrews in Egypt. They lived in exile there, having arrived as refugees seeking food. They stayed involuntarily for a few generations. The religious-philosophical society that formed the Egyptian nation, with its pantheon of gods culminating in Amon-Ra,

personified by the pharaoh, would not have been unknown to the slaves.

To them, these gods represented oppression, misery, and ultimately death. This philosophy was seeped into their lives because they were immersed in it. In fact, to their minds, in the absence of "I AM" who had just brought them out of Egypt, they created an idol to Apis, the Egyptian bull god; at least they knew Apis. Moses quickly set them straight, grinding it down and making them drink their god in a show of power and position. However, God did not forget the Egyptianizing of his people. Centuries later, the prophet Malachi in chapter 4 verse 1 and 2 says:

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall."(3)

They would have recognized the imagery of the sun, exerting its power over humanity, burning, destroying and judging. But for those who worshiped Yahweh, the sun would rise with healing? This imagery was a radical shift for them. After all the slavery, all the exile, all the civil strife, this God was promising healing from the sun. And could the reference to calves be a throwback to when they thought Apis was their savior? No, it is in the Creator God, above even Apis or Ra. God revealed himself to them in references that harkened to their own history, redeeming it for His own glory.

Malachi was but one prophet. Each of them, throughout Jewish history, was used by God to reveal himself or his message in distinctly contextualized ways. The prophet Hosea married and remarried a prostitute. This would have spoken volumes to a community steeped in honour/shame currency. Ezekiel cooked bread over cow dung, after begging for God to not make him cook over human excrement. Amos used a plumbline as his central imagery. In each instance, the people would have clearly received the message. You are unfaithful to God, you will be made unclean in your exile as a result, and you are

unjust to those you are supposed to love. In contrast God was saying, "I am faithful to pursue you, there time to repent and be restored to right relationship with me, and I am a God zealous for justice." He used social mores, religious constructs, and common agrarian-economic principles to reveal who he was to his people.

Of course, the greatest example of God's self-revelation is found in Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus was Emmanuel, God with us. For the Jews, this was a promise handed down to them by their ancestors. They, or at least a certain segment of them, would have realized the significance of the Messiah coming from the lower class. It meant that this God cared for those who were oppressed. In the face of ostracization by their own, and in the face of oppression, God's self-revelation in Jesus was good news, the very evangelion. To all of humanity, God coming in human form was contextualization because our understanding of the Divine was very limited and largely skewed by the idolatry we practiced in subtle and not so subtle ways. Jesus was also subtle and not so subtle. He showed the Father by his teachings and explanation of the Law, in the way that he loved those who

he engaged with with, and how he sacrificed himself for all humanity. He also said plainly, “If you have seen me, you have seen the Father,” one cannot be more self-revelatory. As a result, many understood the message in context, and Christianity was born.

God spoke to a near Eastern tribal society in ways they would have understood arising from their historical context, cultural expressions, and their ancestral hopes for a messiah. In so doing he effected his plan to reveal his nature and essence to his beloved creation. Somewhere along the continuum of Church history, we relegated the dynamic Creator that creatively used culture and history to bring epiphany to various people to a stoic, ethnocentric expression created in the image of Western philosophy that was subsequently imposed on the rest of the world. The good news is that the story is not over, and God is outside of this storyline, knowing the beginning and the end. He has grace for us to lay down our idolatry and for us to see him in his self-revelation flowing from every culture.

## **CONTEXTUALISATION AS A GRACE**

When God demonstrates self-revelation, that in and of itself is a gift. Many of the other gods do not initiate self-revelation, but rather require humanity to approach them. Yahweh Creator God goes a step beyond this and pursues us, in contextually specific ways, lowering the barriers to connection and understanding. This is an unmerited favor, in other words, a grace.

This grace of God is offered to humanity in four ways.(4) The first is in creation itself. All of creation was designed to reflect God’s glory and bring praise to the Creator as noted in Romans 1:19-20. They specifically show his invisible attributes in tangible ways, both his eternal power and his divine nature. Our brains can understand tangible expressions much easier than invisible qualities. The issue is that we have to engage with the creation that is expressing in order to learn from it. Job 12:7-10, according to several Indigenous Elders, is another exhortation to pay attention, even sit at the feet of creation, to learn about the character of God. Yet, in Western expressions of Christianity, dialogue

with that which reflects the Divine is viewed as animism or spiritism.

The second grace in God's self-revelation is in our own hearts. The conscience bears witness to an ordered morality that we understand culturally and contextually. Most people would agree that approaching someone and striking them on the face is generally "bad." Why is that? Did someone gather all cultures and hold council to decide that this was an immoral offence against another human? No, an internal compass within us all points in the direction of "rightness," whether we listen to it or not. That compass is proclaiming the very nature of God. Acts 17:26-27 clearly states that God set in motion the diversity of peoples that would cover the earth, and that each of them, from within their own cultures and contexts, would feel their way toward God. This is a gift and fingerprint that he placed in each and every people group. If this was God's plan, then it seems the height of hubris to hinder a contextualized search springing up from within in a group in favor of your own.

The third gift given to humanity is God's self-revelation in the Bible.

There is no mistaking the fact that the Word was entrusted to a particular people at a particular time. However, as can be clearly seen by the first two chapters of Ephesians, the "mystery of the Gospel" was revealed to be for everyone, Jew, and Gentile alike. The metanarrative of the Bible transcends Judaism and the Israelites. Yahweh Creator God created a humanity to share his love with and relentlessly pursues intimate relationship with us which will extend into eternity. Every culture in the world can be a recipient of this message of love. The particular story enshrined in the pages of the Bible has general and universal application to cultures not even mentioned between its covers. No people, not even God's chosen people, could hold God captive to their own cultural understandings to the exclusion of another's. God was already at work in every culture before the actual book called the "Bible" showed up, but it is in this particular story that a clearer picture of God's nature is revealed and applied all of humanity.

The fourth and final grace in God's self-revelation is found in Jesus, himself.

As stated in the last section, the clearest picture of who God is, is found in “God with us.” Jesus was a living, breathing, bread-breaking contextualization that helped humanity to understand, not only the attributes of God, but also how his kingdom worked. Jesus used mundane things like trees, and wine, and bread to teach supernatural and divine concepts. Christ’s invitation to relationship was not simply to make a friend with an earthly teacher, but to step into the Divine Community of Father, Son, and Spirit. It would take a human, who understood human struggles, to connect humanity once again to divinity, in right relationship. As Colossians 1:15 declares in one of the oldest Christian creeds: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.” There is no wonder that most religions in the world have a Son of Righteousness, or a messenger that makes the gods known.

Again, God was at work in every culture before the name Jesus arrived. However, in honoring that grace within each culture, we see the fullness in the person of Jesus Christ.

Nothing any human, or any of creation did, prompted it. Instead, out of the overflow of his love, were we gifted eyes, ears, and hearts, to comprehend who he is. If we understand the immensity of this action between the Divine and all of creation, then we should be left in awe and mutual respect for the ways God has chosen to reveal himself to every aspect of that created order. To the Choctaw who saw the sun as the hole through which God kept a watchful eye, or to the Anishinaabe who viewed him as the Great Mystery, to the mystic nuns of Spain who viewed God as their literal bridegroom, Yahweh was revealing himself in ways that they particularly could understand. And each, in their own way, responds in worship.

## **NEO-GNOSTICISM AND ETHNOCENTRISM IN WESTERN CHRISTIANITY**

One way in which we respond in worship is to proclaim God’s self-revelation to the world around us. However, the way in which we do this often arises from our limited perspective within our own culture and context.

This is fine when we are speaking to people who are also from that milieu, but problems occur when we attempt to retell the God story in this way cross-culturally. The Black theologian J. Deotis Roberts wrote, “All must be reached in their *lebenswelt* (lived experience) if faith is to be a live option.” (5) What he so eloquently stated was that for others to understand the self-revelation of God through our expression, we must relate the larger story to our own. Roberts went on to write, “When it is objected that we are dealing with a universal revelation, we must raise the issue through which God’s self-disclosure is communicated. The eventual locus of divine revelation is our personal, social, cultural, and ethnic existence.” (6) We cannot divorce who God is from the way he showed up to particular peoples. It is inappropriate to say “we are all just Christians” because the way that you interact with Creator is predicated on how he revealed himself. A believer from the oases of Ethiopia will encounter God in a very different way than one from the banks of the Mississippi River. Whether intentional or not, contextualization of worship will occur because it is God’s design.

The major problem here, is that rather than recognizing and honoring the expressions arising from the self-disclosure of God to unique people groups, we attempt to standardize and apply the same model to everyone. Now, by “we” I am specifically referencing those who have heritage and legacy from the West. The ways of thinking and being that came out of Europe, and across the waters with colonizers and missionaries, may have been appropriate for their own context, but were woefully inadequate when it landed on the shores of any nation they went to. Why was this? Because God was already at work, revealing himself to the people who filled the *terra nullius*. Rather than recognizing this, it was assumed that they had no true God, and therefore the cultural expression of worship bound in ethnocentrism was imposed on the people of the land. This story is true, here on Turtle Island, in South America and the Caribbean, and all along the African coasts. Many of the cultures encountered by the Western invaders had an intrinsic view of their partnership with the rest of creation. But much of Western thought was imbued with elements of Docetic Gnosticism wherein the

concept of God being reflected in anything material or natural was utterly repugnant.

Divinity must transcend the ordinary; in western thought we articulate this with correct knowledge and understanding. That approach stands in stark contrast to *Kitchi Manitou*, the Great Mystery. Apologetics and universities were the resulting expressions of worship for those of the West. For those on Turtle Island, the expression of divinity was found in tobacco, cedar, sage, and sweetgrass, all used in helping to restore harmony.

Today, a form of neo-Gnosticism still has a firm grip on believers who say “there is one way to worship, and I have it.” You can see it played out in worship services where there are a few lack-luster songs at the beginning, then a really long monologue by a trained professional, then a request for payment, followed by a hasty exit. The human mind and understanding is elevated above everything else in the service, even to the extent of talking only *about* God, rather than *to* him. Western Christianity as found here in Turtle Island, North America, has much work to do in

untangling itself from its ethnocentric worldview carried here by its ancestors. However, the beauty of God’s self-revelation, indeed the mystery of the Gospel, is that Creator’s disclosure is meant to bless all of us. The way that God revealed himself to the Indigenous People’s of this land, should be a blessing to those with heritage from Europe or elsewhere, just as the works of the Church Fathers helped to shape much of our theological understandings of God here on this continent. In this way, yet again, God’s self-revelation, particular, general, and specific is a grace to us all.

## **Learning from our traditions to inform worship today**

David Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, as quoted in *Culture, Faith, and Error*, state, “there are two dangers in approaching the task of contextualization --- the fear of irrelevance if contextualization is not attempted, and the fear of compromise and syncretism if it is taken too far. There is a need to use existing cultural forms that can be baptized and pressed into service of Christ if the Gospel is not denied in the process.”(7)



Many hurdles are placed in the way of the message of the Gospel when the way that God chooses to self-disclose is not respected. Whether or not syncretism may evolve as a result of critically analyzing the cultural forms within one's own community is the topic for another article. When right relationship with the Divine Community is explored from the point of view of one's cultural context harmony, with all those involved, is the result.

The Haudenosaunee wampum treaty with the Dutch at early contact is a wonderful example of what this harmony could look like. The Haudenosaunee had already experienced what moving from a place of war and chaos to a place of right relationship meant through the Great Peace and the unity that it brought among the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy. The peace that was wrought was a gift from the very nature of Creator carried by the Peace Bringer to those Nations. Therefore, when the Dutch arrived, it did not seem untoward to extend a gesture of peace to this new People that arrived in their territory. The Two Row Wampum served as a model for how they were to engage with each other: in friendship, peace, and in perpetuity.

By honoring each other's ways and expressions of worship, a shalom was effected over the land. Unfortunately, this living treaty was often treated as dead by those seeking more economic gain in their greed. The Haudenosaunee stand by their treaty, as evidenced by Elder Adrian Jacobs' teaching to the Committee for Contact with the Government, a committee of the Christian Reformed Church in North America. He, a Haudenosaunee man, reaffirmed this covenant with the group, representing a (primarily) Dutch denomination. The effect is more of God's character revealed. (8)

There is a West African Adinkra symbol and concept that also models for us the process of honoring the past ways that God revealed himself uniquely to people's ancestors. Sankofa is a fictitious bird, beautiful to behold, and full of wisdom. On her back she carries, gently, and with much respect, an egg. She turns her head, awkwardly at first, to gingerly lift the egg in her mouth and return her head facing forward. This pictograph teaches us that we should look to our traditions and our ancestors, the egg, and to bring forward to the present those things

that are good and that which was given to us by Creator to transform us so that we can be better in the future. Our traditions and ceremonies were gifted to our ancestors so that we can recognize and “feel our way” towards God. They are meant to help us face adversity and persevere as we press into the self-revelation of God. The result is worship to God and blessing to all those around us.

These are simply two examples, but there are countless nations and cultures to whom Creator made himself known. I agree with Roberts as he stated, “I now see Christ as Giver of grace, Author of nature, and Lord of history as well. The Incarnation remains the center of God’s redemptive revelation. The circumference of revelation, however, has been expanded.”

When we choose to recognize, learn from, and honor that expanded revelation, all of creation is blessed. People will be less inclined to take advantage of each other. People will live as if there is enough for all, because...there is enough for all. People will be able to honestly say namaste, I recognize the Imago Dei, in you. In short, Yahweh Creator God’s self-revelation will be made manifest in the lives of his people in their expressions of love.

# Notes

1. Jodie Cummings, "Nanih Waiya," The Mississippi Encyclopedia, Ridgeland, Mississippi, May 25, 2018, <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/waiya-nanih/>
2. Frank Lorey, "The Flood of Noah and the Flood of Gilgamesh," Institute for Creation Research, Acts & Facts, 26 (3), March 1, 1997, <https://www.icr.org/article/noah-flood-gilgamesh/>
3. All biblical references are taken from the English Standard Version.
4. "How does God reveal himself to us?," Got Questions, Your Questions, Biblical Answers, January 4, 2022, <https://www.gotquestions.org/God-reveal-Himself.html>
5. J. Deotis Roberts, Black Theology Today: Liberation and Contextualization, New York, E. Mullen Press, 1983, pg 106.
6. Ibid.
7. Adrian Jacobs, Richard Twiss, Terry LeBlanc, "Culture, Christian Faith, and Error," NAITTS Journal, Vol 1, No 1, 2016, pg 6.
8. Wampum belt teachings cited are from Elder Adrian Jacobs and cross referenced by the website: Two Row Wampum – Gaswéñdah, Onondaga Nation, People of the Hills, <https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>