

## “Omnipresence”

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om-ni-prez'-ens:

### 1. Non-Occurrence of the Term in Scripture:

Neither the noun “omnipresence” nor adjective “omnipresent” occurs in Scripture, but the idea that God is everywhere present is throughout presupposed and sometimes explicitly formulated. God’s omnipresence is closely related to His omnipotence and omniscience:

That He is everywhere enables Him to act everywhere and to know all things, and, conversely, through omnipotent action and omniscient knowledge He has access to all places and all secrets (compare Psalm 139). Thus conceived, the attribute is but the correlate of the monotheistic conception of God as the Infinite Creator, Preserver and Governor of the universe, immanent in His works as well as transcendent above them.

### 2. Philosophical and Popular Ideas of Omnipresence:

The philosophical idea of omnipresence is that of exemption from the limitations of space, subjectively as well as objectively; subjectively, in so far as space, which is a necessary form of all created consciousness in the sphere of sense-perception, is not thus constitutionally inherent in the mind of God; objectively, in so far as the actuality of space-relations in the created world imposes no limit upon the presence and operation of God. This metaphysical conception of transcendence above all space is, of course, foreign to the Bible, which in regard to this, as in regard to the other transcendent attributes, clothes the truth of revelation in popular language, and speaks of exemption from the limitations of space in terms and figures derived from space itself. Thus, the very term “omnipresence” in its two component parts “everywhere” and “present” contains a double inadequacy of expression, both the notion of “everywhere” and that of “presence” being spatial concepts. Another point, in regard to which the popular nature of the Scriptural teaching on this subject must be kept in mind, concerns the mode of the divine omnipresence. In treating the concept philosophically, it is of importance to distinguish between its application to the essence, to the activity, and to the knowledge of God. The Bible does not draw these distinctions in the abstract. Although sometimes it speaks of God’s omnipresence with reference to the pervasive immanence of His being, it frequently contents itself with affirming the universal extent of God’s power and knowledge (Deuteronomy 4:39, 10:14; Psalm 139:6-16; Proverbs 15:3; Jeremiah 23:23-24; Amos 9:2).

### 3. Theories Denying Omnipresence of Being:

This observation has given rise to theories of a mere omnipresence of power or omnipresence by an act of will, as distinct from an omnipresence of being. But it is plain that in this antithetical form such a distinction is foreign to the intent of the Biblical statements in question. The writers in these passages content themselves with describing the practical effects of the attribute without reflecting upon the difference between this and its ontological aspect; the latter is neither affirmed nor denied. That no denial of the omnipresence of being is intended may be seen from Jeremiah 23:24, where in the former half of the verse the omnipresence of 23:23 is expressed in terms of omniscience, while in the latter half the idea finds ontological expression. Similarly, in Psalm 139, compare verse 2 with

verses 7, and verses 13. As here, so in other passages the presence of God with His being in all space is explicitly affirmed (1 Kings 8:27; 2 Chronicles 2:6; Isaiah 66:1; Acts 17:28).

#### 4. Denial of the Presence of the Idea in the Earlier Parts of the Old Testament:

Omnipresence being the correlate of monotheism, the presence of the idea in the earlier parts of the Old Testament is denied by all those who assign the development of monotheism in the Old Testament religion to the prophetic period from the 8th century onward. It is undoubtedly true that the earliest narratives speak very anthropomorphically of God's relation to space; they describe Him as coming and going in language such as might be used of a human person. But it does not follow from this that the writers who do so conceive of God's being as circumscribed by space. Where such forms of statement occur, not the presence of God in general, but His visible presence in theophany is referred to. If from the local element entering into the description God's subjection to the limitations of space were inferred, then one might with equal warrant, on the basis of the physical, sensual elements entering into the representation, impute to the writers the view that the divine nature is corporeal.

#### 5. The Special Redemptive and Revelatory Presence of God:

The theophanic form of appearance does not disclose what God is ontologically in Himself, but merely how He condescends to appear and work for the redemption of His people. It establishes a redemptive and revelatory presence in definite localities, which does not, in the mind of the writer, detract from the divine omnipresence. Hence, it is not confined to one place; the altars built in recognition of it are in patriarchal history erected in several places and coexist as each and all offering access to the special divine presence. It is significant that already during the patriarchal period these theophanies and the altars connected with them are confined to the Holy Land. This shows that the idea embodied in them has nothing to do with a crude conception of the Deity as locally circumscribed, but marks the beginning of that gradual restoration of the gracious presence of God to fallen humanity, the completion of which forms the goal of redemption. Thus, God is said to dwell in the ark, in the tabernacle, on Mt. Zion (Numbers 10:35; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; Psalm 3:4, 99:1); in the temple (1 Kings 8; Psalm 20:2, 26:8, 46:5, 48:2; Isaiah 8:18; Joel 3:16, 21; Amos 1:2); in the Holy Land (1 Samuel 26:19; Hosea 9:3); in Christ (John 1:14, 2:19; Colossians 2:9); in the church (John 14:23; Romans 8:9, 11; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19; Ephesians 2:21-22, 3:11; 2 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 10:21; 1 Peter 2:5); in the eschatological assembly of His people (Revelation 21:3). In the light of the same principle must be interpreted the presence of God in heaven. This also is not to be understood as an ontological presence, but as a presence of specific theocratic manifestation (1 Kings 8:27; Psalm 2:4, 11:4, 33:13, 104:3; Isaiah 6:1, 63:15, 66:1; Habakkuk 2:20; Matthew 5:34, 6:9; Acts 7:48, 17:28; Ephesians 1:20; Hebrews 1:3). How little this is meant to exclude the presence of God elsewhere may be seen from the fact that the two representations, that of God's self-manifestation in heaven and in the earthly sanctuary, occur side by side (1 Kings 8:26-53; Psalm 20:2-6; Amos 9:6). It has been alleged that the idea of God's dwelling in heaven marks a comparatively late attainment in the religion of Israel, of which in the pre-prophetic period no trace can as yet be discovered (so Stade, *Bibl. Theol. des Altes Testament* 1:103, 104). There are, however, a number of passages in the Pentateuch bearing witness to the early existence of this belief (Genesis 11:1-9, 19:24, 21:17, 22:11, 28:12). Yahweh comes, according to the belief of the earliest period, with the clouds (Exodus 14:19-20, 19:9, 18, 24:15; Numbers 11:25, 12:5). That even in the opinion of the people Yahweh's local presence in an earthly sanctuary need not have excluded Him from heaven

follows also from the unhesitating belief in His simultaneous presence in a plurality of sanctuaries. If it was not a question of locally circumscribed presence as between sanctuary and sanctuary, it need not have been as between earth and heaven (compare Gunkel, *Gen*, 157).

#### 6. Religious Significance:

Both from a generally religious and from a specifically soteriological point of view the omnipresence of God is of great practical importance for the religious life. In the former respect it contains the guaranty that the actual nearness of God and a real communion with Him may be enjoyed everywhere, even apart from the places hallowed for such purpose by a specific gracious self-manifestation (Psalm 139:5-10). In the other respect the divine omnipresence assures the believer that God is at hand to save in every place where from any danger or foe His people need salvation (Isaiah 43:2).