### God’s Omnipresence (Ever-Present)

**1. Biblical Data**

**а. Old Testament**

Another of Yahweh’s amazing attributes is His omnipresence – that He is ever-present. In the early books of God’s revelation, though, it seems that He is limited to occupy a specific space. He is seen, for example, walking in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:8), meeting with Abraham (Gen 18:1), and wrestling with Jacob (Gen 32:28-30). Jacob, in fact, seems to reflect the thinking of his day that God dwells in a certain location, i.e., a “holy place”: “Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely Yahweh is in this place, and I did not know it.’ He was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven’” (Gen 28:16-17). Consequently, Jacob built a shrine there.

In the book of Exodus, the Lord is again associated with concrete places and objects. He appeared to Israel on Mount Sinai and manifest Himself in the cloud of fire that accompanied Israel in the wilderness:

- Yahweh came from Sinai, And dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, And He came from the midst of ten thousand holy ones; At His right hand there was flashing lightning for them (Deut 33:2; сf. Neh 9:13).

- They have heard that You, O Yahweh, are in the midst of this people, for You, O Yahweh, are seen eye to eye, while Your cloud stands over them; and You go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night (Num 14:14).

In the same line, the psalmist writes that during the Exodus, the people of God as a whole were the dwelling place of God: “When Israel went forth from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language, Judah became His sanctuary, Israel, His dominion” (Ps 114:1-2).

Upon the construction of the sanctuary, it became God’s dwelling place where He manifest His presence, particularly in the Holy of Holies over the ark of the covenant (Ex 40:34-35). Moses received a special experience of His presence when he was with Yahweh on Sinai and saw His “form” (Ex 33:21-23). The presence of God was so intense on Sinai that Moses did not require food or drink for forty days (Ex 34:28). Moreover, the Lord regularly descended in the cloud to converse with Moses (Ex 33:9; Num 11:25; Deut 31:15).

In spite of the focus on God’s localized presence, as noted above, there are indications of Yahweh’s omnipresence in the Torah. Moses acknowledged it: “Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that Yahweh, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other” (Deut 4:39). Even the Gentile Rahab spoke of it (Josh 2:11).

The Old Testament historical books continue to stress Yahweh’s localized presence or His association with a certain object. Obed-edom kept the ark of the covenant and received special blessing from the Lord as a result. Those who violated the sanctity of the ark perished (2 Sam 6:6-7).

Upon construction of the temple, God promised to dwell among His people (1 Kin 6:13), and when the ark of the covenant was brought into the temple, it filled with Yahweh’s glorious presence: ”It happened that when the priests came from the holy place, the cloud filled the house of Yahweh, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of Yahweh filled the house of Yahweh” (1 Kin 8:10-11 сf. 2 Chr 5:13-14; 7:1-2). In response to this, Solomon exclaimed, “Yahweh has said that He would dwell in the thick cloud. I have surely built You a lofty house, a place for Your dwelling forever” (1 Kin 8:12-13). From that time, the temple became the place for God’s habitation, to which people directed their prayers (1 Kin 8:28-30). The Lord was thought to act from this place: “May He send you help from the sanctuary and support you from Zion!” (Ps 20:2).

At the same time, the historical books also hint at a fuller understanding of the Ever-Present God. 1 Kings 9:3 limits God’s presence in the temple only to His “name,” “eyes,” and “heart.” Other passages in this context speak of God being in heaven. Solomon acknowledged that no earthly dwelling can contain God (1 Kin 8:27) and that He actually dwells in heaven: “Hear in heaven Your dwelling place” (1 Kin 8:30; сf. Ps 11:4; 115:3; 2 Chr 20:6). Solomon was also aware that not even heaven can fully contain Yahweh’s presence: “Heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You” (1 Kin 8:27). Thus, he acknowledged His omnipresence.

Of special interest is the reference to God’s presence in Psalm 22:3: “Yet You are holy, O You who are enthroned upon the praises of Israel”. On this basis, many expect a special manifestation of the Lord’s presence during times of praise and worship. We see confirmation of this when the glory of God filled the temple not only when the ark was brought in, but also when the priests and Levites praised Him (2 Chr 5:11-14), and when Solomon prayed (2 Chr 7:1-2).

We find the most elegant Old Testament expression of the truth of Yahweh’s omnipresence in Psalm 139:7-12:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me. If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will overwhelm me, and the light around me will be night,’ Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike {to You.}

Finally, in the historical and poetical books, we see a special application of the concept of God’s presence. The expression “God was with him” (Judg 6:16; 2 Chr 1:1) does not imply that God was exclusively with one individual, but that this person enjoyed special blessing from God.

The prophets also contribute to the Old Testament witness to Yahweh’s omnipresence. Many of them experienced a special visitation of God’s presence in the form of visions (see Isa 6, Dan 7, Ezek 1). They most likely saw a manifestation of Yahweh in a human form. Unlike the awesome expression of God’s presence on Sinai, Elijah experienced Him not in wind, fire, or earthquake, but in “a sound of a gentle blowing” (1 Kin 19:11-13).

The prophetic writings also contain direct references to Yahweh’s ever-presence. In Isaiah 66:1, God speaks of Himself, “Heaven is My throne and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?” Through Jeremiah, He announces, “’Am I a God who is near,’ declares Yahweh, ‘And not a God far off? Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?’ declares Yahweh. ‘Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?’ declares Yahweh” (Jer 23:23-24).

Nevertheless, from time to time the prophets also speak of the Lord’s localized presence. For example, Yahweh is in heaven (Mic 1:2-3) or in the new, eschatological (future) temple (Ezek 43:5; 44:2-4). Even the name of Ezekiel’s eschatological city is “the Lord in there” (Ezek 48:35). Zechariah also prophesied of that glorious age: “’I will dwell in your midst,’ declares Yahweh” (Zech 2:10).

In conclusion, the phrase “God with us” is again used to show that an individual is a special recipient of the Lord’s favor (Hag 1:13; 2:4).

**b. New Testament**

The New Testament brings us a clear revelation of the Lord’s omnipresence. Paul insists, for example, that He does not dwell in earthly temples “…since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands” (Acts 17:24). This applies not only to the pagan temples Paul was speaking of, but to the Jerusalem temple as well (Acts 7:48-50). Moreover, Paul affirmed that God’s presence encompasses all things: “In Him we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:28). Christ is He “who fills all in all” (Eph 4:6).

The New Testament writers follow the teaching of our Lord Jesus, who explained to the Samaritan woman that God was not to be worshipped exclusively in Jerusalem or on Mount Gerizim, but “in Spirit and in truth” (Jn 4:23). In so doing, Jesus refutes the universal misunderstanding and superstition that God dwells only in special “sacred” places.

At the same time, in discussing the Lord’s presence, the New Testament assigns a special role to heaven. Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father, who is in heaven” (Matt 6:9). The heavenly temple resides there (Heb 9:23-24). From there, the Holy Spirit was sent (1 Pet 1:12).

The New Testament also teaches that a special manifestation of the Lord’s presence is associated with certain concrete phenomena. The Holy Spirit is present in the Church in a special way, as well as in individual believers in Jesus – we are the temple of God (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19). This coincides with Jesus’ teaching that “where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst” (Matt 18:20). Those who are obedient to the Lord are promised a special visitation of the Father and the Son to “make Our abode with him” (Jn 14:23). Wherever we may be, the Lord is with us (Heb 13:5).

The most remarkable manifestation of Yahweh’s presence was undoubtable when God the Son became human and dwelt among people. John writes about this magnificent event, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:14). At the end of this present age, Jesus will return to again live among us (Zech 14:4).

We await a still greater exhibition of the Lord’s presence when He descends from heaven to abide with us in the New Jerusalem: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them” (Rev 21:3).

**c. Summary**

One may conclude without hesitation that the Bible teaches the Lord’s omnipresence. He is simultaneously present in all places. Nevertheless, some passages seem to indicate that God is located in a certain place or associated with a certain object. In the Old Testament, His presence was associated with the cloud in the wilderness, the sanctuary, and the temple. In the New Testament, the Lord dwells in the hearts of believers and manifests Himself in the Church. Both testaments “locate” God in heaven as well and testify to His visionary appearances in bodily form.

The Lord’s manifest presence also seems to correlate with acts of worship. In addition, Jesus will return in the flesh at His Second Coming to live on the earth during His millennial kingdom, after which the Father Himself will inhabit the New Jerusalem. Ezekiel speaks of God dwelling in the new, eschatological city, named יהוה שָׁמָּה (*Yahweh shamma*), i.е., “Yahweh is there.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

It seems that the Bible gives us conflicting accounts on the topic of the Lord’s presence. On the one hand, He is present everywhere. On the other hand, He is “located” in certain places at certain times. We will seek to unravel this puzzle in the next section.

**2. Theological Considerations**

Simply speaking, omnipresence is the claim that Yahweh is present in every place.[[2]](#footnote-2)The biblical data noted earlier supports this idea. In addition, God’s perfection implies omnipresence. If some location is not accessible to Him, that would compromise His perfection.[[3]](#footnote-3)

We can distinguish *omnipresence* from *immensity*. The former refers to the Lord’s ever-presence in the universe, while the latter – to His presence both in the universe and beyond.[[4]](#footnote-4) We must also distinguish omnipresence from *extension*. Yahweh does not simple “extend Himself” throughout the universe, so that one part of Him is at one place, and one part is in another. He is fully present in every place simultaneously. This idea is consistent with the truth that God is indivisible.[[5]](#footnote-5) Grudem expresses this idea thusly, “God is present *with his whole being* in every part of space.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Another misconception concerning the Lord’s omnipresence is the idea that omnipresence is simply God knowing what is occurring in every place and having the ability to act in every place, i.e., a manifestation of his omniscience and omnipotence. Omnipresence, though, means that God is actually present in every place.[[7]](#footnote-7)

What is the relationship between God’s omniscience and the existence of other objects? It is improper to conclude that His presence “crowds out” the presence of other entities. He coexists with other objects in the universe.[[8]](#footnote-8). Additionally, according to Ephesians 4:6, He is present “in” every object, including people. His presence is necessary to sustain the existence of all things, as Colossians 1:17 states, “In Him all things hold together.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, the Lord’s presence “in” people does not imply that all people are born again. His presence in unbelievers does not lead to regeneration, but simply sustains their existence. If we speak from the vantage point of God’s presence for spiritual life and blessing, He is “far” from unbelievers (Isa 59:2; Prov 15:29).[[10]](#footnote-10)

It is also misguided to presume that the Lord’s omnipresence implies that He is part of other entities in the universe or that they are parts of Him. This is the teaching of pantheism. Although God is truly “in” all things, at the same time He is ontologically separate from them. He is able to “limit” His omnipresence to “make room” for the existence of others.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Many feel that the apparent conflict regarding an omnipresent God’s coexistence with other entities is best resolved by proposing that He does not occupy space at all, but exists in a non-spatial dimension. In this non-spatial dimension, all things are open and accessible to Him. This theory has the advantage of avoiding the theory that the Lord must somehow “limit” His omnipresence to “make room” for other entities.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Mueller defends the doctrine of a “non-spatial” God in the following way. He writes, “We must not think of God’s omnipresence in a corporeal way, as if He, when present, occupied space or were subject to space.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Like Mueller, Grudem writes, “We should tryto avoid thinking of God in terms of size or spatial dimensions.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Yet, Bloesch comments that God can enter into the time-space dimension in order to fellowship with people.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The cases where the Lord is said to be located in one specific place are explained in two ways. The first is that, although the Lord is everywhere, under special circumstances He more powerfully *acts*. The second option is that under certain conditions He more powerfully *manifests His presence*.[[16]](#footnote-16) A fair comparison is to think of a rheostat, which is able to make light progressively more or less intense when turned. In a similar way, Yahweh can make His presence felt more intensely in a certain place or under certain circumstances, or even appear in a certain form.

How about God’s omnipresence and the incarnation of the Son of God? If Jesus is fully God, then He must possess all of God’s attributes, including omnipresence. However, if Jesus is also truly human, then how can He be everywhere? First, in accordance with the doctrine of Christ’s deity, we must affirm that Jesus Christ is God and, therefore, possesses all of the attributes of Deity. Yet, if we affirm His omnipresence, do we not undermine the doctrine of His true humanity, which consists of existence in a body?

Tozer proposes the following explanation. God is not in space, but space is in God. Therefore, Jesus can be at the same time at the Father’s right hand and with us as well. Tozer defends his thesis by showing that when Jesus was on the earth, He was simultaneously “in the bosom of the Father” (Jn 1:18).[[17]](#footnote-17) However, if we assume that space is in God, we may be flirting with pantheism, which teaches that all that exists is really a part of God’s being.

Concerning the Son’s incarnation, we are most likely dealing with a mystery. On the one hand, we must affirm the full deity of Christ, which requires Him to be omnipresent. On the other hand, we confess Him to be fully human, which means He is located in a body. Possibly the preferred solution is to posit that Jesus still enjoys omnipresence, but it is mediated to Him through other members of the Trinity, with which He has immediate and constant fellowship.

What practical value does the Lord’s omnipresence afford for the believer? First, it is a source of comfort. We know that God is always with us and will never forsake us (Ps 23:4; Matt 28:20; Isa 43:2). Second, the Lord’s omnipresence guarantees that we can enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with God. Third, the biblical concept of God rescues us from the pagan idea that God dwells in a certain “sacred” place and receives worship only there. Unfortunately, such an understanding is sometimes reflected in the Church when people speak of the church building as “God’s house,” or a “holy place.” Finally, God’s omnipresence serves as a warning, so that we behave properly in every situation (Jer 23:24).[[18]](#footnote-18)

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2. Shedd, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Chafer, v. 1, p. 119-220. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 281; Shedd, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Grudem W. Systematic Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994. – P. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Shedd, p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hodge C. Systematic Theology. – 1872. – V. 1. – P. 385; Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1953. – V. 1. – P. 442-443. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Grudem, p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Pieper, v. 1, p. 442-443. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Shedd, p. 278; Grudem, p. 174-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. - P. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Grudem, p. 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Duffield G. P., Van Cleave N. M. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology. – Los Angeles, CА: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Tozer A. W. The Attributes of God. – Camp Hill, PA: Christian Publications, 1997. – V. 1. – P. 119-121, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Pieper, v. 1, p. 445; Strong, p. 282; Mueller, p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)