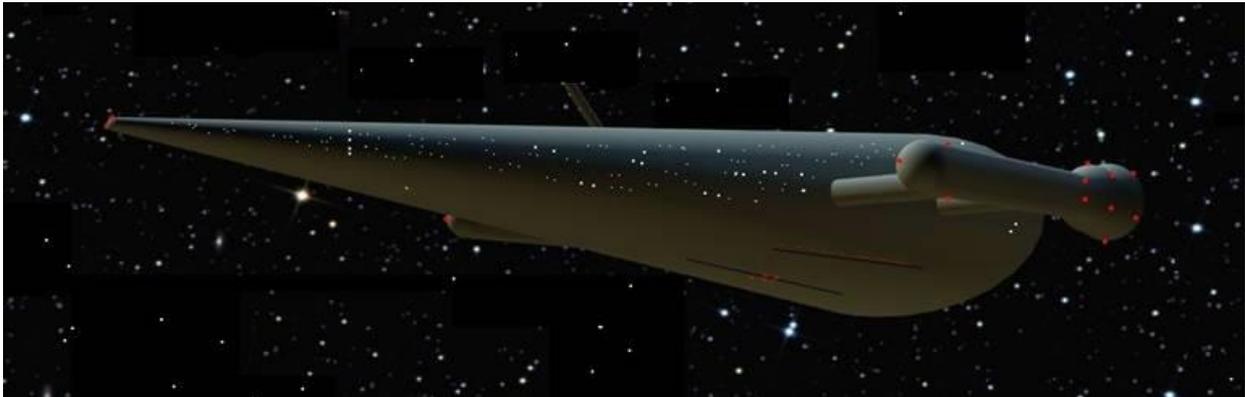


Voyage into the Unknown: God

By Collin Skocik

With the Earth destroyed by a supernova, the Space Star *Silver Streak* moves outward into the heavens, a self-sustaining starship housing thousands, settling colonies on other planets... moving outward into the deepest, unknown reaches of space...



The ancient Greeks put their gods on top of Mount Olympus. But later and more enduring religions more wisely moved their deities away from the Earth, to places where man could never stumble across them in his wanderings. The Jews and the Muslims placed their God in the sky and though the Christians rallied round one very nice man in Judea, even He ascended to join his Divine Father in the sky.

But come 1903, when Orville and Wilbur Wright opened up the Firmament of Heaven for human wandering, there came a conundrum—human beings soared through the clouds, but God didn't seem to be there. Where was He?

In 1971, astronaut Jim Irwin stood at the base of Mount Hadley on the Moon and heard the voice of God speaking to him.

In 1975, astronaut Stuart Roosa, who had orbited the Moon a year before Irwin's epiphany, visited Nepal, where schoolchildren continually asked him, "Who did you see there?" They were devastated when he told them there was *no one* on the Moon. He learned later that the Moon was the place of the Nepalese afterlife.

In 2214, Sergei Luzhin flew a cargo ship into Jupiter's atmosphere, plunging to his death because he'd had a vision that God had spoken to him from deep within the methane layers of the cloud decks.

In 2256, the relativistic colony ship *Kolob* set off with a crew of Mormons for the system of planets they called Kli-flos-is-es, where they believed they would find God.

For millennia, individuals and groups searched the planets and the stars for God. But they never found Him.

Finally the world ended.

When the Earth and the other planets of the Solar System were vaporized by the supernova, the *Silver Streak* carried thousands of survivors on a desperate mission to

colonize other planets in the galaxy. It was the most ambitious and long-range space mission in history, and the most vital to humanity's survival.

But where was God? Why hadn't He intervened? Why had He turned his back on His flock and allowed most of them to perish in the final vengeance of the firmament? As the *Silver Streak* leaped farther and farther into the unknown depths of space, new civilizations presented themselves, new wonders unfolded, new secrets of creation were discovered.

But where was God?

In the aftermath of the destruction of the world, and with the very real possibility of the final extinction of the human race lurking in every new system the *Silver Streak* explored, it could be no surprise that there was a resurgence of religious devotion, even as God repeatedly demonstrated that He either didn't exist or didn't care.

And in what could be final chapter of the story of Man, it could be no surprise that when God finally *did* appear, the people of the *Silver Streak* were prepared to greet Him with the devotion of a dying man meeting his maker...

"Sensor scans completed," Philippe Stargazer said.

Captain Richard Cameron watched the color-negative display of this section of the galaxy which dominated the forward wall of the bridge. "Okay, good. Frank?"

First Officer Frank Johnson bent over the console of the command intelligence station. "No change. Continuation of the same abnormal absence of habitable planets."

Cameron nodded solemnly. Could the *Silver Streak* have left behind the habitable part of the galaxy? Was there something special about Sol and its neighboring stars, something... something touched by God?

If so, why had dear old Sol betrayed them and exploded when the science of solar processes said it had five billion years left to burn?

The *Silver Streak* was well into its second year of searching the galaxy for planets to colonize, and though several colonies had been established and were thriving, there were still thousands of civilians and crew on the ship, hoping for their chance to forge a new world. It seemed the farther the great ship got from the home cluster of stars, the rarer Earth-type planets became. It was disheartening. Cameron projected calm as he acknowledged the discouraging reports. "I see. Thank you very much. Jack, continue on to the next sector."

Even Jack Hasta, usually so enthusiastic and yearning for each new adventure, was discouraged. "Continuing on."

Frank rose from his station and wandered over to stand next to Cameron. "How disappointing. This is the third solar system we've come across that has absolutely no habitable planet at all."

"Yeah, that one star a while back didn't even *have* any planets." A lot of rocky debris had circled that star, but nothing large enough to be considered anything more than a planetoid. Nothing with an atmosphere.

"I know, how disappointing," Frank was saying.

Having plotted and laid in his course, Jack Hasta propped an elbow on his console and leaned his cheek on his hand. "Will we ever set up a colony again?"

Cameron had begun to have his own doubts, but he wasn't about to add to the general glum mood. "Oh, there are bound to be other habitable planets in this galaxy. We've only covered a small fraction of them."

"Yeah, I'm sure our quest is nowhere near an end." Frank didn't exactly sound thrilled at the prospect.

"Absolutely not."

A light blinked for Stargazer's attention. "I am picking up something rather odd on the sensors."

Cameron came to attention. "What is it?"

"An energy field dead ahead."

"Get a reading."

"It is like..." Stargazer frowned. "Strange. But there appears to be a ship in the center generating it."

In a system with no habitable planets? "Interesting."

"Now I am getting a transmission over S-band!"

S-band? Who would be using *that* archaic transmission medium? "Put it on the scanners."

"Putting it on the scanners."

Stargazer slid his hands across his touch-sensitive screen, minimizing squares and switching active programs to access the ancient program that received and transmitted carrier wave signals at the speed of light.

A deep, resonant voice filled the bridge. "*Silver Streak*. Please bring your ship to a halt."

Cameron didn't like being given orders by mysterious aliens, and he didn't like being told what to do with his ship. But he might as well give this alien a chance to explain himself. "Bring us to a halt, Jack."

"All right."

"I have long and hard searched for you," the deep voice went on. "Moving across the galaxy, searching for any sign of you. The *Silver Streak*, my children."

Cameron tried to keep the irritation out of his voice. "Who is this?"

"I'm sure my identity is clear to you. You recognize my voice, my presence."

"Identify yourself!"

"Of course you must know who I am! Your mind simply has difficulty accepting the fact. Welcome, my children, to the Kingdom of Heaven!"

The hero of a science fiction story would no doubt have greeted such a revelation with skepticism, even with sarcasm.

But in an uncharted corner of the universe, on a desperate quest at the end of time, with the light of civilization being extinguished more and more with each dead system encountered, and now encountering an impossible intelligence in a system with no habitable planets, Captain Richard Cameron was a bit more susceptible than usual to believing the incredible.

And so it was with reverence and awe rather than disparagement that Cameron answered, "The Kingdom of Heaven? Uh... who are we addressing?"

“Surely you know by now! I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD!”

Frank was wide-eyed. “Could it be *possible*?”

“I have no idea,” Cameron said honestly. “Um... God... welcome to the *Silver Streak*.” Even as he said it he recognized the absurdity of his worlds, the incongruity of *welcoming* an omnipotent and omnipresent deity. Nor did he immediately register the contradiction of *God* having been *searching the galaxy* for them. But even when desperately in need of some reason to believe in hope, Richard Cameron was not a man to be held in awe for long. “Please explain why you’re in a spaceship.”

“I’ve taken the form of matter,” the resonant voice said, “and put Myself in a spaceship so that I may come aboard your ship, meet with you, mingle with your people. The time has come for Me no longer to be this distant and mysterious God. It’s time for Me to become a friendly, well-known God. Please grant Me this request.”

Cameron drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. It wasn’t entirely unreasonable—if this alien was a very long-lived creature in possession of advanced technology, it was possible he had visited Earth in ancient times and formed the basis of the major monotheistic religions. What was the difference between an unimaginably advanced alien and a God? “You have my permission to come aboard.” *If this really is “God,” did I just have the temerity to “grant Him permission”?*

“Thank you. God out.”

“Transmission terminated,” Stargazer said.

“This has to be some kind of trick, Dick,” Jack said.

Cameron smiled. “Nobody tricks Dick.” The smile disappeared. “Don’t worry, we’ll get to the bottom of this. Certainly seems strange, but it’s possible.”

“Well, I have a feeling we’re going to soon find out,” Frank said. “His ship is emerging from the energy field.”

Cameron looked up at the screen. He could make out the shape of a very conventional spacecraft; though the specific parts were alien, there was nothing divine or incomprehensible about it. It was generally spherical, a cluster of engines at the rear, spidery landing legs below. From a distance and at a glance, he couldn’t guess what kind of engines those were. This may be a rocket-powered interplanetary craft or a miracle machine capable of leaping across galaxies. But it was no golden chariot.

“The energy field is now disintegrating,” Stargazer said. “Now completely gone.”

Well, the readings of the field were recorded; it should be possible to analyze them later. Cameron watched the approach of the Ship of God. “Open launch tube B.”

“Launch tube B open,” Jack said.

Cameron touched a tab on his armchair. “God, you are cleared to dock in launch tube B. Frank, would you care to come with me to the launch tube?”

“Absolutely.”

“Let’s go.”

Cameron, Frank, and two security guards stood on the inside of the walled-off section of the hangar deck. Ahead of them, a light switched from red to yellow to green. Pressure was equalized. “Open the airlock.”

“Right.” Frank keyed in a two-digit code. The door slid aside.

From the connecting tube stepped one of the largest humanoids Cameron had ever seen. Garbed in resplendent gold robes, the eight-foot figure was topped by an enormous bald head with sharply angular features. He looked down upon Cameron with sunken eyes. This was far from the cliché white-bearded man, but he was impressive enough. To a primitive people, he might well be considered a god.

Cameron looked up at the enormous creature, intimidated but struggling not to show it. “Welcome aboard the *Silver Streak*. I’m Captain Richard Cameron. This is my executive officer, Frank Johnson.”

A hand to match the scale of the body extended from the folds of the gold robe. And God spake unto Cameron, saying: “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance.” Cameron disliked placing his small, fragile hand into the grasp of that monstrosity, but he did so. God shook his hand, then smiled. “It is indeed a great honor to finally come aboard the *Silver Streak*, that ship which I have studied since it left the Earth.”

Studied since it left the Earth... that would explain how he knows all about us, about our religions and our language... For now, the best strategy would be to play along, give the Almighty the benefit of the doubt. Fact-checking and inquisitions could come later. “My deepest apologies for what the human race did to the Earth during the last two thousand years, and for all the faults committed by those aboard the *Silver Streak*.”

“All of that is long forgiven.”

That’s very New Testament of You.

“With the Earth destroyed, the sins committed there mean little. And the *Silver Streak* being the last remnants of humanity, they all must be saved. All sins are forgiven.”

It was impossible not to be moved by the words, spoken by that lordly, powerful and authoritative voice. Cameron couldn’t resist the wash of emotion as he said, “Thank you.... Um, why don’t you come with us to the bridge? I’ll introduce you to our leading members of the crew.”

“Of course. I would like the opportunity to meet everyone.”

“Meet” everyone? Don’t You already know all of us?

“Quite understandable. Let’s go.”

As Cameron and Frank led God through the halls, Cameron felt awkward as passersby looked curiously at the towering humanoid in his grand robes. He didn’t know how—or when—to announce the arrival of God on the *Silver Streak*, but inevitably rumors would spread.

How to handle it when they did? How would people react? Would they fall to their knees and praise the Father of All Creation? Would they denounce Him as a fraud? Would holy war break out aboard ship? And how would God react to their reaction?

What if this *really was God*?

Jack and Stargazer both turned in their seats as Cameron, Frank, and God entered the bridge. “This is the bridge,” Cameron said as though escorting any human V.I.P.

“I believe you told me this is where we were going,” God said—as though He were any human V.I.P.

“Yeah, this is the main control center of the ship. This is our helmsman, Jack Hasta.”

Jack extended his burly hand. "A sincere pleasure!" As though he were meeting his favorite basketball player.

God shook Jack's hand. "It is indeed a pleasure to meet you."

"And our science officer, Philippe Stargazer."

God extended His massive hand. "A pleasure."

Stargazer, who had little interest in religion and little respect for a finite God, responded as he would to any guest on the *Silver Streak*. "Actually, to be more precise, it is pronounced 'Star-gah-zay.' You see, I come from the country of France, which speaks a different language than—"

"Shut up, Stargazer."

"Yes, sir."

"There was no need for these introductions," God said. "I know all of your names, of course. I've spoken to all of you in the past."

"Spoken to us?"

"Of course. When you have prayed to Me, I have answered."

Prayed? Cameron hadn't prayed since he was twelve years old.

"Many times," God went on, "the majority of the time, you have not heard My answers. But I have answered them."

"Unbelievable." Cameron recalled his childhood Bible classes... *For it is written, thou shalt not put the LORD to the test...* But any alien could scan the *Silver Streak's* records and come on board claiming to be God. It was time for some tests, and if God had a problem with that... well, Cameron was prepared to be smited. "Well, I suppose now, the most important thing we should take care of, since You've taken human form, is to inspect You medically to make sure that You contain no diseases."

If God was offended by the suggestion, or detected that Cameron was studying Him for reaction, He gave no sign. He simply smiled softly and said, "I can assure you, I have selected a perfect body."

"But You were in deep space," Cameron pressed, "and I want no danger of infecting the rest of my crew should You have picked up something out there."

God was as agreeable as any guest would have been. "Very well."

Cameron was surprised. "Good. And Frank?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd like you to make an announcement to the entire crew that God is here and explain how we picked Him up and everything."

"Okay."

Cameron gestured toward the doors. "Let's go, God."

God nodded His huge bald head. "Of course."

Funny how quickly the cosmic becomes commonplace... here I am escorting God down the hall... Once Frank's announcement rang through the ship, the curious glances he and God received became more pronounced. So far, thankfully, no one had fallen to their knees or burst into hosannas, but now that people knew, or at least guessed, who this huge person was, their looks had become more meaningful.

Dr. Pete Strickland was on his way out of the Intensive Care ward when Cameron led God into the Infirmary. It would have been impossible for anyone not to notice the dazzling robes and enormous stature of the Creator of the Universe, and it was to the

credit of their professionalism that the receptionist went back to work after only a single glance and Strickland merely paused in his stride toward his office.

Cameron stopped him. "Strickland."

"Oh, hi, Dick," Strickland said conversationally. "Come on in."

Cameron and God followed Strickland into his small, cluttered but orderly office.

"Strickland, I believe you heard Frank's announcement."

Strickland settled into his chair, rubbing a hand over his large forehead. "Yes, I did. It's unbelievable."

"Well, this here is God."

Strickland leaned forward and shook the Hand of God. "Pleased to meet You, God."

"A sincere honor to meet you," God said.

Cameron watched the mundane exchange of pleasantries, increasingly aware of the lack of grandeur in this holy visitation. God's style had certainly changed since that Burning Bush thing and that whole affair at the Red Sea. "God, this is our ship's doctor, Pete Strickland."

"Yes, I know."

Of course you know... though it hadn't escaped Cameron's notice that God's "I know"s and "introductions are unnecessary"s unfailingly came *after* the introductions. "Well, an introduction is only the polite thing to do."

"Yes, of course, I understand," God said quickly, "and you may introduce Me to anyone that you show Me."

Well, now that that's settled... "Excellent. Strickland, I'd like a general examination made on this man—well, this god—and a report given to me immediately afterwards. I'll be on the bridge."

Strickland rose from his desk. "Okay," he said in a tired voice.

Man, saw patients all day, operated, wrote prescriptions, filed reports, now gotta examine Yahweh... Cameron left God with Strickland, his sense of unease growing.

He started for the bridge, then changed his mind and went to his quarters. He touched the intercom tab to the bridge and asked Frank to join him. Then he sat at his desk and let his thoughts tumble. The sudden appearance of God was exactly what the beleaguered survivors of the destruction of Earth needed... but who in the universe would know that except for God?

But he recalled some of Stargazer's philosophical and scientific questions—what *is* God? What is omnipotence? The universe is composed of the known, the unknown, and the unknowable. If God knows *everything*, He must know the unknowable... but if He knows the unknowable, then the known cannot be as observed, for the observable is made of the unknowable. Once known, the base variables change...

There was a knock at the door.

"Come on in."

Frank entered. "What's up, Dick?"

Cameron gestured at the chairs facing his desk. "I wanted to talk to you about... God. What do you think the chances are that he's lying?"

Frank sat in the chair to Cameron's left, folded his hands across his lap, and said, "What are the chances that he's telling the truth?"

“Yeah....” Cameron had been raised Catholic, at one point had even been a Bible literalist (though he had been very young at the time), but with the onset of his teenage years found his own ethics at odds with his religious teachings. Gradually he had fallen away from religion, though a vague belief in God—or some higher order of being governing the universe—had never entirely left him.

The huge humanoid who had come aboard the *Silver Streak*, if He really was God, was, Cameron had to admit, a disappointment. Yet if Cameron’s speculation was correct, and God was an alien with an unimaginably long lifespan, if He had visited Earth in the time of Moses and the Israelites, He might have been taken for the God of Abraham. Indeed, God’s appearance in that time and place would have been as desperately needed as He was here and now, to a group of people in a remarkably similar circumstance. Perhaps it was no coincidence.

“We’ve run into a lot of mysterious, strange things,” Frank was saying. “It’s difficult to tell.”

“Yes, it is. He seems to know a great deal about our beliefs in God.”

“Yeah, He seems familiar with at least the general outlook of all the world religions. The monotheistic ones who worship... God.”

“Yeah, but then again, there are inconsistencies. He claims to have assumed human form, but what if this is His real form? What if God is just an alien, a human-like alien who has a highly advanced technology and a long lifespan? What kind of God is that? How will the people of the *Silver Streak* respond to the revelation that the source of their inspiration and faith is... just a guy?”

Frank nodded. “I’ve thought of that too. And there are inconsistencies with the Christian and Jewish faiths—for instance no one is supposed to be able to look on the face of God.”

Cameron shrugged. “Well, that could just be an ancient superstition that has nothing to do with what really happened. How many centuries after the fact was the Bible written? How many books of the Bible were arbitrarily disregarded? How many mistranslations have there been? Frank, there is not a single primary copy of the Bible in existence anywhere. We have the Dead Sea Scrolls, or what’s left of them, here on the ship, but even those were copies of copies of copies. We just don’t know what we’re dealing with.”

“I know. But what reason would He have for lying?”

“It could be the foreshadowing of some invasion, maybe get in our good confidence and then attack.”

Frank sighed. “That energy field...”

“But the energy field disintegrated. He was flying a spaceship. That is suspicious in itself.”

“Well, obviously God could form the spaceship out of matter and energy around him.”

“Yes. I assume that a survey party has been investigating that ship?”

“Yes, they’ve found it’s made out of what appears to be a regular metalloid alloy. They’re breaking down the exact chemical composition. It’s a material we’ve never seen before, but certainly nothing outside the range of nature.”

“So they haven’t found anything that would... distinguish it?”

“No, nothing. It uses a gravity drive of some sort. The mechanism is alien, but the technology is comprehensible and not really any more advanced than ours. The computers are quantum-based, they use parallel operations like ours. But then again, we’re talking about God here. He created all the metals of the Earth, so He could create a spaceship out of those metals, just the same as He could create them.”

“We could play those games all day, and I’m sure He will, and so will anyone who believes in Him.” Once again Cameron’s mind filled with images of holy war, of armies of followers clashing in the halls, slaughtering one another over belief or denial of the big guy in the Infirmary. But so far there had been no indication of that; so far people seemed to take Him in stride. “Hi, I’m God.” “Pleased to meet you, God, I’m Joe.” “I know.” “Ha-ha-ha.” Perhaps humanity had progressed beyond the need to be impressed or cowed by God. Or perhaps they had seen so much on this epic journey that one more cosmic deity meant little to them. Wonder-fatigue.

Cameron imagined God landing on Earth—pictured that ship of His with its exotic energy field lighting a bush on fire, imagined an external speaker bellowing that powerful voice to an enraptured illegitimate prince of Egypt... Really, it wasn’t so hard to put those pieces together. Even the splitting of the Red Sea could have a logical explanation. “I find myself believing Him. I don’t know why, but I do.”

Stargazer didn’t share Cameron’s sentiments.

As they sat side-by-side, alone on the bridge as they so often were, Jack took advantage of the amiable silence by asking his old friend what he thought of the coming of God.

“Perfectly absurd,” Stargazer said bluntly.

“You sure sound awfully sure.”

“Open-mindedness is a wonderful thing as long as you don’t open it so wide that your brain falls out.”

“Too late in your case.”

“Honh-honh. Please, Jack. We find a spaceship drifting around in space and bring aboard some guy who claims to be God. You do not need to be a scientist to be a teeny bit skeptical of that. Frankly I am amazed that anyone on board this spacecraft takes this person seriously. It is like the ancient explorer who visits an island of natives and gets into their good graces by proclaiming himself their god. Are we really so gullible?”

“Sure, but what if it’s true? Might tick him off with your blasphemous doubts.”

“I have been listening to arguments like that my entire life. People ask me if I had better not perhaps believe in God, just in case, so that when I die I can go to heaven. It is silly. In the first place, you cannot simply change your beliefs to suit a remote possibility. You either believe in your heart of hearts that there is a God or you do not. Secondly, if you make the decision to believe ‘just in case,’ then which God do you decide to believe in? If you accept Jesus Christ, then you are sinning against the Jewish God. If you accept Muhammad, you are sinning against Jesus. For that matter, why not accept the Norse gods? There is precisely the same amount of evidence for each of these deities: none.”

“Yeah, but what if we’re looking at evidence right now?”

Stargazer shrugged. “He will have to prove it.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Jack said, “I never asked you this before, but what *do you believe?*”

“I believe nothing. I look for evidence. If I commit myself to a belief without evidence, I may be prejudiced against that evidence when it comes along. Look at how long it took for the human race to accept such things as evolution or the heliocentric model of the Solar System.”

Another silence. Then Stargazer said, “What *do you believe?*”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve been through good times and bad times, and after the really rough start I got in life, in the long run I’ve been so lucky, I just have to think there’s somebody upstairs watching after me.”

“And so what do you say to billions who have not been as lucky as you? What about billions who were left on Earth to perish? God did not care about them, but He cared about you?”

Jack was affronted. “You asked what I believe!”

“I meant no offense. Just pointing out the logical contradiction.”

“Well, now that He might be on board, let’s just wait and see.”

“My sentiments exactly.”

Jack snorted. “Hmph. Frenchmen.”

Cameron met Strickland in the analysis room of the Infirmary. A glowing wall filled with interior shots of God’s body. Cameron didn’t know what he was looking at and Strickland didn’t expect him to. “He’s not human.”

“Of course not. If He’s God, he’s the farthest thing from human.”

“Didn’t He say, though, that He had taken on humanoid form?”

“Yes, He said that He’d taken a perfect human body.”

Strickland half-smiled. “I do read a perfect body—in other words, no handicaps, no disease, no problems in his organs. But He is not human. There are some different internal arrangements of organs, His digestive system is a little more complex, He has three lungs.”

“I see. Well, that’s rather strange.”

“Strange isn’t the word for it. Dick, I would personally call it suspicious. I know I’m not a command officer and I have no business telling you anything about that, but I’m simply advising you as ship’s doctor, He is not human.”

That only supported Cameron’s theory. It certainly would seem to eliminate God’s version of events, but it invited a more plausible, more scientific model of God. Now that he thought about it, Cameron wondered if the Mormons were right.

Others on the *Silver Streak* were as skeptical as Stargazer. The Pope, for instance, had denounced God as a fraud, much to Cameron’s surprise. But although that

effectively cut off most of the Catholic population from reveling in God's presence, He enjoyed a following among other groups, mostly a percentage of the Protestant and Jewish—though many of them, too, rejected God as a lying alien. Muslim imams were split about evenly, those arguing for and against equally vociferous, each finding passages in the Koran to back up their viewpoints, which Cameron found curious.

Interestingly, God's most devoted following was among the agnostic. Evidently the physical arrival of God drove them to discover religion. It was interesting that the skeptical were taken in while the religious tended to be skeptical.

But atheists remained atheists, and there were many shouted arguments in the halls which sounded much like Jack and Stargazer's discussion on the bridge.

Given God's casual attitude, and the casual attitude so many adopted in His presence, Cameron was tempted to discount God's arrival as a nonevent, but it was clearly not. Although there was not a major religious phenomenon occurring, there was no doubt that God's arrival had sparked a resurgence of philosophical and metaphysical debate. In that sense, God's presence on board was unquestionably a good thing.

One thing was for sure: everyone, Jew, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, atheist, Satanist, *everyone* wanted to meet Him.

President Henry Walden certainly gave no indication that he doubted God's identity. "It is indeed a festive occasion, Captain Cameron. God is aboard the *Silver Streak!* That is indeed the most incredible contact ever made in the history of the human race."

"I'm inclined to agree with your sentiments, Mr. President, but remember there is a possibility that this entity is not actually God."

"I disagree with you, Captain Cameron. I believe that the reason for the presence of those other organs is because God hastily put together His human body without thinking of the importance of certain internal organs. He did it quickly and without care."

Kind of like when He made your brain. "Mr. President, God is perfect. And while I agree that there is the possibility that what you're saying is true, we must be cautious." *Which we haven't been so far.*

"Caution is your department. Mine is negotiating. I believe that we should have a celebration aboard the *Silver Streak.*"

"Well, Mr. President, that is a harmless suggestion, and if you would like to do that, I certainly won't protest."

"Good. That makes me happy."

"Good. I take it then, Mr. President, that you are authorizing a celebration."

Walden's attention had wandered, and now he stared past Cameron at the wall, his condescending smile having melded into a contented, vacant grin. "Yeeeeees," he droned in that mindless way of his.

"Good. Yeah. Sure. Uh-huh, yeah. Okay. And who is invited?"

"Anyone who wishes to come, of course. The invitations are for everyone."

"Well, Mr. President, we're not going to be able to fit thousands and thousands of people in there. I'm sure everyone is going to want to be there."

“Very well. We can span the celebration out over several days, a few hundred per night.”

“All right, I can agree to that. And where is this celebration to be held?”

“The celebration will be held in the recreation room for the crew.”

“The recreation room for the *crew*? Are you going to allow civilians in the Command Section?”

“Civilians are allowed to pass and go freely however they please.”

“Yes, but that amount of civilians in the command section could be a little bit disturbing to the smooth running of the ship.”

Again came Walden’s condescending smile. “You do whatever you have to to keep the ship running smoothly. My job is to throw the party.”

“Well, if that’s the way you want it. I’m just exercising caution.”

“Very well. You exercise as much caution as you wish.”

Cameron was sure there was an insult in that statement, but he didn’t feel like playing those cute little word games. He wasn’t a politician and didn’t plan on acting like one. Ever. “Good. And I give you the go-ahead to do this party.”

“Thank you,” Walden said in a childlike singsong voice.

Shaking his head, Cameron said, “You’re welcome.” As he left the Council Chamber, he muttered, “Geez....”

In light of Strickland’s discovery, it was long past time to confront God and talk to Him, one organic being to another. God wasn’t difficult to locate. Cameron wondered if it would have been just as easy to spot Yeshueh ben Yosef in Judea by the flocks of followers. “God?”

“Hello, Captain Cameron,” God said, gesturing to him to join the crowd.

“Hello, God... do You like Your quarters?”

“Yes, they are very comfortable. I find them most agreeable.”

“Well, good, I’m glad You do. I just thought I should tell You the President would like to throw You a party.”

“Is that the President Walden who you told me about?”

Again, an odd question from the Almighty Father. “Yes, President Walden.”

“His prayers are not frequent. He hardly ever prays to Me.”

“Do you resent him for that?”

“No, not at all. As I said, all sins are forgiven, and those who do not wish to pray, that is their choice. However, I simply noted that he hardly ever prays. But he is a good man. Irresponsible, somewhat unintelligent, but good.”

“Well, I guess stupidity breeds goodness.”

Cameron meant it as an idle comment, but God seemed to take it seriously. “Very perceptive, Captain Cameron!” God turned his attention upon His attentive disciples. “That is the way it is. Superior intelligence often inspires greed, corruption. Intelligence is evil.”

Cameron wondered about the contradiction there—if intelligence was evil and God was pure good, did that mean that God was utterly stupid? Thinking back on the divine atrocities of the Old Testament... plagues, debauchery, sacrifices, harsh and hideous laws, fire and brimstone... it occurred to Cameron that God might just be admitting that He Himself was pure evil.

That reminded him of another interesting Biblical phenomenon—Man lived in paradise until he dared eat from the Tree of Knowledge; the vain and jealous God retaliated by forever barring Man from Eden. “Interesting.” Perhaps now would be a good time to put God to the test, despite the adoring followers—or indeed *because* of them. “Is the story of Genesis true?”

God’s brow furrowed. “The story of Genesis... are you referring to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, when they ate the Forbidden Fruit?”

“Well, yes, of course I am.”

“Well... yes.”

A gasp rippled through the crowd.

God looked out at them, studying their faces. “Yes,” he repeated. “It’s true.”

“All of it?”

“Yes, it’s all—everything, every word. It’s all true.”

Cameron studied the adoring faces. He saw open skepticism on some of them. Might as well mine that while he had a chance. Disguising his own skepticism, he adopted a wide-eyed wonder and eagerness to learn. “Incredible! A talking snake! But it seems like there’s evidence to back up the idea of evolution on Earth.” *Oh, teach me, Wise One!*

For the first time since He had come aboard, God appeared uncertain. He looked at his followers. Some were beginning to ease away from the crowd. Others were whispering to one another.

“Evolution,” God said as though He had never heard the word before. “You’re referring to humans evolving from apes?”

Actually I’m referring to the genetic model of random mutation, part of which includes the fossil evidence of divergent species in which apes and humans shared a common ancestor... but not a good idea to patronize the Lord. “Yes, of course I am,” Cameron said simply.

“Okay, yes.” He looked at the faces of his followers, then intoned in as resonant a voice as He could, “That’s true too. They’re both true.”

“Both of them?” *They’re mutually exclusive.*

“What I mean is the story of Genesis is true, but in other parts of the world, apes were evolving into humans.”

Any anthropologist could destroy that idea in seconds. In fact you don’t need an anthropologist. Whoever or whatever this creature was, he wasn’t God. Cameron injected as much humility into his voice as he could manage. “Thank you very much, God.”

“My pleasure.” God turned to resume his sermon, but his flock had by now dispersed.

Cameron returned to the bridge. “Hi.”

Frank rose from the command chair. “Hi, Dick.”

“Hey, how’s God doing?” Jack asked cheerfully.

Cameron sank into his chair, disillusioned, disappointed, angry. “Oh, ‘God’ is fine. I am beginning to wonder...” He trailed off.

“What are you beginning to wonder about?” Stargazer asked.

“Nothing, never mind. Just thinking out loud.” Now that the whole ship knew about God’s presence, now that a multi-day celebration had been arranged, now that the eager people were prepared to greet their savior and follow Him to the ends of the universe, was now the time for Cameron to dash their hopes?

But he could not allow this creature to take over the ship—if that was indeed his goal. Whoever or whatever “God” was, he was lying, and Cameron had to find out the truth. And the people were entitled to know.

But how to proceed? “Who all is coming to that party tonight?”

“Oh, I’ve not really taken a real survey of it,” Jack said. “But according to the rumors I’ve heard, a good portion of the people are coming.”

They would have to learn the truth for themselves. Perhaps he could arrange to expose God publicly, to catch him in another obvious fallacy. Of course, believers in God were often willing to accept the ridiculous. “Well, they do know that only a hundred people are allowed at a time, right?”

“Yeah, they know that. But a lot of people are applying for that thing, a lot of people have tickets.”

“Yeah, well, we can only let a hundred people in. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know. Don’t worry, I know what to do.”

“Good.” *I wish I did.* “I should make you security chief. You’re very good at security jobs.”

Jack laughed. “Three jobs, sure! It’s hard enough trying to juggle helmsman and engineer!”

“I can imagine.” *Perhaps the people are not as taken in as I’m thinking... after all, as soon as God started spouting that nonsense about Genesis and evolution occurring simultaneously, he seemed to lose them.* The people of the *Silver Streak* were not gullible, they weren’t blind religious fanatics. They were the “best people.” Scientists, intellectuals, philosophers, all people capable of thinking for themselves. At least so Cameron often told himself.

“I’ve taken a survey,” Frank was saying. “We’ve got the hundred people selected.”

“Now, why didn’t you say that while Jack and I were talking?”

“I didn’t want to interrupt you.”

“Frank, when you have information, cut in anytime.”

“All right, I’ll keep that in mind.”

“And Stargazer, I want you monitoring that party the whole time, just to see that nothing gets out of hand.”

“Of course,” Stargazer said. “But how could anything get out of hand?”

“Well, there is a small faction of Satanists aboard the *Silver Streak*. We don’t want any assassination attempts made on God.”

“That is a very good point.”

But Jack was cracking up. “Assassination attempts? On *God*? Can you really assassinate *God*?”

Cameron was not amused. “Yes, I think you *can* assassinate this particular God. So keep an eye on things down there and make sure there are always at least ten security guards at a time.” *They might be needed when I reveal to the people that this guy is no God.*

“Of course I will do that,” Stargazer said.

“Good.” *Now, what am I going to do? Challenge God to a theological debate? Quiz him on anthropology or geology? Ask him to turn rocks into bread?* “I’ve never enjoyed parties.”

“No, I’ve noticed that about you,” Frank said. “You don’t seem to enjoy social get-togethers.”

“They’re a big bother. I prefer living my own life, not having interruptions, disturbances.”

“You picked a great job.”

Cameron laughed at that. Frank had a point. But everyone had their own perception of how to live life. For Cameron, living on the edge, tackling galactic crises on a daily basis... that was his life. How could he stand acting like a private citizen, hanging out at a party, when as the Captain he held in his power the means to determine whether or not this truly was God... and what to do about it in either case.

The proximity alert chimed, pulling all of their attention from the light theological matters. Frank bent over his console. “Picking up something on the scanners.”

Cameron stared at the screen, which presently showed only the empty blackness of deep space. “What is it?”

“I’m not exactly sure.”

The doors slid aside and God’s huge nonhuman body lumbered up next to Cameron. “Do you mind if I come onto the bridge?”

“Not at all, God, come on in.”

“I just thought I would hang around here for a little while before the party begins.”

Shootin’ the breeze with my pal God... “It’s perfectly fine with me.” Cameron turned to Frank. “Can you get a more exact reading?”

“Uh, well, my scanners are limited. Ask Stargazer.”

Stargazer had made no acknowledgment of God’s arrival on the bridge—and actually, now that Cameron thought of it, had expressed no interest in meeting God. “I am reading it as an energy field similar to the one that God arrived in, but it is not the same one, obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“Now I am getting a transmission.”

The voice that filled the bridge was harsh, malevolent, guttural, and cruel. “I have heard that you have a prisoner aboard your ship. I want him returned to us at once!”

God took two steps back. “Oh, no... not him...”

Cameron glanced from the screen to God, back to the screen again. “What’s going on?”

“I’m the one he’s referring to! He’s trying to trick you!”

“Do not listen to any of his rubbish,” the cruel voice cackled. “Return him to this vessel at once!”

Stargazer, no more cowed by this new provocative stranger than by God, continued to analyze his readings. “In the center of that energy field I read a ship exactly like the one that ‘God’ arrived in.”

God sounded almost frantic, his resonant voice assuming a whining tone. "Listen to me!" Then, straightening up, he resumed his divine posture and tone. "You recognize that voice, I'm sure. The voice of pure evil. That is Satan!"

"Satan" sounded vaguely irritated. "Listen, I don't want you to continue to embarrass yourself with this foolishness. Simply return to our ship and we will return to where we come from."

Cameron had had enough. He stood, faced God, and despite the overwhelming height differential, stared him down. "What's going on here?"

"He's trying to trick you," God said defensively. "Do not listen to him. Shun him! He is the devil himself!"

"Captain of the *Silver Streak*," the devil himself said, "identify yourself."

"I'm Captain Richard Cameron."

"If you do not return him to this vessel at once, we will destroy the *Silver Streak*."

The destruction of the *Silver Streak* was the one thing Cameron feared the most. He had nightmares about it constantly. He frequently lay awake at night in a cold sweat worrying about it. He obsessively thought of different ways his ship could be destroyed, searched frantically for solutions to every possible crisis. But one thing he did not respond to favorably was threats. "Satan" provoked in him not his frantic worry for his ship, but angry indignance that any alien would come along and dare tell him what to do. "Everyone on this ship is free. No one makes claims on a person. And if you attack us, we will retaliate."

"Go ahead and retaliate! We will destroy the *Silver Streak*. Is that understood? And now... we open fire!"

Frank gripped the sides of his chair as he watched his readout. "They're opening fire on us, all right!"

The ship shuddered. From several sections forward came the sound of metal tearing.

Cameron pulled himself off the floor. "Man all weapons turrets!"

Stargazer relayed the order.

Again a violent vibration rolled throughout the ship. Lights flashed red.

"Prepare the Carrier for launch." Cameron didn't like the idea of running from a battle, but he had to protect the thousands of civilians on the *Silver Streak*. And that was what the Carrier was for. But until the huge warship with its squadrons of space fighters was prepped and deployed, the *Silver Streak* had to defend herself. "Open fire on that ship."

"Open fire," Stargazer said calmly.

The turrets along the ship's midsection aligned themselves on the target and fired. High-intensity beams of superheated plasma and microwave lasers lashed out.

"Direct hit!" Frank cried.

The voice of "Satan" once again filled the bridge. "You will pay for this disaster, I assure you! That prisoner, Lango, has deceived you! You will learn!"

Stargazer jerked. "That ship has just self-destructed!"

Cameron turned, looked up at God, who was clinging desperately to a panel near the door. "Lango'? A prisoner? Who's Lango?"

God shuffled his foot, shrugged. "I'm Lango."

An ancient comedian, observing the vast sums of money brought in by churches who paid no taxes, had once quipped that God was “all-seeing, all-knowing, all-present and all-wise... just can’t handle money.”

On his home planet, called Serrus, Lango had gone deep into debt. Unable to pay for his home, his spacecraft, or, most importantly, his taxes, he had fled.

He first found sanctuary on an inhabited planet of superstitious primitives. When Lango realized that his spaceship bore a striking resemblance to their god, he took advantage of their worship and became the leader of their people.

But his own people, led by the fanatic policeman Vair, eventually tracked him down and laid waste to the planet.

Lango managed to escape thanks to survivors who hid him and passed him through an underground railroad, but he soon found himself pursued by his planet’s police force. Failure to pay taxes was a capital crime on Serrus, so Lango had nothing to lose by fleeing from planet to planet, impersonating gods wherever he could. Vair followed, destroying civilizations wherever he tracked Lango down. Sometimes the natives turned against him when they wised up to the fact that he had deceived them, and once he’d had to escape from Vair’s prison ship.

But once he reached this empty, lifeless tract of space, there were no more primitive, superstitious worlds on which to hide. Lucky for him the *Silver Streak* happened along. He had gotten quite good at learning quickly the religious beliefs of civilizations he came across. A quick scan of the ship’s computer banks told him enough about God that he could extrapolate the rest. The energy field, used to protect his ship from interstellar dust, made a handy Kingdom of Heaven.

As usual, Vair pursued, threatened, and finally attacked. Fortunately, in this case, Vair met his match. And as per Serrus custom, when defeated in battle he committed suicide.

Lango was so ashamed, so contrite, that Cameron couldn’t help but be sympathetic. It was a tragic story—of course, Lango had lied before, he might still be lying. But this version had the ring of truth.

When he told the President about it, Walden was not terribly disappointed that God had turned out to be a fraud. In fact his concerns were quite menial. “Does this mean that we cannot throw the party for him?”

“Well... if you’d like to throw a party to welcome a new guest aboard the *Silver Streak*, that’s just fine, though I don’t think the civilian population will react kindly to knowing that he lied to us!”

In the event, however, the general feeling aboard the *Silver Streak* seemed to be relief. The coming of God shook too many worldviews. He was too small for those who believed in Him, too mundane for those who were undecided, too literal for those who did not believe. During this dark time, a savior was needed, and so the people of the *Silver Streak* had become willing participants in the deception; deep down, many of them probably knew they were being deceived. But for this brief time they didn’t care. Lango told them what they needed to be told, and like audiences swept up in a fantastic

but cathartic movie, they willingly lost themselves in the fiction, giving little thought to when or how—or even if—they would awaken back into the real world.

But now that it was over, the end of the deception was welcome. Now everyone knew who “God” *really* was, and the overall feeling was gratitude for the good time he had given them.

There were exceptions, of course, and Lango was given a bodyguard for a few weeks while the whole event was allowed to fade away.

But President Walden did have one practical concern: “What if the rest of his government comes against us?”

“They won’t. He said that Vair was his sole pursuer. Now that he’s destroyed, none of the rest of them will know our location.”

“Excellent. So as we continue to move outward, we’ll even get further away.”

“That’s right. They’ll never find us.” *At least I hope so...* But even if they did, Vair’s ship had proven easy to destroy. Clearly the Serrus technology was no match for the *Silver Streak*. Not that Cameron ever welcomed hostilities with other civilizations, and a confrontation was not something the *Silver Streak* could afford. But it was reassuring to know that, though the Serrus technology was alien, it was not superior.

“Well, Lango, I guess this explains why your internal organs are differing from any normal human.”

There was no accusation in Dr. Strickland’s voice, yet the words put Lango on edge. There had been a few times in the past when native civilizations had learned of his trickery and been most unhappy. He recalled a time when he had been pinned to a stake and lowered closer and closer to a fire... fortunately Vair’s attacking starship had saved him.

But these people were reasonable and mature, and he had encountered surprisingly little anger over the fact that he had lied to them. “Yes, and I must apologize deeply for lying to you and your people. I thought that I could easily get into your good graces by doing that.”

“Of course you knew eventually we’d figure you out.” Strickland didn’t look at him as he spoke, simply reached for another medical instrument.

“Yes, I figured you would, but after I had already become secure in your hospitality and you’d gotten used to me—possibly accepted me as a friend. And then you would have forgiven me easily for these kinds of things.”

“My people don’t quite work that way, Lango. It’s best we found out now. Our feelings of betrayal run a lot deeper the better we know and the more we trust someone.”

Lango sighed. “I thought I had planned it well.”

Cameron walked onto the bridge and found himself in the middle of a raging argument. Jack Hasta was turned in his chair, red-faced, his fist pounding on his

console. “Frank, he deceived us, he lied to us, and he impersonated someone he has no business impersonating!”

“Which brings me back to my point about belief,” Stargazer said. “Someone ‘he has no business impersonating.’ Because religion has placed so much reverence on an abstract deity, it is more heinous that Lango impersonated Him than if he impersonated Strickland or me or Captain Cameron—”

“Strickland and you and Captain Cameron are not *God!*”

“Precisely my point. You show such passionate deference to a being you have never met and have no proof of, who has committed such horrible atrocities that I do not see how He is worthy of such devotion. If the argument is we should be grateful to Him for creating us, I point out that science describes natural processes which both created the universe *and* created us. So even if God *did* create us, He was doing no more than what nature could have done anyway.”

Jack huffed. “So maybe God *is* nature.”

“A matter of semantics. God can be anything you want Him to be. He might even be Lango if it so pleases you.”

“But He’s *not* Lango, you stubborn French baguette-monger. The point is Lango *lied* to us.”

“Now, listen, he was only trying to become a guest of ours, he did nothing really wrong.” Frank stood, turning the command chair over to Cameron. “Jack believes that Lango should be punished for impersonating God to get aboard the *Silver Streak*, that he ought to be given back to the Serrans or tossed into space or something—”

“*I didn’t say that!*” Jack raged. “I’m just saying he was wrong!”

“With all due respect,” Stargazer said, “you *did* say it would serve him right to take him back to Serrus.”

“I was just saying! I didn’t really mean it literally.”

“Then why did you say it?”

Jack growled. “Lord, you’re pedantic today.”

“And you are uncharacteristically imprecise. Maybe you could pray to God to fix that broken circulator pump.”

“Now, Stargazer,” Cameron said, “let’s not ridicule anyone’s beliefs.”

“I am not ridiculing. I am making a point.”

“Well, so am I,” Jack said. “Lango came aboard under a false name, lied to us, deceived us and caused us to be attacked.”

“We would have been attacked anyway, whether he’d impersonated God or not,” Cameron said.

“But still, there was no need for him to do that. He could have come aboard and told us the truth.”

“Jack, why don’t you try putting yourself in his position?” Stargazer said. “After escaping from Serrus, the first place he landed was a primitive planet that could never have understood the truth. They started worshipping him right away. He found a system that worked. By the time he came across us, it might never have occurred to him to do things any differently than he had before.”

“He scanned us, he knew we were a benevolent people.”

“He didn’t know if we would accept him,” Cameron said. “Jack, I’m not saying he was right to do what he did, but I can’t condemn him for it either. When you’re in a tight spot, you do what you feel you need to do. People who weren’t in the situation have an awfully easy time judging you for it.”

“I don’t know, I still don’t agree. I’ve been in tough spots. I know all about that. Nothing beats telling the truth.”

“Jack, as I recall you used to be a gambler.”

“That’s right.”

“Then I think you should be well aware of his logic. Sometimes you bluff to win the game. Set course for the next solar system.”

Jack wasn’t satisfied with the answer, but he knew that the Captain had spoken. And aboard the *Silver Streak*, the Captain was God. “Course is already set.”

“Good. Let’s hope we finally run across something. Light speed factor nine.”

The *Silver Streak* disappeared from the dead sector, its lonely people moving on in their desperate search for meaning and purpose.

But safely tucked aboard the warm and benevolent *Silver Streak*, Lango had found his meaning and purpose.

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About the Author: Collin R. Skocik is a prolific author of science fiction and science and space-related articles. In addition to the epic *Voyage Into the Unknown* series, he has also written the short story collection *The Future Lives!*, the disaster novel *The Sunburst Fire*, and the science fiction novel *Dreams of the Stars*. His first print sale was “Asteroid Eternia” in *Encounters* magazine. He is the science fiction writer in residence at Kepler Space University. When he is not writing, he provides closed-captioning for the hearing impaired. He lives in Atlantic Beach, Florida.

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Editor’s Notes: The Kepler Team is pleased to begin fiction publications in the *Journal of Space Philosophy* with author Collin Skocik’s story. Arthur C. Clarke devoted his professional life to science-based fiction that has made huge positive contributions to Space exploration and Space based systems. Today’s fiction is entertaining; and it may be tomorrow’s reality. *Bob Krone, PhD.*