

# God with Us: Glory and Fire Motifs in the Old Testament

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This is a research paper that will focus on the significance of glory fire in the Bible. Research will be presented utilizing scholarly articles, books, and book reviews related to this topic. This paper will also discuss different ways that glory fire is understood and utilized within the broader academic debate.

## GLORY DEFINED

In a theological sense the glory of God belongs to the category of communicable attributes. Within the purview of this paper glory is referred to as that attribute of God associated with His presence. Glory in this sense is not something that emanates from God as light might emanate from a power or energy source, but instead because God is spirit, His glory is that which accompanies His presence and makes it possible for the creation to “see” Him.<sup>1</sup> Glory in this sense is often spoken of as manifestation. The glory of God is therefore understood as that attribute of God that displays His splendor, wealth, and royalty as sovereign creator and Lord.<sup>2</sup> In the Old Testament especially glory is defined as that characteristic of weight or visible substance related to a manifestation of God.<sup>3</sup> In these definitions glory is a sweeping attribute that captures many of God’s characteristics. This is consistent with the Hebrew *kabod* which conveys the meaning of God’s total magnificence and the Greek equivalent that speaks of His brightness, splendor, magnificence, and fame.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 220.

<sup>2</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 997.

<sup>3</sup>William Dryness, *Themes In Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1977), 42.

<sup>4</sup>Erickson, 998.

God's glory as presence is the centerpiece of the Bible. None have stated this as succinctly as Terrien: "It is the Hebraic theology of presence . . . that constitutes the field of forces which links . . . the fathers of Israel, the reforming prophets, the priests of Jerusalem, the psalmists of Zion, the Jobian poet, and the bearers of the gospel. This means that the motif of divine presence is seen as a dynamic principle of coherence or of continuity and unity within the OT and between the Testaments."<sup>5</sup>

Many Psalms are illustrative of these definitions. For example we read in Psalm 19 that, "The heavens are declaring the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the works of His hands;"<sup>6</sup> in Psalm 57, "Be exalted above the heavens, O God; let your glory be above all the earth;"<sup>7</sup> in Psalm 72, "And blessed be His glorious name forever; and may the whole earth be filled with His glory;"<sup>8</sup> and in Psalm 148, "Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven."<sup>9</sup>

The New Testament speaks of the glory of God in reference to His activities. For example at the birth of Jesus Christ the angels announced, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."<sup>10</sup> Riding into Jerusalem to begin the final saga of His life Jesus was greeted with, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord; peace in heaven and glory in the highest."<sup>11</sup> In response to questions from His

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<sup>5</sup>Gerhard Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 87. Hasel quotes Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Harper and Row: New York, 1978).

<sup>6</sup>Psalm 19:1.

<sup>7</sup>Psalm 57:5.

<sup>8</sup>Psalm 72:19.

<sup>9</sup>Psalm 148:13.

<sup>10</sup>Luke 2:14.

<sup>11</sup>Luke 19:38.

disciples concerning the events of the last days Jesus told them that He would one day return to them, “on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory.”<sup>12</sup>

Through out the Bible God’s glory is connected to His presence, His face, His self-revelation and even to His name. The biblical record offers a strong and convincing example of the God who is and has revealed Himself to His creation through tangible experiences.

### **FIRE IN THE BIBLICAL RECORD**

While it is not difficult to define glory in a biblical context the same cannot be said about fire. The idea of fire carries several connotations and presents different images in the biblical texts. For instance, Labahn writes about the fire metaphor within Lamentations 2 and suggests that in this context anger and divine judgment are clearly in view.<sup>13</sup> What is interesting about this interpretation from Lamentations is that the fire motif ultimately demonstrates God’s glory and might as only He has the power to control fire and use it for His divine purposes. Again, in this sense, fire is seen as divine judgment, an expression of the divine will being carried out explicitly against that which is judged. Just as fire consumes completely so therefore does God’s judgment. But what also comes to light in considering Lamentations from this view is that because fire does point back to God and His glorious might demonstrated through His supreme control of the physical elements of His creation, no person can ever hope to withstand Him or escape His judgment, since humans cannot control or escape these same elements.

Fire can also be interpreted within the context of God’s divine anger. The biblical record is replete with examples of fire as a demonstration of God’s anger, perhaps none as famous

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<sup>12</sup>Matthew 24:30.

<sup>13</sup>Antje Labahn, Fire from above: metaphors and images of God’s actions in Lamentations 2:1-9. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 31 no 2 D 2006, p 239-256.

as the fire and brimstone that rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah.<sup>14</sup> An interesting exercise beyond the scope of this present effort is to understand the relationship between the fire from heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah and the “coals of fire” believers somehow heap upon the heads of unbelievers mentioned in Paul’s letter to the Romans. In both instances the fire came about as a result of the refusal of God’s grace.<sup>15</sup>

One final application is necessary in this discussion of fire. A clear connection exists between seeing fire as an all-consuming judgment and the appearances of God and or a pre-incarnate Christ. An analysis of Amos 1 and 2 for example demonstrates that theophany and fire picture God as a consuming warrior.<sup>16</sup> In these chapters the picture of God visiting the earth as a warrior with fire as His weapon presents elements of holy war imagery. The same holy war elements are present in Isaiah 29 where the prophet speaks of God’s holy war against Jerusalem; in Psalm 18:7 and 50:3 where God is said to come forth with fire; and especially in Deuteronomy 9 where God is said to go before His people as a consuming fire. These passages as well as many others serve to build a solid bridge that links and transitions the metaphor of fire to the glory of God and for the purposes of this paper to the idea of glory fire and theophany.

The theme of glory fire has been well debated as this paper will demonstrate. Within academia there are those on the left such as Gerhard Von Rad who suggest that glory fire as

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<sup>14</sup>Genesis 19:24.

<sup>15</sup>For further investigation into this subject see John N. Day, "Coals of fire" in Romans 12:19-20. *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 160 (Oct. – Dec. 2003):414-420. Day states that Chrysostom taught that unbelievers would surely incur God’s divine judgment by refusing to heed the grace He offered through His people. The author prefers the Augustinian explanation as do most modern commentators. Augustine taught that the coals of fire were actually representative of the shame an unbeliever would experience at rejecting grace and the subsequent repentance they would undergo. This view is not without problems of its own as evidenced by the allegation that its basis is found in a pagan ritual of Egypt where a repentant would carry censors of fire over their head. See Siegfried Morenz, "Feurige Kohlen auf dem Haupt," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 78 (1953): col. 188. Cited in Day, 416.

<sup>16</sup>Patrick D. Miller, Fire in the mythology of Canaan and Israel. *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. 27 (July 1965):256-261.

theophany was a primitive form of Judaism and rightly gave way to a theophany of name whereby God revealed Himself through His activities toward His people and attached a name as commemoration of the event. Von Rad found support for his view in what he perceived to be a difference in theophany beginning in Deuteronomy. Others on the right suggest that theophany was as described, namely as a visible and physical manifestation of God and not merely in name only. We now turn our attention to these issues.

### **GLORY FIRE AND THEOPHANY**

When it comes to the subject of God's presence people usually react with arched brow and a sense of suspicion as if someone has broached an issue not raised in polite company. Even in the church, talk of the presence of God especially the physical presence such as defined by theophany, is met with lackluster enthusiasm. Far too many Christians see in theophany a subject rife with problems of interpretation and application. But where some people see problems other people see opportunities. Discussion of the presence of God among scholars normally elicits two predictable responses – openness to it as a reality taught in the Scriptures or rejection of the possibility of it as mere mystical wistfulness. Billings<sup>17</sup> and others suggest that textual criticism trumps the plain wording of the Scriptures. Passages such as Exodus 33:14 that record God saying to Moses, “My presence will go with you,” are rejected by some scholars on the basis of the inability of their critical models, notably the four-source division J, E, and the J/E redactor, to make sense of it. Contrasting Billings is Klingbeil who in his study of Psalm 18:8-16 concludes that “the choice of language in the

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<sup>17</sup>Rachel M. Billings, The problem of the divine presence: source-critical suggestions for the analysis of Exodus xxxiii 12-23. *Vetus Testamentum*. 54 (2004):427-444.

text seems to transcend the mere depiction of natural occurrences, pointing to the reality of Yahweh's descent from heaven to battle the king's enemies.”<sup>18</sup>

Although important in scholastic circles, textual criticism does not provide a convincing argument for layman or scholars on the right. As mentioned above Gerhard von Rad was one of the earliest scholars to argue against a physical, bodily manifestation beyond the earliest occurrences of theophany, opting instead to advance the idea of “name” glory theology whereby God was pleased to manifest Himself to His people through His name. Von Rad’s position which was taken up and advanced by almost all scholars on the left after him has its problems. Perhaps the most difficult question that must be answered is how to view the biblical theme of theophany. Should God’s manifestations of Himself, His divine body, be understood from a neo-platonic view as a nonanthropomorphic and incorporeal conception or from the more traditional and some suggest biblical Semitic view of corporeality? Additionally, scholars are split over the issue of whether or not Old Testament theophanies were preincarnate appearances of Christ or not.

The church has from the first century onward believed that Christ did appear to His people in physical form as detailed in the Old Testament. Conservative evangelical scholars continue to support this view today. Liberal scholars reject this position and interpretation, accusing conservative scholars of basing their research and more importantly their conclusions on presuppositions that force them into unwarranted assertions related to the text and the issue of theophanies.

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<sup>18</sup> M. K. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven, God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 169; Fribourg, 1999). Cited in Shnider, Steven. Psalm xviii: theophany, epiphany empowerment. *Vetus Testamentum* 56 no 3 2006, p 386-398.

Examples of this division are numerous. Those ascribing to a Deuteronomic view of name glory theology insist that God dwelt with the Jews in name only as evidenced by the Ark of the Covenant becoming a mere depository and no longer serving as God's footstool. God's name according to liberal scholars became symbolic of His will to save and not His presence.<sup>19</sup> Habel<sup>20</sup> states that the Old Testament texts that speak of God's presence are based on borrowed Middle Eastern pagan religious ceremonial literature. This renders the idea of theophany as one method among many whereby Israel attempted to verbalize their faith in Jehovah. In the final analysis Habel concludes that theophanies were not actual occurrences but essentially fictional in nature. McKenzie<sup>21</sup> speaks for the vast majority of scholars on the left when he suggests that theophanies were born of the Jewish imagination and not rooted in any discernable historical event. In this view theophanies might pass as poetic prose but certainly not as historical events. Windsor<sup>22</sup> adds that Old Testament theophanies were literal fabrications produced well after the stated occurrence and that they were probably rooted in mystical experiences of the prophets while engaged in religious activity. Lindblum<sup>23</sup> believed that theophanies were hallucinations fueled by a fervent hope or expectation of the Jewish worshipper that found their way into the text. Kingsbury<sup>24</sup> declared that Old Testament theophanies were vivid imagery derived from Ugaritic-Canaanite traditions. He identified what he believed to be two prevailing types of

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<sup>19</sup>J. Gordon McConville, "God's Name and God's Glory" *Tyndale Bulletin*, vol. 1 30 (1979): 149-163.

<sup>20</sup>Norman Habel, "He Who Stretches Out the Heavens." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 34 (1972): 417-430.

<sup>21</sup>John L. McKenzie, "God and Nature in the Old Testament" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (1952). Cited in Dr. Dalman lecture number 3, Comparative Old Testament Theology.

<sup>22</sup>Gwyneth Windsor, "Theophany: Traditions of the Old Testament," *Journal of Theology* (1972). Cited in Dalman lecture 3.

<sup>23</sup>Jonannes Lindblom, "Theophanies in Holy Places in Hebrew Religion," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, vol. 32, (1961): 91-106. Cited in Dalman, lecture 3.

<sup>24</sup>Edwin C. Kingsbury, "The Theophany, Topos, and the Mountain of God," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 no 2 (June 1967): 205-210.

theophanies: storm and earthquake. The first deriving from the pagan Canaanite culture and the latter from Baal worship practices. Muhlenberg<sup>25</sup> viewed Genesis as a compilation of J, E, and D materials written during the Babylonian exile. As such the theophany narratives were revised into the shorter versions appearing in the Hebrew Bible. He identified what he believed to be five prevailing features of the Old Testament theophanic record: 1) they include a first person self-disclosure such as “I am”; 2) there is a second person injunction such as “fear not”; 3) there are words of comfort such as “I am with you”; 4) there is a promise of assistance such as “I will help you”; and finally 5) there is a word of revelation.

The first issue that must be taken up against liberal scholars has to do with their presuppositions. As mentioned above liberal scholars deride their conservative brethren for reading into the Old Testament concepts born of the New Testament mind. This criticism deserves consideration but it can not become debilitating to the task of developing an Old Testament theology. If it were the liberal scholar would be just as handicapped as they also bring presuppositions into their engagement of the text. In the least liberal scholars bring with them a belief that Old Testament theophanies did not really happen in spite of what the text says or support it may have from well-regarded sources. Compounding this issue for the liberal scholar is the subsequent endeavor to find historical reasons why the theophany occurrence is merely myth. Thus the effort of developing an Old Testament theology when dealing with the theme of theophany takes on a decidedly imbalanced approach within a reasoned definition of scholarship for the liberal.

What does conservative evangelical scholarship have to offer on the theme of theophany? Griffin and Paulsen marshal considerable evidence to show that from the very beginning of

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<sup>25</sup>James Muilenberg, “The Speech of Theophany,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, vol. 28 (1963): 35-47. Cited in Dalman lecture 3.

the Christian faith the idea of the presence of God was seen both anthropomorphically and corporeally.<sup>26</sup> They suggest that liberal scholars have a blind spot of sorts that prevent them from seeing this in the writings of Augustine and other church fathers. McConville sees the liberal approach as one that has fomented for some time but has seized upon the Deuteronomic demythologizing armory as an opportunity to assist “the collapse of an entire system of concepts which for centuries had been regarded as sacrosanct.”<sup>27</sup> What he means by this is that liberal scholarship overlooks the various texts that present God as manifesting His presence before His people. As an example exodus 33:18 is offered. Commenting on this verse and passage McConville notes:

. . . the problem in Exodus 33:18ff, coming as it does on the heels of the rebellion in Exodus 32 (the making of the golden calf), is: 'how can Yahweh now go with Israel on their journey? There is a deep tension here. On the one hand, Moses expresses the concern that Yahweh should continue to be among his people; his presence is seen as essential to their continued well-being. Yet on the other, that very presence is likely to consume them (v. 20). And Yahweh's answer to the problem is to shield his glory (v. 22) (alternatively, his face, w. 20, 23), while proclaiming his name (and making all his goodness pass before Moses, v. 19). The theophanic terms are marshaled in such a way as to provide a solution to the problem raised by Israel's need to approach and be intimate with one who by his nature was holy and unapproachable.<sup>28</sup>

There can be no mistake that McConville is advocating a literal presence of God with the Hebrews. That He manifested Himself by cloud and fire is not easily disputed by the most skeptical scholars. The texts give no license to refuse the literal interpretation offered here.

Exodus 3 presents a strong argument for physical theophany when read as the original readers of the Pentateuch would have read it. Given the increasing uncertainty related to the Documentary Hypothesis it appears scholars are on better footing to approach the theophany narratives as necessary to revealing Yahweh to His people with the message He intended to

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<sup>26</sup>Carl W. Griffin and David L. Paulsen, “Augustine and the Corporeality of God” *Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 95 (2002): 97-118.

<sup>27</sup>McConville, 149.

<sup>28</sup>McConville, 154-155.

give. Robinson<sup>29</sup> argues that there are a number of valuable principles involved in the burning bush theophany not the least of which is that God initiates the call to service to His spokespersons. That He did not leave this calling to another man but took it upon Himself to appear to Moses in the bush as fire suggests that His holiness would accompany them to Egypt where the burning bush miracle would be replicated through the plagues upon Egypt. Perhaps more important than this though is the statement God made to Moses<sup>30</sup> that He would meet with him again on that same mountain, a statement of commitment and promise to manifest Himself again in like manner. Robinson thus supports the theme of theophany as both visible and physical just as the miracles were visible and physical demonstrations of God's power and glory.

Shnider offers an interpretation of Psalm 28 as demonstrative of God's power and glory via theophany.<sup>31</sup> In this Psalm Shnider states that God's glory surrounded David and provided for his victory by carrying him on wings and providing accuracy for his archers.

Addressing Psalm 28, Klingbeil concludes that "the choice of language in the text seems to transcend the mere depiction of natural occurrences, pointing to the reality of Yahweh's descent from heaven to battle the king's enemies."<sup>32</sup> Savran<sup>33</sup> develops a compelling argument suggesting that theophanies were not merely poetry, expressions of mystical experiences, or hallucinations but instead were actual appearances of God to His people in

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<sup>29</sup>Bernard P. Robinson, "Moses at the Burning Bush," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 75 (1997): 107-122.

<sup>30</sup>Exodus 33:12.

<sup>31</sup>Steven Shnider, Psalm xviii: theophany, epiphany empowerment. *Vetus Testamentum* 56 no. 3 (2006): 386-398.

<sup>32</sup>M. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven, God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 169; Fribourg, 1999). Cited in Schnider, 387. Cited in Schnider, 387.

<sup>33</sup>George W. Savran, "Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative" (London: T. & T. Clark International, 2005). Cited in Robert B. Chisholm, O-D 1996. God at Sinai: covenant and theophany in the Bible and ancient Near East. *Bibliotheca Sacra*. 153 (612):495-496.

both physical and verbal interactions. Savran goes on to submit that “while the Sinai theophany was “a one-time event, never to be re-enacted,” the “variety of texts, personalities, and roles we find in these theophany traditions indicate that the Deity was accessible in a wide variety of circumstances, and that this availability was central in Israel's relationship to YHWH.”<sup>34</sup> This represents conservative scholarship at its best as Savran takes pains to demonstrate throughout his book that through theophany God actively sought to communicate with His people.

### **THEOPHANY AS A DEMONSTRATION OF GOD’S GLORY**

This paper has presented two sides of the debate over the biblical narratives surrounding the theme of theophany. Presuppositions are evidenced on both sides of the discussion. Admitting those, what is left is to weigh the evidence. It is the opinion of this author that understanding the purpose of theophany from God’s perspective – if that can be presumed to be known – lends itself to a clearer understanding and indeed a reminder to scholars everywhere of the purpose of biblical scholarship. Lost amidst the myriad of writing and the flurry of activity critiquing, reviewing, and criticizing is the idea that God reveals Himself for one central purpose – to bring Himself glory. The attempt by scholars on the left to deconstruct the text via any number of imaginative tools amounts to an attack on God’s stated purpose in revealing Himself. God has repeatedly said that He works among His people to bless them and care for them so that He might be glorified.<sup>35</sup> No amount of feigned altruistic vision can hide the animosity of many scholars toward the biblical texts. It is one thing to disagree even vehemently with a scholar’s conclusions but entirely another to carry

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<sup>34</sup>Chisholm, 498.

<sup>35</sup>See especially Psalm 86:9-13, Isaiah 60:21, 61:3, where God works on the behalf of people so that He receives glory. There are of course many other passages that room does not permit to be mentioned.

into a research effort a predisposition of disbelief in the authority of the text for faith and practice within the Christian community. It appears to this writer that the best approach among all the options is to view the biblical literature of theophany as the authors intended it be viewed. The richness of the narratives and the supporting evidence textual criticism notwithstanding, lends itself to a strong case for accepting God's appearance to His people in time.

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