

## THE MANIFESTATION OF THE GLORY OF GOD AS AN EXPRESSION OF DIVINE LOVE

### Abstract

This study explores the manifestation of God's glory as a concrete expression of divine love, tracing continuity from the Sinai theophany through Israel's cultic life to Christ's Transfiguration. It begins with Moses' encounter at the burning bush and the revelation of God's name, grounding divine existence in self-subsistence and historical action. The Exodus narrative and the covenant ceremony culminate in the descent of the divine glory (*kabod*) onto Sinai and its subsequent transfer to the Tabernacle, where God's dwelling among Israel becomes the tangible sign of covenantal presence. The paper emphasizes *kabod*'s dual character: nearness and transcendence perceptible as radiant, heavy presence yet veiled within cloud and fire. The analysis connects biblical, rabbinic, and liturgical traditions (including the Shekinah motif and temple imagery) to the Johannine and patristic visions of divine presence. Moses' plea, 'Show me your glory,' finds fulfillment in the mercy and steadfast love revealed in God's self-disclosure, while Israel's apostasy complicates but does not nullify divine fidelity. The study then shifts to Christ, proposing that the incarnation and Transfiguration actualize Sinai's glory in person: Christ bears the fullness of deity bodily, and the Transfiguration unveils divine light not as created luminescence but as uncreated energy accessible to transformed human perception. Drawing on Gregory Palamas and John of Damascus, the paper argues that witnessing divine glory effects *theosis*—restoring humanity toward its intended likeness—thus framing glory foremost as an act of divine love that sanctifies, judges, and consummates covenantal communion between God and creation.



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## Introduction

The revelation of God on Mount Sinai is one of the most pivotal moments, not only in the sacred history of the Old Testament but also in world history, since that event and the Covenant that followed became the starting point for a world-changing transformation in humanity's spiritual course.

This course begins when a self-exiled courtier of Pharaoh, wandering in the desert of Sinai, comes face to face with a strange sight: from within a bush that burns without being consumed, Moses hears a voice calling to him. As he approaches, he hears God introduce Himself with a name that points back to his people's past: "I am the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6).

As the conversation unfolds, God presents Himself to Moses with a name that reveals something of His nature: 'I am Who I am' (Ex 3:15). God is the only self-existent One, whose being depends on nothing and no one, while all things derive their existence from Him. In contrast to the gods of Israel's cultural environment—who do not exist—the God who reveals Himself to Moses is characterized primarily by existence. Moreover, this divine existence is demonstrated through concrete actions in human history, in which God intervenes dynamically.

Furthermore, the reference to previous and future generations shows that God's existence remains unaltered through time, as is characteristically proclaimed in the Book of Revelation, where the name of God is expressed as "He Who is, and Who was, and Who is to come" (Rev 1:4,8), and vividly depicted in Church iconography with the inscription "Ο ΩΝ" ('He Who Is') in Christ's halo.

At the beginning of the Decalogue, God presents Himself saying: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery," (Ex 20:2) while a little later the reason for this deliverance is made clear: "They shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them and be their God" (Ex 29:46).

This is why the Book of Exodus devotes so much space to the organization of God's worship (Ex 24:15 – 40:38), with the most detailed instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle of Testimony, for the Tabernacle is intended to become the place where God will truly be present among His people.

### **The Manifestation of the Glory of God as an Expression of Divine Love**

In Exodus 24:11, the second part of the book, which recounts the establishment of the Covenant between God and Israel, comes to an end, and from 25:1 begins the third part, which deals with the organization of divine worship. Between these two sections, the descent of the Lord upon the mountain and the ascent of Moses are described, serving as a link between what has preceded and what will follow.

More specifically, the confirmation of the Covenant takes place within the context of a ceremony in which sacrifices are offered to God (24:4–8), followed by a sacred meal (24:11). Immediately afterward, Moses is commanded by God to ascend the mountain to receive the stone tablets containing the fundamental terms of the Covenant just ratified (v. 12). Obeying God's command, Moses, accompanied by Joshua, climbs toward the summit, while leaving the seventy elders of Israel under the leadership of Aaron and Hur to wait below (vv. 13–14).

As Moses ascends, a cloud covers the mountain for six days, while the glory of the Lord settles upon its summit (vv. 15–17). Finally, at the Lord's invitation, Moses enters the cloud, where he remains for forty days (v. 18). This entire event of Moses' encounter with God simultaneously highlights both the presence of the Lord among His people and the uniqueness of Moses as mediator between God and the people, since he alone enters the cloud. The sacredness of this encounter underscores the importance of the instructions concerning the Tabernacle of the Testimony that follow, for the 'glory' of God subsequently moves from the mountain to the Tabernacle (Exo cap 25ff).

The presence of God among His people is a central theme throughout the Old Testament. In this passage, that presence is described as the 'descent of the glory of the Lord.' The term 'glory' translates the Hebrew word **כְּבוֹד** (*kabod*), which literally means 'weight' or 'heaviness' of a person or thing, expressing its social standing or value (Weinfeld 1974, 22–37). The theological use of the term appears primarily in traditions associated with the Temple of Jerusalem (Is 6; Ez 1–3; 8–11; 43–44; Ps 24; 29, etc.).

In 1Kg 8:11 it is said that when the glory of God filled Solomon's Temple, the priests were unable to enter it—this is not poetic exaggeration: the presence of God has weight, occupies space, and is tangible to human beings. In Isaiah's vision within the Temple, the angels surrounding God's throne continually sing: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (6:3).

In rabbinic texts, the phrase of Leviticus 26:11, ‘I will set my dwelling among you,’ is rendered in Aramaic as ‘I will place the Tabernacle of My Glory (ܫܝܚܝܢܬܐ ܕܝܩܪܝ – *Shekhinta di-Yiqri*) among you,’ emphasizing the nearness of the divine to humanity<sup>[1]</sup>. The same idea appears in the Gospel of John: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory” (Jn 1:14). For ancient readers, glory was not something symbolic; it was something that touched the earth.

The luminous character of the Lord’s glory is especially emphasized in the Sinai traditions (Ex 24:16–17; 40:34–35; Lev 9:6, 23) as well as in the visions of the prophet Ezekiel (8–11; 43–44). The Israelites gathered at the foot of the mountain experience the descent of God’s glory as ‘a consuming fire’ upon the summit (Ex 24:17). From this and similar passages (cf. Ez 8:1–3) it follows that the glory of the Lord is visible to human beings as a radiant phenomenon. Through his careful choice of words, the biblical writer emphasizes both God’s nearness to His people—since the Lord makes His presence perceptible to them—and His transcendence, for this presence remains veiled within the cloud, beyond human grasp.

Remarkably, in this description of God’s ‘descent,’ the cloud covers Mount Sinai for six days, and on the seventh day the Lord speaks to Moses (Ex 24:16). Once again, the careful choice of words evokes in the reader’s mind the narrative of the creation of the world and the sanctification of the seventh day. Just as God creates the world in six days and sanctifies the seventh, in a similar way the cloud covers the mountain for six days, and on the seventh day the glory of God descends and sanctifies the mountain’s peak, making it a holy place. Thus, the purpose of Exodus 24 is not merely to describe a wondrous encounter between God and Moses. The descent of God upon Sinai and the sanctification of the place indicate that the divine commandments proclaimed there acquire special significance for the life of the community and hold binding authority for the people of God.

As the story continues, the people repeatedly abandoned their God, but the people’s apostasy did not nullify the plan of divine economy. God remained faithful to His promise: “I will dwell among you and will not reject you. I will walk among you; I will be your God, and you shall be my people” (Lev 26:11–12). The glory of God dwelt in the Tabernacle of the Testimony (Ex 40:28–32; Lev 9:15–23) and later in the temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem (1Kg 8:10–11). The prophet Ezekiel, in anguish, saw it depart from the temple (10:18–19), only to see it return later (43:1–4). God did not abandon His people, even when His presence was no longer perceptible to them.

The expressed will of God to be with His people shows how deeply the worship of the golden calf, described in Exodus 32, disrupted the relationship between God and Israel, and explains the stern decision–threat that God announces to Moses in the next chapter: “I will bring you to the land flowing with milk and honey, but I will not go up with you, lest I destroy you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people” (Ex 33:3). God remains faithful to His covenant with the people and will fulfill the accompanying promises, yet their infidelity has perilous consequences for themselves. It is characteristic that after the incident with the golden calf, every time God speaks to Moses about the Israelites, He refers to them as ‘your people, whom you brought out of Egypt’ and no longer ‘my people’ (Ex 32:7; 33:1), thus showing that He has now distanced Himself from His people.

The danger of violating the covenant’s terms becomes clear in the dialogue between Moses and God in Exodus 33:11–23 (see Childs 1974; Propp 1999; Meyers 2005).

The text begins by stating that “the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend” (33:11). This intimacy allows Moses to speak with increasing boldness to his ‘friend.’ Yet even God’s assurance, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (33:14), does not satisfy him, for Moses knows that what distinguishes Israel from all other nations is the certainty that God is truly with them (33:16). Moses does not want God merely as a vanguard, helper, or guide—but as One who is present among them (Billings 2004: 427–44). Thus, he presses further: “If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here” (33:15).

Strangely enough, God seems to yield to Moses’ persistence (33:17), but Moses is still not content. He understands that the restoration of the broken relationship between God and Israel depends not on who humans are or what they do, but on who God is. Therefore, to be assured, he does not hesitate to make a request that at first sounds excessive: ‘Show me Your glory’ (33:18). And yet God consents. He consents to reveal yet another deeper aspect of His character. Moses will learn that the name ‘Lord’ does not refer only to the God of the ancestors—the One who was, is, and will be; the liberator from the slavery of Egypt; the One who desires to be with His people—but also to the One who affirms: “I will show mercy to whom I will show mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (33:19). God’s mercy and compassion are stronger than human choices. When, on the next day, God fulfills His promise, Moses will learn from God’s own mouth that: “The Lord, the Lord God, is merciful and gracious, slow to

anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness; keeping mercy for thousands” (34:6–7). But the apostates must not misunderstand God’s forgiving nature, and for this reason He warns them that forgiveness does not mean that God overlooks sin: “He forgives iniquities, injustices, and sins, but He does not leave the guilty unpunished; for the iniquities of the fathers, the children and grandchildren will pay, up to the third and fourth generation” (34:7). This warning, however, will be revoked by God Himself when, through the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah, He proclaims the establishment of the new Covenant (Jer 31 [38]:29–34).

It was the love of God that granted Moses to behold His glory on Mount Sinai (33:22–23) as an expression of divine mercy. The same love granted Christ’s disciples to behold His glory on Mount Tabor, ‘as far as they could bear it,’ so that, as the *kontakion* of the feast of Transfiguration proclaims:

When they saw You crucified,  
they might understand Your Passion as voluntary,  
and to the world might proclaim  
that You are indeed the radiance of the Father.

Since in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9), the glory abides with Him throughout His earthly life—even in the moments of His deepest humiliation. Yet the ‘assumption of the flesh’ veils this glory, a veil lifted only briefly now of the Transfiguration. This does not mean that Christ’s human nature is dissolved or lost in the divine light. During the Transfiguration, Christ underwent no change; rather, the disciples were enabled to see what they had previously been unable to see.

The light that the disciples of Christ saw was not a natural light but the light of divinity—a light that does not belong to the created world but to the realm of the divine. Nevertheless, the disciples saw the divine light with their bodily senses. Saint Gregory Palamas, the theologian who would make the vision of the divine light the center of his theological thought, emphasized that God is called ‘Light’ not according to His essence but according to His energy; and it is precisely this uncreated energy of God that can, under certain conditions, become perceptible. This participation in God’s grace transforms the human being into what he was before the image of God within him became tarnished. And as Saint Gregory again explains:

Therefore, that light was not a perceptible, physical light, nor did those who beheld it see it merely with their bodily eyes. Rather, having been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, they underwent a change, and in this way, they beheld the change. (Gregory Palamas 2008, 374)

If then, through His incarnation Christ became human, through His Transfiguration He reveals what the human being is meant to become.

### Conclusion

This truth is beautifully summarized by St. John of Damascus, who writes in his homily on the Transfiguration:

He was transfigured, not by assuming what He was not,  
but by revealing to His own disciples what He was,  
opening their eyes and making them, from blind, to see.  
And this is what is meant by ‘He was transfigured before them’:  
remaining what He was, He appeared to the disciples as He truly is.  
(*Homilia in Transfigurationem Domini*, PG 96:564C)

Just as in the theophany on Sinai the cloud covered the presence of the Lord who proclaimed His law—thereby defining the life of the people of God—so also, at the Transfiguration, a cloud covers the scene, and from within it comes a voice that defines the life of the new people of God: “This is My beloved Son, My chosen One; listen to Him” (Mt 17:5).

### Note

[1] Targum Pseudo-Jonathan. The Hebrew word for *tabernacle* used in Leviticus 26:11 is *Mishkani* (מִשְׁכָּנִי), which derives from the root שָׁכַן, meaning ‘to dwell’ or ‘to reside.’ The rabbis drew on this root to form the noun *Shekhinah*, denoting the indwelling, abiding presence of God in the world. The earliest rabbinic text that explicitly identifies the *Mishkani* of Leviticus 26:11 with the *Shekhinah* is the *Zohar*, *Vayikra* 26:11: מִשְׁכָּנִי — דָּא שְׁכִינְתָּא (*Mishkani*—this is the *Shekhinah*).

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