

GLORY OF GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT – INTRODUCTORY REFLECTIONS

In this thematic issue on ‘The Glory of God in the Old Testament,’ we aim to achieve three main goals: to highlight the theological importance of ‘*kavod Yahwe*,’ to offer a concise overview of key scriptural appearances of divine glory in Old Testament theophanies, and to underline the concept’s openness to patristic interpretation and Eastern Orthodox iconography. We believe that God’s glory is more than a mere religious term; it is a vital theological category that illustrates the human encounter with God’s transcendent presence, evolving from ideas of ‘weight’ and societal significance to the mystical experience of uncreated light.

The Semitic root *kvd*, which leads to the noun *kavod*, functions on two related but distinct levels of meaning: a ‘material’ or social aspect—such as weight, wealth, and prestige—and a ‘spiritual’ aspect—honour, respect, and glory. In scripture, *kavod* mainly signifies divine glory, and its frequent appearance in important texts indicates a rich semantic range that requires interpretation based on context. Glory can be seen as an ontological ‘weight,’ representing absolute significance, but also as a personal experience when encountering the divine—such as holy fear, worship, and humility.

This dual aspect clarifies why *kavod* in the Old Testament is linked to a broad range of elements: royal throne and crown, cloud and fire, temple and sacred objects, as well as terms within a connected semantic network — *oz* (‘power’), *ošer* (‘wealth’), *panim* (‘face’), *or* (‘light’), *ieša* (‘salvation’), *anavah* (‘humility’), *tehila* (‘praise, prayer’). Therefore, glory represents not just an external sign of divine sovereignty but also a force that saves, enlightens, and transforms human lives through communion.

In the narratives that record the pilgrimage through the Sinai desert, God’s glory is often shown through natural signs such as clouds of smoke, pillars of fire, thunder, and earthquakes. These images also symbolize guidance, like the cloud leading through the



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wilderness, and judgment, exemplified by the consuming fire that punishes rebellions. The Sinai theophany serves as the model, where light, sound, smoke, and earthquakes inspire holy fear and encourage a renewed relationship between God and His people. Both the exodic texts and patristic interpretations highlight that, although this glory is perceived through sensory images, it points to a radiant light beyond ordinary perception—a ‘uncreated light’ that is longed for but remains largely inaccessible to the human eye.

The glory dwelling in the sacred space — the Tent and the Temple — signifies the shift from a nomadic presence to God’s permanent residence among His people. The cloud filling the Tent and the Temple, the divine fire consuming sacrifices, and the radiance seen on Moses’ face all confirm that glory embodies Yahweh’s actual presence in these cultic locations. It’s also important to distinguish between ‘shekhinah’ and ‘kavod’: *shekhinah*, meaning ‘dwelling,’ emphasizes the closeness and warmth of the divine presence, while *kavod* highlights its overwhelming, luminous, and transfiguring aspect.

In Psalms, glory often relates to life, salvation, and divine abundance. The royal Psalms, using the links ‘kavod – ošer – ieša,’ demonstrate that God’s glory isn’t just about power but is also life-giving, providing deliverance and blessings. This aspect of salvation practically ties worship, prayer, and holy praise to acknowledging the divine presence that transforms human history.

Prophets reveal echoes and nuanced theological insights. Isaiah’s first vision (chapter 6) depicts the temple’s glory as radiant light shrouded in smoke, symbolizing a presence that also signifies judgment. The seraphim’s cry ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’ highlights the sacredness and intensity of the light, requiring purification of the gaze. St. John Chrysostom and other Church Fathers interpret this radiance as ‘unspeakable light,’ an uncreated light that draws and moves the soul. Ezekiel (chapter 1) offers intricate images: cherubim, wheels, fire, flaming metal, and the rainbow—together constituting a synesthetic revelation of glory, where light, sound, and movement of divine presence merge. Like Isaiah, Ezekiel perceives God’s luminous presence as overwhelming; although he is receptive to sight, he cannot fully gaze upon the divine face. Yet, the distinction between viewing glory head-on or from behind—receiving the light gradually, as Moses did, or being overwhelmed by it—is vital for understanding Old Testament revelation.

The tradition of the Eastern Fathers associates glory with the uncreated light, viewing prophetic visions as encounters with a divine theandric reality that illuminates

and transforms. Moses, as a bearer of light; the seventy prophets filled with the Spirit; and the liturgies and mysteries reflecting openness to grace—all show how glory is transmitted without being diminished, supporting a theology of participation: divine glory is not consumed through communication but overflows and enriches heavenly life. This view also connects to iconography: icons serve as windows of glory, places where one encounters the uncreated light, with saints depicted as emanations of light for worshippers. The icon as a ‘pure perspective’ of glory links theology, aesthetics, and liturgical practice. As bearers of grace, icons guide viewers towards participation; contemplating them models spiritual pedagogy, enabling individuals to become ‘bearers of light’. Artists like Andrei Rublev demonstrate this experience, where the painter, before an icon, allows himself to be illuminated, making liturgical creation a spreading of glory.

Glory of God, rooted in Old Testament texts and Eastern Orthodox exegetical tradition, remains a profoundly luminous theological concept: a divine manifestation that enlightens, saves, judges, and invites communion. It appears in various forms—such as clouds, fire, intense light, facial radiance, and temple presence—and is consistently linked with the Holy Spirit. Patristic interpretation confirms the significance of these theophanies, emphasizing their soteriological importance: glory is not merely an aesthetic display but a conduit for communion and transformation.

Contemporary Old Testament theology sees the theme of glory as opening rich avenues: deepening the link between *kavod* and the Holy Spirit, examining the cultic roles of glory manifestations, engaging in dialogue between historical-critical exegesis and patristic hermeneutics, and fostering interdisciplinary conversations with iconography and liturgical spirituality. Furthermore, expanding research into psalms and psalmody is important, as God’s glory often emerges in salvific and liturgical settings.

This thematic issue aims to gather contributions that advance the ongoing exploration—from analysing the semantic meaning of *kavod* in a Semitic setting, to interpreting Sinai, psalmic, and prophetic texts, as well as studies emphasizing the links between the biblical worldview and the Church’s iconographic tradition. In today’s world, where crises of meaning and presence are common, it is vital to remember that God still reveals Himself as Light—a light that transforms rather than destroys, judges but also saves—calling us to humble participation and worship. Let us explore together the mystery of God’s glory in the Old Testament: not to fully cover the topic, but to open

our eyes and hearts to the light that inspired the prophets, entered the tent and temple, and, through grace, continues to illuminate the Church and its icons.

The studies in this volume primarily originate from an international biblical conference focused on the Glory of God and its theological implications in the Old and New Testaments. The conference took place in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, from November 24 to 27, 2025, as part of the ROOTS project. It was organized by Rev. Ioan Chirilă, a professor of Old Testament at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, 'Babeş-Bolyai' University of Cluj-Napoca.