

“In some passages *shēm Yahweh* is so inextricably bound up with the being of God, that it functions almost like an appearance of Yahweh (Exo 23:20-21; Isa 30:27). Cf. the tabernacling of the Name at various spots almost like a Christophany (Exo 20:24; Deut 12:5; 2Sam 7:13, etc.).”⁶⁹

In the dialogue of Exodus 23:22, where it is clear that God proper is speaking, it is recorded, *ki im-shamo'a tish'ma b'qolo v'asi'ta kol asher adabbeir* (כִּי אִם-שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמָע בְּקוֹלוֹ וְעָשִׂיתָ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר אֲדַבֵּר), “now if to-listen you-listen to-voice-of-him and-you-do all that I-say” (Kohlenberger).⁷⁰ The dialogue has God speaking in the first person, on behalf of this *malakh* or messenger/angel: “but if you obey him and do all that I say, I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes” (Exodus 23:22, NJPS). If this *malakh* or messenger/angel were only a standard, supernatural intermediary, then God speaking in the third person for this figure would instead have been expected, something like: “But if you truly obey his voice and do all that *he* says, then *he* will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries” (Exodus 23:22, modified NASU).

It should not be surprising, for further evaluation of the origins and identity of Yeshua the Messiah, for scenes such as Exodus 23:20-25 to be considered, as the *malakh* or messenger/angel is an entity sent by God proper, but then represents God proper in the first person “I,” when exclusive references in the third person would be more natural to expect. A commentator like Peter Enns is reserved in his conclusion, “Regardless of the mystery surrounding his precise identity and despite the fact that he is not frequently mentioned in Exodus, he is no doubt a central figure in Israel’s redemption. And when we keep in mind the virtual equation of the angel and Yahweh, it follows that the angel’s presence is an indication of God’s presence with his people from beginning to end.”⁷¹ Far be it from the identity of Yeshua the Messiah to be considered from either Ancient Near Eastern or classical mythology—as a god or goddess comes down from the sky to perform some task—Tanach accounts of the *malakh* or messenger/angel authorized from God, and virtually indistinguishable from God Himself, need to be considered for evaluating activities of Yeshua in the first person “I” as God.

EXODUS 24:9-11

“Then Moses went up with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of sapphire, as clear as the sky itself. Yet He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel; and they saw God, and they ate and drank.”

When evaluating the nature of Yeshua the Messiah in the Apostolic Writings or New Testament, questions are undeniably posed from various theophanies in the Tanach or Old Testament. What might various appearances, in some state or another, of God to people, communicate to us about approaching the Incarnation of Yeshua of Nazareth?

Early in the wilderness sojourn of Ancient Israel, the leadership and elders had a unique encounter with God. The Hebrew is straightforward enough: *v'yir'u et Elohei Yisrael* (וַיִּירְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), “and they saw the God of Israel” (Exodus 24:10, NJPS). Later in Exodus 33:20, the Lord will tell Moses, “You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!” Many have viewed Exodus 24:10 to stand in direct contradiction to this, with liberal source critics perhaps suggesting at times that Exodus 24:10 is the product of one Pentateuchal source and Exodus 33:20 is the product of another source. Another option would be that mortals being incapable of “seeing”

⁶⁹ Walter C. Kaiser, “**וַיִּירְאוּ**,” in TWOT, 2:934.

⁷⁰ Kohlenberger, 1:210.

⁷¹ Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp 473-474.

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God is a general observation for most people, although a select few actually do get to see God. Yet another, and we should think most viable option, is that “seeing” God most frequently involves seeing God in all of His majesty and glory—although there are certainly times when people can “see God,” but in a much more limited way.

That some Jewish interpreters of Exodus 24:9-11 have had difficulty with this passage is clear from the paraphrase present in the Targum Onkelos on Exodus 24:11, which states, “Yet the princes of the sons of Israel were not hurt; and they saw the Glory of the Lord, and rejoiced in their sacrifices which were accepted with favour, as though they had eaten and drunk.”⁷² Contrary to the value judgment of this Targum that the leaders experienced some sort of vision or trance, Exodus 24:11 actually says that the leaders of Israel saw God, and they ate and they drank: *v'yechezu et-ha'Elohim v'yo'kelu v'yishtu* (וַיַּחֲזוּ אֶת-הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ), “they gazed at God, yet they ate and drank” (ATS). Durham is forced to observe,

“Despite attempts by ancient translators and modern commentators to qualify this blunt statement and make it more consistent with the bulk of OT tradition, it must be taken seriously as it stands. ראה [*ra'ah*] primarily means see with one’s eyes, and the account goes on to describe, at least in part, what the group saw and to state that (somewhat surprisingly?) no harm came to them.”⁷³

Some have noticed a difference between the verbs *ra'ah* (רָאָה), used in Exodus 24:10, and *chazah* (חָזָה), used in Exodus 24:11, and have concluded that the latter could be some kind of a visionary experience. However, that it is stated the leaders of Israel “beheld God, and they ate and drank” (Exodus 24:11, NJPS), a rather normative activity—rather than the leaders of Israel praising Him or being awestruck by His glory—is a strong indication that no visionary experience or trance was at all what took place.

Textually speaking, readers are told what it meant for the leaders of Ancient Israel, here, to have seen God: *v'tachat rag'layv k'ma'aseih liv'nat ha'sapir* (וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כַּמַּעֲשֵׂה לְבִנְת הַסַּפִּיר), “and there was under his feet a kind of paved work of sapphire stone” (Exodus 24:10, Jerusalem Bible-Koren). Notwithstanding the fact that human language is incapable of fully describing the Eternal God, and with a concession that some level of metaphor might be employed, it is stated “and [they] saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of lapis lazuli, as bright blue as the sky” (Exodus 24:10, TNIV). R. Alan Cole indicates, “In this verse it is...stressed that the elders did not dare raise their eyes above His footstool.”⁷⁴ Enns also concurs, “The leaders do not actually see God in any full sense. In this case, [‘seeing’] the God of Israel’ probably means that they see him in part. Such an understanding removes the notion of contradiction between this passage and 33:20, the latter having to do with seeing God’s glory.”⁷⁵

For later discussions on the nature of the Messiah, those who hold to a low Christology may claim that Yeshua cannot be God, on the basis of it being impossible for mortals to encounter God and live (cf. Exodus 33:20). So, perhaps Yeshua is just a supernatural intermediary of some kind. If, however, it can be recognized from the Tanach that there are various levels or experiences of people legitimately “seeing God”—such as the leadership of Ancient Israel seeing God, but likely only at a level of encountering His footstool—then Yeshua the Messiah being God incarnated as a human being, is hardly something impossible. While people encountering Yeshua the Messiah in the Gospel narratives would indeed be encountering God in human form, that they were not

⁷² BibleWorks 9.0: OKE Targum Onkelos on the Pentateuch. MS Windows 7 Release. Norfolk: BibleWorks, LLC, 2011. DVD-ROM.

⁷³ Durham, 344.

⁷⁴ R. Alan Cole, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 186.

⁷⁵ Enns, 491.

encountering God in all of His glory and majesty (cf. John 17:5)—similar to the leadership of Ancient Israel only seeing God up to His footstool—needs to be recognized.

EXODUS 32:34-33:6

“But go now, lead the people where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you; nevertheless in the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin.’ Then the LORD smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, ‘Depart, go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, “To your descendants I will give it.” I will send an angel before you and I will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way.’ When the people heard this sad word, they went into mourning, and none of them put on his ornaments. For the LORD had said to Moses, ‘Say to the sons of Israel, “You are an obstinate people; should I go up in your midst for one moment, I would destroy you. Now therefore, put off your ornaments from you, that I may know what I shall do with you.”’ So the sons of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.”

Exodus 32:34-33:6 narrates some of the immediate aftermath of the incident with the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-33), and the continued charge of the Lord for Moses to follow Him and lead the people, as He will be the One who will blot sinners out of His book (Exodus 32:32-33). Moses is informed *hinneih malakhi yeileikh l’fnekha* (הִנֵּנִי מַלְאָכִי יֵלֵךְ לְפָנַי), “Look, My messenger shall go before you” (Exodus 32:34a, Alter), an affirmation that there will be supernatural protection as they prepare to enter into the Promised Land. Following this is the assertion, “But when I make an accounting, I will bring them to account for their sins” (Exodus 32:34b, NJPS). Based on what Exodus 32:34 says exclusively, one could assume that the *malakh* or messenger/angel in view, is just a supernatural agent of God, a created being, intended to guard Ancient Israel during their wilderness sojourn and activities.

Further on, however, the Lord directs Moses to lead the people into the Promised Land (Exodus 33:1-3), and He says, *v’shalachti l’fnekha malakh* (וְשָׁלַחְתִּי לְפָנַי מַלְאָךְ), “And I shall send a messenger before you” (Exodus 33:2a, Alter). If this *malakh* or messenger/angel, were just a normal supernatural intermediary, then the immediate actions which follow would normally be expected to be detailed in the third person: “and he will drive out the Canaanite, the Amorite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite” (Exodus 33:2b, NASU modified). Instead, we see God proper speaking in the first person: “and I will drive out the Keana’ani, the Emori, and the Hivvi, and the Yevusi: into a land flowing with milk and honey” (Exodus 33:2b, Jerusalem Bible-Koren). Recognizing how this figure, a messenger/angel, will go before Israel to defeat Israel’s enemies—but God proper is detailing how He will be the One who defeats Israel’s enemies—at the very least serves as an indication of how Bible readers need to pay attention to the identity and descriptions of this elusive entity when encountered.

While the activity of the messenger/angel is described in terms of God proper, in the first person “I,” driving out the enemies of Israel (Exodus 32:2), God in the first person “I” also says how “I will not go up in your midst” (Exodus 33:3). How is this to be approached? While God will obviously be present with His people throughout the wilderness sojourn, that a closer interaction between God and His people will not be present, because of their sin, is to be deduced: “for I will not go up in your midst”⁷⁶, because you are an obstinate people, and I might

⁷⁶ Heb. *ki lo e’eleh b’qirbekha* (כִּי לֹא אֲעֹלָה בְּקִרְבְּכֶם); “because I shall not ascend among you” (ATS).