

Exodus 24:9-11

“The Leaders of Israel See God”

“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* (אלהי ישראל), “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” 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* (ויחזו אתהאלהים ויאכלו וישתו), “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* (ראה), used in Exodus 24:10, and *chazah* (חזה), 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* (ותחת רגליו כמנעשה לבנת הספיר), “and there was under his feet a kind of paved work of sapphire stone” (Exodus 24:10, Jerusalem Bible-

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

⁷³ Durham, 344.

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 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

“The Angel Will Go Out Before Israel”

“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* (הִנֵּה מַלְאָכִי יֵלֵךְ לְפָנֶיךָ), “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.

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

⁷⁵ Enns, 491.