

# WE HAVE SEEN HIS GLORY

By EDWARD MALATESTA

THE RELIGIOUS person spontaneously desires to *see* God. In our human relationships, the sight of those we love brings us joy when they are well and happy, and saddens us when we see them in pain. It is easier for us to speak face to face with our dear ones than to communicate with them by letter or telephone. Enfleshed spirits that we are, so much of our knowledge of others comes from what we *see* of them, and they know us largely by what they *see* of us. Yet we realize that knowing cannot be equated only with seeing. Even those handicapped by blindness come to know other persons and to know them profoundly. And those of us who enjoy bodily sight know more by our thoughts and our feelings than by our eyes alone, even though the eyes together with our other bodily senses are privileged gateways to contact with others.

Since God in his essence is a purely spiritual and infinite Being, our knowledge of him is necessarily different from what we have of anyone else. Although much of what we know about him enters through our senses, in thinking about him and in communing with him we attempt to transcend the limitations of the images with which we naturally tend to conceive of him. Although aware of this, we are forced to use concerning him a language that we know, a language based upon and conditioned by sensible experience. That is why we can speak of a desire to *see* him. We long to have of him an experience similar to what we have of those we love: we want to *see* his countenance, to *look* into his eyes, to *see* him and to *see* that we are *seen* by him.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In the actual economy of salvation, since God has created all men in Christ and destined them for the vision of his glory, every man, in desiring happiness, really desires the vision of God. Thomas Aquinas has given us the classic treatment of this 'natural desire to see God' in Book 3 of his *Summa contra Gentiles*. For the best contemporary treatment of this entire question, see H. de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (London and New York, 1967); and K. Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace' in *Theological Investigations I* (London, 1961), pp 297-318. See also H. de Lubac, *Sur-naturel: Etudes historiques* (Paris, 1946).

It is this desire to see God that has given rise to the biblical language about 'seeing God'. This language expresses various aspects of communion with him. 'To seek the face of Yahweh' originally meant to consult him in his sanctuary, just as one would seek an audience with a king, in order to learn his will and do it.<sup>2</sup> Later the expression took on the wider meaning of the quest to know God intimately, to live in his presence. Such seeking is the will of God himself, who wishes to draw his people into communion with him and faithful service of him: 'You have said, Seek my face. My heart says to you, Your face, Lord, do I seek. Hide not your face from me'.<sup>3</sup>

The primary meaning of the phrase 'to see God's face' is to have a vision of him.<sup>4</sup> Later, 'to see God's face' means to visit his sanctuary, the temple in Jerusalem: 'My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?' The words also mean communion with God in faith and love: '... I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding your form'.<sup>5</sup>

This brief view of some of the Old Testament expressions which verbalize man's desire to see God shows us that there was a progressive spiritualization in Israel's understanding of seeing God. A similar progression will be evident as we consider some of the major Old Testament theophanies, whose rich symbolism reappears in the christian mystical tradition.

### *Divine Pedagogy in the Old Testament*

A 'theophany' is an appearance or transient manifestation of God to man.<sup>6</sup> The literary forms in which theophanies are expressed usually contain the following characteristics: a divine initiative; various revelatory formulae; an encounter and subsequent relationship between God and the human party; an account of the purpose of the theophany; the reverential awe of the human party.<sup>7</sup> The literary form gives expression to an unusually vivid experience of God's presence and of contact with him which may or may not have included all the visual symbols employed by the author.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Sam 21, 1; cf 1 Kg 10, 24; 1 Chr 16, 10-11 (= Ps 105, 3-4).

<sup>3</sup> Ps 27, 8; cf Ps 24, 6; Hos 3, 5; 5, 6, 15; Isai 38, 11; Job 33, 26; Zeph 1, 6. Some of these texts have liturgical overtones. See also Wis 1, 1: '... seek him with sincerity of heart'; and 2 Chr 15, 2; Prov 8, 17; Wis 1, 1. Deut 4, 29-30; Pss 40, 16; 69, 6; 105, 3.

<sup>4</sup> Exod 23, 20.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 42, 2; 17, 15.

<sup>6</sup> From the Greek *theophania*, formed from the words for 'God' (*theos*) and 'appear' (*phaino*).

<sup>7</sup> See the article 'Theophany', in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*.

What the modern reader finds most instructive in the major Old Testament theophanies are the following elements: the artful expression given to God's transcendence as well as to his immanence, God's love for his chosen ones and his design in their regard, the reverence with which they receive God's revelation of himself. But most of all, we learn from the ever-deepening awareness of the israelite hagiographers and their christian counterparts where in this world the glory of God is to be sought and contemplated.<sup>8</sup>

God first appears to Moses in the burning bush and calls him by name. Moses' first reaction is to cover his face, for he is afraid to look at God.<sup>9</sup> But then he converses with God, expressing his sense of powerlessness and asking him questions even to the point of irritating him.

In the context of the Sinai Covenant occur three of the most impressive theophanies of the Old Testament. Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders are invited by Yahweh to come up the mountain with Moses to the Lord.<sup>10</sup> And yet only Moses is invited to come closer to God.<sup>11</sup> He alone goes into the glory of Yahweh, and into the cloud that settles on Sinai; he ascends higher on the mountain and stays there for forty days and forty nights.<sup>12</sup>

The conflated text of Exodus (19, 16-25) emphasizes the signs of God's presence by the thunder and lightning, the thick cloud, the smoke and fire, the earthquake. In this awesome context only Moses is called by God to the top of the mountain. The mediator's role is to approach God whenever he calls, for the good of the community. It is only after prolonged contact with the Lord that he can effectively communicate his will to the people.

The glory, a bright light, manifests God's presence and symbolizes his unapproachable majesty.<sup>13</sup> In the most striking theophany

<sup>8</sup> The 'storm' theophanies are confessions of God's creative and redemptive power as symbolized by and revealed in some of the most impressive phenomena of nature: cf Pss 18, 7-15; 29, 3-10; Job 26; 27; 37; 5; 38, 1. Aspects of these phenomena occur in other contexts to describe various works of God; e.g. the exodus (Pss 68, 7-8a; 77, 16-20); God's coming to judge (Ps 50, 2; Nah 1, 3b. 5, 6); the revelation given on Sinai (Exod 19, 16, 19; Ps 68, 8b); the reign of God (Ps 97, 2-5); Ezekiel's vision (Ezek 1, 4); God's victorious march to save his people (Hab 2, 3-15).

<sup>9</sup> Exod 2, 6b; cp Jos 5, 13-15. Similarly Elijah (1 Kg 19, 13) and the seraphim (Isai 6, 2) cover their faces in God's presence. Jacob is grateful for having survived after seeing God face to face (Gen 32, 31), as are the israelites after hearing his voice (Deut 5, 24), 'out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire' (5, 22); cf also Jg 6, 22-23; 13, 22; Isai 6, 5. Man will die if he looks upon God (Exod 19, 21; 33, 20; Num 4, 20; Lev 16, 2).

<sup>10</sup> Exod 24, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Exod 24, 2. 12. 16.

<sup>12</sup> Exod 24, 15-18.

<sup>13</sup> See *The Jerusalem Bible*, note on Exod 24, 16.

passage of the Old Testament, Moses asks God to show him his glory. God promises to answer his prayer, but the revelation can be only a partial one. All God's goodness will pass before Moses, but he will not be able to *see* it, for God's hand will cover him until he has passed by. God's promise to be gracious and show mercy teaches us that it is especially by his compassion that he reveals himself to us. Moses will *hear* God pronounce his own name, 'the Lord', the name of him who is gracious and merciful.

In the text of Exodus as we now have it, between God's promise to reveal himself to Moses and the actual theophany, there figures an insertion regarding the Covenant, which manifests the final redactor's intention to relate the second giving of the tables of the Law and the theophany, just as the tables were given the first time in the context of a theophany.<sup>14</sup> Again, the mediator of God's Law is a contemplative, favoured with a privileged communion with God.

Moses said,

'I pray you, *show me* your glory'.

And the Lord said,

'I will make all my goodness pass before you, and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.

But you *cannot see* my face;

for man shall *not see* me and live'.

And the Lord said,

'Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock; and while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock; and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall *see* my back; but my face shall *not be seen*'.

And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed,

'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.'

And Moses made haste to bow his head towards the earth, and worshipped. And he said,

'If now I have found favour in your sight, O Lord, let the Lord, I pray you, go in the midst of us, although it is a stiff-necked people;

<sup>14</sup> Exod 24, 12-18; see 34, 27-28.

and pardon our iniquity and our sin,  
and take us for your inheritance'.  
And he said,  
'Behold, I make a Covenant.  
Before all your people I will do marvels,  
such as have not been wrought in all the earth or in any nation. . .'<sup>15</sup>

In his *Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa comments on this theophany with insights that are among the finest in patristic literature. Reflecting upon the 'place' which God provides for Moses 'upon the rock', Gregory says:

When God speaks of a place, he does not mean a space that can be quantitatively measured – for we cannot measure anything that does not have quantity – but rather by using the analogy of a measurable surface, he is guiding the reader to a reality which is infinite and without limit. . . Seeing that you have stretched forth to that which is before you with a great desire and you never experience complete satisfaction in your progress, nor are you aware of any limit to the good, as your yearning goes out to ever more and more – here is a place with me that is so vast that he who runs in it will never be able to reach the end of his course. And yet, from another point of view, this course has its stability; for God says: 'I will set you on the rock' (Exod 34, 22).

But here we have a very great paradox: motion and stability are the same. . . This means that a man advances farther on the path of perfection precisely insofar as he remains fixed and immovable in good. . . His very stability becomes as a wing in his flight towards heaven; his heart becomes winged because of his stability in good.<sup>16</sup>

In this comment Gregory develops his notion of *epektasis*, the constant striving for further perfection, for a deeper union with God, which echoes Paul's declaration: 'Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus'.<sup>17</sup>

That Moses could only see the back of God suggests to Gregory these thoughts about following Christ:

Indeed, the only-begotten, by whom all things were made, is himself the place for those who run; he is, according to his own words, the very way of the course, as well as the rock for those who are well

<sup>15</sup> Exod 33, 18–23; 34, 5–10

<sup>16</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, in *From Glory to Glory*, tr. and ed. by Herbert Musurillo (New York, 1961), pp 148–150.

<sup>17</sup> Phil 3, 13–14. Cf Gregory of Nyssa, pp 142–8.

grounded, and the mansion for those who take their rest. At this point the soul will hear his call and will take its place behind him; it will follow the Lord God according to the precepts of the law (Deut 13, 4).<sup>18</sup> Moses sought to see God, and this is the instruction he receives on how he is to see him: seeing God means following him wherever he might lead.<sup>19</sup> . . . he who wishes to see God, will see his beloved only by constantly following after him, and *the contemplation of his face is really the unending journey towards him, accomplished by following directly behind the Word.*<sup>20</sup>

The great prophet Elijah, zealous for God and desirous that Israel return to the Covenant which she had deserted, makes a pilgrimage to Sinai where God had revealed himself to Moses, and where the Covenant had been concluded with Israel.<sup>21</sup> As Moses had been hidden in the cleft of the rock, so Elijah spent the night in the same place. Moses had been told to come up to God on the mountain. The Word of the Lord tells Elijah: 'Go out and stand upon the mountain before the Lord'.<sup>22</sup> However, the form of the theophany differs from those of Sinai. The description of the experience explicitly excludes the violent visible manifestations of God, and employs rather the symbol of a gentle breeze as more appropriate for designating intimate communion with the invisible Lord.

And behold, the Lord<sup>l</sup> passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks<sup>l</sup> before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And when Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.<sup>23</sup>

### *Divine Pedagogy in the New Testament*

With the Incarnation of the Son of God, a new and definitive phase begins in God's revelation of himself to men and in their ability to *see* him. 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'.<sup>24</sup> Because Moses was mediator of the law, his face shone brightly when he descended the moun-

<sup>18</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *op. cit.*, p 150.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p 151. See Jn 12, 26.

<sup>20</sup> See

Gregory of Nyssa, *Vie de Moïse* (ed. J. Daniélou, *Sources chrétiennes*, I, 1968), pp 102-114.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Kg 19, 10.14 etc; Exod 33, 18 - 34, 9; Exod 19; 24; 34.

<sup>22</sup> Exod 33, 22. 1 Kg 19, 9. Exod 31, 1. 1 Kg 19, 11.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Kg 19, 11-13. For the role of Elijah in christian spirituality, see the article in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol 4, 564-572.

<sup>24</sup> Jn 1, 17.

tain.<sup>26</sup> Paul concludes that, if this was so, 'will not the dispensation of the Spirit be attended with greater splendour?'<sup>26</sup> The revelation and realization of the New Covenant, which is permanent, introduces us into the splendour which is Christ, who, because he is the fulfilment of the Old Testament, contains in himself its full meaning. For 'we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to the other . . .' 'For it is the God who said, Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ'.<sup>27</sup> Yes, because 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father'.<sup>28</sup> Jesus is the *Shekinah* of the New Covenant, the presence of the glory of God in our midst forever.<sup>29</sup>

To contemplate Jesus is to contemplate life; to *see* him is to *see* the Father.<sup>30</sup> The presence of Jesus during his life upon this earth was indeed a continual theophany, surpassing all the manifestations of God in the Old Testament. But this fact was only fully understood after the resurrection. Only then could they come to understand what Jesus had tried to teach them many times and in countless ways, especially by his own example: God chose to reveal himself in lowliness. Indeed the culminating point of the revelation of Jesus's glory during his stay on earth consisted precisely in his greatest humiliation: his passion and death. John insists more than any other evangelist that the mutual glorification of the Father and the Son takes place then.<sup>31</sup> He witnesses emphatically to what he has *seen* while standing at the foot of the cross, *looking* on the one who was pierced: the Father's love has been revealed by the gift of his only Son.<sup>32</sup>

To the Greeks who want to *see* Jesus before his passion, a mysterious answer is given.<sup>33</sup> Jesus teaches us that the only way to *see* him is to die to oneself, by hating one's life in this world and then to serve him by following him. In that way the servant will be where his Lord is.

But the visible presence of the Incarnate Word in our midst was

<sup>25</sup> Exod 34, 29-35.

<sup>26</sup> 2 Cor 3, 8.

<sup>27</sup> 2 Cor 3, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Jn 1, 14.

<sup>29</sup> See L. Bouyer, 'Le Schékinah, Dieu avec nous', in *Bible et vie Chrétienne* 20 (1957-1958), pp 8-22; and A. M. Ramsey, *The Glory of God and the Transfiguration of Christ* (London, 1949).

<sup>30</sup> 1 Jn 1-4; Jn 1, 4; Jn 14, 9; 12, 45.

<sup>31</sup> Jn 17, 1-5; 12, 27-33.

<sup>32</sup> Jn 19, 31-37; 1 Jn 4, 9-10. 14. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Jn 12, 20-26.

meant to be transitory. The day would come when his followers would see him no longer on this earth.<sup>34</sup> The resurrection appearances themselves were intended only for relatively few. 'The disciples were glad when they saw the Lord';<sup>35</sup> but soon the visions of the risen Lord would become memories of a favour not to be repeated. The Lord's final word to Thomas was to become normative of the christian life in this world: 'Blessed are those who have *not seen* and yet believe'.<sup>36</sup>

However, although the risen Jesus cannot be seen with the eyes of our bodies, we know that he is present to us, that he remains in us and we in him, and that we are also united in communion with the Father and the holy Spirit. But must we conclude that the time for theophanies is over; that, in these last times, the christian economy of the New Covenant, God no longer reveals himself in a visible way? It would seem that a meditation on the pedagogy used by the Lord in the biblical theophanies results in our discovering a new and permanent theophany: *the presence of God in our brothers with whom Jesus particularly identifies himself.*

The surprise of both the just and the unjust at the coming of Jesus in his glory will consist precisely in the discovery that to have seen the needy of this world was to have seen Jesus:

Lord, when did we *see* you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?

And when did we *see* you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we *see* you sick or in prison and visit you?

Truly I say to you, *as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me . . .*<sup>37</sup>

The verse of John's first letter most apt for our times suggests the link between *seeing* and having compassion: 'But if someone has the wealth of this world and *sees* his brother in need and *closes his heart* against him, how can the love of God remain in him?'<sup>38</sup>

It is in loving our brothers, in reaching out to them in their need, that we come to know God, for he is the love which reaches out to us in our need. 'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love, does not know God, because God is love'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Jn 16, 4-10.

<sup>35</sup> Jn 20, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Jn 20, 29. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Les absences de Jésus', in *Axes* (June-July 1971), pp 38-46.

<sup>37</sup> Mt 25, 31-46.

<sup>38</sup> 1 Jn 3, 17.

<sup>39</sup> 1 Jn 4, 7-8.



It is fraternal love which places us in communion with the God we cannot see: 'No one has ever beheld God; if we love one another, God remains in us and his love has been brought to perfection in us'.<sup>40</sup>

With remarkable insight Augustine explains how we meet God in loving our brothers, and in what sense we *see* God when we love them:

Why then do we set out for and run to the heights of the heavens and to the depths of the earth in search of him who is within us, if we wish to be with him? Let no one say: 'I do not know what I should love'. Let him love his brother and he will love the same love. For he knows the love by which he loves more than the brother whom he loves. And so, God can now become more known to him than his brother, actually more known because more present, more known because more within him, more known because more certain. Embrace love, God, and embrace God by love.

But one may object: I *see* love and I conceive it in my mind as best I can, and I believe the scripture when it says: 'God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God' (1 Jn 4, 16); but when I *see* it I do *not see* the Trinity in it. But as a matter of fact you do *see* the Trinity if you *see* love . . .

When we love our brother from love, we love our brother from God; nor can it happen that we do not love above all else that same love by which we love our brother. From this we conclude that these two commandments cannot be without one another.<sup>41</sup>

I shall be forever grateful to the Lord for the opportunity to write these lines in India, at the end of a long summer of varied ministries. Since I left Rome in mid-June, I have travelled to many places and met many persons. My work took me to Lyons and Paris, to San Francisco, Seattle and Spokane; to Tokyo and Kyoto, Taipei and Hsinchu, Chang-hua and Hong Kong. Finally I came to India. Whilst in Calcutta I wanted most of all to meet the missionaries of charity, founded by Mother Teresa. I was able to spend some time at her hospital for dying destitutes. During the few hours that I was privileged to assist the brother novices in the men's ward, I realized as never before how Jesus is indeed identified with the poorest of the poor, and that, if we do not seek his face in theirs, we shall never really know him as he is.

There are surely many contemporary followers of Christ who

<sup>40</sup> 1 Jn 4, 12.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book 8, chaps. 7-8, (*Fathers of the Church*, 45, pp 262-265).

serve their brothers in countless ways with no less love and devotion, and all of them edify the Church and all persons of good will. Yet the missionaries of charity who choose to work among the poorest of the poor, in very difficult and depressing conditions, have a particular message for us. They remind us all that Christ is especially present in the least of his brothers, and that in them we can truly *see* him.

The dying poor in Kalighat have no other possession than the poor rags with which they are clothed . . . and some did not even have those when they were found. They have little health and strength of body; often even that is visibly ebbing away. They have no family to care for them, no friends to visit them. The Lord Jesus chose to identify himself with these the least of his and our brothers. What is the meaning of this choice of his love? The poorest of the poor symbolize for us what in God's sight we all are, no matter how many material possessions we may have: poor and needy in the spiritual dispositions of the heart. Further, by their sufferings they proclaim to us what Jesus, the eternal word of the Father, became for us when he gave himself to perfect obedience, even to the death of the cross.

The visitor to India cannot but be overwhelmed by the mystery of this country. Material poverty joined to spiritual riches, the humiliations of the poor joined to an unusual awareness of their human dignity, point to the values that really count in the eyes of God, and which should be the goal of every human heart, since they are our only true and lasting possessions: humility, adoration and love. The Indian soul has an affinity for eternal values, as the writings of Gandhi testify; but I should like to end these brief reflections with the inspired words of Tagore, who truly understood the mystery of the presence of God in the least of our brethren:

Here is thy footstool  
and there rest thy feet  
where live the poorest,  
and lowliest, and lost.  
When I try to bow to thee,  
my obeisance cannot reach  
down to the depth  
where thy feet rest  
among the poorest  
and lowliest, and lost.

Pride can never approach  
to where thou walkest  
in the clothes of the humble  
among the poorest,  
and lowliest, and lost.  
My heart can never find its way  
to where thou keepest company  
with the companionless  
among the poorest,  
the lowliest, and the lost.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* 10 (London, 1961), p 8.