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The Revelation of God's Glory as a Source of Hope

In the Old Testament, there are a number of passages of Scripture where the revelation of God's glory to his people becomes part of the message of salvation, restoration and hope. In these texts, the appearance of the divine glory is a visible sign that the LORD is present among his people. Although the spectacular manifestations of the divine glory (sometimes seen as a bright fiery cloud or as a brilliant light) also create a sense of dread, awe and fear, and at times appear in a context of warning the people of God's displeasure and impending judgment (Num 14, 16, 20, Ezek 8–11), there are several occasions where God's glory becomes a source of encouragement, comfort and hope. This hope is rooted in the reality that God is present with his people and that he has not abandoned them.

Glory in the Old Testament

The glory of the LORD first appears in the Exodus narratives, as the divine glory accompanies the Israelites when they are rescued from slavery in Egypt and brought into a covenant relationship as God's chosen people. Throughout their forty years of journeying in the wilderness the Israelites enjoy the constant presence of Yahweh as he accompanies them with the bright fiery cloud, which appears as a pillar of cloud in the day and as a pillar of fire in the night (Exod 13:21-22; 40:36-38; Num 9:15-23), and when he encamps in their midst, taking up residence in the tabernacle. This divine temporary tent dwelling is filled with God's glory. Here Yahweh sits enthroned upon the cherubim in the holy of holies in the tabernacle. The people know that he is present in the tabernacle by the physical sign of the divine glory present and filling the tabernacle (Exod 40:34-35; Lev 9:22-24).

When the Israelites settle in the Promised Land and the temple is built, the divine glory fills the temple at its inauguration. This act of consecration again becomes a visible sign that Yahweh is present and reigns as king in their midst in Jerusalem on Mount Zion (1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chron 5:11-14; 7:1-3; Psa 48; 99:1-2; 132:13-18).

Unfortunately this wonderful reality of Yahweh present among his people in the temple only lasts for some three hundred years. Due to the sin of God's people, they are eventually driven from the Promised Land and exiled to a foreign country, to Babylon. In this new context of disillusionment and despair (cf. Psa 137; Isa 40:27), the LORD again brings hope by revealing his glory to a prophet named Ezekiel.

Glory in Exile

In the context of exile, Ezekiel has a fantastic vision of God enthroned on a chariot. Although difficult to describe, Ezekiel sees a bright storm cloud approaching from the north, out of which lightening is flashing continually. In this cloud, he sees four living creatures. Each of these composite creatures has four faces: the face of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle.¹ Alongside the four winged creatures are four vast wheels, the rims of which are full of eyes round about. These wheels are such that the chariot throne which they support can move in any

direction. Both the creatures and the wheels support a solid transparent platform “shining like crystal” (Ezek 1:26) on which stands the throne. The creatures are carrying an animated four-wheeled chariot-like vehicle which can move everywhere. Enthroned on this amazing vehicle is a human figure, a man on fire, radiating with the colours of the rainbow. Ezekiel describes the whole vision as the “appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD” (Ezek 1:28).

Why is this vision of the glory of the Lord so significant in the context of Babylonian exile and Ezekiel’s call to prophetic ministry? First of all, the depiction of Yahweh enthroned as king in exile is very significant in light of Zion theology. The central belief in the Zion tradition is that Yahweh is eternally enthroned in the temple in Jerusalem, in Zion, and thus Zion will be eternally protected (Psalm 132). But Ezekiel’s vision reveals God enthroned on the chariot throne in exile. Therefore God is not confined to the temple in Jerusalem. He reigns over the earth. John Kutsko points out that Ezekiel’s vision answers the question: “Was God’s presence available outside the Temple, outside of Jerusalem, even in exile?”² The answer is yes!

As a result, the revelation of God’s glory in exile demonstrates that God has not abandoned his people but is still with them in exile. Just as God was present among his people while they were wandering in the wilderness for forty years, he is again present with them in a foreign land. The revelation comes in a time of crisis, disillusionment and despair, both for the exiled community as a whole, and for Ezekiel personally who could not fulfill his calling as a priest in the Jerusalem temple. The message communicated through the appearance of the glory is that God is with his people in exile. This becomes part of the hope of the book. Yahweh finds a temporary home with his people in exile. He will be a sanctuary among them (see Ezek 11:16). Contrary to the common view among the exiles that God had abandoned them, God is with them in exile, outside the Promised Land. The LORD sojourns with them in a foreign land. God’s presence has no limitations. He is omnipresent; he is everywhere. He is ruler and king in a foreign land; his reign is over the whole earth.³

Glory and Ezekiel’s Call

God’s glory is also revealed in the context Ezekiel’s call to prophetic ministry (compare with Isaiah’s vision, cf. Isa 6). God speaks and commissions Ezekiel (1:28; 2:1ff; 3:23). What is the theological significance of this? As God’s messenger, the LORD will be with Ezekiel and authorizes his message. This revelation gives Ezekiel courage to fulfill his calling in a difficult context. In Daniel Block’s words, “the glory symbolizes more than mere presence; it reminds the one who is called of the supreme majesty and sovereignty of the one who has called him, and by association of the privilege of the vocation.”⁴ What a privilege for Ezekiel to serve such a God!

Throughout his ministry, Ezekiel will encounter the glory of the LORD a number of times (Ezek 1–3; 8–11; 43–44). But in 39:21–29, Ezekiel proclaims a prophetic oracle of salvation and restoration to the people of God, which becomes a source of hope and encouragement for the house of Israel. Ezekiel 39:21 tells us that Yahweh will set his glory among the nations and all the nations will see God’s judgment or justice and God’s hand (or power) upon them. Divine justice is seen in the defeat of the enemy which leads to restoration of God’s people. Not only is the mysterious enemy Gog judged, in the context of 39:23, the nations will see God’s justice in his judgment of his people Israel, bringing them into exile. But that is

not the end of the story! The nations will also see Israel's salvation and restoration in their return to the land (39:27). And the house of Israel will acknowledge the LORD again (39:22); they will know the LORD! God will no longer hide his face, but instead will pour out his Spirit upon them (39:29). As a result the LORD will glorify himself (39:13) and be sanctified through them (39:27) and his name will be honoured (cf. Ezek 39:7, 25, 27).

The prophecy of Ezekiel reveals that God's glory is not tied to the Promised Land of Israel. God's glory can be seen in Babylon, and among the nations of the world. Part of the future eschatological hope of the book of Ezekiel is that God's glory will be set among the nations and be seen by all peoples, including Israel. This is also part of the Old Testament's hope for the future (Hab 2:14; Psa 72:19; Isa 6:3; Ezek 43:2). "The glory of the LORD will be revealed and all flesh will see it together" (Isa 40:5).

Glory and Hope

We have examined a few examples from the Old Testament where the appearance of God's glory, signifying his presence, becomes a source of comfort and hope to his people. Yahweh has been present with his people wherever they were, whether sojourning in the wilderness or in Babylonian exile or living in the Promised Land.

How does God's glory relate to the Church and to the individual believer? How is his glory a source of hope for you and me and for the Church corporately? The New Testament tells us that we have seen, "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6). Jesus was called Immanuel, a name meaning "God with us" (Mt 1:23). Just as the divine glory dwelt among God's people and signified his presence, Jesus Christ's earthly ministry revealed God's glory and presence: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14 TNIV; cf. Heb 1:1–3). With the coming of Jesus, the long-awaited hope of the coming Messiah was fulfilled. This divine action revealed God's redemption and hope for the world.

Similarly as God's glory filled the tabernacle and temple, God now fills the believer with his Spirit and the Church becomes the Temple of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19; Eph 2:21–22). As Christians we are not alone, but God is present with us by his Spirit. This is a profound truth which gives us great encouragement and hope as we face many challenges in life. Yet there are times when we too feel like we are wandering in the wilderness or in exile, and we wonder if God has abandoned us. We may question God's nearness when we face various trials like an illness, death, tragedy or perhaps the betrayal of a friend. Like the Israelites in exile we may feel that we have sinned and failed God so much that he no longer cares and that there is no hope for us (Isa 40:27; 49:14; 62:4). It is in those times we need to be reminded that we are not alone, just as Moses, the Israelites and Ezekiel were reminded of God's presence in important times in their journey with the LORD. Knowing that God is with us by His Spirit should fill us with hope and give us strength to serve him in this world.

As we behold and meditate on the glory of the LORD, we will be transformed into his likeness (2 Cor 3:18). When we become more like Christ, we will reflect his glory to the world, to those around us. This applies to both the individual believer and to the Church corporately. As

the Church of Jesus Christ, we can bless the world by shining forth the glory of God by sharing the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the hope of the world. Just as the prophet proclaimed to the people of God in Zion: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you” (Isa 60:1), we too need to arise and let our light shine. As God’s glory makes Zion beautiful and attractive to the nations (Isa 60:1–3, 13), the transformative work of God in the Church through Christ will cause the Church to reflect the beauty of Christ to the world. As a result others will be drawn to the light of God’s glory. In this way we participate in the mission of God for the world.

Notes

- [1](#) These living creatures are identified as cherubim in Ezek 10:1-5, 14-19; 11:22.
 - [2](#) John F. Kutsko, *Between Heaven and Earth: Divine Presence and Absence in the Book of Ezekiel* (Biblical and Judaic Studies Volume 7; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 93.
 - [3](#) Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 108.
 - [4](#) Block, *Ezekiel: Chapters 1–24*, 161.
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