

SHOW ME YOUR GLORY  
(Exodus 33:12-23)

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## INTRODUCTION

### ORIENTATION AND CONTEXT

#### Significance of Text

“Show me Your glory/ Send down Your presence/ I want to see Your face” (Third Day 7-9). These lyrics are typical of a desire to see God that has become common in contemporary Christianity. This desire can also be seen in these lyrics from another song: “I want to touch You/ I want to see Your face/ I want to know you more” (Park 8-10). This is, however, a rather bold request and desire. When Isaiah was exposed to the Divine Presence, he cried out, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5). Despite the boldness, though, this is not a request that is wholly alien to Scripture.

Within the book of Exodus can be found a request to see the glory of the Lord. This request is made by Moses while conversing with God in the tent of meeting that was set up outside the camp. After declaring His favor to Moses, God was asked, “Show me your glory, I pray” (Exodus 33:18). Despite his boldness, Moses was not fully denied. Though Moses was not permitted to see God’s face directly, God still acquiesced to have an aspect of His glory revealed to him.

Just as Moses desired to see God’s glory, so too is it appropriate for contemporary Christians to seek this revelation. This should not be done lightly, though. After all, God told Moses, “You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). In his apocalypse, John gives us a solemn picture of the heavenly entities, angels and humans alike, gathered before God’s throne, in a constant state of worship and praise (Revelation 4-5). Isaiah’s experience in God’s presence gives the impression that a person cannot be exposed to the glory

of God without being radically changed (Isaiah 6:1-7). Moses' very appearance inspired fear in his fellow Israelites when He would conclude sessions of meeting with God (Exodus 34:29-35). A closer look, then, at Moses' request to God, and God's response, is appropriate for Christians to fully understand what it means to see God's glory.

### Historical and Social Setting

Exodus is the second book of the Pentateuch, which consists of the first five books of the Bible. It is not known if the Pentateuch was always represented in five separate parts or if it was divided at some point prior to its representation as a complete unit, possibly to make the handling of scrolls easier (Fretheim, *Pentateuch* 19). Regardless as to how the grouping and dividing of the Pentateuch came about, though, "both Jewish and Christian traditions view these five books in this order as a single unit, introducing the Bible" (Brettler 3). Within the Pentateuch, Exodus is preceded by Genesis and followed by Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Traditionally, the Pentateuch as a whole, including Exodus, has been attributed to Moses. This is certainly the perspective that Walter Kaiser takes in his commentary: "It is best to take a text (whether secular or sacred) on its own terms and claims" (288). He argues that the internal evidence of Scripture supports Mosaic authorship, including God's instructions to Moses to record specific events and commandments (Exodus 17:14, 34:4, 34:27-28) and the attribution to Moses found throughout other Scriptural passages (1 Kings 2:3, Ezra 6:18, Mark 7:10, Luke 2:22). Marc Brettler writes, "The view that the [Pentateuch] should be understood as the divine word mediated by Moses was the standard view of Church and synagogue through the Renaissance" (4).

Despite these traditional views, most modern scholarship has concluded that what is contained within the Pentateuch actually derives from multiple sources. Terence Fretheim

explains that source criticism has led to the general belief that “the Pentateuch is a composite work that grew over the course of a half millennium or more” (*Pentateuch* 26). Critics have isolated four major sources for the texts contained within the Pentateuch: “Yahwist (J), Elohist (E), Deuteronomist (D), and Priestly (P)” (Fretheim, *Pentateuch* 26). Brettler writes, “Each of these sources or documents is embedded in a (relatively) complete form in the current Pentateuch, and each has a distinct vocabulary and theological perspective” (4). Even further developments in the study of the Pentateuch have led some to associate J and E together, and most scholars no longer recognize single documents for J, E, D, and P but rather schools of thought that developed many different source documents (Brettler 6). Despite these many theories, though, Alan Cole writes, “When all is said and done, the task of the Bible commentator is to comment on the final product, which is the text before him” (16). Regardless as to whether Moses wrote the Pentateuch in its completed form or it developed through the combining of several different texts from several different traditions, contained within the Pentateuch and its individual parts are texts that have deep significance.

Given the possibility that Exodus derived from several different sources, it is difficult to specify one specific purpose for its existence. It begins by continuing the story of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt that was begun in the final chapters of Genesis. It tells of how Israel had become enslaved and how they were eventually liberated by God’s intervention. It continues their story as they begin their wilderness wanderings. It tells of the covenant that God established with them. Finally, it begins giving specific regulations that the people are called to adhere to. Judith Sanderson writes that within the context of the Pentateuch, the purpose of Exodus is to give “the definitive story of the establishment of Israel as a people freed from human tyranny who become slaves to their own loving God” (82). Further, she explains that

“God’s purpose in liberating Israel is expressed in several similar ways: in order to establish an exclusive relationship . . . , to make them unique . . . , and to ‘dwell among them’” (82).

If it cannot be determined conclusively who the original authors of the Pentateuch are, neither can it be determined conclusively specifically who their audience was. For those who maintain Mosaic authorship, the original audience would have been the Israelites who accompanied him out of Egyptian bondage and their immediate descendents who assisted Joshua in the conquest of Canaan. If it is rather a compilation of several different texts, then the original audience would be those within the specific schools of thought that had particular interests revolving around the material contained within the sources. For example, the P sources would have particular interest for the priests and Levites whose duty it was to maintain the temple and the religious rites. Regardless as to whom the original audience was, though, the Pentateuch has a significant audience amongst Christians. Jesus said, “For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18). Likewise, Paul taught that “all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

If the question of authorship is debatable, so too is the date of composition. Mosaic authorship would assume that Exodus and the rest of the Pentateuch were composed sometime during the period of the Exodus and the Israelites’ wilderness wanderings. This would mean that the composition took place somewhere between the time that Moses was 80 and 120 years old (Exodus 7:7, Deuteronomy 34:7). Those who believe that the Pentateuch is a compilation from several different sources date the composition of these sources between the 9<sup>th</sup> Century and the

5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. (Varughese 62). Brettler believes that these were compiled and redacted into their current form either during the Babylonian exile (586-538 B.C.) or shortly thereafter (7).

Cole suggests that the dates that events occurred are more significant than the dates that texts were composed. He writes, “It is widely recognized today that the date of a document . . . is not nearly as important as the date of its contents” (17). Exodus does not give us enough evidence to assume conclusive dates for the events. Fretheim writes, “The narrative does not help the historian by, for example, omitting the names of the pharaohs” (*Pentateuch* 102).

Kaiser explains that the Pharaohs mentioned in Exodus are typically assumed to have either been a part of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1580-1321 B.C.) or the Nineteenth Dynasty (c. 1321-1205 B.C.) (289). Alex Varughese suggests that the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus was Rameses II, and he dates the actual Exodus event to around 1280 B.C. This is largely due to the fact that Rameses II’s father, Seti I, began the construction of a city that would have necessitated slave labor. This is believed to be the city named Rameses that is mentioned in Exodus 1:11 (94). Kaiser suggests, though, that the city mentioned in this verse is actually Qantir. Thus, this city was not necessarily built around the time of Rameses II (289).

Assuming that Exodus unfolds chronologically, despite the likelihood of it being a compilation from multiple sources, the events recorded in Exodus 33:12-23 take place in the vicinity of Mount Sinai. The Israelites’ arrival in this vicinity is recorded as follows: “On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai” (Exodus 19:1). In reference of this wilderness, Cole writes, “The word conventionally translated ‘wilderness’ is not a sandy desert, but grazing country, not settled by man” (150). It is not known specifically which actual peak is the one that Scripture identifies as Mount Sinai. Kaiser suggests that it is either Gebel Musa or Ras es-safsafeh. He writes,

“Most scholars prefer to identify Sinai with Gebel Musa because of its relation to the plain . . . and because of its imposing granite formations” (415). The actual dialogue between Moses and God would have taken place in the tent of meeting, which was pitched “outside the camp some distance away” (Exodus 33:7).

### Literary Context

Fretheim writes, “The book of Exodus is not historical narrative, at least in any modern sense of that phrase. Its primary concern is with issues that are theological and kerygmatic” (*Exodus* 7). Exodus certainly contains historical narrative within it, but a large portion of it is legal in nature, too. In addition to narrative and law can be found liturgical material. Fretheim explains that the interweaving between narrative and law is “one of the chief characteristics of the book” (*Pentateuch* 102), as is the interweaving between narrative and liturgical material. He concludes, “The end result . . . is that Exodus contains a very mixed set of materials from a historiographical perspective” (*Exodus* 9).

Exodus can be broken into two major sections. Chapters 1 thru 18 tell the story of Israel’s bondage in and deliverance from Egypt. Chapters 19 thru 40 tell of the time that Israel spent at Mount Sinai (Varughese 94). The first major section can also be broken down into two smaller sections, with 1:1 thru 15:21 telling about Israel’s stay in Egypt and the Exodus and 15:22-18:27 telling about their wilderness wanderings. The second major section can be broken down into four smaller sections. The first of these is found in 19:1 thru 24:18 and tells of the Sinai stay, the receiving of the law, and the establishment of the covenant. The second section, 25:1 thru 31:18, gives instructions regarding the tabernacle and the priesthood. The third section, 32:1 thru 34:35, tells of Israel’s apostasy, repentance, and covenantal renewal. The last



section, 35:1 thru 40:38, gives further instructions regarding the tabernacle (Fretheim, *Pentateuch* 15).

The text that will be the focus of this paper is Exodus 33:12-23. This passage begins with Moses seeking information from God regarding who will help him lead the Hebrew people. It concludes with God's promise to let Moses see His back. Located immediately before this passage is information regarding Moses' practice of conversing with God at the tent of meeting. He would set the tent up some distance outside the camp, and the people would watch him enter the tent from the entrances of their own tents. Once Moses was inside, the pillar of cloud that represented God's presence would descend to the tent so that God could speak to Moses. Upon seeing the pillar of cloud, the people would bow down at the entrances of their own tents. After Moses has received God's promise to glimpse His back, Moses received instructions to cut two new stone tablets and ascend the mountain to meet with God.

### PRESENTATION OF TEXT

#### Scripture Passage

Exodus 33:12 Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' <sup>13</sup>Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." <sup>14</sup>He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."  
<sup>15</sup>And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. <sup>16</sup>For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth."

17 The LORD said to Moses, I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”<sup>18</sup> Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.”

<sup>19</sup>And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. <sup>20</sup>But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” <sup>21</sup>And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; <sup>22</sup>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; <sup>23</sup>then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.” (NRSV)

#### Text Critical Notes

Fretheim notes that “with you”, found in verse 14, is not in the Hebrew text (*Exodus* 297). Along with the quoted NRSV, though, it is also found in the RSV, NIV, and NJB. It is also found in the NKJV and NASB, but these two translations note that it is an editorial addition by using an italic font type.

#### Outline of Passage

- I. Moses’ First Request
  - A. Moses Asks to be Taught God’s Ways
  - B. God Promises His Presence will Go with Israel
- II. Moses’ Second Request
  - A. Moses Asks for God’s Presence that Israel will be Unique
  - B. God Promises to Fulfill Moses’ Request
- III. Moses’ Third Request
  - A. Moses Asks to see God’s Glory

## B. God Promises to Reveal His Goodness and Back to Moses

## MOSES' FIRST REQUEST

Moses begins his conversation with God by reminding Him of a previous promise. This previous promise can be found in Exodus 32:34: “But now go, lead the people to the place about which I have spoken to you; see, my angel shall go in front of you . . .” The “angel” mentioned here is a reoccurring reference throughout Exodus. It can be seen previously when God told Moses, “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared” (Exodus 23:20). It is also mentioned in this narrative: “The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them” (Exodus 14:19). Of this angel, Sanderson writes, “The divine presence is symbolized . . . as the *angel of God*” (103), and further, “The *angel* represents God’s own presence” (116). It is not clear, though, whether or not Moses perceived this angel as representative of God’s presence. In fact, as Moses says, “You have not let me know whom you will send with me . . .” (Exodus 33:12), it seems quite probable that Moses did not associate the angel directly with God. Kaiser writes, “He became concerned as to the identity of the companion God had promised him. He believed that a mere angel was no substitute for the presence of God” (483). Fretheim suspects that Moses’ inquiry regarding his promised companion is “a not too subtle hint to God to decide whether God will in fact be going up among them” (*Exodus* 297).

Not only did Moses remind God of His promise, he also reminded God that He had said, “I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight” (Exodus 33:12). Fretheim writes, “These phrases are references to God’s choice of Moses to be the leader of Israel” (*Exodus* 297). Moses tells God that if he truly has found favor in His sight, then he should be

shown God's ways. Kaiser explains that "Moses asked the Lord for a demonstration of his love so that he might know and serve him better" (483). Though he might find favor in God's eyes at the moment, he will continue doing so as he is shown God's ways and conforms to them.

Fretheim writes, "If Moses does not know more, he may do the wrong thing and incur God's disfavor" (297). Thus, by seeking to know God, Moses is seeking to continue to honor Him.

Moses next turns the focus from himself to the entire Hebrew nation. He says, "Consider too that this nation is your people" (Exodus 33:13). Not only is Moses concerned about His own relationship with God, but he is also concerned about God's relationship with all of Israel. This recalls a previous incident in which Moses interceded on behalf of Israel with these words: "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people . . ." (Exodus 32:11). Whereas previously Moses sought mercy for Israel despite their transgressions, now Moses hopes that grace will be extended to Israel so that they may know God's ways. Fretheim writes, "Moses thinks that Israel continues to be God's special people in spite of what they have done" (*Exodus* 297). Thus, in reminding God of His favor for Moses, Moses seeks to extend that favor to His people. "If God understands the importance of His relationship with Moses, what Moses thinks about the people is also important" (Fretheim, *Exodus* 297).

After Moses completed his initial appeals to God, he was given the promise that God's presence would, indeed, go with him. This presence is literally his "face" (Cole 235). Fretheim explains that "it can function as a personal pronoun, or refer to the divine presence at varying levels of intensity, or refer to God's very self" (*Exodus* 297). As a result of God's presence, God also promises that rest will be given. Cole writes, "With this promise, Israel's ultimate 'rest' in Canaan will be assured" (235). Unlike Cole, who assumes a corporate "rest" for all of Israel,

Fretheim assumes a personal “rest” for Moses. He writes, “*Moses* will be given rest from all that troubles him about these matters” (*Exodus* 297).

#### MOSES’ SECOND REQUEST

Moses continues his conversation with God by specifically emphasizing how important it is for God’s presence to accompany Israel if they are to continue on their quest. John Wesley notes, “He speaks as one that dreaded the thought of going forward without God’s presence” (33:15). Fretheim speculates that Moses is seeking clarity in regard to God’s commitment for the entire community. He writes, “This divine reply seems focused only on himself as an individual” (*Exodus* 298). Moses’ appeal twice mentions the people in order to emphasize his desire to receive assurance that God’s favor is not just for him as an individual but also for all of Israel.

Moses suggests that if God’s presence does not accompany Israel, His favor for Moses and His people cannot be made known. His favor for Israel makes the Israelites distinct amongst all nations, but without His presence, this favor is unobservable. Fretheim writes, “For only with God’s constant, dwelling presence among them are they distinctive among the nations” (*Exodus* 298). Thus, with God’s presence accompanying Israel, He will be revealed to the rest of the world through them.

Kaiser suggests that this request from Moses is the specific request that God was waiting for (483). God responds, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name” (*Exodus* 33:17). God’s decision is not based upon anything that Israel has done as a nation but solely on the fact that Moses was favored by God. Fretheim writes, “God’s response is in the singular, implying that it is because of Moses’ own standing with God that God decides for the people and determines to be a constant presence

among the people as a whole” (*Exodus* 298). This recalls God’s promise to Abraham that if there could be found ten righteous people in Sodom, He would not destroy the city, despite its wickedness (Genesis 18:32). God’s favor for those whom He favors is so great that He is willing to overlook the sins of the many. Wesley writes, “See the power of prayer! See the riches of God’s goodness!” (33:17). Through the request of Moses, because he was favored by God, His grace was extended to the entire nation.

### MOSES’ THIRD REQUEST

Having secured the presence of God not only with Himself but also with all of Israel, Moses makes one final request. “Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray’” (*Exodus* 33:18). Sanderson describes this “glory” as being “the visible radiance and majesty of God” (131). God’s glory here is the Hebrew word *kabod*, which literally means “weight” (Cole 235). Joanna Dewey writes, “To have glory is to be weighty or important to oneself or others” (379). Fretheim explains that “glory *for Moses* refers to the face/presence of God no longer enveloped by the cloud or the fire. This is a request to see God’s very self” (*Exodus* 299).

Unlike Moses’ other requests, this is one that can only be fulfilled in part. God promises to have His goodness pass before Moses and to proclaim His name to him. Kaiser explains that “by his ‘goodness’ is meant his whole character and nature” (483). Sanderson equates the proclamation of God’s name to the disclosure of “the character or identity of God” (131-132). Thus, God agrees to reveal His character to Moses. Yet God’s glory cannot be revealed to Moses in full. Specifically, God says, “You cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live” (*Exodus* 33:20). Cole writes, “God as he is, in all his mystery, we cannot know or comprehend” (235). Fretheim notes that this passage does not say that God *cannot* be seen. “Rather,” he writes, “it assumes that God can be seen, but one cannot live if this happens”

(*Exodus* 30). If Moses were to glimpse God in all of His splendor, then Moses would immediately die.

Despite Moses' inability to see God's face and live, God promises Moses a view of His back. God offers protection to Moses as His full glory passes by. He says, "I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by" (*Exodus* 33:22). Once God has passed by, His hand will be removed, thus revealing His back. Sanderson explains that although he or she attributes human characteristics to God, such as referring to God's hand and back, "the narrator stresses that God remains hidden, even when most palpably present" (132). Cole writes, "In vivid pictorial language, the passage says that man may see only where God has passed by and so know him by his past doings and acts" (235). Thus, humankind can see the evidence and impact of God's glory, but they cannot see the fullness of it in its present reality without ceasing to live.

## CONCLUSION

### SUMMATION

Moses had been promised assistance as he led the Israelites to Canaan, but he had not been given any specific information regarding that assistance. Thus, when Moses began his dialogue with God, He sought to secure this assistance. Moses appealed to God's declaration that he had found favor in God's sight. He not only sought assurance that God would go with him individually, but he also asked God to remember the entire nation of Israel. In answer to his requests, God assured Moses that His presence would, indeed, accompany him.

Having received this personal assurance, Moses decided to pursue God's promises even further. He emphasized the futility of Israel going up to Canaan if God did not accompany them. He stressed that only if God accompanied them would Israel be able to be regarded as distinct

from the rest of the world, and only in that distinction would the rest of the world be able to see the abiding presence of God with Israel. Once again, God assured Moses that He would grant his requests. He would do so specifically because He knew Moses by name and because Moses had found favor with Him.

Finally, Moses made one final request: He asked that God would show him His glory. God agreed to reveal His goodness and proclaim His name to Moses, but He could not allow Moses to see His face. Were He to do so, Moses would die. God promised to extend His protection to Moses as He passed by, though, and once He had done so Moses would be allowed to see His back. In seeing God's back, Moses was able to see the evidence that God had passed by in His full glory.

#### APPLICATION

Within the context of Christianity, we have access to God's glory in a completely different way than what Moses was requesting. Cole writes, "For a full revelation of what God is like, man must wait until Jesus Christ" (235). Through the incarnation, God revealed Himself to humanity in such a way that we can, in fact, see His face. The writer of Hebrews described Jesus as "the reflection of God's *glory* and the exact imprint of God's very being . . ." (Hebrews 1:3, emphasis added). John wrote, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his *glory*, the *glory* as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14, emphasis added). Paul explained to the church in Corinth that "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 Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6, emphasis added). God's glory has, indeed, been revealed to the world. It can be seen in the Person of Christ Jesus.



Not only does Jesus reveal God's glory, but so too can the impact of His glory be seen in His followers. Just as Moses was able to see the impact of God's glory by seeing His back, the world should be able to see the impact of God's glory in the lives of redeemed and sanctified Christ-followers. Peter wrote, "If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of *glory*, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you" (1 Peter 4:14, emphasis added). Those who are indwelt with God's Holy Spirit are walking and breathing revelations of God's glory, and as such, they should have a profound impact on all those they encounter. God's glory can indeed be experienced as people look at the Incarnate Son revealed in the Scriptures and witness the transforming power of the Holy Spirit within the lives of believers.

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