



## ‘They Beheld God, and They Ate and Drank’

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### A Theological Reflection on Exodus 24:11 from the Perspective of the Dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

#### Introduction

The fresco by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City depicts the Bible story in Genesis where God breathes life into Adam.<sup>[1]</sup> God is represented here as an old white man, however, can and should we even portray God? We will rarely find images of God in either Jewish or Calvinist contexts as the prohibition of images of God is considered irrefutable. We cannot portray God because we cannot see Him as a person. Moreover, it is stated in the Bible that no one can see God and remain alive:

Moses said, ‘Show me your glory, I pray.’ 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. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.’ (Exodus 33: 18-20)

How can this verse be reconciled with the following passage about Moses and the elders of the people who hold a banquet together with God on the mountain?

Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank. (Exodus 24: 9-11)

This is a question that has been on my mind for quite some time. When, as an ordained minister, I was allowed to administer the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper for the first time, I was looking for a text describing a meal with God for my sermon. Then the above passage from Exodus 24 came back to mind, and I wondered whether the ordinance of the Last Supper in the Gospels<sup>[2]</sup> was related to this text. To answer this question, I consider the following in sequence in this contribution: how did people consider this issue from a theological perspective? What does the Torah and what do the Gospels indicate, and what relevant theological reflection can be developed? In other words, can one see God and eat and drink with him? In the conclusion this will be placed in the context of the dialogue between Judaism and Christianity.

#### The image of God

Can we portray God? In this brief historical-theological overview, a number of Christian and Jewish theologians’ or philosophers’ description of their image of God will be considered. The Church Father Augustine (354-430) discusses God’s appearance in the Sinai in his great work *De Trinitate* as a characteristic part of the Torah in which the distinction between letter and spirit is obvious. In this work he plainly states that God’s figure extends from one end of the horizon to the other and

that it should not be thought that He has stood on a specific location on earth. God does not shrink now to expand again later.[3]

Augustine sets the tone for the teaching of medieval theology that God's infinity is revealed in His works.

John Calvin (1509-1564), following Martin Luther who was particularly influenced by Augustine, stated that God presents Himself (or is merciful and gracious) to whom and when He wants. Calvin declared that it would be pretty presumptuous to impose any restrictions on God, or on the choices He makes. God reveals himself to whom and when He wants, but also not to others.[4] In the first four of the 'Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith', Maimonides (1138-1204) tried to formulate the reality of God.[5] These first four beliefs were included in the *Yigdal* prayer.[6]

According to Spinoza (1632-1677), God says in Exodus 33 that He cannot be seen, not because He would have no shape, but because God reveals himself according to the possibilities of the imagination of Moses and the prophets. God does not object, rather if one does not believe that God can be seen, God adjusts to this opinion.[7]

In the thinking of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), the face of the other is the way in which the Infinite becomes visible and speaks to one. Through the ethical appeal that comes from the face of the other, and in spite of one's responsibility, the idea of the Infinite does not remain external, but through this idea the Infinite penetrates into one's intimacy, without losing its transcendence.[8] The Jewish journalist and historian Sylvain Brachfeld (1932) described the transcendent God of Israel thus: 'Israel believes in a purely spiritual form of divinity, superhuman and unlimited in time and space, without beginning or end, without anthropomorphic qualities, one and only, one and only in its nature.' [author's translation][9]

What we see in this brief historical-theological overview, is that from time immemorial theologians and laymen have struggled with the image of God. The outcome of this struggle is linked with the cultural period and this in a dialectical manner: the more the worldview is fragmented in that period, the more weight is placed on the oneness or uniqueness of God.

## **Biblical analysis of Exodus 24: 11**

The pericope about Moses and the elders of the people who hold a banquet together with God on the mountain is part of a slightly longer text describing a Covenant ceremony including a banquet.[10]

This text consists of three parts.[11] The text begins with an invitation from God to Moses to go up the mountain with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of Israel's elders (verses 1-2). There is apparently no immediate response to this invitation, because a Covenant ceremony is being performed (verses 3-8). This ceremony is not a preparation for the invitation (this ceremony is not a purity ritual, for example). After the ceremony, at the invitation of God, action is taken, and a banquet is held with a theophany (verses 9-11). We can group these three parts into two separate stories. The first story describes a theophany during a banquet (verses 1-2 and 9-11), the second story is a Covenant ceremony (verses 3-8). This text is therefore related to a Covenant ceremony in which the theophany is legitimizing as well as being considered the climax. This means that, in order to legitimize the covenant, an anthropomorphic image of God is constructed. The *Imago Dei* is solemnly built as an instrument of political and theological power.

This theophany is completely different to the first one which consisted of thunder, lightning, smoke, and a thick cloud.[12] Rather, God is represented here anthropomorphically because of the indication that under God's 'feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone'.[13] The

pericope does not indicate whether or not God ate with the invitees. In other Bible texts, God is sometimes also represented as anthropomorphic, for example when God is walking in the garden of Eden.[\[14\]](#)

Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of Israel's elders, go up the mountain. These are the most important figures in the Exodus story. Aaron is the brother of Moses.[\[15\]](#) Nadab and Abihu are the two oldest sons of Aaron[\[16\]](#) who will later be killed by God.[\[17\]](#) The elders play an important role in the entire Exodus story: they confirmed the leadership[\[18\]](#) and the authority of Moses,[\[19\]](#) they were loyal to Moses during the confrontation between Moses and the Pharaoh,[\[20\]](#) they celebrated Passover at the beginning of the exodus,[\[21\]](#) and they acted as judges.[\[22\]](#) The elders later played an even greater role when they received a part of the spirit of God that rested on Moses, and thereby became scribes.[\[23\]](#) The historical-critical analysis also indicates a pronounced liturgical character, whereby the Temple of Jerusalem is mirrored in advance:[\[24\]](#) just as only the high priest (Moses), at the very top, converses with God during which the Holy of Holies becomes visible, the priests (elders) are only allowed partial access to where God shows himself (in the Holy), and the people remain at the foot of the mountain (the courtyard).

## Hermeneutical reflection

This research allows us to make a theological reflection on this appearance of God during a banquet. Firstly, we list some parallels in the Old Testament, secondly, we also approach the Lord's Supper in the New Testament as a theophany during a banquet, thirdly, we look at how we can deal with holiness followed by a brief reflection on having communal meals in the New Testament, and finally we end with an analysis of the possible danger of these banquets resulting in an 'us' versus 'them' mentality.

## Eschatology

In the eschatological vision of the prophet Isaiah, God gives a banquet on Mount Zion.[\[25\]](#) Not only are some delegates from the people of Israel invited to this banquet (as with the pericope from Exodus), but all nations are invited. The book of Song of Solomon sings about the relationship between God and Israel as a love affair between a shepherd (God) and a shepherdess (Israel). In this context we can consider the theophany during a banquet as a wedding banquet: the formal part (the Covenant ceremony) is concluded with a banquet. The New Testament also refers a few times to an eschatological banquet.[\[26\]](#)

The most obvious parallel is the Last Supper. At the end of Jesus' life, the night before his death on the cross, Jesus is in the upper room of a house with his disciples and a few followers. During this Last Supper of Jesus, Jesus gives a farewell speech.[\[27\]](#) According to Christianity, Jesus is the Son of God. According to some traditions, Jesus is the reincarnation of God and is therefore the anthropomorphic representation of God par excellence. For Christians, the teachings of Jesus are the new covenant.[\[28\]](#) This new covenant is concluded with a ceremony (the farewell speech of Jesus) and with a banquet (the Last Supper). According to the Christian tradition, this banquet is also presided by God in Jesus.

In Judaism, no further attention is paid to this theophany during a banquet from Exodus. It has no festival connected to it. The anthropomorphic representation of God does not relate to the transcendent representation of God in the Jewish tradition. The theophany during a banquet did have a major influence on the liturgical actions in the Temple, with specific responsibilities for the high priest, the priests, and the congregation. In Christianity, the Covenant ceremony with a banquet in the New Testament is very important and was founded as a sacrament (the Lord's Supper or Eucharist). Depending on the tradition, this sacrament is held weekly, monthly, or only on holidays. The Divine presence of Jesus is interpreted either physically ('this is my body [...] my

blood')[29] or as an act of remembrance with the presence of the transcendent ('Do this [...] in remembrance of me').[30]

## Holiness

The theophany during a banquet also suggests a way of dealing with holiness. The sacred and the profane are separated in different ways: ontologically in space (the holy is in heaven, the profane on earth); in time (for six days we are occupied with the profane, and on the seventh day – the Sabbath – with the holy, with God); and biologically, physically, and liturgically (the difference between pure and impure). If the sacred and profane come into contact in space, the elements of nature are the first to react: thunder, lightning, smoke, and a thick cloud.[31] In order to approach the divine, this pericope, as already indicated, also has a liturgical character: a high priest, priests, and cultic rituals are needed when the holy comes into contact with the profane (such as was the case during the Temple service in the 'holy' Temple). One must also be pure to have contact with the holy. This purity can be achieved through one's way of life, for example by following purity and dietary laws, and by observing certain ethical behaviour.

During the theophany at a banquet, the holy comes into contact with the profane. The elements of nature do not respond however, and this is a clear indication that the holy is not dangerous if one follows liturgical regulations and carry out acts of purity. The same liturgical rituals and acts of purity are also carried out in the Christian church during the Lord's Supper or Eucharist: the minister or priest initiates the service of the table, the bread and wine is often distributed by deacons, and purity is obtained through the forgiveness of the sins before participating in the Lord's Supper or Eucharist. As already indicated, the holy is present during the service of the table.

An additional element in this pericope is the emphasis on a communal meal. Eating together is also very important in the New Testament. The Gospels contain a few stories wherein Jesus attends a meal, each of them results in an important ethical reflection.[32] In addition, in various parables, the meal is central to the coming Kingdom of God.[33] In Acts, Luke describes the first Christian community where such a meal was very much part of church life.[34] In this way the first Christian community celebrated their mutual connection in Christ. In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul describes a meal in Antioch where both Jews and non-Jews ate together.[35] When delegates came from Jerusalem, however, the Jews separated themselves. Paul became angry when this happened because the solidarity that surpasses differences was broken. Eating together also indicates how we are connected, connected to each other and connected to God.

## Radicalization

The theophany during a banquet, having the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, and eating together are all team-building activities. The purpose of team building is to create or to improve mutual cooperation, social bonding, trust, group dynamics and efficiency within a group of people. But team building can also have a negative effect: the creation of the 'us' (the people belonging to the group) versus 'them' (the people outside the group) mentality. In the theophany during a banquet, God created two different groups: a selected group of people went up the mountain for the theophany during a banquet; those remaining had to stay at the foot of the mountain and did not participate. Later in Exodus, Aaron and his sons were appointed as priests[36] and their descendants performed all the liturgical activities in the Temple;[37] the descendants of the people who remained at the foot of the mountain had to stay in the courtyard of the Temple. This resulted in a 'we', the priests who were responsible for the Temple activities versus 'them', those who had no role in the Temple liturgy. When the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD, this 'us' versus 'them' concept in Judaism disappeared.

When reading the story of the tower of Babel,[\[38\]](#) God created much a much greater amount of diversity based on different languages. In addition, during the miracle of Pentecost, no attempt was made by those listening to make uniform the differences encountered when each apostle spoke in their own language.[\[39\]](#) The Tanakh opposes the 'us' versus 'them' mentality, for example, 'them' being aliens[\[40\]](#), or 'them' being the poor and needy.[\[41\]](#)

During the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, only a select group of people are able to participate. Depending on the tradition, the participants should either have been baptized and/or have affirmed their faith and/or accepted Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. This can also result in a 'we' versus 'them' mentality: 'them' being the non-Christians, non-believers, or the people who do not believe as 'we' do. It is both amazing and worrying that a sacrament is sometimes used to differentiate or segregate people. A sacrament is a window between the real world and the transcendent, it is a religious act based on the Bible, the same Bible that tells the story of the tower of Babel where God created diversity. Moreover, this differentiation and segregation of people can become very radical, fanatical even. In the history of Christianity, 'they' were often the Jews and this resulted in anti-Judaism and later in antisemitism, with the Shoah as a dramatic apotheosis. Antisemitism continues today, and the concept of 'them' is now also evolving towards other religious minorities like Muslims. The 'us' and 'them' mentality also occurs within the same religion, for instance between Roman Catholics and Protestants (as seen in Northern Ireland) or between Sunnites and Shiites (as seen in Iraq and Yemen). I have personally witnessed radical and fanatical behaviour during the baptism of an infant. When the service started, those people who only supported adult baptism left the church and came back once the infant baptism had finished.

Eating together can also result in an 'us' versus 'them' mentality. Often people with the same opinions or lifestyles have meals together. It is rather unusual to have people of different cultures, races, religions, or sexual orientation at the same table. Things can also become very radical or fanatical when people do not want to join in or if they leave the table when someone from a different culture, race, religion, or sexual orientation is present.

## Conclusion

The pericope of the theophany during a banquet from Exodus is an interesting text to discuss in relation to Jewish-Christian interaction. The banquets analysed here (the theophany during a banquet from Exodus, and the Last Supper) have different meanings and importance in both religions and have evolved liturgically in completely different ways. The two religions also have a different image of God and a different experience of meeting the holy. The pericope from Exodus also indicates that eating together has its advantages. Eating together creates solidarity (with each other, and in our text also with God, or with Jesus); it is a social event where events can be discussed; it is a way of putting ideas and proposals, but also prejudices, concerns, and reservations on the table and discussing them; eating together is a way of deliberating how to proceed, and what the next steps will be. After the Covenant ceremony, Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and the seventy of Israel's elders have much to discuss in terms of how to proceed and the meaning of what they have experienced. God has offered them the beautiful and useful possibility of a banquet to facilitate this discussion. Jesus also had much to discuss with his disciples and a number of followers: what does his teaching mean and how do we progress?

One of the roles of religion is to teach people how to handle diversity. Diversity is often seen as intrinsically problematic, but we have seen that God created diversity (the story of the tower of Babel) and confirmed diversity (the miracle of Pentecost). The construction of the tower of Babel is an attempt by man to impose an artificial unity on a diversity created by God. Diversity is not a danger, but a blessing, a precious gift from God: out of diversity arises unexpected creativity and makes the range of human possibilities much greater. We must value diversity as an opportunity,

we must continuously and repeatedly learn how to deal with it, through trial and error. The objective of fanaticism is to break this precious gift from God and, as such, is un-Biblical.

I have attended the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ)'s annual four-day conference several years now which always includes a number of participants from the International Abrahamic Forum (IAF). It is possible to have kosher food in addition to the set buffet meals on offer. We always eat together: Christians, Jews, and Muslims at the same table, each according to their own religion's food regulations and with respect for the traditions of the others. After all those centuries of antisemitism, it always feels to me that we have been invited by God to his banquet, in connection with each other and in connection with Him.

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