The Shekinah Glory

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PART I

The Meaning of the Word

Chapter I

Introduction

Before we get into the study of the Shekinah, we should learn how the word is pronounced. The accent is on the second syllable. The first syllable is like “wreck” or “peck.” Then comes the accent on the second syllable that sounds like “eye.” The last syllable sounds like “nah.” That is it. This study could be called “God’s Manifest Glory” or “Seeing the Glory of God.”

If one goes into any library to read theological or biblical books, he will find a number of good books that make passing references to the Shekinah glory. That is about all one will read, a passing reference. Nothing is stated about what it means, where the word came from, or how it is used throughout the Bible. Most of the writers speak only of the cloud that covered the ark and the tabernacle of Israel’s wilderness wanderings. That is only a small part of the revelation of the Shekinah. If there is any work that fully discusses the subject, it is a collector’s prize indeed.

This study will be a summary of what both Old and New Testaments reveal about the Shekinah glory. It will not be exhaustive. It will be as simple as possible. However, it will be an attempt at least to touch on all the main issues and to present them in common language. Any existing controversy will be discussed at the end of the book, with a prayer that the answer to the controversy will be accepted solely based on what scriptures teach us about the Shekinah. Is not this what Bible study is all about? If we are to grow in Bible knowledge, it must be because we are learning things that we did not know before. That is another way of saying opening our minds to the truth.

The word Shekinah is not in the scriptures but is a theological word that has developed from the Old Testament revelation. It is similar to the way that the word Trinity has developed. It also is not found written in the scriptures. Both are truths, which are taught by the scriptures. There is more of a problem with the teaching of the word Shekinah, than the word Trinity, because so many Bible teachers restrict Shekinah to the glory cloud that came down to guide Israel through the wilderness, and later came down upon the ark of the covenant, as stated above.

A Definition

A brief definition of Shekinah will be given and then we will see how we got this word. The Shekinah glory is a visible manifestation of God, and the presence of God, during a rather permanent period of time. The word to emphasize here is the word permanent. Unlike a vision, or a dream revelation, which may be for a brief period, the Shekinah is, relatively speaking, a more permanent manifestation of God’s glory. It is not some overnight dream or vision that is seen today and gone tomorrow.

In J. D. Douglas’s *The New Bible Dictionary*, R. A. Stewart says this concerning the word Shekinah. “The Shekinah, the radiance, glory or presence of God, ‘dwelling’ in the midst of His people, is used by Targumist and Rabbi to signify God Himself.”

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Another definition is by Oehler in his *Theology of the Old Testament*. He states it this way. “The expression belongs properly to the later Jewish theology, but is drawn from those passages in the O. T. where a dwelling of Jehovah or the name of Jehovah among the people is spoken of.”

Notice the word *dwelling*. That is what Shekinah is all about. It is a radiance of God’s glory that remains for some period, or dwells in some place, for a lengthy period. The purpose of this study is to investigate and interpret the biblical teaching of that *dwelling of the glory of God*. 
Chapter II

The Historical Background

How did we get this word? There are two words in the Old Testament revelation that are translated *dwell*, in relation to God. The more frequently used word, *shaken*, in the Hebrew, primarily means, “*to sink or settle down.*” *Young’s Analytical Concordance* gives *to tabernacle* as the primary interpretation. The second word is *yashab*, in the Hebrew, and it means, *to sit.*

From these two words, *shaken* was chosen and changed into a noun form *shekinah* to express the abiding manifestation of God’s presence. Notice that the word chosen means a more permanent residence, a *dwelling*, instead of merely saying *sitting*.

From this, the transliterated form has been bought over into the English and gives us the word Shekinah. The popular definition given by *Webster’s Dictionary* is simply stated as “The divine manifestation, through which God’s presence is felt by man: a conception of the Jewish theologians developed in the Targums, the Midrash, the Talmud, etc., and adopted by Christians. The Shekinah is the radiance and glory of God manifested in the storm cloud, the cloud and fire over and in the tabernacle, the cloud on Sinai’s summit, etc., that was in the Temple of Solomon.”

Then what are Targums and Midrash? We will take the simple definition given without getting too technical or theological. I would just state that Israel was captive in a foreign land for seventy years, because of their idolatry. “Yet ye have not hearkened unto me, saith the Lord, that ye might provoke Me to anger with the works of your hands to your own hurt . . . And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years” (Jeremiah 25:7, 11).

During that time, Israel lost touch with its own Hebrew language. What do you think would happen if we had to live in Russia for seventy years? The language they learned was a mixture, called Aramaic. After losing touch with their own language they then needed some interpreter to make clear the meaning of the Pentateuch; that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, written in Hebrew, so they could understand it. They had to relearn their Hebrew. Here is what *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* says about Targums. “An Aramaic translation or paraphrase of a portion of the Old Testament.”

The word *midrash* is from the Hebrew and is used twice in the Old Testament, where it is translated *story*. In 2 Chronicles 13:22 we read “the *story* of the prophet Iddo.” In 2 Chronicles 24:27 we read “the *story* of the book of the kings.” From this we learn that the Targum is a *translation, or paraphrase*, and the Midrash a *teaching, or interpretation*, of the Old Testament scriptures. What does this have to do with the Shekinah glory? We shall see how the Hebrew teachers, the rabbis, the students of their own Law of Moses, understood passages concerning the Shekinah glory, and their interpretation of some of these passages of scripture.
Chapter III

Theophanies and the Shekinah Glory

To have a correct understanding of the Shekinah it is necessary to have a correct understanding of the difference between the manifestation of the glory of God in the Shekinah and the manifestation of God in the theophanies. A theophany is likewise an appearance of God in some visible form. However, a theophany is more of a \textit{temporary} appearance.

The word \textit{theophany} comes from two Greek words. The prefix \textit{theo} stands for theos, the word translated God. This gives us the word theology. The other part of the word comes from the Greek word \textit{phaino}, which means, \textit{to appear}. Together the word means simply an \textit{appearance of God}. In \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church} the following is written under the heading \textit{Theophany}. “An appearance of God in visible form, \textit{temporary}; [italics not in the original] and not necessarily material (cf. e.g. Exod. 33:20 ff.). Such an appearance is to be contrasted with the incarnation, in which there was a permanent union between God and complete manhood (body, soul, and spirit).”

In Genesis 17:1, we read, “And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared to Abram.” In Genesis 18:1, we read, “And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre.” Likewise, in Genesis 26:2, 26:24, and many other places, we read, “The Lord appeared unto him.” All of these appearances of God were temporary. Unlike the theophanies, the Shekinah was a \textbf{continuing glory} that spoke in a peculiar way of God’s presence. We shall see that the children of Israel could behold God’s glorious presence for years and years when the Shekinah glory rested upon the ark of the tabernacle, and later in Solomon’s temple. Sin then drove it away from men’s gaze, just as sin in the Garden of Eden drove it away from the sight of Adam and Eve.

\textit{The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia} has the following to say about theophanies. They are: “Every extraordinary manifestation of God reported by the Biblical authors, apprehensible by human senses, but especially, in the narrower sense, those manifestations of God in which, equipped with attributes of his divine glory, he appears upon earth, to command, aid, or punish. In the widest possible sense, according to the above, within the scope of theophanies would come generally all the manifestations of God which result in a direct impartation of his will and Word.”

Therefore, the difference then is that theophanies are \textit{temporary} appearances of God, in various forms. The Shekinah glory is a more \textit{permanent} abiding, or dwelling, of God’s manifested glory. That is the subject at hand, this visible manifestation of God’s person in a glory that can be seen by mankind for long periods of time.
Chapter IV

According to the Targums

Now that we have seen the two basic and fundamental differences between the Shekinah glory and a temporary appearance of God in a theophany, let us look at how the Targumists translated some verses that refer to Jehovah God. These men were lawyers, i.e. students of the Law of Moses; rabbis and teachers of the Law. They reveal to us what they understood this Shekinah glory to be.

Localizing God

Because the Targumists believed the Shekinah could be localized, but not the omnipresent God, they substituted Shekinah in every expression that seemed to localize God. When Jacob says, “Surely the Lord is in this place” (Genesis 28:16), the Targum renders it: “The glory of the Shekinah of Jehovah is in this place.” “But the Lord is in His holy temple” (Habakkuk 2:20) becomes “Jehovah was pleased to cause His Shekinah to dwell etc.”

Seeing God

Similarly, when the Hebrew text says that when anyone saw God, or that God appeared to anyone, the Targum could only permit the glory of the Shekinah of Jehovah to be visible to mortal man. Isaiah 6:5: “Mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts,” becomes “My eyes have seen the glory of the Shekinah of the King of the world.” See the following verses (cf. Exodus 3:6; Ezekiel 1:1; Leviticus 9:4): “Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look upon God.” “Now it came to pass . . . I saw the visions of God.” “For to day the Lord will appear unto you.”

In all of these places where scripture refers to someone seeing God, the Targamist substitutes “the Shekinah.” However, they are not alone in this reluctance to say any man could look upon God. It is to be enlarged upon later, and will be discussed under that heading.

Due to their conception of divine aloofness, in which it was thought an indignity to God that He should be supposed to have direct contact with inert matter, and personal conversation with sinful man, God was gradually pushed farther away from His creation. The way in which Judaistic theology then sought to bridge the chasm it had created between God and man was through the Shekinah. The word is never used except of God and implied what we would designate “the Divine Presence,” or “the Divine Manifestation.” The Shekinah “does not indicate the radiance or brilliance, but the central cause of the radiance. This center was conceived to be Divine.”

God in Heaven?

The Targumist even shrinks from saying Jehovah is, or dwells, in heaven. The heaven of heavens cannot contain God; and therefore it is not God but His Shekinah, which can be localized, even in heaven. “He dwelleth on high” (Isaiah 33:5) becomes in the Targum, “He has placed His Shekinah in the lofty heaven.”

Likewise in Deuteronomy 4:39: “The Lord He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath,” is rendered “God, whose Shekinah is [the Jerusalem Targum says, ‘dwells’] in
heaven above, and who rules on earth beneath.” So also Deuteronomy 3:24 where we read, “For what God is there in heaven or in earth that can do according to Thy works and according to Thy might?”11

These translations show how the Jewish mind comprehended the visible glory that resided with the nation of Israel for centuries. The Shekinah glory was substituted in place of the word Jehovah, or Jahway, the name of the holy God of Israel.

With these distinguishing features apprehended; first, the relative permanence, and secondly, the relative localization, one is better equipped to undertake the study of the biblical teaching of the Shekinah glory of God. The Shekinah glory of God represents a localized, visible appearance of God’s glory, and is for a far more permanent manifestation.

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