

## **Divine Presence in the Priestly material<sup>1</sup>**

It seems to me that the issue at the heart of trying to speak about the divine presence, from the ancient world up until the present, is the struggle to preserve and speak about both the transcendence and immanence of God, the complete otherness of the divine and the manifestation of the divine to us or our encounter with the divine – to preserve both these aspects and to hold them together or in tension.

I want to explore how one of the traditions sought to grapple with this, that is the Priestly tradition, a strand of tradition that runs through Genesis – Numbers – when I say runs through I don't mean it is all the material in Genesis – Numbers, but part of it and covering from creation, flood, some of the ancestral material, some of the exodus material, including the setting up of the tabernacle in Exod 25-31,35-40 and a little of Numbers, in particular the rebellion at the edge of the land (within Num 13-14). I'm going to focus primarily on the tabernacle material in Exod 25-29.

In looking at this material, I am going to make some assumptions. I am taking the position with many scholars that this Priestly material, though drawing on, and incorporating earlier traditions was put together in the exilic period, that is during the exile of ancient Israel in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 586 BCE, that is in the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE. I am aware that a different school of thought would date it earlier than this, but that is what I am going with. I am also of the view that this Priestly material was aware of other earlier traditions found in texts within Genesis – Numbers that don't derive from the Priestly school.

Given a 6<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE date, the backdrop to the way in which the divine presence is unfolded in this Priestly material is a time of crisis for the faith of ancient Israel. Judah was living in exile in the foreign city of Babylon – after losing the central symbols of their faith –including the fact that the temple in Jerusalem where they believed *Adonai's* presence dwelt had been destroyed. The challenge to the Priestly

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws heavily on my book, *The Vision of the Priestly Narrative: Its Genre and Hermeneutics of Time*. Ancient Israel and its Literature 27. Atlanta: SBL, 2016, pp. 352-372.

circle then was how to speak of the presence of their God in the face of this? Where would one begin in such a situation?

Well, I'm going to begin with a quote from Hundley in his book called, appropriately, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*:

Divine presence, like divinity itself, is difficult to explain, much less envision, as one must ascribe in human terms what by definition transcends them... The Priestly writers use the language and imagery at their disposal to describe *Adonai* (God) in a way that accurately and approximately reflects him, yet not so definitively that the description becomes a distortion.<sup>2</sup>

An important point to be made is that the Priestly writers did not try and start from scratch but they drew on traditions that were familiar to them. But they couldn't just repeat the traditions of the past, since the situation had changed – they had to reshape these traditions associated with speaking of the divine presence so that they might speak to the situation in which they found themselves, that is in a foreign land with the Jerusalem temple destroyed. So what were some of the traditions concerning divine presence that P inherited, drew on and reshaped?

- There was an earlier tradition that pictured the presence of God in association with a tent, the tent of meeting, that was pitched outside the camp and was the place where *Adonai* intermittently descended (יָרַד) from heaven (or the sky – in the cosmology of the ancient Near East, including within ancient Israel, God or the gods were pictured as situated in heaven). *Adonai* is envisaged as descending from time to time for a specific purpose, to give specific messages for the guidance of the nation (through Moses usually) (e.g. Exod 33; Num 11; 12). The tent was the meeting point for a temporary encounter with God.
- Another tradition was what was called the theophanic tradition (“theophany” = appearance of God). In this tradition the divine presence is imaged in terms of cloud (darkness) (imaged sometimes as God's chariot), storm imagery (see the Baal traditions behind this), and fire (see e.g. Ps 97 – read vv. 1-5; Exod 19:9,16,18 – here in association with Mount Sinai). This theophanic tradition, it has been argued, became part of the Jerusalem temple tradition and its celebrations.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael B. Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth: Safeguarding the Divine Presence in the Priestly Material*. FAT2/50. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011, p. 39.

- Most importantly, there was of course the Jerusalem temple tradition. As with ancient Near Eastern (ANE) temples/sanctuaries in general, the Jerusalem (or Solomonic) temple was conceived of as the divine residence – the dwelling place of the divinity on earth. As in the ANE this did not mean that the divine was restricted to the temple, but it was the sacred space where God was deemed to be particularly present. Both ANE temples and the Solomonic temple had graded areas of holiness with the most secluded space being the most holy place (or inner sanctum) where God was present, with the holy place (or outer sanctum) being further out from where the god was located. In ANE temples there was in the most holy place a cult statue that was seen to partake of the divine essence (although it was not exactly equated with the deity who was also envisioned as being in heaven, and there could be several cult statues of the same god in different places). However, in the Jerusalem temple there was no cult statue: as described in 1 Kings 6-8, in the most holy place, symbolizing God’s presence was the two 10 cubit high cherubim facing the entrance side by side, thought to be the throne bearers of *Adonai* (though there was no actual throne); and the ark (see its earlier roots as symbolizing the presence of God in holy war contexts – 1 Sam 4-6; 2 Sam 6) probably symbolizing the footstool to *Adonai*’s invisible throne. These symbols of the divine presence are described as aniconic, since the actual presence of God is invisible and these do not represent *Adonai* or partake of his essence as the cult statue of ANE temples were understood to do in relation to specific gods. In this way, ancient Israel identified Jerusalem specifically as the place of *Adonai*’s abode on earth, where he had his house (the Solomonic temple) (Note: *Adonai* was not perceived as restricted to this, no more than the ANE gods were seen as restricted to their temples, but this sacred place was seen specifically as the place where heaven and earth met and came together. Various traditions grapple with the relation between immanence and transcendence in relation to the temple – e.g. for the Deuteronomist only the name of God dwelt in the temple, with God himself dwelling in heaven. However, in terms of the pre-exilic Jerusalem temple, *Adonai* was said to dwell (= sit enthroned יָשָׁב there).

Now all these traditions P has drawn on and reshaped to give its own picture or vision of how and where *Adonai* can be present to them in their present situation of exile, a situation in which the Jerusalem temple has been destroyed. So how does P picture the divine presence?

We find this in P's description of the tabernacle or tent of meeting in Exod 25-29, and see also Num 14; 20 and Exod 16.

In a nutshell, P's vision for how the transcendent God can be immanent and present to the Israelites comprises the following elements:

- Through a structure, called the tent of meeting or the tabernacle, which, like the Jerusalem temple, has grades of holiness, with the ark and the *Kapporet* (which is distinctive to P) of which the cherubim are a part, symbolizing the divine presence within the most holy place. But it is a structure that has the features of a tent and is mobile, and is called the tent of meeting, in line with the earlier tent of meeting tradition.
- A hierarchical priesthood who are the only ones that can enter the holy place. The high priest in his person mediates God to the people and the people to God. This is symbolized in his vestments – he has a flower on his head that states that he is holy to God and he has inscribed on stones on his vestments (ephod and breastpiece) the 12 tribes of Israel for a remembrance of them before *Adonai*.
- Images associated with the presence of *Adonai* are the cloud which is consistently linked with the glory of *Adonai*. The “glory of *Adonai*” is P's primary description of the presence of *Adonai* and occurs in association with the cloud before the tent of meeting comes into existence, from which point on it is associated with the tent of meeting.
- Verbs used in relation to God's presence are:  
the verb “to meet” (יָעַד);  
and the verb to settle or dwell, שָׁכַן, which can mean either encamp or settle temporarily or to dwell permanently. P as we will see uses this in both senses.

To get an understanding of P's picture of divine presence, of how P grapples with the issue of how the transcendent God can be present to his people Israel, it is necessary to gain an understanding of how P has reshaped the earlier traditions that I have already outlined.

In visioning a structure that has graded areas of holiness with the ark and cherubim iconography in the most holy place P affirms that, as in the Jerusalem temple, *Adonai* is especially present in relation to a particularly sacred area. However, P modifies the Jerusalem temple tradition in two significant areas.

First, the way in which *Adonai* is described as present in relation to the ark and the cherubim is modified. Instead of enormous cherubim standing side by side, there are two small cherubim as part of the *kapporet* that covers the ark, and these cherubim face each other and spread their wings over the ark. These cherubim allude to the divine presence (as in all ANE iconography) in somewhat reduced form compared to the large throne bearing cherubim of the Solomonic temple. And they protect the ark which in P not only symbolizes divine presence but is a receptacle for the testimony (as in dtr tradition – see Deut 10) which for P is likely the divine instructions for the tabernacle/tent of meeting by means of which *Adonai* is present to the people. The cherubim therefore, symbolizing the divine presence, act as protectors of the testimony that witnesses to how *Adonai* can be present, that is by means of the tent of meeting as divinely prescribed. Here *Adonai* meets (יָעַד) with Moses for specific purposes. P does not image God as sitting or enthroned, using the verb יָשַׁב as in the Jerusalem temple tradition. In relation to the furniture of the inner sanctum the emphasis is on specific encounters with the divine for specific purposes, and not on the static conception of enthronement of king *Adonai*.

This brings us to the second way in which P modifies the Jerusalem temple tradition. In the Jerusalem temple tradition God sits enthroned in relation to the inner sanctum which is a fixed geographical location in Jerusalem. In P, however, the inner sanctum, indeed the whole tabernacle/tent of meeting is mobile – it moves through place and time in the midst of the people. Thereby the divine presence is linked to the people (albeit by means of the tabernacle) rather than to a geographical place. The divine presence in P is not static (and therefore God is not conceived as sitting down,

enthroned) but mobile. It is associated with the people as they journey through space and time.

You can see how P has reshaped the Jerusalem tradition to address the contemporary situation, where Jerusalem and its temple have fallen and they are in a foreign land. *Adonai* is present in the midst of the community through a portable tent, albeit with grades of holiness that serve as protective barriers between the people and the divine. Moreover, this tent of meeting is much smaller than the Jerusalem temple (approx. half the area and a third the height), its walls composed of curtains, and it is more modest in its adornments and therefore more functional for an exiled people.

The portable nature and tent-like structure is obviously taken over from the old tent of meeting tradition but synthesized with aspects of the temple tradition with its furniture and grades of holiness. And it is from the tent of meeting tradition that P also draws his use of the verb “to meet” (יָעַד), which P uses not only in relation to Moses’ meeting with *Adonai* in the inner sanctum (Exod 25:22) but in relation to *Adonai* meeting with the Israelites at, that is outside, the tent of meeting (Exod 29:43). This refers to specific encounters, but unlike the old tent of meeting tradition, P never uses the imagery of *Adonai* “coming down” (יָרַד) for intermittent encounters: P subverts the imagery of the old tent of meeting tradition where *Adonai* comes down from heaven from time to time and then disappears again. Indeed P, whilst allowing for specific encounters, also has a more continuous view of divine presence in relation to the tent of meeting, as already suggested by the graded holiness of the structure.

P refers to a permanent or continuous presence in relation to its tabernacle/tent of meeting by using the verb שָׁכַן in relation to both *Adonai* himself (Exod 29:45-46) and the symbol of *Adonai*’s presence, the glory of *Adonai* (Exod 24:16). This verb שָׁכַן can connote settling temporarily or permanent, durative or continuous presence. It is used in the latter sense especially in the Zion/Jerusalem temple tradition. I would argue that P uses it in both senses. First when P refers to the glory of *Adonai* settling (שָׁכַן) on Mount Sinai in Exod 24:16 this is a temporary thing. However, when in P the glory of *Adonai* moves from Mount Sinai and fills the tabernacle (Exod 40:34) this suggests the permanent and continuous presence of *Adonai* residing within the tabernacle as it moves through time and space. This, along with the grades of holiness

of the tabernacle suggests that the reference to *Adonai* dwelling (שָׁכַן) in the midst of the people in Exod 29:45-46 (and see Exod 25:8) refers to a permanent continuous presence amongst the people.

Therefore for P, the divine presence encamps continuously and permanently by means of the mobile tabernacle/tent of meeting as it journeys with the people *and* also is encountered by Moses and the people for specific purposes when God chooses to meet (יָעַד) with them from time to time (Exod 25:22; 29:43). P's paradigm of divine presence embodies both continuous permanent presence and specific encounters.

This is seen in P's use of the expression "the glory of *Adonai*" which is P's primary symbol for referring to the divine presence. P juxtaposes reference to the glory of *Adonai* filling the tabernacle with its areas of graded holiness (suggesting continuity) with the occasional appearance or public manifestation of the glory of *Adonai* in relation to the tent of meeting once it comes into existence (see e.g. Num 14:10; 20:6) for specific purposes (for guidance or judgment).<sup>3</sup> Just as in ANE conceptions of divine presence where the god can be conceived of as located in heaven and in more than one place on earth (signified by multiple cult statues at different sites) so the glory of *Adonai* as *Adonai's* visible manifestation on earth can be continuously present *inside* the tent of meeting and yet at the same time manifest itself in a special way *outside* the tent of meeting on specific occasions for specific purposes. The glory of *Adonai* filling the tabernacle and appearing in specific situations symbolizes "the concrete, effective presence of *Adonai* both in Israel's history and in Israel's cult."<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to a discussion of the visual images used in P to denote the divine presence. P's primary expression for the visible manifestation of the divine presence is the "glory of *Adonai*" (כְּבוֹד יְהוָה). P also in places uses cloud imagery, drawn from

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<sup>3</sup> Tryggve Mettinger (*The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies*. ConBOT 18. Lund: Gleerup, 1982, pp. 88-89) holds together the public manifestations such as found in Num 14:10; 20:6 with permanent presence within the tabernacle by speaking of "emanations of the Kabod (i.e. the glory)" which is constantly present within the tabernacle on the analogy of the earlier temple tradition of God shining forth from the temple on Zion (Pss 50:2; 80:2).

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Louis Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006, p. 158.

the old tent of meeting tradition and the theophanic tradition. However, in P, cloud imagery is never used on its own to denote divine presence, as for example in the old tent of meeting tradition. It is always linked with “the glory of *Adonai*” (Exod 16:10; 24:15b,16; 40:34). The cloud both marks the presence of *Adonai* denoted by the glory of *Adonai* and conceals it, albeit in a diaphanous way since the glory is partially visible through the cloud. But within P the glory of *Adonai* also appears on its own without the cloud but in these places it is always associated with the tent of meeting.

In using the expression, the “glory of *Adonai*”, P has drawn on the Jerusalem temple tradition (that has already incorporated the theophanic tradition) where glory was used primarily as an attribute of God imaged as a king with the nuance of power, majesty or splendor (e.g. Pss 24, 29, 96, 97, 145; Isaiah 6:1-8). P, however, has transformed this divine attribute in the tradition to signify the visible presence of *Adonai* on earth. So what is its precise connotation for the Priestly writers?

Hundley’s discussion of this is most helpful. He argues that P’s כבוד יהוה, as the visible aspect of the divine presence, is in a sense *Adonai*’s clothing or cloak, that highlights his importance and otherness, and reveals his location, and yet, at the same time, “conceals him in its radiant folds.”<sup>5</sup> The glory, therefore, as both revealing *Adonai*’s presence and concealing it, shrouds the divine form itself, if there is one; the divine form itself cannot be seen and therefore cannot be defined.<sup>6</sup> The glory, as the surrounding radiance of the indefinable *Adonai*, functions as a metonym for *Adonai* himself, capturing some of the divine essence and therefore fittingly identifying and locating the divine presence, but at the same time it ensures the mystery and elusiveness of the deity himself.<sup>7</sup> Even the כבוד as the tangible sign of divine presence is only described via a simile, that is like fire (Exod 24:17), and therefore how much less can *Adonai* himself be described.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hundley, *Keeping Heaven on Earth*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 45-47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 43,51. Hundley (*ibid.*, 51,204) compares the כבוד יהוה to ancient Near Eastern cult statues as the locus of divine presence, arguing that because the כבוד יהוה emanates from the person of YHWH himself, rather than being connected to a human object, *Adonai*’s presence is more elusive, with fewer limitations and anthropomorphisms (since it cannot be deported or destroyed).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

What then, can we learn from all of this?

First, in seeking to describe and plumb the depths of the divine presence, traditional formulations are important – these give us language in which to frame our descriptions, but they must be reshaped and reformulated to speak to our ongoing contemporary experiences.

Second, it is important to preserve and hold in tension both the transcendence and immanence of God, and in relation to the latter the continuous presence with specific encounter, in such a way that the mystery of the divine who is ultimately other is preserved.

And finally, the Priestly picture raises questions for us with regard to sacred space. It also raises questions for us with regard to sacred personnel for, as I mentioned only briefly above, in P the priesthood, the sacred personnel, have a special function associated with this sacred space, as mediators between the divine and the rest of the community.

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May 2021