**Shekinah: God’s Presence with Us**

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**Part 1**

Today, as you know, is “Shekinah Sunday,” as a portion of our congregation is gathering at Shekinah Retreat Centre for worship and fellowship. As I wondered what this Sunday might mean for those of us who gathered here, it occurred to me to take those words literally. So today, on “Shekinah Sunday,” I’d like to speak about Shekinah as a name for God.

 It’s sometimes easy to forget that though our God is One, God has many names. These range from the three names of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, also called Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer – to the many names which draw from human experiences of God to name what God is like. The children’s story reflected many of these: Source of Life, Shepherd, Maker of Peace, Rock, Healer, Redeemer, Father, Mother, Friend. Though we may be tempted, like the people in the story, to claim that some divine names are more legitimate than others, in reality all of these and more can be found in our Bible, meaning that these are all important names for God: as the book says, “that all the names for God were good, and no name was better than another.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And holding onto multiple names for God serves to remind us that God is ultimately beyond all human language and thought – God is not actually a shepherd, or a father, or a rock - but in some ways is like these names. So while not literal, each of these names is a true expression of who God is to us. These names are true and yet not literally so.

To this list, we can add the name, Shekinah. Shekinah does not appear in our Bible as a name for God, but rather comes from the Jewish tradition, from the writings of the rabbis (Talmud and Mishnah) and the Jewish mystical tradition (Kabbalah). It comes from the Hebrew verb, “to dwell,” and is a reference to God’s dwelling among the people, for the divine indwelling presence among the people.[[2]](#footnote-2) What’s interesting about the Shekinah is that this is a female name for God, so that God’s presence among God’s people is depicted as a feminine, even maternal presence, which is found everywhere from the Temple to family households. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson explains, “Rather than saying directly that God or God’s Spirit descended to the Holy of Holies [in the Temple in Jerusalem], for example, the rabbis say that the *shekinah* descended, with the same meaning intended. Rather than saying that God is present among those who are attentive to the divine word, they say, ‘If two sit together and the words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Shekinah rests between them.’”[[3]](#footnote-3)

There is also an intimacy to this divine presence, as Jewish Sabbath prayers often invite Shekinah to the table as the family prepares for the Sabbath meal. This divine presence, the Shekinah, is especially important for the people during times of upheaval or uncertainty, like the wandering in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt, or the time of captivity and exile in Babylon. As you can tell from these examples, though the name Shekinah does not appear in the Bible, the idea of her is present throughout the story of God’s people, in the Old and New Testaments, as they speak of God’s presence. So let’s listen to some examples of the divine Shekinah, God’s indwelling presence among the people, from the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament:

[[OT Scripture Reading]]

*Genesis 1:1-2*

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

*Exodus 13:20-22*

[After crossing the Red Sea], They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night.Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

*Exodus 33:9-11, 15-16*

When Moses entered the tent [of meeting], the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp. . . . [And God said to Moses,] “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And [Moses] said to him, “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. 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.”

*Psalm 139:7-10, 13-14*

Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

*Wisdom 7:24-28*

For wisdom is more mobile than any motion;
because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.
For she is a breath of the power of God,
and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.
For she is a reflection of eternal light,
a spotless mirror of the working of God,
and an image of his goodness.
Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets;
for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.

[[Special Music]]

**Part 2**

The opening verses of our Scriptures begin in the moments before God began creating, with God’s presence hovering over the formlessness and darkness. In other words, creation begins with God drawing near, with the Shekinah becoming present in the just-forming world. This is the cosmic, creative Shekinah who gives birth to us and all living things.

 Later, when the Israelites are an established people, the Shekinah is also one who accompanies and walks with the people of God, especially during difficult journeys like the exodus from Egypt. Though the people were leaving a situation of great suffering and oppression, there was a certain familiarity to life as slaves in Egypt. Moses was leading them out into the hostile wilderness, and there were no guarantees that they would survive and make it to the promised land. But God-Shekinah goes with them, leading the way, taking the shape of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night and “Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people” (Exodus 13:22). God’s Shekinah is constantly with the people in their wandering, a mysterious yet comforting presence in fire and cloud.

 God’s conversation with Moses about this is especially tender. We’re told that God “used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.” God promises Moses, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” And Moses clings to this reassurance, saying that otherwise, the journey would not be worth it! “If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here,” he says to God. God’s presence with them even becomes an identity marker for Moses, as he says, “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” (Exodus 33:11, 15-16). In this way they become the people among whom God dwells; that is who they are. Once they settle in the land, they come to see God dwelling in Jerusalem, on Mount Zion – or even more specifically, in the Holy of Holies within the Temple, which was the most sacred area behind a curtain, accessible only to the priests.

 But this way of conceiving of God’s presence only lasts so long, as the Temple is destroyed and the people are taken into exile in Babylon. Perhaps that is when the tradition of the Psalms became even more important, with its sense of God-Shekinah as intimately present with individuals – and thus not bound to a certain place or building. Psalm 139 is a wonderful instance of recognizing that God’s presence permeates creation, and is inescapable; God-Shekinah is with us from the womb already! So the psalmist wonders, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?” God is truly everywhere.

 During this time of exile, the biblical figure of Divine Woman Wisdom or God’s Wisdom imaged as a woman also becomes important for the Israelite people as a more mobile way of experiencing God’s presence even in a strange land. Wisdom is understood as dwelling within wise men and women, as we heard from the Wisdom of Solomon: “in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom.” The Shekinah and Woman Wisdom are thus parallel figures naming a God who is not bound to Jerusalem, but accompanies the people of Israel when far from home, guiding their discernment of how to live wisely and faithfully even in Babylon.

Johnson writes that this “accompaniment” becomes the Shekinah’s most important aspect during tumultuous times: “‘Wherever the righteous go, the Shekinah goes with them.’ No place is too hostile. She accompanies the people through the post-slavery wilderness, and hundreds of years later, into exile again, through all the byways of rough times. . . . In other words, God’s indwelling Spirit was with them and her accompaniment gave rise to hope and encouragement in the darkness, a sense of divine fidelity to the promise of shalom.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

 But what about the New Testament? How is God’s presence depicted there? Let’s listen to a few examples:

[[NT Scripture Reading]]

*John 1:14*

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.

*Matt. 18:20*

[Jesus said,] “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

*John 14:15-20, 23*

[Jesus said to them,] “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. . . .Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

*Colossians 1:15-20*

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

*Rev. 21:1-4*

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

**Part 3**

Here we see that in the New Testament, interrelated figures like God’s Wisdom, God’s Shekinah, or God’s Word become flesh and dwell among us in Jesus Christ. For us as Christians, Jesus Christ is the embodied presence of God with us – the embodied Shekinah, as seen in the name Immanuel, which means, “God-with-us.” But Jesus’ life and ministry are not centred on an exclusive notion that he is God – rather, he lives in such a way that he shares God’s presence with others. This is reflected in his saying in Matthew 18:20 that “where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” – a saying which echoes the rabbinic saying that ‘If two sit together and the words of the Law [are spoken] between them, the Shekinah rests between them.’ We often interpret these words of Jesus’ to mean that worship is a moment not just of thinking about the divine, but of encountering God – in this case, in the form of Christ-Shekinah, Christ the indwelling presence of God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Perhaps the most straightforward NT connection for Shekinah, though, is the Holy Spirit, who is likewise the ongoing, somewhat elusive and mysterious presence of God with us. Jesus promises this Spirit to the disciples in John 14, and there was an early Christian tradition of viewing the Spirit as female. Given the common image of the Spirit as a dove, the Spirit was often seen as a mother bird, who shelters us under her wings, which ties her even closer to the Shekinah, who is also envisioned as female.[[6]](#footnote-6) So Jesus could just as easily have said “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees [her] nor knows [her]. You know [her], because [s]he abides with you, and [s]he will be in you” (14:15-17). Using poetic language, Jesus describes the mutual indwelling of the disciples and of the divine – they will dwell in one another, and in this way, the divine will make her home on earth.

Paul’s words about Christ in Colossians 1 reinforce this, emphasizing both Jesus’ presence at creation and divine glory in all creation, but also God’s choice to become the Shekinah to us – to draw near to us and to be present with us, love us, reconcile with us when we fail, and make peace with us and through us. Thus God who is the very creator of the universe chooses a close relationship with humanity, chooses to make Godself available to us. And in Revelation, there is a beautiful, hopeful image of a future in which God’s loving presence will be permanently accessible, where the Shekinah will overcome all grief and death: “See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4).

 The purpose statement of Shekinah Retreat Centre recognizes the biblical and theological roots of its name, stating “Shekinah is to be a setting where all who come have the opportunity to experience the presence and glory of God.” But as the ancient Israelites learned the hard way through exile, this doesn’t mean that the presence of God is limited to that particular place, or even to this place where we gather to worship. Instead, God-Shekinah changes us and our lives when we recognize that the transcendent God has come near to us in creation, in the mysteries of cloud and fire when we wander, in accompaniment in times of exile and crisis, in Christ who was, is, and will be the Wisdom, Word, and Embodied Presence of God, in the comforting Spirit of God who will ultimately wipe every tear from our eyes. The Shekinah thus continues to walk with us, assuring us that we are loved, comforting us, like Moses, that she will go with us, and empowering us through her Spirit to work for shalom. AMEN

1. Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God’s Name* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Johnson, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Johnson, 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Johnson 162-163. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Johnson, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)